

LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY

by the Rev. Daniel Fitzpatrick

And it came to pass, as He was praying in a certain place, when He ceased, that one of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray..." (Luke 11:1).

During His life on this earth the Lord prayed many times. He prayed for others so that they might be healed of their sicknesses and infirmities. He prayed for His disciples, that they might truly understand His teachings. He prayed also to the Father, asking for strength to fight against the power of the hells, even though He Himself was the God of heaven and earth. It sometimes seemed to the Lord as if His Father were not with Him, when in fact He was always present.

Once, after the Lord had finished praying, one of His disciples asked Him, "Lord, teach us to pray..." The disciples had certainly seen the Lord pray many times before. Yet this was the first time that any of them asked the Lord to teach them how to pray.

It may seem surprising to us that one of the Lord's own disciples would ask such a thing. After all, who does not know how to pray! In the ancient world, moreover, prayer was an important part of worship. But many people prayed only for worldly things—good health, a plentiful harvest, wealth—things which in time would pass away. Many also prayed by merely repeating the same words over and over, hoping that in this way they might earn God's favor and be regarded by others as pious. The Lord Himself warned His disciples not to use such vain repetitions, but instead to pray with sincerity and humility, not simply to impress others.

The disciples therefore had to learn how to pray properly. So when one of them asked the Lord to teach them to pray, He taught them the very same prayer, called the Lord's Prayer, that we still use today:

Our Father, who art in the heavens, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven so upon the earth. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we also forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen. (Matthew 6:9-13)

Like the Lord's disciples we too need to learn how to pray. Simply repeating the words of the Lord's prayer, without at the same time trying to *do* as the Lord Himself says, will not invite the Lord to be present with us and help us. True prayer comes from our hearts, not merely from our memory or our lips. Genuine prayer is the heart speaking, pleading for help, asking for guidance, or praising the Lord.

The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church defines prayer as talking with God (see *Arcana Coelestia* 2535). In prayer we speak to the Lord about the things that we truly care about. Regardless of whether we pray for earthly or for heavenly things, we need to acknowledge that only the Lord knows what we truly need. This is usually not the same as what we ourselves want or what we think we need. However, the Lord knows what we truly need even before we ask,

and we must learn to trust in His Providence. The Lord wants us to be happy forever, not just during our life here on earth, and so He only gives us those things that will help us to become angels in heaven.

The essence of genuine prayer, therefore, is not to tell the Lord what we think He should do for us. Rather, it is to ask Him to teach us how to live our lives. It is true that the Lord may not answer our prayers in the way that we hoped or expected He would. Yet He will always listen to our prayers, if we truly seek to do His will and not simply to get our own way through prayer.

Prayer, then, is something that all of us must learn to use properly. Only when we pray sincerely, and with eternal ideals in mind, can we truly communicate with our Heavenly Father. The Lord will teach us how to pray properly as we seek to do His will and as we learn to listen to and recognize His responses to our prayers, even if His answers are not what we wanted. In time, we can learn to converse openly and freely with the Lord about natural and spiritual things that concern or trouble us. In this way, we can also learn to cooperate with our Heavenly Father as He seeks to teach us about His eternal kingdom and to lead us into it.

We do well to ask—as the disciple did when he saw Jesus praying—“Lord, teach us to pray.”

Texts: Luke 11:1-4; Matthew 6:5-13; *Arcana Coelestia* 2535