

## Prayer and the Senses

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Every few months it seems right that we should say to each other that you need to pray; and I have tried to do that through the years. It doesn't matter how often you and I come together here in church on Sunday, if you don't pray its all bluff anyway, because the whole purpose of us coming together is for you to know God who made you and not to be surprised when you meet him at the end of this life but to know him and to be aware of him.

So, that's why every few months, I have tried to remind you -- pray! If you don't pray loved ones, it doesn't matter what you do here, you know, it doesn't. If you don't speak to God yourself, all this is just a charade that we are involved in; and it's vital that you speak to him, do you know that, it's just vital that you speak to him. Now don't sit there and say, "Brother I am not kind of religious like that at all and I don't go for that stuff," loved ones you have to go for it, you have to talk to him. You are going to spend forever with him so you better start getting to know him now. And there is no point in saying, "Oh! Well I am not sure, I am not sure whether I'll be there or not," if you are not there, you are going to be burning in hell so you better work towards getting there. There is a hell and a heaven loved ones, there is, you just can't get around it. I was brought up as a liberal and I was brought up to explain how there wasn't a hell and all that stuff, that's all bluff -- there is a hell. There is a place where you burn forever in your own selfish desires and there is a heaven; there is a place where God is, and where you and I will be forever.

So, it's just vital that you get to know him now and that you start talking to him; doesn't matter how you talk to him, doesn't matter if you talk to him the way your grandmother did or your mother or the way people do here it doesn't matter, but it's vital that you start talking to him. It's vital that you start talking to God; it is loved ones, please do it. And it's not just talking to him when you are in a foxhole kind of situation, where you have cancer or where your Mom has just died, that ends up not being prayer, it's just crying out for somebody to save you, it's not real prayer. It's just an agonizing desperate desire to get out of the situation that you've found yourself in. But prayer is talking with God; it's talking with God.

Now, what do you need in order to talk with him? I think a lot of you feel you have to be kind of mystical, or you have to have kind of a feeling about it, or you have to have a great sense of his presence, or you hear other people talking about their prayer times and it sounds glorious. They talk about being caught up into the third heaven and they talk about the wonderful the times they are having with the Lord -- you don't need all that stuff. You don't need all those wonderful feelings at all, that isn't what prayer is first and foremost. You just need one thing to be able to pray and I'll show you where to find it. It's in 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." That's all you need; that's what you need. If you want to draw near to God and you want to speak to him, all you have to do is believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him, that's it. You don't need feelings, you don't.

You don't need to be mystical like Thomas a Kempis or St. Teresa. You don't need to be eloquent like other people that you have heard. You just need to believe that God is. You don't need to have a big cathedral, you don't need to have candlelight and soft music, you don't need above everything else

to “have wonderful feelings,” that’s it, that’s where we go astray. We get into this wonderful “feeling” thing, and all we are involved in is mysticism and spiritualism. And I think some of us kneel down in our bedrooms at home and we can’t get a feeling and we say to ourselves, I don’t feel God’s presence, I don’t feel his presence. And we work for the next five or ten minutes trying to get a feeling of his presence and trying to get a mystical perception of God. That isn’t what the Bible says you need; it doesn’t say you need first of all to feel God’s presence; or you need first of all to have a mystical perception of his reality; or you need first of all to get a real sense, a real feeling that he is there that he is listening to you, it doesn’t. It just says, what a person needs is to believe that God exists. And that he is the kind of God that this Book says he is, that’s it. So, if you say to me, you mean you could be just cold blooded about it; you could be just intellectual about it? Yes, yes, you could. Because actually you know that you have been in certain situations where you have done that.

I think it’s only last week on television, there was an example, a couple gathered around a bed and the person was in a coma and they asked the nurse, “Can she hear me?” and she said, “I am not sure that she can,” and of course the mother in the situation talked to the person in the coma, whether she thought she could hear or not. So, there have been many situations where you have lifted the phone to talk. Do you feel the other person is at the other end? “I really feel you there, I really feel you.” You know you don’t; you know this phone works this way, you know you have tried it before, it works. You just believe the person is there and you keep talking; sometimes you find they weren’t there, but you keep talking. But you do believe it, you don’t go by feeling and that’s what prayer is. Prayer is not that reflective experience that the spiritualists talk about; you see that’s where we get into silly stuff; TM and all that. We try to get into Middle Eastern religious stuff where we kind of feel that God is there. We wear ourselves out; you know you do. You wear yourself out because you try to feel his presence. You feel it for a while, then you don’t feel it. Then the next step is I don’t think he is hearing me. Then your faith goes and the whole prayer collapses. Or you feel him for two or three weeks at the beginning and then the feelings go and you say, God mustn’t be there, the heavens are as brass he can’t hear me because I can’t feel that he hears me. It’s not feeling its faith.

If you read CS Lewis’s partial autobiography “Surprised by Joy” you would have read of his torturous experiences as a schoolboy in England where he would try to realize a prayer. He would pray a prayer and then he would look into himself and say, did I really pray that prayer? He would, as he says, try to realize the prayer. He would try to feel; did I pray that prayer as really as I prayed it last week? Do I feel God heard that prayer? Do I really sense that God heard me? Do I have that feeling that the Bible seems to talk about that I know that he heard me? Do I feel that? And he says his prayer times became masochistic sessions, where he tortured himself and beat himself until he began to hate prayer times, because he was constantly examining himself after he had prayed a prayer to see if he could realize that prayer. And if he was able to realize it; it meant that he could feel that God had heard him and that he was confident. And he could get up having felt that he had prayed well.

He says it drove him mad; it actually drove him away from prayer all together -- this attempt to realize his prayer. And then he has a very good sentence, he says, “little did I realize that every time I looked in the driving mirror” -- because that’s what he was doing. He was driving along the road in prayer then looking in the driving mirror, except the driving mirror went through reflecting directly on himself; looking in the driving mirror to look at himself. So as he was praying, he would look at himself to see if it was a real prayer and he said, “little did I realize that the moment I looked in upon myself, at that very moment I had ceased looking to God and I had ceased to

pray and so, what I saw when I looked in was a man looking in at himself or a boy looking in at himself. I did not see a person praying to God, I saw a person looking in on himself and I came up with the relentless conclusion each time that I was not praying properly because I wasn't, I was looking in on myself; I was introspecting."

Loved ones don't do that. Prayer and worship is what it was expressed in Thomas you remember, when Jesus appeared to him and Thomas was overwhelmed and he fell down and said, "My Lord and my God." He was utterly taken up with Jesus, he hadn't a moment to say, "Am I falling right, or now, am I falling nicely, am I falling without hurting myself?" He didn't -- he just fell on his face before the Lord and said, "My Lord and my God" -- that's what prayer is. If you have time to look in and see how it's going or how well you're praying, you can be sure you are not praying; and that's why it all seems to become a kind of introspective experience; and that's how you get into depressing experiences in prayer, because you are actually involved in spiritualism and spiritual meditation and you are actually opening yourself to the evil spirits who are all around about us trying to get our eyes off God. And the next thing they do is, they bring you some feelings and for a moment you have a good feeling and once you yield yourself to them then they bring you a feeling of depression and before you know it, you are absolutely hooked on spirits of error that are beginning to make chaos out of your prayer time.

Don't do it. Forget that stuff; forget that old business of am I getting satisfaction out of this prayer time, am I getting good feelings out of it, can I feel God's presence, can I be sure he is hearing me. The only way to be sure he is hearing you is whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him -- that's the only way. You are dependent on faith, you are dependent on believing that God, over these thousands of years, has dealt the way this book has said he has dealt with people and that he has not changed over these recent few thousand years. That he is the same yesterday, today and forever and that he listens to you the same way as he listened to Moses and the same way as he listened to Jesus. In other words, you believe it, loved ones. You believe it in your head. If you say to me, now brother, isn't it true that at times the Holy Spirit may give you a real glorious sense of elevation in praying? Yes, yes. But you don't live for those times, you don't go to God to get good feelings; you go to God to talk with Him. Moreover, the Father will watch you, you see. The Father will see when you are in danger of getting hooked on good prayer experiences; he knows when that happens -- you know when that happens in a love relationship, when you get hooked on the satisfaction that the love relationship is bringing to you so that your mind comes off the person that you are loving; God knows that. God knows when you need to be backed off a little. At times I have had good feelings in prayer; yes, the Lord gives you good feelings in prayer but it is the Lord's right to withdraw those feelings when he thinks that your eyes are coming off him.

So, brothers and sisters see that prayer requires only one condition. That is that you believe that God exists and that he is a rewarder of those that seek after him. If you say to me, well brother how can I be sure I am not talking into the darkness? Because you believe, you believe that God hears, you believe that he hears. If he wants to play a game with you that is his responsibility, but your place is to believe that he hears. That's how you know he hears. You get up from your prayer time knowing that he hears. If you say to me, but aren't the Reese Howells' and the C.T. Studd's and the George Muller's -- aren't they men who entered into very deep experiences of prayer that seemed to have more reality in them than that? No, there was no more reality in them than there is for the little guy or the little girl that kneels before God for the first time and believes that he exists. The reality is the same all the time; maybe a Muller or a C.T. Studd or a Reese Howells or some of these great saints were able to perceive more of what God was doing and

were able to understand more but there was no reality that was greater. They maybe saw the reality more clearly but the reality itself is the same all the way. If you say to me, is it necessary for me to have a certain feeling before God can answer my prayer? No. The Father answers prayer in accordance with his promises, he answers it whether you feel he has answered it or not.

If you say to me, but haven't some of these great saints been able to get up from their prayer time and say I know God -- yes, yes they have. At times they have been able to know it and certainly at times you will be able to know it, but that doesn't affect the reality of it. God will answer the prayer whether you know it or not if you fulfill the conditions; and so brothers and sisters in this age you know what an overwhelming power feelings have in this society. In this age when we are all the dupes of this feeling business, this existential experience, "how do you feel, how do you feel, how do you feel, I feel good today, I feel bad today," where we are all at the mercy of this 'feeling' thing, don't let it destroy prayer, which is the highest occupation that a human being can engage in. Don't let it destroy your prayer times, please; and don't get into that feeling thing, or that spiritualist thing, or that transcendental meditation thing, don't. Don't be like little cookie monsters, that's what we are; little cookie monsters, give me another cookie Lord, another cookie give me another nice feeling in my prayer time, another nice feeling like I had yesterday -- don't be a cookie monster, don't. Be a child of God that believes that God exists and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek after him and pray to him.

Now, Jesus gives us some directions and they're there in Mathew 6:6. And they are just very plain and not complex and not filled with ecclesiastical directions. "But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." That's it. Just be private; that's it. Just be private about it. Don't be full of talk with everybody else. "Oh! I prayed last night for my brother who is ill." Don't, that's none of their business, they are not going to answer the prayer. But too often in us there is a feeling that a prayer is a work of salvation and we feel, well I did my little prayer wheel turning last night and so I better let somebody know that I turned, so just in case God doesn't know and then maybe the thing will work, no. Loved ones be private; be private before the Father.

CS Lewis makes another point in that same autobiography. He talks about mastry; I don't know if you know the Anglo-Saxon word, mastry -- but it was connected up with the operation of the Druids and the pagan religion that was followed by the old Celts years ago; and it was the idea that you could gain 'mastry', mastery over the elemental spirits of the universe by working certain kinds of things in your spiritual life; by manipulating the powers of evil spiritually through doing certain things. In other words, it was really the belief in magic. It's strange how it runs through all of our lives. Do you remember as children we thought, oh if we didn't walk on the cracks of the sidewalk, it was in Ireland, maybe it would be okay; or, if you said "abracadabra" a certain way, maybe something would happen -- that whole belief that you could manipulate the spiritual powers of the world through the way you did things; I'd keep clear of that.

Keep clear of looking upon prayer as a work of salvation; that if you do it, then God will have to do something. So be private about your prayer life. You don't need to tell your wife or tell everybody else what great prayer times you have had, or how many hours you have spent on your knees in prayer; that's not their business. There is a time that will come in your life when you will stand alone; absolutely alone, you know that, you know. There is a time when you will stand alone. It doesn't matter how close you are to your Mum or Dad or your husband or wife or your friend or your brothers or sisters. There will come a time when you and I stand absolutely alone. We will be alone facing our God.

Now prayer is to be that time. Often we spoil the honest talk that we have done with God by gossiping about it to other people. And by that means we degrade it and we demean our God. Brothers and sisters, when you pray, go into a quiet private place and pray. If you say, isn't there a time for praying in public? Well you know that; we pray in public here. Isn't there a time for joining together in prayer times? Yes. But the prayer meetings gain their reality from you being alone privately with God. See, the Father looks down upon you and he knows fine well when you are doing it for the sake of everybody else around you seeing what a good Christian you are. He knows that. He knows when you are playing games and it bites into his heart. He knows when you appear at prayer meetings and how rarely you appear before him privately where nobody can see you.

So real prayer is going into a quiet place yourself and talking with God; and for most of us it really does mean, getting a time early in the morning or late at night when we can be quiet before God. Most of us are different; some of us can sit and watch television and almost pray. Some of us can listen to all kinds of stuff coming through our ears and can read with great concentration; others of us can't hear a door bang but our thoughts are distracted. You need to work that out for yourself; but generally, you need to get a quiet place where you can be alone with God and for most of us, that's been either early in the morning before everybody gets up in the house or the apartment wakens up or the dormitory, or very late at night when everybody has gone to sleep.

Often we find it's easier if we kneel down. Why? Because we are human beings and your physical posture influences the way your mind and your emotions operate and the way your spirit operates. And so often we find, when we kneel down it's the kind of thing we know we would do to the King of the Universe and we know it's the kind of attitude that we have towards him. So many of us find it is good to kneel down. You don't have to kneel down if you have sore knees, or you don't have to kneel down if you don't like kneeling. But often it's good to kneel down by your bedside at a time when everything is quiet. And then to begin to first of all state to God, "Lord God, I believe you exist and I believe that you are a rewarder of those who diligently seek after you. Lord I believe that you look upon me with favor because I am seeking you here tonight or here this morning. And Lord God I ask you to hear my prayers." And then loved ones, you just start being honest with God.

And if you are a person who isn't sure that God really does exist, or if you are a person who isn't sure where you are in relationship to God, then that's what you say. You don't go through a whole lot of gobbledygook and a whole lot of nicey-nice prayers. You start with God where you are in reality. And if you are not sure he exists then that's what you say; "Lord, I hardly even know I am sure that you exist. At times I think you do, but I don't know all the time; so, Lord I am coming to you as honestly as I can, and where I am not honest Lord, will you make me honest?" Or maybe you call him God or maybe you call him Jesus. You do whatever is real to you; but the beginning about real prayer is it's honest and plain and straight.

Now that's you remember, what Jesus said, if you look at Matthew 6:7, "And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words." No, you don't need to pray 'thee and thou' if you are not 16th century Englishmen; you don't need to pray that way. Or if that comes naturally to you and you feel because of your background, that is the way you refer to God, then you do it. But you don't engage in games; don't get caught in the, "Oh! I know the way Pastor prays or the way somebody else prays and I am going to pray the same." Don't do that loved ones; God doesn't want little monkeys imitating each other, he wants honest sons and daughters who have come to him as they are, and are plain and straight.

So, be real. If you say to me, do you need to pray out? Most of us at the beginning find that we concentrate better if we actually either speak the words quietly, kind of whisper them because it helps our minds to concentrate or if we mouth the words; most of us start at that level. It really isn't important. If your wife is sleeping just a few feet from you then I suppose you don't want to make any noise at all. But if there is nobody else in the room you can either pray aloud or you can whisper the words to God. Or if you get kind of embarrassed by even what you are praying – “who am I, saying these mighty and wonderful things?” then don't say it out loud, don't embarrass yourself, just let God hear and not even you yourself hear. But most of us find that it's good to start with thoughts. If you say to me, why make the big deal? Because there is a level of prayer where you could run out of thoughts, as there is a level of interrelationship in communion between two people where you operate above the level of thoughts. But most of us start at the level of thoughts and verbalize thoughts because thoughts normally form themselves in words even in our minds.

So begin by speaking to God. If you say to me, what do I talk to him about? You talk to him about what comes into your life as real. You don't get caught up with the business, well, now I know that should be an unselfish prayer, so let me pray for all the missionaries all over the world. Don't, if you don't really care about all the missionaries all over the world, don't pray about all the missionaries all over the world. If you say to me, oh, but I should care -- yeah, maybe you should, but God wants you to be real with him. And if you are all worried about your car then you pray to him about the car. But you be real with him, be honest with him and true with him. And if you said to me, how long do you pray, I would say, you pray as long as it is real to you at the beginning. If you can only pray for a minute then you pray for a minute. If you can pray for two you pray for two. If you can pray for 5 or 10 or 15 all I would say to you is, if you keep on doing it everyday you will get more at home with your God. You will get more at home with him, and his spirit will begin to move in you and prompt you to pray the right way; the way that he is able to hear you and he'll teach you that and your prayer times will grow in length. And you'll pray maybe for 15 minutes, maybe for half an hour, maybe for an hour, it's not really the time that matters it's the reality of it and the good manners of it. The good manners and the respect; and they involve regularity -- that's it.

If you make a commitment to the Lord, “Father I will see you every morning here at 5:30 at this bed,” then do that. Don't say, I will see you every morning at 5 o'clock and then you do it one day or two days and then you stop -- don't do that. Be mannerly, be respectful towards God, and show him that you really do believe that he is there. See that's the importance of that -- do you see that? You know, if you say to me, “Oh, now we are getting into legalism,” No, no. But if you believe he is there, if you believe that God exists and that there he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him, then you make a commitment to him and you know he will be there. And so, what you are involved in doing is saying, either I don't believe he is there or I ignore him even if he is there, that's beyond reality. So be real and regular, day after day. It doesn't matter how brief the time is or how long the time is, but just be ordinary and straight with him. If you say, “How do I know when to finish?” You finish when you finish. You finish when you feel you've said all that you should say. And if you say to me, “Can I get better at this?” Yes. I think God will teach you. But the important thing is to start where you are and to be real.

If you say to me, well, brother I don't know, I mean I like ejaculatory prayers, I kind of go out and as I am starting the car, I say “Oh Lord help me today.” Well, those prayers don't have much meaning unless you at least will give God some time each day, you see that? I mean, he reckons he has given you all of your life; and he is giving you the potential for all of eternity. He knows fine well that an ejaculatory prayer that is just thrown up like that has no respect or no meaning

or no value in it unless you have a set time where you respect him. In other words, if you pray it really does show that you believe God; that you believe God is there. Let's face it, isn't it plain straight? If you don't pray, it's all a big talk. If you really do believe there is a God, you bet your bottom dollar you'll want to talk to him. If I said to you, look here is Jesus, here is Jesus, you know you'd wait here for days; you'd do anything to see Jesus and to talk with him. Now God knows that. He knows that the final proof that you believe him and you believe he exists is that you start talking to him and if you don't talk to him, he knows it's all big talk on your part because faith proves itself in actions and he always knows that your actions are speaking so loudly that he can't hear what you are saying with your lips. If you really believe in God you will speak to him in prayer; and you'll meet him regularly.

So loved ones, I would encourage your hearts -- I didn't get as far today as I thought we would. But could I say to you first, will you start praying because you getting to know God is everything. That's what this Book says, this is eternal life, to know God and him whom he has sent even Jesus Christ -- and the only way you get to know a person is to begin talking with him. And the only way you can pray to God is if you believe that he exists and that he rewards those who diligently seek after him. So I would say to you first of all, what old Kennedy said, "Let's begin; let's begin." Will you begin today? Don't make it a prayer wheel turning thing; don't make it a work of salvation thing; don't make it, I am going to prove that I am a Christian thing, don't make it; I am going to get things from God by doing this little thing, don't, Just be straight.

You and I have been made by a great Creator; we are going to live with him forever. During these 70 years we owe him some time each day to speak with him and to talk with him and to get to know him; and that's where we start -- just begin there. So would you just pause for a minute and think, when could I do that each day? Let me just mention to you how much time you are going to spend these next days talking with people that you will not see next year. Do you know that most of the people you spend time talking with this next week you won't even know them in five years time? Most of them you won't even know in five years time. Now we are talking about talking to the person that you are going to be with throughout eternity. So will you pause just for a minute and think, when could I talk with God each day? Even for two minutes; when could I talk with God each day? Now, when we have a quiet time in a moment or two, will you seriously consider it? I would ask you seriously to consider. Would you seriously consider covenanting with God; that you will talk with him at that time each day for two minutes or five minutes or however long.

Now I ask you to seriously consider it because he who makes a vow to the Lord and breaks it will find that God will reject you from any real relationship with himself. If you just make vows and break them, he does not respond to that kind of playing around. So it's very important if you make the vow, to hold to it. So will you think of that now and what I would like to do is next Sunday try to deal with some of the other questions that come up in prayer that might help you. And so I'd like to begin to deal with why we ask God to do anything at all. All right, let us pray.

Father, we come now into your presence and Father we want to be real with you these moments, we recognize with our minds that you are the Creator of the world; that you made us and that we will spend forever with you. Lord God, you have commanded us to pray at all times and we are now facing that command and Lord we are now going to make our covenant with you as you have guided us during these few minutes and we are going to covenant with you as you have shown us we should. Now Lord, we ask you to meet each one of us according to our agreement to come to you in conversation every day. We ask you to begin to help us to know you and understand you. So that on the last day, we will be meeting a person whom we know and trust and not some unknown judge to whom we have never spoken. Now

the grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us now and evermore. Amen.