



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

December 1984

PRAYER AND FEELINGS

We all have days when we don't feel like praying. When this happens we may try to convince ourselves that we don't feel that way, since we know that we ought to pray. After all, look at all the wonderful things God has done for us. It is ungrateful of us, to say the least, not to feel like praying. Or, instead of trying to talk ourselves out of it, we may just abandon prayer. This doesn't come out much better. We still feel guilty since we know we should be praying.

What, then, is the relationship between prayer and our feelings about it? Do we need to feel something in particular in order to pray, or to pray well? Can we tell that we are praying well by the feeling that we have at the time? Is there some special feeling that goes along with prayer? If we are to pray whatever our particular feelings at the time, how are we to do it?

Sometimes these questions are especially acute. Most of us have times when all of our prayer seems sterile and empty, all work and no fun. It seems as though it is getting us nowhere. We feel like we are bound for hell in a handbasket (or otherwise). And yet, we do not seem to be doing anything different from what we were doing when it all seemed to be going well. This leaves us the more baffled: the acts are the same, but the feelings surrounding the acts are vastly different. What are we to make of it? We cannot but think the one is the result of the other: we must be doing something wrong. It is natural that we blame ourselves for the problem, without even having any very clear idea what the problem is.

To deal with this situation, we need first of all to realize that dryness is a natural stage in Christian growth. When we first start out as Christians, God gives us (usually) some nice spiritual sweetness as a means of encouragement. He wants to get us into the habit of prayer, so He gives us a taste of the spiritual sweetness that can go along with it. Then, after we have been at it a while (and enjoying it, even though it is quite a bit of work sometimes), the sweetness begins to fade. We work a bit harder to try to recapture the sweetness, but still it fades. We redouble our efforts but it is gone. We keep trying. We may even get desperate enough to seek out the advice of someone we know who has some experience in these matters. In any case, we feel pretty miserable, figuring that we must have done something terribly wrong for God to be so upset with us. Or we think we just don't have what it takes to be a good Christian.

The truth of the matter is this (95% of the time, at least): God is not upset with us. He is weaning us from the sweetness. He does not want us to pray all our lives because it makes us feel good spiritually. He wants us to pray because of Him, because it is true for us to pray, because it is the most human thing we can do. If He allowed us those spiritual sweets all the time, we would not pray for Him, but for the sweets. We would not care much for our relationship with Him, with His love for us or ours for Him. We would care for Him only because He made us feel good. We would remain as children, addicted to the feelings, and never reaching any sort of adult prayer at all. For even in human relationships, love for another person is not very mature if it cares only for the ways in which the other makes us feel good.

For prayer is far deeper than those sweetnesses. In prayer we are raised to the very presence of God. It would be too bad for us to get permanently sidetracked, and miss out on the essentials of prayer. Thus God weans us from our feelings in prayer.

God wants us to pray not because it makes us feel good, but because it is right for us to do so. This is more or less obvious, but most of us ignore it most of the time. We feel justified in not praying when we don't feel like it. We all too often think on those Sunday mornings when we are tired (and maybe even a little hung over) that we should roll over and go back to sleep and forget about Church. We wouldn't be able to pray anyway, we tell ourselves. We may even say to ourselves that in our condition it would not be fitting for us to present ourselves before the altar of God. That is the height (or depth) of pride. We pretend that prayer is some offering and work of our own that must be up to a certain standard before it is worth doing. We pretend that we shouldn't worship at all unless we can do it in a certain way. We want it to satisfy our own standards. But it is God who prays through us: it is His work rather than ours. He knows we are human and subject to feelings, and He will use that to perfect our prayer -- if we will let Him.

Another form of the same temptation occurs in those periods of spiritual dryness when we gradually drop our daily, individual prayers. This happens more by default than as a conscious decision. When there is no perceptible reward for the prayer, it is certainly very trying to go on with it. It just doesn't seem worth the effort. We may even know (intellectually) that it is a trial meant to develop the will, but that doesn't seem to be much of a consolation. It is hard for us to keep up with the same old routine when it seems to be failing.

What we have to learn is that prayer operates rather independently of our feelings. This is of profound significance. It is also extremely hard to practice.

It means, first of all, that we are not to judge our progress in the spiritual life by our feelings. Just because we feel better about it today than we did yesterday does not mean we really are doing better. The only real standard of spiritual progress is the moral one: are we less sinful and more virtuous? Even that is not always easy to apply, especially without an outside opinion. For part of growing up as a Christian is becoming aware of all of one's sins. And there are many sins we willfully deny are ours, at least until God's grace makes us strong enough to face them. So there are times when our progress is a matter of becoming more aware of our sinfulness: this may not feel much like progress. But it is. For God cannot redeem what we steadfastly refuse to recognize as in need of redemption. Our feelings in prayer may tell us something about how the prayer is going, but they are notoriously unreliable as a straightforward gauge of how well we are really doing.

In practice, this means that we must resist the urge to judge our prayer by how it makes us feel. The temptation is constantly present. It is more a temptation for the present generation, since we are constantly encouraged to get in touch with our feelings. Feelings are fine. They can help or hinder prayer. Some knowledge of them is useful. But they are not the measure of prayer.

The way to avoid regarding them as such is to let God take the responsibility for your prayer. Hand over to Him day by day the burden of determining your progress, the burden of knowing what sort of prayer is best for you today, the burden of its true significance and quality. Let Him worry about it, and then you won't have to. After all, He is responsible for it even more than you are, since it is His initiative that got you started in the first place.

It is God who prays through us. We all too often think of prayer as our activity, something we do for God and in His presence. In fact, it is something He does in us and through us. He will not do it without our consent and cooperation. But neither can we do it without Him. This is very difficult to learn. We want to be active in our

prayer. We want to accomplish things -- spiritual things, to be sure. We are goal-oriented, in our prayer as in the rest of our lives. So we are constantly looking over our shoulders to see how far we have come, and at the same time constantly evaluating our prayer to see what works and what doesn't. The problem is that we do not have a good standard by which to judge our progress -- feelings won't do. And even if we had a standard, we have no place to stand to apply it to ourselves. We can grasp the principle that it is God who prays through us. But to implement it in our prayer takes a lot of practice.

That practice usually takes the form of our learning from our bouts with vanity and pride. When we succeed in our prayer: when we have a great insight or a real breakthrough spiritually, then it feels good. We have a sense of accomplishment. All our efforts are finally paying off. But as soon as we have thought that, we have fallen. We have taken credit for the success. In our pride, we betray the gift God has given us. Instead of recognizing it as His gift, given not because we deserve it but because He is generous, we claim that we earned it.

God remains generous, of course, and so He will not allow us to abide in the error of our pride. He will show us that we cannot produce such results on our own. For a time, it will seem that He has deserted us. The glow of the success fades. Soon we perceive that we cannot do it on our own. We then turn and see what we have done. We repent, and throw ourselves into God's loving arms, that He may do in us what we cannot do ourselves.

Most of us must go through this many, many times. The lesson is a hard one to learn, because it is based on success. The occasions of our success become the occasions for our pride. The only way we ever overcome this situation is through practice. And in His great mercy, God gives us the opportunities to learn the strength of His grace.

The point is that we do not pray on our own. It is God who prays in us. We need not therefore worry about how it all goes. We have only to give ourselves to it wholeheartedly, making sure that we are keeping open to what God has in mind for us. So long as we cling to that openness (which means rededicating ourselves to it over and over), we can leave the worry about how everything is going to God. And then we can get on with the work of praying, with simplicity and joy, leaving off all preoccupation with our progress.

✦

✦

✦