

Gregory of Nyssa (335-394), *The Lord's Prayer*

The Divine Word teaches us the science of prayer. Now, I make bold to add a little to what Scripture says; for the present congregation needs instruction not so much on how to pray, as on the necessity of praying at all, a necessity that has perhaps not yet been grasped by most people. In fact, the majority of men grievously neglect in their life this sacred and divine work that is prayer. For I see that in this present life men give their attention to everything else, one concentrating on this matter, another on that; but no one devotes his zeal to the good work of prayer.

It is the same with other occupations: the fact that the mind centers its attention on material, earthly things prevents the soul from devoting itself to the better, heavenly things. Thus it comes about that life is so full of sin, which is always increasing in growth and involved in all human pursuits; therefore everyone keeps forgetting God, and men do not count prayer among the good things worth pursuing. Covetousness enters together with trade; but covetousness is idolatry.

For a person who does not unite himself to God through prayer is separated from God. Therefore we must learn first of all "that we ought always to pray and not to faint." For the effect of prayer is union with God, and if someone is with God, he is separated from the enemy. Prayer is intimacy with God and contemplation of the invisible. It satisfies our yearnings and makes us equal to the angels. Through it good prospers, evil is destroyed, and sinners will be converted.

It is clear that in order to obtain our desires we must learn how we ought to pray. What, then, are we taught about it? "When you are praying, do not babble as the heathens." Which advice, therefore, does this passage give us? That in the time of prayer we should not allow such things to enter as passion puts into the mind of fools. In the same way the man who makes prayer without being properly taught, will not lift himself up to the height of the Giver, but wants the Divine power to descend to the mean, earthly level of his own desires. Worst of all, they want to move the Divine towards contrary desires, they would divide the power of God into two, namely into savagery and lovingkindness. On the one hand they want Him to be gracious and gentle to themselves, on the other hand they ask Him to show Himself hard and bitter to their enemies.

Now the human soul cannot be alienated from God except through a mind enslaved by passions. For as the Divine Nature is altogether impassible, a man who is always entangled in passions is debarred from union with God.

"Our Father." For this is the force of His words, that we should learn by them not to pronounce certain sounds and syllables, but the meaning of the ascent to God which is accomplished through a sublime way of life. So first my mind must become detached from anything subject to flux and change and tranquilly rest in motionless spiritual repose, so as to be rendered akin to Him who is most perfectly unchangeable; and then it may address Him by this most familiar name and say: Father.

[The one who prays] would have learned that the Divine Nature, whatever It may be in Itself, is absolute goodness, holiness and joy, power, glory and purity, eternity that is always absolutely

the same. If he has any sense, he would obviously not dare to call God by the name Father since he does not see the same things in himself as he sees in God.

If someone who is “dull of heart” and “seeks after lying,” as the Scripture says, yet dares to use the words of the prayer, he should know that he does not call the Heavenly One his Father, but the infernal one, who is sin and the father of sin. It seems to me that God would say to such a man something like this: You, whose life is corrupt, call the Author of incorruption Father? I do not recognize the image of my nature in you. Your characteristics are the complete opposite of mine. There can be no intercourse between Him who is merciful and him who is cruel. The evils that are in you have another for their father; for my offspring are made lovely by the goodness of their Father.

We should always look at the beauty of the Father and fashion the beauty of our own soul on His. “There is no respect of persons with God,” says the Scripture. The Divine is pure from envy and from all stain of passion. Therefore let no such passions defile you, neither envy nor vanity nor any of those things that would pollute the Divine Beauty. If such is what you are, you may boldly address God by a familiar name and call the Lord of all your Father.

Therefore if I pray “Hallowed be Thy Name,” I ask that these words may effect in me things such as these: May I become through Thy help blameless, just, and pious, may I abstain from every evil, speak the truth, and do justice. For a man can glorify God in no other way save by his virtue which bears witness that the Divine Power is the cause of his goodness.

“Thy kingdom come.” So if we ask that the Kingdom of God may come to us, the meaning of our request is this: I would be a stranger to corruption and liberated from death; would that I were freed from the shackles of sin and that death no longer lorded it over me. The passions cease to be troublesome when *apatheia* has appeared; death is undone and corruption is no more when life and incorruption reign in us unopposed.

“Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” As our enquiry progresses, it comes to the very peak of virtue; for the words of the prayer outline what sort of a man one should be if one would approach God. Such a man is almost no longer shown in terms of human nature, but, thorough virtue, is likened to God Himself, so that he seems to be another god, in that he does things that God alone can do. If a man imitates in his own life the characteristics of the Divine Nature, he becomes somehow that which he visibly imitates. If we approach the Benefactor, we should ourselves be benefactors; if we go to Him who is good and just, we should ourselves be the same. Because He is forbearing and kind, we should also be forbearing and kind, and so with all other things. For He is benign and gentle, He communicates good things and dispenses mercy to everyone—to all these qualities and whatever else we may see in the Divine Being, we should be assimilated by our free will.

[Otherwise] he might hear from the just Judge words such as these, “Physician, heal thyself.” You ask to have debts forgiven, how can you strangle your debtor? Your debtor is in prison, while you are in church? Your prayer cannot be heard because the voice of him who suffers is drowning it. If you will remit the material debt, the bonds of your soul will be loosened; if you pardon, you will be pardoned. You must be your own judge, your own lawgiver.