

Freedom from Quiet Time Guilt

The rare beauty of Weakness Christianity

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1. The Diagnosis: Quiet Time Guilt

I recently watched as a congregation I love was spiritually raped. A Christian ministry came into the church for a three-day program whose purpose was to encourage believers to pray more.

During one of the breakout sessions, a man expressed his frustration with unanswered prayer. He had faithfully prayed with and for his daughter for years, and still she was not walking with God. He was broken, depressed, perhaps more than a little ashamed. How does God in his grace speak to this man? A bruised reed was crying out for help.

“You need to try harder. You need to pray more.” That was the message he was given. I was enraged. Having known this church for many years, I was horrified. What I was hearing was what one seminary professor calls *sola bootstrapa*. Self-reliance—We pull ourselves up by our own spiritual bootstraps. The teachers who said such things surely meant well. The problem was not a lack of sincerity on their part. The diagnosis is far more severe. The problem was heresy. Any heresy wounds the soul.

When I look upon the evangelical world today, I see millions of sincere believers who are loaded down with false guilt by teachers who fail to grasp the basics of biblical prayer. To sharpen the point slightly, Christ’s sheep have been lied to. They have been told that prayer is a work that we must perform in order to get God to bless us. As heresies go, this one is often subtle. Prayer has become a work rather than a grace. The result has been a loss of joy in prayer.

And prayer is not the only grace we’ve turned into a work. Personal Bible study has become a source of bondage as well. A whole generation of Christians has been told that God will bless them if they read their Bibles every day, as if the act of reading the Scriptures were some kind of magic talisman by which we gain power over God and secure his favor. *This is not the religion of the Bible*. This pervasive belief that God gives us grace as a reward for our devotional consistency is antithetical to the religion of Jesus Christ. Prayer and Bible study—what evangelicals for the past century have called the “quiet time”—have become dreaded precisely because they have been radically misunderstood.

It’s ironic, but the Quiet Time has become the number one cause of defeat among Bible-believing Christians today. At one time or another, nearly every sincere believer feels a deep sense of failure and the accompanying feelings of guilt and shame because he or she has failed to set aside a separate time for Bible study and prayer. This condition is called *Quiet Time Guilt*. And it’s a condition with many repercussions. The shame of Quiet Time Guilt manifests itself in even deeper inability to fruitfully and joyfully study Scripture. Prayer becomes a dread; Bible study a burden. The Christian suffering from Quiet Time Guilt then despairs of seeing God work in his or her life, until finally he or she simply gives up. He may continue outward and public Christian commitments like church attendance, but secretly he feels a hypocrite. What is the root of Quiet Time Guilt?

2. The Culprit: Legalism

The root of Quiet Time Guilt is legalism. Often when we think of legalism, we think of the petty man-made rules that have so often strangled the churches—rules against dancing or drinking or makeup or ‘secular’ music. But these legalistic rules are merely an outward sign of a deeper legalism of the heart. When prayer and Bible study are thought of primarily as duties (‘disciplines’) rather than as grace, both prayer and the study of Scripture become unfruitful in our lives. We put ourselves on a performance treadmill and cease relying on God’s grace to sustain us. We trust in ourselves and our consistency, becoming proud if devotionally successful—or despairing because of our inconsistency. Either way, our spiritual self-reliance short-circuits the inexpressible joy of life in Christ. The quiet time becomes a human work whereby we think we gain—or lose—God’s daily favor. When we’ve started our day with Scripture, we presume that God’s blessing will rest upon us because of it. When we fail in our quest for devotional consistency, we feel we’ve short-circuited God’s grace in our lives. *Quiet-Time Guilt*.

If this describes you or anyone you know, the situation is far worse than you think. Jesus condemned the Pharisees for this very attitude about Bible study. “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me” (Jn 5:39). Yes, that’s what Jesus said. *Bible study can be a sin*. The Pharisees assumed the Bible a book of rules or principles for living, but failed the grasp it as a story about God’s love for his people. The quiet time can drive you far from God if you fail to understand that the Scriptures are a story about grace. The Scriptures are a story about Jesus Christ, the man of grace. His works—not our works—are the center of the biblical story. And this Jesus gives grace daily to those who fail him. How you approach the Bible—as needy sinner or as self-reliant Pharisee—says a lot about the state of your soul.

Just like Bible study, prayer too can be sinful. Remember what Jesus said about the Pharisee and the tax collector. The one saw prayer as a work, the other as an expression of need. The one who merely expressed his neediness to God—the expression of our neediness being the heart of true prayer—that one went home right with God.

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Lk 18:9-14).

Often we assume that if we really had it together and could approach God without sin, without failing, with only pure spiritual successes to offer, then God would somehow delight in our prayer more. *The opposite is true.* If you approach God in that manner, you approach him as his enemy. We are all fallen. If we presume to approach him as something more than needy, dependent sons and daughters, God rightly takes offence. There's nothing more dangerous than the pride of devotional consistency.

3. The Remedy: Weakness Christianity

There are two religions calling themselves evangelical Christianity today: Strength Christianity and Weakness Christianity. Strength Christianity is that religion which places both feet squarely on the Bible and proclaims, "I am strong. I sought the Lord. I'm a believer. I've turned away from sin. I read my Bible and pray every single day. I'm for God!" Weakness Christianity, by contrast, places both knees squarely on the Bible and says, "I am weak, but the Lord has sought me. I believe, but help now my unbelief. I fail and am broken by my continued sinfulness. Have mercy on me, Lord, and grant me favor, for apart from you I can do nothing."

Those who pursue Strength Christianity will never find joy in God, for they will never find God. Our Father refuses to be approached in that manner. They will find only increasing religious pride and secret hardness of heart. On the outside, they will project a picture of righteousness. They'll have it all together. They'll be spiritual. But only on the outside.

For those who stumble across the rare jewel of Weakness Christianity, however, there is provision beyond what we can possibly imagine. Our suffering, our failures, our weaknesses and disappointments all gain an incredible spiritual significance. God never says he'll be glorified in our religious accomplishments. But he does promise that his power will be made perfect in *our weakness* (2 Cor 12:9).

Neediness is the heart of biblical religion. When we honestly lay our brokenness before God, we're surprised to see a radically different message in the Bible. While we had perhaps expected a to-do list from Holy Writ, a program to make us righteous, or a divinely sanctioned self-help book, we instead see a shocking message that centers on our God and his grace to his broken people—*not* about us and our performance and expected rewards. And when we approach God in brokenness—Weakness Christianity—we find a radically difference vision for prayer. Prayer is not something we do—a performance designed to get something from God. Instead, it's merely a free and honest confession of our neediness to God and our spoken reliance upon him for each and every blessing. When you stumble upon Weakness Christianity, you realize that true religion is all about God's grace, not about our devotional consistency.

4. The Shocker: Grace for the Christian

This grace is for you right now, now and tonight and tomorrow and next week and forever. The deadly assumption made too often among those who claim to heed the Scriptures is that grace is only for non-Christians. Grace is what God offers to people who don't know Christ. Grace is what makes us Christians; but once we're Christians, we live by our own resources. This is why

advocates of Strength Christianity so often sound like evangelical Christians. They really do believe that God offers grace to *unbelievers* who will turn to God through Jesus Christ. And they're right on that. What they wrongly assume, though, is that the Christian life begins by grace, but continues by human works.

I've seen this confusion many times. I found it ironic that the very same prayer program that so hurt the church I love included within it an absolutely wonderful children's program. This at first puzzled me. The children who attended were pointed to Jesus, reassured of God's love for them, and encouraged to rest in God's mercy and total acceptance in Christ. In the adult activities, by contrast, people were told to try harder, to persevere, to do better, to be more consistent and to pray more, so that God could bless them. The children heard, "God did it," while the adults were told, "Just do it."

Why the difference? The difference was simple. These teachers were assuming that the children of the church were not yet Christians (...an assumption I would question). God offers non-Christians grace. The adults, however, were committed Christians. The Christian's relationship with God rests not upon God's grace, but upon his or her performance, particularly the performance of the ultimate devotional duty, the daily quiet time. This assumption—that grace isn't for Christians—is spiritual venom, which is keeping millions of Christians in bondage to self-reliance, guilt, shame, and despair. Quiet Time Guilt is the great epidemic among Bible-believing Christians today.

If you think the purpose behind this little tract is to absolve you from the call to pray or the need for Scripture, think again. My purpose is to *free you to desire* prayer—to desire *God*. I want you to long for the pure message of the gospel, spelled out on page after page of the Bible, and to find the joyous freedom found in Christ. Prayer is a grace, not a work. It is a confession of our neediness to God, not a proof that our "relationship with God" is going well. If you think that God will not bless you today because you missed your quiet time, this has been for you. If subtle legalism has left you in bondage so that you no longer hunger for God's word or freely call out to him in prayer, then hear this: God has already chosen you, pronounced you righteous, adopted you into his family, and promised to finish his work in you. Perhaps you have been lied to in the past. Now it is time for the truth to set you free. Free to be needy. Free to fail. Free to approach God without dread. Free to delight in him rather than in your performance.

But I have a few more theological reflections to share before you leave. Keep reading.

5. The Surprise: The Quiet Time is Optional

Imagine for a moment you're meeting a Christian friend. "How's your relationship with God going?" they ask you. "Well, I'm struggling with my attitude about my job—but God is teaching me to be content and to not gossip when people rub me the wrong way." A silent stare greets the words, your inquisitor's eyes staring you up and down. After a moment of awkward silence, the question comes again, "But how is your *relationship with God*?" Hmm. What wrong with this picture?

Perhaps this has never happened to you. But I've found contemporary Christians are often more concerned about my 'relationship with God' than with my relationship with God. Whose idea was it to define the sum total of my relationship with God as my *devotional consistency*? Your quiet time is not your relationship with God. Your relationship with God—or, as I prefer to say, God's relationship with you—is your whole life: your job, your family, your sleep, your play, your relationships, your driving, your everything. The real irony here is that we've become accustomed to pigeonholing our entire relationship with God into a brief devotional exercise that is not even commanded in the Bible.

Yes. That's what I said. The daily quiet time—that half hour every morning of Scriptural study and prayer—is not actually commanded in the Bible. And as a theologian, I can remind us that to bind the conscience where Scripture leaves freedom is a very, very serious crime. It's legalism rearing its ugly little head again. We've become legalistic about a legalistic command. This is serious.

But no misunderstand what I'm saying. My goal isn't that we pray and read the Bible less, but that we do so more—and with a free and needy heart.

Does the Bible instruct Christians to call out to God in prayer? Absolutely. “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Th 5:16-18). But this isn't a command to set apart a special half-hour of prayer; it's instruction to continually call upon God. Elsewhere the Apostle calls us to pray: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:6-7). But notice that the focus here is not on the performance of a devotional duty, but on approaching God for grace—for our hearts and minds to be guarded by him. Paul's burden is that we would rely upon God in every circumstance and therefore have peace, rather than relying on ourselves and finding ourselves captive to the anxiety that accompanies self-reliance.

Does the Bible command us to read our Bibles every day? No. Not really.

What Scripture actually instructs is that we *meditate* on God's word all the time. Consider the godly man in Psalm 1. “His delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night” (Ps 1:2). This is not exactly the same thing as reading the Bible every day. Personal Bible reading is one—and only one—way we to meditate upon God's word. At this point it's helpful to consider the difference between a *good idea* and a *biblical mandate*. A biblical mandate is something that God explicitly or implicitly commands in Scripture. Loving your neighbor is a biblical mandate (Mt 5:43). Moving to Philadelphia to work in a homeless shelter, by contrast, is not a biblical mandate. Rather, it's a good idea, a wonderful possible application of the biblical mandate to love your neighbor. But moving to Philly isn't the only way you can love your neighbor. Similarly, meditating on God's word is a biblical mandate. The daily quiet time, by contrast, is a good idea, a wonderful possible application of the mandate of biblical meditation.

It may surprise you to know that the concept of the quiet time as a command is a modern invention. It's only in recent centuries that Christians have been able to actually own Bibles—the printing press and cheap paper have given us more options so far as biblical meditation is concerned. *But remember that most Christians throughout history have not owned Bibles.* They heard the Bible preached during corporate worship. They were taught the Bible in the churches. They memorized the Bible profusely—a first century rabbinic saying stated, “If your rabbi teaches and you have no paper, write it on your sleeve.” But for most Christians through history, biblical meditation took place when they discussed the Bible with family and friends, when they memorized it, when they listened very carefully to God's word preached. The concept of sitting still before sunrise with a Bible open would have been very foreign to them.

We have so many options today, why do we get hung up on the quiet time? Listen to Christian teaching tapes. Invest your time in a small group Bible study. Have friends over for coffee and Bible discussion. Sing and listen to Scripture songs. Read good theology. Tape memory verses to the dashboard of your car. And pray throughout your day. I always reserve the drive to church on Sundays as a time of uninterrupted prayer for my pastors and elders, for those leading worship, and for the peace and purity of the church. Certain landmarks around town remind me to pray for certain churches, Christians I know, or causes God says are important. I suspect I spend more time praying in my car than on my knees. (Though I love praying on my knees as a concrete display of my dependence on God, I can't do this in my car without causing an accident.)

If you have a regular quiet time, don't stop. You've found a wonderful way to meditate on Scripture. You've set aside a specific time to call upon God in prayer. But if the quiet time doesn't work for you, *that's okay.* You should not feel guilty since you have not broken a commandment. The quiet time is an option, a good idea—not a biblical mandate. If the quiet time isn't working for you, there are other options as well. All of them are good ones. The key is to rely on God to accomplish his plans, a reliance expressed in prayer and fed in Scripture. You have all kinds of opportunities to call upon God in prayer and to meditate upon his word. He loves you and delights in your expressions of weakness and dependence. He is glorified in your weakness.

6. The Theology of Prayer: Means of Grace

So what exactly does prayer *do*? That's the question I'm often asked. There are several wrong answers to this question. Some assume that prayer furnishes God with the information he lacks. God doesn't view it that way. He not only knows what's going on now, he knows what will be going on next week. Indeed, he even ordained what will be going on next week—the Bible speaks of “the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will” (Eph 1:11).

Neither is prayer an attempt to convince God to do what he wouldn't otherwise do. He will grant our requests only insofar as they accord with his eternal purpose—his will. “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything *according to his will*, he hears

us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him” (1 Jn 5:14-15).

And I hope we’ve dismissed the idea that prayer shows God how much we love him! It’s not a work, but a grace! But often we think that prayer is something we do to obligate God to bless us. This is the subtlest of errors, for it *resembles* the biblical teaching. Indeed, *it is a caricature of the biblical picture of prayer*. Grace-empowered, grace-motivated prayer *does* bring blessing, but prayer isn’t a work we do that obligates God to give blessing. It’s a subtle difference, but an important one. Prayer is a *means of grace*, not a work to merit grace.

Theologians have classically called prayer and Scripture (along with the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper) *means of grace*—highways along which the Holy Spirit tends to travel. The means of grace are the normal instruments God uses to accomplish his saving work in and through us. Does prayer change things? Yes, because God changes things, and prayer is an expression of our reliance upon him to accomplish his purposes.

I remember about six months ago calling upon God in prayer about my finances. Starting a not-for-profit teaching ministry is hard work, and church missions committees would often rather support a missionary doing evangelism than one who is training believers. One evening I called out to God with great urgency. After a year of support raising and teaching, I could still only afford to teach half-time while working another job, and even the funds that had enabled that year of half-teaching were almost all gone. “Father, this is your ministry, not mine. If you have raised me up for this, then something must change. I cannot go without food. I cannot fail to pay my rent. If you wish me to teach, you must grant the resources to do this. If you do not enable me to teach, I will not teach. Apart from you I can do nothing.”

Was I manipulating God by threatening to stop teaching? No. And being a sovereign God, he wouldn’t have been impressed. Rather, I was confessing to God my utter and total dependence on him to fund my work.

The next day, after eight months without any new support, a new friend took me out for coffee and told me he felt compelled to support me at \$100/month. That same day, I received a note from an old friend in another part of the country pledging monthly financial support. When I checked my email, I had received a message from a member of my church who had since moved away, telling me a \$1200 check was in the mail.

Did my prayer force God’s hand? No. All of this was already in the works long before I prayed. But when I confessed my neediness to God, he was pleased to provide for me. Prayer was the means of grace, not a work I offered for reward. And God was glorified in my weakness. God is faithful to hear our prayers, and he delights in answering them. Prayer is one of the basic freedoms Christians have, and freedoms aren’t given to leave us in bondage. There is a cure for Quiet Time Guilt. That cure is the gospel of Christ, in whom we have redemption. Gospel—our need and God’s provision—is the heart of biblical prayer. God will care for us. We belong to him.