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Private Prayer – Can it Reduce Fear? *by Stephen Russell-Lacy*

The worldly-minded suppose private prayer to be no different from any other personal practice that induces relaxation. They ask ‘Don’t we relax by sitting in a comfortable position, in a quiet setting, having something calming to focus our attention on, and adopting a passive attitude?’

Yet most people would agree that private prayer involves a connection with a mysterious sense of presence. This experience being in line with whatever happens to be the individual’s image of the transcendent. Those people who see themselves as spiritual but not religious tend to think in terms of linking to a creative life-force. They call this the universal mind, higher power, divine being or spiritual source. The western Christian tradition promotes and values the inward journey, encouraging the discipline of personal prayer, times of quietness, and what is called communion with God.

“Prayer is more than meditation. In meditation, the

source of strength is one's self. When one prays, one goes to a source of strength greater than one's own." (Madame de Stael, French political theorist)

According to the Tearfund survey, after praying, 38% reported feeling "peaceful and content". This is a state of mind writers about religion often claim for prayer.

So, can private prayer really reduce fear? And if so, how? I would suggest this depends on several factors.

1 Private prayer with a loving sphere

Sometimes people yearn for God's help but do not ask for it because they believe they deserve only his judgment. They have an idea of a punitive and vindictive God

The way people in distress see their relationships with a compassionate face of God can be a great source of comfort and strength to them. In their darkest hours many of them are sustained by their belief that they are loved by the source of all that is good and all will be well.

2 Engaging one's feelings in private prayer

Going through the motions of a prayer in line with what one thinks is one thing. But are the deeper feelings engaged? I would suggest that private prayer can only be effective in reducing anxiety, if it inspires emotional acceptance of, and trust in, the power of a loving providence.

3 Being genuine in private prayer

The spiritual philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg wrote in his diary about one occasion, when he was reading the Lord's prayer. He claimed to have psychic awareness. In a mystical state of consciousness, he said that he was surprised to notice the spirit of a robber reading it with him. "I observed that he did so with such devotion that I could not tell whether he was of the true faith or not... He then adored the Lord as if from the heart, so that he might be protected."

Swedenborg commented that this devoutness was short-lived and only lasted as long as the person thought he was in danger. It did not run deep. When the peril passed he was the same thief as before.

We can kid ourselves we are being honest. But how could self-deception mislead an omniscient deity who sees everything? Private prayer lacking authenticity would seem a complete waste of time.

4 Pursuing spiritual things in private prayer

In a natural state of anxiety, I may be thinking about what I want: what I crave: what benefits me. But when a worldly and self-centered state of mind rules our lives, don't we close ourselves to higher insights and intuitions?

Private prayer for Christians is putting on the 'mind of Christ'. This takes them out of themselves and raises their spirit to a higher level.

5 Seeking the divine will in private prayer

Sceptics ask 'but if there were a God of Love, wouldn't he be already doing all that is possible to make things better and so not need our prayers as a reminder?' It's true that in a state of fear we can be desperate for help. For a while it may seem that God is neglecting us or has forgotten us. We feel we need to tell him what to do. But as we start to pray, we soon realise our illusion.

"The function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays." (philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, Danish existential philosopher,)

6 Humble submission in private prayer

We can feel anxious about our misdeeds but be put off prayer by the Christian word 'sin'. And assume that the humility required of private prayer amounts to guilt-ridden self-abasement.

On the contrary, I would suggest that no such attitude is required. Instead of judging ourselves as generally bad, we might simply consider only a particular thing we did as so. It is not me who is unworthy, but rather something I once wanted.

Having a humble attitude doesn't stop us from retaining a positive self-attitude. If we believe that the source of all goodness is able to be present within each of us, how could we not recognise this?

7 Adopting a co-operative attitude

Non-believers point out that religious people seem to be expecting a miracle from an imaginary supernatural entity. Yes, I would say it is a mistake to see prayer as a quick fix for personal fears.

I may start a prayer assuming that whatever is to be done to take away my fear is fully in the hands of God. But by the end of the prayer I realise that I also need to make a

change. In other words, not praying for an earthly miracle but rather praying for support and strength needed to do what is needed to face my fears.

8 Attributing healing to the Divine

Prayer invites us to attribute calmness and peace to the one prayed to. Otherwise we have little alternative but to take credit for ourselves. Or else to attribute a change in mood to chance.

The religious attitude is to attribute what is good to a transcendent source of all that is good. But one which is also present deep down within our soul.

Conclusion

I just want to be a calmer person who feels less anxious about the uncertainties of life. To also feel less anxious about my wrong-doing. I have learned I can put my trust in the universe and the Lord its creator, and feel a sense of comfort, reassurance and hope.

“God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”