

James Houston Prayer Course Discussion Questions

Session 14: “The Gift of Tears”

- 1) Stillness of the soul is peace of the heart. It is a deep interior serenity that integrates the whole person before God. This is the significance of Hesychia. There must be silence before the words come to the surface. What does this mean? It means you wait to communicate through your eyes a loving kindness, affection, and empathy with whom you relate. There is a desire to hear and to know the person in your presence. Only then do you speak. Reflect on times when this has occurred to you?
- 2) Hesychia is to prepare yourself for incessant prayer, for an incessant silence of living in the world without being distracted by the world. It is living in the reality that prayer is not an option, nor an exercise, nor an isolated expression of our lives. It is the breath of the Christian. If my body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, then prayer is the expression of that indwelling. Can you visualize yourself sustained in this way by the Holy Spirit to live with the tension of being in the world while not of the world?
- 3) Penthos is the gift of tears. The tears come from a loving heart aspiring after God. St. Augustine would often seek the source and end goal of his tears, knowing that the presence of the tears he experienced speak of what was moving in his soul. Such tears, as a gift of the Holy Spirit, produced in Augustine that which he could not bring about in his own struggle, which is the gift of conversion. He understood such tears to be a prayer beyond his own prayer. The gift of tears is a prayer not in glorious speech, but in humble, vulnerable outpourings having their source in the gift of grace. Share with a friend or spouse moments were you believe you experienced such tears.
- 4) Dr. Houston has frequently encountered people, old and young, who have a schizophrenic disconnection with their emotions. They are totally unemotional when they are expressing great tragedy in their lives, or they have a smile on their face when they are talking about deep pain. The gift of tears brings about a realignment of honesty to our emotions. The tears soften a heart that has been hardened from pride, willfulness, and denial. Simeon in the 10th Century said *‘Without tears our dried heart will never be softened, nor will our soul acquire spiritual humility.’* Dr. Houston recommends that we pray for the gift of tears so that by means of sorrow we will soften our native rudeness or native denial of who we are. How do you resolve any disconnect with your emotions or lack thereof?
- 5) Dr. Houston returns to the theme of the dangers of an exaggerating mindset. This also applies to asceticism. Sometimes Christians who have been persecuted have egged on and attracted persecution due to their own exaggerations. True asceticism is a process of making room in our lives for the presence of God. The true ascetic does not make a distinction between the will of God and the love of God. Asceticism is an initiative we can take to seek God with seriousness of

intent to obey. Obedience however in Greek and Hebrew means to listen attentively, which is different from how the word is most commonly understood today. What initiatives do you contemplate taking to make space for God in your heart in a balanced and loving way?