

The Key to Prayer 1: Talking to God

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

If you don't talk to God yourself then you are really kind of wasting your time coming to church. Do you see that? Because the whole purpose of church and religion and faith and all this stuff is that you yourself would talk to God personally. And if you don't talk to him, loved ones, we are just filling in time here; you really are, because these years are going to pass very fast and its questionable how many of us will even know each other when the moment of your death comes. And yet, it's at the moment of your death that you are going to meet the Maker who made you. And you need to know him before that time comes. So sooner or later you'll have to do it. And if you never address him personally, if you never speak to him personally before that day then don't you see that you will just meet a judge on that day who doesn't know you at all -- and you will presumably meet a judge whom you have not been pleasing at all, all through your life. So, you are going to meet at that day, an unknown God; unknown to you, who will have no alternative but to say, "I never knew you; depart from me into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

That's the bottom line brothers and sisters, and you have to see that, you know. It is just vital that you see it. If you don't see it, it doesn't matter how nice you are to me here or how nice I am to you here, we are just a lot of clowns, because we are not helping each other at all. The whole purpose of being together here for just an hour is not so that you can get a little bit of a lift to help you through the week. Really, if you went to a funny movie, that might give you a lift too, in some ways a better lift -- or if you went out on to the lake and just sailed around or swam around, you might get a kind of refreshing. But the only reason for us being here today is so that you yourself will go on from here and will begin to speak to God. That's the whole purpose of it, what I am trying to do is, I am trying to say, look in here, and you know its not really in here; but that's the symbolism of that chancel; in here is God -- and I am telling you about him, I am telling you the kind of person he is, and I am suggesting even some ways in which you can approach him, but that's the whole purpose of it.

I am here to introduce you to God; and if you don't go through to him, don't you see that all you are receiving from another human being like you is information and knowledge. So brothers and sisters, it doesn't matter where you think you are in regard to Jesus or Christianity. What I am saying to you this morning is if you don't speak to God yourself in whatever simplistic way you may think it is; you'll never get to know him. You may think, Pastor, I am dumb as regards these things. I have no idea how to pray. When I hear other people praying, I don't even know the words to use; I don't know even how to juggle my thoughts around. Loved ones, it doesn't matter how foolish you feel about it you have to go through to God in your own way as best you can. And would you realize this: he knows you. I mean, we don't all know you, we don't all understand you, even your mom or dad doesn't understand you but your God made you, he knows you.

You may say I am stupid about these things. I haven't thought much about them, I don't know how to deal with it -- but he knows that, your God knows you. He knows you and he understands you and he will be understanding to you. You might say I can't do the things that other people do to make him real; you don't make him real, that's not your job. Your job is to close your eyes and to speak to darkness; that's it. Just speak to darkness, that's what faith is. It's speaking to darkness; it's closing your eyes and speaking to darkness. And if you are like the little child that says oh, there is nobody in the world because I can't see anybody. Okay just say that, there is nobody, I can see

nobody. Alright, but speak, speak to God in the darkness; that's where we all start. And I think that's one of the errors that we make, or one of the traps you and I fall into. We think when we close our eyes that everybody else has some wonderful feeling. And so, maybe you've tried it and you've closed your eyes, maybe you went home a couple of Sundays ago and you closed your eyes and nothing. I mean, if I half opened them, then I can see kind of, light through my eyelids but I can't see very much. And you wonder well, surely there is something, surely in spite of what we said two Sundays ago, maybe you think surely I should see something, I should feel something. I'll close my eyes and surely God will give a little signal of some kind -- no, no, he won't necessarily. He won't necessarily give you any kind of signal. He reckons, look, I've overwhelmed you with signals, look at that ceiling up there, that sky that I gave you, look at the storm that I brought yesterday, look at the rainbow -- I've given you all kind of signs. Look I've been giving you signs for years; no, you are not due yet another signal from me. I want you to close your eyes and I want you to speak to me.

And loved ones I feel so for you in one way and yet in another way you know we are all in the same boat. I feel for those men here who -- really its not only the men, some of you ladies are just as pragmatic and practical and commonsensical and earthy as us men but often we men feel we are not really good at this stuff. We are not very good at this mystical stuff or this emotional stuff. Loved ones, you don't need emotion and you don't need mystical stuff to pray; you just don't. I would point you back to that verse that was started at a couple of Sundays ago. 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." So you do have to do that, you see. It means for whoever would draw near to God, whoever wants to come near to God in prayer, you first must believe that he exists and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him; so you do have to believe, you have to believe that he exists.

Now you may say what if I don't even believe that he exists? God is so gracious, even if you go to him like that and say Lord, "I hardly even believe that you exist but I know that I need to in some way try to contact you." But that's what faith is. And you remember two Sundays ago I shared with you the agonies that C.S. Lewis got himself into through being preoccupied with what he was feeling and what he was sensing inside. And you remember how he used to pray a prayer and then suddenly look in on himself and say, "Did I realize that prayer, did I really realize that prayer, did I realize that prayer, that is, did I make it as real as I did two weeks ago?" And he said prayer became an agony for me. It became something I wanted to avoid because I would pray a prayer then I would look in to see if it was real and it wouldn't seem real and so I kept on torturing myself with this eternal introspecting -- don't do that. The one thing you can be sure of when you look into yourself to see if you can sense the presence of God is that you have stopped worshipping him; because you are not looking at him anymore, you are looking at yourself. And so, all you'll see is yourself looking at yourself. So you pray a prayer, and then you have a look to see, have I really got the presence of God? And what you see when you look at yourself, is yourself looking at yourself to see if you have got the presence of God.

And you always come up with the same miserable torturing answer: I am not sensing the presence of God. Well of course you are not; all you are sensing is your own presence because you are looking in at yourself. Loved ones, prayer is not introspecting; it is not having a mystical experience, or having a certain feeling of the presence of God. If you say to me but brother, don't you sense the presence of God at times? Yeah, at times; but thousands of times I don't sense the presence of God. And you remember, I shared with you on the whole phone thing; you call that person out there -- if you are at work you call up somebody and you don't say to yourself, ah, I feel your presence right

here. I feel, no, no, I don't feel it enough yet so I can't speak, no wait, wait I have to feel it. Let me feel your -- yeah, I feel now I can talk. You don't. Even though its only old Bell telephone and they are not always reliable and they are certainly not as reliable as God has been for centuries raising the sun every morning, yet you do put your faith in the system and you talk to the person whether you can feel that the other person is at the other end or not. And I can tell you it's even worse on transatlantic calls where you are very uncertain who is at the other end but you keep calling them. I have a little fax machine, it faxes documents from one country to another and I pop the letter in that and I hit the button and it disappears into my machine and comes out the other end. And I have absolute confidence that Myron has got it in London and yet I haven't seen him there. So loved ones, we are not requiring something ridiculous of ourselves when we say you need to have to faith to pray to God. Even when you don't feel his presence, all you need is faith to believe that he exists.

Now if you say to me yes, but shouldn't you speak to him in a certain way, aren't there forms for speaking to him? Shouldn't I call him Thou or Thee or shouldn't I call him Our Father or, there are certain ways to do it? No, there aren't. Don't you see that that's getting into magic? That's getting into magic. Magic is the belief that you can work the elemental spirits of the universe to do your bidding if you manipulate them in a certain way. That's the difference between Christians and Pagans. Pagans are always trying to manipulate the evil spirits of the universe by all kinds of magic. Christians don't deal with the elemental spirits of the universe. They deal with their God and faith. No, you don't have to manipulate God. You don't have to do certain things to conjure him up; that's not right, that's going back to the yellow brick road, its going back to the Wizard of Oz, its going back to all the magician stories you have heard of, where the magician conjures up the evil spirit, you don't do that loved ones. You just have to believe that God is; and you have to speak to him in honesty from your heart.

And that's how to pray. You just have to be real. You know that our generation is preoccupied with one thing; I mean it is sickening, the extent to which we are preoccupied with this one thing. We are preoccupied with, what's in this for me, what's in this for me? What am I getting out of this? You know loved ones that's what's causing the break up of the society. None of us will do anything now -- we won't go to a movie, we won't go anywhere unless we are getting something out of it for me -- we won't do anything unless we are getting something out of it for me. And do you see that's what tends to dominate our attitude to prayer. With due respect to you, you know that's the way we tend to think of Church, that's wrong. We tend to say, what am I getting out of this? And you know our old great grandparents and so forth, they went to some miserable -- what we would call miserable churches. When the old guy was blasting away, they are boring them to tears but they would be there, Sunday after Sunday because they were utterly convinced that you went to church to realize the worship of God and to honor the worth of God and that's what worshipping meant.

And brothers and sisters, our generation is overwhelmed with the desire to get something out of a thing; and see, that's what you have to watch out for in prayer. Because you will close your eyes at times and you will speak to God and your dear old mind is brainwashed and programmed by our education, by our television, by our books, by the way everybody is talking. And we immediately think, was that a good prayer time? And the last thing we mean is, did God hear our prayer? The first thing we mean is, did I really enjoy myself in that prayer time? Did I get something out of it? Did I get something from God? Brothers and sisters, that's not praying you see. That's looking -- as we said two weeks ago, for another little cookie, "I am a cookie monster, I want little cookies Lord, give me a cookie, another sense of your presence, another feeling of joy or delight, give me another little nibble of happiness." No, brothers and sisters, praying is believing that God

exists and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him. It's speaking to him and believing that he hears you and that he will respond to you, that's what prayer is. So it's nothing to do with introspecting or "I feel I feel a feeling that I feel I felt before." Or looking in and seeing how you are enjoying it. It's nothing to do with that. Prayer is believing that God is there and praying. That's it, that's just it.

You go over to the faucet, hot faucet, you turn it on, you don't say, I feel I am going to get hot water out of that faucet, I feel it. You don't. You turn the faucet on, you stand there and you wait for the hot water to come because it will come. That's what you do. In all of our lives, from turning the key in the ignition of the car to everything else we do, we believe we have faith that the thing is going to respond as we have observed it to respond in past days. So it is with God.

Prayer is believing that God is. Now that's why Jesus gave us the advice that he did in Matthew 6:6, and you remember we talked about this a little last day. "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." And that's it. It's not a work of salvation, it's not something that you quote to somebody else to show them what a great pray-er you are and how very holy you are. Nor is it something that you quote to somebody else to try to put a half nelson on God by exposing them. "Now I prayed for this and I am trusting the Lord will answer me." And you hope maybe the Lord is listening to you as you witness that to somebody else. That's not what it is. It's you going into your prayer room in secret and the Lord who sees you in secret will reward you and he will reward you openly.

Prayer is something between you and God; it's just something between you and him. And in a way, the more private and the more secret it is, in a way the more real it is; and I don't know if you're caught -- I suppose if you are not a Christian you are not caught in this, but some of those of us who call ourselves Christians are more intent on our reputation in everybody else's eyes than we are in our reputation in God's eyes. And so, we are all preoccupied with telling, how we prayed this morning; "well in deep prayer this morning I got this from the Lord." And we are intent on making an impression on other people as to how spiritual we are. Loved ones, prayer is just your private conversation with the Father. It's just you and God, it's just going in privately to God and praying and the more private and the more secret it is, the more efficacious and the more realistic it is. Prayer is you and God. Somebody has said, "Prayer is the soul's sincere desire, uttered or unexpressed." It's what you really want. It's you expressing that to God himself. So prayer is a private thing.

There is an interesting statement that Jesus makes in the next verse; and it creates a problem in many of our minds. It's Mathew 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. Do not be like them," Why? "For your Father knows what you need before you ask him." "For your Father knows what you need before you ask him." And many of us say, well, then why bother, what's all this about? Why ask him, why all this agony about prayer if God knows already; because that's what Jesus says. And sometimes -- I don't know about you, but sometimes I've thought that at times I have tried to explain the thing in such detail to God that it almost seemed as if he wasn't bright enough to understand it and so I had to outline it to him in Technicolor -- and in fact, God does know what we need before we ask him, then why ask him? Why do you ask God for a thing if he knows already that you need it? If you, yourself are in financial difficulties God knows that already and he knows exactly what you need in that situation. He knows whether you need money or he knows whether you need wisdom as to how to rearrange your affairs. If you need a job, God knows that already. He knows which job you need, he

knows what kind of environment you need to work in. If he sees your mother who is dying of cancer, he knows that already before you ask him, he knows exactly what she needs in her situation. Then why do we ask God?

Loved ones, it's just vitally important that you see this. It's because of Genesis 2:16, "And the Lord God commanded the man saying, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.'" And there in 16, "And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden.'" That's the greatest principle next to God's love and it's really a part of God's love that exists in our universe, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden," that's God saying to us, you may do what you want. If you say, but he -- in the next verse said, "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat of it lest you die," yes but that's a command that you'd only give if a people had free will to disobey it. You wouldn't bother giving a command to a person who had to obey you; you only give a command to a person who can disobey you. The greatest principle in our universe besides God's love, and its really part of God's love, is our free will. You can do what you want; you know you can, because you have done it, you can do what you want.

I remember somebody saying about some people who had kind of got out of the way of God's life and will for them, they said oh, such a great relief and he said yeah, it's a great relief for them to find out that God will let them do what they want even if it means their destruction. And the fact is that God has given us free wills, he's given us free wills. And if you say to me, well now what has that to do with the original question, why ask God for things that he knows we need already? Because, and this is startling, it's very humbling, because we are such little fleas compared with God and his greatness. God will not act apart from your free will; that's unbelievable. He can't act against his own will, but he refuses to act apart from your will. It's incredible; I mean even if you are going to kill his Son, he will not send angels down to stop you. God refuses to act apart from your will; in other words, God can look down on your life and he can see exactly what your life needs but he will not act unless you see that yourself and are willing for him to do it, that's right. It's unbelievable that God would respect our free wills. We hardly respect ourselves that much, we don't think that much of ourselves; but God so respects your free will that he refuses to act apart from your free will. And even though he sees what your life needs at this moment, he will not operate independent of you, he will not operate over and above you, he will not come in as an overdrive across the top of your life and do something against your free will, he will not act apart from your free will.

Now if you say to me, but isn't it true that there are some unconditional gifts that he gives all of us quite apart from the exercise of our free will? Yes, there are all the gifts of common grace. He has given us through common grace, rain; the rain rains on the just and the unjust. God graciously gives to us natural life and he gives us all the energy to keep our hearts beating and to enable us to eat food and to enable us to survive so that we may have an opportunity to freely submit our wills to him. So he does give the gifts of common grace to all men and women whether they submit to him or not; but in the area of coming to know him, in the area of submitting to him, in the area of our eternal destiny or our entering the next life which is the real life that he has for us, he is utterly subject to our free wills. And so do you see that even though God knows what you need in your life, he will not bring it about unless you see it too and ask him to do it -- that's it. So, God knows what you need before you ask him, but he is only free to bring that about in your life when you ask him.

If you say to me, do you mean that I -- little flea that I am, can stand up and with my hand hold back the eternal power of the universe? Yes, for seventy years you can do that; or maybe by strength, you can do it for eighty years. For eighty years -- ninety years at the most, you can hold back the power of the universe. After that, he has designed that you will then cease to have that freedom and he will rearrange the whole universe as he originally intended; with those of us who during our seventy or eighty or ninety years have freely submitted our wills to him. But at this point in your life you can; yes, you can. And if you ever question it, you think of your dad or your mom or some good dad or mom that you can think of, or some dear uncle or aunt, you think of them; you know how often they knew what was best for you, you know that. But they could not do it until you wanted it also; and you know how often dads and moms sat and prayed for us day after day, night after night, year after year and they could do nothing if we didn't want them to; that's the power you have over God. Your God knows what he has in mind for your life, he knows the plan that he has for it, but he cannot bring it about unless you ask him to bring it about.

This is stated loved ones, in a very plain and simple way in Ezekiel chapter 36:37. It's one of those important verses that reveals the whole key to what prayer is about and it deals with this whole important issue of us aligning our wills with God's before we can see him act. Ezekiel 36:37, "Thus says the Lord God: This also I will let the house of Israel ask me to do for them: to increase their men like a flock." And this was after the exile you remember. And the Israelites had been decimated and God looked down and he saw, if this nation of mine is to survive, they will need more people, there will have to be more people; they have to have more children born, otherwise they are going to die out and God saw that, he knew that. But he could not bring it about unless the Israelites prayed and asked him to do it. That's why he says, "Thus says the Lord God, this also I will let the house of Israel ask me to do for them; to increase their men like a flock." I will let them ask me to do that for them. I know that I should do it, I know it's what's needed and I will let them ask me to do that for them and when they ask me, then I am able to do it.

That's the same with you. That's the same with you. There are all kinds of things in your life that God wants, and that is best for you but he cannot bring them about and he will not bring them about unless you see them yourself, and ask him to do them for you, that's it.

And you know you may sit there and say, "Pastor, I can't believe that." Loved ones, that's it. That's it, you can hold up God. You can stop him and you can live your own life just as you want, you can. You can prevent God having his way in your life. And the only way in which he can have his way, is if you see it and you ask him to bring it about in you, that's right. If you say every little detail, yes, if you have a car that is in difficulties these days or you have a home situation that isn't satisfactory or you are wondering where you are going to live next year, or you are wondering what you are going to do with your life, or you are wondering about marriage. Every little thing; or your money, you haven't enough money to see you through this coming week, God has a definite will for every one of those details, but he cannot bring that about until you see it and you ask him. Because he refuses to act apart from your freewill, and I don't think you have any doubt in seeing why that is so. He doesn't want robots, he doesn't want a bunch of little know nothings that have just come to him because they couldn't do anything else. He doesn't want robots; he wants living human beings who walk into Heaven because they have submitted freely to their Father and they have chosen to love him of their own free wills and that's what makes Heaven possible.

So, loved ones, will you think about that? I mean it's overwhelming; but that's the key to prayer. God knows what he wants to do in your life but he can't do it until you ask him. Next Sunday I would like to talk a little bit about how to know what he wants to do in your life. Let's pray.

Dear Father, You know it's so hard for us to believe that you who made the Rocky Mountains and who made the Milky Way and who created the Theory of Relativity and the protons and the neutrons and all the particles that we have not yet discovered could be held to ransom by our little wills. Father, it's hard for us to believe that you care that much about our freedom and you care that much that we would come to be your willing friends. But Lord, we see the evidence of history and we know the evidence of our own lives and we can see that finally, we can act against your will if we want to.

Now Lord, we realize that there is only one who knows what we were made for. Our mothers don't know it, or our fathers, or our teachers. There is only one who knows why we were put on earth and what particular thing we have to achieve while we are here -- or what kind of person we have to be, and that's you Lord. So Father, we know that you have plans there for our lives that are the only plans that will work. And Lord, we would turn away from all these prayers that we fly like kites. We would turn away from all this turning of prayer wheels and this wanting our way and expressing our wishful thinking to you and Lord we tell you we want to know what you want for us. We want to know our Father what you want to do in these situations that we are facing, we want to know that Lord. Because that's the only final solution; and so we ask you as we begin to pray to you in faith this coming week, we ask you Father to begin to help us to see what you want for us. So Lord, we commit ourselves to speaking to you and to beginning to talk to you as a real person in real faith. And 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