

CRYING “ABBA” — CONTINUOUSLY

I WAS LISTENING TO the discussion at a staff meeting when our consultant said, “Paul is so quiet. He doesn’t seem to be passionate about anything, except maybe the person of Jesus.” I smiled, partly because it was funny and partly because on the inside I am like Barney Fife, the nervous deputy on the old *Andy Griffith Show*. My mind churns with ideas, and my mouth is eager to assist.

So why did I appear so calm? Because I was praying, quietly to myself, over and over again: *Father, Father, Father*. At other times I will pray the name of Jesus or the name *Christ*. Sometimes I find myself praying a short phrase, such as *Come, Spirit*.

This is not a mindless chant I practice in order to reach some higher spiritual plane. Just the opposite. I realize I’m on a low spiritual plane, and I am crying out for help like a little child who runs to his mother saying, “Mommy, Mommy, Mommy.” My heart is hunting for its true home. David captured the feel of the praying soul in Psalm 63:

O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you;

my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
(verse 1)

Why am I quietly crying out for help? My tendency to interrupt in staff meetings is a “dry and weary land.” When I feel my inner Barney Fife crying out for attention, I pray quietly, *Jesus, Jesus, Jesus*. Like Augustine, my heart is restless, and I need to find my rest in God.¹

I’m at my worst when I’m passionate about a new idea. I can drift into selling instead of listening and can easily become dominating. My heart is a dry and weary land. But when I begin to pray, the energy of my life is directed into the life of God and not into changing people’s minds . . . and I shut up!

When someone shares an idea that was originally mine, I want to mention that I first thought of it. I feel unsettled, as if the universe is out of balance. In short, I want to boast. The only way to quiet my soul’s desire for prominence is to begin to pray: *Apart from you I can do nothing*.

Interrupting, selling, and boasting are just a few of the things that draw me into continuous prayer, into continual childlike dependence on my Father. Each of us has our own list. We can let it drive us into a praying life.

POVERTY OF SPIRIT, NOT DISCIPLINE

I didn’t learn continuous prayer; I discovered I was already doing it. I found myself in difficult situations I could not control. All I could do was cry out to my heavenly Father. It happened often enough that it became a habit, creating a rut between my soul and God.

Even now I often don’t realize that I am praying. Possibly, it isn’t even me praying, but the Spirit. Paul said, “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Galatians 4:6). The

Spirit is not assisting us to pray; he is the one who is actually praying. He is the pray-er.

More specifically, it is the Spirit of *his Son* praying. The Spirit is bringing the childlike heart of Jesus into my heart and crying, *Abba, Father*. Jesus’ longing for his Father becomes my longing. My spirit meshes with the Spirit, and I, too, begin to cry, *Father*.

When Jesus prayed, most scholars think he regularly addressed his Father as *abba*. It is similar to our word *papa*. Their logic goes like this: We know the word *abba* because it burned itself on the disciples’ minds. They were so stunned — no one had ever spoken to God so intimately before — that when they told the Greek Christians about Jesus, they carried over the Aramaic *abba* into the Greek translations of the Bible. This so shocked Paul that he used *abba* in both Romans and Galatians. Translators have continued the pattern set by the early disciples, and no matter what language Scripture is in, they still use *abba*.

This one-word prayer, *Father*, is uniquely Jesus’ prayer. His first recorded sentence at age twelve is about his father: “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49). *Abba* is the first word the prodigal son utters when he returned home. It is the first word of the Lord’s Prayer, and it is the first word Jesus prays in Gethsemane. It is his first word on the cross — “Father, forgive them” (Luke 23:34) — and one of his last — “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” (Luke 23:46). *Father* was my first prayer as I began praying continuously, and I find that it is still my most frequent prayer.

*You don’t need self-discipline to pray continuously; you just need
to be poor in spirit.*

I discovered myself praying simple two- and three-word prayers, such as *Teach me* or *Help me, Jesus*. The psalms are filled with this type of short bullet prayer. Praying simple one-word prayers or a verse of

Scripture takes the pressure off because we don't have to sort out exactly what we need. Paul tells us, "We do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (Romans 8:26). Often we are too weary to figure out what the problem is. We just know that life—including ours—doesn't work. So we pray, *Father, Father, Father*.

This is the exact opposite of Eastern mysticism, which is a psycho-spiritual technique that disengages from relationship and escapes pain by dulling self. Eastern mystics are trying to empty their minds and become one with the nonpersonal "all." But as Christians we realize we can't cure ourselves, so we cry out to our Father, our primary relationship.

I was driving to work one day, thinking about all the options for a new three-year plan at work. The closer I got to the office, the more overwhelmed I became—I didn't have the wisdom to sort through the options. The scripture "Lead me to the rock that is higher than I" (Psalm 61:2) came to mind, and I turned it into a simple prayer. I needed a rock higher than myself. That momentary poverty of spirit (I became overwhelmed . . . I didn't have the wisdom) was the door to prayer. We don't need self-discipline to pray continuously; we just need to be poor in spirit. Poverty of spirit makes room for his Spirit. It creates a God-shaped hole in our hearts and offers us a new way to relate to others.

A praying spirit transforms how we look at people. As we walk through the mall, our hearts can tempt us to judge, despise, or lust. We see overweight people, skinny people, teenagers with piercings and tattoos, well-dressed women, security guards, and older people shuffling along. If we are tempted to judge an overweight person, we might pray that he or she loses weight. When we see a teenage girl with a nose ring, we can pray that she would find her community in Christ. When we see a security guard, we might pray for his career. When we pass an older couple shuffling along, we can pray for grace as they age.

Paul the apostle was constantly aware of his helplessness and the helplessness of the churches he loved—and so he prayed constantly.

PAUL'S EXAMPLE AND TEACHING

"Unceasing prayer" is Paul's most frequent description of how he prayed and of how he wanted the church to pray. This was a real experience for Paul and not a formula. In the twelve times he mentions continuous praying, he seldom says it the same way twice (emphasis added).

- *Without ceasing* I mention you always in my prayers. (Romans 1:9-10)
- I give thanks to my God *always* for you. (1 Corinthians 1:4)
- I *do not cease* to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. (Ephesians 1:16)
- Praying *at all times* in the Spirit. (Ephesians 6:18)
- We *have not ceased* to pray for you. (Colossians 1:9)
- *Continue steadfastly* in prayer. (Colossians 4:2)
- *Always* struggling on your behalf in his prayers. (Colossians 4:12)
- *Constantly* mentioning you in our prayers. (1 Thessalonians 1:2)
- We also thank God *constantly* for this. (1 Thessalonians 2:13)
- As we pray most earnestly *night and day*. (1 Thessalonians 3:10)
- We *always* pray for you. (2 Thessalonians 1:11)
- I remember you *constantly* in my prayers *night and day*. (2 Timothy 1:3)

When Paul tells the young churches to pray, he encourages them in this same pattern of "constant in prayer" (emphasis added):

- Be *constant* in prayer. (Romans 12:12)
- Pray *without ceasing*. (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

Given Paul's emphasis, it is not surprising to see examples of continual prayer in the early church.

THE JESUS PRAYER

The Greek Orthodox Church still uses a simple fifth-century prayer sometimes called the Prayer of Jesus: *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*² The Orthodox tradition calls short prayers like this “breath prayers” because they can be spoken in a single breath.

The earliest version of this prayer came from a blind beggar named Bartimaeus, who cried out as Jesus was passing by, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” (Luke 18:38). If you add Paul’s Philippian hymn, “confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Philippians 2:11), you’ve got the Jesus Prayer. From the beginning, this prayer was used continuously. When the crowd shushed Bartimaeus, “he cried out all the more” (Luke 18:39). He must have been shouting at the top of his lungs because three of the gospels mention his loud persistence!

Jill has her own version of the Jesus Prayer. When we walk the dogs together on Sunday morning, we pass by an incredibly neat house with a well-manicured lawn. It is especially entertaining in the fall, when both the husband and the wife run around with a shoulder-pack leaf vacuum, chasing individual leaves. With her German heritage, Jill feels the pressure to obsess over neatness. As we walk by this immaculate house, she’ll start praying repeatedly, *God, save me from myself. God, save me from myself.*

When our kids were teenagers, Jill asked me, “Do you know what our family needs most?” Lots of things came to mind, including a newer car. Her one-word answer took me completely by surprise: “mercy.” We didn’t need to get more organized. We didn’t need more money. We needed mercy. That mind-set creates a praying heart.

A praying life isn’t simply a morning prayer time; it is about slipping into prayer at odd hours of the day, not because we are disciplined but because we are in touch with our own poverty of spirit, realizing that we can’t even walk through a mall or our neighborhood without the help of the Spirit of Jesus.



BENDING YOUR HEART TO YOUR FATHER

SEVERAL MONTHS AGO I was on a flight, sitting next to a drug rep for a major pharmaceutical company. I mentioned to her that from listening to people talk, I suspected that one-third of suburban American women were on antidepressants. The drug rep shook her head. “You’re wrong. It’s at least two-thirds.”

Most of us simply want to get rid of anxiety. Some hunt for a magic pill that will relieve the stress. Others pursue therapy. While antidepressants and counseling have helped many people, including me, the search for a “happy pill” or “happy thoughts” will not stop our restless anxiety. It runs too deep.

Instead of fighting anxiety, we can use it as a springboard to bending our hearts to God. Instead of trying to suppress anxiety, manage it, or smother it with pleasure, we can turn our anxiety toward God. When we do that, we’ll discover that we’ve slipped into continuous praying.

Here’s an example of how anxiety creates an opening for prayer.