

Prayer Speech

<This was intended to be given at the end of a weekend retreat on prayer for teens, but never took place due to the Covid outbreak>

Greetings!

So far, you have learned about how it can seem God does not answer your prayers, prayers we sometimes place before God, and how Jesus broke down those barriers. Now, we get a chance to talk about how to put it all together.

There are two things I want you to focus on from this lesson. The first is how the ritual, or the patterns we know, will match up to the philosophy, or why we pray. But before I get to the second part, I want to know who here has friends?

Very good.

How many of you who have friends know how to talk to your friends?

Excellent!

You might wonder why I am asking about friendship during a prayer discussion. Well, in John 15:14-15, Jesus calls us friends twice! Praying is talking to God, and Jesus is God. Therefore, if we know how to talk to friends, we know how to pray to God.

The mechanics of praying, what I called the ritual of praying, are already second nature to us. Still, there seems to be something different about talking to Him as opposed to someone else, isn't there? You may feel ashamed to use the same words with Him that you use with your other friends, and there might be some topics you talk about freely with your other friends, but you don't want to tell Jesus. What is going on?

What else can we learn about our experiences with friends? Well, while *we* get along with our friends, any given friend of ours might not be on friendly terms with another of our friends. How many here have had two friends of yours that didn't like each other, yet they get along with you? What happens when all three of you get together? It's a bit awkward, isn't it? And if we are honest with ourselves, we do tend to favor one over the other no matter how hard we try to treat each equally. It is no different with having Jesus as a friend, not all of our other friends are going to be comfortable around Him.

And this can even include Christian friends we may have. We are all human. When Jesus is one of your friends, it's not a matter of *if* you will ever feel awkward when both Him and another friend are together, it's a matter of how *often* and how *bad* this awkwardness is. This problem is on the philosophical side of prayer, but it will hurt the ritual side of prayer as well. Sometimes, if you don't hear God speaking, it's because a poor choice of friends is making us choose sides, and we chose the wrong side. But you have already talked about breaking down barriers this weekend, so I don't want to spend much more time on that, other than to say that perhaps we should do a self-examination on why we want friends we are ashamed to share Jesus with. Instead, I will focus on how healthy friendship skills can help us in prayer.

Now, you all might not have realized this, but we have already given a demonstration of something radically and wonderfully different about Christianity. The mechanics of prayer is a type of ritual, and self-reflection is a form of philosophy. One of the things that makes Christianity Christianity is the marriage of the ritual and the philosophical. I don't have time to elaborate on this here today, but I think you will find that, whenever there is a problem within Christianity that involves well-meaning people, what is happening is an imbalance between the ritual and philosophy. If you want your faith to run true and consistently, you need to find the right balance. Prayer is no exception to this rule. To help your prayer life, you need to understand this balance. This talk is to help you find that balance.

When I was your age, at least where I grew up, the Catholics were notorious for saying formulaic prayers (or "rote prayers"): The Lord's Prayer (the Our Father), the Hail Mary, the Doxology, etc. This is an example of the ritual aspect of prayer. The protestants, however, were proud to improvise every prayer they ever said, with the exception of the Lord's Prayer. This prayer is excepted because it is a commandment of Jesus. But otherwise, protestants were able to give good examples of the philosophy of prayer because that is almost all they ever did in prayer. The times have changed, or at least within the subcultures I belong to. Today, you all prayed me in with an improvised prayer to guide me in giving this talk. When I was your age, the speaker probably would have just begun this session with a Hail Mary and/or the Lord's Prayer, and then introduced me. On the other hand, I once attended a Thanksgiving dinner with a protestant family. I was only a little older than you are now. The blessing of the food turned into an eulogy for the turkey! I wasn't scandalized; I was impressed. I no longer remember the words he said over the food, but I'll never forget thinking, "This is the man I want to speak at my funeral!" Today, the protestant blessing of food almost always ends with something along the lines of, "Lord, we ask You to bless this food to our bodies and our bodies to Your service." I'm not saying either side has a healthy balance yet, but I hope you can see how the two need to come together.

Earlier, I had to address friendship in a negative way. From this point on, it will be in a more positive light. To start with, what do friends want for us? They want us to have fun, right? They want us to have good things, right? They want us to be successful, right? But these things take time, and we only have so much time to do them. But most of all, friends want to do things with us. So Jesus comes along, and asks us to get together. And we say, "Not now Jesus, I got a game to play, or a movie to watch, or a puzzle I'm working on." As for myself, I've got the best excuse possible not to go with Him: "Not now Jesus, I'm writing a paper to help others learn more about You."

Wow! Really?!? To say that is definitely scandalous, but how often is it the truth? I imagine it is more often than we want to admit to ourselves.

But is Jesus mad? No, He is the perfect friend and says, "It's okay, when can we get together?"

"When can we get together?" *That's* the question that should wake you up in the morning.

So, we might answer with, "I'll clear my schedule at 6:30 every day so it's just You and me." We also might say, "I'll invite you to eat with me at every meal, and I'll come to your house at least once a week so we can talk for at least an hour without interruption." These are examples of how we can help bring balance to a situation when the philosophical (coming up with excuses) begins to outweigh the ritual (the need to talk).

But even when we do make time to talk, we run the risk of only being there physically and not

mentally. Who here had a friend that disrespected you? How long did you stay friends after that?

Naturally, we want to be at ease with our friends and overlook a lot of small matters, but there are some lines that should not be crossed. You expect them to listen to you as well as you listen to them. You don't want your friend to give you body language that says, "I don't care," even if you know they really do care. If there is a special event, you want your friend to dress the part and not humiliate you. If you want your friends to treat you like you are worth something, then it is only fair that you treat them like they are worth something as well.

When we stand up in prayer, our bodies are telling Jesus that we are paying attention. When we kneel, we are telling Jesus we are humbling ourselves before His glory. When we fold our hands, not only are we telling God that we won't let idle hands distract us, but we also have them pointing up. This pointing is a subtle but effective way of bringing our attention to Heaven. When we dress up for church, we are telling Jesus that He is worthy of our special consideration. When we dress our best for Christmas and Easter, we are telling Jesus that He is deserving of our best. These are examples of how we can help bring balance to a situation when the ritual (a disrespectful attitude) begins to outweigh the philosophical (the need to be the friend we want Jesus to be for us).

Of course, there is a philosophy to this ritual as well. Our financial and health situations may prevent us from being in an ideal dress and posture. What *we* consider dressing up may be too expensive for another. My advice here is to be honest. Good friends know when the other is holding back, and when the other has legitimate issues to deal with. And Jesus is more than just a "good friend;" He is the *perfect* friend. If you make an honest attempt to get it right and are still torn, just pick one or the other option. Flip a coin if you need to. Have faith and hope that God is more interested in your devotion here than some false pretense of perfection.

Now we come to my final two points -- both concerning thoughts on the prayer itself. The first point, as I mentioned before, is that some prayers are more ritualistic than others, and some are more philosophical. When I was your age, my English teacher took to heart the idea that Catholics were too ritualistic, and he joined a prayer club where the members spend the whole session only saying improvised prayers. One night, one of the members showed up with the news that another member had just died in an auto accident that day. For a long time, the group sat in stunned silence, until one of them began the ritualistic Lord's Prayer.

Improvised prayers, which tend towards the philosophical, are prayers where the primary speaker is you. Rote prayers, those that are more ritualistic, are prayers where the primary speaker is God. Both have their place, and there is no reason why you can't prefer one over the other. Just don't let this preference turn into exclusivity. It's okay for a golfer to have a favorite club, but it's not okay if that is the only club he ever uses.

The second point is about when we pray for others. Be honest and as specific as possible with what is prayed for. We live in a culture that tells us that strangers we never met are deserving of all the charity we have, while those whom we know the best are deserving of our scorn for even the smallest slight. Neither attitude is healthy, as it places us as judge of others' souls, something only God can do. It is also disrespectful to the dignity of those we pray for, as no one person or group is either all good or all bad. To pray that children in a third world country can have a better life is just as misguided as to pray that someone we don't like becomes a better person. Notice that I said "misguided," not "wrong" or "bad." My point is that, the more specific we become in our prayer, the more empathetic we become. Better alternatives of the aforementioned prayers would be "that the malnourished in such-

and-such country can get the food they need," or "that so-and-so can learn to speak with a kinder voice."

To use myself as a case study for why this is so, I want to mention that I have worked in many different places and in many different situations. I have had very good supervisors, very bad ones, and all degrees in between. For the place I work now, the supervisors tend towards the second category. Of course, Jesus commands us to pray for our enemies (Matthew 5:44), therefore I ought to pray for my supervisors out of obedience to Jesus. I could, and actually did for awhile, simply pray along the lines of "God, please make them better persons." During this time, I was praying ritualistically (I was being obedient), not philosophically. This prayer was essentially me judging them, and so I was denying the human dignity that they deserve. I needed to fix this problem, and the fix came from being more specific on who was doing what and what they were doing.

As I thought about it, I realized that what I really wanted them to do differently was to put some thought into their decisions, and then to take more responsibility for how their own ideas worked out. So I changed my prayer to, "I pray that they perform their jobs intelligently and responsibly." And note that this prayer is said in a positive manner (something they need to do), as opposed to saying the same thing in negative terms (such as "I pray that they stop being stupid and stop blaming others"). And this prayer worked.

Over the weeks and months that followed, they *looked* less and less hostile to me. They became less of a group of tormentors and more of a group of real people. People that had their own problems to deal with, including problems that came from their bosses. I began to realize that not everything they said and did was of their own will. So I added the line, "I pray that *their* supervisors do not give them unnecessary burdens." And as time went by and they continued to become more and more human to me, I also realized that the tension between management and the work force was not always one-way, and that the managers had to deal with a lot of difficult and uncooperative people. This caused me to do some self-reflection, and I saw that sometimes I was also difficult. So added another line to the prayer, and I now say, "I pray us employees do not give [supervisors] unnecessary problems."

A real miracle took place at work. It is not that the overall situation at work changed, it is just as bad (and probably worse) than before. But since I started praying all three lines, *I* have changed. By seeing them just as much a victim as oppressor, I have learned to relate to them better. Talking to most of them is much easier than before. Even when dealing with the "bad stuff," I see them as individuals just as tormented as I am, and I have found a peace in knowing that this is not a personal matter. I am not implying I became a "doormat" and let myself get walked on (I have no problem taking advantage of the Union when I am truly wronged), nor that I'm blind to what is going on. What I am saying is that these problems are no longer personal for me. It's just the imperfect world acting in an imperfect way, something that one day soon will forever be in my past. I have learned to focus on what is enduring.

I hope that I have given you some things to think about concerning prayer, and that some of these things will help you in your prayer life. While the intent was to help one get over the "this doesn't seem right" feeling of prayer, I hope that even those new to the faith will find things to benefit from. In many ways, the initiate is probably at an advantage here, as he does not have bad habits to break or preconceived notions to be challenged. Instead, he can start off with a healthy understanding of what prayer is about, and how to go about doing it.

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