

PRAYER AS INTERPERSONAL

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I. Prayer as interpersonal activity establishes the elements of prayer.

Prayer is talking to God, so it is verbal communication from one person to another, silent or oral. Talking to God includes whatever occurs in conversation: praise, thanksgiving, intercession, request, confession, promise, or just talking through thoughts and experiences. The interpersonal character of the act helps explain how our Lord could pray all night.

II. Prayer as interpersonal activity contrasts with practices that get confused with it or substituted for it.

Prayer differs from meditation or thinking out loud. Neither is it meditation as occurs in Eastern religions—the flight of the soul to God, the loss of individuality and self. Prayer is not the contemplation of deity or his wonderful attributes. It is not about him, but to him; so prayer is not merely a sense of awe.

Prayer does not mean communion, a sense of the actual presence of another person without direct interaction. Prayer means more than not feeling alone or directing non-verbal sentiments to God. We need not worry about not getting those sentiments worded well; the Spirit intercedes for us with “groanings” we cannot verbalize (Romans 8:26). The message will get through to our omniscient God.

Prayer is not introspection or self-examination. It is not something directed inward as if the object of interest is an aspect of our own selves or a spark within that participates with universal consciousness. The indwelling of the Spirit must not be confused with the religious notion of being part of the universal One. The closest thing to “the spark of the divine within” is the image of God in us, the interpersonal capacity we share with him.

Prayer is not recitation as if it were a magical mantra spoken into the air rather than into the hearer. Prayer expresses the self and addresses God. Meditation, communion, and introspection are good in themselves, but they do not belong to prayer because they do not take place between persons.

III. Prayer as interpersonal activity eliminates certain degenerate prayer patterns and concepts.

Remembering the interpersonal character of prayer helps correct weak prayer patterns like praying in vague generalities, praying infrequently, praying only in group situations, praying in vain repetition (Matthew 6:7), praying in archaic English or some special language; feeling a

need to use a special intonation or eloquent expression; using only memorized prayers, canned prayers, or read prayers; praying in the wrong direction, or trailing off into glossolalia. When people speak to other people, they do not face someone else or word their statements toward a third party. A preacher's prayer is not aimed at the congregation.

Not every prayer element needs to appear in each conversation. A prayer does not have to have a special structure or follow an outline. It does not call for eloquence or fluency, as if it were oratory for someone else (the audience) rather than for the One addressed. Oratory sounds more like performance than prayer. It addresses the wrong audience, concentrates on form more than content or purpose, and draws attention to self rather than God.

Interpersonal process includes choice by both persons. Prayer cannot be name-it-claim-it. God processes through his will the requests of his people: *"I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy"* (Exodus 33:19). He is not a genie in a lamp that people rub to get what they want. Such behavior reduces God to a non-person or makes him people's servant; God's will to choose falls out of the picture, and the one speaking to him perverts prayer into self-centeredness. Manipulation and coercion do not belong to any interpersonal process.

Personal will affects prayer requests that involve God's will and the will of third parties in the matter. If God respects the free will of his creatures, the fulfillment of a prayer about a third part depends on that person's heart too. We do not expect God to change people because we pray to him to change them if they do not want to change.

Prayer as interpersonal activity retains the existence of the one who prays and the Lord who hears. Prayer is talking to God—with all the possibilities that can involve.