

~ 13 ~

## *The power of gratitude*

—*The second step: Thank You, Lord—*

In the last chapter I pointed out that sensing *God with us* is an individual matter. As we choose to act on our knowledge of the truth that God is always present, our minds and our emotions become involved and we say, "I feel the nearness of God."

Presumably, each person has had some private experience with regard to the presence of Christ, and some mental concept of what he believes Jesus' appearance to be. Because I remember vividly an old hymn from my early teens, "I shall know Him by the marks of the nails in His hands," my visual concept is not of His face, but of His Hands and His feet. Seeing the scars (marks of love) I know Him, and my heart feels an inner enlarging and overflowing which is beyond description.

Just thinking of myself at the feet of Jesus, I am without words, lost in a sense of worship and gratefulness which seem to be pouring into, around and

through me. The extent to which silent worship is effective depends upon our use and practice of meditation. Sooner or later, however, most of us will also need words with which to try and express our thoughts. Educational psychologists tell us nothing becomes a part of us until we have expressed it in words.

I hope, while reading this book, you have discovered my deep concern that people who live together pray together. Praying together in a relaxed, conversational, meaningful way brings real heart-communication with response—praying together and aloud.

You may recall the story of the family of three in a recent chapter who wrote me of their first audible prayer time together. Can you imagine this taking place in your home?

Audible prayer is never easy, for the simple reason we are extremely hesitant to reveal ourselves to one another, as praying aloud will do. I am not going to dwell on all the therapeutic and "releasing" aspects of audible prayer, except to say that when the "sound barrier" is broken and you begin to learn to speak to God in the presence of one or two others, great discoveries follow. You will find other people are a great deal like yourself. This discovery brings a new compassion for all men. Once you have become vocal and honest and personal, you will discover you are loved and accepted in ways not possible had you remained silent.

I recall a week-day audience in a Presbyterian church. They had been accustomed to silently taking part as their leader varied the program of the hour with worship material and the reading of requests, mentioning local as well as national needs. I was invited to share with them some of my own discoveries

in group praying, as they wanted to learn new prayer techniques.

I'll admit I was a bit dismayed at the number present. If there had been 30 instead of 300, I could have handled it quite easily. Perhaps it was well I knew I couldn't. It forced me to immediate prayer. I had planned to introduce them to the four basic steps. But what could I do in a practical way with 300 people!

As I stood there, the answer was there for me. We should do only the first two steps. I would take them into the meditation on the presence of God, then invite those wishing to participate to pray aloud in the second step, Thank You, Lord, for . . . . ."

I gave them a few simple instructions.

We would remain seated, and relaxed.

We would speak so those nearby could hear us.

We would give thanks for only one thing in one sentence.

We would not conclude these one sentence prayers with a formal ending.

If we had four items for thanks, we would remember that meant praying four times.

But we would also remember to give someone else an opportunity before we gave our second prayer for thanks, for this is the meaning of the words, "conversing together with God in prayer."

It is important that we continue to discipline our minds if we are to be conscious of the presence of Christ, for conscious worship will produce specific thanksgiving. Give Him thanks for what He has given, provided, made available—past, present and future. You are speaking *to Him*, not to people.

You don't have to "think up" something to say. As you keep your heart open to receive the love of

God, you will find the words right there—speak up, say them, more will come.

The growing sense of joy in such a thanksgiving prayer service is so encompassing, I often wish we could tape what is being said, so those absent might share in our experience.

This particular service with 300 present “got right off the ground” immediately. People took part and the sentence prayers of thanksgiving began to surround and to penetrate us, to draw us together, to give us a sense of oneness, of belonging, of the love of God present. I heard some voices praying more than once, and I was glad, because the more often one prays, the easier the honest expression becomes.

Then my attention was drawn to a couple on the front row. (I don't always close my eyes, but I do maintain an inner attitude of worship, and I do keep my inner eyes on the Lord Jesus.) This couple arrived late, and the only available seats were in the front row. He was a big man, heavier and taller than the woman. He began to fidget, tap his fingers, cross and uncross his legs—and I knew he wanted to take part in the prayer time. My silent prayer for him was answered.

He cleared his throat, lifted his head and gave thanks.

“Dear Lord,” he paused, and continued, “thank You—thank You for this swell wife of mine!”

Other “thank You's” went on and on, but as I looked again, I saw his hand on the back of the pew drop to her shoulder. She was fumbling in her purse, and brought out a handkerchief. Possibly it was the first time she had ever heard him pray aloud—and for her.

~

One woman who had long ago stopped attending prayer meetings because she did not wish to be embarrassed was persuaded to attend a small group meeting in a Kansas home. Telling me her story, she said, "I told them when I came in that I had not come to take part, but to listen. But when I heard how simply and honestly they prayed, like children with open hearts, I couldn't help myself. I was the third one to speak up and pray! I couldn't believe my own ears!" Since then she has become a member of a new group in her own neighborhood, and a whole new dimension has come into her life.

~

"Pray with these strange women I've never met? Never!" said a young mother to herself, as during a workshop on prayer, she joined a small group to which she had been assigned. "But I did," she continued happily, "and I found they were my sisters but I didn't know it. How rich I am now!"

~

One of the most remembered prayer meetings in my travels (and there have been many) was held in the basement of a large Mennonite church in Indiana. About 200 women were present, and I spoke on the four basic steps in prayer. Remembering the 300, I suggested we follow the same procedure by using only the first two steps. (The last two steps, "Help me," and "Help my brother," are often too personal for such a large number of people. These steps can be easily followed at home.)

The quiet, clear expression of thanksgiving seemed to weave a web which enclosed us with a

sense of belonging—a sense of joy—and the presence of Jesus was real. For a whole hour they gave thanks—for people in their lives, for spiritual blessings and for material blessings; they even gave thanks for difficult situations which thrust them back in dependence anew upon their Lord. At the close of that hour, we sang with a new awareness for the familiar words:

What a friend we have in Jesus,  
All our sins and griefs to bear.  
What a privilege to carry  
Everything to God in prayer.

Oh, what peace we often forfeit,  
Oh, what needless pain we bear,  
All because we do not carry  
Everything to God in prayer.

We had been in His presence, we had touched Him with our words, with our faith. We had accepted anew all that life was bringing to us, knowing He was in it with us. We were refreshed and renewed in body, mind and spirit.

Have you ever tried it—just giving thanks?

Just give thanks, and leave the “asking” until later.

The practice of being grateful turns minds to new channels of creativity. It releases us from the bondage of ego by recognizing all gifts are from God; everything given in life creates an awareness of His loving-kindness.

