

Seeking God in Personal Devotions In Wilhelmus à Brakel's *The Christian's Reasonable Service*

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Oftentimes the believer finds himself far from God, and not basking in His love and communion. Perhaps some sin is plaguing them that has caused a rift in the relationship between a loving and merciful God, and a believer who struggles with sin. This plaguing sin could lead to a period of doubt in the believer's life, a doubt that could cause the believer to feel distanced and cold in his heart towards His Savior. The greatest struggle then is to pursue relations and communion with God, because of this sin, because of unbelief, because of a lack of love or warmth, because a lack of discipline and prayer, or because the believer does not cast himself upon God's Word and the promises contained in it. The believer at this time becomes introspective, and fails to look to Christ, but rather dwells in his experience of unbelief and laxness.

The believer, however, is not alone in this struggle to maintain joy in communion with God and Jesus Christ, for many men have lived before and faced these same problems. In particular the Puritan and Dutch Second Reformation forefathers, like no other men before us, offer a wealth of experiential knowledge and counsel to the believer who finds himself in just such a situation. Of these divines Wilhelmus à Brakel of the Dutch Second Reformation, especially speaks to this issue in his magnum opus, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*. He approaches this issue in light of the Bible, and reveals the heart of the believer with the precision of the surgeon with a scalpel. Not only does he open up the believer's heart before God, but he also glorifies God as the faithful, unwavering Father, Who hears and answers our prayers through the advocacy of His dear and precious Son, Jesus Christ. Brakel gives valuable counsel in regards to seeking God, not only in a time of low spiritual life, but also how to maintain this communion in the believer's love relationship with God and Jesus Christ.

This relationship between the believer and God is ultimately a love relationship and in his chapters on "Love Towards God" and "Love Towards Jesus Christ", Brakel deals with this extensively. He makes it very clear that this relationship between God and the believer is based in God Himself, for God is love. This love does not proceed from the heart of the believer, but proceeds from God and is kindled in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.¹ The relationship with Jesus Christ is commanded by God to all those who have heard the gospel, and believe in Christ as the only Name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved (Acts 4:12). The love that we have towards God must also be shown to Jesus, for He is both God and man. This relationship with God and Jesus Christ is not merely a relationship at a distance, with God and heaven and believers on earth, but the Spirit dwells in the believer and works this love towards

¹Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, vol. 3, (Pittsburgh, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1994), 264-265.

God and Jesus Christ. The believer upon believing is made a son and an heir with Jesus Christ, being adopted into God's family as sons (Galatians 4:5, Romans 8:15, 23). This relationship with Christ is also compared to a marriage by Paul in Ephesians 6. This love relationship speaks of intimacy, warmth, union and communion.

In order for a husband and wife to grow in knowledge, intimacy and love towards each other, they must be united in the holy bonds of marriage and they must put forth an effort to grow in the aforementioned things. They must communicate daily, they must show each other affection, and they must be one physically and spiritually before God, in order to have a fulfilling relationship with one another. So too, the believer must foster and cultivate this relationship with God through the working of the Holy Spirit. An effort must be made in order to make this relationship blossom and bud forth into holy communion with the Triune God. Brakel agrees with this assessment, but he says that, "a union must first be established. Union between God and the sinner is brought about by the Mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ".² This union between God and the believer is maintained and strengthened by the means of faith on the part of the believer, which is of course worked by the Holy Spirit in their hearts. The faith which operates in the life of the believer leads to love for God and thus a relationship of love is established.³

In his chapter "Love Towards God", Brakel gives several marks whereby a person can distinguish whether they truly love God. These marks are also important in seeking God in the believer's devotional and prayer life. First, God is esteemed and exalted above all that exists, second, there is joy in love, third, there is reverence in love, fourth, love is active, fifth, there is delight in the enjoyment of this love, sixth, there is grief over absence and being at a distance, seventh, there is willing obedience, eighth, the objects of love and hatred will be identical, ninth, everything is sacrificed for the loved one, and tenth, there is a most intimate and perfect union.⁴ As Brakel makes clear, this relationship with God is centered and grounded in love towards Him.

The example of marriage is helpful again in understanding these marks, but especially the fourth mark as found above. A reciprocal love exists between the husband and wife, which seeks to find the other out: what they think, what they feel, and to please the other. All measures and methods are taken in seeking to establish intimate communion with one another, with love playing an active role in this process. The fourth mark is especially telling in the aspect of seeking God as Brakel explains that love is active, motivating the "seeking of communion...it searches out all opportunities to draw near, and brings herself into the presence of the Lord".⁵ The love implanted by the Spirit in the heart of the believer must be nourished and fed and reciprocated by God. It seeks to find God and this becomes a daily habit when the soul is dependent upon God.

When a husband and wife have a disagreement, then communion is broken between the two parties. Sometimes this communion can be broken for a long period of time, but if the love for one another was strong before this disagreement, then love will again seek to repair the breach. Love will always seek to be restored for either party will be grieved, not at being hurt, but at

²Ibid, vol.3, 265.

³Ibid, vol.3, 265.

⁴Ibid, vol.3, 266-267.

⁵Ibid, vol.3, 267.

losing the communion and fellowship with one another. In his sixth mark of love, Brakel says that this is exactly what happens to the soul that is separated for a time in communion with God and Christ. This soul is grieved over absence and being at a distance from God, for where there is love, the absence of communion will be readily felt and will trouble the soul seeking communion. The cause of this absence says Brakel is either because the Lord hides Himself, or because of sinful conduct which causes separation.⁶

Though an earthly love can grow cold between a husband and wife, a marriage grounded in the Word of God and Christ Himself cannot have love that grows cold, rather this love will not fail, as it is described by the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 13:8. It rather seeks to establish itself and perfect the union of marriage between the husband and wife. The love between God and the believer does the same in that it “cannot be satisfied unless there be a most intimate and perfect union”.⁷ The communion with God in this life is only a foretaste of that full and perfect communion that a believer will have in heaven, and Brakel says that they therefore will have a desire to die and be eternally united with Christ. The love that a Christian has towards God and the Savior will result in some measure in these marks of love that Brakel gives. The important part that he is getting at is that this relationship is based solely on love, and that the believer will seek God based on this love, and will not seek Him to earn and curry favor with God. The sole motivation for seeking communion and union with God and Christ is love and nothing else.

Wilhelmus à Brakel does not leave the reader with only the motivation for seeking communion with God and Christ, but He also gives practical suggestions on how to maintain fellowship with God. He argues in his section on “Guards Against all that Impedes the Exercise of Love Toward Jesus” that love “wants to be maintained” through fellowship and communion.⁸ There are numerous ways in keeping up this communion and union with Christ, such as attending the means of grace such as the preaching of the Word, partaking by faith of the sacraments, communion of saints, prayer and personal devotion, Scripture reading, and prayer meetings. Perhaps the most important part of the believer’s life of faith is that of personal prayer to God and personal reading of His Word. Brakel calls it “that necessary, profitable, holy and sanctifying duty of a Christian”.⁹

Verbal communication is one of the essential components of a healthy marriage, for it makes one’s needs known to the other spouse. It lets the one spouse know how he or she thinks. It allows the husband and wife to thank one another and to show appreciation for each other, as well as to verbalize their love for one another, one of the most important aspects of marriage. Communication with God is also necessary and can be seen as the barometer of the Christian’s life. A life steeped in prayer is directly correlated to a holy walk of life before the face of God, while a life of little or insincere prayer results in a life that is confused, dark, and without the warmth and light of communion with God. Then there is no communication of the heart’s most intimate desires, there is no heart to heart communion, there is no offering of thanks, no spontaneous joy. Prayer is the life of the Christian and the most eminent example of prayer is

⁶Ibid, vol.3, 267.

⁷Ibid, vol.3, 268.

⁸Ibid, vol.3, 289.

⁹Ibid, vol.3, 444.

that of Christ Himself, while He walked on this earth. The Bible speaks highly of prayer, for even the Son of God required much time in prayer, therefore the Christian is exhorted by Brakel to engage in this most important exercise.

Brakel gives a formal definition of prayer in his section on “Prayer”. “Prayer is the expression of holy desires to God in the name of Christ, which, by the operation of the Holy Spirit, proceed from a regenerated heart, along with the request for the fulfillment of these desires”.¹⁰ He proceeds to flesh out this statement in much detail, and he makes some very important and helpful points to help the believer present himself with his whole being before God in prayer. The most important thing to realize when praying is that the whole being should be involved. Prayer is not just a mechanical and mental exercise, nor is only an exercise just of the emotions. Rather it is an exercise of the whole being which makes up a person. “There is total involvement; that is, the intellect, will, passions, eyes, mouth, hands, knees, the entire soul, and the entire body are involved”.¹¹ Prayer is not an exercise to be taken lightly but to be taken seriously, for it is the primary means of communication of a believer to God.

Prayer involves three areas of focus: focus upon self, focus upon God, and focus upon the requests. The focus upon self involves sensing one’s inadequacy, a sense of emptiness, spiritual hunger, a sense of helplessness in trying to fulfill one’s own spiritual needs. How often the believer neglects this aspect of dependency upon God! Oftentimes the believer focuses on self, but in the wrong sense, for the believer still often erroneously thinks that his own strength and power are sufficient to meet all his spiritual needs. When the believer approaches prayer in the right disposition of heart, that is, humbly and before the face of a holy God, then a sense of inadequacy, worthlessness, and filthiness overcomes him.¹² The focus then inevitably turns from self to God.

When the believer focuses upon God, he realizes that God is the only one who can fulfill his requests and satisfy his spiritual hunger. Brakel gives some important and practical advice in focusing on God in prayer, and that is to focus on His majesty, omniscience, glory, immanence, holiness, and graciousness in Christ.¹³ This focus on the attributes of God will put the praying soul in a disposition that is proper to approach unto God, to make the requests known to Him. This focus on God is really where the Christian finds freedom to express his desires, “knowing that God is glorified in hearing and helping repentant sinners”.¹⁴ God’s Word also speaks clearly in this regard in John 14:13 and 14, “And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask anything in my name, I will do it”. This focus upon God by the believer during prayer is motivated by love towards God, thus meshing the love of God and seeking to commune with God in prayer. Brakel makes this connection between prayer and love when he says, “Apart from God we do not wish to be helped, because we love God and do not wish to give His honor to another”.¹⁵

¹⁰Brakel, vol.3, 446.

¹¹Ibid, vol.3, 446.

¹²Ibid, vol.3, 447.

¹³Ibid, vol.3, 447.

¹⁴Ibid, vol.3, 447.

¹⁵Ibid, vol.3, 449.

The preceding text also offers what Brakel calls the focus upon the matters which a Christian desires, “be it deliverance from a cross which oppresses or threatens him, or a blessing for either soul or body. He perceives how necessary and beneficial it would be for him either to be delivered from this, or to receive a blessing.”¹⁶ This focus upon the matters which a believer desires is buttressed by Scripture, particularly Philippians 4:6, “Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God”. This is the purpose of God, to making one’s requests known to Him. Though He knows what the believer needs, He delights in hearing one’s requests and the believer should delight in making these requests known.

Brakel again offers some practical words in making one’s requests known to God. He says that one does not merely state them in a matter of fact manner, but presents these requests with arguments, thus to “enlarge his request by way of argumentation”.¹⁷ This argumentation can be compared to a child beseeching his mother and father for something which he desires. He tries to argue with them why he should have it, and how that would benefit him. Perhaps he would even be so bold to say that he would become a better a child as a result of obtaining this particular object, thus bringing glory to his parents. Though this example is perhaps a bit trite, it does offer an example of the believer’s prayers to God. Such argumentation in prayer renders the supplicant more humble in the face of God, for His grace and mercy that God will hear his requests. With this argumentation comes fervency, holiness, and perseverance in prayer; fervency because the supplicant’s heart is enlarged, holiness because “his objective will be more genuine”, and perseverance since one desire will lead to another as the prayer is made.¹⁸

In order to guide the believer in true prayer and seeking God, Brakel offers several important characteristics and fleshes them out to demonstrate why they are necessary when approaching to God. The characteristics he gives are humility, spirit and truth, earnestness, fervency, incessantness, and faith.¹⁹ Humility is necessary, for the lowly believer approaches a holy God, it is pleasing to God, God answers humble prayer, and the supplicant finds delight in being able to view God’s glory and majesty. Spirit and truth in prayer are necessary for “God is a Spirit...God requires the heart...God knows the heart as well as the mind of the Spirit...God desires truth in the inward parts...God hates and punishes such who approach unto Him physically and not with the heart”.²⁰ Fervency and earnestness are also desired characteristics in prayer, for where there is no fervency or earnestness God is displeased, prayers do not avail anything with God, and the believer is not considering the command of Scripture to be fervent in all things.²¹

Perseverance is perhaps one of the most important characteristics of prayer, because without perseverance the Christian’s faith would wilt and fail, and he would lose that communion with the One whom he loves. Perseverance denotes diligence and discipline, and Brakel concurs with these two aspects, saying that prayer must be made a daily activity. Just as a person needs daily

¹⁶Ibid, vol.3, 447.

¹⁷Ibid, vol.3, 455.

¹⁸Ibid, vol.3, 455.

¹⁹Ibid, vol.3, 456.

²⁰Ibid, vol.3, 458.

²¹Ibid, vol.3, 456-459.

food, so the soul needs daily communion with the Lord in order for faith to remain active. As much as it must be a daily practice, the believer is also exhorted to always be in a prayerful disposition, even though he is not actively engaged in the act of prayer.²² Perseverance in prayer will also allow the believer to be continually focused on God, which is one of the three foci of true prayer. Since God does not answer prayer right away concerning “growth in faith, hope and love, spiritual life, strength against sin, and sanctification”, one must always be persevering in prayer at the throne of grace.²³

A sister characteristic to perseverance in prayer is that of faith. The Word of God is very clear in Romans 14:23, when it says, “Whatsoever is not of faith is sin”. Believing prayer is extremely important and appears several times throughout Scripture. One can well imagine that when prayer is void of faith, it is void of power and efficacy, for it denies the faithfulness of God to whom one prays. Brakel quotes several Scripture references in respect to praying with faith. In particular, James 1:6 stands out, “But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering”. All real and effective prayer hinges upon faith, and Brakel agrees because he states that the first requirement for the supplicant is that they must be believers. Furthermore, the promises only apply to the children of God, and not to the unbeliever, who lives yet in unrepentant sin. Thus when the child of God prays he considers himself to be child of the promise and that these promises apply to him through Christ.²⁴ These promises are the pleading ground for the supplicant and it is paramount that he believe that God will fulfill these promises for they are yea and amen in Christ (II Corinthians 1:20).

Having considered the inward disposition of prayer in the heart of the believer, Brakel moves to the externals of prayer: time, place, gestures, and the voice.²⁵ Regarding the time of prayer, he gives several helpful suggestions which relate to the situation that one finds himself in. There is corporate prayer, whether it be in public gatherings, private gatherings, family worship.²⁶ He does not offer much advice in this regard, except to conduct daily family devotions. Private devotions are also important, the time in which a Christian can personally draw near to God and commune with Him. Brakel makes this important statement concerning the observation of our personal devotional time, “Therefore he who desires to be in an assured state, to have continual fellowship with God, to attain to a higher level of illumination and experience, and to fear God steadfastly, let him strictly observe his devotional time and let him not neglect in this”.²⁷

One warning connected to private devotion, but certainly not an excuse to abstain from it is that those “who strictly observe their devotions will experience more assaults, darkness, weakness of faith, and unusual strife than someone who is not steadfast in his devotions”.²⁸ This section was extremely helpful in understanding the questions concerning personal spiritual devotions and communion with God. A believer is lulled into thinking that a set time for

²²Ibid, vol.3, 459.

²³Ibid, vol.3, 460.

²⁴Ibid, vol.3, 462.

²⁵Ibid, vol.3, 464.

²⁶Ibid, vol.3, 465.

²⁷Ibid, vol.3, 465.

²⁸Ibid, vol.3, 465.

personal devotions is not necessary and indeed is not even helpful or advantageous. Darkness sets in and no communion takes place between the supplicant and God; laziness ensues and the cycle often repeats itself. This personal devotion time with the Triune God requires perseverance for one often thinks that they ought to experience a “great measure of light, a more elevated disposition, and stronger exertion than apart from this time (personal devotion time)”.²⁹ A believer ought not to look to others and to compare himself with them and the communion they have with God. They ought rather to persevere in seeking God and to be diligent in prayer lest the devil find them listless and doubting and take advantage causing them to have their faith weakened to the point of despair.

The place, gestures, and voice in prayer are also important in putting the heart in a right posture to prayer. A place of solitude is desired because Jesus Himself did this; He went off into the wilderness to pray, or into the mountain, or in the Garden of Gethsemane to wrestle with His Father. Brakel says this about the place of prayer, “The disposition of our soul and the matter which we wish to present demand solitude; rarely would one want to make this public to men”.³⁰ A place of activity is also not conducive to private prayer, but rather serves to distract a person and prevents full concentration of one’s faculties on the three foci that Brakel put forth earlier. There are, however, also appropriate physical gestures in regard to prayer which allow the supplicant to more effectively present his petitions before God. This does not mean that one’s physical deportment will bring them into favor with God, rather it will serve to aid them in concentration on themselves, on God, and on the matter to be presented to God. There are various postures such as kneeling, standing, sitting, prostrating oneself.³¹ Brakel also gives some practical advice concerning the voice in prayer; one should use common sense depending where one finds themselves. The voice should be used in moderation, and we must use our God-given faculties to express our desires to God Whom we love.³²

Another valuable part of Brakel’s treatment on prayer and devotion are the exhortations he gives in order to pray. He shows the true value in prayer, that it is motivated by love towards God and that God is pleased when His children pray to Him. He lists six exhortations or reasons to prompt the believer to pray:

1. Prayer glorifies God.
2. Prayer of the upright supplicant is pleasing to God.
3. God hears prayer.
4. Prayer is a glorifying and sanctifying work.
5. Prayer is the means whereby and upon which God fulfills the desires of believers.
6. Consider furthermore that you will experience much more joy if God grants you something upon prayer than if you receive your wish without having prayed for it.³³

Brakel offers much experiential advice and counsel to the believer, describing conditions which are detrimental to prayer and prescribing the antidote for these conditions. He also speaks of

²⁹Ibid, vol.3, 466.

³⁰Ibid, vol.3, 467.

³¹Ibid, vol.3, 468.

³²Ibid, vol.3, 468.

³³Ibid, vol.3, 468-441.

prayer in a high and exalted fashion, elevating it to its proper place. Prayer is often seen as secondary to spiritual life, but in reality it is the heart beat of the Christian and the vital link between himself and God.

Prayer is the most important aspect of communion with God, yet Brakel offers some practical ways in which the child of God can seek Him and have communion with Him. Much like prayer, fasting is a spiritual exercise in “which a believer deprives himself for a day from all that invigorates the body, humbling himself in body and soul before God as a means to obtain what he desires”.³⁴ Unlike prayer, fasting is not meant to be a daily exercise, lest one deprive himself too long of food and his health is put in jeopardy. Fasting is done on special occasions to seek God such as “being oppressed by the danger of a plague, having to engage in a very weighty task, perplexity, or having to make a choice concerning a weighty matter”.³⁵ All activity which is done to sustain the body must be refrained from, even work if circumstances allow. The object of fasting is to humble oneself before God and to focus on Him alone, including confession of sin, declaring ourselves to be worthy of judgment, supplicating for grace, renewal of the covenant, and giving of alms.³⁶

Solitude is also very helpful in seeking after God and His communion, and ministrations of His Holy Spirit. It is separating oneself from people and activities to “express one’s self more earnestly and freely as one engages himself in seeking after God”.³⁷ This type of spiritual activity is especially helpful in today’s frantic world, so occupied with busyness and activity. One rarely makes time to be alone with God, away from the rush and bustle of daily life. One’s success is usually measured in terms of activity and money earned, but rarely ever in spiritual growth, yet Brakel brings out the value and necessity of seeking a place of solitude and bringing the heart into a disposition of solitude in order to seek God and have communion with Him. Times of solitude are conducive to communion, softening of the heart, recovery from the busyness of the world, and visitation from the Lord.³⁸

A proper view of meditation is also very helpful in today’s society, which stresses transcendental meditation and yoga, getting in touch with one’s self, balancing the body’s energies. Spiritual meditation is not like this meditation associated with Eastern mysticism, rather it is associated with divine mysteries and the believer being led by God further into these mysteries. Brakel gives this definition of spiritual mediation:

This is a spiritual exercise in which a godly person – having a heart which is separated from the earth and lifted up toward heaven – reflects upon and engages his thoughts toward God and divine things with which he was already previously acquainted. He does so in order to be led further into divine mysteries, to be kindled with love, to be comforted, and to be stirred up to lively exercises.³⁹

The person who engages in spiritual meditation “knows God and has a desire after God; this is

³⁴Ibid, vol.4, 3.

³⁵Ibid, vol.4, 3.

³⁶Ibid, vol.4, 6, 7.

³⁷Ibid, vol.4, 20.

³⁸Ibid, vol.4, 22, 23.

³⁹Ibid, vol.4, 25.

the reason why his heart is repeatedly drawn to God”.⁴⁰ Meditation is not done on one’s own, but rather is a work in connection with the Holy Spirit, says Brakel. The objective of meditation is “to acquaint oneself with God, to rejoice and delight ourselves in God, to be kindled with love toward God, to be comforted when we are downcast, and to be quickened in sanctification”.⁴¹

All these methods, the chief one being prayer, are given by God so that the believer can draw near to God and have communion with Him. Seeking God requires much discipline and perseverance and it is only by the grace of God that one can be upheld in these practices. Brakel in *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, offers practical, experiential advice to the believer who seeks to overcome obstacles regarding seeking after God. He also offers counsel on how to come to God in a right frame of mind and heart, seeking out the Savior whom we love, because He loved us first. This relationship of reciprocal love, though fluctuating on the believer’s part, is the motivation for seeking communion for God, whether it be through prayer, fasting, solitude, or meditation. God hears and answers those who come to Him in faith, visiting them with the ministrations of His Spirit, and His grace sustains those who seek Him daily.

A few concluding verses from Psalm 73 aptly sum up what Brakel has touched on in regards to spiritual exercises and seeking God. “Nevertheless I am continually with thee: thou hast holden me by my right hand. Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there *is* none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever. For, lo, they that are far from thee shall perish: thou hast destroyed all them that go a whoring from thee. But it is good for me to draw near to God: I have put my trust in the Lord GOD, that I may declare all thy works (Psalm 73:23-28).

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⁴⁰Ibid, vol.4, 27.

⁴¹Ibid, vol.4, 29.

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