

June 19, 1966
Psalm 91
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THE LOST ART

Some weeks ago I was invited to speak to the Pilgrim Fellowship of our church on the theme, "Being Your Best Spiritually". I did so with some reluctance because it is difficult to speak on such a subject--at least it is difficult for me--without appearing to be preaching, and I felt that our young people had ample opportunity to hear me preach on Sunday morning without hearing me do so on Thursday evening.

So I decided I would use the occasion to learn from them, by presenting to them a series of questions. If we want to reach young people with a religious message it is extremely important to discover what they are thinking and why they are thinking as they do.

The first question I asked these thirty or forty young people, therefore, was, "How many of you have read your Bible during the past week?" What would you judge the answer might have been? Perhaps you have more hope and faith than I, but my expectations were not great. I was therefore both surprised and pleased when at least one-half of those present indicated that they had voluntarily picked up their Bible and read it during the past seven days. You see, these young people can easily fool you.

My next question was this: "How many of you pray regularly?" I expected a fairly good proportion of them to indicate an affirmative answer. Young people are extremely idealistic, they desire a new and better world, and I thought that they would probably pray with some degree of regularity. Again, I was very much surprised for only about one-third of them admitted to praying regularly.

Since that time I have been asking myself why it is that these young people--young people close to the church--do not take prayer more seriously. If the proportion is so low with these young people, what must it be with those whose relationship to the church is much more tenuous? Perhaps they and vast numbers of adults never pray, and if so it is not difficult for me to understand why we live in a world of confusion and chaos. I am utterly convinced that he was right when St. Alphonsse Liguori said, "No one was ever lost who prayed, no one was ever saved who did not pray."

Well, after giving much thought to the matter, I have concluded that the primary reason people do not pray is that they have never learned how. This is a condemnation of ministers, Sunday school teachers, and parents, who themselves have never learned how to pray effectively. Too many people think they are teaching children to pray when they are merely teaching them to be spiritual beggars, beseeching God to give them the things they think they ought to have. When we ask, "God give me this or that", "God make me a better person", "God give peace to the world", we are on the very lowest level of prayer, if it could be called prayer at all. For as Gerald Heard puts it so well, "Prayer is not asking for things, not even for the best things, it is going where they are."

I have hopes, therefore, that the lack of prayer on the part of these young people may be due to their understanding that the mess in which the world finds itself is not caused by God but by man. If it is to be straightened out it must be straightened out by man. God will not do it for man and there is no use begging him

to do so. But these young people also need to know that man cannot straighten out this world unless he has the help of God. That help is available to us through prayer.

Now no prayers are ever completely wasted or entirely in vain, even those on this lowest level. One cannot pray, "Lord, make me a better person" without at least having some vision of how he could become better, but it is a very weak and ineffective prayer. Yet this is primarily how we teach children to pray. It is the way in which many people continue to pray for the rest of their lives. They grow physically, they grow mentally, but they remain spiritual infants forever.

II

So let us start at the beginning. We are like children. When my child asks me a question I must first be sure I understand what it is he wants to know. I may give him answers he is not asking for and which he is not prepared to receive. When a child asks his first questions about sex, he does not want, nor is he capable of receiving, a complete and complicated course on the subject.

Even so, you and I must be careful for what we ask and be certain that we ask for first things first. Before we ask God anything, God wants to question us, and his first question is this, "Who are you to ask of me anything?" Then we must confess what we are, how unworthy we are, and our true motive for coming to him in prayer. Is it perhaps because we have tried everything else first and have failed, and now God and prayer are our last hope?

In the matter of prayer, what you are is just as important as what God is. Are our keenest, most earnest prayers, petitions to know God better? This is the real essence of prayer--in one sense this is the only proper function of prayer--to grow in our knowledge and understanding of God. We can never help anyone else effectively until we ourselves have a firm hold on God. "Prayer is not asking for things, not even for the best things, it is going where they are."

If you were sick and in trouble, to whom would you go first to ask them for their prayers? Would you go to someone for whom you thought God was a stranger, who appeared to have no prayer life of his own? Or would you go to someone who by his own life demonstrated that God was real to him, and whom you were confident had a meaningful life of prayer already established? Is this not why so many people ask the minister to pray for them? It is assumed, not always legitimately I am afraid, that he does know God and has a deep and meaningful life of prayer.

Then ask yourself this question, "Do I really want to be helpful to my friends and loved ones in the largest possible way? If so, have I done that which could enable me to be most helpful to them? Have I come to know God? Is God real to me? Do I myself have a firm hold on God? If I do not, then I will likely fail my loved ones when they most need me." What you yourself are is the most decisive factor in the effectiveness of your prayers. The kind of life you live is all important.

III

We must remember that the primary purpose of prayer is to strengthen our spiritual understanding and make God both more meaningful and real in our daily lives. It is for this reason we do not need to ask God for anything save himself. If we

possess everything else and do not have him, we are miserable creatures. If we have him and nothing else, it is enough.

This being the main function of prayer, we weaken and dilute our communion with him by continually verbalizing, telling him what we need, what we would like him to do, or what he should give us, and never listening. To hear some ministers pray one would think they had been assigned the task of bringing God up to date every Sunday morning by digesting all the news of the world.

God is not in ignorance of the world's needs, nor of mine. I need not outline them to him. What I need is the strength of his presence, the assurance of his reality, if I am to meet and overcome my own and the world's problems.

So, much prayer should be pure meditation and contemplation, in peace and quietness; a temporary drawing aside from this world of things and events to dwell for a few moments in a different world of spiritual realities. "Prayer is not asking for things, not even for the best things, it is going where they are."

If nothing else could be said for it, it is practical. Research now indicates that noise and confusion and disorder are physically and mentally debilitating. The heart rate decreases when noise is turned off and increases when a noise is turned on. We must take time to get away from the busyness and confusion of life--take time to be holy, whole, hale and hearty--to be at our best for the sake of ourselves and those whom we love.

IV

May I be very practical and tell you how to do it. First you must take at least fifteen minutes and you must take it every day. Draw apart, find a quiet, undisturbed time and place. If you have young children, it may mean getting up fifteen minutes earlier or staying up fifteen minutes later, but it must be fifteen minutes that is all yours.

Take with you a constructive thought: "God is love", "The Lord is my shepherd", "This is my Father's world", dwell on that thought and what it can and should mean in your life. Just be aware that God is, that God cares, that God is always with you. Ask of him nothing, just rejoice in the fact that he is God and that you are his.

Then after a few minutes, you can take your friends and loved ones into that presence with you, as did Catherine of Genoa. When her servant girl asked her to pray for her husband suffering from cancer, Catherine replied, "The first thing you must know is that this very moment God is not alienated from him, and therefore cares for him more than it is possible for you or me at our very best to care for him. Therefore, I cannot ask God to do anything for him that God, in the immense lovingkindness of his heart would not do, and, as he is God, is therefore doing; but what I will do is that when I go into the light, I will take him with me."

When we pray like this, we are helping to create a spiritual environment or reservoir upon which all mankind may draw. That environment or reservoir is so small and inadequate because so few of us add to it by praying, or because we pray so ineffectually.

V

And of course prayer does not stop there. We seek continually to live in the presence of God, moment by moment, turning our thoughts to him constantly, trying never to forget that he is God and that he is with us. We learn how to take that spiritual environment with us and live in it continually. You may argue that this is very difficult, and it is. You may have tried it and found that you could not concentrate, but remember, Chesterton was right when he said, "If anything is worth doing, it is worth doing badly." You may do all of this very badly at first, but it is infinitely worth doing. If you really love others, if you really want to be of help and of benefit to others, you must learn to pray in this way. You cannot help others until you yourself have a firm hold on God.