

Prayer

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At times we pray because there is nothing left to do but to pray. We have reached the limit of despair. We are filled with hopelessness. We are convinced of our inability to cope with the situation. Then we open our hearts to God and ask for His aid. We pray because we have to. But there are other times when things are going well, and we feel able to cope, and control our lives. At such times we may not feel the need to pray, may not even see the purpose or value of prayer. Then we need to understand what prayer is for.

The Lord tells us to pray. “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find” (Matthew 7:7). “Seek ye the Lord while He may be found, call ye upon Him while he is near” (Isaiah 55:6). And He promises that when we pray He will hear us. “Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you” (Jeremiah 29:12). “All things, whatever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive” (Matthew 21:22).

Over and over again, especially in the Psalms, we are shown that when we pray the Lord hears us: “I waited patiently for the Lord, and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry” (Psalm 40:1). And again, “Verily God hath heard me; He hath attended to the voice of my prayer. Blessed be God, who hath not turned away my prayer or His mercy from me” (Psalm 66:19-20).

The Lord also taught us to pray by His own example. He prayed to thank the Father, as in Matthew: “I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because Thou hast hidden these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes.” (11:25) He prayed often. We read in Luke: “Now when all the people were baptized, it came to pass, that Jesus, also, being baptized, and praying, the heaven was opened” (3:21). Also, “And He withdrew himself into the wilderness, and prayed” (5:16). And again, “He went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God.” The Lord prayed for help in times of trial: “Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour. But for this cause came I unto this hour. Father, Glorify thy name” (John 12:27-28). And the Lord prayed for us: “And now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are” (John 17:11).

When we pray, it is important that we understand what prayer does not do. The Lord is all loving and merciful. By praying we cannot make the Lord love us more, or care for us more than He already does. Nor can we make Him love others, or care for them more than He already does. The Lord is all seeing. We should not think, in prayer, that we are informing the Lord of something He does not already know. We cannot cause Him to see what we need. He sees all our needs. So He says in Isaiah: “Before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear” (65:24).

The Lord is all wise. We cannot teach Him what He does not already know. Nor should we ever presume that we know better than He what is good for us. “Shall the clay say to him that fashioneth it, ‘What makest thou?’” (Isaiah 45:9) In prayer we should never think to teach, inform, or enlighten the Lord about our own condition or the condition of others.

The Lord wills to give all blessings to us, without restraint or condition. Our failure to receive the Lord’s blessings lies in our unwillingness to acknowledge our need and our unwillingness to receive at the Lord’s hand. The inmost or essential of prayer is the acknowledgment of the Lord’s help and the desire to receive His blessings. This internal prayer receives power and strength in a person as it descends into the thought, and from there into the words and actions of the body. Prayer helps bring a person into a state of humility and willingness to be led by the Lord. So we read in the *Apocalypse Revealed*: “It is common in all Divine worship, that a person should first will, desire, and pray, and the Lord then answer, inform, and do; otherwise a person does not receive anything Divine.... But yet the Lord gives them to ask, and what to ask; therefore the Lord knows it beforehand; but still the Lord wills that a person should ask first, to the end that he may do it as from himself, and thus that it should be appropriated to him” (n. 376).

Because the purpose of prayer is to enable a person to receive the Lord’s gifts and make them his own, it is essential that a person follow prayer with action. We must do the things we ask for, or pursue the goals we have asked the Lord to help us reach. We must also repent of those evils which stand in the way. Verbal piety does not accomplish anything. We must follow our prayers with deeds in life. “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the Kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of my Father, Who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21).

As was said above, the Lord gives us to ask, and what to ask for. In praying, we should strive to pray for the things that we believe the Lord wants us to have. We should be guided in our prayer by the Word, and what it tells us we need. Thus the Lord said: “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.” (John 15:7) If we observe the Lord’s commandments and shun evils, then the things that we ask for will be those things which we inmost need. For He will then give us to ask. Thus in all our prayer will be the silent prayer: “Nevertheless, not what I will, but what thou wilt” (Mark 14:36).

We should remember that the Lord is never concerned with temporal or worldly things, except for the sake of eternal or heavenly things. Thus He makes a person rich or poor, famous or of little note, healthy or sickly, depending upon what will best serve that person’s eternal welfare. In our prayers we should likewise be guided by a desire for eternal things. The prayers we ask should be primarily for eternal blessings and spiritual riches.

This does not mean that we should never pray for temporal or worldly things. Such things are needed, and it is the Lord’s desire that we have all His blessings to the degree that they are not harmful to us. Still, when we pray for worldly things it should be with some higher use in mind. It may, for example, be appropriate to pray for help in finding a home. But our thought should be on the use of that home, not on our desire to have great possessions, or to appear successful before people. When we pray for worldly things it is especially important that we remember to

ask that the Lord's will be done. We should not wish to be given that which would harm us or endanger our eternal welfare.

Just as the Lord prayed for us, and asked the Father to forgive us, so too it is appropriate for us to pray for others. He even exhorts us to "pray for them who despitefully use you, and persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). But in praying for others we must remember that the purpose of prayer is not to inform the Lord, or try to persuade Him to do something that He would not otherwise do. Certainly the Lord would not withhold something needed by another until someone else had prayed for him. In praying for others the primary benefit will be to us. It will promote our love of the neighbor and our desire that the neighbor be saved. Praying for another, when that person has harmed us, can be especially helpful in removing a spirit of hatred or revenge from our hearts. But our prayers for others also affect them. Such prayers enable us to love that person more, and thus to have increased perception of ways in which we may benefit that person's eternal welfare. These prayers can fill us with a sphere of love for the neighbor, which sphere may also have a positive effect upon the one we are praying for. And, when a person has asked us to pray for him, in a time of great trial or struggle, the knowledge that we will may be very comforting.

Just as the Lord taught us to pray, so we should teach our children to pray. This is an important responsibility of parenthood. We may teach our children to pray in a number of ways. The most positive, and probably most important way is the lesson of our own example. The child who sees his parents praying for help and guidance is learning firsthand about humility. He is learning that just as he is dependent upon his parents for everything, so his parents are dependent upon God. In this regard, we cannot over stress the value of personal prayer, in which one, before the members of his family, asks for the things that he needs from the Lord. By observing the personal prayer of his parents the child learns that prayer is more than external ritual or formality. He also learns by example the kinds of things that he should pray for.

Family prayer times, during which the parents ask the Lord's help, and the children are given opportunity to ask things of the Lord, provide a chance for the child to practice praying, and to learn that it is a natural thing to go to the Lord when he or she is in need.

A parent should also be sensitive to times when the child should be encouraged to pray, as when the child has had a bad dream, or when he is having difficulty in some area of his behavior, or when something tragic or unfortunate happens. A child may be encouraged to ask the Lord to help him be forgiving when a friend has hurt him. A child may be encouraged to ask the Lord to help him understand why grandpa died, or why he cannot have some material thing that he wished for very much.

We should also teach our children by instructing them; telling them that they should ask the Lord for the things that they need, but also reminding them that they should trust the Lord. They should understand that the Lord would not give them something that would hurt them even if they wished for it very much. Remember, too, that a child is not yet able to be in internal worship, although there is innocence in his worship. He cannot think about heavenly blessings or spiritual riches except in material terms. Thus it is proper for a child to pray to receive worldly things and temporal delights. That is all he is capable of desiring. But he should be reminded that

the Lord will give him the things he asks for only if that is the best way for Him to make the child happy.

A person ought to pray. Praying contains within it the acknowledgement that all good is from the Lord, that He is the source of all blessings. A person ought to pray to the Lord so that he may desire the things of heaven, and that he may come to love his neighbor and the Lord. Prayer opens the mind, and adapts it to receive those loves. In prayer the Lord shows us what is good, and gives us the desire to ask for that good. Prayers which come from the Lord, in us, are always answered. "For everyone that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened" (Matthew 7:8).