



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Not about Me
(Prayer, pp. 26-35)

What do you think?

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Christian Reflection

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Not about Me

Perhaps a burning preoccupation with oneself can coexist with our prayers of thanksgiving, confession, petition, and intercession, even as it contaminates and domesticates them. But the prayer of praise requires a deep decentering of the self.

Prayer

As we turn aside from all else...

Speak Lord, your servants are listening.

As we declare our faith...

Speak Lord, your servants are listening.

As we acknowledge our need...

Speak Lord, your servants are listening.

As we search for wisdom...

Speak Lord, your servants are listening.

As we listen for your call...

Speak Lord, your servants are listening.

As we lift up our hearts...

Speak Lord, your servants are listening.

Scripture Reading: 1 Samuel 3:1-18

Reflection

"I remember reading a list of the five elements of prayer: praise, thanksgiving, confession, petition (for self), and intercession (for others). It triggered a shocking recognition: I do not know the first thing about prayer," writes Merold Westphal. He is comfortable thanking God for good gifts, seeking forgiveness, and asking for God's help for himself and others. The tough one is praise. Why this "dis-ease"? Praise requires "the deepest decentering of the self, deep enough to begin dismantling or, if you like, deconstructing that burning preoccupation with myself."

Westphal explores three prayers to reveal the "kenotic gesture," the total emptying of the self, that is "the condition for the possibility not only of praise but of all five elements of prayer, insofar as they can be united in a complex whole in which each knows its proper place and plays its proper role."

- ▶ *Samuel's prayer*, "Here I am for you called me. Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:5, 10), teaches us three things about prayer. First, prayer is the task of a lifetime, for it requires that we really listen to God. "We only kid ourselves," Westphal says, "if we think we have finished learning how to listen to God as God deserves to be listened to." Second, "prayer needs silence, not only external but also internal silence; for our minds and hearts can be and usually are very noisy places even when we emit no audible sound. God speaks in and as the silence." Finally, Christian prayer is rooted in Scripture. "The very call to which we may respond 'Here am I' can come as a mysterious voice in the night, but it typically comes through the words of Scripture, directly or indirectly in preaching, hymnody, liturgy, and so forth. Before prayer is a fivefold speech act on our part, it is listening to the word of God as found in Scripture."



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- ▶ *Mary's prayer at the annunciation, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; Let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38), addresses God as the One who speaks and is present. The question is whether she is willing and able to be present with God. She knows "that to be present to God, she must turn away from the world in which she has been immersed. Not that there is something evil about the world, into which, in fact, God will send her back with a task. It is rather that apart from that turning, the world is defined by her agenda, however innocent, and not God's."*
- ▶ *This 'prayer' of Elvis, "I want you, I need you, I love you with all my heart," might be addressed by the believing soul to God. In its crassest, most self-preoccupied form, this "I love you" might simply mean "I want and I need your help, your blessings, the benefits of having you on my side." But suppose one really means, speaking to God, "I want you, you yourself, not your gifts" (cf. Psalm 42:1-2a; 63:1). Here is a glimmer of hope. "But if we ask how it might be possible to 'have' or to 'possess' God, to drink of the living water (John 4:7-14, 7:37-39), we will realize that the 'you belong to me' path leads away from our goal, and only the 'I belong to you – I am at your disposal' path leads to it. God cannot be 'had' in any other way," Westphal writes. "God is always at our disposal, always giving Godself to those who are willing to take. But the only way to take this gift is to place ourselves at God's disposal, to give not this or that but our very selves to God."*

Henri Nouwen described the paradox of prayer this way: "it asks for a serious effort while it can only be received as a gift."[†] Westphal concludes: "No doubt it is a privilege to be gifted; but there is a price. One must abandon the project of being the center in terms of which meaning, and truth, and goodness are defined. To dare to pray is to consider the price worth paying. To mature in prayer is to discover that the price itself is a gift."

Study Questions

1. How can "a burning preoccupation with oneself" contaminate and domesticate prayers of thanksgiving, confession, petition, and intercession? Do we easily overcome this problem when we pray with a communal "we" instead of "I"?
2. If we take the prayers of Samuel and Mary to be models of praise, then adoration is not saying flowery words about God. What, then, is the substance of their adoration?
3. In what sense, then, is Christian prayer both "the task of a lifetime" and a gift from God?
4. Discuss Merold Westphal's claim that "Scripture and prayer are integrally intertwined. Before prayer is a speech act on our part, it is listening to the word of God as found in Scripture." How does Scripture guide and inform your praying?
5. How, according to Westphal, does Mary's prayer echo in the life and prayers of her son, Jesus?

Departing Hymn: "When Gathered Saints in Common Praise" (vv. 1 and 4)

[†] Henri J. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 89.

Not about Me

Lesson Plans

| <i>Abridged Plan</i> | <i>Standard Plan</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Prayer | Prayer |
| Scripture Reading | Scripture Reading |
| Reflection (skim all) | Reflection (all sections) |
| Questions 1, 2, and 3 | Questions (selected) |
| Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn |

Teaching Goals

1. To explore how all prayer, especially the prayer of praise, requires a deep decentering of the self, shifting the focus from ourselves and our projects.
2. To discuss how Christian prayer, in all its forms, must take root in Scripture.
3. To consider how prayer can be both “the task of a lifetime” and a gift.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Prayer (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

The story is told of some fourth-century monks who asked Abba Agatho what he discovered to be the most difficult part of the Christian life. “I may be wrong but I think nothing needs so much effort as prayer to God,” he replied. “If anyone wants to pray, the demons try to interrupt the prayer, for they know that prayer is the only thing that hinders them. All the other efforts in a religious life, whether they are made vehemently or gently, have room for a measure of rest. But we need to pray till our dying breath. That is the great struggle.” (*The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christians*, 12.2, translated by Benedicta Ward)

Merold Westphal agrees that even learning to pray is “the task of a lifetime” because it requires that we abandon our preoccupation with ourselves and our agendas. He calls this shift in focus the “deep decentering of the self.”

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading responsively the prayer in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Samuel 3:1-18 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This discussion focuses on the essential change of character that is produced in us and required of us by the practice of Christian prayer. Merold Westphal calls this change “a deep decentering of the self,” as prayerful adoration of God replaces one’s preoccupation with oneself, one’s interests, and one’s agendas. He describes the prayerful attitude as a “*kenotic* gesture,” adapting a Greek phrase from the hymn of praise to Christ who “emptied himself” (Philippians 2:7).

As he reviews the prayers of Samuel and Mary as scriptural models of prayer, Westphal highlights their stance of silent waiting before the Lord. We will explore this theme in more detail in the sixth study guide, “Our Deepest Prayer.” Here it is important to emphasize that he is not describing a therapeutic practice of yogic meditation, but our preparation for and welcoming of a life-changing relationship with the God who is present and speaks to us through the words of Scripture.

Study Questions

1. Westphal begins with this story: “Our neighbors were visiting a cathedral in Italy with their three-year-old son. He saw a woman kneeling in one of the pews and asked what she was doing, ‘She’s praying,’ he was told. ‘She’s asking God for things.’ A few minutes later his parents found him kneeling in one of the pews. In response to their query, he replied that he was asking God for – gelato!” This three-year-old beginner’s prayer reminds us that too often we have not matured beyond our own gelato prayers: we just thank God for *my* gifts, seek divine forgiveness for *my* sins (or, more even more selfishly, just to remove *my* guilty feelings), and ask God to help *me* or *my* loved ones. The focus is on *me*, and I treat God like a divine therapist who responds to my beck and call.

Reflecting on the vulgarity of selfishly praying “Our father in heaven, hallowed be *my* name, *my* kingdom come, *my* will be done,” and so on, Westphal notes: “The crassness of this formulation is barely mitigated if we substitute *our* name, kingdom, and will for *mine*.” Communities of faith can offer self-centered communal prayers. As we consider how the self must become decentered in prayer, we should also recognize that congregations must become decentered in their communal praying.

2. The prayers of Samuel and Mary are remarkably short, simple, and unadorned. Surely they were spoken quietly, without dramatic flair. Their adoration is in being fully present to God, silently listening, and offering their full obedience. No part of their stance of adoration is easy for us, Westphal notes. Sometimes it is easier to say wonderful things about God – for *me* to say them before others do, and more fervently, with larger gestures, using more complex theological concepts, and so on – which would also call more attention to *me*. It is the very simplicity of Samuel and Mary’s adoration that is difficult for us.
3. The lifetime task is to “abandon the project of being the center in terms of which meaning, and truth, and goodness are defined. To dare to pray is to consider the price worth paying,” Westphal writes. Yet, in this task we are constantly being strengthened by God’s gracious Spirit. So, “to mature in prayer is to discover that the price itself is a gift.”

Encourage members to share their stories of learning to pray and growing in prayer. Has it been a great effort for them to pray, to be fully present and obedient to God? When have they experienced prayer as a gift, despite the effort of attention and submission it required?

4. “Scripture and prayer are so integrally intertwined,” Westphal writes, that “prayer can never be separated from some form of *lectio divina*,” the practice of attentively and obediently meditating on a scripture passage. “The very call to which we may respond ‘Here am I’ can come as a mysterious voice in the night, but it typically comes through the words of Scripture, directly or indirectly in preaching, hymnody, liturgy, and so forth.”

Scripture may inform our prayers directly, as we memorize prayers from the Bible, use biblical phrases in our own prayers, reflect on a passage of Scripture in *lectio divina*, meditate on the meaning of a biblical story or teaching, and so on. Or its influence may be more indirect, as our prayers are shaped by phrases we remember from scripturally based hymns, responsive readings, devotional books, and so on, or as we pray from a prayer book or written liturgy.

5. Mary’s prayer is reflected in Jesus’ model prayer (Matthew 6:9-13; cf. Luke 11:2b-4), and in his prayer in Gethsemane (Mark 14:36/ Matthew 23:39; cf. Luke 22:42). The model prayer, or the Lord’s Prayer, requires attention and obedience to God when we pray to the Father that *your* name be praised, *your* kingdom come, and *your* will be done. “After, but only after I have made this move, I am in a position to pray rightly for material and spiritual blessings, daily bread, and forgiveness, for myself and for ‘us,’” notes Westphal. In the garden, Jesus adopts “the posture...of belonging and disposability” before the Father.

Departing Hymn

“When Gathered Saints in Common Praise” can be found on pp. 51-53 of *Prayer*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.