



Ask, Father James:

What is the difference between “praying prayers and “saying prayers”?”

When we pray, are you really praying or just saying prayers? For instance, when we say the grace before meals, are we just saying the prayers or are you praying in thanksgiving to God? Another good example is when we get into the habit of just saying the Lord's prayer. If we deeply pray the Lord's Prayer, we would discover that it is an invitation to enter into Gethsemane with Jesus. At Gethsemane, Jesus prayed; “Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done” [Luke 22:42]. I must have read that verse or heard it a hundred times before without seeing or hearing what it means. Maybe I didn't want to see it. But then one day I saw it. It just knocked me in the head. This, I thought, is what is meant by “thy will be done” in the Lord's Prayer [Matt 6:10], which I had prayed time and again without thinking about it.

When we pray prayer, we get “knocked in the head” and we can see the resemblance of Jesus' prayer in our prayer. Church figures who exemplifies how to pray prayer include Antony the Great, Augustine of Hippo, Basil the Great, Benedict of Nursia, Bernard of Clairvaux, Ephrem Syrus, Gregory the Great, Isidore of Seville, Jerome, John Cassian, John Climacus. They advised that Prayer should not be long and wordy (Matthew 6:7), but it should certainly be frequent and fervent, and frequent and fervent prayer requires proper preparation; reminding us that God is offended by prayer that is rash or imprudent. They advised that the best way to learn to pray is “to do all that we do for the love of God and when we pray, to separate ourselves at the time we have set aside for prayer from all visible things, and to exclude from our senses, our imagination, our memory, our understanding, as well as from our heart, everything that is not God.”

When we say our prayers, we are manufacturing the words. Prayer is not something manufactured by the mind, but a voice and a cry from the heart. When we say prayers, we can seldom connect with this God but when we pray the prayer, we connect with God who in his infinite power chose the physical presence of Jesus Christ becoming human and pitching his tent among us to be present to us. His name is "Immanuel" - "God is with us" in no matter the situation we find ourselves in. This is what is meant by the “theology of presence.”

Thus, praying prayer means having a close relationship with Christ. Through the strength of this relationship, one in turn is in the position of becoming Christ to others. Therefore, one must learn again and again to pray. This is why God invites us to pray using God's intimate name: Abba (Father). Prayer disconnects our attention from false gods and broadens our attention on the world around us, looking for the arrival of God, who announces himself by speaking to us and calling us to pray Prayer. As a matter of fact, it is often those who pray who hear God speak. Jesus links it explicitly with three typical practices of spirituality - almsgiving, fasting, and prayer “whenever you give alms” (Mt. 6:2), “whenever you pray” (Mt. 6:5), “whenever you fast” (Mt. 6:16). These three must come together and if this is not the case, one's prayer will be barren and ineffective.

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