

Prayer, Part 7

This article will take up 2 other very related topics in prayer: prayer intentions and petitionary prayer.

Petitionary prayer, prayers where we are asking God for something, could be considered a sub-category of the topic of prayer intentions. It is perhaps an especially fitting time to take up petitionary prayer given last weekend's second reading from the letter of St James. Recall the last few verses from that reading:

“You do not possess because you do not ask [i.e., pray]. You ask but do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.”

St James (the Apostle) says this in the context of talking about wisdom. More specifically, he contrasts “false wisdom” with real or true wisdom. Aquinas points out that real wisdom is knowledge or understanding about the cause of things. In other words, true wisdom knows: 1) the true purpose of something – or the end goal, you might say – and 2) how to bring it about (its causes). Why false wisdom, or false anything? Anything that is truly good (wisdom, for example), anything that leads a person to their true good, is the enemy of Satan and the other demons, it is the enemy of temptation, it must be attacked. Now the tempter cannot just take it from you, he must convince you to give it up, and this swindle often (if not always) involves offering you some fake imitation. It's like waving a bright shiny piece of glass in front of you, trying to get you to give up a huge diamond in trade for the trinket. Sound dumb? Ah, but he is *very* good at it.

St James is bringing out one of these swindles: a fake imitation of real wisdom, where real wisdom knows real purpose and how to bring it about. Real wisdom knows the true final end that man is meant for – ultimate, irrevocable happiness called Heaven – and what's needed to bring it about. James contrasts the fake imitation with the real thing. There are 2 characteristics of fake wisdom, in particular, that St James (under Divine Inspiration) brings out that are especially relevant to prayer – in fact, he himself says they are relevant to prayer, that's the above quote. One is that the fake wisdom is earthbound. A person who embraces fake wisdom thinks almost entirely, if not entirely, in terms of getting things for this life and this world. True wisdom says that cannot be the purpose of this life, that cannot be man's true end, because all of that is temporary, transitory, gone with one last breath. True wisdom says: Jesus claimed to be God and gave ample evidence that in fact He is. And *He* said 1) that there is another life beyond this one, something far greater than this life, far greater than what we can even imagine; and 2) the purpose of this life is to reach that true destiny. Fake wisdom, once again, says: hey, hey, forget that, look at this shiny thing that I have for you; look at the here and now; wisdom is a matter of knowing how to get what you want here and now; see how smart you are, how much smarter you are than that knuckle-dragger over there who nobody thinks anything of, who's not a pillar of the community like you, who's not as successful you, and on and on. This leads directly to a second important characteristic of fake wisdom that St James mentions: it is “unspiritual.” These 2 characteristics of fake wisdom are so tightly connected that they are really one thing. True wisdom says: character, integrity, real virtue – these are first and foremost, they are the cause(s) that bring about the true end; these are “spiritual” goods. What James means by unspiritual is that the fake wisdom is irrationality, fake wisdom says don't use your mind to seek, just blindly follow your blind passions – feelings, emotions, desires. Some of the principle passions are anger, fear, and pleasure. Just satisfy those. The passions are not intrinsically evil, they were created by God for a good purpose. But they were disordered by original sin. What that means is that they now direct us away from our true, ultimate good. So, of course, fake wisdom encourages us to follow them blindly. Somebody cuts you off in traffic – follow your desire to give that dirty blankity-blank piece of your mind, or even run that cuss off the road. Hey if it feels good, do it. This is fake wisdom – the satisfaction of my immediate desires.

We have spent a fair amount of time laying out this fake wisdom – in the context of prayer. Is it worth it? Our Lord, through His servant James, says it is – hence the above quote from James. St James is saying that if we embrace fake wisdom, our so-called prayers will be fruitless. It is saying that for prayer to really bring about our good, we have to embrace true wisdom. We cannot be earthbound in our thinking, we cannot simply be seeking to satisfy our own immediate desires. We cannot be treating God like a gumball machine or a genie in a bottle who is just supposed to satisfy my every whim and desire (whims and desires disordered/misdirected by original sin); such a thing is not prayer.

Let us take one example of praying with real vs fake wisdom, namely prayer in times of suffering, loss, trials, and tribulations. First of all, it is not wrong to ask our Lord for deliverance from pain, either for ourselves or others. Our Lord Himself taught us this in the Garden of Gethsemane. But the prayer of the wise man and the fool (one who has embraced fake wisdom) will be different. The best Scriptural example of this might be the two thieves who were crucified with our Lord. St Dismus, the “good thief” said: Lord, remember me when you enter your Kingdom. He was wise, his thinking was not earthbound. The other said: yes, use your power to get us down from here and out of here. As Bishop Sheen said, he just wanted to get back to the dirty business of thieving; his “thinking” was entirely earthbound; he asked for deliverance so he could get back to satisfying his passions. The wise man might say: Lord, if not be against your good will, deliver me from this trial, but his first prayer, and his consistent prayer, will be: Lord, please help me: 1) to remain steadfastly with you, and 2) help me draw out of this whatever good You want it to bring about. He seeks character, integrity, virtue above all.

This brings us back to petitionary prayer. The guiding rule is to seek the highest and greatest things first and foremost, to pray, to ask, to seek with real wisdom. It is not wrong to ask for material *needs*, in fact we should. But if it’s better for us to do without some material thing, the wise man will be fine with that while the earthbound will give up in disgust. If they have any belief in God, it will now turn to anger towards Him.

Petitionary prayer can be for ourselves or for others. Sometimes people get the mistaken notion that they should not pray for themselves, that it is somehow selfish to do. This might flow from having a mixture of true and fake wisdom. In any event, not to ask God for the grace needed to become holy – deliverance from vice and growth in virtue – is like saying I don’t need God, which is not love of God or of neighbor.

Perseverance is often needed in truly wise petitionary prayer. St Monica is a prime example of this. For 20 years she pleaded with our Lord for the conversion of her son, Augustine – now known as St Augustine, Father and Doctor of the Church. Augustine, prior to his conversion, once said to his mother that they could be together perfectly if only she would lay down this stuff about Catholicism. Monica informed him, in no uncertain terms, that they could “be together” when he yielded to conversion. Of course St Monica wanted very much to be perfectly and peacefully united with her son. But she was wise and did not allow herself to be controlled by her own desires, nor did she allow anyone else, not even her own son, to manipulate her by using her desires. Our Lord often allows the need for perseverance for the good of the person persevering. As one perseveres, their desire grows more intense and with that comes greater gratitude and greater love. If our Lord seems to delay, He does it only for our good. In petitionary prayer, do not look for results, it will kill your perseverance. Your role is to pray wisely, leave the results in His good and all-knowing hands.

In the space left, let us return to the more general topic of prayer intentions. Petitionary prayer should not be the only prayer intention we have. Sometimes people will parse prayer out as being of 3 or 4 or 5 kinds and say things like there is petitionary prayer, thanksgiving, adoration (or worship), praise, and maybe others. These could be called prayer intentions. It is of course true that these are all good and even necessary prayer intentions. There is some value in pointing these out insofar as we should not be neglectful of any of these. If we never have gratitude to God, for example, there is something wrong. But gratitude for what? For my new pickup, or a good job, or for other goods of this life? Well yes, maybe, but what happens when all of those are taken away? Do I realize my sinfulness and have gratitude for His mercy? Am I grateful for the Mass? But even more to the point that I would like to come to here is that if I set out in too mechanical of a way to do each of these – something like: ok, first I am going to give thanks, then I am going to adore, then ... -- I will probably end up not really praying at all. These other prayer intentions or types of prayer will often occur during the course of real prayer like meditation. If I am contemplating our Lord’s Passion, for example, and it really strikes me what He has done – I will say: I am so sorry for my sins Lord, please forgive me (petition), thank you for your mercy (thanksgiving), you are a stupendously good Lord (praise). However, even this is not yet the main point that I want to come to here. The fundamental purpose of prayer is to know and love the Lord, and this is the basic intention that needs to pervade all our prayer. “Praying always” by praying first thing in the morning and thus offering everything from the day to the Lord puts this intention first. This is the most basic of all prayer intentions: to love the Lord. Don’t let it escape you. God bless you, Fr Kuhn.