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Thing Needful

But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:41-42 RSV)

In 1983 God called my wife and me to spend two hours a day in prayer, from 5 to 7 a.m. Our prayer goal: a great worldwide spiritual awakening. This came with a sign: the oven-timer in the kitchen sounded at exactly 4:59 the second day after we were called into this. And because it was a confirmed calling from God, we have been motivated to stay at this call to early morning prayer all these years.

Acts 2:37-41

Acts 3:19

Acts 1:14

And yet something was lacking in our prayer life. As a man, I was able to relate to praying for “Revival with a capital R” because it was a goal, something to strive for. This was a man’s idea of prayer. It required a warrior’s boldness, manly faith and firm purpose. We wanted a New Pentecost, a great turn-around for our nation. A time of refreshing from the presence of the Lord that spilled out of the churches and into the world. Prayer had produced this in the past. Why not now?

Heb 10:35-39

But as the fulfillment of our prayer was delayed, I became embroiled in spiritual warfare and heaviness. I came under assault, some of it a direct attack of discouragement and depression, some of it from people who were deceived about me and my motives.

Song of S 5:2-8

Through the bleakness of a wilderness, God led me to realize that, though His calling to pray was genuine, my prayer life lacked “the one thing needful”: love. I had turned prayer into a Martha enterprise; but I needed the heart of Mary. Without a fiery furnace of devotion at the center, my prayer life—my whole life—would not be strong enough to keep me warm through the seasons. Here was winter, and I was growing cold.

After a visit to the Kansas City International House of Prayer, and conversations with some of the people there—like Gary Wiens, author of *Bridal Intercession*—my prayer life got its heart. Love took its rightful place in my two-hour prayer time.

A Fiery Furnace

Most people see prayer as a religious duty. We develop our prayer lists from the requests people make. I have been in churches where the whole back page of the bulletin is a list of all the sick people you’re supposed to pray for. This is “Martha” prayer.

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Mt 22:1-14

But now I was learning to define prayer differently, as a fiery furnace of love. Suddenly I saw God's heart. God wants our love. Why hadn't I seen this before? He loves us. But love, to be satisfying, must be a two-way boulevard. Unrequited love is always frustrating and unsatisfying, even for God. We get embroiled in our issues, consumed by our projects and comforted by our purchases with never a thought to spend quality time with God. Quality time: the raw material of love. My prayer time began to change into a furnace. I was gaining the heart of Mary.

Deut 6:5
Lk 15:25-30

How often Jesus asked for this, reflecting the heart of the Father from the beginning, going back to the Ten Commandments. And how often Jesus contrasted the life of love with that of religious duty, recommending the former, and warning us against the latter.

2 Cor 4:3-6

Some people don't love God because they have never been presented with the option. A veil hides God's love from them. Muslims, for example, believe that God is so holy and far away that He can never be known, let alone loved. All we have from this lofty God is a collection of messages spoken through an angel to a prophet, at best a third-hand word. Prayer, to them, is a religious duty, performed five times a day to honor this distant and uncaring God, usually in the Arabic language quoting the Koran. Duty, not love, is what drives their prayer.

For most Buddhists it is the same. My friend, Brad Long, has been inside many a Buddhist temple. Deep in some inner sanctum of those temples was a plaque "to the Emperor of the Universe"—God. But few people go there because God seems so remote—and Buddha himself was an atheist. So they go to other corners of the temple offering prayer to other spiritual powers more likely to do things for them. God love them? They would not have thought of God like that.

Jn 3:16
1 Jn 4:7-21
Mt 26:6-13
Lk 7:36-48

It was Jesus who revealed God's loving heart through all this God-fog. Followers of Christ have good reason to comprehend God's heart of love, and respond to it with a genuine love of our own. And yet, when I go to most churches today, I sense the same religious duty driving most Christians, who still believe that God is far, far away—and who don't get the idea of loving God heart to heart.

Jn 17:26

The invitation is right there in Scripture. And yet there is something that blinds us, something that keeps us from responding....

Reflect:

Evaluate yourself as a lover. Can you relate to the whole idea of loving God in return for His love for you? Does God crave your love?

Further Reading:

Bridal Intercession, Gary Wiens

The Seven Longings of the Human Heart, Mike Bickle with Deborah Hiebert