

Why Should I Pray?

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The other Sunday, a friend of mine who is a pastor took an informal survey of his congregation during the homily. “How many of you struggle with your prayer life?” he asked. Every hand in this parish of nearly three hundred shot up! The priest admitted that prayer was his own greatest spiritual struggle. The fact is, practicing effective prayer is like fighting on the front lines in a war. Our greatest challenge is to pray!

This is an interesting time to be Orthodox. Our secular world provides little certainty for people’s lives, and the Orthodox faith issues an unchanging message of truth and stability. Orthodox Christianity may be the last firm footing on which to stand, yet it would be fair to say that very few Orthodox Christians are aware of the depth and richness of the Church’s spiritual tradition when it comes to personal devotion. We Orthodox are big on externals. Our liturgical worship is a drama of striking beauty and color, of scent and sound. But besides being beautiful, icons, vestments, chanting, and incense together constitute an important statement about God. He has created us as physical beings in a material world, and we approach Him using the elements of that material world. The way in which we Orthodox worship involves all of our senses and physical nature, so that we may respond to God with all of our being—our bodies as well as our minds and souls.

However, there is something else that is as essential to our spiritual growth as outward worship, and that is personal prayer. Anyone who wants to grow closer to God must develop a disciplined prayer life.

What Is Prayer?

Public worship and personal prayer are the twin support beams of the spiritual life for any believer. All our growing will take place within the framework they provide. But they are not the same thing, and they are not interchangeable.

Certainly we pray when we come to church, but we do other things as well—we sing, we learn, we offer. Worship is what we do as a group, when we gather as Christ’s Body. The prayer that is offered by the Church is a united offering of prayer, “on behalf of all and for all,” to the Father, in Christ, by the Holy Spirit.

One-on-One

Personal prayer is just that, personal and individual. It is my own personal conversation with God, in which no one else will be involved. In personal prayer I will pray for others, but not with others. Jesus’ teaching about prayer makes it clear: “But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly” (Matthew 6:6).

Personal prayer is our own private time with our Father. Everyone feels the need for a little personal attention at times, and in prayer we get that; but it never replaces our worship in church. The oneness of being in the Body of Christ, united in faith and love with other believers, is both glorious and necessary. But an individual relationship with God is just as important. In order to be a complete Christian one must relate to the members of the Body of Christ together, and relate to God as a person. St. John of Kronstadt (1829–1908) wrote, “Why is it necessary to pray at home, and to attend divine services in church? Well, why is it necessary for you to eat and drink, to take exercise, or to work every day? In order to support the

life of the body and strengthen it.” Worship and prayer are the food and drink, the work and workout, of our life with God.

Your relationship with a personal God is what private prayer is all about. There are many things required for our growth, such as reading, study, and good works. But they will bear no real fruit unless they are supported by the life of worship and prayer.

Good Tools for an Effective Job

Why should we be concerned about being effective? Because we do not want to waste time when it comes to something as important as prayer. God has given us a job to do, and the job description is a dandy. “Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). What could be simpler? We just have to be perfect!

If we are to meet such a challenge, we cannot waste time spinning our wheels. We must do the most efficient job of praying that we can. Being concerned about efficiency does not mean only making decisions about style and technique. We will deal with those things in the course of this book, but to be effective we must also be concerned about results. Is your prayer life helping you to reach the goal of Christian perfection? If not, then it may be worse than no prayer at all, because it is a waste of time! Prayer is not an end in itself, but a means by which we draw closer to God.

Jesus said, “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit” (John 15:7, 8). Our Christian growth can be measured, just as you would measure the quality of a vine by the fruit it bears. Our grapes are our thoughts and actions. Are they like Christ’s thoughts and actions? Are we becoming more Christlike? The more Christlike in action we become, the more fruit we will bear.

Being concerned about the effectiveness of our prayer also prevents, or at least helps us avoid, misdirection, and it allows us to correct mistakes as they occur. The problems we will encounter will not be new problems; untold numbers of people have faced them before us. We have good directions: in Holy Scripture, and in the writings of holy people who have cultivated God’s Word abiding in them and have borne much fruit. We call these holy persons “saints.” They are our fathers and mothers in the Faith, and their experience can prevent us from fumbling around if we pay attention to it.

The Love Connection

Americans are practical people. We like to know what is involved before committing ourselves to a program. It only makes sense to do things this way. Jesus certainly expressed this idea when He said, “For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it?” (Luke 14:28). So we need to count the cost. Why bother with the effort of a disciplined prayer life at all?

There are several possible answers to the question, but I find two to be persuasive: We pray as a response to love, and we pray in order to love. “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. . . . In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:7, 10).

God always takes the first step! We do not have to worry about getting in touch with Him, because He has already established contact with us by sending His Son to die for us. God is the primary Lover of the creation and everything in it—the One who sweeps us off our feet the first time we really encounter Him. And He does this not so much by what He does as by who He is.

Remember when you fell in love? Everyone has done so at some time or another. It may have been with your second-grade teacher or a high-school football star. Your new love probably did nothing in particular to get your attention, except show up! But when you discovered that person, you did not know what had hit you.

That is the kind of Lover our God is. He doesn't try to grab our attention with fancy clothes or a flashy car. The approach is more subtle. He is just here, always here. He introduces His presence into your life, and then one day you wake up with the knowledge that you cannot live without Him! He is the Great Lover, and when you are on the receiving end of His love, you just cannot help but respond. Prayer is our act of response. When we love someone, we want to be with him, do things with him, and respond to him.

Please notice the words “act” and “do.” For Christians, love is action, not feeling. Christian love is not the warm rush of desire and joy that can be experienced in a love affair, political rally, or charismatic power meeting. That is romanticism, not Christianity. So responding to God with warm feelings is not what prayer should be about. As we shall see, the Orthodox tradition is very cautious about such things. Love experienced on the deep level of reality results in a conscious decision to act toward someone in a caring way and to communicate with that person. So God acts by sending His Son, the Eternal Word, to us. This is the ultimate declaration of love. We respond to the sending of His Word with our words. We pray.

The Act of Loving

Prayer is more than just our response to the way God loves us. It is part of how we love Him. Love breaks down separation because we want to be one with the person we love. If we love God, we want to become one with Him. St. Dimitri of Rostov wrote, “No unity with God is possible without an exceeding great love.” Loving and joining go together.

But you cannot become one with someone if you never talk to him. You cannot be in love with someone you do not know. Genuine lovers are always discovering things about each other. The more you know about the one you love, the more you will be in love with him.

Our relationship with God is like that, and it is not hard to understand what happens. In order to love Him, we have to trustingly open ourselves to Him, and He will open Himself to us. We become one with our Lover. “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you” (James 4:8). He already knows about us (He did create us, remember), but He will open Himself to us so that we can learn as much as possible about Him. This does not mean that we will learn everything there is to know about God, but we will learn all that we can possibly absorb. We can ask no more of any lover.

Our love will express itself in a desire for knowledge and union. Prayer is the way we express our desire and the way we achieve it. To understand the need for prayer, we must realize how much we need a personal relationship with God. Prayer is the encounter between two loving persons seeking to become one: God in us, and we in Him. “My beloved is mine, and I am his” (Song of Solomon 2:16).

God walks among the hills and valleys of His creation with something in His glance that pulls us toward Him. “You have ravished my heart . . . / With one look of your eyes” (Song of Solomon 4:9). Do not be afraid to respond to God. Never be afraid to love Him! He is calling for us: “Rise up, my love, my fair one, / And come away” (Song of Solomon 2:10).

What are you waiting for? Start to pray!