



David Torkington • March 23, AD2017

Did you know that you can't really pray without distractions? Don't take my word for it, take the word of St Teresa of Avila. When she went to confession to St Peter of Alcantara she told him that she couldn't pray any longer because of the distractions that attacked her every time she tried to pray. He told her that you can't really pray without them. If that is not enough to convince you, read about Jesus and the distractions and temptations that he had to combat during his forty days in the desert. The first Christians had similar experiences when they tried to follow his example in the forty days before Easter by setting aside extra time for daily prayer.

When Prayer Becomes Difficult

For those who take prayer seriously and journey on beyond the fizz and pop of first fervour, what was once easy and filled with sweetness and light will become dark and difficult and full of distractions and temptations. Prayer does not grow because distractions and temptations gradually disappear it grows because they get stronger and stronger and the ensuing battle is the place where true Christian prayer reaches its height. Beginners always think it is about having nice feelings and emotional highs. Romantics think it is all about having feelings of inner peace, and the latest gurus from the East, seem to think it is all about having high states of transcendental awareness and mastering the techniques that lead to Nirvana. When St Francis came back from his first serious attempts at prayer, he came back so exhausted that even his friends hardly recognized him. He probably overdid it as beginners often do, but the truth is, trying to fend off distractions and temptations in prayer can be rather exacting for those who persevere when they are tempted to throw the towel in too soon and turn on the telly.

Remember Jesus in his prayer, in his conflict with the power of evil in the desert and later in Gethsemane. To begin with, God often gives an experience of his presence that leaves us in no doubt who is at work. Initially, this is usually of short duration and is but a glimpse of what will be of longer duration when the purification about to begin is brought to completion.

When Love Strikes Our Obstinate Heart

The pain that all must experience who want to travel on beyond first beginnings in prayer is the pain caused by the irresistible force of God's love, as it strikes the immovable object, which is our obstinate and sinful heart. Do you remember the question that was asked in physics class at school? What happens when an irresistible force strikes an immovable object? Heat is generated. The same principle that applies to the physical order applies to the spiritual order too. When the irresistible power of God's love strikes the immovable object of a proud, intractable human heart, then heat is generated. It is the heat that comes from the fire of the Holy Spirit. It is the purgatorial purification that all must go through before union with God, on the simple principle that unlike things cannot be united. Somewhere between now and union with God, a likeness has to be created within us. The Holy Spirit has been sent to create that likeness by purifying us of all and everything that prevents us from being united with God. The deepest distractions and temptations arise from the sinfulness within that barricades God out. Once the Holy Spirit has burned that away there is nothing left to keep him out.

True Christian Prayer

Saints have already passed through their purification here on earth and so can become a perfect instrument that God is able to use to communicate to others the love they have received. Do not believe the pseudo-mystics from the East or the West, who try to deceive far too many people today into believing that true mysticism is primarily about high states of consciousness or esoteric experiences with accompanying phenomena of dubious authenticity. They attract the spiritual butterflies who are always looking for new seductions on which to settle, at least for a while. If you are ever in doubt, turn to the Gospels and see Jesus at prayer; see Him at war with the power of evil throughout his life in Palestine until his death in Jerusalem. True Christian prayer always involves a fight, a battle, a conflict that is fiercest in the desert where no escapisms can lure the believer from the repentance that exercises the muscles of the heart like nothing else on earth.

A Tug-Of- War with Distractions

When I was a student in Suffolk in England, we were invited to enter a tug-o'-war team in a local competition. When we saw the other teams from the local villages in action we were ready to throw in the towel before we even started. Then one of the lecturers, who once played rugby for Wales, said we would beat all comers if we were prepared to train. For five months we trained every afternoon without fail, until our muscles had grown, and hardened to the task ahead of us. To cut a long story short, we won the competition outright and pulled our opponents into the river, over which the final competition took place. We were the toast of the town for beating some of the heftiest farmers I have ever seen. We did it by persistent and consistent practice, that enabled the muscles of our bodies to generate the power and strength that made us unbeatable.

Battling Against Distractions

The same process takes place in prayer. If you are prepared to give consistent daily time for practising prayer, battling against distractions and temptations, then gradually the most important muscles that you possess are developed. They are the spiritual muscles of the heart that open that heart ever more fully to God. Then we have to learn the final lesson and that is how to wait on God. It is here that one of the most important of all the virtues is learnt – patience.

St Catherine of Siena said that if you do not have any patience, it is ten to one you do not have any other virtues either that are worth writing home about. Patience, according to her, is not so

much a virtue, but the test of all virtue – that puts us all in our place! She insists that true patience can only be found through prayer. She does not just mean praying for patience, although that is a good start, but practising patience inside of prayer itself, by patiently waiting on God especially in darkness and aridity whilst battling against distractions and temptations. No matter where you begin or how you progress, the time will come when you have done all that you can do, and then you have to learn how to wait patiently on God. It is here that a person learns by practical experience that it is not they who are in control, but God. He comes when he chooses not when we choose. Our job is to be ready at all times to receive Him, waiting like the wise virgins.

The Real Test of Love

Waiting on God is easy when he seems to be close at hand, listening to all we have to say and granting any request that we make of Him. That is what is called cupboard love. But the real test of love is when we are prepared to go on loving, go on giving, go on waiting when He seems far away when He does not seem to be listening at all or granting what is asked of Him. St John of the Cross makes it quite clear that anyone who perseveres in prayer will inevitably come to the place where they have to wait on God in darkness amidst dryness and aridity. Here there will be, not only many distractions but temptations too, against faith, hope, and charity. When there is no experience of the presence of God for prolonged periods of time you begin to ask, not just where is God, but is there a God, and if there is no God, what hope is there? Only those who are prepared to persevere waiting on God despite these temptations will be purified and refined in such a way that they are ready and prepared to receive the One who comes when you least expect him. Then his love will gradually transform them into the One they have chosen to follow.

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