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How to Pray

E. Stanley Jones

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When the disciples asked Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray,” they uttered one of the deepest and most universal cries of the human heart. For men of all ages have instinctively felt that prayer is the distilled essence of religion. If we know how to pray, we know how to be religious; if not, then religion is a closed book. Where there is no effective prayer life, the heart of religion has ceased to beat and religion becomes a dead body of forms and customs and dogmas.

And yet how few Christians have an effective prayer life! (And this includes many ministers.) If I were to put my finger on the greatest lack in American Christianity, I would unhesitatingly point to the need for an effective prayer life among laity and ministers. Kagawa once said to second-generation Japanese Christians on the West Coast: “Your greatest lack is that you do not know how to pray.” He saw that their Christianity was anemic and ineffective, because they had not learned the discipline of prayer.

If I had one gift, and only one gift, to make to the Christian Church, I would offer the gift of prayer. For everything follows from prayer.

Prayer tones up the total life. I find by actual experience I am better or worse as I pray more or less. If my prayer life sags, my whole life sags with it; if my prayer life goes up, my life as a whole goes up with it. To fail here is to fail all down the line; to succeed here is to succeed everywhere.

In the prayer time the battle of the spiritual life is lost or won. Prayer is not an optional subject in the curriculum of living. It is a required subject; it is the required subject. And there is no graduation into adequate human living without prayer.

Perhaps we are all more or less convinced of this viewpoint, but the “how” of prayer is the crux of the difficulty. To try to answer that word “how” is the burden of these articles. I propose to begin at the lowest rung of the ladder so that no one will feel I begin beyond him.

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