

Discourse 1

The Nature of Prayer

Trans. Theodore G. Stylianopoulos, 2003

Why We Need to Pray

Christ the Divine Word gives us instruction on prayer. To His worthy disciples who diligently seek the knowledge of prayer, He shows how to gain the favor of God's hearing through the words of the prayer "Our Father, who art in heaven." And I will dare add to what is written. The present gathering needs to learn not only how to pray but that we must, by all means, pray. Perhaps, this has not yet been understood by many. For many in daily life have neglected and passed over this sacred and divine work of prayer. About this matter, therefore, it seems good to me to testify as strongly as possible that first of all we must, as the Apostle says, "persevere in prayer" (Rom 12:12) and thus, secondly, we must listen to the Divine Voice which defines how to offer our supplication to God.

For I see that in the present life everything else is busily pursued. One person fixes his soul on this matter and another on that. But the benefit of prayer is not eagerly sought after. The merchant rises early for business. He fights to show his goods to buyers and to beat his competitors. He tries to be the first to serve the customer and sell off his things. In the same spirit the buyer, too, thinks about how not to lose out on what he needs, nor to be preceded by another. He runs not to the place of prayer but to the place of trade. All are equally possessed by the desire for gain. They struggle to keep ahead of their neighbor. And so the hour of prayer, stolen away by intense cares, is given over to business.

All seem to act the same way -- the craftsman, the orator, the one who files a lawsuit, as well as the one who happens to be the judge. Each devotes his whole self to what is at hand and forgets the work of prayer. He considers engagement with God a harm compared to the work before him. For whoever practices a craft thinks God's alliance is useless and unprofitable for one's current business. He therefore forsakes prayer, putting all hope in his own hands and forgetting Him who has given us hands. The orator, too, while carefully crafting his speech, does not consider Him who has given us speech. Instead, as if he had brought himself into existence, he relies wholly on himself and his pupils' studies. He thinks that nothing good will accrue to him through God's action, estimating study to be preferable to prayer.

In a similar way other occupations, through care for material and earthly things, cut off the soul's engagement with what is better and heavenly. It is for this reason that life is engulfed by sin, entangling all human affairs and forever increasing in dimension. And that because forgetfulness of God prevails over all things. People do not connect the benefit of prayer to their pursuits. Greed enters into business. Yet "greed is idolatry" (Col 3:5).

Accordingly, the farmer does not measure tilling the land by his essential needs. He gives wide entrance to sin in his occupation by always extending his efforts to achieve more and by spreading out to what belongs to others. From this cause disputes arise that are difficult to resolve. Those who are possessed by the same sickness, namely greed, conflict with one another over boundary lines. This is the source of tempers, evil impulses, and violent acts against one another that end up many times in bloodshed and murder.

In the same way disputes in the courts, finding a myriad of ways to promote injustice, serve the manifold wiles of sin. The judge either tips the scales of justice willingly for a gift, or ratifies injustice involuntarily by being deceived through the subtleties of those who distort the truth. But of what value is it for us to detail each instance through which sin is mixed with human life in complex and diverse ways? For the cause of sin is none other than that people do not engage God's compassionate help with their burning concerns.

However, if prayer precedes labors, sin will not find entrance into the soul. When the remembrance of God is established in the heart, the wiles of the adversary remain futile. And everywhere in disputed mat-

ters justice acts as mediator. Prayer keeps the farmer from sin, bringing about ample crop to a small plot, so that sin will no longer find entrance together with the desire for more. So also in the case of the traveler, or one sent to perform some service or arrange a marriage.

It is the same with everyone who intends to do something: if he does everything with prayer, he will be prevented from committing sin. Nothing contrary will drag the soul down into passion and the undertaking will be successful. But if one gives oneself wholly to one's affairs, he distances himself from God. Then, necessarily, one who departs from God must in all ways come under the influence of the adversary. One who does not unite himself with God through prayer is separated from God. Therefore, it is necessary first to learn from the word of Scripture that we "must always pray and not lose heart" (Lk 18:1). For unity with God occurs through prayer. Whoever is united with God is separated from the adversary.

What is Prayer

Prayer guards prudence, moderates temper, restrains vanity, cleanses from rancor, removes envy, destroys injustice, and corrects impiety. Prayer is the strength of the body, the prosperity of the household, the good order of the city, the might of the kingdom, the victory in war, the security in peace, the unity of those divided, the constancy of those united.

Prayer is the seal of virginity, the fidelity of marriage, the weapon of travelers, the guardian of those sleeping, the courage of those awake, the abundance of farmers, the safety of sailors. Prayer is advocate to litigants, comfort to prisoners, rest to the weary, solace to the sorrowful, delight to the joyful, consolation to mourners, wedding crown to spouses, festival to those celebrating birthdays, shroud to those who die.

Prayer is to speak with God, to behold invisible realities, to satisfy spiritual yearning. Prayer is equality with angels, progress in good things, overthrowing of evil, correction of sinners, enjoyment of present gifts, assurance of future blessings.

For Jonah prayer turned the whale into a home (Jon. 2). Prayer brought Hezekiah back to life from the very gates of death (2 Kings 20:111). For the Three Young Men prayer changed the fire into a refreshing wind (Dan 3:23-27; Song of The Three Youths 27). To the Israelites prayer raised up the banner of victory against the Amalekites (Ex 17:816). Prayer laid low by the invisible sword one hundred eighty-five thousand Assyrians in a single night (2 Kings 19:35).

The Act of Thanksgiving

A myriad other examples could be found in history which make plain that, among all the valuable things in life, nothing is superior to prayer. Although it should be time to turn to the Lord's Prayer itself, yet let us briefly add something to this discourse, that is, thanksgiving. Divine grace has given us many and various blessings. In return for all that we have received, we have but one gift to exchange with the Benefactor -- prayer and thanksgiving. I can envision the possibility that we could extend our conversation with God in thanksgiving and prayer for the whole duration of life. Nevertheless, we would still fall so short in adequate exchanged value, as if we had never even begun to think about a return gift to the Benefactor.

For example, the Lord's generosity is received in all dimensions of time measured in three parts the past, the present, and the future. If you think of the present, it is in Him that you live. If the future, it is He who is the hope of your expectations. If the past, you did not even exist before you were created by Him. You benefited by receiving your very existence from Him. Once born, you benefited by living and moving in Him (Acts 17:28)¹, as the Apostle says. Your future hopes are dependent on the same divine energy.

¹ 28 for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.'

Only the present is at your disposal, but even if you never cease giving thanks to God, you will barely render satisfaction for the gift of the present. Neither for the future, nor for the past, can you conceive some way to give back sufficient thanks to God for all the things you owe Him. Yet we are so lacking in thanksgiving that we do not show gratitude even in what is possible: I do not say ill day, but we choose to devote not even a tiny portion of the day in attending to God.

Who has laid out the earth beneath my feet? Who has given me reason to make the seas passable? Who has established heaven for my sake? Who lights up the sun before my eyes? Who "makes springs gush forth in valleys" (Ps 104:10)? Who has carved out the course of rivers? Who has put dumb animals to my service? Who has made me, lifeless dust that I am, to share in both life and reason? Who has formed this clay according to the image of the divine seal? Who has restored again in me that ancient beauty of the divine image which had been darkened by sin? Having been exiled from paradise and deprived of the tree of life, who draws me back to the original bliss from being engulfed in the pit of material life?

Scripture says, "There is no one who has understanding" (Rom 3:11). If we contemplated these things, we would offer endless thanksgiving without ceasing throughout our entire life. But now nearly all human beings are quick to pursue only material things. To this end are given all care and eagerness. It is with such matters that mind and hope are occupied. Human nature goes on without rest, sleepless, driven by desire for more in all things, to discover in them whatever more exists. Whether it concerns both honor and fame, or abundance of money, or the disease of anger -- in all these things human nature gazes everywhere for what is more. But no word whatever is said about God's true blessings, whether those visible or those promised.

Not Babbling in Prayer

It is time to examine as far as possible the meaning of the words of the Lord's Prayer. It is clear that success in what we desire occurs by learning how to make our petition properly. What, then, are we taught? "When you are praying," He says, "do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words" (Mt 6:7). Perhaps the meaning of this teaching is self-evident. It is presented to us clearly and requires no subtle understanding. However, it is worth examining the word *battologia* ("heaping up empty phrases") in order that, learning its meaning, we may avoid what is prohibited.

It seems to me that the Lord chastens the mind's slackness and restrains those who focus on vain desires. It is for this reason that He coined this strange new word in order to rebuke the folly of those whose desires make them run after useless and vain things. For only a word which is both prudent and wise, and reflective of what is useful, deserves properly to be called *logos* ("word"/ "reason"); whereas that which is poured forth by illusory desires seeking hollow pleasure is not *logos* but *battologia*. If one were to render this word in finer Greek, he would say *phlyaria* ("nonsense") or *leros* ("trash") or *phlenaphos* ("babble") or anything else of a similar meaning.

What, then, does the Divine Word advise us? That at the time of prayer, we should not suffer the sort of passions active in childish minds. Such simple people do not bother to consider how something they fancy could actually take place, but imagine, as if they had power to achieve, some marvelous good fortunes for themselves. They dream of treasures, kingdoms, and great cities bearing their own names. They fantasize that they are actually in whatever state the vanity of their thoughts suggests to them. And there are some who indulge in this vanity even more wantonly. They imagine transcending natural limits: they become birds or shine like stars or hold mountains in their hands or make paths to walk in the sky or live myriads of years changing to youth from old age. These and other similar soap bubbles and vain inventions rise up in the hearts of the most foolish.

A person is a wretched fool who does not think about his actual affairs from which he might gain some intended benefit, but rather indulges in vain and fanciful desires. He wastes on daydreaming the time he has to think about doing something useful. This is what happens as well with a person who, at the time of prayer, does not attend to the benefits of the soul but presumes to make God a partner in the pas-

sionate movements of his own mind. That person is truly a sort of fool and babblers because he prays to make God the coworker and servant of his own vanities.

An example will illustrate what I am saying. A person draws near to God in prayer and, not estimating the exalted power he is approaching, fails to understand that by his base and trivial petitions he mocks God's majesty. Think of someone who out of extreme poverty Or uncouthness regards clay pots as precious and then happens to approach a king who is willing to distribute riches and honors. But the man, failing to make requests appropriate to the king, expects the one of such great honor to shape the clay and make of it something that the poor man fancies.

In the same way, as well, a person who comes to prayer without understanding does not lift himself up to the height of the Giver, but rather craves that the divine power descend to the low and earthly level of his own desires. Presenting his passionate impulses to the One who sees the heart, he aims not to have the improper movements of his mind healed but rather to make them worse and have his evil impulses turn into deeds through God's cooperation. He says to God: "Because so and so vexes me and I dislike him, strike him down!" He all but calls out to God: "Let my own passion enter into You and my evil disposition pass over to You." For just as in human conflicts a person cannot join one side without sharing the ire of an angry man against his opponent, so also it is clear that a person who seeks to move God against his enemy entreats God to share his own ire and become a partner in his own anger. This means nothing less than to have God fall into passion according to human disposition and be changed from His natural goodness to brutish crudeness.

The same is true of a person who is mad after glory, or one who out of pride wants to be first, or one who engaging in litigation is eager for victory. So also is the case of someone in athletic games chasing after the crown, or one in the theater expecting triumphant applause, or frequently even one given over to the raging passion of youth. All these present their petitions to God not to be freed from their enslaving disease but rather that their sickness might develop to its fullness. Judging failure to fulfill these longings as disaster, all of them indeed babble by imploring God to become a partner in the sickness of their mind. And what is worst of all, they desire to move God to act for their benefit according to opposite impulses as if God's energy could simultaneously be divided into both savageness and love toward humanity. The same God, whom they ask to be merciful and gentle to them, they entreat to be mean and harsh to their enemies. Oh, the foolishness of babblers! If God is harsh to them, neither would He be mild by any means to you. But if He is inclined, as you hope, to be merciful to you, how could He possibly change to the opposite by transforming mercy into meanness?

Prayers Against Enemies

However, the contentious have ready objections to this line of thought. They immediately present the words of the prophets as advocacy for their own meanness. They refer to David yearning for the destruction of sinners (Ps 104:35)² and praying for shame and dishonor to befall enemies (Ps 35:4)³. They

² May sinners be consumed from the earth,
And the wicked be no more.

³ Let those be put to shame and brought to dishonor
Who seek after my life;
Let those be turned back and brought to confusion
Who plot my hurt.

mention Jeremiah who desired to see God's vengeance against adversaries (Jer 10:17-25)⁴. They recall Hosea asking that enemies be afflicted with a sterile womb and dry breasts (Hos 9:14)⁵. They collect many similar texts dispersed throughout the Holy Scriptures in order to make the case that they must pray against adversaries and thus make God's goodness a partner of their own meanness. But to stop the babblers who from such pretext are led to contrary thinking, we shall briefly examine each of the mentioned references.

No one among the true saints, who were inspired by the Holy Spirit, and whose sayings have been recorded according to God's plan as legislation for succeeding generations, can be proven to have intended anything evil. Rather, the whole purpose of their words was directed toward the correction of evil that dwells in human nature. Thus, when a saint prays that there be neither sick nor poor people, he in fact desires not the slaying of human beings but the disappearance of sickness and poverty. In the same way, when each of the saints prays for the destruction of whatever is hostile and contrary to human na-

⁴ 17 Gather up your wares from the land,
O inhabitant of the fortress!
18 For thus says the LORD:
“ Behold, I will throw out at this time
The inhabitants of the land,
And will distress them,
That they may find it so.”
19 Woe is me for my hurt!
My wound is severe.
But I say, “Truly this is an infirmity,
And I must bear it.”
20 My tent is plundered,
And all my cords are broken;
My children have gone from me,
And they are no more.
There is no one to pitch my tent anymore,
Or set up my curtains.
21 For the shepherds have become dull-hearted,
And have not sought the LORD;
Therefore they shall not prosper,
And all their flocks shall be scattered.
22 Behold, the noise of the report has come,
And a great commotion out of the north country,
To make the cities of Judah desolate, a den of jackals.
23 O LORD, I know the way of man is not in himself;
It is not in man who walks to direct his own steps.
24 O LORD, correct me, but with justice;
Not in Your anger, lest You bring me to nothing.
25 Pour out Your fury on the Gentiles, who do not know You,
And on the families who do not call on Your name;
For they have eaten up Jacob,
Devoured him and consumed him,
And made his dwelling place desolate.

⁵ 14 Give them, O LORD—
What will You give?
Give them a miscarrying womb
And dry breasts!

ture, they give the impression to the less educated that they are embittered and angry with human beings.

When the Psalmist says, "Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more" (Ps 104:35), he prays that sin and wickedness may be abolished. It is not that a human being is an enemy of other human beings, but that the evil movement of free will has set as enemy that wickedness which is joined to human nature. He prays for the abolishment of evil, whereas a human being is not of himself or herself evil. For how could the image of the good ever be evil? Accordingly, if he prays for shame and dishonor to befall enemies, he exposes for you the battle array of foes sent by the invisible enemy who are opposed to and fight human life. Paul tells more clearly about these adversaries by saying that "our struggle is against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this world, against the spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places" (Eph 6:12).

David perceived the demonic plots which induce human beings to sin through evil provocations, angry outbursts, and inflamed desires which are the basis for envy, hate, pride and other similar wickedness. When David the great prophet prays against enemies, it is these cunning passions that he sees surrounding each soul and he asks that they may be put to shame. The shaming of these enemies is the same as being saved. It is natural for a defeated person to be shamed by his fall, just as it is natural for the victor to delight in his victory. That this interpretation is true is shown by the form of David's prayer. For he says, "Let them be put to shame and dishonor who seek after my soul" (Ps 35 (34):4).

David does not pray against those who plot his financial loss, or those who dispute land boundaries with him, or those who threaten him with some bodily harm, but rather against those who plot against his soul. But what is plotting against the soul, if not alienation from God? The human soul is alienated from God in no other way than by lapsing into the state of evil passions. Since God is always free from evil impulses, a person ever given to evil passions is cut off from intimacy with God. In order that he may not suffer this, David prays against the antagonists. This means nothing other than praying for victory over his enemies, and the enemies are the evil passions.

So, also, Jeremiah, who perceives the king to be mad with the worship of idols and leading his subjects astray. Possessed by pious zeal, Jeremiah does not seek to satisfy some evil passion of his own, but rather offers his supplication for the common good of all people. He attacks those who have committed impiety expecting that the whole human race might come to its senses (Jer 10). The same is the case with the Prophet Hosea. Seeing at that time the rampant spread of wickedness among the Israelites, he justly condemns it to sterility and desires that the bitter breasts of sin be dried up. His purpose is that people never give birth to evil, nor feed it. It is for this reason that the Prophet says, "Lord, give them a sterile womb and dry breasts" (Hos 9:14).

Whatever other similar words may be found among the saints expressing the marks and accusations of anger, they serve by all means this purpose, namely, to banish evil, not to destroy humanity. "God did not make death" (Wis 1:13). Do you hear the pronouncement? How then could one, intending the death of his own enemies, so entreat God who is foreign to death's operations? God does not delight in the destruction of the living. A person who prays in this manner is babbling. Seeking to stir up God's love against one's own enemies, he in fact blasphemes by enjoining God to delight in human misfortunes.

Prayer for Spiritual Blessings

But those who disagree might say: "Some have already proven worthy of high positions, honors and riches by using prayer for this purpose. They have been seen as beloved of God on account of their good fortune. How then would you keep us from offering supplications to God about these things?" To be sure, all things are dependent on the divine will. The present life is ordered from above. This is obvious to all and no one can contradict it. However, as we have come to know, success in such material things through prayer has other causes. God in no way dispenses these things as good gifts to those who ask, but rather grants them as means of strengthening the faith of the more shallow. Thus engaged

with the smallest requests and learning by experience that God hears our supplications, God wants us to rise to the desire for the gifts which are both higher and worthy of Him.

This is also what we observe in our own children. So long as they cling to the maternal breast, they seek from their mother as much as their nature can hold. But when the child grows strong and acquires the power of speech, it disdains the breast and asks for whatever the eye of children find delightful, such as a head piece, or garment, or something like these. When it becomes of age and the mind has grown together with the body, then it leaves aside childish desires and asks the parents for whatever is proper to adult life.

In the same way God uses all things to accustom a person to look to Him. Therefore He is often not deaf even to the smallest requests in order, through His kindness in small things, to call the recipient of His grace to the desire for higher gifts. So now you must comprehend the aim for which, according to divine providence, a person rises from obscurity to become both renowned and admired, or acquires anything else, such as high position, or wealth, or reputation, which are sought after in this life. God's loving care shown in these matters provides you with proof of His great power in order that, because you may have received such childish toys, you may present requests to the Father for greater and more perfect gifts. The latter are the gifts that accrue profit to the soul.

Indeed, it would be utterly foolish for one to approach God and ask the Eternal for transient things, the Heavenly for earthly benefits, the Highest for trifles, the One who grants the Kingdom of Heaven for earthly good fortune deserving of contempt. To do so would mean that from the One who gives abiding blessings we would ask for the fleeting use of things foreign to our eternal destiny. Indeed the enjoyment of earthly goods is temporary and their use risky, while in the end they must necessarily be taken away.

The Lord does well to expose the unseemliness of such conduct by adding "as the Gentiles do" (Mt 6:7). Excessive concern for ephemeral things belongs to those who hold no hope regarding the future age neither fear of judgment, nor the threat of hell, nor expectation of blessings, nor anything else which we await at the resurrection. Looking upon the present life in the manner of grazing animals, they classify as good whatever gratifies their palate, their belly, or any other carnal pleasure. They strive to be ahead of others and to be regarded as preeminent. Or they find security in their abundant money or anything else in this deceitful life. If someone happens to speak to them about our future hope, it seems to them as outright nonsense talking about paradise, kingdom, life in heaven, and the like.

It is characteristic of those who are without hope to cling to the present life. The Divine Word well states, therefore, that pleasure seekers who suppose that they can fulfill useless and vain desires through prayer are like the Gentiles. For these think that by beseeching God for unseemly things, they will recruit Him as partner in achieving what is not needful. As the Divine Word says, "They think that they will be heard because of their many words" (polylogia, Mt 6:7).

Thus, by what we have examined, we have now learned what we ought to know. In the next discourse we will hear about what kind of prayer is appropriate to offer to God, by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.