

Praying to God with Grateful Hearts

"Pray always and do not lose heart" (Luke 18:1)

Prayer is the first fundamental aspect of Christian stewardship. A necessary part of the Christian disciple's vocation is to pray. Prayer makes us aware of God and opens us to God's love. Prayer gradually makes us realize our complete dependence on God. It makes us appreciate how utterly bound we are to God's grace. Prayer also makes us realize the great power we have as disciples to use our own gifts in a meaningful way.

Prayer is a Gift

The desire to pray is a gift from God. So radical is our dependence on the graciousness of the Lord that we cannot even desire to pray unless God invites us. Even the beginnings, the urges to pray, are sheer gift. Among other signs, the desire to pray is a clear sign of God's presence in our lives, for without God's presence, we could not desire God.

The Ancient Notion of Blessing

The teachings on stewardship that Moses tendered to Israel in the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy did not begin with sacrificial giving or the tithe. The teaching began with the stewardship of prayer time:

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon our heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise" (Deut. 6: 4-7).

The ancient and traditional notion of stewardship was intimately linked to the notion of prayer as blessing. A gift was blessed and made holy when a person acknowledged to God in prayer that God had provided it as a most purposeful and personal gift. Thus, God was prayed to and blessed for the gift. When the rain was not simply water that fell down, but God's dewing of the earth for fruitfulness so that the Hebrews might have bread and wine, then it became holy for them. But if one took it for granted and simply thought that it was a thing that occurred in course of time with no personal affection behind it, then for that person it was profane. It was unblessed.

Stewardship gives us a lifetime of progressive insight into what God has provided for us. What is sacred is what we have come to discover as God's gift. We have a life of blessing not when we receive new things but when we notice that they have been there all the time. We bless God for what we have and bless ourselves for receiving it.

Jesus and the Stewardship of Prayer

The Gospels are replete with occasions when Jesus paused from his public ministry, departed from the crowds, went off to a lonely place and prayed. After Jesus had cured Simon Peter's mother-in-law, *"in the morning, a great while before day, he rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed"* (Mark 1:35-36). After great crowds gathered to listen to him, *"he withdrew to the wilderness and prayed"* (Luke 5:16). After the multiplication of the loaves, he sent the crowd away and *"went into the hills to pray"* (Mark 6:46). Again, before the appointment of the Twelve, *"He went out into the hills to pray; and all night he continued in prayer to God"* (Luke 6:12). The work of each day was closely bound up with prayer as Jesus Christ showed us that prayer was the center of his Messianic ministry and paschal death.

The Christian Steward Makes Time to Pray

The early Christian community made a habit of constant and persevering prayer. Indeed, Luke ends his gospel story with a picture of the apostles *"continually in the temple praising God"* (24:53). Today's Christian emulates the early apostolic community and makes specific commitments to daily prayer, pausing during each day to glorify God. The Christian disciple's prayer is joined with that of Christ and it is the Holy Spirit who is praying with us.

Making time to pray is not only a reminder of God's divine presence, but also a means of expressing the divine life, with all that this implies about the fullness of time (*kairos*) and Jesus Christ drawing near and calling into our hearts. By taking time out for prayer, we are following Christ: not only learning to be his disciples, but also sharing our experience of God.

If you are already a person who spends time each day devoted to prayer, you understand why it is vitally important that those who are to be invited to Christian stewardship must first learn the fundamental importance of taking time to pray and bless God for all that we have and all that we are.

Standing at a Crossroad?



Choose to Walk with the Lord



Stewardship

"Jesus said, 'Let us go off . . . to some place where we will be alone . . .'

So they started out in a boat by themselves to a lonely place" (Mark 6:31-32)