

## STEP 11: PRAYER(2)

In our studies of Step 10, we have already talked at some length about prayer. If you have not yet read those studies, you may want to do so before you read this one. One of the main reasons for this suggestion is that what we have to say about prayer is controversial, and a significant part of that controversy is dealt with in the treatment of Step 10-based prayer.

If you *have* read that study, you will know that we have taken the usual divisions of prayer into different kinds, and grouped petitionary, penitential, and intercessory prayer together, linking them directly with Step 10. This particular study will group together prayers of thanksgiving, prayers of adoration, and meditative or contemplative prayer, and associate them with our practice of Step 11. Our thesis will be that all these activities are really meditative or contemplative prayer – that they are, in fact, meditation rather than prayer at all, in the sense that prayer is normally understood. In other words, prayers of thanksgiving or adoration are, when offered meaningfully and thoughtfully, really meditation.

One thing that ought to make this discussion of Step 11-based prayer simpler is that we have already dealt, in our discussions of Step 10-based prayer, with the issue of our wanting things and looking to something or somebody called God in order to obtain them. Hopefully, we won't be doing this as much as we used to if we are regularly practicing Step 10. It is always a great deal easier to focus on our working of the last three Steps when the business of our desires has been removed from the equation.

But in Step 11-based prayer we encounter another problematic preconception: that of a God who is external to us. In this case, instead of being some mythical Santa Claus figure who deliberately or arbitrarily gives us or doesn't give us what we want, God is now some gigantic Other whom we should thank for what we *have* been given even though we probably didn't deserve it, or should be adored or venerated because He or She or It is so wonderful, powerful, or perfect when compared to the miserable beings that we are. The childish notion that we are able to influence, persuade, or flatter God into giving these things (our immature idea of Step 10) is now succeeded by an attitude that is supposedly more adult or mature, the attitude that – far from being able to get God to do these things – we are unworthy, helplessly guilty, undeserving, and impotent. Consequently, we are almost pitifully dependent upon this God, and should be unreservedly grateful for whatever God provides because it is entirely a gift of grace.

Now, on the face of it this is a definite improvement over the “gimme!” model of God that underpins much petitionary or intercessory prayer, as we saw in the previous Step 10 study on prayer. We are no longer under any illusions as to our ability to provide for ourselves. We appear to have abandoned the notion that our lives should somehow be an equal or near-equal partnership between us and God, with God thoughtfully providing what we think we need. In fact, this model of God emphasizes our total God-dependence. So far, so good.

But when we look more closely, we see that we are making the same fundamental mistake we made before – that of treating God as though God is somehow *other* than us. We are *here*; God is *there*, by which we mean somewhere other than *here*.

And the underlying problem which lurks behind this idea of the *otherness* of God is this: It allows our ego to remain center stage, which is of course where it always wants to be. *I am here, right here and now*; and this God-entity, whatever He, She, It, or They may be, is *somewhere else*. What it is important to note is that *there are still two players present in this mistaken view*. There is the great, omnipotent, omniscient and eternal God ... and then there is *I*. This *I*, of course, does not cut a very impressive figure any longer. This is no longer the *I* that caused all the mayhem with its addiction-driven behavior. This is a humbler *I*, a down-sized *I*, an *I* that knows and accepts that it is quite unable to run its own life alone, an *I* that actively seeks fellowship with this God-entity ... an entity which is, of course, *over there*.

This view of the divine cosmos naturally contains other entities too – other people, for example: our relations, our friends, our enemies, the seven billion or so people we've never met; and the world of plants and animals, of course, not to mention a universe full of stars, galaxies, black holes and so on. But these other entities are, in a sense, bit-players. At the center of this model sits *I*, a diminished *I* perhaps, but still at the center, albeit totally dependent on God ... a God who, wherever He, She, It, or They may be, is *somewhere other than here*.

The model of God we are discussing here seems naturally to encourage the kinds of prayer we want to discuss in this study. After all, if God is *other* than *I*, if *I* am here and God is somewhere *other* than here, and if *I* am completely powerless and God-dependent, doesn't it make sense to *thank* this Other for the good things that I have, to *adore* and *praise* this God for being so wonderful, so kind, and ... so condescending ...?

The 1967 movie *Bedazzled* takes this view of the relationship between *I* and God and pushes it to its ultimate, ludicrous conclusion. In the movie, the Devil (the character George, played by Peter Cook) describes for Stanley Moon (played by Dudley Moore) why he tired of being the favorite angel in Heaven, revolted against God, and decided instead to “rule in Hell,” as the poet Milton puts it. “Pretend I'm God and now dance around me and sing my praises,” says George to Stanley. Stanley, after doing this for a short time, says that he's getting tired. “That's exactly how I felt!” says George.

One of the most ironic aspects of this idea of the supremacy, the omniscience, and above all else the Otherness of God is that it appears to have taken root most firmly in that overwhelmingly democratically republican of nations, the USA. For the USA was born as least in part as a result of its banishment of the idea of kingship; and yet this notion of the Otherness of God, so warmly espoused by the American nation, is derived entirely from kingship. It is a king who is treated, honored, and praised in the manner manifested in prayers of thanksgiving and adoration. He is treated this way precisely because his followers regard him as qualitatively as well as quantitatively different from themselves – because they regard him as Other. At the periods in history of the rise of Judaism and

Christianity, no other model was available to describe God. Using the model of kingship made perfect sense to the Jews and the Christians because it was a model every believer knew of and understood. Today, particularly in the West, it makes no sense at all.

The root of the problem with prayers of thanksgiving and adoration, then, is that they only make sense if we are willing to see God as *other* than ourselves. To see God as *other* than myself means that my ego is able to remain on-stage – that my universe remains, at its core, a place that is occupied by two entities: a wonderful, all-powerful, all-knowing God, and miserable *I*, utterly God-dependent, quite unable to fend for myself ... but still there on the stage.

Step 11-based prayer is really devoted to getting that second entity off the stage entirely. In fact, it's devoted to establishing the reality that there is no *I* at all – not in the sense that we have just described. Step 11-based prayer is devoted to the dissolution of the ego, to the acceptance and above all the *experience* that there is only God – not simply that there is only God in the world or only God in the universe, but that there is only God. And – to repeat – Step 11-based prayer is intended to allow us to *experience* this truth – not to acknowledge it as an intellectual, emotional, religious or spiritual truth but to *experience* it, to *live* it, to *be* it.

If this is true – that there is nothing other than God – then prayers of adoration or thanksgiving, prayers in which *I* thank or adore a God who is *other* than *I*, make no sense. In fact, such prayers carry a risk with them – a risk that, by praying these prayers, *I* merely reinforce the myth that it is possible and meaningful for *I* to be *here* adoring or thanking a God who is *over there*, separate and different from me.

We now find ourselves in an interesting situation with respect to Step 11-based prayer. If there is no real *I* here and there is no “God over there,” what is it that we are able to do in such prayer to experience this true God who is in fact everything?

The answer is ... *nothing*.

There is nothing that we can do. If we pray in the normal sense of the word, if we think about God, if we try to speak to God, then we are merely back in the position where we are, in some sense, *other* than God. We find ourselves back at the position we were at in Step 1 with respect to our core addiction. What was it that we were able to do about that core addiction? The answer, of course, was *nothing*. Our recovery paradoxically only began when we “fully concede[d] to our innermost selves” that we were helplessly and hopelessly addicted – that we could do absolutely nothing to help ourselves.

Step 11-based prayer, therefore, is the practice of *doing nothing in the presence of God*, whatever and wherever God may be. It is the act of modeling, right here and now, what we are able to do to help ourselves, which is *nothing*. We may call this act *meditation* or *contemplative prayer* or *centering*; we may call it all kinds of things; but at its heart it is, and must be, the practice of *doing nothing in the presence of God*.

Now, the moment we attempt to do nothing in the presence of God, we find ourselves in the midst of difficulties. For it turns out, as every potential meditator has discovered, that doing nothing is the most difficult thing in the world. When we attempt to do nothing, we discover that our minds and our bodies are simply not willing to play along. Our bodies twitch and wriggle. Our minds generate thoughts and tempt us to become absorbed with them. Of course, now we understand why we encounter this revolt when we attempt to do nothing in the presence of God. We now understand that we are embarked on an activity designed to sweep away our ego; and our ego will resist that more strongly than anything else we might undertake, for when we pray or meditate in this way we are looking to encompass its death.

So we cast around for something to do which comes as close as possible to doing nothing. Most of us watch the breath. We watch the in-breath, the out-breath, and that fascinating gap that occurs between the out-breath and the next in-breath, that simulation of death. Almost instantly we forget to watch the breath. A thought arises, an idea, a feeling; we hear a noise, or smell something cooking, and our minds take over and race away. Then – a little later, perhaps much later – we recall that we are simply watching the breath, and we return to it. *That is the practice of meditation: watching the breath, forgetting to watch the breath, realizing we have forgotten to watch the breath, going back to watching the breath.* Everyone who ever meditates, who ever practices this business of doing nothing in the presence of God, goes through that sequence over and over again during the period of prayer and meditation. It is *meant* to be like that.

This pattern, this sequence of watching the breath, forgetting to do so, and then remembering to do it again, is a perpetual reminder to us of what we are able to do to bring us closer to God, and that is *nothing*. The very act of failing to remember to watch the breath and then remembering all over again is an actual *acting-out* of our helplessness. It is an *acting-out* of the key truth of our total God-dependence. It is an *experience* – a direct experience of God, a direct experience of our complete one-ness, our complete identity with God. There is no longer any need for adoration, no need for thanks. In this Step 11-based prayer/meditation, we not only act out or model our God-dependence, we encounter God directly and – with time – find we are at least to some extent absorbed into God.

*For more information about meditation as “doing nothing in the presence of God,” see the Step 11 study entitled Doing Nothing.*