

Focused On The Father

Who are you looking at when you pray?

By Roger C. Palms

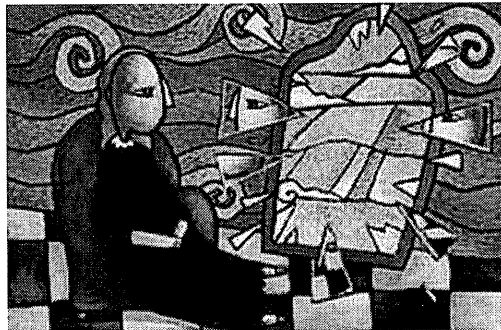


Illustration by Matthew Baek

Three times a week I go to the health club. I need it to help control my cholesterol. So I ride the stationary bicycle, walk on the treadmill, work out on a couple of machines—and watch other people.

Directly in my line of sight is the weight-lifting area and next to that a wall of mirrors. Sometimes people come in, stretch, and carefully start lifting weights. Except for an occasional glance, they ignore the mirrors.

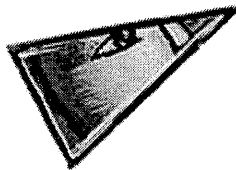


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But not everyone.

Others stand in front of the mirrors, flex their muscles, lift a few weights, check their muscles again, then walk back and forth in front of the mirrors to see themselves in motion. Then they lift a bit more, check their muscles again, and head for the showers. They don't appear to take weight lifting nearly as seriously as their image while they lift.

One day it hit me. When I pray, do I do the same thing? Am I meeting God or looking at myself in the mirror? When I do my “spiritual exercising,” what is my focus? Am I concentrating on the way I look to myself when I am “exercising” or focusing on what God has to say to me?

Prayer is a time to meet God. Its purpose is not to make me feel good about myself because I'm doing something “spiritual.” The value is in what happens during prayer, not in the way I look because I have prayed. I think Samuel knew that; so did Ezekiel. But what they understood, I've found, is not so easy to learn.

The Listening Servant

God wanted to do something with Samuel just as He wants to do something with me. When He called Samuel, the boy did not recognize God's voice. Samuel thought, *It must be Eli calling me*. But it wasn't Eli. Finally, after being awakened three times by Samuel, Eli realized what was happening. He instructed Samuel, "Say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening'" (1 Samuel 3:9).

Eli didn't tell Samuel, "God is speaking to you, Samuel. Go, enjoy His voice and savor the experience." He didn't instruct Samuel to focus on what was happening to him or how he felt because of the experience. Instead, Eli taught Samuel to respond to God's call by listening attentively. Samuel's response acknowledged the proper relationship between himself and God: "You are Lord. I am your servant. You are speaking."

Samuel was not looking at himself or even at his ability to listen. He was simply open to what God had to say. He was focused completely on his Lord, as a servant should be. He was ready to receive what God had to say to him.

Do I Want To Hear God?

In my praying, am I listening to God, or am I listening to me listening to God? There is a difference. Where is my focus? Is it on God or on my spirituality? If being too casual in prayer is one danger, being too intense as a pray-er is another. When we focus on how intensely we're praying, that self-focused intensity can distract our focus from God.

In his book *Centering Prayer*, M. Basil Pennington wrote,

If we go to prayer longing for or expecting an experience of some sort, to find peace or quiet, if we are concerned about doing it right, getting the right effect or result, then we are no longer simply seeking God.

Seeking the face of God has to be an intentional act. I must shift from looking into the mirror that reflects my own image and focus instead on God and what He is saying. He is the purpose for the visit, not me. His voice is the one I need to listen to, not my own.

Listening and Life

This does not mean that we leave who we are or what we are feeling outside the prayer closet. Listening to God is not about going into some trancelike state in which we remove ourselves from our surroundings. We meet with God and listen to Him in the context of our lives, not removed from it.

None of us is immune to what happens to us—all of life invades our prayer time. God knows that. He wants to hear about our anxieties and concerns. But voicing those things is not the primary purpose of praying. Rather, we go to God in prayer to hear what He has to say to us.

We must remember that we're praying to a God who already knows who we are and what we're facing. Knowing that, I don't have to focus on me; I can focus on Him. Many times the presence of God, not answers from Him, is the blessing of meeting with Him. I find great hope in the awareness that God wants to meet me in the context of who I am and what I am facing.

Meeting God

Just as He did with Samuel, God also spoke clearly to the prophet Ezekiel. When he went off

to be alone with God on the plain, Ezekiel was given a responsibility that would make anyone tremble. He was to tell people what God said, to tell them the truth about themselves (Ezekiel 3:22–27). It was a frightening responsibility, enough to make anyone want to back away.

But God did more than speak to Ezekiel. He showed the prophet His glory. God had that opportunity because Ezekiel was looking at Him, not at himself. God could reveal His glory because the prophet had responded to His invitation to meet with Him on the plain. In that encounter, Ezekiel didn't glean answers to the great theological questions, but he experienced the very presence of God in His glory! Ezekiel's meeting with God was not self-centered but God centered. In it, God chose to reveal His glory, and what Ezekiel saw overwhelmed him.

How great was it to see the glory? Ezekiel tells us: "I fell facedown" (Ezekiel 3:23). No mirrors, no muscle flexing, just meeting God and experiencing His glory.

Does God have that chance with us? When does God have our full attention? When, if He chooses to, can God show us His glory?

Beyond Self-evaluation

When I go into my prayer closet seeking God, it isn't time for personal introspection, a how-am-I-doing-as-a-prayer-warrior kind of evaluation. I don't pray to be impressed with myself. I am not standing in front of a spiritual mirror in order to admire my flexing spiritual muscles. There are no mirrors in the place of prayer.

I pray because I need to meet God. He is the God who wants to speak to me and teach me. He is the Giver of peace when around me there may be no other peace at all. When we focus on our Father in prayer, we encounter the one who reaches out to us continually and invites us into life-changing fellowship with Him.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

ROGER C. PALMS is the former editor of *Decision* magazine. He has served in pastorates in West Virginia and New Jersey and is the author of 14 books.

On his days off, Roger likes to walk along the edge of the Mississippi River near his home in Anoka, Minnesota. Roger and his wife, Andrea, have two children and two grandchildren.