

Ten Questions on Prayer

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Ten Questions on Prayer

These ten questions really cover, with a great sense of development between one question and another, the whole problem of prayer. Of course, prayer is a problem. If we all obtained exactly what we asked, I suppose it wouldn't be. But prayer is an education.

1. Praying for Others?

Is it valid for us to pray for others?

This question, I think, is not the first question which people who are only starting to pray would ask, it is the question which people who have been at prayer some time would ask. “Is it not unavoidable, is it not an essential step, to pray for others?” I do not think we can avoid praying for others.

The Scotch, when they go to church, take their collie dogs in with them. The collie dog would be unhappy outside, so it sits beside them. In prayer there is no absence. When we come into prayer, we too must take the people who are with us. We can't leave them outside. That is my first answer: it's unavoidable. But, when we take others with us, we must know what we are doing. Everybody has to pray for others. The real problem is the kind of prayer we offer. The question is, how we pray for others.

When people have practiced prayer seriously for a long time, they find that they have to make distinction between the various stages of prayer. For these stages indicate steps in the intimacy and confidence of our relationship with God. Because most of us are very self-willed and have wandered far from God, prayer is not easy. It is part of a new life. It must be a growth. It is like our physical growth, growth by exercise, by hard exercise, by skilled athletic training. No growth is without effort. To recover from a state of atrophy is impossible without sustained and

exacting effort. As prayer is growth of spirit, growth of consciousness, it represents mental conflict.

Our deep mind is lazy and likes to run in ruts. Prayer, on the contrary, is always pulling us out of these ruts of custom and habit. It has been said with some appropriateness that an easy conscience is generally a dull one. Prayer that does not raise as many questions as it answers, is a prayer which will be driven deeper by God's challenging silence to its easy, obvious appeals for help. We want answers from God because we think we know what He should give us. But God wants first to question *us*. You cannot answer a child rightly till it can ask its question rightly and it cannot ask rightly till it knows why it so asks.

For this reason, when we begin to pray we must confess both our ignorance and (what is even more painful) our very mixed motives. Furthermore, true confession means not only telling God what we feel we must, but letting Him ask us questions about what we have not told and what we may have forgotten, repressed into our unconscious because we were so ashamed of it. True confession includes our motives for coming to pray.

When a man who has more than once exploited his friendship with you enters your office and says a few pleasant things (maybe, also, mumbles a few excuses and apologies) and then begins to ask fresh favors, you wait. Even when he says they are for others you cannot overlook the fact that, though he may be speaking the truth, he may intend himself to figure as the real benefactor. That certainly does him no good. And if you were not only just

and kind but infinitely wise you would probably wait even longer. Have our keenest prayers, perhaps the first we ever offered with whole-hearted intensity, been to know God better and to love Him more? Has our sharpest pain, driving us to implore His aid to lessen it, been because we felt so far from Him and because we realized how little we cared for Him and felt so helpless to approach Him whom we realized we need so desperately? We do not like being exploited, we are pained when our loved ones are exploited, why should we wish to exploit God?

But is not our wish to pray for others sufficient guaranty for the purity and rightness of our prayer? It certainly assures a degree of selflessness. But not necessarily enough to make our prayer fully efficacious. It will, no doubt, help us toward understanding our own weakness, ambiguity, and disingenuousness. But that may only help indirectly and distantly those for whom we pray. For as it is God who saves (and it is because we own that, that we take off any time at all to pray) so we can only help save others in so far as we have a firm hold on God. If we are more attached to saving (in the way *we* want them saved) those whom we love, than we are attached to loving and serving God, then we shall never really save or serve anyone. If someone has fallen into the water and you lose your hold on the rock to pull him out, you and he will both drown. And when we realize that God is no inert rock, He is not mere strength, He is as wise as He is strong, and as loving as He is wise, then the more we would serve others the more we must serve Him: the more we would understand others, the more

we must learn of Him: the more we would truly love others, the more we must love Him.

That remarkable saint, Catherine of Genoa, was once asked at the height of her spiritual power to help her poor little servant girl who had served her faithfully. The maid's husband was dying of a cancer that had eaten into the trigeminal nerve. He was in such frantic agony that in the poor reaction of his simple nature he could only curse God for having done such an abominable thing to him. The abscess had penetrated so far that even the physicians of that day knew that he would not last much longer, and the poor child was terrified for fear her husband would go out of life cursing God and abusing the aid of religion. So she rushed to Catherine and implored her, as she was known to be a giant in prayer, that she would exert herself with God to help the victim. Catherine replied, "The first thing you must know is that at 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. That is the first thing you must realize. And therefore I cannot ask God to do anything for him that God of the immense loving kindness 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."

She is said to have gone out of the room at that time to pray. And at that very time the pain became manageable for the man whose suffering turned from what we call a *patheia*—helpless torment—to an *agonia*—a struggle and effort to sustain the anguish. He was able to turn his mind with trust to God, and so died.

When we consider so vivid an illustration of how a saint prayed for others, our prayer does alter from, “Do this! Though not my will, but Thine be done!” to finally, as in Catherine, “Thy Will be done.” This latter prayer is a greater service to the soul, for the sufferer is not merely relieved, he is raised by his accepted suffering out of his suffering, and attains to a new level of consciousness.

It is so hard for us not to ask for the other person that which he wants and that which at that moment we want for him, restoration from some terrible deprivation or relief from what seems an intolerable strain. Here again we have to recognize that our spiritual life is gauged entirely by our progress in prayer. The more we study the people who have grown in prayer, the more we are aware that as they went on in prayer they did not pray for people less, they prayed with greater intensity, but without asking anything specific. Is not *that* difficult? To pray with intensity without trying to endorse on the back of one’s appeal exactly what shall be done, to keep the mind wide open, wanting nothing that it can contrive, and yet the heart and will at the very peak of intensity.

I think only people who have been long in prayer can endure that waiting upon God, can endure the strain which goes on in our faith at that moment. How can He be all that we have believed Him to be? And how can He endure for His creature to be in this pass? I do not think it possible for us to grow in spirituality, in prayer, in the life of the companionship of God, without such crises.

I find in my own life, I find in the lives of people who have instructed me that when things go well we imagine the situation, as it is, to be more or less God's will, while this may not be the case at all. Circumstances may be further from His will when they seem to us right. We may be in the condition of a person who is desperately ill and so ill, so filled with toxin, that there is no pain reaction to the condition. There must be pain in order for the person to recover his life, for pain is the nerves' sensation, a necessary symptom of recovering life; and our lives, our souls, until we are saints, are always in need of recovery.

Is it not then an essential step in our knowledge of God and our trust in God, to pray for others, and then watch Him? First of all, He very, very seldom gives us exactly what we prayed for. Further, and this certainly has marked the lives of some of the saints, He will at times give the very reverse, give what we feared. It is then that we are compelled to give Him what He wants of us, a further act of faith. So we see in the end and can finally admit, "That was the best thing which could have happened, but it was superhumanly brilliant and cunning. One could never have thought of such a process as being possible and good."

2. Is Prayer Productive?

Our next issue is: *Will praying for others be productive of constructive results in securing peace?* I like that way of putting it: *Constructive results in securing peace.*

I think we should be very far wrong if we thought of God as other than the God of peace. The greatest people in the

world have told us that He is, essentially, peaceful—that in His Presence there can be never anything but peace. But in that tremendous passage in the Fourth Gospel, the farewell of the Christ to His Disciples, He says: “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you; not as the world giveth, give I unto you.” And all the structure of that theological gospel, as it is called, is in terms of taking the ordinary terms of life—love and peace and joy—and putting them in the crucible of the intensity of God’s Eternal Presence. They turn into something which is not temporal, but eternal, *eternal in this time*. That, I am sure, is the teaching of the Fourth Gospel, eternal *now*. Eternity is *now*.

In securing peace, yes; our prayers certainly will be the best way, the most essential way, the basic way, without which everything else is failure. Without prayer there can be no “producing constructive results in securing peace.” But what is peace? True peace is the deepest of all things. Political and international peace is not a source of our peace, but a consequence. It is the fruit and depends on wide and deep roots.

There are three levels of peace. Peace has to be founded on a basis not only deeper than politics but deeper than time itself. The first peace, of course, is the peace in our own hearts. You shall keep your “mind and heart in the knowledge and love of God” and we are told we must go even deeper, into the peace of God passing all understanding. Below the critical, contriving, level of the mind is a great depth of those absolute assurances where the basic will resides. Our prayer then is, at the start, productive in bringing constructive results in ourselves.

God alone is totally present. Everybody who has known Him says it is because *He* has absolute presence of mind, presence of will, presence of love, that we are sustained at all. It is because at this very moment He is thinking *totally* that we are, that we exist. Otherwise, there would be no human race, no world, no universe.

He has made this world for us, *He has made us to come to Him*. And, as the great philosopher Bergson said, at the end of his life, “That seems the supreme meaning, and the wholly complete and satisfying meaning, indeed the only meaning and explanation of this world.” Therefore, He holds us continually free of any pressure of His touch: that we may turn to Him freely.

So to turn to the phrasing of this question, *constructive results in securing peace*, yes, certainly; peace in ourselves, peace toward our fellows. What that peace will be, what its framework will be, what structure, politically, economically, it will precipitate, I do not think God gives us to know. At this point comes in the fact which is essential in all Christian thought, the act of faith. God has not given us infallibility. He has not given us a blue print of Utopia. The Christ in the Fourth Gospel says in His farewell, “In this world ye shall have tribulation; but be of good cheer. I have overcome the world.”

When that great statesman Boethius (a very capable man who had administered the Roman Empire for some time) was waiting to be killed because his master had turned against him, he wrote out what he believed to be the essential things on which your life depends, when

everything toward which you had been looking forward had been ruined, your family had been ruined, your life work had been thrown away, and you were going to face a shameful death. At that moment he was able to see that God was present and this was God's intention. Things seemed to be ruined, and hopes of rebuilding civilization appeared to have failed. And then, as Boethius thought upon God's dealings with him, he thought increasingly in terms of God, of how God, because He is always entirely present, never interferes with our free will in the slightest. For God, because He is Presence, has no future or past. He is quite untied, unaffected by the apparent fact that there is a past which is irrevocably finished and done with, fixed and settled forever, and a future which is wholly unknown and indeed non-existent. It is we who tie ourselves up with these notions, and then say from our limitations what God can do and what He cannot do.

The truth is that the closer we come to God the nearer we come to being completely free, partaking of His complete freedom, His constant creation. That is the service which, as the collect says, "is perfect freedom." That is why, if anyone wants to be free to do good, the first thing is for him to come close to God. That thought, which was revealed to Boethius as he waited for death and reflected on the failure of all his dreams for mankind's peace and prosperity, is very helpful to all of us today in our present crisis. The particular importance of this profound thought to our immediate concern, prayer for peace, is that it teaches us the supreme need for waiting upon God. Let us always remind ourselves, especially when we are perturbed

by hurry, that God not only will be there, He was there, He is there—before we even foresaw the urgency or suspected that there was going to be an emergency.

In the most instant crises it never takes God any *time* to do anything. So we are certain that if we pray, we are making the deepest, most constructive and most instant results in securing peace, the peace that God intends. If we are really filled with the Spirit of God, then there is no doubt whatsoever that the contagion of what we have discovered will spread everywhere. God permits us to give as much peace as we have got, from Him.

Men of God, wholly committed to the desire to find Him, know these three things: (1) that He *exists*, this Eternal being, infinitely wise, infinitely loving, and infinitely powerful, infinitely concerned; (2) that *He wishes to be known*; and (3) that in the main, *we do not know Him*. If we realize this, we have a basis for our lives. We do not really require anything else. The rest of our lives will be a tremendous struggle to know Him more. And as we watch the lives of people who have known Him, we discover that their enormous power is in proportion to their closeness to Him.

The great spiritual master, Ruysbroek, said, “There are three stages of being—the servants of God, the friends of God, and finally, the sons of God.” The servants of God are beautiful characters, and we all know them; they do an enormous amount of good in the home and in business. But they very often have no message on this particular issue. The friends of God produce a tremendous effect in their

own society; take, for example, such a man as John Wesley. He did change the history of a great section of English-speaking people. "He prevented," as Harold Laski used to say to me, with a sad shake of his head, "he prevented single-handed the French Revolution coming to England!"

One man, an Oxford scholar. He went down and out into the uneducated world to save souls. He cared for men's, individual men's, eternal salvation. And as a by-product, he saved his society, including many who hated him and were indulgent, greedy sinners, from revolutionary destruction. He took the world as his parish. Being only a friend of God (and not a son) he did not save the world, only his own society. In America, he was largely a failure in the South, and in Europe, he did not prevent the Napoleonic wars. But the sons, they change history. A new epoch, a new age, a new civilization follows after their appearance.

That is why we must make this tremendous effort to turn, our prayer life to seeking the peace of God. We may reckon our progress by watching ourselves to see how far that blessed corrosion has eaten away the wish for *my way, my hopes, my ideals, and my way of management*. The man who cannot be discouraged is a hero; he who cannot be insulted is a saint; he who cannot be destroyed is a son of God.

3, 4. Is Indifference a Block?

The third question is linked with that: *How serious is the barrier presented by secular minds in the United Nations to*

our efforts to reach God through these men? I think we can combine number four with this. Does prayer, when offered by inefficient (and by efficient) pray-ers have any effect on the wills of men who are indifferent to spiritual values?

I am very much interested in these questions, how they hit at and fit into all the problems which I am sure have been raised in your lives when people have questioned you on the life of prayer. Here we come to a tremendous issue. We must ask ourselves again: what has God created this world for? For human beings to come to Him. We don't know that He intends it to be a Utopia. He has not revealed that to us. He has told us that people can come to Him, He has told us that they are free, that free will is an essential part of their contribution to His plan. If that is so, then, of course, secular minds in the United Nations are able to be a barrier. We see this in no religion more clearly than in the tremendous drama of Christianity, in the experience of Jesus beginning with the Sermon on the Mount and culminating on Calvary. It culminates with the world's resistance against the doctrine of freedom until there is no way out of the issue but the particular achievement of self-sacrifice at its utmost. Had the Sermon on the Mount worked in the beginning, had it been possible to make the people of Galilee and the people of Judea submit to the Roman Empire, had there been a solution in terms of the Jewish people in that particular district, the history of the world might have been quite different. We do not know that it would have been at all what it is. By apparent failure, by the earthly ministry ending in defeat, by an "other-

worldly” sequel, a new epoch opened not for Palestine but for all of western mankind.

If we believe that God has given us free will, has given every human being free will, we can do an enormous amount for each individual soul. We may not make men do what we wish them to do now. Mankind may have to learn and re-learn by the ultimate sacrifice, by complete earthly failure. Men may go even farther; they may fight God to the very end of time; as it says in the gospels, “to the end of the eon,” which is the actual Greek phrase for those horrible terms which seem to speak of eternal damnation. It means that to the very end of time a soul has the inalienable right to resist God, but not beyond that. No one can dispute with God in eternity. There is only One there. He has no rival. Evil is not in eternal consciousness. It only exists in time, but to the end of time, it does exist; and the end of time may be long, immeasurably long, as we know today from our scientific knowledge, fabulously far beyond where we are now.

So again, it comes to this tremendous act of faith. About our life of prayer there is no doubt. No prayer is ever in vain. But because God gives each of us free will, we must be prepared for secular minds to resist to the very end, if they will. If they do not resist, of course, then you have a new force, or a newly recognized force in the world.

I believe the battle which is going on today is the battle of ideas. Materialism is dying. But the new birth, our spirituality, has only begun. We are in the birth pangs. What we are actually witnessing in this decade is a battle

between *apt force* and *apt violence*. And I believe that *apt force* is *spirituality*. It springs from absolutely dedicated lives. The oldest church in the West, the Roman Church, has a very interesting phrase which I think is apposite to this point. It talks of what it calls the treasury of merits. It says some people pray for all mankind. They pray with constant intensity and yet for nothing and no one in particular. They say, "God give me nothing, not even my wishes, but at least let my will be entirely in accord with Your will, always: for all mankind, I pray for them all." In those cases, the Church points out, prayer cannot go unanswered. It builds up, as it were, a capital of prayer, an enormous force which is pent there, waiting to break onto the world the moment a person touches that door. But as we pray to God, and the less we are praying in particular, the more He can direct the real aperture in time through which this immense pressure comes.

Take the simile of the sun. The sun, as we know, is surrounded by this great blazing thing called the photosphere. It gives us visible light but it also screens us from the appalling powers which are at the center of the sun. Every now and then, through a process which is now being intensively studied, a hole comes in that blanket of flame and out through this aperture pours this shortwave radiation in upon the earth. This can be the cause of new species arising on this earth of ours. For this invisible light is a much higher form of power than visible light. And, therefore, every now and then I think God makes us cease from being able to be the ordinarily good and direct light that gets quick, short-lived results. He tears away the veil of

what we thought was the good, obvious, visible way of helping people, and then there is released this invisible radiation, out from the very heart of His Being.

Let us then remember that we should not ask, *Am I being an efficient pray-er if secular minds will not try to make peace?* What our prayer is doing, if it is keen, painful, devoted, is giving those we pray for, all men, a new power of freedom. How they will use it is a concern between their souls and God.

Distractions are a torture to anybody who wants to pray. Violence is of no use. The more you beat the dust, the more it rises. We have no comfort in our prayer, no self-congratulation. As long as we do not want self-congratulation, God will often take away the distraction. The moment we can really attend to Him, the moment we feel this terrible longing for Him, distractions cease.

“Flies settle upon everything save boiling water.”
Distractions will not settle on the fervent mind. Once you are really engrossed, noises do not matter.

But what of the comment, “I want to pray but I find that I am wasting my time”? “I had better be doing one of the jobs that is due for me to do.” This is one of the temptations. We say, I am not prepared to pray unless I can pray efficiently and well. God says, “You are not *fit* to pray efficiently and well, you shall pray at the level at which I choose you to pray. You want to be a beautiful and admirable ego. I want your ego to go.”

Chesterton said, "If anything is worth doing, it is worth doing badly." We must begin at the beginning. No one does a thing as well as he will do it after painful practice, not even a genius.

The Cloud of Unknowing says, go on repeating some simple word, such as *God* or *Love*, over and over again on your heart beat. That happens to be my own prayer. No other prayer works for me as well. I have tried every kind. Go on repeating *God* over and over again on the heart beat and that somehow keeps Him present.

Cling to Him. Cling to Him continually. Keep on trying to start again. Gradually, He will teach us. "There is no director of the soul, no educator, but God the Holy Ghost." Others can help. He alone inspires. And He never turns from a soul that turns to Him. There is always some purity of intention in our heart. It may only be one per cent. He will work upon that one per cent.

In the eighteenth century they used to say of a man who had done a perfectly finished piece of work: he was a *painful* worker. We say *painstaking*. It is the same word. It costs a great deal to pray. It costs a tremendous amount to pray for somebody who, one feels, is utterly wrong, but that prayer when it is prayed is forever to the credit of the soul, waiting for it. The final pain is to be able to wait and continue waiting when nothing seems to have been effected.

5. *Praying for Others?*

And then question five. *What can one do to stimulate the will to pray for others, in persons who ordinarily pray only for themselves?*

The great answer to that, I believe, is a thing which I am sure all of you feel. It was not present in the religion I was brought up in, and therefore that religion became paralyzed by a certain narrow fundamentalism. The real truth is, as we know, there is no private salvation. You can't pray for yourself very long without discovering that God is a God of unlimited Love. He cannot save you by yourself. He cannot save you until you can love Him. And to the degree that you can love, you are saved. For He is Love. The result is, of course, we come back to the very thing we started with: you *must* be able to pray for others.

And you must keep on praying. We have all got to keep on in this agony of prayer when no results seem to come at all. That is testing our faith! That is showing that we wait upon God. We have to wait. God never waits, being Eternal. He cannot be kept waiting. The whole of what Whitehead used to call "the event, the moment," is seen by Him as we cannot see it at all.

I do think that is one of the most important things in our time, to realize that God is not far away. His transcendence is the awful fact that He is totally present. He transcends all kinds of limitations and, therefore, He alone is instant. So when we say, *What can one do to stimulate the will to pray for others in persons who ordinarily pray only for*

themselves? I think we must, if they are willing to listen to us, impress upon them, whether by telling or by praying it for them, this fact that God is totally present.

Then comes in a very interesting point if they say, “Well, I get results from my prayers and you don’t. You pray vaguely, unscientifically. I pray exactly. Actually, I can show you the profits I have made out of prayer.”

We have all met people of that sort, who have actually been able to get a finer house and a better automobile. If proof is anything, they have proof. I think nowadays all of us are sufficiently acquainted with the mystery of prayer not simply to say, “I don’t believe you, you’re a liar.” We simply say, “Will you tell me more about this? This is very interesting and important. How did you pray? When did your results come? How long have you had those results?”

And then, when they see that one is really interested, I think you can question them further. You can say: “Do you really feel *happy* about it? Do you find that your *peace of mind* has increased? Do you find that you are now really getting on very much better with others, with, perhaps, the difficult members of the family, than you were before? Do you find that your generosity is increased? That you are more inclined to find other people real?” In every case that I have known, and I am sure in every case you have known, the person has said, “No, no, that will come later.”

Be patient, then, and go back after three months or after six months. By that time, of course, (here we come into the exactitudes of prayer) the thing may have given out; the

“luck has turned.” They are not getting the results they did, and they are bewildered. Some of them give it up completely. If it does not lead to love, joy, and peace, there is something wrong with it.

We have very mysterious powers in ourselves, there is no doubt of it. The appalling power of Hitler was not from God, but it was a power outside any ordinary human activity. He was tapping something dreadful. I think we can say to people that it is very important that they should know to whom they are praying, and the nature of that Being to whom they are praying, and the gifts which He has—love, joy, peace, long suffering, gentleness, patience.

6. Must We Love?

And then comes the sixth question. *Must we love someone before we can pray effectively for him?*

Again I wonder whether that question could not be put the other way around. “If we pray for somebody,” William Law says, “in the end, we cannot avoid loving him.” If we really pray for him. It is very difficult to do it. It is unpleasant. We would rather pray for someone we love. But as we hold on, the process works. For, as a matter of fact, none of us, as far as we are separate selves have any love in ourselves. It is always God who loves through us, for He alone is love. If I may share with you my way of doing, I make a short list in my mind—and change it from time to time—of the people from whom I have had great blessings from God, and the people to whom I have been a complete stumbling block and frustration. I alternate

between those people (it comes generally to about twenty or so people in one's life) and go into the Presence of God with them. Here are those through whom great blessing came to me, and I was aware in their presence that we were sharing the presence of God. Here is the other person to whom I was a frustration and a problem and a disappointment. We two shall go into the presence of God together, and as that takes place, one will cease to be an obstacle to the other person. Gradually, it will be possible again for surface relationships to be restored. Once more there will be trust on both sides. So I am sure that we must pray for someone in order that we may love him. It is an act of faith that leads to God's granting us love.

But the practical thing today is, of course, this terrible issue: *Can we despise Stalin, or even what he does, and at the same time pray successfully for him?* There we have our old problem, "Love the sinner and hate the sin." Morley, the great liberal historian, used to say that you must never denounce, you must explain, otherwise you are just at the level of the person you abuse. You can never understand. But I think we can go further. We must not only explain, we must re-interpret. "If I were in their position, would I have done better?" That terrible question! I think it is a question for all who have been so much interested in peace that they have taken the completely pacifist point of view. They always have to ask, especially in a democracy, "What would I do if I ceased at this moment to be a critic in the opposition and had to take over the meeting?"

We have not the power, even to open the doors of one large mental hospital, or one jail. That is a fact which I try to

repeat to myself every time I go into prayer. Owing to what I am, there is not even the power to do that. Here and there an individual helps. We see the extraordinary initiative of the *Alcoholics Anonymous*; here a wonderful person working in the slums; there a solitary person who can deal with felons. But by and large, we have only enough spiritual resources to keep evil in some check. To take the vast initiative against the sorrow of the world, we are not yet ready. When we realize this, we are driven to say, humbly in the Presence of God, that contrition goes deeper, the deeper one's knowledge of God goes. We begin to wonder whether there is very much difference between one's self and Stalin.

Richard Baxter used to say, when he saw poor men dragged to the scaffold, "There, but for the Grace of God, goes Richard Baxter." There was just a little self assurance in the statement. For by that time, he had become the guardian of the religious free world in Britain. He had gone through his persecutions, gone through his severe trials. He had arrived at peace and recognition. But I think some of the greater saints would have said, "There am I going," identifying themselves with the condemned person. "The evil in me, to a certain extent, made it possible for that person to perish." That is only half the argument, however. The other half is, "And the evil in me, but for the grace of God, and but for the fact that I am surrounded by the holy, would drive me into the same place."

The ego hates God, hates everybody but itself. It is held in some control by the grace of God. It is held by our religious

exercises. It is like a snake that is strangled but not dead. The moment you loose it, it will recoil again.

Stalin was once at a clerical seminary as a student. Did he meet any teachers who only cared for God? It is terrible to realize that some youth may take his ideas about God from us and afterwards take his revenge on human beings because we impressed him so ill. Only God can judge such. Therefore we must ask continually on their behalf. I see no other way of keeping ourselves lowly-holy, and lowliness and holiness are the same thing. And then again there is the residue of merits, the treasury of merits. Stalin in the end will have the vision of God, at tremendous cost to himself, and to ourselves.

Someone will ask: *Is it to be expected that our prayer life will force us into an active program in the political and economic field?*

This is a very important issue. It is the problem of vocation. If a boy begins to show by the age of seven that he has extraordinary aptitude and desires to play the violin, very few of us would say, “No, no, I don’t think you should do that. It is a very lovely life, etc., etc., but I think you ought to take the ordinary way and go the hard way. You shouldn’t be peculiar, and if you have time when you are an old man, you may take up the violin.” He has a vocation for it. With Higher Mathematics, we have the same problem. And likewise in Prayer.

People have different vocations. There are in this life, so far as we know, (1) the life of the active who serve God

through social service to man; and (2) the life of the people who have the intellectual love of God, those who would understand the meaning of life, of nature, of the universe; and (3) the people who have a tremendous devotion to the person of God, especially in this aspect of incarnation. Those three overlap to a certain extent, but the people who have the vocation for service will find that their prayer life will lead them to that. Others make other contributions. In every complete society, there is the pure researcher, the applied researcher, the manufacturer, and the distributor. They are all absolutely necessary.

Without the diagnostician, the surgeon would not operate. Without the biochemist and the cytologist, the surgeon cannot give a verdict or know what he has found. We are members one of another. But we must have a complete roll of membership. At present we tend to leave out the great secretory or endocrine centers, the pure researchers. We have neglected them too long. The spiritual body, the church universal, is therefore suffering from deprivative disease. My word to you is to beg that prayer be made an expert study and that there be a center where study and research can go on. It will repay you and mankind many thousand fold.

7. Intensity of Prayer?

What is the relation in effectiveness between intensity over a prolonged prayer time and repeated short prayers?

That is a terribly practical question. "Repeated short prayers." Some of the greatest men who gave up their

whole lives to prayer said repeatedly that the best of all prayers are short prayers, by which they mean those darting prayers. These are stabs like an angina stroke on the heart, or like *tic douloureux*, a certain stabbing sense of one's distance from God, one's longing for Him, one's wish for His Will, one's terrible sense of one's weakness. Now that kind of prayer seems to me the most constant prayer. As far as I can make out, in the time I have been able to study the lives of the great masters of prayer, that was their prayer; and it is our prayer, too, from time to time. That is what they did the whole time. Finally, they did it whatever they were doing. It shot through all their actions, just as when you hold a piece of paper between two oppositely charged poles, a spark goes right through it. The spark may not mark the paper, but it goes right through it. This practice does not disturb one's occupation. These masters of prayer were following it through all the time. Those who can achieve this are very advanced when they do it. And the paradox is, when we are starting prayer, we have to find more time to give to it because we cannot do this! As Pascal, the brilliant writer, wrote at the end of a long letter, "This would have been shorter had I had more time," that is, had he been less hurried.

Brother Lawrence, yes; but Brother Lawrence had actually been in a very severe order for a number of years, an order which none of us are called upon to be in, where prayer was the central thing. He was a Carmelite. And, also, he had eight years of such terrible strain that he thought he was damned. He was a terrific tough. We have to admit that. Most people could not stand the strain under which

that man had been, and I am not certain that it would be wise that they should. One has to feed the mind gradually. I can frankly say to you that after twelve years in the definite process of trying to make the life of prayer the most central thing in life, I have come to the conclusion that you cannot extemporize, you cannot push people. It is the hunger for God that leads them to do it. They have to find time for it. We cannot dictate to God. Roughly speaking, though, if we get little, it is because we do not want to give much.

People, when they reach my age, the age of perhaps many readers of these pages, dread very much, as every doctor knows, insomnia. They are not sleeping as they used to sleep. Of course, they are not! The eight, ten, or eleven hours a day that a healthy boy can take, they no longer take, and I understand that it is not normal for them to take it, and yet it is important for them to rest. They can more easily tire out the heart than can a younger person. What are they to do with their hours of rest? Many people say to me, "I'm so busy I can't, it wouldn't be right for me, to spend hours of the day in prayer." But there is not the slightest reason why they should not spend hours of the night in prayer.

When you are going to sleep, when you are waking up, the mind should be kept solely upon God. Again, it is no use talking about these things unless one is absolutely frank. I never attain to any true concentration upon God save at night and in the early morning; the small hours, and the last thing at night. During the day I am continually keeping it up, continually having to remind myself that I have forgotten. But that intensity of total attention to Him, that

realization that He exists, and because He exists, in the end, nothing can be wrong, the peace of God, that seldom becomes completely dominating save at night! The terrific sense that He is sustaining the world, that He is conscious thought through whom alone all thought is at all possible, that idea only fills the mind in the hours of night. And I think that is the experience of a great many beside myself, in the spiritual life. We cannot *bring* that state to its intensity at will during the day. But we all know if you have an immensely vivid dream, it will influence the climate of your thought the day after. It is bound to, it is flowing there just under the level. It is fertilizing the crop of your life, either with bitter or with sweet water. And if you do that with prayer, gradually the prayer level rises, it reaches the normal waking level of your life.

Again, may I be exact, because these things are so interesting, so important, so practical, so business-like. Some great masters of prayer say, “Do not push your life of prayer to beyond three hours a day until you discover it turning up in your dreams.” And it will turn up in the dream life in all the ways we know of in the waking life. First of all, you will meet someone who laughs at prayer and says, “You? I thought you weren’t that sort of person, why, you are a very capable man! You pray? I am not laughing at you, I just don’t understand what you are doing. You can’t really take it absolutely seriously? Of course, I go to church on Sunday, but to take time out during a week day for prayer, honestly, I don’t understand it!” And the Sufis say that while you are in this way watching the life of prayer being acknowledged by your deep self, you will

discover that when in your dream you meet people like that, and they ask these questions (I know it perfectly well) you are ashamed. You make a feeble excuse, you say, “Well, of course, I don’t spend much time at it.” Or you even deny the whole thing. “No, it wasn’t me! It was somebody else you heard about. You made a mistake about me.”

It is horrible: the discovery of the cowardice, the shameful duplicity and mendacity of this creature. It lies. It lies about things it really cares for. It is utterly ashamed. And it is because at this deep powerful level we are cowards and disloyal that we cannot for so long command, when waking, the attention in prayer which we would like to have. Gradually, gradually, month after month, our time, interest, and loyalty will be acknowledged. Then at last our prayer life begins to sink into the deep levels of the soul.

I am sure this way of using part of the night is of unique value to our prayer life. And as we get on in life, I am sure that God gives us that opportunity. You can lie perfectly quiet in bed when it is necessary to do so, when, for example, the eyes cannot read, you can quietly repeat the name of God. So you keep thinking of Him. And gradually you realize that His peace has come into your heart.

A man who prays very deeply at night will not have any difficulty praying in the day. Gradually I begin to know that. Thus your main interest begins to seep up, and you find the mind returning of itself to this, its principal concern. The distractions now work the other way. You become distracted towards God from the incoherence of the

world. You look on, for example, at Fifth Avenue, at the rush and confusion, and the usual reflection rises in the mind. “My, what a muddle—I wonder where it’s going?” And as soon as you have thought for a moment on the complexity of modern life, its infinity of cross purposes, conflicting aims, and blind strivings, any reflective person has to own it is probably a problem beyond human comprehension. Then the worldly-minded have to shake their heads in bewilderment; but with those who pray, the mind turns to God.

Another question is this: *Are the emotions involved in prayer? What should the pray-er’s personal feeling be? Is there too great an intensity of feeling?*

That is a very important question because if there is too much intensity of feeling, the pray-ers will exhaust themselves. It’s just like running. You know there is a certain pace for doing the hundred yards, there is a certain pace for doing the two miles, and you have to keep this critical velocity—depending on the distance you intend to run. I, therefore, feel it important that people should be aware with their minds, as well as with their hearts, that God is Present. When they *feel* nothing at all, they still know that He is Present when they turn toward Him. Emotions are a great help, but they are a tricky help, and we never know when they will let us down. It is the will based on a clear intellectual conviction that keeps us going when prayer seems dull and even actually boring.

To every one of those challenging questions the man of prayer has the same reaction: the same to every event

whether it be somebody ill, scare headlines, the posters of a burlesque show. “This is life, this is realism,” is the ordinary reaction. Then suddenly the mind turns to God, “And it *could* be something else by the Will of God.” The mind turns toward Him, and offers that event, offers every single event, the irrelevant, the horrible, the grotesque. Everything takes on meaning in that light. Nothing is truly comprehensible seen otherwise.

8. Awareness of Prayers?

Is prayer more effective when the person for whom you pray knows that you are praying for him?

Well, of course, as we know enough about prayer, we know that prayer is, to start with, a form of high attention. You can never attend to anything without affecting it. If you direct your mind straight at somebody else, you will affect him. If you are praying for people at night, when your attention is high, you will undoubtedly very quickly get results. I am sure that many of you have experienced that. Often, you will actually find that the person was aware of you at that time. You have put yourself into his mind. But take great care there. Prayer is much more than attending to some other human being. Remember the ego loves power. It is even willing to do for people what it thinks may be good if only it may control them. I think God keeps us from seeing the results of prayer which He has worked for us, because He knows we would say, “I did that! I helped that person with my prayers.” No person has ever helped somebody with prayer. He has stood aside, and asked God. God has done the helping. And if we can keep that in our

minds, then it is safe. Maybe giving someone what we feel he should have, we seem to get quicker results. But these results are not as safe and lasting as those attained by the slower process.

9. Quantity of Prayers?

Are many individual prayers more effective than a smaller number of groups meeting for intercessory prayer?

An enormously important question, for there are two questions contained in it. And I am certain the answer is that both methods must be used. There is something, I am sure we all know, in individual prayer which is unique. And the man who has not a deep individual prayer-life is not likely to be able to stand the austere strain of prayer in the presence of others. Especially if it should be vocal prayer. And at the same time if a man lives an exclusively private life and never prays with others, he too has an incomplete life. Many of the ministers often remark to us that nothing is more exacting to them than leading a congregation in prayer. The sermon is comparatively easy. The real spiritual strain of public worship is week after week to offer vocal prayer for large numbers of people. It is an unparalleled strain. Words help prayer to a certain point, and then they hinder it. It is like a wave that washes you up on the shore to a certain distance and then sucks you back again. The moment language begins to flow, the moment style and phrase take the place of spirit and self-forgetfulness, then prayer stops though sound goes on. The strain of finding fitting words can easily check the mind's ascent to God. That again is why masters of prayer say:

Short prayer! That is why the best prayer meetings, however difficult it may be at the start, are mainly silent. As a help to that, when leading a congregation, Allan Hunter, for example, always makes a definite pause after every clause, even of one of the great collects. So that in that silence the whole will may dart toward God. Then one more proposition, then another. Ignatius said, “Do it in *beats*, and then wait for a moment, and when the mind begins to wander, start it again.”

I think most of us feel that slow prayer is best. Slow down till each clause, each phrase, is only introduced to bring back the mind as it had begun to wander. There are methods of praying quickly, but I think for most of us who are—God help us—intellectuals (I mean we are used to thinking of problems, with our analytic minds managing them) we have to consider a prayer clause by clause for fear the whole thing should run off into poetry. Prayer is really almost one of the enemies of religion, for its sheer beauty, its sheer sound. We listen to it like a song, and we think we are praying, but we are not.

10. Quality of Life?

What bearing does the quality of one's own life have on the effectiveness of his prayers for others?

Well, surely, there is a simple answer to that question. I could give only one answer to that. The life is everything! There is absolutely nothing else in the world that counts. Intellect, intuition, powers of intense concentration, yes they may lead to powerful states of consciousness. We may

make wonderful finds and exercise remarkable influence, but we shall not know God unless we are pure of heart. You cannot enter His Presence otherwise. And, therefore, I do not see any other way of avoiding the task, the heavy work, and constant vigilance of purification. You cannot operate with septic instruments. Without an Act of Contrition, who can go into God's Presence? You will remember one of the greatest saints said, "He is infinitely desirable, attractive; He is infinitely unsupportable." As we are, we cannot endure Him. And what are we doing as evidence of our contrition? Why have we to know Him first as forgiver? Because so we are getting rid of some of the inflammable material with which we have smeared ourselves. Go otherwise into His presence and we are consumed.

We must be honest in this matter. There are terrible sins of the will; purposed, planned things. That is mortal sin. By God's grace, none of us, need commit that. We need not think that we are in this dreadful state, having gone right back on everything we really believed, and ruined all we stand for. No, by God's grace, that need not happen to us! He can keep us in a state of grace. A state of grace is a very real thing, and the great point is to realize that we need never move outside it, if we stay with ejaculatory prayer. He will take that care of us.

But we are continually committing little sins. They speckle us with mud—those continual little wicked thoughts that remain; the little bit of passion, the dishonesty, egotism, arrogance, the impatience, the unpleasant story at the expense of somebody else, all those mean things from

which our nature already recoils with disgust, and, therefore, about which we lie to ourselves! Those must be erased. And it is those things which are continually getting in our way, like small cataracts on an eye. Remember, neglected they spread; and also remember it is because of them (these surface uncleannesses) that the world so often judges our spiritual life to be a sham.

Now what shall we ask of those who respond to a call to prayer? First and basically they must be quite certain that God exists. They must dwell upon Him more and more and more in their hearts. If they *know* that He exists, that He alone is the reality, all else will follow.

All of us who have followed these questions and answers are what is described in the ordinary sociological charts as people of superior intelligence who influence the community. We have a special obligation. We must not be ignorant of God. We realize (and many people do not) how strong the case is for believing in God. But we are timid. We sit back. We do not realize, and this is especially true of many who are great specialists, how tremendously the tide has gone in our favor. We have nothing to fear from the ordinary mechanist today when he argues for the fact that materialism is true. He is out of date. He is like a medievalist arguing with Galileo. He has not troubled to look the matter up.

You have your case. God does not excuse us for not knowing our case. God, the Holy Ghost, speaks to us through intelligence; He speaks to us through love; He speaks to us through purity of living; but He speaks also

through the understanding. That knowledge He is ready to give us. We must have it. And these people you wish to influence must be certain that this is true. Otherwise (and here is a terrible problem), people meet a psychologist, for example, who says, “Oh yes, prayer is all right for you.” And he looks rather patronizingly at the pray-er. “I expect it is a good adaptation you have made to life. Of course it wouldn’t do for me—a highly intellectual man—but I can tell you exactly what it is, why it works with you, and why it does not work with me. It is because I am so critical and so advanced. The prayer is autosuggestion. Anybody can do the tricks, and this is what you are doing. Goodbye, and I won’t charge you a fee for consultation.”

This is nonsense! He does not know his stuff. Of course low prayer is autosuggestion. *High* prayer has nothing to do with autosuggestion. And you can tell him so. And you can make him realize that he does not know what he is talking about. Again, of course, it would depend upon your charity in not looking down on him: your knowledge of where your subject takes over and goes beyond his, and the results it has produced in your life, results he can admire and cannot explain away by his theories. We want experts in spirituality more than we want anything else now.

What helps can be offered? Well, you know one of the greatest spiritual masters, who happened to be an intellectual giant, said, “There are three things for which you must return God thanks every time you go into prayer. One is that He gave you this mysterious and wonderful thing which is meant to be the temple of the Holy Ghost—the *human body*. The second is that He gave you *a wish to*

know Him.” There seem to be millions in the world who do not have that wish. And thirdly, without which the other two are not enough, “He gave you the company of fellow-seekers—*the company of the holy.*” We must keep together!

The bees cannot make their wax (all their honey goes to waste) unless they can come together, perfectly still, out of their incessantly active life. When the wax begins to form under the wings, they can build these cells which will hold their honey. *We must meet together.* Never forget that, the *company of the holy.* We must keep together.

Tennyson’s line: “For so the whole round earth is every way bound by gold chains about the feet of God!” Yes! bound to Him, but also bound to one another! And if we are not doing that, we are not taking the benefits which we were meant to have and we are not giving them, either. We help others, and they help us. We cannot be saved without others.

Let us recall that great saying of St. Alphonso Liguori, “No one was ever lost who prayed, no one was ever saved who did not pray.”

About the Author

In 1936 William Sheldon, the psychologist, told me that we at Harpers should be publishing for a brilliant writer and lecturer he had recently met in England. The man’s name, he said, was Gerald Heard. Up to that time Gerald Heard had been writing scientific and sociological books but he

was now turning to religious subjects. A note was made of the name. Some time later, when I was making a valiant effort to work through an accumulation of mail, that note reappeared—one more letter to dictate. The response came promptly. Gerald Heard was coming to America and would look me up.

The hour he later spent at my desk was one of the most intellectually stimulating that I have ever known and led to a publishing relationship which he, poor man, cannot escape from even in a Pendle Hill Pamphlet. But no, he does escape through writing a mystery novel now and then or a volume of essays or a book on flying saucers. I should not be surprised if tomorrow a book of poetry were announced, so facile and informed the mind, so competent the hand that writes. If so, the leading poem would likely be on the theme so close to his heart—how to make the ways of God known to man.

That vast and vital theme Gerald Heard returns to in this pamphlet. Much of the material was presented in the Spring Retreat at Pendle Hill. This text has been prepared from extemporaneous answers which he gave subsequently in New York to a series of questions put to him by fellow laymen. What he said was transcribed and appears with but slight editing.

Eugene Exman

Pendle Hill

Located on 23 acres in Wallingford, Pennsylvania, Pendle Hill is a Quaker study, retreat, and conference center

offering programs open to everyone. Pendle Hill's vision is to create peace with justice in the world by transforming lives. Since Pendle Hill opened in 1930, thousands of people have come from across the United States and throughout the world for Spirit-led learning, retreat, and community.

At the heart of Pendle Hill is a residential study program which encourages a step back from daily life for reflection and discernment in preparation for deeper engagement in the community and wider world. Because spiritual experience is essential to Quakerism, Pendle Hill's education is experiential, or experimental at its core. Adult students of all ages come for a term or a year of education designed to strengthen the whole person—body, mind, and spirit. The Resident Program captures the earliest vision for Pendle Hill while responding to the call of the world in which we exist today. Program themes include:

- Quaker faith and practice
- Dismantling oppression
- Spiritual deepening
- Leadership skill development
- Ecological literacy
- Personal discernment
- Arts and crafts
- Gandhian constructive program
- Building capacity for nonviolent social change.

Programs are offered in a variety of formats—including term-long courses, weekend workshops, and evening presentations. Those unable to come for a term or a year are

encouraged to take part in a workshop or retreat. Information on all Pendle Hill programs is available at www.pendlehill.org. Pendle Hill's mission of spiritual education is also furthered through conference services—hosting events for a variety of religious and educational nonprofit organizations, including many Quaker groups.

The Pendle Hill pamphlets have been an integral part of Pendle Hill's educational vision since 1934. Like early Christian and Quaker tracts, the pamphlets articulate perspectives which grow out of the personal experience, insights, and/or special knowledge of the authors, concerning spiritual life, faith, and witness.

A typical pamphlet has characteristics which make it a good vehicle for experimental thought. It is the right length to be read at a single sitting (about 9000 words). It is concerned with a topic of contemporary importance. Like words spoken in a Quaker meeting for worship, it embodies a concern, a sense of obligation to express caring or to act in response to a harmful situation.

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