

## What is Prayer?

Romans 12:12d

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

If you sit back and you look, at all the things that we see around, as the cars and the dogs and the people and the vacations and the water skis and the boats and the motorbikes and the sky and the planes and all the teeming life that is around us, it's very easy to sit back and wonder, "What on earth is behind this whole thing?"

For about 11 or 12 years now, we here as a group have been studying the answer that is given to that in this book, particularly in a part of it called Romans. The answer that is given there is that behind all this that we see around us is a dear loving Father who has made it all.

The man who wrote this particular part of this book, the letter to the people who lived at Rome, Paul, said more than that. He said that this same dear loving Father is the one to whom you and I owe our existence -- and that He Himself has placed us here on this earth to show something of His character that nobody else can express but you. There's something of this Creator that you can express but no one else can express. You may remember that the first 11 chapters of that book of Romans, as it's called, is spent explaining how we human beings reacted to that plan that our Creator had for us, and also how He has got our lives back on track again. Then in the 12th chapter, it's God, really, speaking through Paul. God begins to explain to us the kinds of actions and thoughts and words that should fill our day-to-day lives in the light of this reality.

So that's the place we're at in this study. What kind of lives does the person who made us say that we are to live? You'll see what He said, loved ones, if you look at Romans 12:12c.

Romans 12:12c, "Rejoice in your hope. Be patient in tribulation", and then, "Be constant in prayer". So our Creator says, "Be constant in prayer". Pray all the time. I had hoped we'd talk about "Why pray?" this morning, but as far as I could get was, "What is prayer?" So maybe we should talk about that.

What is prayer? Prayer is talking with God, not talking at God. I think a lot of us have had that experience of somebody who started to talk TO us but they really talked AT us. We didn't feel for a minute that they were interested in us, ourselves. They just kept on babbling away. In fact, we kind of sensed that if we could have left a picture of ourselves there and moved away and got on with our lives, they would have kept on talking because they weren't interested in our reaction. They weren't interested in our response. They were utterly preoccupied with the things they were saying. Prayer is not that, loved ones.

That's the kind of thing that is mentioned by Jesus in Matthew. 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." The King James version has, "Do not use vain repetitions."

Now vain repetitions are the same as talking at God or what we talk about today as "saying our prayers." You remember our mom and dad used to say, "Now don't forget to say your prayers". It's saying our prayers. It's that tendency to think that praying is getting the words out of your mouth. As long as you got the words out of your mouth and you got the sentences said, then you prayed.

Actually it's a subtle kind of deception because, don't you agree, your mindset very easily becomes, "If I do this, God will answer me." It can then, very easily, slip into prayer as an act of righteousness which I do. "Now, I don't know how this works. I don't know whether He hears me or not, but it says you've to pray. Okay, I'll pray. So, I pray at God."

"I say the things. I get the things coming out of my mouth. I kind of feel okay, I've done it. Now it's up to Him to reward me for that." It's very easy to end up talking at God as if talking at Him -- irrespective of whether He is listening or hears me or not -- is a kind of meritorious act that makes it necessary for Him to respond and answer.

Now brothers and sisters, all I point out is it's not very different from the old Hindu, or the Buddhist, or the other loved ones in Eastern religions who turn the old prayer wheel. It has something of that element in it. "Now as long as I turn around the right petition -- okay, that's it off my shoulders. I've said that to God. Now it's up to Him to reward me for saying it."

Now loved ones, you know that, that kind of saying your prayers or talking at God becomes an insupportable burden. I mean, it just wears you down. Eventually you get fed up. You say to yourself, "Oh this is dumb. I mean, I am just going through the motions here." Now loved ones, praying is not praying at God. It's not talking at God. It's even more than praying to God, but at least it's praying to God.

Prayer is at least that. It's more than that, but it is at least praying to God. Now this kind of thing we should be interested in then when we go to prayer is the kind of thing that is mentioned by God in Hebrews, if you look at it.

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." In other words, the first thing we should think of when we start our prayer is, "Now, does God exist? Now, does He exist? Now let me think, does He exist? If He does, where is He at this moment? Who is He and what is He like?"

In other words loved ones, we need to start our prayers with thinking of the person we're speaking to. I know that sounds simple but that just transformed my prayer life. I was at seminary. I mean, it's stupid -- you should know all these things if you've been to seminary -- but I was at seminary, and yet I suddenly wakened up to the fact that I was just saying my prayers.

I never thought for a moment, "What is God doing? Is He asleep? Is He snoring? Can He hear me? Is He out for a walk? What is He doing? Is He looking at me? Can He see me? Can He really see me? Does He see the way my collar's crumpled up or does He see that I haven't shaved yet? Does He see me?"

Gradually, I began to think, "Now, does God exist. I believe He exists and I believe that He can see me at this moment. Now, what is He doing? Is He sitting with Jesus and are they looking down at the Coral Reef in Australia or are They looking at the Victoria Falls in Africa? What are they doing at this moment?"

Loved ones, the first step in prayer is to make sure you're praying to God by making sure that you're thinking of Him. In other words, it's a bit like the plane at the airport. You get on the plane. It takes off. You arrive in Washington. You drive to the White House. You see the White House. Then you go up the driveway. You go up the broad staircase and then, it's very reasonable

to believe that that dear guy in the oval office is the President, because you've gone through the necessary, sensible, reasonable actions to get to the President.

It's a little more difficult if I say to you, "The President of the United States is here!" "Yet no, he shouldn't be here. I mean what's he doing in our service? No, now that probably isn't him. It's probably an imitation." Do you see there's something connected with having to go through the reasonable steps that prepare your mind and body to believe that that guy behind that desk is probably the President of the United States?

Even though the place you start there is you believe, don't you? You believe that he exists. You believe people that you can depend on -- maybe Billy Graham has seen him. Maybe Mother Teresa has seen him. You believe, maybe, if his own son says, "Now he is in the oval office." You believe their evidence, but then you act on that belief. You take the plane to Washington. You take the taxi to the White House. You go up the driveway. You get in. You go up the wide staircase. You get into the oval office, and it's reasonable to believe that yeah, he is the President of the United States.

Now it's the same in prayer. It's necessary first of all, to meditate upon the evidence that we have that He exists. You should start your prayer times with the evidence that is available in this dear book, evidence given by different men and women over the years that this God really does exist -- experiences they've had with Him. Maybe you read a part of the history in the Old Testament. Or maybe you read some of the words of His very own Son that He has spoken about His Father. But, you meditate on that and you bolster your own intellectual belief that this God does really exist. Then, you begin to take the necessary steps to approach Him.

You set aside a fixed time, a special time of the day. You set aside a quiet room. You get the quietest part of the day for you and then you close your eyes and you close your ears -- as far as you're able -- because you're about to speak to the Uncreated Being that made all the created things around us. So you first close out all the created things and then you kneel down on your knees because you want your body to do everything it can to reinforce the belief of your mind that you're speaking to the King of kings.

In other words, you do the physical and mental actions that would normally be required to get into the presence of the Creator of the universe. You will your thoughts upon Him. You direct your thoughts to Him and you think about Him. Maybe you speak those thoughts in verbal terms. Maybe you speak them aloud -- but if your loved one is sleeping in the bed then you can't without awakening her or without awakening the children. So at times, no, you don't speak. You just have the thoughts and you mouth them. Some of them just start by mouthing the words.

Some of us are able then just to think the thoughts to Him and to begin to think how good He has been to us; to thank Him for what He is and the gifts He has given us; to thank Him for the kind of person He is; to thank Him that He is not like Hitler -- that He is like Jesus -- and to tell Him how glad we are of that. That's the normal way, loved ones, to begin to come into a sense of God's presence.

Now, do you see there are a couple of important reasons in that whole outline that I have shared with you that show why our prayer times are often simply journeys into our unconscious? Many of our prayer times are just journeys into our subconscious. They're just introspective meditation and meandering. Here's the first reason: we think that the casual thought and the casual belief in

God's existence is the same as entering His presence.

In other words, I believe Reagan's in the White House. I believe he is probably in the oval office tomorrow on a working day. I believe that. That doesn't bring me into his presence. Faith is not a mental belief. Faith is action on the basis of that. Faith is going down, getting the plane at the airport, taking off, getting the taxi at Washington, going to the White House, going up the staircase and going into the oval office.

Faith is action based on belief. So loved ones, praying to God is an exercise of faith. It's taking the mental and physical actions that are needed to come into His presence. So, coming into God's presence, praying to Him, is not the same as casual thought. I think too many of us are sitting -- you know we're so casual in our day, aren't we? We're just very casual and very informal. It's all right until we come into the presence of royalty. Then, we kind of freeze because, "How do you behave in their presence?" It's the same with God.

It's very easy to just sit there and say, "Oh well, yeah, I thought of God. Okay, Lord I am going to talk to You." Some of the books that have come out have encouraged that. Yet, you can see that our whole mental and physical being has to be orientated towards God. It's just natural that we do that. If God is really the Creator of the whole universe, then there are certain mental and physical actions that are needed and are appropriate if we're entering His presence. I think some of us have real trouble with sensing reality in prayer because we think that, "Oh, it's no big deal. It doesn't really matter much what we do."

We were at a conference in Devon where we spoke and where God moved in us through His Spirit. Then we were at the Harrogate Gift Show in connection with some of the products that we produced down below in the basement. While we were there, we went to York Minister Cathedral. York Minister was built in 1200 A.D. on a site of a wooden church that was built in 760 A.D. It is the very place where Constantine, in 300 A.D., was proclaimed emperor by his troops. It goes right back, almost, to Jesus' own day. While at York Minister, Myron, my wife and I went to "Matins" they call it, or morning prayer. It's interesting because you go through this massive gothic door and then into the beautiful cathedral. As you go down those echoing flagstones to a little chapel, you see the clergy, or the priests, dressed in their robes. Gradually of course, your whole mind becomes very aware, "We are going to do important business here. We are going in to see Someone who is important."

So brothers and sisters, I think sometimes we make praying to God difficult because we mistake faith for the simple thought that God exists and the belief that He exists. We're so informal in our day that we don't realize there are certain mental and physical actions that help our personalities to communicate with God so that gradually, His Spirit can transform the purely mental and physical actions into Spirit communion.

In other words, ritual is not all bluff. Why do we have weddings? Why are you very reluctant simply to look around at one another and say, "Okay. We're married." I mean why would you? Even if you don't want a big wedding, you'll come to me and you'll say, "Well Pastor, could we do it in your study then?" Someone has to do it. Of course, it's because there's a whole orientation of the personality that takes time. It's important to symbolize that, not just so that others will understand, but so that we ourselves will fully appreciate what we're doing.

So it is, loved ones, in prayer. I do think that this casual business of an ejaculatory prayer, as

we're hitting the freeway, does nothing. No wonder it is just a mental reflection. We do not give our personalities half a chance to get into the presence of the King of the universe as we give them more than half a chance to get into the presence of just the President of the United States. So praying to God is that.

There's another reason why our prayer is often so unsatisfying. It is built into the example we used. You're in the oval office, suddenly your eyes go glassy and you look as if you're not even conscious that Ronald Reagan is there. He says to you, "Are you okay?" You say, "Oh sure, Mr. President. I am just trying to feel your presence." He says, "Well, you certainly won't feel it that way because you're not even looking at me! You're not even thinking of me! You're all wrapped up in what you're feeling." Loved ones, do you see that you can't do two things at once?

You can't speak to the President and at the same time feel you're speaking to the President. You either speak to the President or you concentrate on introspecting into your own feelings. It's the same with praying to God. You're either speaking to Him, in which case, you're utterly indifferent and unaware of what you're feeling yourself -- or you're all wrapped up in your own feelings. You're saying, "Do I really feel I am in God's presence? Do I really feel I am praying to Him?" In which case you can be sure of one thing: you're not praying to Him. You're just looking in on your own feelings.

C.S. Lewis is good. In a part of his biography, "Surprised by Joy", he writes of some of his own problems in concentrating on deciding, "Am I really realizing a spirit of guilt here? Am I really realizing a spirit of thankfulness?" He says for years as a school boy, his prayers used to fall apart because he was always concerned, "Did I really pray that prayer? Did I really really pray it the way I prayed it yesterday? Do I really feel guilt?" He said eventually, he realized, this was just a game he was playing, trying to realize a prayer. "Realizing a prayer has nothing to do with praying. Praying is acting physically and mentally in accordance with what you know to be true and not looking at yourself in driving mirror to see how you're doing it." Then he gets on to what we've just been talking about. He says he eventually saw that, "The surest way of spoiling a pleasure was to start examining your satisfaction. But if so, it followed that all introspection is in one respect misleading. In introspection, we try to look inside ourselves and see what is going on. But nearly everything that was going on a moment before is stopped by the very act of our turning to look at it." Do you see that?

The moment you turn in and look at yourself, that moment you ceased to do what you were doing before you looked in. So when you look in, of course all you see is yourself looking back at yourself. He says he always came up with one conclusion when you look in to see, "Do I feel the presence of God?" No, I don't feel the presence of God, there's no longer any sense of the presence of God because you've stopped looking at Him. There's just a sense of the presence of yourself.

"Nearly everything that was going on the moment before is stopped by the very act of our turning to look at it." Unfortunately, this does not mean that introspection finds nothing. On the contrary, it finds precisely what is left behind by the suspension of our normal activities. What is left behind is mainly mental images and physical sensations. The great error is to mistake this mere sediment or track or by-product for the activities themselves." In fact he has a good term that he uses further down. He says, "When we look in to see if we're feeling the presence of God, all we see is the mental track that our sense of the presence of God has left in our memories." Isn't that interesting?

So loved ones, when you're praying to God, it's something that takes up your whole being. You give your whole self to it. I would argue, you know, even for the old bending of the knee. There is something to it. Give yourself the best chance possible. That's what we'd do if Jesus were to manifest Himself here physically -- you know we'd all get down on our knees.

So give yourself the best possible chance. Set aside a time, a fixed time each day that you observe. See, that's the first place we make it difficult for ourselves. We set a time. We say, "We'll see You at five o'clock, Lord." Certain. 5:30 -- we're still in bed. Right there, we're working against our own faith because we've broken our vow -- to our friend? To our mother? To our brother? To our teacher? To our boss? To the President of the United States? No! To the King of the universe! Satan is immediately attacking us saying, "You don't really believe He is there. If you did..." So set a time aside and keep to it.

Have a quiet room where you can speak to Him or a quiet place. Get down on your knees and close your eyes and close your ears and direct your thoughts to God and think, "Now what is He thinking at this moment? What is He like?" Then begin to thank Him for the things that He has given you and for Himself. That's the first step in coming into God's presence.

Now, the point is that praying to God is not really all that prayer is. A lot of us do this kind of thing: "Well Lord, I have a list of petitions here that I would like to lecture You about. Now my mother needs some help. She has had some physical difficulties. Now, I also have problems in my finances and I'd like You to help me with those. Then, I think I'd like You to get me some guidance..." We just go on and on. You can kind of imagine God is supposed to be walking along like a stenographer taking it down!

It's just unreal because we are not gods! He is God and we're the ones that take down the notes. So, speaking to God is not just what prayer is. Prayer is not just talking at God. It's not just talking to God. It's talking with God. It's speaking with God and then giving God opportunity to speak back. That's the point that is mentioned in that great verse that many of us know.

Isaiah 40:31, "But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary. they shall walk and not faint." Maybe the King James English is even better because it runs, "Those who wait upon the Lord." Prayer is certainly speaking your thoughts or talking your thoughts to God -- but then it is waiting upon God and giving Him an opportunity to speak back to you. Waiting upon Him really means that.

It means waiting with your mind and your thoughts intent upon Him. It doesn't mean waiting with a passive or a blank mind the way the Transcendental Meditation people do. It means waiting. "Thou will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee." It means setting your mind and your thoughts upon God and watching for the lightest and slightest move that He makes.

"Waiting upon Him" the way servants wait upon a king. "Waiting upon Him" to see if His eye turns a little one way or the other if He wants anything. It means waiting upon Him like that. We joke a lot about "taking time to smell the roses". Sometimes, our little dog seems to be the only one among us that has time to smell the roses. Little animals are great. They really enjoy life and take time to enjoy it. We talk about the need to do that. But really a greater need is for us to have some quietness in our lives.

Honestly loved ones, I think a lot of us get into mental and emotional problems because there's no

quietness in our lives. There's just no quietness. I don't know if you've thought of our services, but I think it's very important in the prayer times that there be a time of quietness where we don't feel we have to fill it with noise.

It's surprising in our modern worship, how little quietness there is. It's surprising in our own lives how little quietness there is, just peace. Then something happens when you get before your God and you say, "Lord, I have this hour to give to You and You only. I will talk to You as best I can in this first half hour and then Lord, the second half hour I will wait upon You. I will wait for You to say if You want to say something, and if You don't want to say anything, I'll be here Lord. I'll wait upon You. I'll put my mind and my thoughts upon You."

Loved ones, there's a healing power and a strength that comes when you make provision for God to begin to speak back to you. If you say to me, "Oh, will I hear a verbal voice?" Maybe not. Maybe sometimes you will. Maybe sometimes your thoughts will be rearranged so that you begin to sense what God is thinking. Maybe it will be afterwards when you get up. You'll just get up and that thought will strike you, "Oh, that's what I should do."

Maybe it'll be later on even when you're reading a book and a line will come home and it'll be like God saying, "This is true for you." It'll only come if we make provision for this Creator of ours to speak to us. Do you see, brothers and sisters, one of our problems is we're so active and so busy that we have grown big in our own eyes? We think that there's no action outside ours. That's why we can't hear God. We're so busy with our own noises. That's why we can't experience God acting upon us. We're so busy with our acting that we can't sense whether He is acting or not.

That's one of the beautiful things about real love. When you really are in love with someone -- whether your son or your daughter, your mom or your dad or your husband or wife or your boyfriend or your girlfriend -- it is so nice, isn't it, when you can have those moments when you just sit with each other, and you just look at each other, and you don't do anything -- and it's then that you sense the slightest move on the part of either person would be experienced by the other one? Now that's what prayer is. It's talking with God. You and I can just take some sensible steps to do that.

So I would encourage you -- whether you are Christian or not, wherever you think you are in regard to God -- to set some time aside. Start with some short time -- with 10 minutes or 15 minutes. What about setting aside a definite time -- same time each day? Not this kind of thing, "Lord, see You at 6:00 tomorrow. I can't see You at 6:00 tomorrow because at 6:00 the next day I've something else to do. I'll change it the next day" -- not that kind of stuff because that's unreal. That's not belief. You know you don't treat God that way. He knows fine well you don't treat Him that way. He knows all your bluff. You're bluffing there. You're worshipping an idol that you think you can fiddle around with. So don't treat Him that way. Set aside a fixed time each day which you will give to Him and then hold to that. Give your personality half a chance to believe what you really do believe, in your heart. That there is a Creator who has made you and that He loves you. He is more than anxious to talk with you each day.

So brothers and sisters, will you consider it? I'd love to ask if you'd raise your hand if you have a quiet time or a prayer time, but I won't do it because it is kind of embarrassing. But think, would you put your hand up or would you not?

Then I'd say to you, "Well, do you sense any need for guidance or direction in your life? Do you

sense any need for peace in your life?" Well loved ones, why not start there? Why not start with praying to God, with talking with your Maker?

Let us pray.

Dear Father, we thank You for all the things that we have in this society of ours, but we do realize Lord that we're a kind of informal bunch. We have often treated You in an off-hand, casual manner. We know Lord, that the Queen of England wouldn't let us get away with it. The President of the United States wouldn't let us get away with it. They would see immediately that we have no respect for them. Lord God, we know that You are even more important than them and You will not let us get away with treating You as some kind of servant or slave or office boy.

So Lord, we do ask forgiveness for any casual manner in our attitude to this business of praying. Lord, we intend to set that important part of our lives in order. We intend Father, to set aside some time that we will hold to each day of our lives which we will give to You. Lord, You are the One we're going to meet after this world is over. You're going to be the only One that is of any importance at that time. We intend to begin to get to know You now while we still have time.

So Lord, we pray for each other now. Father, we would pray that You'd help each one of us here to start tomorrow, Monday, and have a quiet time -- a prayer time when we can read a little bit of the evidence about You in the scriptures. Then when we can speak to You, and then where we can give You some time to speak to us. Lord, thank You for the privilege. Thank You for being so good and kind and forbearing with us. Thank You for being there, ready to hear us. Thank You Lord. Amen.