

The Truth about Prayer

a sermon by Rev. Michael D. Gladish
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Prayer for most of us is a very personal thing. Perhaps the words “intensely personal” and “intimate” would not be too strong. For one thing, prayer can make us extremely vulnerable as we pour out our inmost concerns to the Lord, acknowledging our weaknesses and fears as we really perceive them. And even when we use prayer in more positive ways, for instance to express joy and thankfulness or to speak of our love and hope for others, we may not want to expose these feelings in public for fear of being misunderstood and misjudged, maybe as being a little arrogant or condescending. Even worse, knowing our own failings, we may be sensitive to a real risk of hypocrisy, or at the very least an inconsistency that makes us uncomfortable.

It is ironic, in fact, that the experience of prayer for many people is more private even than the intimacies of marriage. And yet “prayer, regarded in itself, is (simply) talking with God” (AC 2535). “Prayer is nothing but communication” (AC 3285). What is so fearful about this?

Well, we all have our own answers. For some of us it is a fear that we just don’t know what to say. For some it is a fear of being too selfish about it. Some fear that we will look or feel foolish in the process. Some worry that spontaneous prayers may be too focused on material things. And who are we to be demanding the attention of the Almighty in the first place? What makes us so important or our particular need so much more urgent than those of millions of others?

– Which brings up another point: a lot of the time prayer seems presumptuous enough without having to vocalize it in front of another person or group. Anyway, there’s something a little odd about talking with God in front of others – sort of like having people eavesdrop or listen in to a private conversation. Who are we really addressing, the Lord or the people in the room with us? What are we trying to achieve?

Jesus said, “When you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly” (Matt. 6:6).

Does this mean we shouldn’t pray in public? (If it does we ministers are in a lot of trouble.) Does it mean only ministers can pray in public? Many stories in the Word suggest otherwise. The context here shows that the prayer to avoid is hypocritical prayer, prayer that is merely for show. Indeed when we consider the **spiritual sense** of the passage we understand that the private room mentioned by the Lord actually is the mind itself, the spirit and the heart where all true prayer has its beginning. So the teaching, more deeply understood, is not that we have to go and hide to pray but that the source of the prayer should be internal and not merely external or material. The Lord, we are taught, looks at the heart, not just at the outward appearance.

Still, there is nothing wrong with the outward appearance, the outward expression, if it is in harmony with a true internal. The real issue in prayer is not whether it is done publicly or secretly but whether it is done sincerely or fraudulently. So the Lord also said,

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, *but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.*” (Matt.7:21)

This brings us to the difficult question of how to judge sincerity in prayer. It is one of the problems we face in public worship or group prayer when we listen to the petitions of others, and it is a concern we should have for ourselves even in our private devotions. Again, the issue is, what are we really trying to achieve?

In one forceful passage from the heavenly doctrines we read that “they who are in temptations are inclined to slack their hands and devote themselves solely to prayers, which they then ardently pour forth, not knowing that prayers will not help, but that they must fight against the falsities and evils that are being injected by the hells” (AC 8179). At first this seems a shocking statement, as if prayers don’t do any good at all, but clearly that is not the meaning. The uses of prayers are explained in many passages and we know that Swedenborg himself prayed most earnestly when in temptations. But experience can teach us that prayers alone don’t do much good. We could go to the Lord in what feels like genuine grief or humility, but if we aren’t willing or able to make changes in our lives, the whole exercise fails for lack of substance; there’s a basic integrity missing because the wish or thought is not fully integrated with life.

Therefore the teaching is that we must take action; we must do something to co-operate with the Lord. And if we are not doing something (or as it said in the Writings, if we are not “in some other active life than that of prayers”) it is actually necessary for the temptation to continue until we get the point! **“For this reason, moreover, the prayers of those who are in temptations are but little heard;** for the Lord wills the end, which is salvation.... And it is for this reason that “prayer (alone) is not to be relied upon” (AC 8179).

All this having been said, if we now assume that there IS harmony between the will and the life, or between thought and action, we understand that there WILL BE integrity and sincerity in prayer, public or private. How do we recognize a false prophet? The Lord says, “You shall know them by their fruits.... A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit” (Matt. 7:15-20). So we can also recognize a false prayer – if we are willing to consider.

But there is an issue of trust in prayer that is very precious. For example, we ought to be very careful to watch for any element of control or manipulation of the affections of others in our own use of prayer. On the other hand, unless we have evidence to the contrary we should be able to assume that other people’s motives in prayer are good. So we should be able to benefit from the words of encouragement or the focus on the Lord that comes through their prayers.

In this connection, and going back to our opening thoughts about the very personal nature of prayer, it is important for us to realize how often in the Word – throughout the Old and New Testaments – individuals are asked to pray for others, in public and in private. The Lord Himself prayed most earnestly, not for Himself so much as for the people He had come to redeem and save (John 17). These are sometimes called “intercessory” prayers because the idea is that one person intercedes or comes between another person and the Lord, pleading his cause.

An example of this is in the book of Numbers where “the people came to Moses, and said, ‘We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you; **pray** to the LORD that He take away the serpents from us.’ *So Moses prayed for the people*” (Numbers 21:7). Another example, earlier, in Genesis, occurred when Abimelech took Sarah, Abraham’s wife, thinking she was Abraham’s sister. Then God came to Abimelech and threatened him with death, promp-

ting poor Abimelech to plead his innocence. God listened and told him what to do, saying, “Now therefore, restore the man’s wife, for he is a prophet, *and he will pray for you* and you shall live,” which is exactly what happened (Gen. 20:6-7, 17).

Moses often prayed on behalf of the Children of Israel, as did the judges, the prophets and the kings. To give just one more example, when the Jews were threatened by the Philistines one day Samuel said, “Gather all Israel to Mizpeh (which was a mountain), and I will pray to the Lord for you . . . And the Children of Israel said to Samuel, ‘Do not cease to cry out to the Lord our God for us, that He may save us from the hand of the Philistines’” (I Sam 7:5, 8).

Finally, the Lord instructed His disciples always to pray and not lose heart (Luke 18:1), to believe that whatever they prayed for in His name they would receive (Matt 21:22, John 14:14, etc.), to pray for one another (Matt. 17:21) and even to pray for those who would spitefully use them and persecute them, that they might be the children of their heavenly Father (Matt. 5:44).

Still, the concept of intercession is easily misunderstood. The truth is that no one can stand between God and any individual person: God is everywhere, He is omnipotent, omniscient and in essence pure love and mercy for the whole human race. No one is left out, no one is cut off, no one is ever beyond His affection or thought. His presence is immediate, that is, not mediated by any others; it is direct, spiritual, internal; in fact, we can’t get away from it (Psalm 139:7-12). So how can we “TELL” God anything He doesn’t already know about a person? How can we presume to KNOW even a micro-portion of all that the Lord already understands about any situation? And how can we imagine that our pitiful appeals could make the Lord any more sympathetic toward anybody than He already is? The Lord has more reasons to be concerned than you and I could ever be aware of – and His mercy is *infinite*.

Further, and in the same vein, the notion that we could pray to God the Father for the sake of His Son, as if they were separate and distinct personalities, or as if the one would only act as a favor to the other, is inconceivable given the infinity, that is, the transcending unity and perfection of God. Rather, an appeal to the Heavenly Father is an appeal to the love itself *within the Lord*, and the title, Son of God, refers to the Divine Truth by means of which that love is presented to our thought and understanding. So there is nothing wrong with praying to God the Father or to the Son of God, as long as we realize that these are aspects of the same infinite Being made manifest or clearly shown to us in the love and wisdom of the Lord, Jesus Christ.

And the usefulness of this prayer is described in the reading from our third lesson today: –

“Prayer, regarded in itself, is speech with God, and some *internal view* at the time of the matters of the prayer, to which there answers something like *an influx into the perception or thought of the mind*, so that there is *a certain opening of his interiors* toward God; but this with a difference according to the person’s state, and according to the essence of the subject of the prayer. If he (or she) prays from love and faith, and for only heavenly and spiritual things, there then comes forth in the prayer something like a revelation (which is manifested in the affection of the one who prays) as to hope, consolation, or a certain inward joy” (AC 2535).

Here we see how much prayer benefits the one who prays by opening his heart and mind to the

Lord. This openness, this affection, hope, comfort and joy then are available as encouragement to others – for example, to the ones prayed for – and can be translated also into positive actions that benefit everyone within the sphere of our influence.

As we read elsewhere, “the Lord does indeed require humility, adoration, thanksgiving, and many other things from man (which are all involved in prayer) . . . *but these are for sake of the man himself*, for when a person is in humility he can receive good from the Lord, because he has then been separated from the love of self and its evils, which are the obstacles: (AC 5956).

So prayer of all kinds is essential to our spiritual life, and yet it is also true that the essential of all prayer is the kind of life we live. The two must be integrated; they must be in harmony; one cannot be honest and sincere without the other. That’s why the doctrines declare that “Divine worship consists primarily in a life of charity and secondarily in external piety ...and prayers” (AE 325:6). One follows after the other. “Moreover,” we read, “when a person is in a life of charity he is constantly praying, if not with the mouth yet with the heart; for that which is of the love is constantly in the thought, even when the person is unconscious of it” (Ibid:12).

What, then, shall we conclude about verbal, oral prayer? How personal and private should it be?

First, let there be order and freedom; let everyone decide for himself! Let there be no compulsion nor any sphere of compulsion, for what flows from this in worship is not good for anyone.

Second, let there be no hypocrisy, but as David said, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer” (Psalm 19:14). Unfamiliar terms and phrases should be avoided since they don’t represent the real person within, but the affections and the thoughts should be allowed to flow from the Lord through our individual perceptions and dispositions, and we should learn to love and accept each other for what the Lord reveals in this way.

Finally, let there be no manipulation or desire to control the lives of others through this means. The Spirit of truth does indeed flow from the Lord through one person to another, but the first use of prayer is to the individual himself, and the first thing that should become clear in the “revelation” that flows from this is the need to honour others on their own terms, according to their own needs.

One of the reasons prayer is so personal is that it is so powerful. So let us all pray this morning that we may all learn to speak to the Lord more freely and more effectively together, that He may bless and enrich us in our individual lives, in our relationships with one another and in our congregational life more freely and more effectively every day by this Divinely appointed means.

Amen.

Lessons: Luke 18:1-14
Children’s talk on Thankfulness in Prayer

Psalm 143
AC 2535, or AC 8179:selections