

## How to Pray

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

I thought it would be good today to talk simply about how to pray. Why? Because prayer is the whole point of what we talk about every Sunday here. Prayer is the whole purpose of creation. It's the whole purpose of our individual lives. This is because prayer is talking with God. It is communicating with the dear person who has made you. It's conversing with the kind Father who thought you up in the first place.

And that's why you are alive. You're not alive to get saved – though that's necessary. You're not alive to have your sins forgiven – though that's necessary. You're not here to help America achieve the goal of a zero-growth population. You're not here to help General Motors sell cars. You're here to enjoy friendship with the dear person who has made you. That's it -- honestly.

That's what prayer is. You're here to get to know your dear Maker and to love him and enjoy him, and for him to love you and enjoy you. That's the whole purpose of it all – honestly! You're not here to be used by God. That's not it! That's one of the things that can happen, but that's not the primary reason why you're here. That sounds like a holy thing to pray, and in certain circumstances it's right to pray it. But that isn't the primary purpose that you're here. You are not even here to redeem God's world and bring it back into control of his will. No! Those are lesser and secondary purposes. In fact, those lesser and secondary purposes are only methods that God uses to bring you into a close friendship with himself.

But believe me, the reason each dear face is here, and others who are reading this, are here, is to know your Maker and to love and enjoy him. You're not a pawn in God's hands, or in some mighty cosmic scheme! You're an end in yourself for God. You're not a means to achieve some other end. You're an end in yourself. God made you because he wanted to enjoy your company and your friendship.

You're not here to get a good education to get a good job to get married, to have children, so that they can get a good education and get a good job and get married, and they can have children, and they can get a good education, and get a good job, and get married, and have -- you're not! You're here because God knows you individually.

Do you know that there's no one like you in the whole world? Actually, there's no one like you yourself in the whole universe. There never has been. And there never will be. You are an absolutely unique person.

Deep down we all know that! It doesn't matter how society tries to classify us into groups by the tests that they give us. It doesn't matter how industrial and commercial society tries to make us into stereotyped robots. You know fine well that every one of us in this world, when we think quietly for a moment, knows that there is no one exactly like us. Even identical twins know that they aren't identical.

Now do you begin to see the importance of it? God made you unique because there's a love and enjoyment and friendship that he can have with you, that he cannot have with any other person who has ever lived, or who is living now, or who will live in the future. And that's why you are going to be missed by God if you don't enter into a communicating, loving friendship with him. You will be

missed by the great Maker who has created the universe.

There's a story of Sir Malcolm Sargent rehearsing Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in the Albert Hall in London with a huge orchestra. You know the tremendous sounds that come from a big orchestra during the production of that piece. At one point Sargent stopped the orchestra and pointed to the little guy at the back who hits the triangle, and he said, "You didn't come in on that note." The man thought, of course, that he wouldn't have been missed at all. How could a conductor in the midst of all the rest of the mighty instruments that were being played, hear that he hadn't come in?

Do you see that that's why Jesus said that every hair of your head is numbered? You know fine well Jesus isn't a kind of cliché kid, and he isn't casual and easy going. He isn't a generalizer in his statements. You knew Jesus speaks precisely what he intends to say. And he said that about you: "Every hair of your head is numbered." {Paraphrase of Luke 12:7}

And the fact is, your dear Maker is missing you at this very moment. His love is in some sense being frustrated and disappointed. And the amazing thing is, in some real sense, the purpose that he had in mind for the universe is being spoiled -- if you are not in a living friendship with him. That's why he made you. Jesus' disciple John said, "We have seen the life of God made manifest and we proclaim it to you so that you might have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with God and with his Son Jesus Christ." {Paraphrase of 1 John 1:1-3} And loved ones, that's why you are alive. You are alive to enjoy your Maker's friendship and his love, and to give him the enjoyment of your love. That's it.

Do you see why I say prayer is the point of it all? That's the whole purpose of it! The whole purpose of prayer is for you to fulfill the purpose for which God created you -- to enjoy him and for him to enjoy you.

You know, of course, what happens when two people get together in a close friendship. They just become more like each other the more they talk together, the more they walk together, and the more they experience together. Gradually the mannerisms of one begin to appear in the other. Gradually the attributes the one has begin to be planted in the other person. They just become more and more like one another.

They don't know it themselves. That's one of the beautiful things about it. It's an unself-conscious, natural, free experience of their respect and affection for one another. All the other people see it -- the husbands and wives who just look like brother and sister. We all see it. All the rest of us see in two people who are close friends, either two guys or two girls, how they begin to use the same phrases, some of them tell the same jokes, and begin to like the same things. They still remain individuals, but there is a great sharing of the richness in both of them.

Of course, in a deep, maturing friendship, that experience is so real that it seems as if the very life that flows through one person is beginning to flow through the other. And with God, you can see that that life is so much a part of himself that Jesus explained that it is his Spirit -- the Spirit of God. The closer you are to God and the more you have a relationship with him, the more his Spirit -- his very life -- begins to go through you, and you begin to see things in the same way that he does.

Now, Paul pointed out to us that that's the explanation of everything in the world. He said, "Listen! All things -- everything in your life, everything in the universe -- are working together

for good to them that love God, to them that are in a loving, friendly relationship with their Maker. Because those whom he has foreknown, he has conformed to the image of his Son. And so the good that all things work together for, is that they might be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren." {Paraphrase of Romans 8:28 - 29)

That's what's happening in every illness you have, and every little disaster you experience, and your financial state at the present, and your birth and your family background, your home and your job, and all the little things that will happen to you today. That's the explanation of all of them.

All of those things are working together to conform you to the image of the dearest friend that you can ever have, to make you like the person that you love -- so that we will be together in a perfect family of free-willed people who enjoy each other's life as it comes to us selflessly from Jesus. And that's why we are all here, loved ones. Everything in your life is working for that purpose. Everything that happens to you is working toward making you more and more like your dear Maker and your dear Father -- so that the next world will be a perfect world! So that there will be no arguments. There will be no disagreement. There will be a continuous progress in love and beauty and enjoyment and peace together. And that's what's happening to us day by day.

But it is like any other learning experience. If you don't have close contact with the instructor or the coach or the counselor, the journey through life becomes bewildering and disintegrating and seems like "a tale told by an idiot."

It's just the same on the ski slopes. Every time you fall without the instructor near to tell you what needs to be changed -- every fall on the ski slopes becomes a discouraging disappointment. Every hooked shot off the tee on the golf course becomes yet another miserable failure in your eyes. Every mistake at work becomes just another proof of your inadequacy. But -- put an instructor beside you, or a coach or a counselor, who can point out to you why that happened -- and suddenly the experience is transformed into something that makes you more perfect, and makes your life more successful, and improves your own personality.

It's the same in other areas of life. Without close daily contact with the dear person who has set the whole thing up in the first place, every bounced check becomes just another anxious worry for you. Every conflict with a dear friend becomes just another shattering mess that you have on your hands.

But if you begin to have daily contact with your dear Maker -- if you begin to have daily conversation with him -- suddenly you begin to see the bounced check in a different framework completely. You begin to see that it's an opportunity to reach out to Jesus, to begin to let him exercise some of his mighty faith in your life. The conflict with the personality becomes a message to you that there is some deeper place for you to enter into with Jesus on the cross where your bitterness and your resentment will be buried. Suddenly life begins to take on an orderly pattern.

You know fine well, that for many of us life isn't that! For many of us it's like walking through one of those halls of distorted mirrors. One makes you fat, one makes you thin, one makes you bend, and one cuts your head off. So often for many of us, walking through life is like that. We're being bounced like a ball on a pinball machine this way and that. This thing hits us today, and that thing hits us tomorrow. Life is becoming more and more distorted and more and more bewildering to us.

It will always be like that -- unless you have a dear Counselor beside you whom you talk to every day, who can begin to make some sense out of it for you. That's the whole point of prayer. Do you see that? That's why Jesus said, "I haven't called you servants. I've called you friends. Because a servant doesn't know what his Lord is doing. But I want you to know what your Lord is doing. I want you to know what God is working in all these things. He's not bringing them upon you. Other people cause them, the chaos of the world creates them -- but your Father is using them to make you more like himself." {Paraphrase of John 15:15} But to do that, loved ones, you need to be close to that dear Father. You need to be in daily communion with him. You need to begin to pray to him and know him.

So you can see, prayer isn't for getting things. That's ridiculous! That's a pagan idea of prayer. You CAN get things through prayer. God often gives answers to prayer. But that's not the point of prayer. It's a prostitution of friendship to say that! It's like saying that, "Friendship is just to get things from your friends." Well, that's not it.

Prayer is real friendship. Prayer is getting to know God, and him getting to know you better -- and you getting to understand the way his mind works, the things he thinks, and the things he cares about. The more you do that the more sense you begin to make of your own life, the more you begin to understand why certain things happen, and how they are changing you more into the kind of person and the kind of likeness that will be happy in the next world. Of course, it happens not only with your life, but it happens with your understanding of other people's lives.

Getting close to your dear Maker is like friendship between people. If we're friends with each other, you know what I think of certain things. I know what you think of things. If I know something about some sport that you don't, and I'm there as your friend, you know you'll understand all the things that I understand -- and it will be the same with you. If you understand football better than I do, then if I'm with you, you can explain to me what's happening and why it's happening.

So it is with God. The more you get to know him, the more you understand him and the more you can make sense of what's happening in other people's lives. That's what Jesus said. He said, "The life that comes from my Father to you in this friendship -- the Holy Spirit -- will tell you the things that are to come. You begin to understand what is going to happen in a person's life if they do this -- what's going to happen if they do that. You begin to see your own life through God's eyes, and you begin to see other people's lives through God's eyes." {Paraphrase of John 16:13-14}

Of course, you see what that does for intercession. It just transforms it. It's no longer this business of offering up about twenty--five different suggestions to God for what he might do for your daughter or your brother or your husband or your colleague at work. That's what we are doing. "Well Lord, I think they need this, and this, and this. Pick whichever one you want. But I'll give you a few suggestions." And we outline in detail -- almost in Technicolor -- because he's not too bright and he doesn't know these things!

Well, Jesus said, "Listen! Your heavenly Father knows what you need before you ask." {Paraphrase of Matthew 6:8} That's not the point of prayer! It's not to inform God what to do. It's for you to begin to see what God intends to do in this person's life and this situation. And then you can begin to thank him for it. So you begin to pray prayers of faith. A prayer of faith is a prayer of thanksgiving that you pray because you've been with God so closely and you understand life so much as he does that you know what he is going to do.

That's true with us. I know what my wife would like, and I know what she wouldn't like. The closer you are together, the more you can just think each other's thoughts. That's what happens with God. The more you begin to get to know him the more you realize what is happening in a dear daughter's life or a dear son's life or a dear relative's life, and the more you can begin to thank God for what you know he is doing. Of course, that brings a stream of peace and order into their lives and opens the spiritual way up for God to achieve in their life what he wants to achieve. But he cannot do it unless one of us gets the picture and thanks him for it. So intercession begins to have some sense to it.

How do you pray? Well, the first thing – it's a good step in any friendship -- is at least to acknowledge that the person exists. That will do wonders for your whole social life! The first step is to treat God as if he is really alive. One of the writers in the Bible said, "For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." (Hebrews 11:6)

In the morning, the first moment you awaken is the moment to say "good morning" to your dear Father. Do you realize that all through that night you have zoomed through thousands of miles of space on a spinning spaceship? This old sphere was spinning like mad, avoiding all kinds of hideous collisions which could have ended your life just like that. Don't you owe the pilot thanks?

So the first step is to be very simple and straight. Don't get all holy and pious about it. Don't get all religious. Just be very real and honest and say, "Good morning, Father. Thank you for taking care of this whole thing through this night. Thank you for the sleep I had, Lord. Thank you even for the dreams I had. Lord, whatever you want to interpret to me of those dreams -- that's good, and whatever not -- that's good too. But Lord, I thank you for tonight's sleep. I thank you for the rest for my body. And even if it's been a restless night, I thank you, Father, that my performance today doesn't depend on the amount of rest I got last night, because you can give me rest whether I feel I have rest or not. I can receive this rest today by faith, not by feeling. So thank you Lord."

Then look outside and thank him for the way the weather is. Just be normal and natural. It's nothing spookier than that. No standing on your head. None of that stuff. No saying certain words. It's just a dear, honest friendship with the kind person who has made you.

But if you don't do that, do you see you are making yourself a pagan at that very moment? Faith is an awareness of reality. Lack of faith is a failure to perceive reality! When you get up out of that bed and you head for the toast and coffee without a word to the dear person who made everything, you are not being realistic! You are living a lie. You're a fool! Don't do that – because that brings your life immediately into deception and meaninglessness. Be real with your dear Maker.

Then the second thing is: don't slip out of faith into selfishness. Here's the way we do it. C.S. Lewis described it perfectly when he said something like this: "As I was worshipping God and realizing his worthship, and I was thanking him for the things he had given me and I was appreciating what he was like, suddenly I wondered, 'Am I really talking to God? And so I looked inside my own mind and emotions to see if I could see any sign there that I had really been in contact with God and I had really been worshipping him to see if I could feel his presence.'"

And then he says, "All I could see was the mental track left by the worship I had been involved in the moment before, and the worship that had ceased the moment I began to look in to see if it was there." Don't slip into selfishness. Don't slip into the game of trying to find out if you're really praying, really feeling God's presence. That's selfishness! When you kiss your loved ones you kiss

her because she is such a dear person. When you put your arms around a brother it's because you appreciate him. You don't look at your arm and ask, "Did you enjoy that?"

That is self—love. All of us know that every time an expression of love to another becomes primarily a source for your own enjoyment, you've stopped loving the other. And it's the same with God. The moment you begin to look in and introspect to see if you're worshipping God, that moment you're not worshipping God. You're introspecting. And what you'll see in there is your own face in the mirror. You won't see God, because you've stopped loving him at that moment.

Don't get into the business of, "Do I feel as if I'm praying. Do I feel as if God really heard me?" Stop that bluff. "Father, you've given me all the universe. You've given me health. You've given me work. You've given me Jesus on the cross to change my life. And now I want another little feeling that you're loving me. Give me a feeling that you're here listening to me." Stop that. That's not fair or realistic, and it doesn't work. It's deception and foolishness. Don't slip from faith into selfishness.

The third thing that I would suggest to you: read Psalm 1 the first day. Next day Psalm 2. Next -- Psalm 3 -- right through the Psalms. Read them. Read the first Psalm, and then go to God and say, "Lord, what part of your nature that I see in this Psalm are you going to make real in my life through the circumstances of the day?" Do that. That's the whole purpose of it. God wants you to know him better and he wants to transmit something of himself to you. So in that Psalm or that piece of scripture, God will set forth some quality or some attitude of himself.

Don't use it as God! But look away from what you have read, and close your eyes, and say, "Lord, that Psalm that I've just read -- here are some of the words of it. Lord, show me some of the ways that you set that forth in the Bible. I remember Jesus said this, and Elijah did this, and you did this with this other person. Lord, make me alive and aware today -- so that when this comes forth into my life or through somebody else's life I'll see it." That's it.

Prayer is your everyday life. Jesus said, "If my words abide in you, ask whatever you want and it will be done for you." (John 15:7) Loved ones that's true. It's only as you begin to perceive the beauties of God's nature through readings that you have in Scripture and that you pray to God and allow to become part of you during the day, that your friendship with God becomes real.

You know that yourselves. Every one of us who has a friend or who lives with a friend, knows that you have to come to a real harmonizing of your two lives together. It's just insulting if the other person just likes to hammer the toothpaste tube to death. And you like to roll it up neatly! It's just insulting for them to keep hammering it to death. And there are other things that are much worse than that. But we all know -- we harmonize with somebody that we love. We make our lives align with their wills -- if we truly love them.

And that's what it's like with God. But that's why we're all here. Don't say to yourselves, "I'm no good at praying." Then you're no good at living! You're not good at being -- because that's why we are here.

Don't worry if you don't pray the way somebody else prays -- that doesn't matter. But praying is being friendly with your dear Father in heaven who made you. It's allowing him to enjoy you and you to enjoy him. It isn't setting up little standards that you have to pray this long or that long. It's being real and praying to your dear God.

If you say to me, "Oh, I don't know what to say to him." You know fine well – you have tons of things to thank him for. You know that. That's all it is. It's being real with God, and talking with him, and getting to know him, and getting to know what he wants for you and for others. Believe me -- it will begin to make sense of your life. It makes sense of the most senseless things. You begin to understand what's happening to you. Life begins to move in peace, the way it's meant to be.