

The Word of Jesus on Prayer

by George MacDonald

Prayer is a necessary and reasonable part of our relationship with God, and it is not about getting what we want, but about seeking God and having a relationship with Him.

Scripture: Matthew 7:7, Luke 18:1, Philippians 4:6, 1 Thessalonians 5:16, James 5:16

Topics: "Prayer Life", "Faith And Communion"

Description

George MacDonald preaches on the importance of prayer, emphasizing that prayer is a means to seek help and guidance from God, especially in times of difficulty and uncertainty. He delves into the concept of God's response to prayer, highlighting the necessity of faith and persistence in prayer, even when it seems like our prayers go unanswered. MacDonald stresses that prayer is not just about asking for things, but about seeking communion with God, aligning our will with His, and ultimately finding satisfaction in His presence and love.

Transcript

'They ought always to pray.'--St. Luke xviii. 1.

The impossibility of doing what we would as we would, drives us to look for help. And this brings us to a new point of departure. Everything difficult indicates something more than our theory of life yet embraces, checks some tendency to abandon the strait path, leaving open only the way ahead. But there is a reality of being in which all things are easy and plain--oneness, that is, with the Lord of Life; to pray for this is the first thing; and to the point of this prayer every difficulty hedges and directs us. But if I try to set forth something of the reasonableness of all prayer, I beg my readers to remember that it is for the sake of action and not speculation; if prayer be anything at all, it is a thing to be done: what matter whether you agree with me or not, if you do not pray? I would not spend my labour for that; I desire it to serve for help to pray, not to understand how a man might pray and yet be a reasonable soul.

First, a few words about the parable itself.

It is an instance, by no means solitary, of the Lord's use of a tale about a very common or bad person, to persuade, reasoning a fortiori, of the way of the All-righteous. Note the points: 'Did the unrighteous judge, to save himself from annoyance, punish one with whom he was not offended, for the sake of a woman he cared nothing about? and shall not the living Justice avenge his praying friends over whose injuries he has to exercise a long-suffering patience towards their enemies?'--for so I would interpret the phrase, as

correctly translated in the Revision, 'and he is long-suffering over them.'--'I say unto you, that he will avenge them speedily. Howbeit when the Son of Man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?'

Here then is a word of the Lord about prayer: it is a comfort that he recognizes difficulty in the matter--sees that we need encouragement to go on praying, that it looks as if we were not heard, that it is no wonder we should be ready to faint and leave off. He tells a parable in which the suppliant has to go often and often to the man who can help her, gaining her end only at the long last. Actual delay on the part of God, we know from what follows, he does not allow; the more plain is it that he recognizes how the thing must look to those whom he would have go on praying.

Here as elsewhere he teaches us that we must not go by the look of things, but by the reality behind the look. A truth, a necessity of God's own willed nature, is enough to set up against a whole army of appearances. It looks as if he did not hear you: never mind; he does; it must be that he does; go on as the woman did; you too will be heard. She is heard at last, and in virtue of her much going; God hears at once, and will avenge speedily. The unrighteous judge cared nothing for the woman; those who cry to God are his own chosen--plain in the fact that they cry to him.

He has made and appointed them to cry: they do cry: will he not hear them? They exist that they may pray; he has chosen them that they may choose him; he has called them that they may call him--that there may be such communion, such interchange as belongs to their being and the being of their Father. The gulf of indifference lay between the poor woman and the unjust judge; God and those who seek his help, are closer than two hands clasped hard in love: he will avenge them speedily.

It is a bold assertion in the face of what seems great delay--an appearance acknowledged in the very groundwork of the parable. Having made it, why does he seem to check himself with a sigh, adding, 'Howbeit when the Son of Man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?' After all he had said, and had yet to say, after all he had done, and was going on to do, when he came again, after time given for the holy leaven to work, would he find men trusting the Father? Would he find them, even then, beyond the tyranny of appearances, believing in spite of them?

Would they be children enough towards God to know he was hearing them and working for them, though they could not hear him or see him work?--to believe the ways of God so wide, that even on the breadth of his track was room for their understanding to lose its way--what they saw, so small a part of what he was doing, that it could give them but little clue to his end? that it was because the goal God had in view for them was so high and afar, that they could detect no movement of approach thereto?

The sigh, the exclamation, never meant that God might be doing something more than he was doing, but that the Father would have a dreary time to wait ere his children would know, that is, trust in him. The utterance recognizes the part of man, his slowly yielded part in faith, and his blame in troubling God by not trusting in him. If men would but make haste, and stir themselves up to take hold on God! They were so slow of heart to believe! They could but would not help it and do better!

He seems here to refer to his second coming--concerning the time of which, he refused information; concerning the mode of which, he said it would be unexpected; but concerning the duty of which, he insisted it was to be ready: we must be faithful, and at our work. Do those who say, lo here or lo there are the signs of his coming, think to be too keen for him, and spy his approach? When he tells them to watch lest he find them neglecting their work, they stare this way and that, and watch lest he should succeed in coming like a thief! So throughout: if, instead of speculation, we gave ourselves to obedience, what a

difference would soon be seen in the world! Oh, the multitude of so-called religious questions which the Lord would answer with, 'strive to enter in at the strait gate'! Many eat and drink and talk and teach in his presence; few do the things he says to them! Obedience is the one key of life.

I would meet difficulties, not answer objections; I would remove stumbling-blocks from the path of him who would pray; I would help him to pray. If, seeing we live not by our own will, we live by another will, then is there reason, and then only can there be reason in prayer. To him who refuses that other will, I have nothing to say. The hour may come when he will wish there were some one to pray to; now he is not of those whom I can help.

If there be a God, and I am his creature, there may be, there should be, there must be some communication open between him and me. If any one allow a God, but one scarce good enough to care about his creatures, I will yield him that it were foolish to pray to such a God; but the notion that, with all the good impulses in us, we are the offspring of a cold-hearted devil, is so horrible in its inconsistency, that I would ask that man what hideous and cold-hearted disregard to the truth makes him capable of the supposition! To such a one God's terrors, or, if not his terrors, then God's sorrows yet will speak; the divine something in him will love, and the love be left moaning.

If I find my position, my consciousness, that of one from home, nay, that of one in some sort of prison; if I find that I can neither rule the world in which I live nor my own thoughts or desires; that I cannot quiet my passions, order my likings, determine my ends, will my growth, forget when I would, or recall what I forget; that I cannot love where I would, or hate where I would; that I am no king over myself; that I cannot supply my own needs, do not even always know which of my seeming needs are to be supplied, and which treated as impostors; if, in a word, my own being is everyway too much for me; if I can neither understand it, be satisfied with it, nor better it--may it not well give me pause--the pause that ends in prayer?

When my own scale seems too large for my management; when I reflect that I cannot account for my existence, have had no poorest hand in it, neither, should I not like it, can do anything towards causing it to cease; when I think that I can do nothing to make up to those I love, any more than to those I hate, for evils I have done them and sorrows I have caused them; that in my worst moments I disbelieve in my best, in my best loathe my worst; that there is in me no wholeness, no unity; that life is not a good to me, for I scorn myself--when I think all or any such things, can it be strange if I think also that surely there ought to be somewhere a being to account for me, one to account for himself, and make the round of my existence just; one whose very being accounts and is necessary to account for mine; whose presence in my being is imperative, not merely to supplement it, but to make to myself my existence a good?

For if not rounded in itself, but dependent on that which it knows not and cannot know, it cannot be to itself a good known as a good--a thing of reason and well-being: it will be a life longing for a logos to be the interpretative soul of its cosmos--a logos it cannot have. To know God present, to have the consciousness of God where he is the essential life, must be absolutely necessary to that life! He that is made in the image of God must know him or be desolate: the child must have the Father!

Witness the dissatisfaction, yea desolation of my soul-wretched, alone, unfinished, without him! It cannot act from itself, save in God; acting from what seems itself without God, is no action at all, it is a mere yielding to impulse. All within is disorder and spasm. There is a cry behind me, and a voice before; instincts of betterment tell me I must rise above my present self--perhaps even above all my possible self: I see not how to obey, how to carry them out! I am shut up in a world of consciousness, an unknown I in

an unknown world: surely this world of my unwilling, unchosen, compelled existence, cannot be shut out from him, cannot be unknown to him, cannot be impenetrable, impermeable, unpresent to him from whom I am! nay, is it not his thinking in which I think? is it not by his consciousness that I am conscious?

Whatever passes in me must be as naturally known to him as to me, and more thoroughly, even to infinite degrees. My thought must lie open to him: if he makes me think, how can I elude him in thinking? 'If I should spread my wings toward the dawn, and sojourn at the last of the sea, even there thy hand would lead me, and thy right hand would hold me!' If he has determined the being, how shall any mode of that being be hidden from him? If I speak to him, if I utter words ever so low; if I but think words to him; nay, if I only think to him, surely he, my original, in whose life and will and no otherwise I now think concerning him, hears, and knows, and acknowledges!

Then shall I not think to him? Shall I not tell him my troubles--how he, even he, has troubled me by making me?--how unfit I am to be that which I am?--that my being is not to me a good thing yet?--that I need a law that shall account to me for it in righteousness--reveal to me how I am to make it a good--how I am to be a good, and not an evil? Shall I not tell him that I need him to comfort me? his breath to move upon the face of the waters of the Chaos he has made? Shall I not cry to him to be in me rest and strength? to quiet this uneasy motion called life, and make me live indeed? to deliver me from my sins, and make me clean and glad?

Such a cry is of the child to the Father: if there be a Father, verily he will hear, and let the child know that he hears! Every need of God, lifting up the heart, is a seeking of God, is a begging for himself, is profoundest prayer, and the root and inspirer of all other prayer.

If it be reasonable for me to cry thus, if I cannot but cry, it is reasonable that God should hear, he cannot but hear. A being that could not hear or would not answer prayer, could not be God.

'But, I ask, all this admitted--is what you call a necessary truth an existent fact? You say, "It must be so;" I say, "What if there is no God!" Convince me that prayer is heard, and I shall know. Why should the question admit of doubt? Why should it require to be reasoned about? We know that the wind blows: why should we not know that God answers prayer?'

I reply, What if God does not care to have you know it at second hand? What if there would be no good in that? There is some testimony on record, and perhaps there might be much were it not that, having to do with things so immediately personal, and generally so delicate, answers to prayer would naturally not often be talked about; but no testimony concerning the thing can well be conclusive; for, like a reported miracle, there is always some way to daff it; and besides, the conviction to be got that way is of little value; it avails nothing to know the thing by the best of evidence.

As to the evidence itself, adduction of proof is scarce possible in respect of inward experience, and to this class belongs the better part of the evidence: the testimony may be truthful, yet the testifier utterly self-deceived! How am I to know the thing as he says he knows it? How am I to judge of it? There is king David:--Poetry!--old poetry!--and in the most indefinite language in the world! Doubtless he is little versed in the utterance of the human soul, who does not recognize in many of the psalms a cry as true as ever came from depth of pain or height of deliverance; but it may all have been but now the jarring and now the rhythmical movement of the waves of the psychical æther!--I lay nothing upon testimony for my purpose now, knowing the things that can be said, and also not valuing the bare assent of the intellect. The sole assurance worth a man's having, even if the most incontestable evidence were open to him from a

thousand other quarters, is that to be gained only from personal experience--that assurance in himself which he can least readily receive from another, and which is least capable of being transmuted into evidence for another. The evidence of Jesus Christ could not take the place of that. A truth is of enormous import in relation to the life--that is the heart, and conscience, and will; it is of little consequence merely as a fact having relation to the understanding. God may hear all prayers that ever were offered to him, and a man may believe that he does, nor be one whit the better for it, so long as God has no prayers of his to hear, he no answers to receive from God. Nothing in this quarter will ever be gained by investigation. Reader, if you are in any trouble, try whether God will not help you; if you are in no need, why should you ask questions about prayer? True, he knows little of himself who does not know that he is wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked; but until he begins at least to suspect a need, how can he pray? And for one who does not want to pray, I would not lift a straw to defeat such a one in the argument whether God hears or does not hear prayer: for me, let him think what he will! it matters nothing in heaven or in earth: whether in hell I do not know.

As to the so-called scientific challenge to prove the efficacy of prayer by the result of simultaneous petition, I am almost ashamed to allude to it. There should be light enough in science itself to show the proposal absurd. A God capable of being so moved in one direction or another, is a God not worth believing in--could not be the God believed in by Jesus Christ--and he said he knew. A God that should fail to hear, receive, attend to one single prayer, the feeblest or worst, I cannot believe in; but a God that would grant every request of every man or every company of men, would be an evil God--that is no God, but a demon. That God should hang in the thought--atmosphere like a windmill, waiting till men enough should combine and send out prayer in sufficient force to turn his outspread arms, is an idea too absurd. God waits to be gracious not to be tempted. A man capable of proposing such a test, could have in his mind no worthy representative idea of a God, and might well disbelieve in any: it is better to disbelieve than believe in a God unworthy.

'But I want to believe in God. I want to know that there is a God that answers prayer, that I may believe in him. There was a time when I believed in him. I prayed to him in great and sore trouble of heart and mind, and he did not hear me. I have not prayed since.'

How do you know that he did not hear you?

'He did not give me what I asked, though the weal of my soul hung on it.'

In your judgment. Perhaps he knew better.

'I am the worse for his refusal. I would have believed in him if he had heard me.'

Till the next desire came which he would not grant, and then you would have turned your God away. A desirable believer you would have made! A worthy brother to him who thought nothing fit to give the Father less than his all! You would accept of him no decision against your desire! That ungranted, there was no God, or not a good one! I think I will not argue with you more. This only I will say: God has not to consider his children only at the moment of their prayer. Should he be willing to give a man the thing he knows he would afterwards wish he had not given him? If a man be not fit to be refused, if he be not ready to be treated with love's severity, what he wishes may perhaps be given him in order that he may wish it had not been given him; but barely to give a man what he wants because he wants it, and without farther purpose of his good, would be to let a poor ignorant child take his fate into his own hands--the cruelty of a devil. Yet is every prayer heard; and the real soul of the prayer may require, for its real answer, that it

should not be granted in the form in which it is requested.

'To have a thing in another shape, might be equivalent to not having it at all.'

If you knew God, you would leave that to him. He is not mocked, and he will not mock. But he knows you better than you know yourself, and would keep you from fooling yourself. He will not deal with you as the child of a day, but as the child of eternal ages. You shall be satisfied, if you will but let him have his way with the creature he has made. The question is between your will and the will of God. He is not one of those who give readiest what they prize least. He does not care to give anything but his best, or that which will prepare for it. Not many years may pass before you confess, 'Thou art a God who hears prayer, and gives a better answer.' You may come to see that the desire of your deepest heart would have been frustrated by having what seemed its embodiment then. That God should as a loving father listen, hear, consider, and deal with the request after the perfect tenderness of his heart, is to me enough; it is little that I should go without what I pray for. If it be granted that any answer which did not come of love, and was not for the final satisfaction of him who prayed, would be unworthy of God; that it is the part of love and knowledge to watch over the wayward, ignorant child; then the trouble of seemingly unanswered prayers begins to abate, and a lovely hope and comfort takes its place in the child-like soul. To hear is not necessarily to grant--God forbid! but to hear is necessarily to attend to--sometimes as necessarily to refuse.

'Concerning this thing,' says St. Paul, 'I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he hath said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee; power is made perfect in weakness.' God had a better thing for Paul than granting his prayer and removing his complaint: he would make him strong; the power of Christ should descend and remain upon him; he would make him stronger than his suffering, make him a sharer in the energy of God. Verily, if we have God, we can do without the answer to any prayer.

'But if God is so good as you represent him, and if he knows all that we need, and better far than we do ourselves, why should it be necessary to ask him for anything?'

I answer, What if he knows prayer to be the thing we need first and most? What if the main object in God's idea of prayer be the supplying of our great, our endless need--the need of himself? What if the good of all our smaller and lower needs lies in this, that they help to drive us to God? Hunger may drive the runaway child home, and he may or may not be fed at once, but he needs his mother more than his dinner. Communion with God is the one need of the soul beyond all other need; prayer is the beginning of that communion, and some need is the motive of that prayer. Our wants are for the sake of our coming into communion with God, our eternal need. If gratitude and love immediately followed the supply of our needs, if God our Saviour was the one thought of our hearts, then it might be unnecessary that we should ask for anything we need. But seeing we take our supplies as a matter of course, feeling as if they came out of nothing, or from the earth, or our own thoughts, instead of out of a heart of love and a will which alone is force, it is needful that we should be made feel some at least of our wants, that we may seek him who alone supplies all of them, and find his every gift a window to his heart of truth. So begins a communion, a talking with God, a coming-to-one with him, which is the sole end of prayer, yea, of existence itself in its infinite phases. We must ask that we may receive; but that we should receive what we ask in respect of our lower needs, is not God's end in making us pray, for he could give us everything without that: to bring his child to his knee, God withholds that man may ask.

In regard, however, to the high necessities of our nature, it is in order that he may be able to give that God requires us to ask--requires by driving us to it--by shutting us up to prayer. For how can he give into the soul of a man what it needs, while that soul cannot receive it? The ripeness for receiving is the asking. The blossom-cup of the soul, to be filled with the heavenly dews, is its prayer. When the soul is hungry for the light, for the truth--when its hunger has waked its higher energies, thoroughly roused the will, and brought the soul into its highest condition, that of action, its only fitness for receiving the things of God, that action is prayer. Then God can give; then he can be as he would towards the man; for the glory of God is to give himself.--We thank thee, Lord Christ, for by thy pain alone do we rise towards the knowledge of this glory of thy rather and our Father.

And even in regard to lower things--what it may be altogether unfit to do for a man who does not recognize the source of his life, it may be in the highest sense fit to grant him when he comes to that source to ask for it. Even in the case of some individual desire of one who in the main recognizes the Father, it may be well to give him asking whom, not asking, it would not benefit. For the real good of every gift it is essential, first, that the giver be in the gift--as God always is, for he is love--and next, that the receiver know and receive the giver in the gift. Every gift of God is but a harbinger of his greatest and only sufficing gift--that of himself. No gift unrecognized as coming from God is at its own best; therefore many things that God would gladly give us, things even that we need because we are, must wait until we ask for them, that we may know whence they come: when in all gifts we find him, then in him we shall find all things.

Sometimes to one praying will come the feeling rather than question: 'Were it not better to abstain? If this thing be good, will he not give it me? Would he not be better pleased if I left it altogether to him?' It comes, I think, of a lack of faith and childlikeness--taking form, perhaps, in a fear lest, asking for what was not good, the prayer should be granted. Such a thought has no place with St. Paul; he says, 'Casting all your care upon him, for he careth for you;' 'In everything making your request known unto him.' It may even come of ambition after spiritual distinction. In every request, heart and soul and mind ought to supply the low accompaniment, 'Thy will be done;' but the making of any request brings us near to him, into communion with our Life. Does it not also help us to think of him in all our affairs, and learn in everything to give thanks? Anything large enough for a wish to light upon, is large enough to hang a prayer upon: the thought of him to whom that prayer goes will purify and correct the desire. To say, 'Father, I should like this or that,' would be enough at once, if the wish were bad, to make us know it and turn from it. Such prayer about things must of necessity help to bring the mind into true and simple relation with him; to make us remember his will even when we do not see what that will is. Surely it is better and more trusting to tell him all without fear or anxiety. Was it not thus the Lord carried himself towards his Father when he said, 'If it be possible, let this cup pass from me'? But there was something he cared for more than his own fear--his Father's will: 'Nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done.' There is no apprehension that God might be displeased with him for saying what he would like, and not leaving it all to his Father. Neither did he regard his Father's plans as necessarily so fixed that they could not be altered to his prayer. The true son-faith is that which comes with boldness, fearless of the Father doing anything but what is right fatherly, patient, and full of loving-kindness. We must not think to please him by any asceticism even of the spirit; we must speak straight out to him. The true child will not fear, but lay bare his wishes to the perfect Father. The Father may will otherwise, but his grace will be enough for the child.

There could be no riches but for need. God himself is made rich by man's necessity. By that he is rich to give; through that we are rich by receiving.

As to any notion of prevailing by entreaty over an unwilling God, that is heathenish, and belongs to such as think him a hard master, or one like the unjust judge. What so quenching to prayer as the notion of unwillingness in the ear that hears! And when prayer is dull, what makes it flow like the thought that God is waiting to give, wants to give us everything! 'Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.' We shall be refused our prayer if that be better; but what is good our Father will give us with divine good will. The Lord spoke his parable 'to the end that they ought always to pray, and not to faint.'

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