

Prayer is the act from which all other good comes



Often has the Church proclaimed, 'Prayer is the act from which all other good comes.'¹

It may seem strange that, in this statement, the source of all good is ascribed to the act and state of prayer. Certainly, all good comes from God! There is only one source of Good, and of the identity of this source there is no question. Lest any be tempted to forget, it is proclaimed at every Liturgy in the prayer before the ambo: 'Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from Thee, the Father of Lights'.² Certainly, there is no other fount from which goodness flows than God Himself, the very essence and heart of Goodness. Good gifts are good only inasmuch as they come from Him, for 'whatever is not God, is nothing'.³

Why, then, the exalted status given to prayer? If all good gifts are from God and Him only, how can we then say, 'Prayer is the act from which all other good comes'? How is it possible to hold to the divine truth here stated, and still proclaim, as the holy Abba Agathon does in regard to prayer, that by its action it is the reconciliation of man with God, the mother and daughter of tears, a bridge for crossing temptations, a wall of protection from afflictions, a crushing of conflicts, boundless activity, the spring of virtues, the source of spiritual gifts, invisible progress, food of the soul, the enlightening of the mind, an axe for despair, a demonstration of hope, the release from sorrow.

Would it not be better for us, if we were to ascribe these gifts to God and set prayer aside as another among them?

The answer we must give—that which I am sure you will have determined I will give, based on the manner in which I posed all of the above—is certainly 'no'. There is a mystery to prayer, or perhaps better, prayer is a great mystery, by which all other gifts are made known in their true natures, and through which they in fact come. Prayer, as the holy Church teaches, is the very source of our participation in the good gifts of God; while He remains ever the giver and one true fount of all blessings, it is only by prayer that we are brought into communion with and possession of these very blessings. St Symeon of Thessalonica writes, concerning the primacy of prayer, It is an excellent task for the servants of Christ above all others, for the other things are ministries and secondary ... truly this is the task entrusted to us by God, and the crown of all else.⁴

If, then, this great task of prayer, this 'crown of all else', is the source of our possession of all that is good and blessed, what must be its nature? Surely the initial reaction had by many toward this idea, namely that our petitionary prayer must be that from which we receive all good, is negative for the very reason that a notion of prayer ultimately as spoken discussion with, or even fervent supplication to God, is itself a flawed understanding. Prayer of this sort, though it is good and holy, certainly cannot be the ultimate form and character of prayer, for it is a temporal and designated act within the scope of the 'rest of life'. To pray in this manner is to set aside whatever predetermined (or undetermined) duration of time for prayer, to speak petitions, to offer adoration and thanksgiving, and so on. Yes, this is a holy act, and one to which we are called, one and all! But it cannot be the only form of prayer, especially not the ultimate, because it is simply impossible to engage in this kind of prayer at all times if one is truly to live a human life in this world; and the exhortation to 'pray without ceasing' comes directly from the great Apostle (1 Thess 5.17). If our method of prayer is such that we cannot keep the commandment of God, handed down through His elect, then we must admit a greater reality to prayer which we have yet to approach. Our prayer is good and holy by virtue of its being prayer, but there are depths we have not sounded and heights to which we have not yet climbed. These are to be found in a profound inward prayer to which we are all summoned by Christ Himself.

It is this deeper, inner prayer to which we must turn if we are to understand how prayer is genuinely the source of our communion with the blessings of God. The nature of this deeper reality is first explained by Evagrius the Solitary,⁵ writing in the fourth century: 'Prayer is the communion of the intellect with God'.⁶ Abba Agathon, already encountered in this discussion, expanded upon Evagrius in stating that 'Prayer by its nature is communion and union of man with God'.

Here we begin to see the true essence of deepest prayer as it has always been proclaimed by the Church. Far beyond the discourse of thought and speech with our Divine Saviour which prayer is in certain of its forms, it is much more deeply the actual union of humanity with God in Trinity, a state of being in constant communion with Him who is the Source of all. Such prayer goes beyond a mere act of the intellect, to a deep state of constant awareness of the presence of God, of dwelling with Him in all places and times, no matter what the outward activities of the body or mind. 'He who loves God is always communing with Him as his Father'.⁷

Thus we can see how all the outward acts of discipline, rigour and asceticism that lead to true prayer, are indeed the means by which we attain to all things good, not because these acts somehow 'purchase' good things for us (God forbid!), but because by them we are drawn ever closer to God Himself; that same God who is, in His essence, the very fullness of Goodness. The acts of attaining to prayer form our great motion of continual service, our personal leitourgia, by which we come into all joy; for 'to serve God is bliss itself'.⁸

Scripture itself proclaims the importance of prayer, the exhortation to which often seems confounding when prayer is viewed as primarily an act of petition before God (for surely He knows all our needs!),⁹ but which is only sensible when it is understood as the continuous communion of our person with God. The book of Sirach lists much that must be sought after in life, yet capstones its list thus: 'But above all, pray to the Most High, that He may direct your way in truth' (Sirach 37.15). The holy Paul, as we have already said, commands not only that we pray, but that we pray 'without ceasing' (1 Thess 5.17). Long before the Incarnation of Christ, His prophet had proclaimed that ceasing to pray—especially for others—is a sin against the Lord (1 Samuel 12.23). Yet the importance of prayer is also witnessed clearly in the fact that our Saviour Himself prayed, both in the desert where He met the demons (Matthew 4.1-11), as well as in His fatigue (Mark 1.35) and throughout the whole of His life, often with loud cries and tears. (Hebrews 5.7).

None has prayed so purely as the man Jesus Christ, nor has any known more of the blessedness of divine communion. Christ incarnate, as the very embodiment of the union of man and God, is in His person the icon of the goal of prayer; there can be no greater communion with the divine than the actual union of divine and human natures in the person of the incarnate God, Jesus Christ. And even as the Father was well-pleased with the life of prayer of His Only-Begotten Son, so will He be pleased with us when we come to pray truly, for 'God rejoices when a man offers Him a wise prayer'.¹⁰

What else could prayer be, apart from the act by which all other good comes, if prayer is, itself, our communion with the Good One? It is the source, the only source, of our possession of the blessings of God, for through it the Holy Spirit joins us together with the Giver of every gift. Unless we are united to God, we can know no blessings, we can experience no good, we can comprehend no real joy. But we are not

despondent of these things, for the Spirit does indeed call us to the communion which provides them, to the prayer which makes them real in us.

The fruits of prayer are thus those of the Holy Spirit—love, joy, peace and many others¹¹ — for it is only through the Spirit that we ever come to true prayer. It is He who cleanses us from every impurity, and prays within us, joining our minds and hearts to God.¹² He thus makes us capable of receiving all the goodness of God, and our prayer gives rise to the good gifts that God grants. Should we ever doubt, St James the Brother of Our Lord reminds us, 'The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest' (James 5.16-18). Christ also spoke to us of the power of prayer, when He reminded all the faithful that 'whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received, and it will be yours' (Mark 11.24). If we are in truth united to God, then our will also is united to His and the things for which 'we ask' are the very gifts of His divine power—far exceeding the limitations of the world in which we dwell. Mountains can be moved and seeds turned into forests; cold and stony hearts can be warmed; the dead can be raised; light stronger and more radiant than the sun can shine forth from the souls of those with a humble and prayerful heart.¹³

But we should not pray in order that we might receive such gifts, or any gifts at all. This was the great sin of Simon the Samaritan, who thought that the gifts of God were of more importance than God who gives them.¹⁴ Our prayer is to be contrite, inward, hopeful, and the fruit only of our intense love of God. It is true that all good comes to us from prayer, but it is not for our reception of the good that we pray, but only for communion with God. We must never consider ourselves worthy of God's gifts, for then we evidence greed, and this greed leads to prayer becoming an act of pride. St Macarius reminds us,

Pray simply. Do not expect to find in your heart any remarkable gift of prayer. Consider yourself unworthy of it. Then you will find peace. Use the empty cold dryness of your prayer as food for your humility. Repeat constantly: I am not worthy, Lord, I am not worthy!¹⁵

If we approach prayer with such a sense of personal unworthiness (after all, who is 'worthy' of having communion with the immortal and all-powerful God of the universe!), and view it not as an access to divine gifts but simply and profoundly as our source of fellowship with Christ, then He shall provide for us, through our prayers, those good things of which we have need.

When tomorrow comes, it will supply what you need, if you seek above all else the kingdom of heaven and the righteousness of God; for the Lord says: 'Seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness; and all these things as well will be given unto you'.¹⁶

In such a state, we will find ourselves pleasing to God, who works wonders in the hearts of His faithful, for the beginning of every action pleasing to God is calling with faith on the life-saving name of our Lord Jesus Christ ... together with the peace and love which accompany this calling. These two, peace and love, not only make the prayer propitious, but are themselves reborn and shine forth from this prayer, like inseparable Divine rays, increasing and coming to perfection.¹⁷

Love and peace go into our prayer (for it is impossible to attain to communion with God if we do not love Him); but they come forth from it far more profoundly. The good which we bring to prayer is only the fruit of what God has already brought to us through our prayer; it is this relationship of exchange that brings us together with the Source of Life and calls us to the possession of every good and perfect gift that comes down from above. In prayer, in our constant communion with the Holy Trinity, we find that beautiful flower of gentleness and of freedom from anger, of joy and all thankfulness, of remedy for every gloom and despondent thought¹⁸ — indeed, we find Christ Himself in the very depths of our hearts. There is no better gift than this. There is no other gift that does not come from this.

Prayer is thus the true nature and character of human life. It is that which has been made possible by the salvation granted in Christ, and that to which Christ calls each of us as heavenly children of the Father. Joining us to God, it becomes our all, and the state for which we strive with every breath.

If, when praying, no other joy can attract you, then truly you have found prayer.¹⁹

1. I have as yet been unable to identify a specific patristic source for this commonplace saying. By the onset of the modern era, it had become so commonplace as to be mentioned, in most texts, without any specific attribution of authorship. Reference to a known or posited source would be warmly received by the present author. [back]
2. Prayer Before the Ambo, The Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom. [back]
3. Attributed to St Frideswide of Oxford. [back]
4. St. Symeon of Thessalonica, On Prayer. [back]
5. That is, first explained from within the Patristic witness. The character of inner prayer as communion can be extrapolated—as it was by the Fathers—from the Gospel and Scriptures; cf. 1 Samuel 12.13; Romans 8.26, Romans 12.12; Sirach 37.15; Revelation 5.8; Mark 11.24. [back]
6. Evagrius the Solitary, On Prayer, 3. [back]
7. Evagrius the Solitary, On Prayer, 55; emphasis mine. [back]
8. St John of Kronstadt. [back]
9. Cf. Psalm 139: 'O Lord, Thou hast searched me and known me ... Thou discernest my thoughts from far away... Even before a word is on my tongue, Thou knowest it completely'. Passages such as this are often sources of confusion for those who seek to understand the Scriptural exhortation to prayer, as they would seem to make prayer a redundant act. Yet when prayer is understood as communion rather than only petition, such passages rather reinforce its power and call. [back]
10. St. Isaac the Syrian. [back]
11. Cf. Galatians 5.22, 23. [back]
12. Cf. the opening prayers of the Hours. [back]
13. As it did from St Seraphim of Sarov; cf. the account of Nicholas Motovilav, A Wonderful Revelation to the World. [back]
14. Cf. Acts 8. [back]
15. St. Macarius of Optina. [back]
16. Evagrius the Solitary (cf. Matthew 6.33). [back]
17. Attributed to Sts Ignatius and Callistus Xanthopoulos. [back]
18. Cf. Evagrius the Solitary, On Prayer, 14-16. [back]
19. Evagrius the Solitary, On Prayer, 153. [back]

Source: <http://www.monachos.net/content/monasticism/monastic-spirituality/109-on-prayer-as-the-source-from-which-all-good-comes>