

How to Pray When You're Out Of Words

C.S. Lewis

Of the two difficulties you mention, I think that only one is often a practical problem for believers. The other is, in my experience, usually raised by people who are attacking Christianity.

The ideal opening for their attacks, if they know the Bible, is the phrase in Philippians about making your request known to God. I mean, the words “making known” bring out most clearly the apparent absurdity with which they charge us.

We say that we believe God to be omniscient, yet a great deal of prayer seems to consist of giving Him information. And indeed, we have been reminded by our Lord, too, not to pray as if we forgot the omniscience. “For your Heavenly Father knows you need all these things.” This is final, against one very silly sort of prayer. I have heard a man offer a prayer for a sick person which really amounted to a diagnosis followed by advice as to how God should treat the patient.

And I have heard prayers nominally for peace, but really, so concerned for various devices, which the petitioner believed to be means to peace, that they were open to the same criticism.

But even when that kind of thing is ruled out, the unbeliever's objection remains. To confess our sins before God is certainly to tell Him what He knows much better than we. And, also, any petition is a kind of telling. If it does not strictly exclude the belief that God knows our need, it at least seems to solicit his attention.

Some traditional formulae make that implication very clear. “Hear us, good Lord. Oh, let Thine ears consider well the voice of my complaint.” As if, though God does not need to be informed, He does need, and even, rather frequently, to be reminded. But we cannot really believe that degrees of attention, and therefore of inattention, and therefore of something like forgetfulness, exist in the Absolute Mind.

I presume that only God's attention keeps me, or anything else, in existence at all. What, then, are we really doing? Our whole conception of, so to call it, “the prayer situation,” depends on the answer. We are always completely, and therefore equally, known to God. That is our destiny, whether we like it or not. But though this knowledge never varies, the *quality* of our being known can.

A school of thought holds that freedom is will necessity, never mind if they are right or not. I want this idea only as an analogy. Ordinarily, to be known by God is to be, for this purpose, in the category of things. We are, like earthworms, cabbages, and nebulae, objects of divine knowledge. But when we, A, become aware of the fact — the present fact, not the generalization — and, B, ascent with all our will to be so known, then we treat ourselves, in relation to God, not as things, but as persons. We have unveiled — not that any veil could have baffled His sight — the changes in us, the passive changes, to the active. Instead of merely being known, we show, we tell, we offer ourselves to view,

To put ourselves thus on a personal footing with God could, in itself and without warrant, be nothing but presumption and illusion. But we are taught that it is not, that it is God Who gives us that footing. For it is by the Holy Spirit that we cry, “Father.” By unveiling, by confessing our sins, and making known our requests, we assume the high rank of “persons” before Him and He, descending, becomes a “Person” to us.

But I should not have said, “becomes.” In Him there is no “becoming.” He reveals Himself as “Person,” or reveals that in Him which is “Person.” For, dare one say it, in a

book it would need pages of qualification and insurance. God is in some measure to a man as that man is to God. The door in God that opens is the door He knock at. At least I think so, usually.

The “Person” in Him — He is more than a person — meets those who can welcome, or at least face it. He speaks as “I,” when we truly call Him “Thou.” ...

This talk of “meeting” is no doubt anthropomorphic, as if God and I could be face to face like two fellow creatures, when, in reality, He is above me, and within me, and below me, and all about me. That is why it must be balanced by all manner of metaphysical and theological abstractions. But never, here or anywhere else, let us think that, while anthropomorphic images are a concession to our weakness, the abstractions are the literal truth. Both are equally concessions, each singly misleading. And the two together mutually corrected.

Unless you sit to it very lightly, continually murmuring *not thus, not thus, neither is this Thou*, the abstraction is fatal. It will make the Life of Lives inanimate and the Love of Loves impersonal. The naive image is mischievous, chiefly in so far as it holds unbelievers back from conversion. It does believers, even at its crudest, no harm. What soul ever perished for believing that God the Father really has a beard?

Your other question is one which, I think, really gets in pious people’s way. It was, you remember, how important must a need or desire be before we can properly make it the subject of a petition. Properly, I take it, here means either without irreverence or without silliness or both. When I thought about it for a bit, it seemed to me that there are really two questions involved.

One. How important must an object be before we can, without sin and folly, allow our desire for it to become a matter of serious concern to us? This, you see, is a question about what old writers call “our frame,” that is, our frame of mind.

Two. Granted the existence of such a serious concern in our minds, can it always be properly laid before God in prayer?

We all know the answer to the first of these in theory. We must aim at what — St. Augustine is it? — calls “ordinate loves.” Our deepest concern should be for first things, and our next deepest for second things, and so on down to zero, to total absence of concern for things that are not really good nor means to good at all. Meantime, however, we want to know, not how we should pray if we were perfect, but how we should pray being as we now are. And if my idea of prayer as unveiling is accepted, we have already answered this. It is no use to ask God with factitious earnestness for A when our whole mind is in reality filled with the desire for B. We must lay before Him what is in us, not what *ought* to be in us.

Even an intimate human friend is ill-used if we talk to him about one thing while our mind is really on another. And even a human friend will soon become aware when we are doing so.

You yourself came to see me a few years ago when the great blow had fallen upon me. I tried to talk to you as if nothing were wrong. You saw through it in five minutes. Then I confessed, and you said things which made me ashamed of my attempt of concealment. It may well be that the desire can be laid before God only as a sin to be repented. But one of the best ways of learning this is to lay it before God.

Your problem, however, was not about sinful desires in that sense. Rather, about desires intrinsically innocent and sinning, if at all, only by being stronger than the triviality of their object warrants. I have no doubt at all that if they are the subject of our thoughts, they must be the subject of our prayers, whether in penitence, or in petition, or

in a little of both. Penitence for the excess, yet petition for the thing we desire. If one forcibly excludes them, don't they wreck all the rest of our prayers? If we lay all the cards on the table, God will help us to moderate the excesses.

But the pressure of things we are trying to keep out of our mind is a hopeless distraction. As someone said, no noise is so emphatic as one you are trying not to listen to.

The ordinate frame of mind is one of the blessings we must pray for, not a fancy dress we must put on when we pray. And perhaps as those who do not turn to God in petty trials will have no habit or such resort to help them when the great trials come. So those who have not learned to ask Him for childish things will have less readiness to ask Him for great ones.

We must not be too high-minded. I fancy we may sometimes be deterred from small prayers by a sense of our own dignity rather than of God's.