

BASIC CHRISTIANITY

Lecture Number 23

PRIVATE PRAYER

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INTRODUCTION

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Most of the time, most of us are guided in large part by our urges and our emotions. However, it has been wisely said that the only one who can trust his impulses is the saint, the finished product of the process of sanctification.

Therefore we should pray by rule, because if we wait for the spirit to move us to pray, we won't get much praying done. It is very unlikely that anyone ever became advanced in the spiritual life who had not learned to regard prayer as a duty.

No one likes to hear talk about duty. But there are duties which go with being a Christian. A duty is something which is due to the circumstances, the setting. If I am a married man with a family, I have a duty to that family, because I am a married man with a family.

As a priest, I have certain obligations, duties, which go with that position, for example, to conduct services, preach sermons, hear confessions, and teach classes.

Prayer is a duty which pertains to our status as Christians. It is due to God. He has it coming to him. One of my duties is to say the Daily Office. I have been doing that for over fifty years. I seldom look forward to doing it. I almost always have the desire to do something else before I do it, or instead of doing it. But I am always glad I have done it afterwards.

Since you cannot trust your whimsy, you need to make a deliberate decision about what praying you will do, when you will do it, and even where you will do it.

ARRANGEMENTS

All the experts on the spiritual life agree that the best time of day to say your prayers, for most people, is the first thing in the morning, before you are distracted. The last thing at night, just before going to bed, is the worst time.

Of course, brief prayer at night, just before one goes to bed is fine. In fact, it is desirable. But that is not the time to get the bulk of your praying done, because you are tired then and your distractions are at their height. God is entitled to have us at our best and able to give him our fullest attention.

Your posture should be comfortable but not too comfortable. Sitting at the dinner table is a good arrangement, especially since the dinner table is the family altar and it has good associations. Kneeling at a prayer desk is the best arrangement for some people when there is room for it. However, the Church in apostolic times considered standing to be the normal posture for prayer.

It would be good to have a chapel, or, at least a prayer corner, if possible. At the very least, have one spot where you regularly say your prayers. It is a good idea to have a crucifix or holy picture in view from where you do your praying.

STAGES OF SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

In regard to the spiritual life, no two people are just alike. That is because every spirit is a separate species. As animals, we belong to the same species, but since we also have a spiritual side, we have to be cautious when we make generalizations about prayer. God has an individual plan for the spiritual development of each of us.

Nevertheless, there are certain generalizations which more or less apply to most people. For most of us there seems to be a sort of normal progression in the types of prayer.

It begins with formal vocal prayer. This is where primers like St. Augustine's Prayer Book come in handy. The formal written prayers which you find in primers, and the ones you commit to memory are to prayer a little bit like etudes are to a pianist; they are studies, exercises.

Such prayers are very valuable. Every Christian would do well to have a supply of them committed to memory, which he can fall back on when he runs dry.

But sooner or later, there comes a time when formal prayer becomes more of a hindrance than a help, and you are drawn to move on to informal vocal prayer. And then you may find that helpful for six weeks, or six years, or sixteen years, or not helpful at all.

About the time that one moves on to informal vocal prayer, he may also be ready to start making meditations. This is also called discursive prayer and mental prayer. It is, in fact, intellectual prayer, prayer with the active intellect, prayer in which you are engaged in doing some serious thinking.

The most common form of meditation begins with the reading of a passage of Holy Scripture or from some devotional book and then reflecting upon it. It is a kind of prayer in which most serious Christians engage for years. But there comes a time when even this is outgrown and the intellect becomes a hindrance instead of a help.

The highest and most perfect forms of prayer occur on the farther side of the intellect. But the boundaries between the various stages of the spiritual life are fuzzy. And a person may move back and forth from one to the other. Usually you never give up entirely any of the earlier forms of prayer.

When you reach a point after a prolonged period of regularly meditating when you feel drawn to some other form of prayer, you may be ready for affective prayer, sometimes called arrow prayer. It is prayer from the heart. It consists of short phrases, two or three words, or short sentences, perhaps interspersed with periods of silence.

In a period of fifteen minutes set aside for prayer, you might not say more than twenty or thirty words. But they are emotionally charged words. Remember, the Christian religion is a love affair between the soul and God. Prayer is conversation between lovers.

Affective prayer can occur throughout the day, spontaneously whenever it occurs to you. It does not need to be confined to rule. God is always there, and you can always tell him you love him any time you want to.

It is worth noticing that most of our curse words and phrases show signs of having started out as this kind of prayer. “My God!” is the beginning of a prayer.

Affective vocal prayer merges into the prayer of quiet. Your heart will be so full of intense emotion and love that you can’t find adequate words to express it. And so you remain silent.

For example, it is a little like a long-married couple sitting in front of the fireplace some evening not saying a word, just gazing into the fire and enjoying being in each other’s company.

And then the prayer of quiet merges into contemplation. In genuine contemplation, one is oblivious to the passage of time and to one’s surroundings, totally absorbed in God himself. All of the authorities on the subject recognize contemplation as the highest form of prayer. But we will have to save that for a little later.

The way you tell whether a mystical experience, that is a prayer experience, is authentic or not is whether it leaves you with a stronger desire for God and for his will to be done. The test is not whether you think you heard God speak to you or heard the rustle of angel’s wings. The test is does it issue in an improvement in your character.

Even a vision of God himself is nothing if it does not make me nicer to my spouse. Because all of the experiences which might be considered mystical can be self-induced, or even be the result of something I had for supper.

THE LADDER OR SCALE OF PRAYER

The form of prayer which will make me try to be more pleasing to God may leave you cold. And vice versa. Some forms of prayer seem never to be in order for some people, perhaps because of differences in temperament. But generally speaking there are four types or classes of prayer which should be included in the “diet” of every one.

St. Paul said, “When I became a man, I put away childish things.” On the other hand, Jesus said, “Unless ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall in no wise enter the kingdom of heaven.” This is not a contradiction. Jesus did not tell us to remain as little children. He intends for us to become mature, complete, perfect.

Jesus also told us to ask and we would receive, to seek and we would find, to knock and it would be opened unto us.

So the first type of prayer one usually prays is petition.

St. James says, “ye ask and do not receive, because ye ask wrongfully.” That is, God hears what we are praying and says, “You’ve got to be kidding!”

To illustrate: Once upon a time, there was young fellow in college who had read in the Bible, “Whatever you ask, believe in your heart you will receive it, and it will be given unto you.” One day he saw the homecoming queen, whom he had never met, and he decided to marry her. So he asked her for a date, and every time he did she refused him.

But he kept on praying, and he kept on asking her. Finally, just to shut him up, she agreed to give him a date three months in the future. Well, during those three months he kept on praying. And then on that first date, he asked her to marry him. And she told him to get lost.

The next morning, he was through with God, the Bible was false, and the Christian religion was a hoax! He had been asking for something which was incompatible with what God wanted to give him. Could he have really believed in his heart it would be otherwise?

We’ll come back to this point in a few minutes.

Well, sooner or later, something moves you on beyond petition. Perhaps some priest tells you it is time to make your confession. Or perhaps you discover yourself committing some kind of sin of which you thought you would never be guilty. And you discover that inside you are a bucket of worms, and that insight sends you to God on your knees. And so, because of your sense of shame and guilt, your prayer changes from “God, give me” to God, forgive me.”

The easiest and most efficient way to practice repentance is by making your confession on a regular basis. And after a couple of years of doing that on a regular basis, you begin to get to know yourself. And you realize that most of your petitions treat God like a celestial bellhop. You realize that you are taking God’s mercies for granted.

You begin to appreciate the extent to which God is really in control and is making provision for his people. And so your prayer moves on to include gratitude and thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving leads naturally to “I love you”, ...into adoration.

The best answer to the best prayer you will ever offer is the conviction that God has whispered into your ear, “You know, I love you too!” And with that all your feelings of dependency will evaporate.

So far, we have been working our way up a scale or ladder. And on the way up, all our prayers have been self centered: “God, give me”; “God, forgive me”; “God, thank you for what you have done for me and for those whom I love.”

Only at the top of the ladder when you have come to adoration, do you escape from self-centeredness. With St. Paul, you will have put away childish things; you will have put away the “gimmies” which are so characteristic of children.

Progress up the ladder is helped by keeping all four categories of prayer in your diet. The emphasis may shift from one to another, but you need formally to do all four types: petition, confession, thanksgiving, and adoration. However, once you have gotten to the top of that ladder, then you will go, with Jesus, back down the other side and become as a little child again.

When one has reached the point of adoration, he will have developed a pervasive concern for what God wants.

To illustrate: When Fred goes to another city to interview for a new job, he always has in the back of his mind, as he sees the people and conditions and other circumstances in the new place, “How will Alice like this?” “What will Alice think of this?” etc.

That kind of reflex, being habitually concerned with what God thinks, with what he wants, with what he likes, is what is meant by “praying without ceasing”. It is also called being “recollected.”

Sooner or later, after a period of emphasis on adoration, the question comes, “What if there were no God?” And when that happens you will be moved to thanksgiving *because God is!*

Now, before we continue down the “other side of the ladder, let us review the three kinds of sorrow for sin.

- First, there is remorse which says, “I’m sorry I hit my wife and broke her arm, because now I will have to cook my own breakfast.”
- Then there is attrition which says, “I’m sorry that people will now know that I am a wife-beater.”
- Real sorrow, which is called contrition, says, “I love my wife and I would be just as sorry if we had a maid to cook breakfast and it had been someone else who had hit her.”

So after you have reached the point of being thankful just because God is, the next step down the other side is contrition on behalf of others. You feel acutely sorry that others have sinned against God whom you love.

Then your love for God moves you on to petition, to pray for what God wants—because He wants it. And with that you become a powerful intercessor.

THE PROBLEM OF PETITIONARY PRAYER

This brings us to a problem about prayer which has occurred to many people. It goes like this:

If I ask God for something he wants to give me, he does not need me to tell him what I need. He already knows all the facts. He can just do it.

On the other hand, if I ask God for something he does not want to give me, do I think he will change his mind because I pester him?

Then why ask?

Well, there are three parts to the answer:

- We ask because Jesus told us to do it.

- We ask because God is a gentleman, and he does not intrude without being invited. What God really wants to give us is himself, fellowship with him, his love. That relationship has to be free or it will be less than real fellowship.
- We ask because God wants us to share in all of his activity, to “get in on it.” And it is not because he needs us, but because he is like a human father letting his son help him in his work so that the son can have fellowship with his daddy.

God wants us to share in his life: in his creative activity; in his atoning activity, and in his providential activity. Let us consider these activities of God one at a time:

- God wants us to share in his creative activity—After creating the universe, from galaxies to the Pacific Ocean to Mt. St. Helens to puppies, God said, “Wow! I’ll bet my children would enjoy doing stuff like that!” So he made us creative, to have babies, to pull weeds, to paint pictures, etc., and to make suggestions to our Father about what he could do next.
- God wants us to share in his atoning activity—The only thing which strips the mask completely from the face of sin is the voluntary suffering of the innocent. God asks us to become true heroes by participating in the voluntary suffering of Christ and in his redeeming work of prayer.
- God wants us to share in his providential activity—God is like a master chess player. No matter what moves we make, he is going to win, because he can see absolutely all of the possible consequences of every move we might make, and has already anticipated every one of them and has made provision for them.

To help visualize what this means, just think of how today’s computers can anticipate “infinitely” more alternatives than we could have thought possible fifty years ago. Well, God has no shortage of “memory” and his “processing” speed is infinite.

God loves diversity, and, within limits, he lets our free choices determine history. For me this is symbolized by an experience I had a number of years ago when I was a worker priest and on the staff of the Pima County, Arizona, Planning Department:

I was given the job of doing a study to determine where a new elementary school should be located in what was called the Sunnyside School District. When my study was completed, I made a presentation to the Board of Supervisors and then to the School Board. They both accepted my recommendation, and in due time, Los Niños Elementary School was built.

The subsequent history of Tucson, Arizona, and ultimately of the world, is already different than it would have been if I had chosen a different location. And that is true of absolutely every choice each one of us makes. And God has anticipated each of those choices and made provisions for them “*from before the foundation of the world.*” [I Peter 1:20]

All of our petitions are suggestions we make to God for the sake of ourselves and others, and sometimes he takes our suggestions.

PETITION AND INTERCESSION

God's answer to the request we make may be "No". In all of our prayer, Jesus is to be our model. Maundy Thursday, in the Garden of Gethsemane, he prayed that God would "let the cup pass" from him. But, above all, he prayed that God's will would be done.

The essence of all prayer is to unite our wills with God's will. That is the "bottom line" of all authentic prayer. So when God said, "No" to the request of Jesus, he was saying "yes" to his basic prayer, "Thy will be done."

In petition, always pray rather than worry. If Aunt Susie asks me to pray for her "bad back," I will not concentrate on her back and put my energy into that. That would not be prayer; it would be worrying about Aunt Susie's back. And Jesus tells us not to worry, not to "be anxious."

The way to pray for Aunt Susie's bad back is to begin by recalling that I am in the immediate presence of God my Father. Then, while I am concentrating on God, I will reach out with the "corner" of my mind and bring Aunt Susie and her back into God's presence for him to fix or to deal with as he sees fit.

One excellent way to pray for someone else, is to pray "for" him, that is to say the prayers *in his name* that he should be saying, but perhaps is not saying. That is literally to pray on someone's behalf. Jesus is doing that for you and me at this very minute.

Actions, with or without words, can be offered to God on behalf of others. For example, once upon a time, a doctor was summoned to the bed of a woman who was seriously ill. As he came in through the living room, he noticed a young boy standing in the corner with his head bowed and his eyes closed and his hands folded in front of him.

The doctor realized that the boy was repeating over and over "A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, etc." He stopped and asked the boy what he was doing.

He answered, "I am praying."

The doctor said, "But you are just saying the alphabet. that's not prayer!"

The boy said, "The preacher told me to pray for my mother, and I don't know any prayers, so I'm saying my ABCs for her."

That was real prayer.

THE PRAYERS WE SAY

The words of the prayers we say are not addressed to God as much as to ourselves. God is omniscient, and I do not need to read him tonight's paper to keep him up to date. But what I say, even to him, or especially to him, affects what is in my heart. It changes my heart, if ever so slightly. So as a result of the prayers I say, my heart begins to conform to those words.

When I verbalize what I want, I want it even more. Or else, when I hear myself say it, I realize what a silly idea it was all along.

The Real prayer takes place on the other side of the words. And our finest prayers are the ones we say without thinking about the words. In our private prayers, just as in our corporate prayer, we can be distracted by God, which is what we really want. The words can act as shields against the other kind of distractions which prevent that.

This is the way, for instance, that prayer beads such as the Rosary function. Most distractions come from within us. The Rosary gives us something to say and to hear and something to do with our fingers while we are meditating on the mysteries of God made flesh in Jesus Christ. Those mysteries are usually referred to as the Joyful, Sorrowful, and Glorious Mysteries.

JOYFUL MYSTERIES: The Annunciation; The Visitation; The Nativity; The Presentation; Jesus found in the Temple at 12 years old.

SORROWFUL MYSTERIES: The Agony in the Garden; The Scourging; The Crowning with Thorns; The Bearing of the Cross; The Crucifixion.

GLORIOUS MYSTERIES: The Resurrection; The Ascension; Pentecost; The Assumption of the BVM;* The Coronation of the BVM.#

- St. Mary represents the Church as both Bride of Christ and our Mother. The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary is an old symbol of the Church's entry into heaven.
- # The Coronation of the Blessed Virgin Mary is a symbol of the Church's union with Christ the King in Glory.

The Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Hail Mary are recited while meditating on the various mysteries in sequence.

An alternative to the Hail Mary which some use are these words, "O Saviour of the world, who by thy cross and precious blood hast redeemed us, save us and help us, we humbly beseech thee, O Lord."

My grandmother, who was a member of the Christian Church, the "Campbellites," had what amounted to a simplified version of the Rosary. As she went about doing her housework thinking about Jesus, she would quietly sing over and over, "He walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own...He walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own...etc."

MEDITATION

This brings us to the subject of meditation. Prayer is the establishment of conscious union with God by choice, by the will, and then paying attention to God as a fact, as Reality. Meditation is reflection with the intellect upon the nature of this union while you are being conscious of it. The classical name for meditation is the *lectio divina*, the "divine lesson or "reading".

There are many systems of meditation designed to overcome our distractions and self-centeredness. One method is to choose an incident from the life of our Lord. Then put yourself consciously in God's presence.

As you slowly repeat the words of Scripture which describe the event, you visualize the scene with your imagination. You try to hear and smell and feel every sensation you would have if you had been present when it happened. This is called the composition of the scene.

Then you watch and listen as the event takes place, and you think about it while it is happening. In your imagination you may ask the others present what it means to them. You try to empathize with those present as though you were the one to whom Jesus is giving his love.

You conclude the meditation by asking what the event means to you for your life, and then you make a resolution to do one specific thing to put that meaning into effect.

CONTEMPLATION

The highest form of Christian prayer is contemplation. St. Thomas Aquinas said that the purpose of all work is to acquire time for contemplation. In heaven all we will do is contemplation.

The following is a quotation from the book *Behold the Spirit*, written by Alan Watts while he was still a Christian.

“Both children and adults, when they have their wisdom are most happy when they are doing things that have no purpose: making up lunatic stories with their friends—walking aimlessly through fields and hitting an old stump with a stick; whittling hunks of wood just for the sake of whittling; etc.”

God's creative activity is not really his labor, but his play. From *Behold the Spirit* again:

“In eternity, the Father and the Son are, in the unity of the Spirit, forever in the play of love, giving themselves one to another in an ageless dance whose finite image is the blaze of aimless splendor that fills the heavens in the celebration of the glory of God...

“To enter into and share something of God's experience of eternal now is religious contemplation.”

Contemplation is not emotional. Contemplation is not rational. Contemplation is quiet experience with no rational content which can be described or communicated.

According to the mystical saints, there are various stages of contemplation from what is called acquired contemplation to what St. Theresa called the “mystical marriage.” Everything beyond acquired contemplation is simply the gift of God.

There are two kinds of acquired contemplation:

- religious contemplation which is a state of prayer;

- natural contemplation as, for instance, when one is lost in the enjoyment of great music.

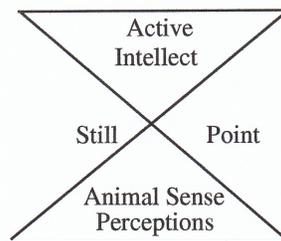
Contemplation is the opposite of concentration. Thus one of the signs that a person is ready for contemplation is that he is no longer able to meditate. Of course there may be other reasons such as fatigue, boredom, guilt, etc...

For example, when a painter is at work, he is both applying paint to the canvas and, from time to time, stepping back to criticize what he has done. But when he has finished he also steps back to look at the painting, but this time to admire it rather than to criticize it.

The criticism while painting is, like meditation, a rational activity. But the admiring of the painting when it is done is, like contemplation, simply enjoyment.

On the seventh day, God rested from his creative activity and admired his creation. In heaven, we will enter into God's Sabbath, into his Rest, and we will behold the King in his beauty and enjoy!

Most of the time what we do is experience the created world through our animal sense perceptions. And then our active intellect reaches down and takes those perceptions up into itself, examines them, names them, applies them, etc...



This reaching down by the active intellect is called apprehension, literally, “grasping”. But apprehension has another equally pertinent meaning, “fear” or “anxiety,” which is an ingredient of awe.

When the active intellect has the experience in its realm and is dealing with it, it has it under control and thus there is no sense of danger. But for that first split second before it has classified it, there is peril.

While we are thinking about an experience, we are not attending to the experience itself. We are spiritually in the top half of our nature, the top triangle.

But on the other hand, we can be so involved in an experience itself, as when we are coping with an emergency, that we are not reflecting at all. For example, people speak of fighting so hard that there is no time to be scared. On such occasions, we are in the bottom triangle entirely, completely within our animal nature.

There is, however, a third possibility. One may be engaged in contemplation. On those occasions, his attention is neither in the top triangle nor the bottom triangle, but at the still point.

Normally, we do not pause at the still point but pass it on the run. That is because if we stop there, we are vulnerable to that which is outside both triangles, the world of the spirit. When we stop there, the door is open to God.

Contemplation is going to the still point and waiting for God. That encounter with God may result in awe, or in apprehension, or in delight.

Just which will result will depend on the state of the person's soul, since, at the still point, the door is also open to other spirits. And not every spirit is of God.

For that reason, it would be wise to discuss it with your spiritual director before trying contemplation. One can actually have a "bad trip" from contemplation. In fact, the bad trips which people on LSD report may be explained this way, perhaps.

Remember how Moses is said to have seen the back side of God as he passed by while Moses was hid in the cleft of the rock. That sounds like contemplation.

The role of the intellect is to take us to God. But when we get there, then God takes over. For example, in the *Divine Comedy* of Dante, Vergil, symbolizing reason, takes Dante through Hell and Purgatory, but turns him over to Beatrice at the Gate of Heaven.

Beatrice is the symbol of admiration and love.

When reason has brought us to God and he has taken over, then, WOW!

The mystics talk about it but never try to describe it, because it cannot be described. It seems as if the heart will break for beauty alone. That is the first, ever so slight taste of the joy of the contemplation of God.

Right at the end of his life, after he had completed the most magnificent summary of all of Christian thought, the *Summa Contra Gentiles* and the *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas Aquinas had an experience of God which he said made everything he had written seem "like straw" in comparison.

When one has been away from his home and family for years and then, at long last, is coming home for Christmas, as he draws near he thinks about whom he will see and what it will be like. But then when he actually arrives he simply embraces those he loves. In heaven, all our faculties will be stilled, because they will be filled.

Contemplation is for everyone, just as heaven is. But just as heaven requires preparation—that process of spiritual growth called sanctification—so also does contemplation require preparation. It is not for just anybody whether prepared or not. It is for those who are ready for it.

And the way to get ready for contemplation is by practicing all the prior forms of prayer as well as the rest of the Christian disciplines. When the time comes and we knock, God will make good on his promise and open unto us.

DRY PERIODS

Inevitably, there will come times when it is not fun to say your prayers, or even to go to church, for that matter. In those dry periods, the temptation will be simply to quit.

But the dry periods are the times when real spiritual growth can occur—if you keep at it. The times when it is easy are times of consolidation. Make the most of those times and enjoy them. But do not take them for granted. Rather be ready for the dry periods which will surely come.