

PRAYER

Listening to God

Prepared by the Reverend Brent Anderson



The Goal of Spiritual Disciplines

When it comes to spiritual disciplines, we constantly need to remind ourselves of the purpose of it all. We read scripture, we pray, we fast, we keep the Sabbath because we desire to be in communion with God. It is all about the relationship. We want to know God. We want to draw ourselves closer to God. We read scripture because it reveals to us the nature of God as well as the nature of ourselves. By reading scripture, we come to know God better (as well as God's ways and God's desires for us). We pray in order to be in relationship with God. That is what prayer is—relationship acknowledged and lived out. In prayer we share ourselves and we expect God to share God's self with us as well. In prayer, we bask in the presence of God.

Spiritual disciplines are meant to be life-giving exercises of faith. They are meant to deepen our relationship with God. In them we seek the new life that God desires to give to us.

Unfortunately, we forget this. There are times when prayer and reading the scriptures feels like just another chore that *has* to be done. And so sometimes they feel like dry, routine affairs.

Some people enter into these exercises with the misconception that by doing them, they will *earn* God's favor. Subconsciously they might be thinking that by doing them, they will get another gold star placed next to their name (like our teachers might have done when we were little). But that's not it at all. Much of their value is lost when they become nothing more than a checkmark on a checklist.

Our "intentions" and our "attention"

Like with anything, our *intentions* matter. What do we intend to do when we pick up our bibles to read? What is our intention when we turn to God in prayer? Somewhere deep inside of us, hopefully we are crying out *"God, I want to know you more! Show me what You intend!"* God's intentions matter. Our *intentions* matter!

And that's why our *attention* matters. What are we *paying attention to* when we do these things? Are we paying attention to God or are we distracted by other things? Are we merely going through the motions—following a bunch of "steps" or some particular "method"—or are we paying attention to God; seeking to learn from God; seeking to draw ourselves closer to God and God's intentions?

"In the presence of" vs. "being with"

It's like the difference between being *in the presence of* someone and being *with* someone. You can eat a fantastic meal *in the presence of* someone you love without being *with* them... If you're always checking your phone to see what your friends are writing on Facebook, or if you're worried and thinking about all the work you need to get done before the weekend, or if you are distracted by the other people you see in the restaurant or if you are worried about your finances and how you are going to pay for everything. If your mind is elsewhere, then your loved one is going to notice. You are going to feel it. And your relationship might suffer because an opportunity to share and be together has been wasted.

Think of the story in Luke chapter ten where Jesus visits Mary and Martha:

³⁸Now as they went on their way, (Jesus) entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. ³⁹She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. ⁴⁰But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

⁴¹But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; ⁴²there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

A listening heart that pays attention to the other makes all the difference in the world. Prayer and bible study are meant to be life-giving exercises of faith and hope and love because in them we seek to grow closer to the source of life and hope and love.

It's very interesting what God says at the transfiguration of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew. God has to interrupt Peter who is yapping away about how good it is for him to be there to witness what was happening and about how he wants to build three tents; one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah. From a bright overshadowing cloud, God speaks and says:

*"This is my Son, the beloved;
with him I am well pleased; listen to him."*

Those last few words should stick with us. Listen to him! Listen not just to anything or anyone—listen to HIM! Listening is just as important in the Christian life and in prayer as speaking. We need to listen.

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One clever individual noted:

"God didn't say 'This is my son, the beloved, keep yakking at him!' — God said, 'Listen to him!'"

In a similar vein, someone else commented:

"Prayer isn't about giving marching orders. It's about reporting for duty."

The tribal elder in New York

Mark Yaconelli tells the story about a researcher from Columbia University who went up to North Dakota to study the Native Americans and their leadership.

And while he was there he became fascinated with one of the tribal elders and so he decided to have him fly back to New York to meet with his fellow researchers. This elder had never flown on a plane before.

The morning they arrived, they checked him into his hotel and then an hour later, the researcher went over to get him and escort him through central park to a series of meetings they were having at the University.

So they're heading up Broadway walking along the sidewalk and as they're walking, the elder stops, looks around and says, "Did you hear that?"

Looking a little puzzled, the researcher says, "Hear what? This is New York City. There are people and cars and noises everywhere."

The elder slowly walks over to the edge of the sidewalk where there is a small patch of dirt with a tree in the middle. He reaches down and carefully picks up what looks like a cricket.

The researcher is totally amazed and he says "How did you hear that? With all these people talking, cars honking, noises everywhere... how did you hear that cricket?"

The elder thinks for a minute. Then he reaches into his pocket, pulls out a small handful of coins and throws them in the air. When they land on the ground, everyone around them stops and looks down. And the wise elder said, "It depends on what you're listening for."

What are we listening for? To whom are we listening? Do we even know that we're supposed to be listening? God said, "Listen to him!"

Consider this prayer:

*Tender God, You whisper words of life to us.
Help us attune our ears always and everywhere
to listen for them. Amen.*

Moses and the burning shrubbery

When we talk about listening to God, I think we can't help but remember the story of Moses and the burning bush in Exodus 3. There's Moses, tending the flocks of sheep of his father-in-law Jethro when all of a sudden he notices a bush that is blazing but is not consumed. Moses turns aside to check things out. And God calls to him from the bush, "Moses, Moses... remove the sandals from your feet... this is holy ground... I AM the God of your ancestors and I have something I want you to do."

I love the way one of my favorite seminary professors, Dr. Kenda Creasy Dean, puts it. She says: "When I'm honest, it irks me that God called Moses through a burning bush, and God has sent nothing of the sort in my direction as far as I can tell. How hard can it be to refuse the great I AM when you hear God in the hedges? Surely if a burning bush told me what God needed me to do, I would do it, wouldn't I?"

She goes on to say: "We don't know how long God has been trying to get Moses' attention. Maybe God had been burning shrubbery for decades to no avail. Maybe God had tried more traditional means to attract a worthy candidate for the position but no one applied. Or maybe one day God just decided that the person for the job was the one who noticed Yahweh's presence on Horeb, and so God ignited a bush for minutes or millennia until a miracle occurred: Somebody finally paid attention."

She then says: "Brought up short by the cauterizing fire of truth, God says to each of us: 'Remove your sandals! Leave all that (baggage) behind. I am not out to destroy you; I am out to change you. Take off those smelly shoes—this is holy ground, the place where you leave your old ways behind and start over as the person I made you to be.'"

How do we listen?

How do we listen? How do we turn our hearts attention toward God? How do we become more and more aware of God in our surroundings? How do we become more attentive to God's presence within us, among us, and around us? How do we pay more attention to the movement of the Spirit in our lives and in our world?

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Silence and Solitude

Dallas Willard says *“silence is frightening because it strips us as nothing else does, throwing us upon the stark realities of our life... Think what it says about the inward emptiness of our lives if we must always turn on the (cd player) or radio to make sure something is happening around us.”*

Or listen to the words of TS Elliot: *“Where shall the world be found, where will the word resound? Not here, there is not enough silence.”*

Blaise Pascal writes *“all unhappiness of (men and women) arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own room.”* We no longer know how to be alone. We no longer know how to be quiet. We need our diversions. We need noise and busyness around us at all times. We have what Dallas Willard calls a “rabid busyness” that drives us, possesses us, plagues us. We worship the God of multi-tasking, yet we hunger for intimacy, we thirst for rest, and we’re starved for silence. But why?

Muddy waters

When we first try to experience silence and solitude, we can’t help but notice how difficult it is. Our lives are chaotic. They’re like a jar of river water that has been shaken or disturbed; the mud and sentiment swirling around. It’s hard to see anything through cloudy water.



But if we set the jar down and it remains silent and still, the sediment will begin to settle and the water will begin to clear. This is what silence and solitude can do in our lives. Through silence and solitude, God can clear away the clutter, settle us down, and speak to us in that clear, small voice.



It might not be that God wasn’t speaking before. It might just be that we were too busy, too distracted—the noise of our lives was just too loud—and so we couldn’t hear anything. And sometimes the noise isn’t outside of us. Sometimes the noise is inside.

Frederick Buechner writes:

What deadens us most to God’s presence within, I think, is the inner dialogue that we are engaged in within ourselves, the endless chatter of human thought. I suspect that there is nothing more crucial to true spiritual comfort than being able from time to time to stop that chatter, including the chatter of spoken prayer.

And so perhaps it’s time we listen to those scriptures that talk about being quiet and still.

Psalm 37:7

“Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him”

Psalm 46:10–11

Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Psalm 107:28–31

Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out from their distress; he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they were glad because they had quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven. Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind.

Psalm 131:1b–2a

I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother.

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Isaiah 30:15

For thus said the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel: In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.

We desperately need to cultivate periods of silence and solitude that will help us dispel our “rabid busyness” and remind us of who we are and whose we are. We need to learn how to be alone and how to be silent with God. Silence isn’t just the absence of noise or the absence of speech. As Richard Foster says, *“Simply to refrain from talking, without a heart listening for God, is not silence.”* We seek silence and solitude so that we can listen better.

Like a Phone Call from a Friend

We know already how to get away and to listen. We do it all the time when someone we love, a friend or family members, calls us on the phone and wants to tell us something important. We move away from TV in the family room, the blender in the kitchen, and the kids playing in the Veranda. And we find a nice quiet place where we can be by ourselves and truly listen. This is the kind of thing we need to do with God as well.

Some people like to take prayer walks. Some people like to go fly fishing. Some people like to hike in the mountains. Some people like to curl up in a comfortable chair with a warm blanket and a cup of coffee. Some people like to walk along the beach or the shore of a lake. Some people like to rest under a tree. Some people check themselves into a nice hotel. Some people like to sit on the couch in front of a warm fire. Some people make arrangements to spend the night at a monastery or they camp out at a place like Taizé. Some people sit on a dock and watch the light of the moon shine across the waters. Some sit beside a flowing stream. Some go to Starbucks with their Bose® noise-canceling headphones. Some find a nice, quiet park bench.

Jesus knew what it was like to have people constantly following him; constantly asking things of him. He knew the busyness and chaos of life all too well. And that’s why we read that Jesus, often, would get up early and sneak off to a quiet place by himself to pray.

What do we do now?

Once we have entered into the silence and the solitude, with our hearts attentive to God—seeking to listen to God and to hear God speak—what do we do then?

The best answer is probably the simplest—Nothing! We don’t need to do anything. The best thing we can do is to simply enjoy being with God; resting in God’s presence. Richard Foster says: *“What we must clearly understand and underscore is that our real task (in solitude) is to create a space in our lives where God can reach us. Once that space has been created we wait quietly, expectantly. From this point on, the work belongs to God.”*

The Prayer Walk

There is no magic to a prayer walk. It is really quite simple. A Prayer Walk is exactly what it sounds like. It is where you take a walk (recognizing that you are walking with God) and you pray while walking (remember that prayer can be speaking, listening or just being). You are walking and praying (speaking, listening, or simply being with God/enjoying God) at the same time. You are aware and expectant of God’s presence while you walk. It is a time for you and God.

Our intentions during a prayer walk (which begin with a desire to be in communion with God) can take several forms. Some people like to see prayer walking as a deeply contemplative exercise where you really focus on opening up yourself to God—and so you walk slowly and deliberately. Others like to see prayer walking as a way to bless the world around you and pray for the people, locations and situations you come across. For these people, a prayer walk is both discovery and spoken (mental) prayer. It is discovery because they begin to see the people and their settings differently. It is prayer because they pray that God would bless the people and places they meet. Some people use prayer walks to find solitude. Some people do prayer walks in a small group, an intercessory pilgrimage of sorts. Again, what is most important when it comes to a prayer walk is our intentions and our attention.

Centering Prayer

“Centering Prayer is a receptive, deep method of silent prayer that prepares us to receive the gift of contemplative prayer, prayer in which we experience God’s presence within us, closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than consciousness itself. This method of prayer is both a relationship with God and a discipline to foster that relationship.”

Centering Prayer is not meant to replace other kinds of prayer. Rather, it adds depth of meaning to all prayer and

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facilitates the movement from more active modes of prayer — verbal, mental or affective prayer — into a receptive prayer of resting in God. Centering Prayer emphasizes prayer as a personal relationship with God and as a movement beyond conversation with Christ to communion with Him... it is resting in God beyond thought, words and emotions."

From www.contemplativeoutreach.org

Those who practice centering prayer recommend at least twenty minutes (somewhere between 20 and 30 minutes).

The Method:

- 1) **Choose a sacred word as a symbol** of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within.
 - Pray for the Holy Spirit to provide you with a word that can be used to bring you back to your center (which is God) whenever your thoughts or feelings wander.
 - Common words are: God, Jesus, Spirit, Love, Mercy, Peace, Silence, Stillness, Faith, Trust.
- 2) **Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed**, settle yourself briefly and then silently introduce your sacred word.
 - You introduce the sacred word inwardly as gently as laying a feather on a piece of absorbent cotton
- 3) **When engaged with your thoughts, return-ever-so-gently to the sacred word.**
 - The word is not said repeatedly. It is to be spoken quietly within to gently turn us back toward God whenever we wander in our thoughts.
 - We avoid analyzing our experience or thinking about it. We simply rest in God's presence. The goal is simply to be.
- 4) **At the end of the prayer time, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.**

Ignatian Awareness Examen

Popularized by Saint Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th Century, the *Awareness Examen* is meant to help us develop a

spiritual sensitivity to the special ways in which God works in our lives.

Most often the *Awareness Examen* is practiced at the end of the day. At its most basic level it is a simple review of the day's events. The purpose of the review is to help one become increasingly aware of God's presence and work in their lives (to become spiritually attuned to God), to offer up this relationship in prayer, and to resolve oneself to change one's ways through the grace of God.

The basic form of the *Examen* involves five phases which, for the purposes of simplicity and memorization, have been reduced to five simple words:

REST • RECOGNIZE • REVIEW • RESPOND • RESOLVE

Phase 1 — REST in God's Presence

To begin, simply rest in God's presence, quieting your heart and mind and focusing on God's desire to be with you. A simple prayer like "Here I am God, remain with me" can be a helpful way to gain focus and quiet. Ask God to help you see your life through God's loving eyes.

Phase 2 — RECOGNIZE Causes of Gratefulness

As you begin to think through all of the events and experiences of your day, ask God to show you those times and places where you should be most thankful. Looking back over the day, for what are you most grateful? Ask God to show you the little things and not just the big things. In silent prayer, express your gratitude to God.

Phase 3 — REVIEW the Good and the Bad

Again look over the events of your day. This time ask God to show you where you were open to God's presence and living according to God's ways, as well as, where you were blocked to God's presence and failed to live according to God's ways. Ask:

- "Where were you most aware of God?"; and
- "Where did you most deliberately turn your back on God?"

To frame these questions in other ways, you could ask:

- "Where were you most able to give and receive love today?" and
- "Where were you least able to give and receive love?"

Or you could ask:

- "When did I listen to your voice today?"
- "When did I resist listening to your voice today?"

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Reflect on these moments and ask yourself: "What do these moments indicate about my relationship with God? What do these moments say about my patterns of life? See what insights come to mind.

Phase 4 — RESPOND to God

Speak to God about what you discover. Confess those times when you have not cooperated with God or have not been responsive to God's presence. And thank God for those times when you were open to God and God's ways. Consider writing your response in a journal.

Phase 5 — RESOLVE to Change

Now that you've had a chance to reflect on your awareness of God throughout the day and the manner in which you lived in God's presence, consider what changes you might want or need to make. Ask God to give you the strength to change those things that need to be changed and the grace to live more and more into Christ's likeness.

Ignatian Contemplation

Ignatian Contemplation is a way of praying with the scriptures through the use of the imagination that has been around for centuries but was championed by Saint Ignatius of Loyola as part of his *Spiritual Exercises*. With *Ignatian Contemplation*, we take the familiar stories of the bible and let them flow through our imagination to see where the Lord leads us. Using our imaginations and our five senses, we enter into the story. What would we see, hear, taste, smell and feel if we were there in this story—if we were a fly on the wall, an innocent (or not so innocent) bystander, or one of the characters of the story? We can think about *Ignatian Contemplation* like this: If we were a filmmaker trying to make a movie, what would this scene look like? The process is simple: Read a narrative passage of scripture (a story) and then try to imagine the scene in your mind and notice what happens.

Step 1—Getting Settled

Find a quiet place where you won't be distracted. Open your hands on your lap and ask God to open your heart and your imagination as you read scripture.

Step 2—First Reading

Then pick a story out of scripture. Read through it once slowly. Make sure that understand the story line; what happens when and where and to whom. Once you have the story in mind, put your bible down.

Step 3—Engage Your Imagination

Now begin to imagine the scene as if you were standing right there. What is around you? Who else is there? What do you hear in the scene? If you are in a house, what noises are in the house or in the street outside? What do you smell? Who is there? What conversations are taking place? What is the mood—tense? Joyful? Confused? Frightened? Angry?

Feel free to paint this picture in any way your imagination takes you. Don't worry too much about historical accuracy. Let God take your imagination and reveal something new to you. Let God reveal the story to you in a new way.

Step 4—Reflection/Response

Having experienced this story using your imagination, what do you think God is trying to say to you through this story? In what ways does it stir you, confuse you, or challenge you? Take some quiet time to reflect on its message for you.

Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina means "spiritual or divine reading". It's a way of reading scripture that involves the heart as much as the head. It's not so much about the *amount* you read. It's about the *depth*.

Classical writers have compared this process to eating. In reading, you bite off a small chunk of text. Through meditation, you chew on it, extracting the nutrients and juices. In prayer, you swallow, incorporating the result of your meditation and allowing it to nourish your life. And in contemplation, you savor the good taste left in your mouth, celebrate the gift of God's word to you, and embrace the new life you have received.

Classic descriptions of *Lectio Divina* list a sequence of four movements: *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (ruminating and reflecting/meditation), *oratio* (responding to God/praying), and *contemplatio* (receiving and resting in God/to admire or think). Try remembering these four words:

READING • MEDITATION • PRAYER • CONTEMPLATION

Movement 1 – Reading

First, choose a relatively short passage of scripture and read it meditatively, prayerfully. In this phase you are a seeker, looking for the "word within the Word." Watch for

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a key phrase or word that jumps out at you or promises to have special meaning for you. Read it slowly with your own life and choices in view.

Movement 2 – Meditation

Next, mull over the text; internalize the words. Listen for the phrases that stand out for you as you read the passage. Turn them over in your mind. Reflect on why these words catch your attention, what they bring to mind, and what they mean for you today. This stage is comparable to walking around a great statue, viewing it from multiple vantage points.

Movement 3 – Prayer

Next, pray the text. You have listened; now respond. Turn your meditation from dialogue with yourself to dialogue with God. Share with God in all honesty your reflections, questions, or feelings. Offer your thanksgiving, confession, petitions, or intercessions as they arise within during your dialogue with God. Listen for God's response and inner nudging.

Movement 4 – Contemplation

Finally, rest. Rest your mental activity and trust yourself completely to God's love and care. Relax in God's presence. Allow the text to work itself into you. Pick a phrase from the text to which you can return again and again as you keep your attention on God. Enjoy the rest that Jesus promised to those who come to him. Quietly, when ready, move toward the moment in which you ask God to show you how to live out what you have experienced.

The gospel is not a doctrine of the tongue, but of life. It cannot be grasped by reason and memory only, but it is fully understood when it possesses the whole soul, and penetrates to the inner recesses of the heart.

—John Calvin

Writing Exercises

Letter from God

Find a nice quiet place where you can be quiet and alone. Then sit down with pen and paper and write yourself a letter from God.

Think about your life: What you are doing? What you are thinking? What decisions do you need to make? What direction is your life heading? Who are the key people? How are those relationships? How is your spiritual life?

How is your relationship to the church? How is your relationship with God? Think about these things and then try to see them as you imagine God sees them. What would God want to say to you about these things? In prayer, turn to God with the details of your life and ask God to help you write a letter to yourself (from God) about your life.

Consider putting this letter in an envelope and sealing it. And then consider opening it in six months and reading it again. The key here is to be as faithful as possible to what you honestly think God would want to say to you.

Write a “Dear God” Letter

Sit down with pen and paper and consider writing a “Dear Abby” letter to God (Dear Abby was a famous advice columnist in the United States; people would write letters to her and she would respond with a letter of her own which would be printed in her newspaper column).

Think through some problem or issue that you are having and write a letter to God about it, seeking God's advice. Explore your thoughts and feelings in some depth. Then write a letter in which God responds to your letter. Again, be as faithful as possible to what you honestly think God would say.

Conversation with Jesus

Start a conversation with God or Jesus on paper. Think of something that you want to say to God or Jesus and write it down (for example, “God, I've been struggling with how to show more love to my family recently.”). Then write down what you think God or Jesus might say in response (for example: “Jesus: ‘Oh really. What seems to be the problem?’”). Then continue the conversation by responding to God's response. Let the conversation flow where it will alternating between your statements/questions and God's responses.

A Prayer from Paul – Ephesians 3

¹⁴For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. ¹⁶I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. ²⁰Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

