

Dear Parents and beloved children of our Parish,

We last spoke on some fundamental methods and implementations of prayer in our daily lives. These, however, do not fully answer why we need to pray. We gloss over this question as we assume we know the answer. Yet, it might be instructive and beneficial to all of us, for the leading Orthodox theologian of the English-speaking world, Metropolitan Kallistos, to offer us His insight on the subject. His answers are both surprising and shockingly obvious. The relevant part of His interview begins with a question and develops as follows:

Q: "Prayer is something we hear so much about today, and it sounds for many people simple; there are many books on the shelves about it. But often when we actually try to do it, it becomes difficult. So, why is such a fundamental thing, so hard to do at times?"

METROPOLITAN KALLISTOS WARE: Yes, indeed, it is difficult. I agree with you. But before I begin to make some comments on that, I'd like us to turn to a more fundamental question. What do we mean by prayer? And, at the outset, I think of the words of St. Paul. "Pray without ceasing." (1 Thessalonians 5:17) Paul's words make it sound even more difficult.

Now, what is prayer? When I was twelve years old, I heard a sermon about prayer. The preacher mentioned how there was an old man who used to spend long time each day in church. His friends asked him, "What are you doing?"

And he said to them, "I'm praying."

"Praying?" they said. "You must have a great many things you want to ask from God."

And the old man replied with some warmth of feeling, "I'm not asking God for anything."

"Well," they said. "What are you doing then, all those hours in church?"

And the old man replied, "I just sit and look at God. And God sits and looks at me."

Now, when I was twelve years old, I thought that was rather a good definition of prayer. I just sit and look at God and God sits and looks at me. Prayer is not necessarily asking for things, though it may sometimes be that. It does not necessarily mean using words. Fundamentally, prayer means "God awareness."

St. Gregory of Nyssa speaks of prayer as a sense of presence. God awareness. The realization that I am in God and God is in me. And this can be something all embracing. That's why St. Paul says, "Pray without ceasing." It can be something that's present in everything else we do—a sense that God is with us. So that prayer is not necessarily just an activity set apart. It's something that can be intertwined with the whole of our life.

Now, if we look at prayer that way, why is it so difficult? To me, the answer is we humans are scattered. We're fragmented. We find it very difficult to be gathered. To be concentrated, single-pointed. We suffer from wandering thoughts. I remember reading once in the Reader's Digest the following apothegm: the people who get things done are the people who do one thing at a time. And I thought, how true! But then I also thought, that's quite difficult—to do one thing at a time. And certainly it's difficult in the case of prayer. This fragmentation that I speak of is not something that we've deliberately desired for ourselves. I suppose it is a consequence of the Fall. But this means that, in prayer, what is asked of us is regularity, persistence, faithfulness.

It's a strange paradox. When something isn't very important, it's not so difficult to concentrate. When we're watching television we don't suffer particularly from an inability to concentrate and attend to what's happening. If we're reading a serious book, a biography, or a piece of historical writing, then the concentration is more difficult, but it's not so hard. Prayer, which is the most important thing of all, then the concentration is hardest of all.

He does know what's going on. He does see into our hearts But He wants us to tell Him. He wants us to bring it into the open, to be honest with Him

And this would bring us to another point about prayer. The aim of prayer is not to change God's mind. It is to change our mind. Some people say, why pray to God? He knows what is best for us. Why don't we just leave it to Him? That's true, He does know what is best for us and we don't know. But, by praying, we are not so much making God agree with us, but, through prayer, we are helped to make ourselves agree with God." (End of interview segment)

In prayer we remain in a constant state of training on how to approach God despite our shortcomings and sins which contradict His nature and activities. We learn to be earnest, consistent, persistent and humble before our Father and ultimate creator ridding ourselves from all things warping our nature. This training creates imperceptible changes which become apparent only after the passage of many years. Hopefully, the presence of God, and our persistence in praying, our communion with Him, will change our lives making us His worthy sons and daughters.

In Christ

Fr. N. Galanopoulos