

# The Lion

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## The Uselessness of Prayer

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**B**EFORE I am drummed out of church as a heretic or carted away as having finally (some would say predictably) lost my wits, I must say that I am not suggesting that all prayer is useless. I merely want to look at one way in which prayer can be useless.

Certainly most people have had the experience of praying to God for some specific purpose and discovering that that specific purpose was not achieved. The sick person for whom we prayed was not healed; the alcoholic was not freed from his addiction; the new job offer fell through; the dysfunctional marriage ended in divorce. No need for me to list the kinds of things we all can point to as prayers that seem to have served no purpose, prayers that were, in a word, useless. And I am speaking here of sincere and proper prayers, not of merely formal or half-hearted attempts at prayer. Our Saviour's Gethsemani prayer "Let this cup pass from me" was not answered with a divine Yes.

On the basis of such "useless" prayers, many become discouraged in prayer and some turn away from prayer permanently. But in fact no prayer, if it is genuine and from the heart, is truly useless. All prayers are answered – we have to remember that "No" is an answer, even if not the one we want or expect. The effect of all genuine prayer may never be known or seen by us in this life, but it is absolutely real and always powerfully effective. All of us – and particularly

those who as monks and nuns dedicate themselves more fully to a life of prayer – need to be reminded of this and heartened by the knowledge that no true prayer is ever wasted or lost.

The well-known preacher and author Ronald Knox once observed that when a little girl prays, genuinely, for a new doll, the whole world is changed. For true prayer is not so much about what we ask for, but what we permit God to do with us in and through our prayer. Because we are all members of one body, what happens to one member affects the health and well-being of every member and of the whole body.

In genuine prayer – prayer in which I open my heart and mind to God to dispose of me as he will – God uses our openness as a conduit through which grace and power flow into the body of mankind, infusing it with new life and strength, healing its wounds, giving it new energy for the present and future.

This is absolutely real – so much so that we have to add that our failure to pray – to make ourselves open to God for his grace

– is not a merely personal failure, but a new wounding of the whole body, a failure to let ourselves be a vessel for healing power, a selfish refusal to be a willing and available instrument of God's work. If the world is changed by the prayer of a little girl for a new doll, it is surely changed too – for the worse – by our failure to pray or by our half-heartedness in prayer.

Recently, on the tenth Sunday after Pentecost, we heard the Gospel of the Pharisee and the Publican praying in the temple. The Pharisee's prayer, full of energy and sentiment and words, was not in fact a prayer at all. The man had an agenda that consisted merely of informing God of various "facts" about the man's life – things which may well have been true: the Pharisee may have been a generous giver, non-adulterous, far more respectable than the poor Publican slumped over in the back of the Temple. The parable does not even suggest that the Pharisee is a bad man; he may be – we just don't know or have any grounds to assume so. But he is certainly not a man who knows how to pray.

How does he fail in this? First, he has morally and spiritually isolated himself from the body of which he is in fact a member, united to it in whatever suffering and misery of which it is part. And he thanks God for this putative separateness: "I thank thee that I am not like the rest of men." Even if he is not in fact guilty of the sins he mentions, he certainly is like the rest



John Woolley assists Fr. John in the consecration of the Cemetery at St. Laurence this summer prior to the burial rite for Richard Thomas Woolley. Rest eternal grant unto him, O Lord. And may light perpetual shine upon him.

of men – fallen, alienated from God, subject to sinfulness and death. And he is blind to this brotherhood, this membership in sinful humanity. Blind to it, insensitive to its needs, he closes himself off in a world of sheer self, under the illusion that God is in that ego-space. His “prayer” has nowhere to go, has no real purpose other than to inform God of his achievements. He has no concern for the needs of any one other than himself. He has asked for nothing. His “prayer” begins and ends with himself. It is in every sense of the word useless, for he has given God neither room nor opportunity to work through him.

What of the prayer of the poor Publican? His prayer begins and ends with the realization that he is a sinner – one with all of sinful humanity. And in that deeply organic bond, that flawed human brotherhood to which Christ has joined himself by his enfleshment, the Publican prays for the one true gift that sinful humanity (himself, you, me) really needs – mercy, immense mercy, unfathomable mercy. That is a prayer that the God of all mercies cannot fail to answer. And so through the Publican’s seemingly meager and repetitive prayer (forerunner of the classic “Jesus Prayer”), the mercy and love of God enter the world through a newly opened portal and the world is changed. You and I are changed. The mercy flows forth for all men, though not all men will accept it or be open to it. The Pharisee, in the hermetically sealed capsule of his ego/self, can know nothing of the torrent of grace streaming down and all around him, through the ministry of the humble Publican.

It is that torrent of grace that flows through us whenever we truly open ourselves to God in prayer, a torrent that reaches endlessly beyond the little arena of our selves and flows forward and backward in time to the utmost reaches of creation, watering and nurturing deserts and bringing them to bloom and flourish as God wills and seeks them to do.

Measured by the standard of getting what we ask for, much prayer may indeed be useless, for we don’t always get what we ask for. But if our prayer is genuine, and we truly open ourselves to God, with the simple trust of a puppy or kitten exposing its soft and vulnerable belly to be rubbed and fondled, knowing that it will receive from its master nothing but love in return, we – and the entire body of suffering mankind – receive a healing infusion of life, grace and divine mercy. May God give us all that sure and loving trust in his goodness and good will toward us. §