

# George A. Buttrick

## *A Simple Regimen of Private Prayer*

### INTRODUCTION TO THE AUTHOR

Born in England, George Buttrick (1892–1980) was educated at Lancaster Independent College. He later came to the United States and was ordained by the Congregational church in 1915. Five years later he entered the Presbyterian ministry. In 1927 he became the pastor of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City and served there until his death in 1980.

During his ministry Buttrick delivered many lectures and addresses at colleges and universities around the world. He was also a gifted writer on the spiritual life. His book *Prayer* is considered to be one of the most thorough and comprehensive works on prayer ever written. The following selection deals with the actual practice of prayer, offering the reader, in his words, “detailed guidance.” May God use these “hints,” as Buttrick calls them, to better your life of prayer.

### EXCERPTS FROM *Prayer*

#### 1. A Simple Regimen of Private Prayer

We now attempt to give some clear and detailed guidance in private prayer. There can be no rules, certainly no binding rules, but only hints. Yet no one need travel an unmarked path. The saints are our teachers; and other people, versed in prayer, who would be aghast to be called saints. Jesus himself is *the* Teacher.

Prayer is friendship with God. Friendship is not formal, but it is not formless: it has its cultivation, its behavior, its obligations, even its disciplines; and the casual mind kills it. So we offer here, as a guide-map not as a chain, a simple regimen of private prayer.

#### 2. An Orderly Quietness

Prayer begins, not in asking, but in *a silent self-preparation*. We should not rush into the Presence; the church of private devotion should be entered through the vestibule in an orderly quietness. This comes best as a by-product of a mind focused on God. We say to ourselves, “His light fills the world. It fills this room.” Thus we meditate.

The next step is an *act of faith*, on which Jesus laid the constant stress: “All things, whatsoever ye ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive.” In this initial silence of prayer we say to ourselves that whatever we ask “in the nature of Christ” is ours,

granted only our earnestness in prayer and life. Always prayer is prefaced by an act of faith. We take counsel with our certitudes, not with our doubts and fears.

### 3. The Widespread Mercy

In prayer itself there is no fixed order, but both a primary impulse and the experience of praying people show that the first stage may be *thanksgiving*.

A lecturer to a group of businessmen displayed a sheet of white paper on which was one blot. He asked what they saw. All answered, "A blot." The test was unfair: it invited the wrong answer. Nevertheless, there is an ingratitude in human nature by which we notice the black disfigurement and forget the widespread mercy.

We need deliberately to call to mind the joys of our journey. Perhaps we should try to write down the blessings of one day. We might begin: we could never end: there are not pens or paper enough in all the world. The attempt would remind us of our "vast treasure of content."

### 4. Rooted in Life Beyond Life

Therefore the prayer of thanksgiving should be quite specific: "I thank thee for *this* friendship, *this* threat overpassed, *this* signal grace." "For all thy mercies" is a proper phrase for a general collect, but not a private gratitude. If we are "thankful for everything," we may end by being thankful for nothing.

The thanksgiving should also probe deep, asking, "What are life's *abiding* mercies?" Thus gratitude would be saved from earthliness and circumstance, and rooted in Life beyond life. "Count your many blessings," says the old hymn, "and it will surprise you what the Lord hath done." This prayer should end in glad and solemn resolve: "Lord, seal this gratitude upon my face, my words, my generous concern for my neighbors, my every outward thought and act."

### 5. Setting Hooks into the Facts

Prayer may next become *confession*. A rebound of nature hints that this is a wise order: "God has been exceedingly kind, and I have given him selfishness for love." True confession is neither self-excoriation—"To be merciless with anyone, even ourselves, is no virtue"—nor casual evasion. Overconscientiousness becomes morbid: underconscientiousness becomes indifference and decay.

Confession to those we have wronged is sometimes, not always, wise: there are circumstances in which such confession would spread and aggravate the hurt. But confession to God, whom we have more deeply wronged, is always wise: he has understanding and love.

Our sin is against the Living Order, and we have neither inward peace nor inward power until we have offered prayers of penitence. Confession, like thanksgiving, should be specific. It should not be ruthless, but it should not excuse: it should set hooks into the facts. "I confess *this* sharp judgment, *this* jealousy, *this* cowardice, *this* bondage of dark habit, *this* part in the world's evil."

## 6. New Freedom in His Grace

Contrition is not easy work: it is surgery. But, like surgery, it is not an end in itself: the wise prayer of confession always leads to an acceptance of God's pardon . . . God does not wish us to remember, except as a reminder of our dependence, for he is willing to forget anything.

It might be wise to rise from kneeling at this point in the prayer as a token of our acceptance of God's pardon, our sure faith in his absolution, and our new freedom in his grace. That standing erect might also symbolize both our resolve to make wise restoration insofar as we have power to mend our blunders, and our sincere renunciation of our sins.

Confession is incomplete without that resolve. Our will, however feeble it may be, must descend squarely on the side of a new life. Otherwise even our penitence may become a self-deceit and an abuse of God's goodness. But true confession is a cleansing of the soul.

## 7. Love Sees Faces

Then may follow a prayer of *intercession*, without which the most earnest prayer might sink into selfishness. *The Lord's Prayer* in almost every phrase keeps us mindful of our neighbors: "Our Father" . . . "our daily bread" . . . "our trespasses."

Private intercession should be specific. "We humbly beseech Thee for all sorts and conditions of people," is an appropriate phrase in a collect—which, as the very word indicates, draws all worshipers into one act of devotion, and provides a form into which each worshiper may pour his secret prayer—but it is out of place in individual petition.

Genuine love sees faces, not a mass: the good shepherd "calleth his own sheep by name." Intercession is more than specific: it is pondered: it requires us to bear on our heart the burden of those for whom we pray.

## 8. Its Heart Entreaty

Whose name should come first? Perhaps the name of our enemies. The injunction of Jesus is plain: "Pray for them which despitefully use you." He told us that worship is vain if we are embittered; that we should be wise to leave our gift before the

altar, go to make peace with our neighbor, and then worship. Only then can we truly worship. So the first intercession is, "Bless So-and-so whom I foolishly regard as an enemy. Bless So-and-so whom I have wronged. Keep them in Thy favor. Banish my bitterness."

Intercession also names the leaders of mankind in statecraft, medicine, learning, art, and religion; the needy of the world; our friends at work or play, and our loved ones. A sense of responsibility may prompt us to prepare a chart of intercession, so that day by day we may enter earnestly into the needs of the world, and not forget nor fail anyone who closely depends upon our prayers.

So true intercession is specific and pondered. It is also daring: it carries on its heart-entreaty the crisis of the world. Like thanksgiving, it is not complete without our vow. Sincere prayer-in-love is never in vain.

### 9. Before Eternal Eyes

The fourth order in our prayer may be *petition*. It comes last, not because it is most important, but because it needs the safeguard of earlier prayer. We should not fear to lift *our* earthly needs before Eternal Eyes, for we are held in Eternal Love.

But we should fear the encroachment of a selfish mind. Petition is defended against that threat if first we give thanks, confess our sins, and pray for our neighbors. Then the petition may have free course.

Sometimes, in sorrow, dread, or helplessness, it will be a crisis cry of creaturehood—a beating on heaven's door with bruised knuckles in the dark. Sometimes it will be friendship-talk with God about the affairs of everyday. Surely both prayers would be approved by Christ: his disciples cried in their extremity, "Lord, save us"; and day by day they spoke with him about their struggles, enigmas, and joys of the journey.

To try to thwart the prayer of petition is to deny human nature. The New Testament has better wisdom: "Be overanxious for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God." Yet petition should grow in grace so as to "covet earnestly the best gifts"; and it should always acknowledge that our sight is dim and that our purposes are mixed in motive. It should always conclude with, "Nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done."

### 10. Friendship Held in Reverence

The intervals of these four prayers should be filled by *meditation*. After thanksgiving we should contemplate God's abounding goodness, and await his word concerning his own gifts. After confession we should adore the pardoning Love made known in Christ, and listen for his guidance. After intercession we should pause to try to

see the whole world's need as Christ saw it from his cross. After petition we should wait again to meditate upon the Will.

Prayer is listening as well as speaking, receiving as well as asking; and its deepest mood is friendship held in reverence. So the daily prayer should end as it begins—in adoration. The best conclusion is, "In the name of Jesus Christ: Amen." For in the name or nature of Jesus is our best understanding of God, and the best corrective of our blundering prayers. The word "Amen" is not idle: it means "So let it be." It is our resolve to live faithfully in the direction of our prayers, and our act of faith in God's power.

### BIBLE SELECTION: LUKE 6:27-36

"But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

*The following questions can be used for discussion within a small group, or used for journal reflections by individuals.*

1. Buttrick cautions us against being either too formal or too formless in our prayer life. On which side are you more likely to err?
2. It is easy, says Buttrick, to forget "the widespread mercy" of God and focus instead on all our personal problems. How might his recommendation that we set aside time for thanksgiving help you see more of the "white paper" and less of the "blot"?
3. In all four aspects of prayer, Buttrick urges us to be specific. Why is this so important?

4. Do you ever feel guilty praying for yourself? What would George Buttrick say to those who do?
5. If you were to follow Jesus' command to pray for your enemies, who would you begin praying for today?

## SUGGESTED EXERCISES

The following exercises can be done by individuals, shared between spiritual friends, or used in the context of a small group. Choose one or more of the following.

1. Use Buttrick's guide-map of prayer this week. Move gently from silent self-preparation to thanksgiving to confession to intercession to petition.
2. Even if you do not follow Buttrick's regimen, follow his advice about being specific when you pray. Make your thanksgiving visible by writing down all the things for which you are thankful; make petition more tangible by seeing faces, not merely the masses, as you pray.
3. This week pray for your enemies, for those who have wronged you. Make them the central focus of your intercession. Notice how difficult it is to pray for someone and retain those angry feelings.
4. Beyond praying for our enemies, Jesus admonishes us to do good, not only to people who are kind to us, but also to those who are not. This week do something helpful or kind to someone you do not know, to someone who has not done anything for you.

## REFLECTIONS

*I am helped by George Buttrick's words on prayer. It isn't so much that he is giving me new insights into prayer—in one form or another I have heard it all before. It is that when I read him, I want to pray. Many authors help me understand prayer; few help me practice it.*

*I'm glad for this feature in Buttrick for I am in need of constant encouragement to keep in the experience of prayer. It is so easy for me to fall back into analysis and debate and avoid "the practice of the Presence." Maybe you experience the same difficulty. Certainly we can all be grateful for Buttrick's "hints" on prayer, which nudge us onward in the Way.*

—RICHARD J. FOSTER

## GOING DEEPER

Buttrick, George Arthur *God, Pain and Evil*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1966.  
Buttrick was a pastor and as a pastor was concerned to communicate the Christian faith to modern men and women conditioned by the skepticism of our day. To re-

respond to this pastoral need he wrote three books on apologetics, of which this is one. The other two are *The Christian Fact and Modern Doubt* and *Christ and History*. Buttrick, George Arthur. *The Parables of Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990. This series of sermons shows Buttrick at his preacherly best. He was a great preacher and even wrote a book on the sermon craft—*Jesus Came Preaching*. Buttrick, George Arthur. *Prayer*. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1977. This is a very substantial and comprehensive book. Not for speed reading but don't be afraid of it either.