
On Prayer

ALBAN GOODIER S.J.

FAILURES & REMEDIES IN PRAYER

A summary of an essay on prayer taken from 'The School of Love and Other Essays'.

Prayer is a gift from God—one He readily bestows on those who dispose themselves for its reception. Prayer is not easy, it is like a delicate flower that requires nurturing.

Many books have been written on how to pray but the lessons of our own experiences are probably the best.

OUR FAILURES

Our failures in prayer most often fall into three categories:

(i) We begin well enough—or we did

not, which is more common than people allow—but immediately we are lost. People we know wandered through our brain, above all two classes: those we like best and those we like least.

(ii) We make our selves comfortable—mindful of St. Theresa's warning than no one can pray whose body is in torture. After the first half minute, the restful attitude has led to a complete blank; it has either soothed us into slumber or else has let our minds wander to the moon. Of how many meditations is

this the history?

(iii) The desire and relish of spiritual things deserts us as soon as we try to pray. There remains nothing but weariness and languor; mean and shameful thoughts then come careering through our minds which are totally absent at other times. We have scarcely begun our prayer but we long with an almost irresistible longing for the end.

These are more likely than not our own experiences of prayer, but fortunately they have their remedy written right across them; we have but to acknowledge them, to discover the right relation that exists between prayer and mortification, and realise that, to some extent at least, one is the price of the other.

THE REMEDIES

(i) In the first place, if excessive preoccupation is a hindrance to prayer [as it most often is in our busy world], then we must train ourselves to resist this preoccupation. This does not necessarily mean doing less work in order to pray more, but it does mean that, no matter how much, or how engrossing, or how urgent our work may be, it must never be allowed to master us. We must learn to shut the door to interference; this is the active side of the virtue known as peace of mind.



Prayer is not easy, it is like a delicate flower that requires nurturing.

On Prayer



Our minds easily wander to the moon.

(ii) Secondly, if bodily ease is found to be a hindrance to prayer, then not only during times of prayer but at other times too, we must train the body to give up its comfort for the sake of energy of mind and heart.

(iii) Thirdly, if nature resists the supernatural effort to be made in prayer, if prayer is a time of weariness and agony, then it is likely that the hindrance to prayer comes from without rather than from within. It is much more likely to be a real trial than the consequence of our own faithlessness and self indulgence. There are three things to be done:

(a) First of all, at times which are not strictly times of prayer, seize the opportunities for ejaculatory prayers [e.g. “Jesus, I love Thee,” or “Jesus, my Lord and my God” etc.], or a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, or to pray the Angelus. Pray when nature is not in conflict; gradually nature itself will learn to “taste and see how

sweet is the Lord.”

(b) If prayer is not a matter of duty, if it is irksome (when body and soul are weary) it is of little use driving the soul against its own inclination. To pray long at such times, simply because one has made up one’s mind to do so, does but make a prayer a matter of greater horror.

(c) On the other hand, when prayer is of duty (due to one’s state in life or according to one’s religious rule), our practice must be the complete opposite. We must not clip the time but train ourselves to prolong it; and the reason is that prayer is then something more than a matter of inclination. It is the fulfilment of a duty and no yielding in duty can possibly make for growth in prayer.

OTHER FAILURES AND REMEDIES

The above failures represent the most common hindrances to prayer, but sometimes the fervent, with all the best will and effort and preparation in the world, still seem to make little progress. In such

cases it is likely that the trial comes from the hand of God Himself. He sometimes makes prayer difficult [how many saints have had to pass through the “dark night of the soul?”] to confirm a soul in the virtue of disinterested love. To such souls that persevere, He rewards them richly.

Finally, there is another hindrance, one which a soul is often loathe to admit, something clothed in the garments of goodness but which leads us away from God. This is a disordered affection for a person or a thing. A disordered affection is not just a distraction to be dealt with by mortification of the senses, it is something to be rooted out. By a disordered affection, we place a creature in competition with its Creator for our love.

SUMMARY

Hence to sum up the remedies to our failures in prayer: we need to cultivate discipline of thought, discipline of body, discipline of nature and discipline of heart. May Jesus grant us this grace. Ω



Shutting the door to interference is the active side of the virtue of peace of mind.

On Prayer

IMPRECATORY PRAYER

(from a sermon on prayer)

DEFINITION

Prayer, my dear brethren, is the lifting of the mind and the heart to God. It is our first duty as Christians, and even according to the natural law.

DIVISION

prayer	private	mental	meditative
			contemplative
	public	vocal	personal
			collective

THE ENDS OF PRAYER

Prayer, in the strictest sense is imprecatory, it is also an act of adoration, reparation, and thanksgiving, but strictly speaking it is a request for something from God. And it will always be answered, for we have the promise of Christ Himself:

"Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find: knock, and it shall be opened to you," (Matt., vii, 7).

"Therefore I say unto you, all things whatsoever you ask when ye pray, believe that you shall receive," (Mark, xi, 24).

THE OBJECT OF PRAYER

Does this mean that we can ask for things like chocolate, or a new husband, or vast wealth? No it does not.

When we pray, when we ask something of God, there are conditions attached. If God accords us anything, it is always for our good, which means that

only the things useful to our salvation will be accorded by God—accorded infallibly by God. Frivolous things, like the victory of a local cricket team, are not objects of prayer. Exams on the other hand, can be objects of prayer because they are not frivolous. There is no use, however, praying for better exam results if we have already received them. The most fitting objects of prayer are spiritual gifts such as an increase in virtue.

HOW WE SHOULD PRAY

When we pray for such good things, we should first pray with attention, lifting our hearts and minds to God. We should pray with a firm faith. We should pray with an ardent desire for the good requested and a hope of obtaining it. And we should pray in meekness and humility.

EFFECTS OF PRAYER

When we pray in this way we are never left unrewarded. For, although God has known from all eternity our every need and has His will fixed for all eternity, by His foreknowledge, our prayers are woven in into His providential plan of the universe. In this way we can say that they really are the cause of God's munificence which, if the conditions of prayer are observed, will lead to the according of our desires.

If what we demand is not the best for our salvation, the prayer nevertheless does not fail to shower down upon us new graces and an increase in faith, hope and charity as long as we pray with humility.

Ω



By the foreknowledge of God, our prayers are woven in into His providential plan of the universe.

On Prayer

MENTAL PRAYER

(from another sermon on prayer)

NATURE OF MENTAL PRAYER

Mental prayer is something that is distinctly lacking in our busy world full of distractions—even among our religious and priests—and it is something that is necessary for our spiritual growth. There are very few of us who can truly say that they pray well in this way.

Mental prayer can be either meditative or contemplative.

MEDITATION

Meditative prayer is the simplest form of mental prayer and may be defined as “a loving discursive consideration of religious truths”.

What this means is that, having put ourselves in the presence of God (imagining ourselves kneeling before His throne, or sitting at His feet or however we might wish to become conscious of His presence) we begin to consider Him or consider some aspect of His created world and its creatures as being ordered to Him.

But the object of this effort of discursive reasoning is not to become more knowledgeable about the truths of our faith (or truths of philosophy or science in relation to Him) but to discover manifestations of His love for us.

St. John of the Cross says succinctly: “The end of meditation and mental consideration of divine things is to obtain some knowledge of the love of God.”

Thus meditation can be seen as the first stage of courtship. Just as when two kindred spirits are attracted to each other they find themselves conversing with de-

light and then, when alone, pondering on their every conversation, their every deed, their every jest (not only to discover new reasons to love the other but also to discover signs of love in the other), by meditation we converse with God and discover new reasons to love God and new signs of God’s love for us.

The difference between human lovers and divine lovers is that, instead of wondering whether the other loves us, we know that God loves us with the certainty of faith and reason. Our meditations, therefore, are an exercise in discovery and elucidation of this love and an eliciting of our love for Him by this discovery.

CONTEMPLATION

Meditation is but the first stage of courtship; it is a prayer of means to the perfection of prayer which is contemplation. St. Theresa of Avila describes contemplation as “nothing but the intimate commerce of friendship, in which a soul converses one to one with this God by whom it knows itself loved.”

At first it is an intimate colloquy, wholly personal and spontaneous, without preoccupation about form and order, and proceeding only from the overflowing love of the heart. Just as two lovers, convinced of their mutual love, feel total liberty and delight in each other’s company, contemplation is that unrestrained, uninhibited relationship of love with God.

Sometimes the soul speaks, sometimes it holds itself in silence, listening interiorly in order to perceive the movements of grace which are God’s answer

When all our love’s desires have been spoken, just as two lovers might gaze at each other in silence when all is said and done, our colloquy ceases and our soul is stilled in silent contemplation of God. This is the consummation of the prayer of contemplation: a simple intuition of the Truth. In contemplation the soul seeking God is illuminated by His light and is drawn intensely to Himself.

Unfortunately, my dear brethren, the gift of contemplation is given mostly to those who are advanced in the spiritual life. For the spiritual pigmies, like most of us, our journey to this perfection of prayer requires much work. We might receive flashes of intuitive love but they are sent for our encouragement rather than as a consequence of our spiritual efforts.

WHAT MUST WE DO?

Our sights should be set on the prayer of meditation first. Aim to set aside some time during the day, 15 minutes is enough. Ideally we should be alone and in silence but if needs must we can apply ourselves to this prayer when travelling or when performing any task that does not require mental reflection.

St. Theresa recommends that those who have difficulty recollecting themselves (again most of us), should read and re-read a passage in a book.

Above all, in all our prayers we should never forget that the finality of our meditation is to discover how much Our Lord Jesus Christ loves us so that we might love Him as He deserves. Ω