

It is an interesting request that the disciples have of Jesus: “Lord, teach us to pray.” At first glance, this might seem like a strange request because praying, it seems, should be second nature to us. It doesn’t seem like we should need to be taught how to pray, and yet we do – we do need to be taught how to pray. I don’t mean just taught the words of prayer, like when we learned the Hail Mary as kids. I mean taught to pray. So where do we start?

We should start where Jesus started: “Father.” When we pray, by beginning with a call to the Father, we come into the presence of God, or better put, we make ourselves aware of the presence of God. This is important because there are many distractions in life, both necessary distractions and unnecessary ones. So this is the first thing about prayer. The first thing that Jesus teaches His disciples about prayer, and the first thing that He is teaching us about prayer – to open ourselves to the presence of God. No matter what kind of prayer we are saying, no matter what way in which we are praying – to open ourselves to the presence of God.

And not only that, but to open ourselves up to the presence of God as children – “Father.” So prayer begins with an opening of ourselves to God with humility and reverence as a child to a father. This is where prayer begins.

Well, I’ve talked for 5 minutes already and haven’t even got off the first word. I believe it was St. Teresa of Avila who said that we could meditate our whole life on the Our Father and not exhaust its meaning.

So moving on, what is the goal of prayer? If your answer is to ask things from God, I would say that is not correct. Now I’m not saying that we shouldn’t ask things from God, of course, but the goal of prayer is communion with God. Communion with God makes us very happy because when we commune with God, God fills our hearts and souls with Himself. That brings us great joy and peace and stirs up a burning love for God within us. When we commune with God, God fills our minds with light so that we recognize more fully and love more deeply the truth, the teaching of the Church and the scripture, and this also brings us joy.

So the goal of prayer is communion with God, but one might say, “Well, I’ve engaged in prayer but I’ve never experienced this communion.” There are things that can hamper this communion with God in prayer.

First is mortal sin. God does not enter the soul that has driven Him out by mortal sin, and while a person is in a state of mortal sin, communion with God in prayer is impossible. One in this state must repent and seek God’s forgiveness in the Sacrament of Confession. Then the relationship with God can begin anew and God will seek once again to deepen His presence in the cleansed soul.

The second thing that can hamper this communion with God in prayer is lack of attention to prayer. The life of prayer is like any relationship, it takes time and effort. So the one who only offers a few bedtime prayers a couple of times a week cannot expect that a prayer relationship

with God will blossom into a growing communion with God. The person simply isn't allowing God the time or opportunity to allow communion with God in prayer to grow.

This same dynamic can happen in the person who has come into a dry time in their spiritual life, a time when God seems far, a time when it is very difficult to pray. When we are in this situation, we are tempted give up on prayer way too easily. God calls us to persevere. In dry spiritual times, perseverance helps us to grow and to gain spiritual maturity. If we give up prayer during the dry times, no growth happens and then deeper communion with God also cannot happen. So in the dry times, we must persevere in prayer, never giving up and allowing God to give us spiritual maturity even though the process can be interiorly painful.

Finally, communion with God is hampered by our general human weakness. St. Paul says, "For we do not know how to pray as we ought." He goes on, "The Spirit helps us in our weakness." So when we pray we should call on the Holy Spirit to help us to pray and the Holy Spirit will help us to open our hearts more fully to God and will assist us to draw more deeply into communion with God.

In the communion of prayer with God during our earthly life, we can begin even now living the life of heaven where we will have perfect communion with God for all eternity.

Given by Father Mark Gurtner at Our Lady of Good Hope Catholic Church, Fort Wayne, Indiana, on the 17th Sunday of Ordinary Time, 2013.