Prayer: A Love Affair with God

Forget the formulas; just pour out your heart to the One you love.

Pastor Eddie Ildefonso

"I need help with prayer!" The voice coming through my telephone receiver was one I did not know, though the urgency within it was unmistakable. A stranger had called me long distance to confess his need for assistance in praying.

Caught off guard, I told the man that I would be glad to try to help but that I was not sure how beneficial I could be to him. He interrupted my comment, explaining, "I have heard some of your prayers when you were ministering in my country. I want you to tell me how to pray."

Not quite sure how to continue the conversation, I urged him to be honest with God about his feelings and thoughts, his needs and desires. Once again, the fellow interrupted me. "No. You don't understand," he said with a sense of hopelessness in his voice. "I want you to tell me exactly what to say to God. I want to write down your words and use them as my prayer."

I told the caller that I could not form words for him. I urged the man to pray to God in his own words.

The following day, the same man telephoned again. After politely thanking me for our previous discussion, he told me that he still needed help. "I know you can't speak for me. So, I want to describe several different situations to you and then hear what you would say to God in a prayer if you found yourself in each of these sets of circumstances. Speak slowly because I want to write down your words."

"Why are my words so important to you?" I asked, wanting to know the motivation behind this unusual request. "I told you," he responded, "I have heard some of your prayers. I believe God hears what you say. I want God to hear and answer my prayers. So, please tell me what to say to God and how to say it."

At this point, I made a mistake. I yielded to his request and gave him specific words and phrases to use in prayers related to a variety of situations. But I failed to speak with this man about what he needed most—an understanding of the nature of prayer.

My error was an honest one. Until that time, my primary thoughts about prayer centered on tangibles—should I say "Thou" or "You"; is it best to sit, kneel, or stand when praying; by what title must I address God; with what words should I conclude my prayer; is my prayer too long or too short? Since that point in my life, my dominant thoughts about prayer have changed. With invaluable assistance—some from God and
some from other people—I have come to a new understanding of prayer and how to pray. The understanding is only new to me. It is as ancient as the revelation from God in the Bible.

**Those Helpful Metaphors**

The biblical writers used personal experiences and their own cultural background to help them form images to describe God. They borrowed images from the world around them in an effort to communicate the nature of God. Thus, they described God as a rock, a father, a king, a shepherd, and a judge. Each of these images contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of God.

Jesus, too, spoke of the nature of God and God's rule by means of stories, similes, and analogies. He borrowed Old Testament depictions of God, as well as introduced new insights into the nature of God: divine physician, bridegroom, bread, light, door, and vine.

The inspired writers of Scripture knew that we can best understand spiritual realities by means of tangible images. We can best talk of a relationship with the God beyond us by drawing from the dynamics of interpersonal relations around us.

**The Metaphor of a Love Affair**

The metaphor of a love affair proves most helpful to me.

A right relationship with God involves falling madly in love with God and nurturing that love to grow and mature. To pray to God is to speak freely and intimately to God within the security of that loving relationship. The conversations of a love affair comprise the content of prayer.

Lovers do not need experts to tell them to spend time with each other or talk to each other regularly. As a matter of fact, it seems like that's all either one of them ever wants to do. People in love try to begin and end every day by making contact with each other and talking together about whatever is on their minds.

Occasionally, moments come when words fail them. In such situations, lovers sit together in silence sharing trembling emotions, exciting thoughts, profound concerns, and fragile dreams. They enjoy each other's presence and share a quality of communion which cannot be matched by whispers or shouts. The silence between them is not a void—a sign of emptiness—but a place where their spirits meet and their lives touch, a bridge across which their love for each other travels to new depths.

Eventually, lovers know each other so well that either one of them can pretty well anticipate what the other will say, think, or feel in every situation. Such knowledge and intimacy do not shut down conversations between them, however. Rather, the joy of a shared life prompts even more communion. In bad times and good times, with laughter and with tears, lovers articulate the obvious, as well as disclose the mystery of their faith, needs, assurances, and requests.
The affections, trust, devotion, honesty, intimacy, and freedom that characterize the relationship between lovers characterize the content of an individual's prayers to God. Meaningful prayer looks very much like the ceaseless communion between two people caught up in a love affair.

The Biblical Use

I wish I had been the first to think of using the love affair metaphor to describe humanity's relationship to God. But that is not the case.

Eight centuries before the birth of Christ, a spokesman for God named Hosea described a troubled love affair in which the fidelity of God stood in sharp contrast to the infidelity of Israel. Hurt erupted. And sometimes anger. But God's love for Israel never wavered, not even when Israel behaved as a harlot. God, the betrayed Lover, steadfastly exhibited mercy and grace by pursuing the beloved and reaching out to assure her that their love affair could continue.

Several other Hebrew prophets used the same imagery in their writings. Isaiah likened Israel's relationship to God to a marriage (Isaiah 54:5–6). After writing of Israel's early devotion to God as the love of a bride (Jeremiah 2:2) and of the nation's subsequent disobedience to God as adultery (Jeremiah 3:1–16), Jeremiah captured the true identity of God as Lover and conveyed the incredible depths of this love (Jeremiah 3:12; Jeremiah 31:3).

Throughout Jesus' ministry, He frequently referred to God in terms of love, speaking of God's love for the world and every person in it (John 3:16). The tenderness and all-embracing concern of a love affair can be seen as Jesus describes God's sensitivity to a fallen sparrow and awareness of the number of hairs on each individual's head (Luke 12:7).

The Apostle Paul chose the image of a love affair to describe the relationship between Jesus and the Church. In the love song that appears in Ephes. 5, Paul identifies Christ as the loving Bridegroom and the Church as Christ's beloved Bride.

The new meaning, freedom, and intimacy that I have found in prayer spring from the ministry of this metaphor in my life. My prayers to God stem from a realization of God's love for me and take form as an expression of my love for God. The understanding and practice of prayer center upon and invite you into a love affair with God.

Misperceptions of Prayer

Failure to understand prayer in this manner often leads to misperceptions or misplaced priorities. Most common are:

Mechanical Prayer: Some folks view prayer mechanically. They make effective praying depend upon following a carefully prescribed set of procedures. They approach God in prayer in much the same manner as they begin to put together the parts in a make-your-own-bicycle kit. They follow step-by-step directions!
When viewed mechanically, praying to God means meeting certain requirements. It might be a matter of finding the right place and choosing the proper time to pray. It might mean assuming one particular physical posture and adopting a specific mental attitude. Some people feel they must pray according to a predetermined sequence. They must move, point by point, from adoration of God to intercession for other people, and they require that an appropriate amount of time be devoted to each part of the prayer. Stated or implied, the claim is, "Follow these directions and your prayers will be effective."

**Magical Prayer:** Another common perspective on prayer dangerously flirts with magic. Advocates of this point of view guarantee that certain words and actions get a good response from God. Therefore, prayer requires that meticulous attention be devoted to choosing one term over another and forming phrases in a precise manner.

Tragically, this misunderstanding of prayer tends to reduce important phrases like "in Jesus' name" and "through Jesus Christ our Lord" to the status of an abracadabra-type formula that is guaranteed to "work." When their prayers don't "work," frustrated individuals often complain, "I used all the right words, but nothing happened."

Meaningful prayer is neither magical nor mechanical. It is personal and spiritual. Meaningful prayer is the honest talk that occurs between two lovers.

**Questions about Prayer**

Understanding prayer as communion within a love affair radically alters answers given to the questions that dominate most discussions about prayer. In fact, such an understanding of prayer renders these questions virtually irrelevant.

"**How do you define prayer?**"

I don't. Neither does the Bible. The Scriptures commend, command, invite, and describe prayer. But the Bible does not define prayer.

Traditionally, religious leaders speak of prayer as communication with God. **Communion** may actually be a better term. Communication implies an exchange of words and logic. Often a prayer consists of nonverbal outcries that are far more emotional than rational. The substance of prayer is communion with God—what John Killenger calls "the act of being with God."

Prayer starts and ends with God the Lover. We pray because God invited (and commanded) us to pray and then made it possible for us to meet this divine expectation. Thus, prayer is a gift—a gift from the loving God which, when properly received by the beloved, becomes that person's reciprocal gift of love to God. In this sense, prayer is the language of a love affair.

"**How should I address God?**"

In the Bible, God is addressed in a variety of ways. No one title for God is superior or "right." However, the words with which people address God ought always to convey a reverence born of love.
Jesus most frequently spoke of God as Father, sometimes joining the word for father in one language with the same word in another language—"Abba, Father." A redundancy of intimacy! In every instance, Jesus addressed God with terms indicative of tenderness, compassion, and closeness. For Jesus, God was the essence of love.

I find that variety in how I address God helps me avoid falling into a thoughtless routine.

Sometimes I begin a prayer with "Our Father." But I also acknowledge God in other ways: "God of Creation and Redemption"; "God of Life and Death"; "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob"; "God of Sarah, Rachel, and Ruth"; "Great and Good God"; "God of Revelation and Inspiration"; "God of Faith and Hope"; and "Loving God."

I must confess that sometimes I rush into prayer so hurriedly that I fail to employ any formal mode of address for God. You can do that with your lover, you know. When we urgently need to speak to God, all we have to do is begin speaking—no prelude, no words of address, no hesitations. God is already listening.

"Must every prayer conclude with the same words?"
No. No one phrase is sacred (or magical). No one conclusion to prayer has been divinely established. A study of the prayers that appear in the New Testament reveals a wide variety of endings to people's communiqués to God.

"What kind of language should I use?"
The language that one lover would exchange with another is the language of prayer. No need exists to be more specific than that because no one can tell someone else how to articulate their love. No two people have to pray alike.

"What is the proper physical posture for prayer?"
Another mechanical question. The meaning of prayer is not determined by proper mechanics, but by personal authenticity.

Many people prefer a position conducive to meditation when praying. They may recline in a chair or sit on the floor. Throughout history, the greatest intensity in prayer has been associated with a person lying completely prone on the floor while praying.

The most important consideration is that a person be himself. The "proper position" is the one which most contributes to concentration on communing with God. At times, expressions to a lover erupt so naturally and spontaneously that no thought is given to the place or posture of prayer.

"How long should I pray?"
How long should lovers talk to each other? Neither brevity nor great length is a virtue. Most crucial is an individual taking whatever amount of time he needs to unload his heart before God and to hear God's response.
"Does prayer really work?"

Often this question comes first. Actually, it is a bad question. Prayer is not a utilitarian practice aimed at achieving an accomplishment. Neither is prayer an exercise in which a person gets exactly what he asks for if he takes great care to state the request properly.

Prayer is communion with God. The value of prayer is prayer! To ask if prayer works is to misunderstand the nature of the experience. It's like asking, "Does love work?" or "What do you get out of talking to the one you love?"

Prayer as Loving Communion

In our conversations with God, we need not be preoccupied with the logistics, language, and organization of our concerns. We need only speak to God with absolute candor and a total lack of inhibition. Prayer is an invitation to speak to the One who loves us beyond measure about anything and everything in our lives, in any way and in every way, without the least fear of God's rejection of us or a diminishment in God's compassion for us.

Praying is one dimension of being in love—being in love with God.