

## A DESIRE TO PRAY IN THE SPIRIT

*Pastor Richard received the following question from a grown TCK (third culture kid, a missionary kid) and he shares his answer below.*

### QUESTION

Hi, Uncle Dick and Aunt Jenn!

We are commanded to pray in Spirit in Ephesians 6:18 (and maybe other places as well), but I truly don't know what it really means to pray in the Spirit. However, I do very much desire to pray in the Spirit. Do you have any insights or things you've learned about what it means or what it looks like practically to pray in the Spirit?

### ANSWER

What a wonderful question. Thanks for asking it. I think Ephesians 6:18 partners with 1 Corinthians 12, 13, and 14 and Romans 8:26–39. I would encourage you to pour over these passages and see what the Lord teaches you about them.

Starting with 1 Cor. 13, love conquers all, so praying in the Spirit must be motivated and guided by love. If it is not loving, it is not of the Spirit. In 1 Cor. 12:3, Spirit prayer is Jesus-centered, focused on His Lordship. Any prayer that draws attention to self (not to Jesus) is not of the Spirit. First Cor. 12:7 says that Spirit prayer is for the common good and builds up the inner man (1 Cor. 14:4). Any prayer that does not bless others in the body is not of the Spirit. And in 1 Cor. 12:8–11, Spirit prayer is diverse and individualized, given as the Spirit wills. It might be tongues, it might be tears, it might be groanings (Rom. 8:26), it might be ecstatic, or it might be silent. First 1 Cor. 14:6–12 notes that when prayed publicly, it must be in order, not confusing; it must be distinct and abound for the edification of the church. First 1 Cor. 14:14 says, if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful, while in verse 15 we find the conclusion: I will pray with my mind and I will pray with the spirit; I will sing with the mind and the spirit. To me, these are the most clarifying verses, and I take the following from them:

- The most usual way to pray in the Spirit is to pray in tongues.
- Praying with the spirit is different than praying with the mind (understanding).
- We must pray and sing both with the spirit and with the mind (understanding).
- The Spirit prays through us (Rom. 8:26–29).
- Publicly, the point is public edification, not private (1 Cor. 14:19, 26).

There is a difference in private praying in the Spirit (for me, that usually means in tongues) and public praying in the Spirit. Paul is quite clear that if there are public tongues, it must be interpreted (1 Cor. 14:26–28) which is in line with order and communal edification. Private praying in the Spirit builds up the inner man, and public praying in the Spirit (with interpretation and in order) builds up the body of Christ.

Just as it is a both/and for the individual of praying with both mind and spirit, it is a both/and for us to have private prayer in the spirit and public (order and edification). For God is not a God of confusion (14:33), so we don't forbid tongues (v. 39), but all things are done properly and in order (v. 30). In the church then, if there is a public tongue, a voice raised above all others or over other events, there should be a holy hush as we wait for the interpretation. If it does not come, the one who spoke publicly in tongues should give the sense of what he thinks the Spirit is trying to say, in an edifying manner. If no interpretation comes and the speaker cannot interpret it, then he/she should not speak out publicly in that manner. There can be times when the whole church prays together in tongues quietly or even in a mighty chorus. I have experienced this many times—it can be beautiful and orderly, passionate and powerful. But I would say it needs to be done in such a way that no voice rises above another and there is full participation, or the individual does so in a restrained, quiet voice that does not distract those singing or praying in the spirit.

Finally, to individual prayer in the spirit. I believe we should do what Paul said: pray in the understanding (mind) and in the spirit (let the Spirit pray through us). I try to do this every day. It's not as if I turn my mind off. I participate and my volition is engaged. I don't go into a trance or yield consciousness. I am very much aware (almost always) of when I begin and when I stop. I begin by praising the Lord in English and focusing on Jesus. Then comes a point when I don't have any more English to say, but my spirit is not done praying.

There is a deeper level, a yearning for more *of Jesus*. And I then allow the Spirit to pray through me (participating willingly). To be honest, it's quite practical for me. I'm aware of the sounds I'm making, I'm aware it's not a real language, and I'm aware it could be gibberish. I'm aware that I can even choose sounds and interject new ones. I could be articulating the same sounds and be praying in the spirit or the very same sounds could be nonsense.

So, can you pray mindlessly? Yes, but praying in the spirit is not that. Can you just be speaking gibberish? Yes, but praying in the spirit is not that. Can you be a willing participant and your mind involved? Yes, but praying in the spirit is not using known words. Praying in the spirit is participating in childlike faith to allow the Spirit to pray through you. It is part mystical and part practical. It can be abused. It can also be precious. If in simple trust we believe that the Spirit can pray through us as the Scripture tells us, then we join Him tenderly and thankfully, respectfully and joyfully. We start by looking to and longing for Jesus. We praise Him. We pray in a known tongue. And in those moments when our mind no longer knows what to pray, but our spirit longs to pray on, we pray on in practical and precious partnership with the Spirit.

In my own life, on the mission field, I must pray in the Spirit every day. I am so thankful, for so often I don't know what or how to pray. It is comfort and help to pray with the Spirit as He prays through and in me. Normal times and desperate times (overt warfare, power encounters, intense spiritual moments) are equally important for praying in the Spirit.

Much love!  
Uncle Dick