

# spiritual life

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## Reviews

**Wasting Time with God: A Christian Spirituality of Friendship with God.** By Klaus Issler. InterVarsity Press: PO Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515-1426, 2001. Pp. 297. Paper. \$14.

The purpose of Klaus Issler's thoughtful and challenging book, *Wasting Time with God: A Christian Spirituality of Friendship*, is captured in the Scripture verse with which the book concludes: "Come near to God and he will come near to you (James 4:8). Issler, a professor at Talbot School of Theology of Biola University in La Mirada, Calif., rightly contends that human beings are called to be seekers of God because we are made for intimacy and friendship with God. To be human is to search for God and to hunger for God—it is every person's vocation—because it is only in absolute communion with God that we know happiness and are fulfilled.

As Issler writes, "Redeemed humanity has been designed expressly by God...to be in continual communion with God." Consequently, seeking God is not something we do occasionally; rather, it is an ongoing and always unfinished way of life. But even more important than our desire for God, Issler says, is God's steadfast and relentless desire for us. God wants fellowship with us. God seeks companionship with us. The God who created all things wants to share in our lives intimately and completely—the God of the universe wants to love us *as friends*. "The majestic Creator of the universe desires our friendship," Issler explains. "In fact, he is more interested in this

endeavor than we are; he has been contemplating it and planning it for a long time."

With this as his starting point, Issler devotes the rest of *Wasting Time with God* illustrating how we can deepen and flourish in our friendship with God. The book is divided into two parts. Part 1, "Making Room for God," explores the practices, lifestyle, and character attributes one must embrace in order to live in friendship with God. Here he focuses on the role of friendships with others in deepening our friendship with God, the critical importance of humility as the virtue that cultivates abiding openness to God, and the theological virtue of faith.

In Part 2, "Deepening our Friendship with God," Issler explores the necessity of commitment and faithfulness in a life of friendship with God, ongoing communication in friendship with God, suffering as a kind of apprenticeship that deepens intimacy with God, and prayer as the practice by which we become partners with God in achieving good. In each chapter Issler highlights the example of Jesus whose life presents us with the most perfect model of friendship with God. And he concludes each chapter with suggestions of two concrete practices by which the reader can deepen his or her friendship with God.

The most important contributions of this book can be summarized in four themes. First, Issler underscores the close connection between friendship with others and friendship with God. This is true not only because human beings are inherently social and relational, but also because we need others

to teach us about a life of friendship with God and to help us grow in friendship with God. Although Issler does not explicitly allude to Thomas Aquinas, he echoes Aquinas's point that a life of friendship with God—what Aquinas called *charity*—is always a life lived with others. When discussing the importance of close, intimate relationships for our life with God, Issler overcomes the charge that the preferential character of friendship violates the universal character of the distinctively Christian love of *agape* by suggesting that friendships centered in Christ should teach us how to love all our neighbors, even the most unfriendly of them, our enemies. In short, friendships lived in God may be the most intimate and preferential of all, but they also always enlarge our circle of love. Agreeing with the theologian Gilbert Meilaender, Issler says particular friendships are schools through which we should learn the more universal love of *agape*.

Second, Issler offers a fascinating account of humility, beginning with the pivotal observation that humility is a defining characteristic of God. We easily forget, he suggests, how truly humble God is. The humility of God is displayed in the Incarnation, in Jesus's passion and death, in God's abundant patience and forgiveness, and in the Eucharist. As Issler succinctly observes, "Pride is of the devil. Humility is of God." Humility should also characterize the friends of God. This key virtue is expressed when Christians are honest about their faults, when they regularly confess their sins and acknowledge behavior that hinders friendship with God, and when they

seek the guidance of others. If the honesty and openness wrought by humility is necessary for human relationships to prosper, it is especially crucial in one's friendship with God.

Third, Issler gives extensive attention to the role of suffering in a life of friendship with God. Suffering may be inevitable, but how we respond to it is not. As Issler notes, the disappointments, setbacks, and misfortunes of life should *engender* rather than *endanger* our trust in God. Issler emphasizes the positive contribution suffering can make in the Christian life by focusing on some of its possible benefits. He notes Paul's claim in Romans that believers can only share in Christ's glory when they have first participated in his sufferings. He suggests suffering can remind us of our dependence on God and weaken temptations to self-sufficiency. Suffering can help us defeat evil, develop our character, build community, and make us advocates for justice.

Fourth, in the final chapter, Issler explores the meaning and purpose of prayer. He suggests that prayer is a means of developing and living in partnership with God. Through prayer, especially intercessory prayer, we articulate our desire that good be done for others and in our world. A life of prayer makes us collaborators with God in doing the work of God's kingdom, whether that be in praying for or practicing justice, mercy, joyfulness, truthfulness, or compassion. Hence, prayer is the ongoing dialogue we have with God about the good to be done for the sake of God's kingdom.

Some questions do arise in Issler's treatment of these pivotal themes. For

example, given his proper emphasis on the necessity of intimate, abiding friendships for flourishing in the Christian life, can one assume that such relationships are readily available or that most Christians understand what true friendships require? In light of the individualistic, consumerist bent of Western society, Issler could devote more attention to elements in ourselves and in our culture that undermine the very relationships we need for friendship with God. Similarly, he is certainly right that good can come from suffering and that Christians believe in the redemptive character of suffering, but at times Issler glosses over the demonic element in some suffering and does not adequately acknowledge the challenge catastrophic suffering brings to fundamental Christian beliefs about the providential goodness of God.

But that *Wasting Time with God* raises such questions is a tribute to its richness and its power. Issler is an expert guide through the many dimensions of a life of intimacy and communion with God. His deft and prolific use of Scripture, as well as his abundant examples from personal experience, testify that this book is not only the result of scholarship but is, more importantly, the fruit of a good and holy life. Written in an engaging and friendly style, *Wasting Time with God* is a wonderful resource for personal spiritual reading, for adult education, and for faith-sharing groups. It is a book any friend of God will want to read.

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