

Prerequisites for a Healthy Prayer Life

The single most important suggestion to make for growth in devotion concerns the attitude we bring to any method. The central requirement for devotional vitality is openness before God. We must lay aside pride, contradictory interests, present habits and prejudices.

Relaxation is often suggested as the first preparatory step in a devotional period, since a relaxed body for many persons contributes to quiet receptivity in mind and spirit. For devotional purposes the aim is not apathy or sleep, but relaxed attention or restful alertness. As tension is a habit, so is relaxation a skill which can also be learned by regular practice

Exercises

Recall one of your most relaxing experiences. In imagination see the situation – a peaceful hill, calm lake, trees in the breeze, waves on the beach or quiet stars overhead. Hear the rippling of the stream or distant bells – or enjoy the silence of the chapel. Feel the warm sand under your body, or the soft grass under your feet.

Consciously try to unlock all your tension points. Wherever you sense tightness, let it go. Close your eyes or keep them lowered to the same neutral nearby point. Let each part of your body settle down heavily on whatever is supporting it. Allow the weight of the head to settle down on the neck, the neck to rest on the shoulders, and so on down the entire body. Melt down into your chair, though still sitting erect without slouching. (Or if you are lying down, let the body weigh heavily on the bed or floor.) If you are seated, let your feet rest solidly on the floor. Let the chair and floor support you. Feel the pressure of the floor lifting your feet, and feel the pressure of the seat and back of the chair against your body. Let your hands lie on your thighs like wet oak leaves on a log. You might think of all your tensions and cares draining into your feet and then into the floor (or flowing out of the tips of your fingers and the ends of your toes).

We can rest on God as an even more solid support than chair or floor. We are at peace because God strengthens and sustains. That is the most important single thing going on at any moment. God never leaves us or stops loving us. We can relax into this. Tension, worry, and fear can vanish when we know that “underneath are the everlasting arms” (Deuteronomy 33:27). God is closer than our breathing, more dependable than any other resource. We can count on this completely.