

# A Call to Spiritual Reformation

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*Priorities from Paul and His Prayers*

D. A. Carson

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This book is gratefully dedicated to

*Paul and Anke Miller*



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## Preface

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I doubt if there is any Christian who has not sometimes found it difficult to pray. In itself this is neither surprising nor depressing: it is not surprising, because we are still pilgrims with many lessons to learn; it is not depressing, because struggling with such matters is part of the way we learn.

What is both surprising and depressing is the sheer prayerlessness that characterizes so much of the Western church. It is surprising, because it is out of step with the Bible that portrays what Christian living should be; it is depressing, because it frequently coexists with abounding Christian activity that somehow seems hollow, frivolous, and superficial. Scarcely less disturbing is the enthusiastic praying in some circles that overflows with emotional release but is utterly uncontrolled by any thoughtful reflection on the prayers of Scripture.

I wish I could say I always avoid these pitfalls. The truth is that I am a part of what I condemn. But if we are to make any headway in reforming our personal and corporate praying then we shall have to begin by listening afresh to Scripture and seeking God's help in understanding how to apply Scripture to our lives, our homes, and our churches.

This book is not a comprehensive theology of prayer, set against the background of modern debate on the nature of spirituality. Elsewhere I have been involved in a project that attempted something along those lines.<sup>1</sup> Here the aim is far simpler: to work through several of Paul's prayers in such a way that we hear God

speak to us today, and to find strength and direction to improve our praying, both for God's glory and for our good.

This book began its life as a series of seven sermons preached in various settings. The sequence of seven was delivered in only one place: the Church Missionary Society "summer school" in New South Wales, in early January 1990. Humanly speaking, the timing was inauspicious: my mother had died on New Year's Eve. Yet taking that wrenching step to fulfill my previous commitment served only to demonstrate once again that God's strength is displayed in our weakness, for the meetings in New South Wales were full of the presence and power of the Lord. I am grateful to my father and brother for urging me to continue with the meetings, and to Rev. Peter and Joan Tasker and to Archdeacon Victor and Delle Roberts and their colleagues for their warmth and encouragement. I am grateful, too, to Baker Book House for their interest in this expository study, and for their practical suggestions as to how best to turn seven rather lengthy sermons into shorter chapters for the printed page. Preachers interested in how these chapters were originally configured might want to look at the "extended note" that concludes the "Notes" section of this book.

The content of these pages is substantially what was given in oral form, but the style has been modified for the printed page. Because of the anticipated readership, I have not included bibliography except where I actually cite a source. To facilitate the use of this book in group study and in Sunday school classes, I have included questions at the end of each chapter. The questions sometimes require factual answers (and are therefore useful for review), and sometimes require reflection, debate, or further study; they might be most helpful, therefore, to a group led by someone a little further down the path of Christian discipleship than the casual reader might be.

*Soli Deo gloria.*

D. A. Carson  
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Preface



## Introduction:

# The Urgent Need of the Church

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What is the most urgent need in the church of the Western world today? Many different responses are given to that question. Just as in the political arena single-issue groups have sometimes captured the limelight and temporarily controlled national discussion, so also in the arena of the church there are groups with a single focus and a single answer to all questions.

Some in the church say that what we need is purity in sexual and reproductive matters. Certainly the facts are alarming. A few years ago *Christianity Today* published the results of a poll showing that in several church singles groups in California—groups of unmarried and divorced people, usually between the ages of twenty and thirty-five—more than 90 percent of both men and women had engaged or were then engaged in illicit sexual affairs. Ah, you say, that is California: what can you expect? But a more recent poll published by *Leadership* is scarcely more encouraging. A study of teenagers from evangelical churches across America revealed that more than 40 percent of such churched young people eighteen years of age or younger had engaged in premarital sex (over against a national base of about 54 percent). Within a twenty-five-mile radius of my home, at least four pastors have ruined their ministry in recent years because of moral failures. The directors of several mission boards in North America and in Europe have quietly mentioned to me that they have had to deal with more problems of sexual immorality among missionaries

during the past five years than during the previous thirty, forty, or fifty years.

Although a frog dropped into hot water will immediately jump out, that same frog can be quietly cooked to death if the temperature of the water in which it is already lying rises slowly. Like this proverbial frog, our culture is slowly heating up and destroying us. Technicolor celebration of lust and violence invades our homes through magazines, radio, newspapers, and television. Pornography that would not be admitted into *any* neighborhood cinema three decades ago is now readily available. The invention of the video recorder and the widespread availability of both cable and pay-television have exposed millions of people to soft and hard pornography that even today could not be shown in public cinemas. A glance at the magazine rack at the checkout of any grocery store shows we belong to a culture obsessed with sex.

But that is not all. The World Health Organization estimates that no fewer than ten million people will die of AIDS, no matter what discoveries are made in the near future. Doubtless a small percentage of AIDS sufferers are entirely innocent of any sexual misconduct: hemophiliacs have contracted the disease, and so also innocent spouses, children born of infected mothers, and drug addicts who have shared dirty needles. But there is little doubt that the disease is driven by promiscuity, both homosexual and heterosexual. If promiscuity were miraculously barred, the disease would die out.

Others locate the most urgent problem of the church less in personal morality than in larger policy issues connected with reproduction. Christian outrage at the continued tolerance of abortion-on-demand is steady: not a few see this issue as the most urgent challenge before the contemporary Western church.

God knows we need purity in sexual and reproductive matters. But let us be frank: some societies experience high degrees of sexual rectitude without much knowledge of God, without eternal life. Many Muslim nations, for instance, exhibit a far higher degree of sexual purity and a far lower abortion rate than any Western nation. Surely this cannot be our greatest need.

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Others say the church's most urgent need is a combination of integrity and generosity in the financial arena. It might be embarrassing to discover how many people who read this page have at some time cheated on their income tax forms. There was a time in many Western nations when what a business person promised was as binding as a written contract, but no longer. Large-scale corruption has rocked financial houses whose names once symbolized utter reliability.

One of the most frightening characteristics of the return to a more conservative lifestyle in the eighties and nineties is the sheer greed in which it is wrapped. The conservatism of the fifties arose out of the Depression of the thirties and the world war of the forties: parents worked hard to build a better world for their children than they had known themselves. But the new conservatism devotes little thought to the future, and still less to children. We want to get our own little nest-egg together, and spend it; we want the government to do as much as possible for us, but to defer the taxes until the time our children will have to pay for our excesses. Marketing techniques conspire to make us think that happiness is bound up with acquisition—people in business know of the number of credit cards at their limits; rank in society is heavily tied to perceived wealth.

In some measure, of course, greed characterizes every culture in this fallen world. But the raw worship of Mammon has become so bold, so outrageous, so pervasive in the Western world during the last ten years that many of us are willing to do almost anything—including sacrificing our children—provided we can buy more. So what we need, then, is integrity coupled with generosity, a new freedom from this miserable enslavement to wealth, an enslavement that is corroding our resolve and corrupting our direction.

God knows we need to be released from our rampant materialism. But candor forces us to recognize that there are societies far less devoted to the creed of "More!" than we are, but whose people do not know God. How can this be our greatest need?

Well, then, someone might say, what we need in this hour of spiritual declension is evangelism and church planting. World

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population figures are escalating. Also, “missions” can no longer be thought of as something that takes place “over there.” Most Western nations are growing in ethnic diversity. In America, we are told, by the year 2000 WASPs (white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants) will make up only 47 percent of the population. If we ask how much effective evangelism has been done among Hispanics in Chicago, Greeks in Sydney, Arabs in London, or Asians in Vancouver, we must hang our heads in shame. World-class cities continue to draw in the bulk of the world’s population, while in most Western countries the church at its strength (however weak that “strength” may be) is rural and suburban, not urban. Although there are some wonderful bright spots, evangelicalism is not proving very zealous or very effective in obeying the Lord’s mandate to evangelize.

Yes, we urgently need more and better evangelism. But we must candidly come to grips with several alarming facts. To what extent do those who profess faith at world-class evangelistic meetings actually persevere, over a period of five years from their initial profession of faith? When careful studies have been undertaken, the most commonly agreed range is 2 percent to 4 percent; that is, between 2 percent and 4 percent of those who make a profession of faith at such meetings are actually persevering in the faith five years later, as measured by such external criteria as attendance at church, regular Bible reading, or the like.

Even such frightening statistics do not disclose the immensity of the problem. Many who profess faith seem to think that Christianity is something to add to their already busy lives, not something that controls, constrains, and shapes their vision and all of their goals. The Princeton Religion Research Center, which studies religion in America, has demonstrated that the slight increase during the last ten years in Americans attending church must be set against the marked decline in professing American Christians who think that there is an essential connection between Christianity and morality. The sad truth is that much American Christianity is returning to raw paganism: the ordinary pagan can be ever so religious without any necessary entailment in ethics, morality, self-sacrifice, or integrity.

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In short, evangelism—at least the evangelism that has dominated much of the Western world—does not seem powerful enough to address our declension.

Perhaps what we most urgently need, then, is disciplined, biblical thinking. We need more Bible colleges and seminaries, more theologians, more lay training, more expository preaching. How else are we going to train a whole generation of Christians to think God's thoughts after him, other than by teaching them to think through Scripture, to learn the Scriptures well?

I am scarcely in a position to criticize expository preaching and seminaries: I have given my life to such ministry. Yet I would be among the first to acknowledge that some students at the institution where I teach, and some faculty too, can devote thousands of hours to the diligent study of Scripture and yet still somehow display an extraordinarily shallow knowledge of God. Biblical knowledge can be merely academic and rigorous, but somehow not edifying, not life-giving, not devout, not guileless.

Time fails to list other urgent needs that various groups espouse. Some groups point to the desperate need for real, vital corporate worship; others focus on trends in the nation and therefore the need to become involved in politics and policies.

Clearly all of these things are important. I would not want anything I have said to be taken as disparagement of evangelism and worship, a diminishing of the importance of purity and integrity, a carelessness about disciplined Bible study. But there is a sense in which these urgent needs are merely symptomatic of a far more serious lack. The one thing we most urgently need in Western Christendom is a deeper knowledge of God. We need to know God better.

When it comes to knowing God, we are a culture of the spiritually stunted. So much of our religion is packaged to address our felt needs—and these are almost uniformly anchored in our pursuit of our own happiness and fulfillment. God simply becomes the Great Being who, potentially at least, meets our needs and fulfills our aspirations. We think rather little of what he is like, what he expects of us, what he seeks in us. We are not captured by his holiness and his love; his thoughts and words capture too

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little of our imagination, too little of our discourse, too few of our priorities.

In the biblical view of things, a deeper knowledge of God brings with it massive improvement in the other areas mentioned: purity, integrity, evangelistic effectiveness, better study of Scripture, improved private and corporate worship, and much more. But if we seek these things without passionately desiring a deeper knowledge of God, we are selfishly running after God's blessings without running after him. We are even worse than the man who wants his wife's services—someone to come home to, someone to cook and clean, someone to sleep with—without ever making the effort really to know and love his wife and discover what she wants and needs; we are worse than such a man, I say, because God is more than any wife, more than the best of wives: he is perfect in his love, he has made us for himself, and we are answerable to him.

Even so, this is not a book that directly meets the challenge to know God better. Rather, it addresses one small but vital part of that challenge. One of the foundational steps in knowing God, and one of the basic demonstrations that we do know God, is prayer—spiritual, persistent, biblically minded prayer. Writing a century and a half ago, Robert Murray M'Cheyne declared, "What a man is alone on his knees before God, that he is, and no more." But we have ignored this truism. We have learned to organize, build institutions, publish books, insert ourselves into the media, develop evangelistic strategies, and administer discipleship programs, but we have forgotten how to pray.

Most pastors testify to the decline in personal, family, and corporate prayer across the nation. Even the recently organized "concerts of prayer" are fairly discouraging from an historical perspective: some of them, at least, are so blatantly manipulative that they are light-years away from prayer meetings held in parts of the world that have tasted a breath of heaven-sent revival. Moreover, it is far from clear that they are changing the prayer habits of our churches, or the private discipline of significant numbers of believers.

Two years ago at a major North American seminary, fifty students who were offering themselves for overseas ministry during the summer holidays were carefully interviewed so that their

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suitability could be assessed. Only three of these fifty—6 percent!—could testify to regular quiet times, times of reading the Scriptures, of devoting themselves to prayer. It would be painful and embarrassing to uncover the prayer life of many thousands of evangelical pastors.

But we may probe more deeply. Where is our delight in praying? Where is our sense that we are meeting with the living God, that we are doing business with God, that we are interceding with genuine unction before the throne of grace? When was the last time we came away from a period of intercession feeling that, like Jacob or Moses, we had prevailed with God? How much of our praying is largely formulaic, liberally larded with clichés that remind us, uncomfortably, of the hypocrites Jesus excoriated?

I do not write these things to manipulate you or to be engendering guilty feelings. But what shall we *do*? Have not many of us tried at one point or another to improve our praying, and floundered so badly that we are more discouraged than we ever were? Do you not sense, with me, the severity of the problem? Granted that most of us know some individuals who are remarkable prayer warriors, is it not nevertheless true that by and large we are better at organizing than agonizing? Better at administering than interceding? Better at fellowship than fasting? Better at entertainment than worship? Better at theological articulation than spiritual adoration? Better—God help us!—at preaching than at praying?

What is wrong? Is not this sad state of affairs some sort of index of our knowledge of God? Shall we not agree with J. I. Packer when he writes, “I believe that prayer is the measure of the man, spiritually, in a way that nothing else is, so that how we pray is as important a question as we can ever face”?<sup>1</sup> Can we profitably meet the other challenges that confront the Western church if prayer is ignored as much as it has been?

My aim, then, in this series of meditations, is to examine the foundations again. Many different approaches might have been chosen, but the one adopted here is simple. Just as God’s Word must reform our theology, our ethics, and our practices, so also must it reform our praying. The purpose of this book, then, is to think through some of Paul’s prayers, so that we may align our

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prayer habits with his. We want to learn what to pray for, what arguments to use, what priorities we should adopt, what beliefs should shape our prayers, and much more. We might have examined the prayers of Moses, or of David, or of Jeremiah. But here we focus on Paul, and especially on Paul's petitions, acknowledging that the focus is limited. We shall constantly try to grasp not only the rudiments of Paul's prayers but also how Christians can adopt Paul's theology of prayer in their own attempts to pray. And since lasting renewal, genuine revival, and true reformation spring from the work of the Holy Spirit as he takes the Word and applies it to our lives, it is important for me as I write this, and for you as you read it, to pause frequently and ask that the Holy Spirit will take whatever is biblically faithful and useful in these meditations and so apply it to our lives that our praying will be permanently transformed.

### **Questions for Review and Reflection**

1. What is the most pressing need in the contemporary church of the Western world? Defend your view.
2. List as many of the church's needs mentioned in this chapter as you can remember. Add to this list. How do these things relate to the fundamental question of how well we know God?
3. Although this book is concerned to encourage biblical praying, quite obviously it is possible to pray without any real knowledge of the living God. How can this be so? Is there a certain kind of prayer that should be avoided? If so, what kind?



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## Lessons from the School of Prayer

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**T**hroughout my spiritual pilgrimage, two sources have largely shaped, and continue to shape, my own prayer life: the Scriptures and more mature Christians.

The less authoritative of these two has been the advice, wisdom, and example of senior saints. I confess I am not a very good student in the school of prayer. Still, devoting a few pages to their advice and values may be worthwhile before I turn to the more important and more authoritative of the two sources that have taught me to pray.

Among the lessons more mature Christians have taught me, then, are these.

**1. Much praying is not done because we do not plan to pray.** We do not drift into spiritual life; we do not drift into disciplined prayer. We will not grow in prayer unless we plan to pray. That means we must self-consciously set aside time to do nothing but pray.

What we actually do reflects our highest priorities. That means we can proclaim our commitment to prayer until the cows come home, but unless we actually pray, our actions disown our words.

This is the fundamental reason why set times for prayer are important: they ensure that vague desires for prayer are concretized in regular practice. Paul's many references to his "prayers" (e.g., Rom. 1:10; Eph. 1:16; 1 Thess. 1:2) suggest that he set aside specific times for prayer—as apparently Jesus himself did (Luke 5:16). Of course, mere regularity in such matters does not ensure that effective praying takes place: genuine godliness is so easily aped, its place usurped by its barren cousin, formal religion. It is also true that different lifestyles demand different patterns: a shift worker, for instance, will have to keep changing the scheduled prayer times, while a mother of twin two-year-olds will enjoy neither the energy nor the leisure of someone living in less constrained circumstances. But after all the difficulties have been duly recognized and all the dangers of legalism properly acknowledged, the fact remains that unless we plan to pray we will not pray. The reason we pray so little is that we do not plan to pray. Wise planning will ensure that we devote ourselves to prayer often, even if for brief periods: it is better to pray often with brevity than rarely but at length. But the worst option is simply not to pray—and that will be the controlling pattern unless we plan to pray. If we intend to change our habits, we must start here.<sup>1</sup>

**2. Adopt practical ways to impede mental drift.** Anyone who has been on the Christian way for a while knows there are times when our private prayers run something like this: "Dear Lord, I thank you for the opportunity of coming into your presence by the merits of Jesus. It is a wonderful blessing to call you Father. . . . I wonder where I left my car keys? [No, no! Back to business.] Heavenly Father, I began by asking that you will watch over my family—not just in the physical sphere, but in the moral and spiritual dimensions of our lives. . . . Boy, last Sunday's sermon was sure bad. I wonder if I'll get that report written on time? [No, no!] Father, give real fruitfulness to that missionary couple we support, whatever their name is. . . . Oh, my! I had almost forgotten I promised to fix my son's bike today. . . ." Or am I the only Christian who has ever had problems with mental drift?

But you can do many things to stamp out daydreaming, to stifle reveries. One of the most useful things is to vocalize your prayers.

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This does not mean they have to be so loud that they become a distraction to others, or worse, a kind of pious showing off. It simply means you articulate your prayers, moving your lips perhaps; the energy devoted to expressing your thoughts in words and sentences will order and discipline your mind, and help deter meandering.

Another thing you can do is pray over the Scriptures. Christians just setting out on the path of prayer sometimes pray for everything they can think of, glance at their watches, and discover they have been at it for all of three or four minutes. This experience sometimes generates feelings of defeat, discouragement, even despair. A great way to begin to overcome this problem is to pray through various biblical passages.

In other words, it is entirely appropriate to tie your praying to your Bible reading. The reading schemes you may adopt are legion. Some Christians read a chapter a day. Others advocate three chapters a day, with five on Sunday: this will get you through the Bible in a year. I am currently following a pattern set out by Robert Murray M'Cheyne in the last century: it will take me through the Psalms and the New Testament twice during this calendar year, and the rest of the Old Testament once. Whatever the reading scheme, it is essential to read the passage slowly and thoughtfully so as to retrieve at least some of its meaning and bearing on your life. Those truths and entailments can be the basis of a great deal of reflective praying.

A slight variation of this plan is to adopt as models several biblical prayers. Read them carefully, think through what they are saying, and pray analogous prayers for yourself, your family, your church, and for many others beyond your immediate circle.

Similarly, praying through the worship sections of the better hymnals can prove immensely edifying and will certainly help you to focus your mind and heart in one direction for a while.

Some pastors pace as they pray. One senior saint I know has long made it his practice to pray through the Lord's Prayer, thinking through the implications of each petition as he goes, and organizing his prayers around those implications.<sup>2</sup> Many others

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make prayer lists of various sorts, a practice that will be discussed in more detail later.

This may be part of the discipline of what has come to be called “journaling.” At many periods in the history of the church, spiritually mature and disciplined Christians have kept what might be called spiritual journals. What such journals contain varies enormously. The Puritans often used them to record their experiences with God, their thoughts and prayers, their triumphs and failures. Bill Hybels, the senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, takes a page to record what he did and thought the day before, and then to write out some prayers for the day ahead of him.<sup>3</sup> At least one seminary now requires that their students keep such a journal throughout their years of study.

The real value of journaling, I think, is several-fold: (a) It enforces a change of pace, a slowing down. It ensures time for prayer. If you are writing your prayers, you are not daydreaming. (b) It fosters self-examination. It is an old truism that only the examined life is worth living. If you do not take time to examine your own heart, mind, and conscience from time to time, in the light of God’s Word, and deal with what you find, you will become encrusted with the barnacles of destructive self-righteousness. (c) It ensures quiet articulation both of your spiritual direction and of your prayers, and this in turn fosters self-examination and therefore growth. Thus, journaling impedes mental drift.

But this is only one of many spiritual disciplines. The danger in this one, as in all of them, is that the person who is formally conforming to such a régime may delude himself or herself into thinking that the discipline is an end in itself, or ensures one of an exalted place in the heavenlies. That is why I rather oppose the imposition of such a discipline on a body of seminary students (however much I might encourage journaling): true spirituality can never be coerced.

Such dangers aside, you can greatly improve your prayer life if you combine these first two principles: set apart time for praying, and then use practical ways to impede mental drift.

**3. At various periods in your life, develop, if possible, a prayer-partner relationship.** Incidentally, if you are not mar-

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ried, make sure your prayer partner is someone of your own sex. If you are married and choose a prayer partner of the opposite sex, make sure that partner is your spouse. The reason is that real praying is an immensely intimate business—and intimacy in one area frequently leads to intimacy in other areas. There is good evidence that after some of the Kentucky revivals in the last century, there was actually an *increase* in sexual promiscuity. But whatever the hurdles that must be crossed in the pursuit of rectitude, try to develop an appropriate prayer-partner relationship.

In this connection I have been extremely fortunate. While I was still an undergraduate, in one summer vacation a single pastor took me aside and invited me to pray with him. We met once a week, on Monday nights, for the next three months. Sometimes we prayed for an hour or so, sometimes for much longer. But there is no doubt that he taught me more of the rudiments of prayer than anyone else. One or two of his lessons I shall detail later; for the moment, it is simply the importance of this one-on-one discipleship that I want to stress.

At various periods of my life, other such opportunities have come my way. For the last year or so of my doctoral study, another graduate student and I set aside time one evening a week to pray. Eventually (I was rather slow on this front), I got married. Like most couples, we have found that sustained time for prayer together is not easy to maintain. Not only do we live at a hectic pace, but each stage of life has its peculiar pressures. When you have two or three preschool-age children, for instance, you are up early and exhausted by the evening. Still, we have tried to follow a set pattern. Quite apart from grace at meals, which may extend beyond the expected “thank you” to larger concerns, and quite apart from individual times for prayer and Bible reading, as a family we daily seek God’s face. About half the time my wife or I leads the family in prayer; the rest of the time, the children join us in prayer. We have discovered the importance of injecting freshness and innovation into such times, but that is another subject. Before we retire at night, my wife and I invariably pray together, usually quite briefly. But in addition, at various points in our life together we have tried to set aside some time one evening

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a week to pray. Usually we achieve this for a few weeks, and then something breaks it up for a while. But we have tried to return to it, and we use those times to pray for family, church, students, pressing concerns of various sorts, our children, our life's direction and values, impending ministry, and much more.

If you know how to pray, consider seeking out someone else and teaching him or her how to pray. By teaching I do not mean set lessons so much as personal example communicated in a prayer-partner relationship. Such modeling and partnership will lead to the sorts of questions that will invite further sharing and discipleship. After all, it was because Jesus' disciples observed his prayer life that they sought his instruction in prayer (Luke 11:1).

If you know little about praying, then consider seeking out someone more mature in these matters and setting up a prayer-partner relationship for a period of time. If you cannot find a person like that, then foster such a relationship with someone who is at your own level of Christian growth. Together you may discover many useful truths. Prayer-partner relationships are as valuable for the discipline, accountability, and regularity they engender as for the lessons that are shared.

There are many variations on this sort of relationship. I know a few pastors who seek out a handful of people who will meet, perhaps early in the morning, to give themselves for an hour or more to intercessory prayer. The ground rules vary quite a bit from group to group. In some suburban churches, an early morning prayer meeting may be quite open and public, simply a good slot in the day to hold a public prayer meeting, granted the scheduling difficulties of suburbanites. But I am primarily thinking of more private groups of carefully selected prayer warriors. The ground rules for such groups may include the following: (1) Those who agree to participate must do so every week, without fail and without complaint, for a set period of time (six months?), barring, of course, unforeseen circumstances such as illness. (2) They must be Christians without any shadow of partisanship, bitterness, nurtured resentments, or affectation in their lives. In other words, they must be stamped with integrity and with genuine love for

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other believers, not least the obstreperous ones. (3) They must not be gossips.

Such clusters of prayer partners have been used by God again and again to spearhead powerful ministry and extravagant blessing. They may continue unnoticed for years, except in the courts of heaven. Some little groups grow and become large prayer meetings; others multiply and divide, maintaining the same principles.

But whatever the precise pattern, there is a great deal to be said for developing godly prayer-partner relationships.

**4. Choose models—but choose them well.** Most of us can improve our praying by carefully, thoughtfully listening to others pray. This does not mean we should copy everything we hear. Some people use an informal and chatty style in prayer that reflects their own personality and perhaps the context in which they were converted; others intone their prayers before God with genuine erudition coupled with solemn formality, deploying vocabulary and forms of English considered idiomatic 350 years ago. Neither extreme is an intrinsically good model; both might be good models, but not because of relatively external habits, and certainly not because of merely cultural or personal idiosyncrasy. When we find good models, we will study their content and urgency, but we will not ape their idiom.

Not every good model provides us with exactly the same prescription for good praying, exactly the same balance. All of them pray with great seriousness; all of them use arguments and seek goals that are already portrayed in Scripture. Some of them seem to carry you with them into the very throne room of the Almighty; others are particularly faithful in intercession, despite the most difficult circumstances in life and ministry; still others are noteworthy because of the breadth of their vision. All are characterized by a wonderful mixture of contrition and boldness in prayer.

Once again, my life has been blessed by some influential models. I must begin by mentioning my own parents. I remember how, even when we children were quite young, each morning my mother would withdraw from the hurly-burly of life to read her Bible and pray. In the years that I was growing up, my father, a Baptist minister, had his study in our home. Every morning we

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could hear him praying in that study. My father vocalized when he prayed—loudly enough that we knew he was praying, but not loudly enough that we could hear what he was saying. Every day he prayed, usually for about forty-five minutes. Perhaps there were times when he failed to do so, but I cannot think of one.

My father was a church planter in Québec, in the difficult years when there was strong opposition, some of it brutal. Baptist ministers alone spent a total of eight years in jail between 1950 and 1952. Dad's congregations were not large; they were usually at the lower end of the two-digit range. On Sunday mornings after the eleven o'clock service, Dad would often play the piano and call his three children to join him in singing, while Mum completed the preparations for dinner. But one Sunday morning in the late fifties, I recall, Dad was not at the piano, and was not to be found. I finally tracked him down. The door of his study was ajar. I pushed it open, and there he was, kneeling in front of his big chair, praying and quietly weeping. This time I could hear what he was saying. He was interceding with God on behalf of the handful of people to whom he had preached, and in particular for the conversion of a few who regularly attended but who had never trusted Christ Jesus.

In the ranks of ecclesiastical hierarchies, my father is not a great man. He has never served a large church, never written a book, never discharged the duties of high denominational office. Doubtless his praying, too, embraces idioms and stylistic idiosyncrasies that should not be copied. But with great gratitude to God, I testify that my parents were not hypocrites. That is the worst possible heritage to leave with children: high spiritual pretensions and low performance. My parents were the opposite: few pretensions, and disciplined performance. What they prayed for were the important things, the things that congregate around the prayers of Scripture. And sometimes when I look at my own children, I wonder if, should the Lord give us another thirty years, they will remember their father as a man of prayer, or think of him as someone distant who was away from home rather a lot and who wrote a number of obscure books. That quiet reflection often helps me to order my days.

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There have been many other models since the days of my youth. I can think of two women who in church prayer meetings invariably prayed with a great breadth of vision and a sense of utter reality, and above all with compelling compassion. They prayed in line with the truth of Scripture, but they prayed because they loved people. I remember the prayers of some of the Christian leaders I have met through the World Evangelical Fellowship.

I remember some of the public prayers of Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. In particular, I recall how shamed I was when one of Lloyd-Jones's daughters told me some months before he died that her father had asked her to tell me that he prayed for me regularly. It was not as if I were within his inner circle of friends—and so I suddenly realized how extensive his prayer ministry must be and how deep his commitment to intercede for ministers of the gospel.

Choose models, but choose them well. Study their content, their breadth, their passion, their unction—but do not ape their idiom.

**5. Develop a system for your prayer lists.** It is difficult to pray faithfully for a large spread of people and concerns without developing prayer lists that help you remember them. These lists come in a variety of forms. Many denominations and mission agencies and even some large local churches publish their own prayer lists. These can be a considerable help to those with large interest in the particular organization; otherwise, they may seem a trifle remote. Despite its remoteness, there is one prayer list that offers a tremendous compensating advantage. The list to which I am referring is the publication *Operation World*,<sup>4</sup> which over the course of a year takes you around the world to country after country and region after region, and provides you with succinct, intelligent information to assist you in your prayers. Its value lies in its ability to enlarge your horizons, to expand your interest in the world church and the world's needs.

Many Christians who give themselves to prayer, however, find that, in addition to such published information, it is wise and fruitful to prepare their own lists. These come in many forms. Some are really a subset of journaling, briefly described earlier in this chapter. One approach to journaling involves writing down

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prayer requests on the left-hand side of a notebook, along with a date and relevant Scriptures, and answers on the right-hand side. This approach has the advantage of encouraging thoughtful, *specific* requests. General intercession, as important as it may be, cannot so easily be linked to specific answers.

Although I have sometimes adopted this and other forms for my prayer lists, the prayer-list pattern I have followed in recent years I adapted from J. Herbert Kane, a veteran missionary to China (1935–1950) and then a productive teacher of world mission. Apart from any printed guides I may use, I keep a manila folder in my study, where I pray, and usually I take it with me when I am traveling. The first sheet in that folder is a list of people for whom I ought to pray regularly: they are bound up with me, with who I am. My wife heads the list, followed by my children and a number of relatives, followed in turn by a number of close friends in various parts of the world. The two institutional names on that sheet are the local church of which we are a part, and the seminary where I now teach. Of course, exactly what I pray for these people and institutions will vary from time to time as my perception of their needs changes (as my children grow older, for instance, or as a close friend faces a particular challenge in life or ministry), but the heart of my burden for these people is shaped, so far as I am able to shape it, by my grasp of what Scripture wants of us.

The second sheet in my folder lists short-range and intermediate-range concerns that will not remain there indefinitely. They include forthcoming responsibilities in ministry and various crises or opportunities that I have heard about, often among Christians I scarcely know. Either they are the sort of thing that will soon pass into history (like the project of writing this book!), or they concern people or situations too remote for me to remember indefinitely. In other words, the first sheet focuses on people for whom I pray constantly; the second includes people and situations for whom I may pray for a short or an extended period of time, but probably not indefinitely. The entries on the first sheet do not change, but their particular needs often do; the entries on the second sheet are

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largely shaped by short-term needs, and names and concerns are being added and deleted often.

The next item in my manila folder is the list of my advisees—the students for whom I am particularly responsible. This list includes some notes on their background, academic program, families, personal concerns and the like, and of course this list changes from year to year.

The rest of the folder is filled with letters—prayer letters, personal letters, occasionally independent notes with someone’s name at the top. These are filed in alphabetical order. When a new letter comes in, I highlight any matters in it that ought to be the subject of prayer, and then file it in the appropriate place in the folder. The letter it replaces is pulled out at the same time, with the result that the prayer folder is always up to date. I try to set aside time to intercede with God on behalf of the people and situations represented by these letters, taking the one on the top, then the next one, and the next one, and so forth, putting the top ones, as I finish with them, on the bottom of the pile. Thus although the list is alphabetized, on any day a different letter of the alphabet may confront me. As I write these lines, I see that names beginning with “F” are next in the folder.

I am not suggesting that this is the best system. It suits me, and I am happy with it. I need to use it more, not enlarge it more. But the system is flexible, always up-to-date, expandable; above all, it helps me pray. I tell my students that if they want me to pray for them regularly after they graduate, they need to write regular letters to me. Otherwise I shall certainly forget most of them.

Whatever the system, use prayer lists. All of us would be wiser if we would resolve never to put people down, except on our prayer lists.

**6. Mingle praise, confession, and intercession; but when you intercede, try to tie as many requests as possible to Scripture.** Both theoretical and practical considerations underlie this advice.

The theoretical considerations can best be set out by mentally conjuring up two extremes. The first judges it inappropriate to ask God for things. Surely he is sovereign: he does not need our counsel. If he is the one “who works out everything

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in conformity with the purpose of his will” (Eph. 1:11), surely it is a bit cheeky to badger him for things. He does not change the course of the universe because some finite, ignorant, and sinful human being asks him to. The appropriate response to him, surely, is worship. We should worship him for what he is and does. Because we so frequently skirt his ways, we should be ready to confess our sin. But to bring him our petitions is surely to misrepresent where true piety lies. Godliness rests in submission to the Almighty’s will, not in intercession that seeks to change that will. Petitionary prayer can therefore be dismissed as at best an impertinence, at worst a desperate insult to the sovereign and holy God. Besides, if God is really sovereign, he is going to do whatever he wants to do, whether or not he is asked to do it. Of course, if a Christian adopts this line, he or she is thinking in much the same way as a Muslim: the right approach to God binds you to a kind of theological determinism, not to say fatalism.

The second extreme begins with the slogan, “Prayer changes things.” Petitionary prayer is everything. This means that if people die and go to hell, it is because you or I or someone has neglected to pray. Does not Scripture say, “You do not have, because you do not ask God” (James 4:2)? Worship and confession must of course be allotted an appropriate part, but they can reduce to mere self-gratification: it can be fun to worship, a relief to confess your sins. Real work for God, however, demands that we wrestle with God, and cry, with Jacob, “I will not let you go unless you bless me” (Gen. 32:26). Not to intercede is to flee from your responsibilities as a Christian. Far from being an insult to God, petitionary prayer honors him because he is a God who likes to give his blessings in response to the intercession of his people. In fact, if you agonize in your prayers, fast much, plead the name of Jesus, and spend untold hours at this business of intercession, you cannot help but call down from heaven a vast array of blessings. Of course, if a Christian adopts this line, he or she is in danger of treating prayer much like magic: the right incantations produce the desired effect.

On the face of it, neither of these extremes captures the balance of biblical prayers, and both of them are reductionistic in

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their treatment of God. I shall return to this question at greater length in chapters 9 and 10. Anticipating the argument there, we must remember that the Bible simultaneously pictures God as utterly sovereign, and as a prayer-hearing and prayer-answering God. Unless we perceive this, and learn how to act on these simultaneous truths, not only will our views of God be distorted, but our praying is likely to wobble back and forth between a resigned fatalism that asks for nothing and a badgering desperation that exhibits little real trust.

Even a little reflective acquaintance with the God of the Bible acknowledges that he is not less than utterly sovereign, and not less than personal and responsive. Correspondingly, the Bible boasts many examples of praise and adoration, and no fewer examples of intercession. Indeed, “Christian prayer is marked decisively by petition, because this form of prayer discloses the true state of affairs. It reminds the believer that God is the source of all good, and that human beings are utterly dependent and stand in need of everything.”<sup>5</sup>

Of the various models that usefully capture both of these poles, the model of a personal relationship with a father is as helpful as any. If a boy asks his father for several things, all within the father’s power to give, the father may give him one of them right away, delay giving him another, decline to give him a third, set up a condition for a fourth. The child is not assured of receiving something because he has used the right incantation: that would be magic. The father may decline to give something because he knows it is not in the child’s best interests. He may delay giving something else because he knows that so many requests from his young son are temporary and whimsical. He may also withhold something that he knows the child needs until the child asks for it in an appropriate way. But above all, the wise father is more interested in a relationship with his son than in merely giving him things. Giving him things constitutes part of that relationship but certainly not all of it. The father and son may enjoy simply going out for walks together. Often the son will talk with his father not to obtain something, or even to find out something, but simply because he likes to be with him.

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None of these analogies is perfect, of course. But it is exceedingly important to remember that prayer is not magic and that God is personal as well as sovereign. There is more to praying than asking, but any sustained prayer to the God of the Bible will certainly include asking. And because we slide so easily into sinful self-centeredness, we must approach this holy God with contrition and confession of our sins. On other occasions we will focus on his love and forbearance, on the sheer splendor of his being, and approach him with joy and exuberant praise. The rich mixture of approaches to God mirrored in Scripture must be taken over into our own lives. This rich mixture is, finally, nothing more than a reflection of the many different components of the kind of relationship we ought to have with the God of the Bible.

In addition to these “theoretical” considerations (as I have called them), there are some intensely practical questions. If the one to whom we pray is the sort of God I have just portrayed, then when we ask him for things, when we intercede with him, we must not think either in fatalistic terms or in terms of magic. Rather, we must think in personal and relational categories. We ask our heavenly Father for things because he has determined that many blessings will come to us only through prayer. Prayer is his ordained means of conveying his blessings to his people. That means we must pray according to his will, in line with his values, in conformity with his own character and purposes, claiming his own promises. Practically speaking, *how do we do that?*

Where shall we learn the will of God, the values of God, the character and purposes of God, the promises of God? We shall learn such things in the Scriptures he has graciously given us. But that means that when we pray, when we ask God for things, we must try to tie as many requests as possible to Scripture. That is an immensely *practical* step.

Elsewhere I have told of my first hesitant experiences along these lines.<sup>6</sup> They began with that pastor who took me aside on Monday nights and began to teach me to pray. I shall not repeat the account of those first experiences here. From him, however, I learned that one of the most important elements in intercession

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is to think through, in the light of Scripture, what it is God wants us to ask for.

That is not a superficial question, and the answers are rarely easy to come by. Thoughtful, balanced answers depend on a growing grasp of just what the Bible says in its parts, and as a whole. For example, what, precisely, should we be praying for with respect to each member of our family—and why? Someone close to us contracts a terminal disease: what should we pray for, and why? For healing? For freedom from pain? For faith and perseverance? For acceptance of what has befallen? And would it make a difference if the person in question were seventy-five years of age, as opposed to twenty-nine? Why, or why not? Are there some things we may humbly request from God, and others we should boldly claim? If so, what kinds of things fall into each category?

A very useful book could be written on this subject, provided it were written by someone not only learned in the Scriptures but also schooled in years of prayer. No matter how well done, such a book would have a lot of loose ends, precisely because effective prayer is the fruit of a relationship with God, not a technique for acquiring blessings. Besides, there are countless situations in which we simply do not know what to pray for. Then the Christian who is diligent at prayer learns what Paul means when he writes that “the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will” (Rom. 8:26–27). When we pray, our intercessions may be off the mark; on many matters we do not know the Scriptures well enough, we do not know God well enough, to be confident about what we should be praying. But the Holy Spirit helps us by interceding for us with unuttered groanings offered to the Father while we Christians are praying.<sup>7</sup>

We must frankly admit that the task of tying as many petitions as possible to the Scriptures is challenging. Christians who grow in their ability to do this will learn that there are countless situations in prayer where we must simply rely on the Holy Spirit to intercede on our behalf. But having conceded these

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points—indeed, having insisted upon them—it is essential to pursue this discipline. How else shall we learn what our heavenly Father wants, what he expects us to ask for, and why, and how to approach him?

**7. If you are in any form of spiritual leadership, work at your public prayers.** It does not matter whether the form of spiritual leadership you exercise is the teaching of a Sunday school class, pastoral ministry, small-group evangelism, or anything else: if at any point you pray in public as a leader, then work at your public prayers.

Some people think this advice distinctly corrupt. It smells too much of public relations, of concern for public image. After all, whether we are praying in private or in public, we are praying to God: Surely he is the one we should be thinking about, no one else.

This objection misses the point. Certainly if we must choose between trying to please God in prayer, and trying to please our fellow creatures, we must unhesitatingly opt for the former. But that is not the issue. It is not a question of pleasing our human hearers, but of instructing them and edifying them.

The ultimate sanction for this approach is none less than Jesus himself. At the tomb of Lazarus, after the stone has been removed, Jesus looks to heaven and prays, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me” (John 11:41–42). Here, then, is a prayer of Jesus himself that is shaped in part by his awareness of what his human hearers need to hear.

The point is that although public prayer is addressed to God, it is addressed to God while others are overhearing it. Of course, if the one who is praying is more concerned to impress these human hearers than to pray to God, then rank hypocrisy takes over. That is why Jesus so roundly condemns much of the public praying of his day and insists on the primacy of private prayer (Matt. 6:5–8). But that does not mean there is no place at all for public prayer. Rather, it means that public prayer ought to be the overflow of one’s private praying. And then, judging by the example of Jesus

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at the tomb of Lazarus, there is ample reason to reflect on just what my prayer, rightly directed to God, is saying to the people who hear me.

In brief, public praying is a pedagogical opportunity. It provides the one who is praying with an opportunity to instruct or encourage or edify all who hear the prayer. In liturgical churches, many of the prayers are well-crafted, but to some ears they lack spontaneity. In nonliturgical churches, many of the prayers are so predictable that they are scarcely any more spontaneous than written prayers, and most of them are not nearly as well-crafted. The answer to both situations is to provide more prayers that are carefully and freshly prepared. That does not necessarily mean writing them out verbatim (though that can be a good thing to do). At the least, it means thinking through in advance and in some detail just where the prayer is going, preparing, perhaps, some notes, and memorizing them.

Public praying is a responsibility as well as a privilege. In the last century the great English preacher Charles Spurgeon did not mind sharing his pulpit: others sometimes preached in his home church even when he was present. But when he came to the “pastoral prayer,” if he was present, he reserved that part of the service for himself. This decision did not arise out of any priestly conviction that his prayers were more efficacious than those of others. Rather, it arose from his love for his people, his high view of prayer, his conviction that public praying should not only intercede with God but also instruct and edify and encourage the saints.

Many facets of Christian discipleship, not least prayer, are rather more effectively passed on by modeling than by formal teaching. Good praying is more easily caught than taught. If it is right to say that we should choose models from whom we can learn, then the obverse truth is that we ourselves become responsible to become models for others. So whether you are leading a service or family prayers, whether you are praying in a small-group Bible study or at a convention, work at your public prayers.

**8. Pray until you pray.** That is Puritan advice. It does not simply mean that persistence should mark much of our praying—though admittedly that is a point the Scriptures repeatedly make.

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Even though he was praying in line with God's promises, Elijah prayed for rain seven times before the first cloud appeared in the heavens. The Lord Jesus could tell parables urging persistence in prayer (Luke 11:5–13). If some generations need to learn that God is not particularly impressed by long-winded prayers, and is not more disposed to help us just because we are garrulous, our generation needs to learn that God is not impressed by the kind of brevity that is nothing other than culpable negligence. He is not more disposed to help us because our insincerity and spiritual flightiness conspire to keep our prayers brief. Our generation certainly needs to learn something more about persistence in prayer, and to that point I shall return in a later chapter. Even so, that is not quite what the Puritans meant when they exhorted one another to “pray until you pray.”

What they meant is that Christians should pray long enough and honestly enough, at a single session, to get past the feeling of formalism and unreality that attends not a little praying. We are especially prone to such feelings when we pray for only a few minutes, rushing to be done with a mere duty. To enter the spirit of prayer, we must stick to it for a while. If we “pray until we pray,” eventually we come to delight in God's presence, to rest in his love, to cherish his will. Even in dark or agonized praying, we somehow know we are doing business with God. In short, we discover a little of what Jude means when he exhorts his readers to “pray in the Holy Spirit” (Jude 20)—which presumably means it is treacherously possible to pray *not* in the Spirit.

Something of the same perspective is presupposed in an anonymous poem that C. S. Lewis quotes:

They tell me, Lord, that when I seem  
 To be in speech with you,  
 Since but one voice is heard, it's all a dream  
 One talker aping two.

Sometimes it is, yet not as they  
 Conceive. Rather, I  
 Seek in myself the things I hoped to say,  
 But lo!, my wells are dry.

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Then, seeing me empty, you forsake  
 The listener's role and through  
 My dumb lips breathe and into utterance wake  
 The thoughts I never knew.

And thus you neither need reply  
 Nor can; thus, while we seem  
 Two talkers, thou art One forever, and I  
 No dreamer, but thy dream.<sup>8</sup>

As Lewis comments, this “dream” language smacks rather too much of pantheism “and was perhaps dragged in for the rhyme.”<sup>9</sup> Doubtless the anonymous author is a better poet than theologian. But there is something important here just the same. If God is the one “who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Phil. 2:13), then of course he is the God who by his Spirit helps us in our praying. Every Christian who has learned the rudiments of praying knows by experience at least a little of what this means. The Puritans knew a great deal of it. That is why they exhorted one another to “pray until you pray.” Such advice is not to become an excuse for a new legalism: there are startling examples of very short, rapid prayers in the Bible (e.g., Neh. 2:4). But in the Western world we urgently need this advice, for many of us in our praying are like nasty little boys who ring front door bells and run away before anyone answers.

Pray until you pray.

These, then, are some of the lessons I have learned from other Christians. But I would not for a moment want to leave the impression that they constitute a rule, a litmus test, still less a “how-to” manual. The words of Packer in this regard are worth pondering:<sup>10</sup>

I start with the truism that each Christian's prayer life, like every good marriage, has in it common factors about which one can generalize and also uniquenesses which no other Christian's prayer life will quite match. You are you, and I am I, and we must each find our own way with God, and there is no recipe for prayer that can work for us like a handyman's do-it-yourself

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manual or a cookery book, where the claim is that if you follow the instructions you can't go wrong. Praying is not like carpentry or cookery; it is the active exercise of a personal relationship, a kind of friendship, with the living God and his Son Jesus Christ, and the way it goes is more under divine control than under ours. Books on praying, like marriage manuals, are not to be treated with slavish superstition, as if perfection of technique is the answer to all difficulties; their purpose, rather, is to suggest things to try. But as in other close relationships, so in prayer: you have to find out by trial and error what is right for you, and you learn to pray by praying. Some of us talk more, others less; some are constantly vocal, others cultivate silence before God as their way of adoration; some slip into glossolalia, others make a point of not slipping into it; yet we may all be praying as God means us to do. The only rules are, stay within biblical guidelines and within those guidelines, as John Chapman puts it, "pray as you can and don't try to pray as you can't."

### Questions for Review and Reflection

1. List the positive and negative things you have learned about praying by listening to others pray.
2. List practical ways in which you will commit yourself to improve your prayer life during the next six months.
3. What do Christian preachers and teachers mean when they encourage us to "meditate prayerfully on the Word of God"?