

Meister Eckhart (1260-1328), *Talks of Instruction, Sermons and Fragments on Prayer*

You will never hear an obedient person saying: “I want it so and so; I must have this or that.” You will hear only of utter denial of self. Therefore, in the best prayer that man may offer, he will not say: “Give me virtue or a way,” nor “Yea, Lord, give me thyself or life eternal,” but only, “Lord, give me nothing but what thou wilt and dost—Lord, what and how thou wilt in every detail!” This excels the first prayer as heaven the earth; and when one has achieved it, he has prayed well.

The strongest prayer, one well-nigh almighty in what it can offer, and the most exalted work a man can do proceed from a pure heart. The more pure it is, the more powerful, and the more exalted, useful, laudable and perfect is its prayer and work. A pure heart is capable of anything. What is a pure heart? A pure heart is one that is unencumbered, unworried, uncommitted, and which does not want its own way about anything, but which, rather, is submerged in the loving will of God, having denied self. Let a job be ever so inconsiderable, it will be raised in effectiveness and dimension by a pure heart. We ought so to pray that every member and faculty, eyes, ears, mouth, heart, and the senses be directed to this end and never to cease prayer until we attain unity with him to whom our prayers and attention are directed, namely, to God.

Meister Eckhart said: I shall never pray that God give me himself. I shall pray that he make me pure; for if I am pure, God must give himself and dwell in me, because it is his peculiar nature to do so.

Having a pure heart turned toward God, even if he never prayed aloud, a man would be all right; for the heart is not made pure by prayer as a physical act, but rather the prayer is made pure by the pure heart.

The only true and perfect will is the one that has been merged with the will of God, so that the man has no will of his own. And the more so it is, the more the man himself blends into God. Indeed, a single Ave Maria, said in the spirit of self-denial, is worth more than a thousand Psalms read without it. Indeed, one step taken in surrender to God is better than a journey across the ocean without it.

I pray all day as God directs: “Thy will be done.” And yet when God wants suffering, I complain that it is wrong. So I say certainly, that God suffers gladly, with and for us, but that he suffers without anguish when we suffer only for his sake. Suffering is then bliss to him and gives him no agony. If, therefore, we were what we should be, we should find in suffering, not anguish, but blessing and comfort.

It is my custom to say—and it is a fact—that every day we shout and plead in the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy will be done!”—and when his will is done, we grumble and are not pleased with it. Whatever he does, we should be glad, and those who are will always live in peace.

To walk through the fields and say your prayers, and see God, or to sit in church and recognize him, and to know God better because the place is peaceful: this is due to man’s defective nature and not to God. For God is equally near to everything and every place and is equally ready to

give himself, so far as in him lies, and therefore a person shall know him aright who knows how to see him the same, under all circumstances.

For truly, if you imagine that you are going to get more out of God by means of religious offices and devotions, in sweet retreats and solitary orisons, than you might by the fireplace or in the stable, then you might just as well think you could seize God and wrap a mantle around his head and stick him under the table! To seek God in rituals is to get the ritual and to lose God in the process, for he hides behind it. On the other hand, to seek God without artifice is to take him as he is, and so doing, a person “lives by the Son” and is the Life itself.

Know too that when you seek your own, you never find God, for you are not seeking him with purity of heart. You are seeking something along with God and you act as if you are using God, as if he were a candle with which one might look for something else and, having found it, one might throw the candle away.

Meister Eckhart asks: Who is the man whose prayers God always hears? He answers: God hears the man who appeals to God as God. When, however, man appeals to God, hoping for some worldly good, he is not appealing to God at all, but to what he is asking God for. He is trying to make God his servant. On this point, St. Augustine says: “You pray to what you love, for true, whole prayer is nothing but love!” Thus we pray to what we love and no one rightly prays to God but he who prays for God and has nothing on his mind but God.

Some people want to see God with their eyes as they see a cow and love him as they love their cow—they love their cow for the milk and cheese and profit it makes them. This is how it is with people who love God for the sake of outward wealth or inward comfort. They do not rightly love God when they love him for their own advantage. Indeed, I tell you the truth, any object you have on your mind, however good, will be a barrier between you and the inmost truth. The just man loves God for nothing, neither for this nor for that.

When I pray for something, I do not pray; when I pray for nothing, I really pray. . . . To pray for anything except God might be called idolatry or injustice. Right prayer is prayer in spirit and in truth. When I pray for some person such as Henry or Conrad, I pray least, but when I pray for no one in particular, I pray most of all. Really to pray, one must want nothing, for as far as God is concerned there is neither Henry nor Conrad. When one prays for what God is not, there is something wrong and faithless about the prayer and it is a sign of immaturity. As I said not long ago, when one puts something before God, he makes God nothing, and nothing God.

This is the way they pray who do everything lovingly, solely for the love of God, careless of their own convenience and pleasure, and bowing humbly before him, they let God alone act. These pray without ceasing. The prayer of the lips is ordained for Christendom only that the soul may be gathered in from the senses, through which it is scattered in a multiplicity of perishable things. When it is collected in the highest agents, that is, the intellect, the will, and memory, it is spiritualized, for when the spirit clings to God in a complete union of will, it is made divine. Then, for the first time, it is really praying, for at last its goal has been reached—the goal for which it was created. We were created only for God and that is why we were created in his image. Not to achieve oneness of spirit with God is to fail to be spiritual!