

Prayer

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Imagine one of those cold mornings and the theater (where church is held) is locked when you arrive, so we're all standing outside freezing. Then somebody comes and opens the door. But, you all stand there freezing and saying, "That's great, the door is open. Isn't it great the door is open? We could go in if we wanted to and it's great the door is open." Now, an hour afterward you're all standing out there freezing and saying, "It's great the door is open we could go in if we wanted to."

Now that's the kind of irrational situation many of us have got into with God. Many of you have come Sunday after Sunday and you know fine well that the door is wide open and that God really does love you. He is your Father, and because of Jesus he will give you anything you want or anything you need in your life. And yet, you have a tendency to be standing outside freezing, lacking all kinds of things and saying, "Oh it's great that God's my Father. God's my Father, he'll give me anything I want, he'll help me, he'll do whatever I want him to do in my life." Yet you're standing out there and not approaching him at all.

Now brothers and sisters that isn't what God wants. God wants you to live by the power of the Holy Spirit that flows from the tree of life. He wants you to have the power of the Holy Spirit bringing about results in your life that you cannot bring about yourselves. And when you don't use that power then your lives become very slow, cumbersome, clumsy, frustrating and very dull. And that's the reason so many of our lives move so slowly. We are trying to bring about things in our lives that only the power of God's Holy Spirit can bring about as a result of our praying to him.

One of the big problems with many of us is that we really don't know too much about prayer and it's prayer that makes all these things real. Brothers and sisters do you see I could explain all the beauties of the abundant life in Jesus Sunday after Sunday until all of us die and you wouldn't experience any of them unless you approach God yourself for them in prayer. Loved ones, it's prayer that makes it all real to you. It doesn't matter what you do, or what you hear, or what you study, or what you read, or how hard you try. If you never approach God in prayer yourself God will never make any of those things real in your life.

Now loved ones, you know that we are a counseling mad generation, aren't we? We'll go to anybody for counsel. We'll go to anyone but we will not go to the person who made us and who knows what the whole problem is anyways. So many of us spend a great deal of time frustrated. We spend hours in midnight conversations because we do not approach God in prayer. Now loved ones, that's the way God wants us to live. He wants us to live in a relationship of prayer with him so that his Spirit can be given to us in our lives and can bring about changes in our world.

Brothers and sisters you can protest like mad about the bombing (in Vietnam). I'm with you that it's a mess. All you can do is respect the man in the White House for standing up for some principle. And whether you understand the principle or not, at least he's standing up for the principle of standing for principles. And that's something right now. I mean, the people at the other end of the fulcrum are just as bad. They're saying, "No, no it doesn't matter don't bother about anything, let's just get out for peace sake." Well, that's just as wrong as going the other direction.

I'm as baffled as you are by what exactly we're doing, but brothers and sisters it is no answer for us to just protest about that. Now, I praise God that he has delivered us from marching up and down negatively protesting against things. But do you see what God wants to do is have a group of his children in a place like Vietnam praying the power of the Holy Spirit through their lives so that Vietnamese North and South can see the beauty of a life that is lived in God. That is the only way peace can come to a place. Everything else is superficial.

Until we get onto God's method of bringing the world into submission to his will we'll continue to use our own methods. Loved ones don't knock the B52s (bombs) because your lives are filled with B52s. Our lives are filled with B52s, our rooms are filled with B52s, we have our B52 method to bring about what we want in our life and it isn't God's way. God's way is through prayer.

Now here's an example of it. Here's a big problem. Moses had a mass of people behind him and suddenly found himself confronted with this problem in Exodus 15:22-23. You remember the Israelites had just come out of Egypt -- over the Red Sea and into the wilderness of Sinai. Exodus 15:22-23 -- "Then Moses led Israel onward from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur; they went three days in the wilderness and found no water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter."

So there he was with men, woman and children behind him and the only water that they could find was bitter, "Therefore it was named Marah." And the people murmured against Moses, saying, 'What shall we drink?' And he cried to the LORD," ---- that means he prayed, he went to God himself. "And he cried to the LORD; and the LORD showed him a tree, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet." Now that's the way it works.

You pray to God and God actually affects the situation in which you find yourself. Now, that is God's will. Now I'm with you that there are times when you have to do something. There are times when you have to throw the tree into the water. There are times when we have to do what God tells us. But the power to effect the change in the situation is brought by God's Spirit through prayer. And brothers and sisters I'll push you on it, have we achieved very much by our own efforts in our society? Have we achieved much by our own efforts? I think you have to answer no. Anything that has been achieved in society has been achieved because hearts of people seem to have been changed in certain attitude to things as obviously wrong as slavery. Even our attitude to things that are obviously wrong socially, even those have been changed not by men moving masses of people but by some other spirit changing the hearts of people.

Now loved ones that's the way God wants us to work in our own lives. He wants us to work through the power of prayer releasing the Holy Spirit to work in our own situations. The reason your situations get more complicated is because you try to do it on your own. We decide, "Okay, what we need in our dorm is a sensitivity group," and before you know it you've had the sensitivity group and everybody has shared everybody else's sins. Then everybody else is gossiping about everybody else's sins and the last state is worse than the first.

Or, at home we can't get on with our mom, we can't get on with our dad, or our brother, or sister so we go in with our B52s and we decide, "We'll sort this one out with all the psychology that I understand now through that first course in psychology at the University. I can deal with this situation." And so we go right in there and make a mess. And then we don't go home for another two quarters.

Now brothers and sisters do you see that God's way is releasing his Spirit of life through our prayer. And I read that most obvious example to you to show that this Spirit of God's life achieves not only spiritual changes in people's personalities but it affects the physical situation. It can deal to some extent with the pollution situation. Obviously, not while we're continuing to sin and to pollute further but it alone can affect the physical situation. And what God wants us to do is to begin to deal with him through prayer.

Now that's really what it is. A lot of us have misconceptions about prayer. A lot of us think that prayer is a kind of auto suggestion. You auto suggest yourself into believing that the thing is going to come about and the sheer power of your auto suggestion affects some of the psychological laws of the universe and brings it about. Loved ones, it's not auto suggestion. It isn't a matter of psyching yourself up to believe that God could do for you what he did through Moses. It isn't that at all. Prayer is a very logical thing that you do on the basis of the truth that you know about God.

In other words, prayer is a rational thing. It's based on empirical evidence that we have that there's a God on the other side who can hear us. That's what the Bible says. It says that before you approach God in prayer you must settle certain beliefs about God in your own head. If you look at it it's in Hebrews 11:6. Prayer is not mysticism or auto suggestion. Prayer is an action that a person engages in on the basis of certain evidence that he has about God. Hebrews 11:6, "And without faith it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him."

So if you say, "I'd like the power you're talking about. I'd like to pray to God like that." Brothers and sisters you can't do it unless you do study the empirical historical evidence of the kind of person that God is that we have in this history book (the Bible).

Unless you study the evidence of history and come to certain conclusions about God you cannot pray. If you say to me, "Well brother I don't really believe there is a God." Then loved ones you can't pray. Prayer is not mysticism. Prayer is not uttering some thoughts up into darkness and thinking they'll come back down in a meaningful way to you. Prayer is treating the person of God in a certain way because you have found in history he is that kind of person.

So first of all you ought to settle what you believe about God. You really need to decide is there a God and if there is a God is he like Jesus? Is what is said in the Bible true or is it not true? Is Jesus real or is he not real? Are the documents behind the Bible reliable or are they not reliable? Did Jesus rise from the dead or did he not rise from the dead? You have to settle certain beliefs about God.

Now when you settle those, then you've to approach God on the basis of the kind of person he has shown himself to be in the Bible. One of the best ways to begin a prayer is to look at a piece in the Bible such as a Psalm. The Psalms are good because they are prayers that other people prayed to God and they reveal the kind of person God is. Take a psalm and read it first. Then take one verse that talks about God. For example Psalm 103 -- "Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who heals all thy diseases, who forgives all thy iniquities, who delivers thy life from destruction."

Now it's good to take a few of those verses and memorize them. Then close your eyes, or keep your eyes open, but treat God as that person. Don't go by feelings. If you say, "What do you do when

you go to prayer? Do you try to feel God's presence?" No. That's irrelevant because that's in the emotions. It's not in the emotions that you communicate with the Creator it's in the spirit by faith. So you approach God as the God who heals all diseases, and who forgives our iniquities. You go to God like that and you say to him, "Lord God, I know that this is the kind of person you are." You treat him like that brothers and sisters.

You know that before you would ever talk with Nixon (President of the U.S.) you would know the kind of person he is, and you'd know the kinds of things that he does. We haven't the exact details of his breakfast the way we used to about LBJ (Lyndon Baines Johnson) but we have some details about Nixon and you know the kind of thing that he is interested in. And so you go to him and you treat him like that.

Now that's what prayer is, you close your eyes and you speak to the person whom you see delineated in the Bible. You treat him as a person who does forgive your iniquities and who does heal your diseases. Of course you don't need to yell at him or shout at him. You don't need to bargain with him because he's a God that delivers your life from destruction. He's a God who loves you, who restores your soul. And speak to him in the character you see designated in the Bible.

Now, if you say to me, "Do you talk to him with your lips, or do you talk to him in your thoughts, or do you talk to him in your emotions?" Loved ones, honestly it really doesn't matter. It really doesn't even matter if you close your eyes. The big thing is to turn your eyes away from the world around you which you've been accustomed to communicating with all the time throughout your life. Turn your eyes or your senses away from that and turn to God, the God who is designated here. It doesn't matter whether you speak out loud. Some of us speak aloud to God because it helps us to overcome the noise in the next room, or it helps us to overcome the music that we hear from the TV set. Some of us just think thoughts up to God. Some of us don't think thoughts at all because we've got to the point where we can communicate with him just in our spirits. So there are levels of prayer loved ones and it's not important which level you're on because God will listen to you.

If you start on some level just being honest with him he'll deal with you on that level. Even if you just start praying the Lord's Prayer to him, God will respect you for that. If you begin to read the lives of the Saints you begin to find that mental prayer deepens into spiritual prayer. Verbal prayer tends to be where we all start, then we go onto thought prayer where we think thoughts up to God, and then we go onto spiritual prayer. This is where we just have an inward sense with him in our spirits which doesn't involve the psychological part of us at all. So that there can come a time when electrodes would measure nothing going on in the brain at all and a person could pray at that level.

It is on that level you remember, that Coleridge said, "Prayer is the deepest function of which a human being is capable." It's not so important how you pray but that you look up to God. That's the second thing, start by looking to God. Here's one of the problems a lot of us have. We get down and say, "Lord, I'd like to talk to you about my home situation. It's miserable Lord, as you know." And you start outlining to God what he should do about the home situation. And as you outline all the details and all the gruesome facts about your home situation so your mind comes off God completely and gets on to the home situation and you finish the prayer convinced that nobody, not even God, could do anything about that home situation.

So don't pray about the problem. Don't keep praying yourself deeper and deeper into your problems. Look up to God. Look up to God. Now if you tell me, "It's hard brother. There doesn't seem to be

anything there.” Loved ones, when you haven’t been doing it for years, you haven’t done it throughout your whole life; it’s going to be hard at the beginning. It’s going to be hard to look up to someone whom you cannot see in spite of the fact that you obviously talk quite happily into a thing called a telephone and you can’t see anybody. You’re used to that but you haven’t been used to talking to this person (God) so it’s going to be hard at the beginning.

The important thing is to get your eyes off yourselves and off your own problems. Look up to God and be interested in him. There’s a verse in the Bible that says you know that in Colossians 3:2. I say this loved ones, because a lot of us turn our prayer into a conversation with ourselves. We just turn it into an introspection exercise. We’re just looking into ourselves all the time instead of looking up in faith to God. Colossians 3:2, “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.” So God says, “Look up to me. Look at me.” Now that is faith, looking up to him. That is believing that he is there as he says he is in the Bible. That is what faith is.

Now I think a lot of us are concerned about what we do after that. Well, it’s not important what you do as long as you’re honest. All kinds of things result when you really look at God. Some of us begin to want to just look at him and converse with him. Real prayer is just conversation with God. It’s just talking with the Creator. It doesn’t matter how you do it. It doesn’t matter what you’re saying or what you’re asking. It’s conversation with him so some of us will just look at him. When you’re with a girlfriend that you really love, often it’s just enough to look at each other. And when we do that with God it’s called adoration. That’s what many of the saints spend a great deal of their prayer time doing. As you get to know the person more and more it’s enough to just be with them and to love them.

So maybe some people will just love him. Maybe you’ll want to thank him for some of the things that you’ve got and so you just thank him. But you do whatever the spirit inside you wants to do because God gives you the spirit to help you pray. You’ll find that if you begin this way by reading a piece of the Bible, memorizing a verse, and then looking up to the person who is there, (who is like the person in that verse), then the Spirit will begin to pray through you and will probably begin to make you want to thank God.

Then maybe you’ll see some beauty of his and you’ll see how patient Jesus was. It will stab you to your heart that you’re not that patient. You’ve just been impatient with your roommate a few minutes before and you’ll want to confess that. So sometimes it’ll drive you to confessing. Sometimes it will drive you to asking him for something that you need. Sometimes it’ll drive you to asking for somebody else and interceding. But prayer is a natural thing brothers and sisters. You shouldn’t get all caught up with flowery words and with trying to do it right. Prayer is just honesty. It’s just an honest desire to God.

Now I think I should stop at that point to allow you to ask any questions. And I think we need to talk more about it in on other Sundays. Are there any questions? That’s just beginning the surface but I feel a lot of us here have very little idea of how to pray. I’ll try to deal next day with things like unanswered prayer. But are there any questions on just that how to begin or how do you pray? Now, don’t sit there and say, “My questions is a stupid one.” No. Probably 20 other people are thinking the same question.

QUESTION: Could you give any insight into what do you do when you find it hard to have faith in prayer?

ANSWER: Normally brother we have difficulty holding on to faith that God will answer when we're immersing ourselves more in the problem and the difficulty than we are in God. What I have found is that faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God. I found that the more I read this book (the Bible) and thought of God as really being like that, the more my faith that he could do everything was built up in me. And so I think that's one way. In other words, build up your faith in God rather than your concern for the circumstances. I think that's one answer.

I think another reason is that some of us are still trying to bring about the answer ourselves. We're trying to mix our own methods with God's method and so he pulls away our faith in that situation. Now if that isn't answering your question will you push me? Wring the answer out of me if I don't say it.

QUESTION: How often should we ask God for something?

ANSWER: I'll try to deal with this in regard to unanswered prayer but it seems that many of us think God is deaf. "Lord, will you heal my mother? Will you hear my mother Lord? Lord, will you heal my mother? Lord, heal my mother." We think the Father is a bit dumb and just can't get the message the first time. It seems to me that's repetition, empty repetition. It seems to me we should approach God as we would approach an ordinary person. If I ask Pete to do something and he didn't do it the first time I wouldn't keep saying, "Pete, will you do it, will you do it?" I'd eventually say, "Pete, why will you not do this? Is there some reason why you won't do it?" And it seems to me loved ones we need to go to God that way.

"Father, why are you not doing this?" Then God will have the opportunity to show us something in our own lives that is preventing him answering or some reason in his own plan for us or for the person involved that prevents him answering. Or, he will show us some condition that we need to fulfill for him to answer the prayer. But it seems that's the approach. I have a lot of references here that we just haven't time for this morning. But that's the approach that the men used in the Old and New Testament.

We shouldn't just keep trying to brain wash God or bore him into answering. I really think we insult the Father. I think we insult our God. We treat him like a slot machine. God is a dear person who understands you and who loves you. He really knows you and believe it or not can carry on a sensible conversation with you. That may be amazing to you because you're so brilliant, but he can. You can see how we've got such a terrible idea of God and such a miserable idea of prayer, haven't we? We thought of something and then just repeat it and repeat it. No, you converse with a dear person who knows you and loves you.

QUESTION: Can you ask for something specific or just general guidance?

ANSWER: I will try to deal with this next Sunday in greater detail, but yes God says, "Ask and it shall be given you." The important point is that God knows what you need at certain times and yet he can't bring them about unless you ask him. So it's very important to ask God, "Lord, what do you want for my life? What do you want for my family?" As the Holy Spirit brings about certain petitions within us then we should ask. And if there's a brother and sister sitting here saying, "Well, I haven't gotten to that level of surrender." Well loved ones, probably first of all you need to get to it but secondly then ask for what is on your heart.

When God doesn't answer ask him, "Father, I know you're listening to me. Will you either answer my

prayer or change my prayer?" I think that's the way to deal with it. I have asked for many definite things and God has given them. Other times I have asked for things and he has not. He did not give me a BSA250 (a type of motorcycle) when I asked for it. I was nine years old. But still, I had my mind set on it. So it seems that we should ask but it's as God reveals to us what we need.

Don't just sit there doing nothing. Ask for something rather than sitting in a vacuum. God wants to talk to you. God wants to communicate. That's the whole reason for all that we're preaching. That's the whole reason for the Bible. It's the whole reason for everything, that you would get in touch with the one who made you. I could take one more question.

QUESTION: How do you know when you're asking God for something that you're not trying to tell God what he should do?

ANSWER: That's where I think the Holy Spirit comes in. Paul says, "The Holy Spirit will help us in our infirmities because we do not know how to pray as we ought and he will pray within us with sighs that are too deep for words." It seems that the Holy Spirit will let us know if we really are submissive to him, when we're trying to push God and when we're trying to express what the Holy Spirit is saying.

I could give you an example that some of the brothers and sisters have already heard. My mom was dying of cancer in Ireland and I was here in the states. At that time I was in a difficult time financially and didn't have the money to fly across to Ireland. I didn't really know what to do. They said she would die before Christmas and I got the word in November. I began to pray for her that she would be healed. I would have said that I prayed with strong spiritual groans and urgings that she would be healed. But, she just got worse.

Then God gave me the money to fly. I flew back on one of those excursion fares for two weeks and stayed with her but she got worse and worse. I came back to the states and I prayed for her that night. At one o'clock in the morning there seemed to be – brother it was incredible, there seemed to be a voice inside me that said, "Will you die to her as your mother? Will you stop asking for her to be healed so that you may be able to make up to her for things that you failed to do in during your past life or so that you'll have her as a friend or so that you won't be lonely and you won't be without her? Will you die to her as your mother and pray for her as my child, as your sister in Christ?"

I changed my prayers and prayed that way. There came a different sense inside me, a conviction that said, "I have borne her sicknesses and carried her pains." My mother was healed. It was a different voice; it seemed to be the Holy Spirit praying the prayer of faith through me when I gave up praying my own prayer for my own reasons. So it seems to me the answer is the Holy Spirit will show you whether your prayer is God's prayer for you or your own.