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Talking About God or With God?

“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”
—*Matthew 6:5-8*

Not long ago I read again in the well-known autobiography of Friedrich von Bodelschwingh the chapter in which he gives his account of the death of his four children one after another within two weeks, leaving the stricken parents in dreadful loneliness.

The thing in this account that affects one so deeply is not so much the terrible event itself, though any father who had little children of his own and saw them exposed hour by hour to the deadly menace of the bombing raids would surely be deeply moved by this account of the Grim Reaper's assault upon these innocent, hardly opened blooms of childhood.

Far more moving in this account is the way in which Bodelschwingh writes about the death of these four little children,

the way in which he tells how he committed each one of these beloved children to the fatherly hands of God and also how they too looked longingly to their Shepherd as "Jesus' little lambs."

In the last analysis what is it that is so moving in this story?

I think it is this: that even in the worst moments of this truly ghastly trial of faith Father Bodelschwingh never lost contact with God, that his childlike conversation with the Father in heaven never ceased, and hence that never for a moment did this conversation with God appear to yield to that dumb, leaden silence which many of us know from the darkest days of our life.

It can also be expressed negatively: it is true that Bodelschwingh said later that when this happened he learned for the first time how *hard* God can be; but nevertheless he apparently never asked "How can God allow such a thing to happen?" or "Why should God do this to me?"

That is to say that anybody who asks that question is no longer speaking *with* God, but only *about* God. What he is doing is making him the topic of a discussion, turning him into a matter of debate, the undertone and implication of which is expressed in words like this: "Let's just look at this God a little more closely. Is a person really expected to be able to believe a thing like that?" And then, of course, what happens is what happens in almost every debate: the subject is talked to pieces and God melts away in one's hands, choked to death in a lot of words—at least so far as he is *our* God.

Characteristically, this fearful moment of doubt and decide did *not* occur at this crisis in Bodelschwingh's life, for he did not talk *about* God and he turned the very dread itself into a prayer. And in this he was following the example of the crucified Savior. For even when Jesus cried out in the agony of death, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" this has nothing to do with the modern doubt, which sounds so

similar to it, because it too asks the question “Why” and yet asks it so differently. For in reality it only talks *about* God and cries out *about* God, and in that very act *cries him down*, so that he is no longer heard.

For even in this uttermost depth of trial the Crucified still addressed his Father in *prayer*: “My God, my God . . .,” and this cry of terrible torment is clothed in the words of the Old Testament. He spoke to the Father as it were in the Father’s own words. So close to the Father’s side is he even *here*—even in this extreme darkness when the face of the Father seemed to have vanished utterly.

Why do I mention all this? Simply because it teaches us to understand the opening words of our text. For it begins with the words, “When, or whenever, you pray. . . .” If I am catching the sense of this, Jesus is here alluding to the fact that our praying is not a matter of course, but that we talk more *about* God and would rather talk *about* God than *with* him. For what is referred to here is not merely a fixed time of prayer in the sense of “When the time of your hour of prayer comes, you should do so and so.” It is rather a *conditional clause*: if it should come to the point (come to the point *at all*) where you pray (even if this “at all” is as it were guaranteed by set rules and times of prayer), then you should do this or that.

Prayer is therefore not a self-evident, automatic thing. To say that we pray “always” and are “always” in communication with the Father is out of the question. With us prayer is more or less an exceptional thing. It is an event that occurs from time to time and, so to speak, requires definite conditions.

Why is this? Why is it that we have so much trouble with our prayer life, instead of finding in it the real substance and joy of our existence? Why is it that we have to *force* ourselves to keep company with the Father? Why is it that we are always so weary and indolent and that every silly newspaper, every vexation, or even every joy that comes our way is able to kill

or crowd out our prayers, until finally we only talk *about* God and after a time even stop doing that? For anybody who once makes of God a mere topic usually turns after a time to more current and immediate topics.

The reason for this lies in the fact that prayer is no longer the native soil of our life, our home, whose air we desire to breathe. The world is our home—the world and all that fills us to bursting, the worries about money and food; the letter we receive or have to write; the dissensions with our colleagues; the concern about getting ahead in our business or profession; the cramped quarters we live in; the nervous tensions; the sleep that overpowers us at evening or the sleep we miss, when forced wakefulness drives us, not into reflection, but only into nervousness; this world that consumes and hounds us, keeping us vibrating no matter whether it is moving or stopping. This world has become our home, except that it is incapable of giving us the security of home.

So we have this dislocated feeling that the world of prayer is a strange and alien place, that we therefore need some kind of a push, a resolution, a positive force, in order to muster up the desire to pray and to tear ourselves away from our home in the world.

How different was Jesus' prayer! When he came to men to preach and to heal he came out of the homeland of prayer. What he said to men he had first talked over with the Father. He came out of this prayerful contact with the Father, where he was really at home, into the alien country of this world. And look at the tremendous difference between Jesus and us: with effort *we* rouse ourselves out of the consuming concerns of the world—"Whenever you pray"; whereas Jesus lives in prayer and, just the opposite from us, comes from prayer and enters *into* the concerns of this world. Here we begin to see what is lacking, how deeply estranged we are from the *real* life. We are amazed to hear what Luther, following in his

Lord's footsteps, somehow managed to do. He prayed from three to four hours every day, and he tells us that the great fullness of his life's work came out of these hours of quiet, whereas *we* would think just the opposite, namely, that these hours would be lost from the day's work and that in any case we today could never afford this loss of time.

Could it not be that the truth is quite different from what we think with all our shrewd and modern way of looking at things? In any case, this is my experience: the shorter and more hurried our prayer time becomes, until finally it dwindles to a few seconds of reading the daily text, the more it actually becomes a burden, because these few seconds lack strength and savor, which means that they have no quietness in them and therefore no longer provide a sustaining foundation for the day—despite or just because of their brevity, which we think is so rational. This is the irony that mocks our rationalization of our prayer life and destroys it by the very means by which we try to salvage a tiny portion of our life for it.

We sober realists ought to be sober and realistic enough to know that this economy of time is deficit-spending economy; and in this vicious circle we grow more and more disinclined and averse to prayer.

When the devout man of the Old Testament offered an animal for sacrifice which was not free of blemishes his sacrifice was not accepted *at all*. The man who does not give to God the best hours of the day, the hours when he is most fresh and alert, but rather reads his mail or the newspaper first or indulges in his own pursuits, good or bad, which he thinks are more pressing, will receive nothing *at all* from his heavenly Father; he ought to keep his mouth shut altogether, because it will be shut for him anyhow.

Down underneath we also know very well that God does not have first place in our life—neither the first place in time at the beginning of the day nor the first place in the actual importance

he has for our life. That's why we think that certain conditions have to be fulfilled in order that we may pray. Among these conditions we include, for example, the stipulation that we must first have time and quietness (though it is just the other way around—it is only in praying that we get this quietness!); and also that we must be in the *mood*, for which again we need leisure and quiet and above all the stimulus of some kind of solemn ceremony (perhaps a Christmas or Easter service) or some great moment in our life. But anybody who sets up conditions for God is off the track from the start and again had better keep his mouth shut. God gives himself only when we put ourselves unconditionally in his hands.

And here our text gives us the decisive direction. All this waiting for devout moods or moments when our hearts are so full of care and fear that we can hardly do anything else but pray, all this waiting for such moments is brushed aside by Jesus' repeated *command* to pray.

I should think that this could be a real comfort to all of us when our prayer life breaks down. As we find again and again that we are not in the mood or that we have other thoughts in our mind, and besides—we know the old routine by heart—we have “no time,” there comes to us the command “*Pray*,” “Seek ye my face” (Ps. 27:8). Now it is simply the Christian's *service*, the obligation, so to speak, of his office as a Christian, that he should pray—an obligation which, in exactly the same sense as our daily work, simply disregards the question whether we are in the mood to go to work tomorrow: “A job is a job.”

And then, too, what a liberation this command can be when we are in a state of doubt and dispute with God, tormented by the thought that prayer may have no meaning at all, that—as Rilke once said in another connection—the whole thing is like calling on a telephone when nobody ever answers at the other end, that it is therefore utterly senseless to attempt to intervene by prayer in the natural, inevitable course of a disease like

cancer. Are not all of us staring, like a rabbit held spellbound by a serpent's eyes, into the dreadful fate in store for us in the atomic age, the massing clouds of great cosmic catastrophes that threaten to discharge upon our heads? Have not all of us, down in the secret corners of our hearts, become a bit fatalistic and so tend to forego the feeble gesture of prayer, which, after all, is only the whimpering of a child in a storm and does not avert the storm anyhow?

What a comfort it is then simply to be lifted above these doubts and hesitations by a command, just as a soldier knows that he is in duty bound by a command, even when he does not understand the command. Often we do not understand the mystery of prayer theoretically, and discussions about it are pretty futile. But we learn it in obedience and in the practice of it, just as we learn to understand the Lord better the more we follow him; and we misunderstand him more the more we insist upon understanding beforehand "why" this discipleship is justified and worth while.

So prayer is not a matter of our mood and inclination; it is a matter of a command. But we must remember that he who gives a command thereby assumes full responsibility for it. And Jesus gave the command. So we can take him at his word, and, as Luther said, we should "throw the whole sackful of his promises at his feet." We do not come merely in our own name—good heavens, who are *we*, we who are drunk with hope, plagued by fear, and undermined by doubt; how could *we* ever rise above this sea of madness, how could we ever break through this blockade in our life?—I say, we come, not in our own name, but in the name of the Lord Jesus. We come in his name, not only because he has commanded us to pray, but because through his death and resurrection he has made us again children of his Father and therefore has given us the right to speak as children and to trust in his suffering and death.

Then Jesus gives us still another indication of how little all this depends upon us alone and our mood. He says, "When you pray, go into your room and shut the door." This we visualize perhaps as a simple but solemn room, possibly furnished with a cross, a gold-edged Bible on a table, and a *prie-dieu*. But what Jesus means is the storeroom outside of the house, a very unsolemn and very unreligious and very prosaic place. This may indicate how unnecessary it is for us to climb up upon a special pedestal and reach a particular mood in order to find the Father. We can come just as we are—simply because God came to *us* first in the Christmas Child and because his coming too was very prosaic and unsolemn. There is only *one* respect in which the quiet room will help us to pray, and that is that we can be alone with God and that this aloneness will not be disturbed by pious play acting or by things and people, impressions and thoughts that press in on us from all sides. We should therefore in all earnestness see to it that we keep the hour of prayer undisturbed. There is nothing more wonderful than this hour of quiet. And the devil operates far less with doubts and evil thoughts than with the harassing maneuvers of petty trivialities. He works through haste and restless thoughts, through crowded conditions which make it almost impossible to find such a quiet place. And I venture to say that modern, urban man's lack of time and the overcrowded housing conditions provide the devil with more welcome opportunities than all the Feuerbachs and Nietzsches and anti-Christian propagandists put together. The quiet room is one of the most important strategic points in the confusion of our time; for he who has lost sight of *God* (and only here will he find him) no longer knows how to cope with the world. How can one structure a world when one has stopped up the springs of blessing and cut off communications with him who has overcome the world?

Then Jesus mentions still another, last difficulty about prayer

that disturbs our contact with God. It appears in our heaping up empty phrases like the pagans who think they will be heard for their many words.

Actually, the two most dangerous causes of disease in our prayer life are either that we use *too few* words because our contingent of thoughts and resolves runs out, having already been spent on people and things, or that we use *too many* words because we do not trust anything to God.

So it is elsewhere in life too: when a person who wants to obtain something from us uses a great plethora of words there are usually two possible explanations for his doing so.

The *first* is that he has a bad conscience and also has a lot to cover up with his many words. We have to watch out that he does not covertly bring us around to something quite different from what he so emphatically insists is his purpose.

So Jesus is quite right to distrust the pious talkers: may not they too be wanting something quite different from what they say? They declare that what they want is contact with the Father, his blessing and giving hand. But in reality they are not concerned about that hand at all, but as Walter Flex once said, only about the pennies in that hand. In their trouble or in their desires they want to *gain* something from him, they want him as a means to an end, and when he has helped them they run away, simply because the means has performed its function and is dismissed with favor or disfavor. It is of these people—are we among them too?—that Jesus was thinking with deep sadness when he said after the miraculous feeding of the five thousand (John 6:26): You seek me, not because you saw signs (i.e., you seek me, not because I revealed myself to you as your Savior in the miracle of the feeding and because you were given a glimpse into my heart and my loving concern for you), but because you ate your fill of the bread. No sooner are your stomachs filled than you forget me, and if you say a prayer of thanksgiving at all, your “Amen” sounds more like

“Boy, am I stuffed”! This is what you are trying to cover up with your many words. O you fools, seeking the gifts and not the Giver!

Was not Jesus talking about you and me when he said this? How passionately we prayed as the bombs whistled down upon our roofs and how feeble our thanks when the “All Clear” came! The reason for it was that we were concerned only about our little bit of life and not about his kindly heart, watching over us and stationing his angels like a guard around us.

It was probably because the person who prays is thus concerned first of all to gain contact with the Father and to reach out for his hand that the ancient prayers of the church were accustomed to begin with a long, detailed address. There was a time when I did not understand this and was even critical of it, for I felt that one would be so exhausted by these long addresses that one could hardly take in the real substance of the prayer. But perhaps now we understand what the fathers were trying to achieve through these “long-winded” addresses and why this may also give us a pointer for our own praying. The fathers were concerned not merely to express their needs and hopes in prayer, but above all to establish contact with that last court of appeal which they were approaching with these needs and hopes. Otherwise we may be all too apt to dwell upon the fears and hopes that fill our hearts and our prayer will never get us free from ourselves, because the “addressee” has never been found at all, indeed, has never even been approached.

Then there is a *second* explanation why a person may overwhelm us with a plethora of words when he wishes to gain something from us. His verbosity may be due to the fact that he *distrusts* us. He steps on the accelerator, as it were, in order to set us moving, because he thinks, rightly or wrongly, that we are too inert to move of ourselves. Or he may use a lot of words and graphic descriptions as tearjerkers in order to move us, because he thinks we have a stony and pitiless heart.

Or he may be desperately trying to make us understand his situation, because he assumes that we are uncomprehending and cold.

And this is exactly what Jesus says of those who “heap up empty phrases” in their prayers. They, too, step on the accelerator because they think they have to get things moving themselves, because they do not really believe that God has been thinking about us before we even began to think. They, too, work on the tear glands in their prayers, because they do not believe in the Father’s measureless mercy. What they are practicing is work-righteousness in the form of prayer.

And therefore because we are among these people who distrust God and cannot get away from our activism even in prayer and thus cannot bring ourselves simply to let ourselves *fall* into God’s hands, Jesus is calling out to us:

“Your Father knows what you need before you ask him. He is already there, even *before* your need comes. He is already there, ahead of the waves that threaten to engulf you. I, your Savior, am already there, before your sins; you have only to claim what lies ready for you to use. For the blessing and the help and the salvation are there, ready at hand. Don’t you see that all your efforts, your chattering of empty phrases, your crying is like battering down a door that is already open? Don’t you see what a terrible distrust this is of him who has opened the door and is waiting for you, as did the father of the prodigal son? What you are doing in these furious prayers is like writing threatening letters to your Father, telling him he is obligated to help you, when all the while this Father is thinking of you day and night and waiting for the first sign that you are willing to come home. When you know that someone loves you and is near to you, it does not require many words, but only a quiet sign, a glance, a little suggestion, and he will understand. Should it be any different with your Father? Your Father ‘who knows what you need before you ask him?’”

These are precisely the words that bring a great calm to our prayers. We do not need to utter any long and well-phrased speeches; God understands even a sigh or a groan. He also understands the crude and halting words—simply because he loves us and knows us better than we know ourselves. And the groans of a dying child of God, who can no longer speak and is already beyond the zone in which human words count, are more precious to him than all the calculating prayer-rhetoric of many a devout person and many a shrewd and “religious” worldling.

But all this is true only on one condition, and that is that we come in the name of him who taught us to pray in this way. How else could we ever arrive at the acceptance of the fact that a Father hears us, that he takes an interest in us, listens for our sighs, and desires to make his dwelling place in our poor chamber? The people who keep telling us Christians that it is presumptuous of us to bother God with our trivialities, that we are rating ourselves altogether too high when we do this and making of God an all too human person, these critics are actually right. If we did not recognize in Christ the fatherly heart of God; if we did not see in him that divine downward pull that keeps drawing God to broken and contrite hearts, to the poor in spirit, to widows and orphans, the sick and the destitute, in a word, to his lost and beloved children; if we did not know the dark night of the Cross, in which the Son of God allowed himself to be plunged to the abyss of hell, compared with which the most cruel depths of human woe are but as green valleys, *then*, yes, it would of course be better if we kept quiet, because it is more courageous to stand up and bear adversity than to console oneself with illusions and pious romanticism.

But this Savior *has* appeared, the door to the Father's house is open, and now nothing can separate us from the love of God.

I said a moment ago that we are commanded to pray, but having said that, this last thing must be added. Such a command

and task would be meaningless if the really clinching thing in all this were not the *gift*, which means that we are given to know that in Jesus Christ we have the joyful and indescribable surprise of knowing that we have a Father who loves us, that there is someone upon whom we can cast all our cares, that there are watching over us eyes that see all the misery and the longing, that there are ears listening to us that can interpret the sighs and groans.

“Out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord!” Yes, now I really can do this, since all this is true. Blessed be he who can hear us because he himself is beside us in whatever depths from which we may cry and pray! His ear is inclined to our voice and his heart is marvelously ready to hear, to understand, and to help “more abundantly than all that we ask or think.”

Don't you see: we are being called by name, and now we need only to answer, now we need only to speak out and cry out with all our strength, “Here I am!”

This answering to that *call*, which has already come to us—that's what prayer is.

And now let us trust with all our hearts that there is a Father who has called to us, and then stride bravely into the dark, never ceasing to call back to him, perhaps as Peter cried when he threatened to sink into the sea—that's what faith is.