

Chapter 2

September 1, 1996

D.L. Moody was once staying with a Scottish friend in London. “A young man had come to speak to Mr. Moody about spiritual things. He was in difficulty about a number of points, among the rest about prayer and natural laws. ‘What is prayer?,’ he said, ‘I can’t tell what you mean by it!’ They were in the hall of a large London house. Before Moody could answer, a child’s voice was heard singing on the stairs. It was that of a little girl of nine or ten, the daughter of their host. She came running down the stairs and paused as she saw strangers in the hall. ‘Come here, Jenny,’ her father said, ‘and tell this gentleman “What is prayer.”’ Jenny did not know what had been going on, but she quite understood that she was now called upon to say her Catechism. So she drew herself up, and folded her hands in front of her, like a good little girl who was going to ‘say her questions,’ and she said in her clear childish voice: ‘Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins and thankful acknowledgement of his mercies.’ ‘Ah! That’s the Catechism!’ Moody said, ‘Thank God for that Catechism.’” [Warfield, Sel. Short. Writings, vol. I, pp. 382-383.]

What a wonderful definition of prayer that is, however catechism-like. It is like the acrostic ACTS by which many other children have been taught what prayer is: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication. Prayer is all of those things, absolutely. But these are such definitions as you might find in

a catechism which is seeking to be accurate and comprehensive.

As a matter of fact, of course, you find many prayers in the Bible, even some of the Lord's own prayers, that do not contain all four elements of the ACTS definition, or the five elements in the definition of the shorter catechism. Some prayers are only supplication (Nehemiah's famous "arrow" prayer, 2:4), others are only adoration, others only confession. And some prayers are not really any of these things. Some prayers in the psalms, for example, are almost all complaint!

So, while a catechism might rightly define prayer by giving a more or less complete account of what prayer is in all of its various forms and parts, prayer must still be defined more simply than that, so that we know what prayer is no matter what kind of prayer it may be.

I gave you last week John Knox's excellent and beautiful definition of prayer: "earnest and familiar talking with God."

Thomas à Kempis speaks simply of "conversation with God."

And what is meant in these definitions, which are surely exactly what prayer is and is everywhere seen to be in the Bible, is that prayer is a personal communication like that we have with one another, conveying our thoughts to one another. Speaking and hearing. What is remarkable about it, of course, is that the one we are speaking to is Almighty God! But, that is what we are doing: we are speaking to him and he is listening to us. That is exactly what prayer is and anything less than this or other than this is not prayer. For example, if we are merely uttering religious words while on our knees, we are not praying because we are not really, that is, so far as our hearts and minds are concerned, we are not really *speaking to God himself*.

John Burton (1803-1877) reminds us how this simple definition of prayer unmasks so much that purports to be prayer for what it really is: something else entirely.

I often say my prayers,
But do I ever pray?
And do the wishes of my heart
Go with the words I say?

I may as well kneel down
And worship gods of stone,

As offer to the living God
A prayer of words alone.

For words without the heart
The Lord will never hear;
Nor will he to those lips attend
Whose prayers are not sincere.

Lord teach me what I need,
And teach me how to pray;
And do not let me seek thy grace,
Not meaning what I say.

And the truest test and sign of insincerity in prayer is the lack of a genuine sense that we are actually in conversation with God himself, that we are talking to him and he is listening to us. What is most characteristic of the prayers that we are given to see prayed or to read in the Bible is just this feature: that they were so clearly when they were offered a *real talking with God*.

The church's best teachers of prayer have always emphasized this conversational character of true prayer, that one speaks with God as one speaks with another human being, especially another person that one loves and trusts.

Here is Francois Fenelon, the 17th century French Catholic mystic, friend and defender of Madame Guyon, the center of a great controversy in French Catholicism of his day concerning the inner life, Fenelon being a champion of the mystical life and of a pure and disinterested love for God. He was condemned by the Pope at the insistence of the French king, but so gently that his enemies, Louis XIV principally, were mortified and all the more when, later, the Pope was widely quoted as having said, "Fenelon was in fault for too great love of God; his enemies equally in fault for too little love of their neighbor."

Tell God all that is in your heart, as one unloads one's heart, its pleasures and its pains to a dear friend. Tell Him your troubles that he may comfort you; tell Him your joys, that he may sober them; tell Him your longings that he may purify them; tell Him your dislikes, that He may help you conquer them; talk to Him of your temptations, that He may shield you from them; show Him the wounds of your heart, that He may heal them; lay bare your indifference to good, your depraved tastes for evil, your instability. Tell

him how self-love makes you unjust to others, how vanity tempts you to be insincere, how pride disguises you to yourself and to others. If you thus pour out all your weaknesses, needs, troubles, there will be no lack of what to say. You will never exhaust the subject. It is continually being renewed. People who have no secrets from each other never want for subjects of conversation. They do not weigh their words for there is nothing to be held back; neither do they seek for something to say. They talk out of the abundance of their heart; without consideration they say just what they think. Blessed are they who attain *to such familiar, unreserved, intercourse with God.*

There again: over and again: prayer is talking, telling, conversation.

Or take Martin Luther's famous letter to his barber, Peter Beskendorf. Apparently, while cutting the famous Reformer's hair, Peter must have asked him, "Dr. Luther, how do you pray?" For his pains he got back a 40 page letter that was published in the Spring of 1535 under the title, A Simple Way to Pray, for a Good Friend.

Now, it is a good thing that a man like Luther wrote down his thoughts on praying, because he was a man of prayer and such men are the ones who most deserve to be heard on the subject.

Listen to what Luther's friend, Veit Dietrich, wrote to Melanchthon from the Diet of Augsburg where he was assisting Luther.

"Not a day passes but he reserves *three hours at least* for prayer out of the portion of the day which is most suitable for work. One day I had the privilege of overhearing him pray. Great God! what a spirit, what a faith in his words! He prays with all the devotion of a man before God, but with all the confidence of a child speaking to his father. 'I know,' said he, 'that Thou art our good God and our Father; that is why I am persuaded that Thou wilt exterminate those who persecute Thy children. If Thou does not do it, the danger is to Thee as much as to us. This cause is Thine; what we have done, we could not have done otherwise. It is for Thee, merciful Father to protect us.' When I heard him from a distance praying these words with a clear voice, my heart burned with joy within me, because I was hearing him speak to God with altogether as much fervour as liberty; above all he supported himself so firmly upon the promises in the Psalms,

that he seemed fully assured that nothing he asked could fail to be accomplished.” [Cited in Monod, Farewell, p. 79n.]

Luther said of the reformation, “Prayer must do the deed,” and he practiced what he preached and what he meant by prayer was exactly what John Knox said prayer was, “earnest and familiar talking with God.”

And so Luther began in his letter on prayer to his barber: “Dear Master Peter, I give you the best I have. I tell you how I pray myself.” And on he goes with the most interesting account of how to pray. We’ll have cause to consider some of his advice in subsequent weeks. And he speaks always of prayer as a real conversation, indeed, he makes a great deal of the fact that in true prayer you not only speak to God, but God speaks to you!

There are other ways the Bible uses to convey the true essence and character of prayer besides talking to God or conversation with God, but they all have this in common, that they represent prayer to us as a real communication of mind and heart to and with God. For example, prayer can be likened in the Bible to “looking to God.” E.g. Psalm 69:3: “I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched. My eyes fail looking for my God.” Psalm 121:1 “I will lift up my eyes to the hills — from whence cometh my help?”

But the point of the image is exactly the same as that I am making: prayer is a real engagement of one person with the Lord — it is real communication and a seeking of a real conversation with God.

Now listen to the opening words of a selection of biblical prayers:

“Answer me when I call to you, O my righteous God. . .” (4:1)

“Give ear to my words, O Lord, consider my sighing. Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray.” (5:1-2)

“O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger. . .” (6:1)

“Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself. . .?” (10:1)

“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?” (13:1)

And on and on. These are real exchanges on the level of the deepest personal sincerity, real dealing with God, talking with him, face to face, person to person.

And there is a great wonder here, for, of course, when you come to God in this most personal, direct way, you are not the only person who is calling upon the Lord in that same way. And yet, the promise of the Scripture is that you have God's full attention.

C.S. Lewis explains it this way: "Almost certainly God is not in time. His life does not consist of moments following one another. If a million people are praying to him at ten-thirty tonight, He need not listen to them all in that one little snippet we call ten-thirty. Ten-thirty – and every other moment from the beginning of the world — is always the present for him." Perhaps. In any case, it is not a pageant, a charade that the Bible describes, but real personal engagement between his children and the Father in heaven.

As we begin our consideration of prayer, we must begin here! This is prayer and nothing else. And it is to this definition and standard of prayer that we must bring all our own prayers. Are they really conversation with God, are they really my earnest and familiar talking with God? Just to ask yourself that before you pray and as you pray will purify many prayers and keep you praying when, otherwise, you might well imagine yourself to be praying while all the while you are really only uttering words, not having a conversation at all.

We can do that so easily with others whom we can see. We can be talking with them and not hear a word they say, not pay attention to what they are talking about. We can even forget what we ourselves have said or were going to say so little engaged were we in the talk. My falling asleep while reading to the children! Our mouths were moving but we were not really having a conversation, a sharing of minds and hearts. How many of us have had this experience in prayer, speaking words, but without any living sense that we were talking to God, no sense that there was another person at the other end of our conversation. And how often that conviction, if not absent, is at least dim, far too dim and weak.

We are going to say many things about prayer in the coming weeks of Sunday evenings, about the parts and circumstances and qualities of true prayer. But everything we say about prayer begins and ends here: that it is nothing more nor less than simply a *real conversation* with God himself, a real talking to God that he might hear what we say and reply! And the more prayers we look at in the Bible, the more plain and obvious it will become that, however different from one another those prayers may be, they all have this

in common, they are all real talking to God.

Here then is our first application: *never to pray without getting the presence of God himself fixed before you so that your speaking is, from beginning to end, a real conversation, a real talking with him.*

David, in Psalm 16:8 writes that he set the Lord always before him. J.A. Alexander paraphrases David's words as meaning that David "recognized God's presence." Calvin speaks of his meaning that he kept all of his senses "bound and captive." The Lord was before him as he prayed. That 16th psalms begins with David saying to God, "You *are* my Lord. . ." Now is that done? How does one set the Lord before oneself.

Well, the best advice I have ever read or heard in answer to that question comes from Alexander Whyte — are you surprised? Listen to this magnificent wisdom regarding how to begin and end your prayers — all your prayers — so as to be sure that those prayers are real talking with God.

"If, then, you would learn to pray to perfection, — that is to say, to pray with all that is within you, — never fail, never neglect, to do this. Never once shut your bodily eyes and bow your knees to begin to pray, without, at the same moment, opening the eyes of your imagination. . . . Do things like this, then, when you would be in the full spirit of prayer. . . . Let your imagination sweep up through the whole visible heavens, up to the heaven of heavens. Let her sweep and soar on her shining wing, up past sun, moon, and stars. Let her leave Orion and the Pleiades far behind her. And let her heart swell and beat as she says such things as these to herself: 'He made all these things. *He*, whom I now seek. That is His sun. My Father made them all. My Mediator made them all to the glory of His father. And He is the heir of all things. Oh, to be at peace with the Almighty! . . . Oh, to be found among the sons and the daughters of God Almighty!' At another time, as you kneel down, flash, in a moment, — I still speak as a child, — the eyes of your heart back to Adam in his garden, and with the image of God still in all its glory upon him: and to Abraham over Sodom; and to Moses in the cleft of the rock; and to David in the night-watches; and to Jesus Christ all night on the mountain top — and your time will not be lost. For, by such a flash of your imagination, at such a moment, the spirit of grace and supplications will be put in complete possession of your whole soul. . . . never so much as say grace at table, however short time you have to say it in, without seeking Him: in the twinkling of an eye, be for one moment, if

no more, with Him who spreads your table, and makes your cup to run over. In short, be sure to get a true sight and a true hold of God, in some way or other, before you begin either prayer or praise. There is nothing in this world so difficult, the time it takes, sometimes, and the toil, and the devices, and the instrumentalities — you would not believe: because no word in all the Bible better describes us when we are at prayer, and at praise, and at table than this: ‘Without God’; and this: ‘Their hearts are far from me.’ Be sure, then — with all the help that heaven and earth, that God and man can give you — be sure you get your eyes and your hands on God in your prayer. . . . Never say any of your idle words to Almighty God. Say your idle words to your equals. Say them to your sovereigns. But, never, as you shall answer for it, — never, all your days, — to God. Set the Lord always before you. Direct your prayer to him, and look up. . . . Better say that so bold saying, — ‘I will not let thee go,’ than pray with such laziness and sleepiness, and stupidity as we now pray. Look for God, and look at God: till you can honestly say to Him, with Dr. Newman, a great genius and a great saint, that there are now, to you, two and two only supreme and luminously self-evident beings in the whole universe, yourself and your Creator. And, when once you begin to pray in that way, you will know it. Every prayer of yours like that will, ever after, leave its lasting mark upon you. You will not long remain the same man. Praying with the imagination all awake, and all employed — such praying will soon drink up your whole soul into itself. You will then ‘pray always.’ It will be to you by far the noblest and the most blessed of all your employments in this present world. You will pray ‘without ceasing.’ We shall have to drag you out of your closet by main force.” [Lord Teach us to Pray, pp. 244-248]

How we talk you and I, talk, talk, talk. And how important it is for us to talk, that others know what we think. The world turns by conversation. How insightful then for William Cowper to challenge us with this fact in his famous poem on prayer:

Have you no words, ah! think again!
Words flow apace when you complain
And fill your fellow creature’s ear
With the sad tale of all your care.

Were half the breath thus vainly spent
To heaven in supplication sent,

Your cheerful song would oftener be,
"Hear what the Lord has done for me!"