



The Seven Secrets of Prayer



EASTER IS A TIME when churches are thronged with millions who come to worship, to rejoice, to pray. It is a time when prayer and its implications are brought into sudden, sharp focus.

In my research and writing on religion, I have explored these implications and have compiled what I call the seven basic secrets—one could call them techniques—of prayer. I would like to share them with you.

1. Prayer is not a question but an answer.

A young woman came to me not long ago in deep distress and anger. "I poured out my heart to God in prayer," she said. "I told Him all my problems. I asked for guidance—and absolutely nothing has changed!"

"But did you take time," I asked, "to listen to His answer?" She seemed startled. Further discussion revealed clearly she had not. She had been so intent on pouring out all her questions that she had failed to hear God's word to her.

We pray in affirmation and adoration; we seek His will for us, knowing that it is all good. And the prompting comes within us, in the morning of quiet, in the silence. Listen—for the answer is there.

2. Prayer is not a demand but a promise.

Promise of what? A promise to seek not for ourselves alone but rather to be channels of God's purpose.

One man prayed that he could be instrumental in ridding a neighbor woman of her brutish, drunken husband. One night when the husband was in a rage, the neighbor stormed into the house, threatened to thrash the husband, and told him, "I'm praying to God that she can get rid of you so I can marry her and give her some happiness."

Those knife-edged words ripped through the husband's alcoholic haze. The result was extraordinary; in the days that followed, the man began to reclaim himself and his marriage. The neighbor eventually moved to another part of town, without understanding how his prayer could possibly have resulted in this victory—for the husband.

3. Prayer is both a petition and a repenting.

At a party, a group of young "intellectuals" were discussing repentance. Several insisted that they had nothing to repent. An older man asked, "You mean you never did a thing you wanted to tell somebody you were sorry for?"

To tell somebody we're sorry! There are guilts that we pile up on ourselves, little items and big; these are the burdens that we seek to have lifted from us in our prayers.

4. Prayer involves awareness.

We must be aware that God's will for us is always the will of love, and we must realize that through Him even the impossible is possible.

During World War II, a friend of mine was shot down in the South Pacific. He and his crew were on a raft, trying to get back to an American-held island. It was night and moonless. Although they prayed the brief, silent prayers of such moments, rescue seemed beyond hope. Yet my friend was sure he would be rescued; someone would come, as friends had come back home on his farm in Alabama whenever he needed help.

They heard a plane, and by the engines they knew it was one of ours. Someone had a cigarette lighter. When the plane came closer, he lit it—and the night-flying amphibious patrol plane came down and made the rescue.

After my friend was taken aboard the rescue plane, he discovered that the pilot was an old school chum from back home in Alabama!

5. Prayer is most effective when it is offered for others.

Theologians warn that such prayers should never be used as a substitute for our own charitable actions—nor as a means of imposing our ideas or secret desires or judgments on someone else. But selflessly offered, intercessory prayer for others works miracles. In his *A Primer of Prayer*, Charles Laymon says, "It is love that gives significance to all praying, especially when we are lifting up others to God."

6. We should have a place apart for our regular prayers.

It may be a corner of our home or garden, or it may be in a church or temple when other peo-



At Easter, a noted religious writer offers helpful advice concerning an often-misunderstood subject

By WILL OURSLER



ple are not there in large numbers.

What is important is that it be a place to which you go; that it require a certain action, a definite active step toward God in going there, in bowing your head, in consecrating yourself.

7. Effective prayer is possible, particularly in emergency, under any conditions.

We can be in contact with the Infinite any time and any place. But the reaching out to God cannot be flippant or offhand; it cannot be a casual conversation en route from the hairdresser to the cocktail lounge. It must be deeply, earnestly, completely meant.

An intern in a New York hospital goes from bed to bed down the long aisle of the hospital ward each night and prays beside each bed. He tells no one in the hospital of this.

How much good he achieves cannot be measured. But he knows, as he has told me, that his prayers are heard.

A ticket vendor at a circus may pray effectively—so may a night-club dancer or an alcoholic on Skid Row. When a prayer is offered as a sacred thing, it does not go unheard.

Prayer in its highest state is communion with God. It is not asking nor demanding nor petitioning nor seeking. It is a listening, it is a welcoming of the Holy Spirit in ourselves, it is opening ourselves to the eternal response of His Kingdom.

All that we need, all that is right for us stems from this communion which is ours in prayer.

COVER:

This lovely church, photographed by Eric M. Sanford, nestles in Old Sturbridge, a reconstructed early-New England village in Massachusetts. It draws throngs yearly.

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