



## Twenty minutes a day

Once in a while I run into booklets with titles like "Twenty Minutes a Day," or "Ten Minutes to Physical Fitness." Such publications want to make us aware that even a small investment of time and energy pays big dividends in cardio-vascular health and overall strength. Being fit doesn't require twelve hours of training a day! Still, most of us know that disciplined exercise runs contrary to our natures. Who wants to go jogging after school? Only when we consider the rewards are we motivated to act.

As bodily health is produced and maintained only through disciplined living and exercise, so we can only thrive as Christians through what we might call "spiritual exercises." Our heart, as the centre of our life with God, doesn't stay healthy without spiritual discipline and exercise. In this context we could speak of the worship service, of Bible reading, catechism classes, Bible Study groups, and so on. All these activities form part of the overall discipline of Christian life through which our life with God is maintained and strengthened.

But another very important part of the spiritual exercise regime is prayer. Prayer is both a duty and a privilege of Christian life. Unfortunately, it is frequently neglected. I once asked a group of people whether they thought a non-praying person could be a Christian. Surprisingly, not a few thought that this was indeed possible. This is surprising, because the Bible shows us that a non-praying person is either a non-Christian or a disobedient and weak Christian well on his/her way to becoming a total unbeliever.

And yet, there is probably no other area of Christian life as neglected as prayer, and as a result, no other point about which so many feel so much guilt. Few have developed the discipline of regular private prayer. Yes, I know that we pray at mealtimes, at public meetings of Christians, at our Reformed schools, and so on. But if we speak of private, personal prayer, we discover a real lack.

This problem is a reason for great concern. A church composed of members who pray only at formal church functions like the worship service or at family functions (like meals) is bound to be a weak church, unable to fight for the truth, virtually powerless against secularizing decay. People who don't pray in private are unlikely to diligently fight against temptation. More and more they will succumb to the Evil One. A church without a praying membership is on its way to religious formalism and apostasy. We might say that a church whose members don't pray in private is a church full of hypocrites.

The way we pray or don't pray reveals the quality of our relationship with God. If you have a good relationship with someone, you will want to communicate with that person. If you never pray personally, you should ask yourself whether you really have faith, whether you have really accepted the promises of God made to you, personally.

Prayer life always has to be seen in the light of the covenant which God has made with His people and their children. This covenant means that Almighty God has become our Father in Jesus Christ. It means that the Creator and Lord of the universe has decided to love us and make us His people. Our prayers have a firm basis in this covenant. We don't have to go looking for God. He comes very near to us. His Word is at hand. He has promised that His Spirit will dwell in our hearts.

Yes, the basis for communication with God has already been established. There is a relationship between yourself and God. The point is, however, that we are now called to live on the basis of that relationship. And, as anyone knows, if relationships are to flourish and endure, there must be communication. Young men and women often get into trouble in their relationships because they never really talk. If there is no meaningful exchange of thoughts, feelings, and desires, a friendship or courtship will be shallow and unsatisfying.

Well, many people have a very shallow and unsatisfying relationship with God because they never talk to Him. They never open their hearts to Him. What is your prayer life like? I'm asking you to be very honest with yourself because this is a matter of life and death. To have a shallow prayer life means that you will be a very weak Christian. It means that you will easily become unfaithful to your God — just as people in shallow marriages more easily fall prey to the temptation of adultery.

Prayer is the exercising of a relationship with God. Prayer keeps that relationship going. The covenant initiative of God requires our response. To respond to the loving initiative of God, who constantly woos His people, is both a duty and privilege. No person who neglects prayer can expect to survive as a Christian.

So prayer is the necessary response of the believer to the covenant initiative of God. You agree with that, of course. But now, what do you talk about with God? Once you get past the Lord's Prayer or the formulas of your childhood, what do you say? Well, prayer is in the first place a matter of bringing our petitions before God (think of the Lord's Prayer). As believers we realize that we have many needs. We need forgiveness of sins, renewal through the Holy Spirit, strength against temptation, wisdom in relationships, the ability to seek God's Kingdom above all. God has promised to fulfil all our needs — but only through our prayer. Ask, and it will be given. If you are a poor Christian, you have only yourself to blame. The only kind of poverty in the Church is that which is self-imposed.

And then there is the need for intercession — prayer for others. We can only mention a few necessary points: prayer for government, for parents, friends, boyfriend/girlfriend, teachers, minister, elders, deacons, the rest of your congregation, missionaries, your unbelieving neighbour, the Jehovah's Witness who keeps coming to your home, the sick, those who are depressed, etc. etc.

And, of course, your prayer will always have the framework of praise and thanksgiving.

Prayer is essential. No Christian can survive without it. So why not make a commitment to it, today? Why not resolve to spend twenty minutes a day in the privacy of your room, or wherever you might want to go, to speak with your covenant God? Take your Bible with you. Follow a system of reading. Meditate on the sermons you've heard the previous Sunday. And then speak to God. Speaking aloud or whispering helps to keep your mind from wandering. And trying to pray while lazing in bed is definitely asking for trouble. The best posture for praying is still kneeling.

We are God's children by covenant privilege. But He demands a response of love exercised in prayer. Without prayer, your heart will wither and eventually shrivel up altogether. You will have no joy in your life with the Lord. And you will have no resistance to the assaults of your enemies — Satan, the devil, and your old human nature. Instead of growing in faith, obedience, and service, you will regress.

And so, please do take the time for prayer.

Of course, everybody is busy. But a lot of other things can be left aside without any serious effects in your life. Leaving prayer, however, will have the result that nothing works. Without prayer you will die. So turn off the TV, shut down the stereo, or get out of bed twenty minutes earlier. Everybody and everything else can wait. But God can't! Who wouldn't give up just about anything for an evening with a very special person? Well then, how can we keep God waiting on His date with us? He wants to hear from us every day. Keep the appointed hour.

And then watch as God fulfils His promises in your life. You will become increasingly sensitive to God's revealed will. The Lord will bring great joy to you because of your growing relationship with Himself. Through prayer you will become a fine-tuned instrument in the hand of God, a ready servant, equipped for the tasks of your young life and able to persevere to the end.

The rewards of prayer are very great.

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