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HORIZONS OF PRAYER

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CLASS LECTURE

BY

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Horizons of Prayer

OMEONE asked me a strange question the other day; the question was:

"Do you believe in prayer?"

We are so apt to take for granted the fact that we accept prayer, that few of us ask ourselves this question.

In thinking the matter over, this other question arises:

"Just what is belief in prayer?"

If when you ask yourself the first

question the answer should be in the negative, is there then any chance of receiving an answer to your prayer? Suppose, for example, that you have made a habit of prayer, that you have turned to prayer because your problems seem to have no other solution—you cannot think your way out, so you have tried to pray your way out—but when you begin to analyze your own mind honestly, you discover a negative response. Can you pray in the face of this doubt? Are prayers depen-

dent upon faith? If so, those who have prayed merely from habit or custom seem to be confronted with a hopeless situation when they are forced to meet this lack of belief in their prayers. What can be done about it? Can one go on praying? These points arising upon consideration of the first question seem worthy of our serious attention, so I bring them to you.

What are the horizons of prayer? Is believing in prayer essential to its success? We are told that the rule for

prayer is: If you pray desiring anything, believe you have received it. But suppose you cannot believe that you have received an answer to your prayer; suppose your mind balks in the face of contrary evidence; although you pray and wish to believe, appearances contradict. Should you then reject prayer as an act of hypocrisy, or continue in spite of unbelieving? If you pray to have an increase of faith, or ask God to help you free your heart from doubt, and you have no faith or

belief, is it going to do you any good to pray? These are the questions which we hope to find answers to.

To begin with, let us consider the words of the first question: Do you believe in prayer? "Belief" and "prayer" are the two words which attract our attention. What is belief? What do we mean when we say that we believe in a thing? A religious dictionary defines belief as a "pondering with assent." You ponder a subject which you accept as true. Pondering with assent,

your mind consents to a consideration—you believe in it. Pondering with assent is thinking with consent.

Another definition of belief is the acceptance of an idea as true, not because of any personal demonstrative knowledge, but rather on the foundation of authority; that is, you have been told or you have read that the matter is true. This is called believing; you believe in that which you do not actually hold through knowledge; you believe in something that is invisible to

the senses.

So belief or believing is a special act of intellect. It is a goal reached through faith. Faith is your approach to that which you believe. What you believe in can transcend reasoning and enter the domain of faith.

Believing can be both internal and external. You ponder with assent with your own mind; then you express what you believe in actions; for example, if you believe in a friend's integrity, you show it through acts of trust.

Besides being internal and external, belief is also human and divine. It is human belief that has placed the whole faculty of believing in such disrepute, because this human tendency to believe so frequently betrays the mind. While on the other hand, divine believing, the supernatural power to believe—the heights of which are attained by the gift of faith—perfects the mind. Human belief restricts the mind, but divine belief is the elevation of the mind through faith to the actual reali-

zation of truth—which is the perfection of intellect.

Human believing has been harshly discredited under the term, "gullibility." The frequent betrayal of intellect through too much human believing has been illustrated this way: Internal human believing is compared to the gullible individual who becomes the ready victim of an intriguing get-rich-quick scheme. The too-believing person falls into the trap because the prospects appear to be so good. The

external act of human believing occurs when spurious stock in the project is bought. This kind of believing betrays the intellect. A person having had experience with such betrayals, who has been too ready to believe in any suggested idea, suddenly denounces faith altogether, and like the agnostic says, "I will not believe in anything," for he has become afraid of his very ability to believe!

According to the great apostle Peter, a person who is too ready to believe

is just as ready to disbelieve; consequently it is very important to have faith supported by reason. True faith and reason are always compatible; they go hand in hand to substantiate belief. So while human gullibility is the subject of betrayal because it contradicts the principles of reason, divine belief perfects the mind because it fulfills and crowns reason by transcending it and opening up more expansive horizons.

Let us now consider supernatural

belief approached through the gift of faith. Here our belief rests on God's Word rather than on human words, and therefore is entirely free from mistakes. History, which is a matter of human belief, is frequently biased or in error because its statements rest upon man's authority. But God's Word, as revealed in the Scriptures, is infallible. Human belief is framed by man's mind, but divine belief is the manifestation of God's Mind. Consequently when your own mind has pondered

with assent supreme truth, this perfection is sealed upon the very intellect itself, perfecting rather than betraying the mind.

To believe is a special act; there is no act of the mind quite like it. It is a special operation of the intellect. It is not guesswork; it is not supposition; it is not inference; it is not suspicion; nor is it doubt; it is not mere opinion; it is not conclusive knowledge obtained through sense evidence or scientific experiment—belief is a special act of

the intellect. It is an act wonderfully meritorious to the mind, for the less a person actually knows, the more faith he needs to have; yet, paradoxically, the more profound knowledge is, the deeper faith should be, for real knowledge should not destroy but promote faith. True, a child's immaturity of knowledge makes the extent of faith necessarily greater; but as his knowledge grows and the extent of his faith diminishes, its intensity and profundity should increase accordingly.

Intellectual progress is not the great threat to faith that people think; it can never do away with faith, for there is always the infinite mystery beyond knowledge. Thus, intellectual progress should intensify and deepen faith rather than weaken it.

The great threat against belief in the world is moral decay. The first article in a current magazine puts this question:

"Is America happier now that it no longer believes in God?"

Is it true that moral decay is so great that America no longer believes in God? America was actually founded on belief in God, which is evidenced by the words stamped on our coins: "In God we trust." To trust in God is to believe in Him. I do not like to think that America has repudiated God; nor do I believe that happiness can come from lack of faith. The early founders of America believed in the power of prayer, and there is no question that prayers are woven into the vital pat-

tern of our nation. If as a people we no longer believe in prayer, then we no longer believe in the principles of our country.

True happiness springs from a mind and heart purified by faith and love of God. Therefore, we say that it is not intellectual progress but moral decay alone which is our threat to faith. Intellectual progress can carry one to the very threshold of infinite mysteries; but there the truly intelligent mind relinquishes its hold and turns the

heart over to faith.

What do we mean by moral decay? Let me repeat an illustration I recently read in which faith is compared to a jack-in-the-box, the spring of which is the intellect and the lid on the box, the will. Moral decay weakens the will and because of the constant straining against the lid by the pressure of intellect, suddenly off flies the lid and the whole meritorious compression of faith is lost, dissipated into doubts and disbeliefs. Like jack-in-the-box, faith

is always under strain by the energy of the intellect struggling against the mysteries. It is the restraint of the will that preserves the spirit of faith; only when moral decay has weakened the will does faith escape into obscurity.

The point I am trying to bring out is that there is great merit and strength in believing, for believing is entirely a matter of free will. You cannot be said to believe in that which is forced on you by indisputable proof, for this is knowledge rather than belief. Believ-

ing ponders with assent that which transcends the senses. Hence, there is great merit in believing. Jesus declared this merit when He said, Blessed are they who have not seen and yet believe.

Let us next consider prayer—how we may arrive at a true evaluation of prayer. Most people look on prayer as a glorified wish; prayer has been called a wish with spiritual energy. If one's wishes are projected as prayers and the specific answer does not ap-

pear in the exact form requested, the conclusion is that the prayer is unanswered. Very often you do not receive the particular object you ask for; perhaps you receive something far better, something that you never dared dream or hope for. To recognize an answer, one needs to know the real value of prayer. A direct answer to a specific petition does, more often than not, actually follow; yet this type of demonstration is definitely incidental—this is not the real value of prayer. Strictly

speaking, no prayer is ever unanswered. It can be truthfully said that prayer is infallible. But to comprehend this fact, one must know in what the answers consist. A prayer for some particular desire imposes a sort of limitation on omnipotence—you restrict your prayer by such finite wishes!

Another point to be understood is that no one can receive as an answer to prayer anything from which evil could accrue, injuries result, or harm develop. People often wish for that

which, if they should receive it, would be their undoing; but prayer becomes the clearinghouse for wishes. Even a mere wish has power, so people who realize how powerful a wish is, have learned to hold back their desires. If a mere wish has such power, how much greater is the power of prayer! A prayer frees wishes from ignorance; that is, wishes which go through the clearinghouse of prayer are delivered from all possibility of harming either one's self or one's neighbor. If you

should foolishly wish for a serpent, by expressing your desire in prayer you could quite congruously receive bread—but never the serpent. But whatever the prayer, you may be sure it will receive an answer; for the Lord said,

"Ask, and it shall be given you . . .
everyone that asketh receiveth . . ."

This is our great authority for belief
in prayer.

There is another problem that arises regarding the effectuality of prayer. If we accept the spiritual doctrine of the

redemption which teaches that the Lord's coming into the world brought absolute salvation to mankind — all evil and all defects in human nature have been conquered, even death itself; every aspect of human weakness has been overcome; all deception and tyranny of lies have been abolished— of what possible use then is prayer? If the allness of good is granted, why should there be any need for prayer? All good having been accomplished, salvation established, all defects of hu-

man nature removed, death having been met and overcome, there seems to be nothing to pray for. If there is nothing to ask for, is not prayer redundant?

The great secret is that it is because all this has been accomplished that prayers are effectual. Prayer does not make changes; prayer raises the mind to God so that truth may be known. Because goodness is real, your prayers make this knowledge practical.

The very least value of prayer is the

granting of particular requests; its greatest value is the actual grace received during the act of prayer. Here are the real values of prayer: the certain grace bestowed, the strengthening of faith, and the raising of the mind to God. The mind raised to God perfects the human intellect through a direct and clear contemplation of truth. When one understands these real values of prayer, he can truly say that no prayer is ever unanswered. Prayer always brings grace and strength; it

gives man a real goal in life which he can maintain through the habit of praying.

There are three distinct parts to every correct prayer: praising God, giving thanks to God, and beseeching God. Although it is the most common, beseeching God is the least important form of prayer. The most important parts of prayer are praising and giving thanks to God; then, if you wish, you may make your petition and beseech God.

* Because God is all good,
all love, all health, all ~~happiness~~
infinite & unlimited good, joy.

Now having considered belief and prayer separately, let us see if they are essential to each other. Let us suppose that you have asked yourself the question: "Do I believe in prayer?" and after careful analysis you have to admit that though you would like to believe, your honest answer is negative—you have to admit your doubts. Having thus exposed your uncertainty regarding prayer, have you any longer a right to pray? Perhaps you have already exhausted all other solutions

to your problems, leaving prayer as your only hope, and now faced with your doubts of prayer, is the situation hopeless? Can you go on praying even when you are doubtful of its effectuality? In other words, does the efficiency of prayer depend upon belief in it?

To answer such a question, we must understand that the power of prayer does not rest on belief, but on the omnipotence of God. Spiritual doctrine itself has provided a fountain-

head of belief, and faith superabundant to supply all man's deficiency. This powerful advocate supplementing man's needs is the Saviour's own Mother. She is always available to supply human deficiency; she is an ever-ready channel to augment weak prayer. Even doubts submitted to her dissolve in her great faith and love. Her compassion keeps pace with your humility, and as it takes greater humility to pray when you doubt, place all your seemingly doubtful prayers

under the auspices of her compassion, and she will cover all shortcomings with her love. The effectuality of prayer is thus assured, because she supplies with her faith any lack of this virtue in you. She guarantees an answer to your prayers.

Mary has been compared to the moon, which shines with a reflected light. The Saviour is called the Sun of Justice. As the sun gives the moon its light, so the Sun of Justice is reflected in the spirit of divine congruity, and

Mary directs the healing rays of salvation to the world's problems. Like the moon, her power is a reflected glory, but most effectual, whether you believe it or not; and prayers directed through her are quickly answered, for what is accomplished in a year by the natural sun is accomplished by the moon in a month. It is the divine Mother who sees to the fittingness of all answers as well as to the prayers themselves.

There are certain points about pray-

ing that one needs to remember. The great Apostle James said that if you do not receive answers to your prayers, it is because you have not prayed right; Saint Augustine says it is proper to pray for whatever it is proper to desire. What are some of the wrong ways of praying? In the first place, one should not ask for unworthy things. Also, you should not shout at God, nor command Him as a king would his slaves; nor should you issue an ultimatum to God, saying that thus and

so shall be the answer.

True, the Lord said, "Ask and you shall receive," but He did not say what you would receive nor did He put a time limit on His answers. He seems to like to direct His answers through the Mother because her heart is compassion itself. She fits the answers to your needs. She is congruity—the fittingness—of spiritual to natural life, the suitability and becomingness of true grace. Answers to prayers are always so natural, so suitable, that we

know they must proceed through channels of congruity. It seems as though the answers are perfectly natural, so completely adapted are they to one's needs. The miraculousness of the deed is obscured by its very congruity, its entire fittingness to the problem. This Mother acts as a reduction agency to all dispositions foreign to prayers. She modifies, adds, or subtracts the elements pertinent to prayers, depending on the particular situation.

In the Old Testament the Lord pre-

sents a terrifying aspect. He seems to be a God of wrath and chastisement. But in the New Testament, the Lord's power is one of love and compassion and healing. Instead of coming to chastise and punish, the power of truth comes to save and redeem. This difference in aspect is reflected in Mary, the divine Mother, who broods over the New Testament. Her spirit of compassion, understanding, and consideration extends mercy to the weakness of humanity. She takes all man's fail-

ures, shortcomings, and deficiencies, and supplies from her abundance of love all that is needed to perfect their prayers. Worthy as well as unworthy are balanced in her love.

A man and his son who lived on a little farm in Georgia were once overtaken in the field by a terrifying electrical storm. The father running for shelter in the barn, looked back and saw his son standing paralyzed with fright looking up at the sky. The father called out to the boy,

"What are you doing standing there?"

The boy answered in a quavering voice,

"I am praying."

The father said:

"Don't you know that scared prayers are no good?"

I should like to correct that error by stating emphatically that all prayers are good. Any kind of prayer is important whether doubtful, scared, or weak; just so long as they are prayers,

they are effectual. Praying is infallible, and if you lack the essential disposition of a proper prayer, the compassionate, loving Mother will take charge of your prayers and convey them to the very throne of God, where her wish is the Lord's command.

—Genevieve Burnell Forgey.

