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If you've had similar experiences as I, you may have found how oftentimes in prayer, either public or private, people change their voices and stretch their words, as if talking to some unknown, powerful being a million light years away. Their voice may fluctuate and they may sound as though they were giving a speech or trying to convince God to do something. This, my brothers and sisters, is not to be defined as prayer.

Contrary to a lot of religious examples, prayer need not be just some mystical, superspiritual activity. Simply put, prayer is conversation between Father and child.

Have you ever noticed how a child comes and talks to his mom or dad? You never need to look for a dictionary to find out the meaning of the words children use. They come just as they are. They come simply. You will never find a child getting into a frenzy and fluctuating his voice as he talks. All you will hear is a small voice, in simple conversation, looking up into the mom's or dad's eyes.

One of the most exhilarating experiences for me is when I get a chance to hear a little child pray. It will make you both laugh and cry at the same time. Read some of these prayers from children:

Dear Lord,

Thank you for the nice day today. You even fooled the TV weatherman. Hank (age 7)

Dear Lord,

Do you ever get mad? My mother gets mad all the time but she is only human. Yours truly, David (age 8)

Dear Lord,

I need a raise in my allowance. Could you have one of your angels tell my father? Thank you, David (age 7) 1

In Matthew 18:3, Jesus turned to the disciples gathered around Him and taught them an important lesson: "Unless you . . . become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven." The way a child prays, in simplicity and trust, is the perfect portrait of prayer.

When we look at the prayer of Jesus in John 17, we find the same picture. Jesus was never closing His eyes and praying in a different tone of voice. In fact, we are told that "Jesus . . . lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said: "Father" (John 17:1, emphasis added).

What a beautiful portrait of His relationship with the Father! Through this example, Jesus was showing us that prayer is simply talking to God—not just as the almighty Creator of the universe, but as the caring, lovesick Father who waits for His child to come, a Father who delights to be with His children.

Come Just as You Are to the Father

We have need to remember this through our days. So easily we can forget that the Father loves us just as He loved Jesus. Then, instead of coming to Him because of whom He is, we are kept at bay, consumed more with who we are or are not.

I believe the enemy has numerous tactics to keep us from praying because he knows that it is the greatest way for the kingdom of God to expand. He also understands how our hearts and perspective on the situations of life are changed through prayer.

Perhaps you are one who truly desires to pray, yet when you do, you are soon bogged down with all the ways you fail, remembering how you aren't matching up to the spiritual person you want to be, until eventually all motivation to pray is lost in guilt.

Our Father in heaven knows us. And I believe that is why Jesus told the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15. Although it is often taught with the emphasis being on the prodigal son, I believe Jesus was trying more to paint a clear picture of our God and Father.

He [the prodigal son] arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. And the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son."

But the father said to his servants, "Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." And they began to be merry (Luke 15:20-24).

I share this with you because I know how easily guilt can keep us from talking with our Father. Please see how the father rejoiced at his son's return. Instead of reprimanding him, punishing him, demanding he say sorry or make some sort of restitution, the father embraced his son, rejoiced and even called for a celebration. Remember this promise: "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:15-16, emphasis added).

So then, let us pray, remembering whom it is we call Father and realizing that prayer is coming to Him and listening to what He has to say. Prayer is waiting before Him and meditating long enough in His presence until our hearts are touched and moved with His concerns and burdens, so that we become channels for Him to work through.

Prayer is our willingness to say no to our own desires and accept suffering in the flesh to experience the pain and agony the Lord feels for the events and people in our generation.

Prayer is our willingness to join with the unseen Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane and experience His pain and heartbreak for a world that is lying in utter darkness, plunging into eternity to perish forever.

Prayer is standing in the gap on behalf of the needy and hurting, asking the Father to heal and to save before it is too late (see Ezekiel 22:30).

E.M. Bounds said it perfectly: "Prayer is the outstretched arms of the child for the Father's help."

The Nearness of God

So then we see that prayer has less to do with words and posture and more to do with intimacy and closeness, like a child has with his father or mother.

The nearness of God is not determined by space and time, but rather by the inner relationship and intimate fellowship we have with Him in our hearts.

Just the other day, I was meeting with a few of my coworkers in the ministry. Before we started to discuss some things we were dealing with, I said, "Let us pray."

Gathered in my office and sitting in our chairs, I began to pray, "Lord, You are the One who promised that when we gather like this You will be with us. Right now we are here because of You and in Your name. We are Your sons and daughters."

All of a sudden, I felt like we should have another chair in the room because Jesus was certainly present with us. In my mind, I did not want Jesus standing somewhere while we were all sitting down. You see, in my Asian culture, it is terribly impolite and unacceptable for a subordinate to sit while there is a superior standing. This is why when a superior walks into a room everyone stands up until the superior sits down and asks for everyone else to please sit as well. This thought came to my mind, and I prayed right in the middle of it, "Lord, I feel like we should have a chair for You because You are right here with us." In fact, Jesus assured us that "where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20).

In all of our prayers, whether private or public, let us have this attitude and frame of reference for sharing our prayer: We are talking to a Father who is closer to us than our own thoughts. He is near, so near that no words can describe it.

In Psalm 73, we read of a godly man who, in the midst of tremendous discouragement and inner struggles, finally recognized the nearness of God. After all was said and done, he cried out saying, "The nearness of God is my good" (Psalm 73:28, NASB). His prayer is no longer directed to somebody far away, but to someone who is near to him. It is the understanding of this that changed his view on the situations of his life and even changed his own heart.

Let us then remember that when we pray there is no reason we should close our eyes and imagine some strange being far away. Rather, let us have the honest attitude of a little child talking to his father.

I believe the Lord is so delighted when we approach Him with a childlike heart, sharing our concerns and burdens with Him in this manner.

Tell God all that is in your heart, as one unloads one's heart, its pleasures and its pains, to a dear friend. Tell Him your troubles, that He may comfort you; tell Him your joys, that He may sober them; tell Him your longings, that He may purify them; tell Him your dislikes, that He may help you to conquer them; talk to Him of your temptations, that He may shield you from them; show Him the wounds of your heart, that He may heal them; lay bare your indifference to good, your depraved tastes for evil, your instability. Tell Him how self-love makes you unjust to others, how vanity tempts you to be insincere, how pride disguises you to yourself and others.

If you thus pour out all your weakness, needs, troubles, there will be no lack of what to say. You will never exhaust the subject. It is continually being renewed. People who have no secrets from each other never want for subject of conversation. They do not weigh their words, for there is nothing to be held back; neither do they seek for something to say. They talk out of the abundance of the heart, without consideration they say just what they think. Blessed are they who attain to such familiar, unreserved intercourse with God.³

Notes:

¹ Bill Adler, *Dear Lord* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1982).

² E.M. Bounds, *The Complete Works of E.M. Bounds on Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990), p. 231.

³ Francois Fenelon, quoted in *The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart* by Charles R. Swindoll (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 1998), p. 309.