

Lord, Teach Us To Pray

A Sermon by Rev. Derek Elphick

INTRODUCTION

Prayer, defined in its simplest terms, is speech with God (See AC 2535).

"Speech with God"

What a truly awesome proposition...

Yet how can we the "created" speak with God the "creator"?

How can we, the created, have anything to "add," anything to "enhance" this sacred connection with God?

As the prophet Isaiah said, surely we have turned things around...

*Shall the potter be esteemed as the clay;
For shall the thing made say of him who made it,
He did not make me?*

(Isa. 29:16).

"Shall the potter be esteemed as the clay?"

Can we put ourselves on the same level as God?

It seems like an impossible proposition, doesn't it?

- the finite speaking with the infinite and visa-versa...?
- how can there be any ratio?

YET, THIS IS PRECISELY WHAT WE ARE INVITED TO DO!

As with many things, the Lord makes the seemingly impossible, possible.

Being "acquainted" with our sorrows (Isa. 53:3), the Lord our God
YEARNs to speak with us...

And URGES us to enter into a dialogue w/Him that promises to
grow in depth & maturity, in love and understanding

Now, I think it's fair to say that most of us assume that our prayers - the words, the timing, the occasion - are something WE initiate but this is actually an appearance.

In reality, prayer is something the LORD initiates! **The Lord creates the mechanism for us to engage with Him in conversation - all we need to do is respond.**

This is why we need to be *taught* how to pray, partly because we may have picked up some erroneous ideas along the way but also because it's much *easier* to do once we understand how it works.

1. WHY SHOULD WE PRAY?

This may sound obvious but we need to pray because the Lord is *inviting* us to pray. The Scriptures speak of this "call" from God in a variety of ways but perhaps the most concrete, visual one is this:

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come to [them] and dine with [them], and [they] with Me (Rev. 3:20).

Prayer is about waking up to the presence of God.

The Lord stands at the door of our mind and knocks because this is the nature of His love. In all love there is an effort to *intercede* (see AC 8573:2, AE 644:23). This is especially the case with the Lord...

Who burns with a love for our salvation and, as such, constantly seeks to "intercede" - to help us on our journey offering us...
"hope, comfort, and inward joy" (AC 2535)

When you look at the Old Testament, you find that prayer is a frequent, regular habit in the lives of the patriarchs, prophets, kings, in the lives of regular people.

By the time you get to the New Testament, it's a "given" that we should pray.

It's *assumed* that every good Jew prays...
And in establishing a new religious dispensation, the Christian religion, the same assumption is made by the Lord.

So you get more explicit teachings in the New Testament that say...

When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites...who wish to be seen (Mt. 6:5).

Wherever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive them (Mk. 11:25).

And *when you pray, go into your room...and shut the door* (Mt. 6:6).

Again, the assumption is that we're ALREADY doing these things, already spending time with the Lord.

And in anticipation of any frustration we might have that our prayers don't seem to be working, the Lord told the disciples that they: *ought always to pray and not lose heart* (Lk. 18:1).

Teachings of the New Church amplify this point:

Saying prayers is necessary (AC 7038).

A person "*must pray*," a person "*must pray to the Lord for help*" if he or she wishes to refrain from sins, shun them, and turn away from them (See AE 803:2).

We "*ought to pray daily*" (AC 5135:3).
... "morning and evening, also at dinners and suppers" (Charity 174).

The point is that the Lord invites us to make prayer as much a part of our daily routine as any other daily routine.

2. WHAT SHOULD WE EXPECT?

Speech is a vital form of communication for the health of any relationship!
 (It's not the only kind, but a critical one).

Healthy speech is not a monologue, but a dialogue...

requires "give & take"
 action & reaction
 a time for speaking, and a time for listening...

In the case of our speech with God, this dialogue, this conversation with the Lord...could run silently in our mind while we're driving in our car, or walking, fishing, boating, running or sitting

...it could also be a verbal dialogue, spoken out loud, privately,
 behind closed doors...
 words of gratitude, a cry for help, or direction,
 or forgiveness, or understanding.

Whatever the "occasion" the important thing to remember is to create space for *silence* so that we can pay attention to our deeper thoughts and feelings.

In our reading today, we are explicitly told WHAT we can expect from our prayers if we're able to get into the right kind of "head" and "heart" space:

"When our prayers spring from love and faith...something like a revelation is present within our prayer which *manifests itself in our affections in the form of hope, comfort, or some inward joy*" (AC 2535).

The Lord is the ACTIVE force in our lives. In the context of prayer, again, we need to remember that the Lord is *initiating* the conversation.

That said, the Lord will not FORCE His life, His presence, His truth on us
(HE loves us too much to do such a thing!!!)

And so, if we are to receive anything from the Lord, it must be received in FREEDOM (see AR 376). The Lord stands at the door of our mind, and knocks, and waits...

He waits because only WE can open the door...

3. WHAT SHOULD WE SAY?

When one of the Lord's disciples came to Him and said, *Lord, teach us to pray*, He for the very first time, revealed the MODEL prayer, what we now call the "Lord's Prayer."

The Lord's prayer, w/out question, is the most sacred prayer
It is the Divine "template," giving an outline of WHAT to pray for...

When we recite that prayer humbly, and w/reverence & sincerity we are brought into a wonderful communication & association with the angels in heaven (See AC 6619; SE 1790).

Closely connected to the power contained in the Lord's prayer is our own reading of the Word.

There are so many passages in the teachings of our church that say we will gain *enlightenment*, clarity of thought, in our prayers, when reading the Word (see AC 8993:4, Lord 2, TC 165:1, 621:3, 634, etc.)

So the subject matter of the Lord's prayer, as well as our own prayers, becomes an important focal point, for as one teaching says, "*those in heaven attend solely to the ends (goals) of our prayers*" (AC 4227:4)

Our willingness to open the door, and engage with the Lord in pray, becomes so much easier (less daunting) when we realize what the goal or end in view is!

Even though our prayers often focus on ourselves, the end-in-view is so that we may focus on *others*, on those *beyond* ourselves.

Think about the Lord's prayer - it is, in large measure, "other" centered.
It's about the Lord and our neighbor!

Hallowed be Thy name
Thy kingdom come
Your will be done
Forgive us our debts *as we forgive our debtors...*

Point is, our prayers will naturally gravitate towards that which we care about...

Lord, neighbor, friends and loved ones...

And our cries for help, direction, strength almost always have a broader context, have to do with one of our relationships...

- spouse, friend, child, sibling, co-worker
(and the sins we inevitably discover in ourselves during prayer are for the purpose of allowing ourselves to be re-born, so that we may be better instruments in the Lord's hands)

So, what should we pray for?

1. Pray for our own salvation:
 - a. for the Lord's mercy & forgiveness
 - b. for the strength to face our evils
 - c. for comfort (See T. 539).
 - d. for truth, enlightenment (AR 956).
2. Pray for others (neighbor):
 - a. *Pray for those who spitefully use you (Mt. 5:44).*

- b. *Whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him (Mk. 11:2).*
 - c. *Pray for humility. Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."*
3. Pray for our country and church:
- a. *"There's a law engraved on the hearts of people that one's country should be loved, not as a person loves himself, but more than oneself" (TC 414).*
 - b. *Thy Kingdom come...*
 - c. *Pray for the New Church. He who knows anything of the Lord's coming, and of the New Heaven and New Church, thus of the Lord's Kingdom, should pray that it may come (AR 956).*

"Truth is what prays in a person" (AE 493).

"Those who are practicing a life of love and charity do not ask for anything but what is good" (AE 325:8).

It only makes sense -- use the *tools* (goods and truths) the Lord has given us.

4. HOW WILL WE KNOW IF OUR PRAYERS ARE WORKING?

In our prayers we need to realize that the Lord is not a distant spectator...

He is not listening to us from a distance (or absent).

HE IS STANDING AT THE DOOR OF OUR MIND, KNOCKING, WAITING

The Lord is present with every one of us, pressing urgently to be received" (TC 766).

On the deepest, most personal, private level, we are asking the Lord to...
perform the work of His redemption, salvation

The Lord's yoke is easy and His burden light because a person, so far as he resists the evils that flow forth from the loves of self and the world, is led by the Lord and not himself... (HH 359:e).

Again, it is the Lord who initiates our prayers.

It is *"the Lord who leads [us] to search [evils] out, He discloses them, and inspires grief for them, and together with this [inspires] an effort to refrain from them and begin a new life... (TCR 359).*

So how will we know our prayers are working? Two things to remember:

1. **Our state of mind**
2. **End-in-view**

(1). Our own state of mind - HUMILITY (vulnerability)

In our supplication to the Lord it is our state of humility that draws the angels close to us -- and not so much the subject matter at hand (AC 7391).

Intense supplication is expressed in the Word by a 'cry,' for the reason that a supplication, even a silent one...is heard in heaven as a cry (AC 9202).

(2). Our end-in-view - not my will, O Lord, but Your will be done.

"He must increase; I must decrease."

"Lead me to the rock (truth) that is higher than I."

"Love one another as I have loved you."

When we have gone into our room and shut the door and realize that we are standing on holy ground...

...when we have found the right "head and heart" space, we can expect the Lord to answer our prayer in the form of *"hope, comfort, or a certain inward joy"* (AC 2535).

5. **LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY (CONCLUSION)**

We're talking about a relationship (an incredibly sacred, special one).

As with all our relationships, they are never "finished," never "perfect."

We are all **works in progress.**

1. Prayer is something the Lord initiates. Our job is to "wake up" to the call, the knock on the door of our mind. Sometimes it's loud, but not always. Be alert to the still small voice. **Prayer is about waking up to the presence of God.**
2. We need to pray. We need to make it a part of our daily routine. Prayer is as necessary to our soul as food and water is to the body. We need to take the time to strengthen our relationship, our speech with God.
3. The Lord knocks at the door of our mind inviting us to speak with Him, but we cannot receive His blessings unless we OPEN the door of our mind and ASK Him to speak. **The Lord loves us too much to force us to listen to Him.**
4. Speech with God is not a monologue, it is a dialogue. We should feel free to use our own words and pray for specific things regarding our own salvation, our neighbors and friends, our spouse and children, the church, our country - anything that looks to, and honors, what is good, noble and true in life. **Remember: love always seeks to intercede.**
5. Prayer becomes so much easier and more enjoyable when we remember what the end-in-view is. Our speech with God reaches up to the heavens, reaches up to the Two Great Commandments, loving the Lord and loving our neighbor. As soon as we remember this, things start falling into place.
6. And lastly, humility needs to become the beating heart of our speech with God. When we can say, "Not my will O, Lord, but Your will be done" we are truly ready to listen.

But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly...

Amen.

Lessons: *Luke 11:1, Matthew 6:5-15, Revelation 3:20, AC 2535, AR 376, AC 8573:2*