

## The Power - and Dangers - of Prayer

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish  
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Jesus said, "...If you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' it will be done. *And all things, whatever you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.*" (*Italics added; Matthew 21:21-22*)

Here is one of the most inspiring and at the same time challenging passages in Scripture. Psychologists and coaches have known forever that if you really believe you can have or do something the chances are greatly increased that you will succeed. Why? Well, naturally you will work hard if you believe that success is possible, but if you don't believe it's possible then what's the point of making any effort at all? Still, can we really have *whatever* we ask for in prayer, believing?

The title of this sermon, "The Power - and the Dangers - of Prayer" is a deliberate provocation. We all know that prayer is important, that it has power, and that we should pray every day, perhaps often every day according to some Scriptures. We have all probably also heard the expression, "Be careful what you pray for, *because you just might get it.*" But that's not the danger of prayer. Actually there are two concerns: the first is that if we are not careful we may expend a great deal of emotional energy in *fruitless* and *frustrating* prayer that the Lord *cannot* answer. The second is that we can very easily be deluded into *thinking* that God is answering our prayers when in fact it may not be God at all but some charismatic leader, an evil spirit or our own wishful thinking that "speaks" to us. And this can be a serious problem!

So in our New Church teachings we read, "IT IS A LAW OF THE DIVINE PROVIDENCE THAT A PERSON (SHOULD) NOT PERCEIVE OR SENSE ANYTHING OF THE OPERATION OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE, BUT STILL (SHOULD) KNOW ABOUT AND ACKNOWLEDGE IT" (DP 175: heading). Why is this so? The reason is, "If a person were to perceive and sense the operation of Divine providence, he would not act in freedom in accordance with his reason, nor would anything appear to him as his own doing. So, too, if he were to foreknow events" (DP 176).

How does this relate to prayer? Well, most simply, it comes down to a sense of our own identity and responsibility. Unless we were able to act in freedom, *not knowing for certain how God is acting in our lives*, we would lose that sense of identity and feel like little more than chessmen on some infinite game board, or marionettes on strings pulled from above.

Of course you may say, "But we can still choose whether to pray or not, and also what to pray for," and that's true, *but if you knew without a doubt that what you heard in answer to prayer was the absolute truth, what kind of a world would you have?* And what if your prayers conflicted with the prayers of others – which they often do? Who wins? Only the most devout? Only the ones with the most compelling belief? And does this mean the Lord doesn't care as much for the rest of the people who do not know about Him, or who may have lost their way? Of course not! The Lord loves *everyone*, and not one more than another. Besides, a lot of the things we want are not really the best things for us, and even if they are good, sometimes we fail to see the implications or the responsibilities of having them.

For example, there was a story in the news a few years ago about a woman who won \$25 million in a lottery and then had a heart attack – which she attributed to the unexpected stress of dealing with all the people who called her asking for a share of the windfall. On the other hand there are countless stories of people who have suffered incredible hardship – not at all what they would have prayed for – and yet have achieved tremendous levels of accomplishment and personal satisfaction while making significant contributions to the arts, science and human development in general, not to mention their own spiritual development.

These are just some of the reasons why it is so important that when we pray we pray above all that the Lord's will be done. Only the Lord really knows what is best for us, and His concern is not just with short term benefits but with what is of eternal value - for everyone. We are taught over and over, especially in the New Testament and in our New Church books, that the Lord is only concerned about our material welfare to the extent that it supports our spiritual welfare in the long term. And if doing well materially would interfere with our eternal welfare then why would He NOT withhold that success from us (see Matthew 16:25-26, DP 214, etc.)?

But let's look more carefully at what is going on when we pray. Yes, the Lord certainly teaches the importance of prayer. He tells us that we should pray often, that we should pray with humility and gratitude... that whatever we pray for we can receive... and so on. He does not, however, leave it at that. He also tells us specific things that we should pray for and some things that we should not be concerned about. For example, He says that we should love our enemies, bless those who curse us, do good to those who hate us and pray for those who spitefully use us and persecute us (Matt. 5:44). On the other hand He says, "*Take no thought for your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor yet for your body, what you shall put on*" (Matt. 6:25). And He warns us that when we pray we should "not be like the hypocrites," who pray to be seen, but that we should "go into our room" and pray in secret, avoiding "vain repetitions" (Matt. 6:5-7).

"Prayer" itself is an interesting word. In the Old Testament it comes from a root that has to do with judgment. So it carries the idea of appealing to God for mercy lest we be judged harshly – as we may well deserve!

In the New Testament the words for prayer have a variety of meanings. Some of them simply convey the idea of asking for something (whether of God or another person), but the most common term is one that implies a *commitment* of vows or worship, not just a request – as in the Lord's prayer, "Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done." And so on.

But when we think about prayer we should not just think about those particular passages that use that word, or those particular postures that we associate with it. Rather we should think in terms of any sincere desire to communicate with the Lord. And here's the key philosophical point that is so important and so often overlooked in our considerations of prayer: *when we ask for what we want or what we think we need we are going to be looking for that specific thing in the response.*

This isn't necessarily bad! After all, if we don't ask for and seek specific things, how can we ever expect to get them? Wishful thinking in general, like asking for happiness or peace of mind, or that we may be "good" and not "evil" doesn't usually help much. It's sort of like wishing for the skill to draw but not asking for the courage or instruction to pick up a pen and start drawing.

On the other hand, when we ask the Lord for what WE want rather than for what is good for us in HIS eyes we are definitely putting OUR finite limits on His love, His wisdom and His power. Not only that, but *we are limiting our ability to perceive the truth* because – again – we are setting ourselves up to expect only certain kinds of answers. Then one of two or three things typically happens: either we are disappointed, maybe even bitter and angry if we don't get what we want (this leads many people to reject the very idea of a loving God!), or we get ideas that we think are God answering us, because they favour our assumptions, when in fact they may be illusions or falsities inspired by the hells.

For example, if someone prays for a truly spiritual marriage, a deep and intimate relationship with someone who shares his convictions and loves the things he loves, but is convinced that his wife cannot fulfill these expectations, he may be led easily into an extramarital affair thinking, "Finally... the Lord has given me the partner I really need or deserve. Now I can 'move on' from this failed relationship and start over with 'the right' person." Duh. This answer is not from the Lord, it's from the hells who love nothing more than to inspire adultery and self-centeredness.

A truer and more spiritual prayer in this case would be for this man to ask the Lord how he could be a better husband to his wife, or what he could do to improve his relationship with her.

Many people really believe that if they pray to God for what they want or need He will give it to them, or at least, that He will answer their prayers in some obvious, external way. But let's think about this. In the first place it is a manipulative idea – as if we can tell God what He should do! But beyond that it assumes a sort of infallibility of our perceptions about what God is saying to us, and how He is saying it. Perhaps you have heard someone say – or perhaps you yourself have been convinced – that "God told me to do this or that." "God told me," for example, "to go to the library and get a certain book," or "God told me that I should go here and not there today."

Well, maybe! But then again, maybe not. The problem is that you can't be sure. For if there's one thing that our New Church teachings make abundantly clear it is that apart from His laws, principles and loving appeals God does not speak to us unequivocally in a given situation and say "This is what you must do now." Indeed, as a rule, if we think He is doing this we can almost take it as given that we are under the influence of spirits (or other people in this world) who would like to dominate or control our behaviour in some way (DP #321:3). We read,

“...It is according to the laws of order that no one ought to be persuaded about truth in a moment, that is to say, that truth should be so confirmed in a moment as to leave no doubt whatever about it, because the truth which is so impressed becomes persuasive truth, and is *devoid of any extension, and also of any yielding quality*. Such truth is represented in the other life as hard, and as such that it does not admit good into it so as to become applicable. Hence it is in the other life that as soon as any truth is presented before good spirits by a manifest experience, there is soon afterwards presented something opposite which causes doubt. *In this way it is given them to think about it* and to consider whether it be so, and to collect reasons, and thus *to bring that truth into their minds rationally*” (Arcana Caelestia #7298:2).

So important is this concept that we read further in even more forceful terms,

“...The Lord does not teach a person truths either from Himself or through the angels *immediately*, but He teaches *mediately* by means of the Word, preaching, reading, conversation and communication with others, and thus by thoughts within one’s self about these things. *A person is thus enlightened in the measure of his affection for truth from use*. Otherwise he could not act as if from himself” (Apocalypse Explained #1173:2).

The principle here is that the Lord wants us to take spiritual responsibility for our actions, which we cannot do if we are simply following a plan dictated by some outside force, even though that force is God. Instead He teaches us through His Word, which is written for everybody, and we must go to the Word, not to some mystical meditation process, in order to see those teachings in the context of our lives. That’s how we get answers to our individual prayers. Yet even so, we must acknowledge our biases and the limitations of our understanding, so that we approach it with humility, an open mind and so far as possible a reverent, spiritual point of view.

Remember the story about the little girl who’s mother was dying of a certain illness. She prayed and prayed for her recovery until finally one day the mother died. Of course the little girl was heartbroken, but when one of her cynical uncles tried to tell her this was proof that God does not hear prayers she replied simply, “Oh, yes, He does, but this time He said ‘No.’”

And with that we return to our opening reference from Matthew about moving mountains and the idea that *whatever* we ask in prayer, believing, we can receive. *Really? - Whatever?* If so why does the Lord elsewhere say, “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)?

Prayer, to be real must be sincere, and the sincerest form of prayer is a life according to the Word (AE #325:3). It should therefore come as no surprise to learn that the mountain referred to in this verse is not actually a physical mountain, but the mountain of arrogance and self-love that the Lord can and will remove from us if we co-operate with Him!

So if we really believe and really live according to the Word, *then* can we get whatever we ask in prayer? Literally the answer is yes, but it is yes *only* because really to believe and really to live according to the Word is to believe and live *that His will may be done*, and we have to be prepared at all times for the fact that *His* will may not be *our* will for our lives in this world. For as He said,

“...Whoever desires to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”

Amen.

Lessons: Matt. 7:7-23, with a Children’s talk on Prayers of Thanks  
Psalm 143: “Hear my prayer, O Lord; give ear to my supplications...”  
Arcana Caelestia #2535: “Prayer, regarded in itself, is talking with God...”

Prayers for this service:

1.

Heavenly Father, teach us to pray. Teach us and inspire us with the things we need to know and do, that our prayers may be meaningful to You and to ourselves.

In the meantime, Lord, help us to remember how little we know, and how selfish and worldly we tend to be when we open our hearts to You. So help us to begin our prayers with gratitude and thanks for all that You have given us, and for the promise that You will give us what we really need if we prepare ourselves to receive it.

Grant us encouragement, perception and strength to shun the evils that prevent us from sincerely communicating with You or receiving the blessings that You always provide. So let our cries come before you. Incline Your ear to us, and answer us!

Amen.

2.

Dear Lord, let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to You! Cleanse us from our secret faults and keep us back from any presumptuous sins in our approach to You.

Strengthen us in the knowledge and understanding of Your Word and grant us help from Your heavenly kingdom as we do our part to live according to what we know. Let all our petitions come before You in a pure spirit of concern for others rather than ourselves, and that Your will may be done. So fill our hearts with a grateful sense of Your power and Your love, that we may experience the joy of Your salvation.

Amen.