

From a letter to Proba by Saint Augustine, bishop

Liturgy of the Hours, Vol. IV, pp. 407-9; 412-3; 416-8; 421-2; 425-6; 429-30.

Why in our fear of not praying as we should, do we turn to so many things, to find what we should pray for? Why do we not say instead, in the words of the psalm: *I have asked one thing from the Lord, this is what I will seek: to dwell in the Lord's house all the days of my life, to see the graciousness of the Lord, and to visit his temple.* There, the days do not come and go in succession, and the beginning of one day does not mean the end of another; all days are one, simultaneously and without end, and the life lived out in these days has itself no end.

So that we might obtain this life of happiness, he who is true life itself taught us to pray, not in many words as though speaking longer could gain us a hearing. After all, we pray to one who, as the Lord himself tells us, knows what we need before we ask for it.

Why he should ask us to pray, when he knows what we need before we ask him, may perplex us if we do not realize that our Lord and God does not want to know what we want (for he cannot fail to know it) but wants us rather to exercise our desire through our prayers, so that we may be able to receive what he is preparing to give us. His gift is very great indeed, but our capacity is too small and limited to receive it. That is why we are told: *Enlarge your desires, do not bear the yoke with unbelievers.*

The deeper our faith, the stronger our hope, the greater our desire, the larger will be our capacity to receive that gift, which is very great indeed. *No eye has seen it; it has no color. No ear has heard it; it has no sound. It has not entered man's heart; man's heart must enter into it.*

In this faith, hope and love we pray always with unwearied desire. However, at set times and seasons we also pray to God in words, so that by these signs we may instruct ourselves and mark the progress we have made in our desire, and spur ourselves on to deepen it. The more fervent the desire, the more worthy will be its fruit. When the Apostle tells us: *Pray without ceasing*, he means this: Desire unceasingly that life of happiness which is nothing if not eternal, and ask it of him who alone is able to give it.

Let us always desire the happy life from the Lord God and always pray for it. But for this very reason we turn our mind to the task of prayer at appointed hours, since that desire grows lukewarm, so to speak, from our involvement in other concerns and occupations. We remind ourselves through the words of prayer to focus our attention on the object of our desire; otherwise, the desire that began to grow lukewarm may grow chill altogether and may be totally extinguished unless it is repeatedly stirred into flame.

Therefore, when the Apostle says: *Let your petitions become known before God*, this should not be taken in the sense that they are in fact becoming known to God who certainly knew them even before they were made, but that they are becoming known to us before God through submission and not before men through boasting.

Since this is the case, it is not wrong or useless to pray even for a long time when there is the opportunity. I mean when it does not keep us from performing the other good and necessary actions we are obliged to do. But even in these actions, as I have said, we must always pray with that desire. To pray for a longer time is not the same as to pray by multiplying words, as some people suppose. Lengthy talk is one thing; a prayerful disposition which lasts a long time is another. For it is even written in reference to the Lord himself that he spent the night in prayer and that he prayed at great length. Was he not giving us an example by this? In time, he prays when it is appropriate; and in eternity, he hears our prayers with the Father.

The monks in Egypt are said to offer frequent prayers, but these are very short and hurled like swift javelins. Otherwise their watchful attention, a very necessary quality for anyone at prayer, could be dulled and could disappear through protracted delays. They also clearly demonstrate through this practice that a person must not quickly divert such attention if it lasts, just as one must not allow it to be blunted if it cannot last.

Excessive talking should be kept out of prayer but that does not mean that one should not spend much time in prayer so long as a fervent attitude continues to accompany his prayer. To talk at length in prayer is to perform a necessary action with an excess of words. To spend much time in prayer is to knock with a persistent and holy fervor at the door of the one whom we beseech. This task is generally accomplished more through sighs than words, more through weeping than speech. He *places our tears in his sight*, and *our sighs are not hidden from him*, for he has established all things through his Word and does not seek human words.

We need to use words so that we may remind ourselves to consider carefully what we are asking, not so that we may think we can instruct the Lord or prevail on him.

Thus, when we say: *Hallowed be your name*, we are reminding ourselves to desire that his name, which in fact is always holy, should also be considered holy among men. I mean that it should not be held in contempt. But this is a help for men, not for God.

And as for our saying: *Your kingdom come*, it will surely come whether we will it or not. But we are stirring up our desires for the kingdom so that it can come to us and we can deserve to reign there.

When we say: *Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*, we are asking him to make us obedient so that his will may be done in us as it is done in heaven by his angels.

When we say: *Give us this day our daily bread*, in saying this day we mean "in this world." Here we ask for a sufficiency by specifying the most important part of it; that is, we use the word "bread" to stand for everything. Or else we are asking for the sacrament of the faithful, which is necessary in this world, not to gain temporal happiness but to gain the happiness that is everlasting.

When we say: *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*, we are reminding ourselves of what we must ask and what we must do in order to be worthy in turn to receive.

When we say: *Lead us not into temptation*, we are reminding ourselves to ask that his help may not depart from us; otherwise we could be seduced and consent to some temptation, or despair and yield to it.

When we say: *Deliver us from evil*, we are reminding ourselves to reflect on the fact that we do not yet enjoy the state of blessedness in which we shall suffer no evil. This is the final petition contained in the Lord's Prayer, and it has a wide application. In this petition the Christian can utter his cries of sorrow, in it he can shed his tears, and through it he can begin, continue and conclude his prayer, whatever the distress in which he finds himself. Yes, it was very appropriate that all these truths should be entrusted to us to remember in these very words.

Whatever be the other words we may prefer to say (words which the one praying chooses so that his disposition may become clearer to himself or which he simply adopts so that his disposition may be intensified), we say nothing that is not contained in the Lord's Prayer, provided of course we are praying in a correct and proper way. But if anyone says something which is incompatible with this prayer of the Gospel, he is praying in the flesh, even if he is not praying sinfully. And yet I do not know how this could be termed anything but sinful, since those who are born again through the Spirit ought to pray only in the Spirit.

We read, for example: *May you receive glory among all the nations as you have among us, and May your prophets prove themselves faithful.* What does this mean but *Hallowed be your name?*

We read: *Lord of power and might, touch our hearts and show us your face, and we shall be saved.* What does this mean but *Your kingdom come?*

We read: *Direct my ways by your word, and let no sin rule over me.* What does this mean but *Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven?*

We read: *Do not give me poverty or riches.* What does this mean but *Give us this day our daily bread?*

We read: *Lord, remember David and all his patient suffering, and Lord, if I have done this, if there is guilt on my hands, if I have repaid evil for evil....* What does this mean but *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us?*

We read: *Rescue me, God, from my enemies, deliver me from those who rise up against me.* What does this mean but *Deliver us from evil?*

If you study every word of the petitions of Scripture, you will find, I think, nothing that is not contained and included in the Lord's Prayer. When we pray, then, we may use different words to say the same things, but we may not say different things.

We should not hesitate to make these prayers for ourselves, for our friends, for strangers, and even for enemies, though the emotions in our heart may vary with the strength or weakness of our relationships with individuals.

You now know, I think, the attitudes you should bring to prayer, as well as the petitions you should make, and this not because of what I have taught you but thanks to the teaching of the one who has been pleased to teach us all.

We must search out the life of happiness; we must ask for it from the Lord our God. Many have discussed at great length the meaning of happiness, but surely we do not need to go to them and their long drawn out discussions. Holy Scripture says concisely and with truth: *Happy is the people whose God is the Lord.* We are meant to belong to that people, and to be able to see God and live with him for ever, and so *the object of this command is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience and a sincere faith.*

In these three qualities, "a good conscience" stands for "hope." Faith, hope and love bring safely to God the person who prays, that is, the person who believes, who hopes, who desires, and who ponders what he is asking of the Lord in the Lord's Prayer.

You may still want to ask why the Apostle said: *We do not know what it is right to pray for,* because, surely, we cannot believe that either he or those to whom he wrote did not know the Lord's Prayer.

He showed that he himself shared this uncertainty. Did he know what it was right to pray for when he was given a thorn in the flesh, an angel of Satan to bruise him, so that he might not be puffed up by the greatness of what was revealed to him? Three times he asked the Lord to take it away from him, which showed that he did not know what he should ask for in prayer. At last, he heard the Lord's answer, explaining why the prayer of so great a man was not granted, and why it was not expedient for it to be granted: *My grace is sufficient for you, for power shines forth more perfectly in weakness.*

In the kind of affliction, then, which can bring either good or ill, we do not know what it is right to pray for; yet, because it is difficult, troublesome and against the grain for us, weak as we are, we do what every human would do, we pray that it may be taken away from us. We owe, however, at least this much in our duty to God: if he does not take it away, we must not imagine that we are being

forgotten by him but, because of our loving endurance of evil, must await greater blessings in its place. In this way, *power shines forth more perfectly in weakness*. These words are written to prevent us from having too great an opinion of ourselves if our prayer is granted, when we are impatient in asking for something that it would be better not to receive; and to prevent us from being dejected, and distrustful of God's mercy toward us, if our prayer is not granted, when we ask for something that would bring us greater affliction, or completely ruin us through the corrupting influence of prosperity. In these cases we do not know what it is right to ask for in prayer.

Therefore, if something happens that we did not pray for, we must have no doubt at all that what God wants is more expedient than what we wanted ourselves. Our great Mediator gave us an example of this. After he had said: *Father, if it is possible, let this cup be taken away from me*, he immediately added, *Yet not what I will, but what you will, Father*, so transforming the human will that was his through his taking a human nature. As a consequence, and rightly so, *through the obedience of one man the many are made righteous*.

The person who asks for and seeks this one thing from the Lord makes his petition confidently and serenely. He has no fear that, when he receives it, it may harm him, for if this is absent, anything else he duly receives brings no benefit at all. This is the one, true and only life of happiness, that, immortal and incorruptible in body and spirit, we should contemplate the Lord's graciousness for ever. It is for the sake of this one thing that everything else is sought and without impropriety requested. The person who has this will have all that he wants; in heaven, he will be unable to want, because he will be unable to possess anything that is unfitting.

In heaven is the fountain of life, that we should now thirst for in prayer as long as we live in hope and do not yet see the object of our hope, *under the protection of his wings in whose presence is all our desire*, so that we may drink our fill *from the plenty of his house* and be given drink *from the running stream of his delights*, for *with him is the fountain of life, and in his light we shall see light*, when our desire will be satisfied with good things, and there will be nothing to ask for with sighs but only what we possess with joy.

Yet, since this is that peace that surpasses all understanding, even when we ask for it in prayer we do not know how to pray for what is right. Certainly we do not know something if we cannot think of it as it really is; whatever comes to mind we reject, repudiate, find fault with; we know that this is not what we are seeking, even if we do not yet know what kind of thing it really is.

There is then within us a kind of instructed ignorance, instructed, that is, by the Spirit of God who helps our weakness. When the Apostle said: *If we hope for something we do not see, we look forward to it with patience*, he added, *In the same way the Spirit helps our weakness; we do not know what it is right to pray for, but the Spirit himself pleads with sighs too deep for words. He who searches hearts knows what the Spirit means, for he pleads for the saints according to God's will*.

We must not understand by this that the Holy Spirit of God pleads for the saints as if he were someone different from what God is: in the Trinity the Spirit is the unchangeable God and one God with the Father and the Son. Scripture says: *He pleads for the saints* because he moves the saints to plead, just as it says: *The Lord your God tests you, to know if you love him*, in this sense, that he does it to enable you to know. So the Spirit moves the saints to plead with sighs too deep for words by inspiring in them a desire for the great and as yet unknown reality that we look forward to with patience. How can words express what we desire when it remains unknown? If we were entirely ignorant of it we would not desire it; again, we would not desire it or seek it with sighs, if we were able to see it.