

Prayers Are Always Answered

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When we were youngsters, we all envied Aladdin.

What wonderful luck that chap had! First he finds himself a wishing ring, and then he stumbles on to a wonderful lamp, and both times things begin to happen.

He rubs the ring and up pops a jinnee. "I am the slave of the ring," cries the monstrous but benign figure, "and whatever you command I shall do."

A little later, when he polishes the lamp, an even more powerful jinnee puts in an appearance, and anything that his master wishes is instantly fulfilled.

Lucky Aladdin! Every boy and every girl that ever read his adventures dreamed that some day they would stumble over a ring or find in some alley junk heap a wonderful lamp, and the simple process of rubbing vigorously and insistently would mean that all their wishes were going to be realised.

Wishing.

That is why, as youngsters, we went around eternally wishing. We wished on loads of hay. We wished on red-headed girls and white horses — a simply miraculous combination that meant certain luck. We watched for the first star, and when it appeared, we cried out:

"Star light, star bright,

First star I've seen tonight,

Wish I may, wish I might,

Have the wish I wish tonight"

Then we kept strict silence until we had made our wish and looked around to find the second star that established the charm.

Besides, every one of us who ever met the charming characters of the fairy tales was sure that some evening a fairy godmother would arise out of the darkness. Cinderella had one, and so had Prince Charming. So why not we? Our fairy godmother would cry: "You may have one wish, and only one wish. But whatever that one wish is, I shall fulfil it perfectly."

One Only Wish.

One wish, and only one wish! What possibilities that opened! We hesitated whether we should ask for a solid-gold piano studded with diamonds or the beauty of Cinderella herself (if we were girls); we hesitated between a complete baseball outfit and the strength of Hercules (if we were of the masculine conviction). But only one wish. That was so limited!

Then a sudden inspiration came to us. It is the same inspiration that comes to every boy and girl, and every boy and girl thinks it completely original. We realised we could combine the limited

generosity of the fairy godmother with the limitless possibilities of the magic ring or lamp. We'd fool 'em!

When the fairy god-mother finally did appear, we would put it this way: "Did you say I could have one wish, and only one wish? Then this is what I wish: 'I wish that henceforth everything that I wish shall come true'."

Nothing could be more satisfactory than that.

Alas, and very sadly alack, we never found the ring, nor did we stumble on the lamp. While fairy godmothers were so numerous in the fairy tales that they tripped over one another's wands and got into one another's spells, none came fluttering into our lives. No. And no fairy queens, either; and no dwarfs to whom we gave a glass of water, and who rewarded us with jewels that popped out of our mouths every time we uttered the most commonplace statement. (Most of us were not sure that that was an unmixed blessing. Imagine making some simple remark over the soup, and being obliged to fish two or three diamonds and a half-dozen rubies from among the alphabet noodles!)

Now, fairy tales are, experience teaches us, remarkably true. As life goes on they have a way of becoming realities. They are the stories that men built up out of their desires. And God does not give right desires, even desires that may seem a little selfish, without meaning in some way to fulfil them.

Sudden Light.

So one day it suddenly dawns upon every follower of Christ that he wears a wishing ring on his finger. More than that, he comes to the astounding, but entirely pleasurable, realisation that this "wish that every wish he wishes come true" is quite within the realities. Yes, he wears a wishing ring, and we can be certain that every wish properly made will be fulfilled.

The most instinctive gesture when one wants something very badly is to fold one's hands. As one pleads for a thing, one rubs those hands together feverishly. In real distress, one wrings one's hands violently.

Well, when a man folds his hands in prayer, rubs them feverishly together as he pleads with God, begs so hard that he actually seems to wring his hands, he can actually believe that he wears a wishing ring upon his finger, and that what he prays for will be infallibly granted.

Certainty.

For attached to prayer is a promise that makes real and certain our desire that everything we wish comes true. Attached to prayer is the glorious promise made by Christ, a promise to which we pay so little attention, even though it actually is the fulfilment of our child-like dream, a dream from which, as a matter of fact, we never wake.

"Whatsoever you ask the Father in My Name," said Jesus Christ, "He will give you."

That is the most remarkable promise that God on earth could have made. Equivalently, it is as if Christ had said: "On your finger I am placing a magic ring. Rub it through devout prayer, and your wishes will be fulfilled." It is like the appearance of Christ as an incredibly powerful benefactor who says with a vast, sweeping inclusiveness, "Henceforth, anything that you ask you may be assured with certainty will be yours."

Christ Insists.

Christ evidently meant to be insistent on this power of prayer. He wanted to reassure a doubting world that God was more anxious to fulfil the wishes of men than men actually were to present their wishes to Him. He seemed to insist that all that was lacking was man's willingness to ask. About the Heavenly Father's willingness to give there could not be the slightest doubt. Would men ask?

So, elsewhere, He repeated on more than one occasion: "Ask and it shall be given you . . . that your joy may be full." He used other comparisons. He begged us to knock so that the welcoming door of God's generous House would be opened to us. He instructed us to seek for what we want; if we sought it where all riches are to be found, in the great heart of our generous Father, we would find all we are looking for.

And Smiles.

Indeed, Christ, on one occasion, seems to have treated the subject with delightful humour. It was as if He thought the importance and value of prayer so worth stressing that He would point it with laughter. He tells the story of the well-to-do householder who turns in for the night. His doors are locked. His cupboards are closed. He is deep in his first slumbers, and all his servants are safely tucked into bed.

But his next-door-neighbour has had an unexpected guest. The visitor is fresh from the road, and, consequently, hungry. Unfortunately, the neighbour finds himself without even a loaf of bread to slice for his uninvited guest. So he comes to the door of his well-to-do friend and pounds for admittance.

We can imagine the sleepy man awakened by the noise of the pounding. He rolls in annoyance and tries to sleep. The noise continues. Finally, in anger, he gets up and leans out of an upper window. The neighbour explains that he simply must have some bread. The aroused householder glares at him and shouts back the quite obvious answer: "Don't you see that the house is locked and my servants are in bed, and you've just pulled me out of a deep sleep? No; I will not go down, open up my chests, rummage around in the dark, and get you and your bothersome guest food. Not at this hour of the night. Now get away and let me sleep!"

Whereupon he stumbles airily back to bed.

Persistence Wins.

With amusing persistence, the neighbour declines to give up. He has come for those loaves, and he's going to get them, no matter what the man thinks. So he pounds again. This time the householder is furious. He rises and threatens violence. Again he climbs into bed, and we can imagine him pulling the bed-clothing up over his ears. No use. The neighbour continues to pound, to hammer on the door with his fist, to demand the bread, to make sleep impossible for both the householder and his servants, until, in sheer desperation, the sleepy man gets out of bed, fumbles with the lamp, crawls down the dark stairs, gets out the loaves, opens the door, dumps them into the waiting arms of his neighbour, and cries: "Get off, and let me sleep!"

Triumphantly, the neighbour, his arms filled with loaves, marches home. If he couldn't get his friend to give the food out of friendship, he had made it so uncomfortable for him that he gave it for the sake of peace and a little sleep.

Bother God.

There was, we can be quite sure of it, a smile on the lips of Christ as He drew the conclusion: "If you, being evil, do these things, what shall your Father, being good. . . ."

And it is not likely that any of the listeners ever forgot Christ's suggestion that, when they wanted something badly enough, they were wise to keep pounding at the gates of heaven until they got what they wanted. Christ seemed, with delightful humour, to urge them, if need be, "to bother God."

Christ So Acted.

That was the theory of prayer as Christ laid it down again and again in His teaching. His practice as the generous God-man Who gave His beloved brothers and sisters anything they might need, even if it was His life's blood, was a continuous confirmation of His teaching. The most obvious fact in the whole Gospel is that no one ever asked Christ for anything without getting an immediate response. "Lord, my servant is ill." "I will come and heal him."

"Lord, my daughter lies sick." "Take Me to her." Lepers silently stood by the wayside asking for a cure. They received it. Nicodemus came by night asking for truth. He went away, his mind filled with the most glorious truths. The multitude on the hillside looked up at Him hungrily; He fed their souls with the glorious Sermon on the Mount, and then fed their bodies with the multiplication of the loaves and fishes.

Only once did He seem even to hesitate. That was when the pagan woman sought a cure. He feigned for the moment to turn away, as if unwilling to grant her request. But she knew His Heart. Perhaps she had even, from the outskirts of some crowd, heard His delightful parable of the householder roused from sleep and angrily slinging at his neighbour the bread he demanded. She pressed Him. She kept on begging. He needed only one more request. The miracle was hers, and the cure had been wrought.

Certainly, if the life of Christ indicated anything, it indicated very clearly that Christ was far more eager to give than men were to ask. This is significant, for we know that the life of the Saviour was lived in fulfilment of just what He knew His Father wanted Him to do.

The Certain Power.

With years in the practice of one's religion there grows a deepened belief in the power of prayer. At first we accept on faith the promise that whatsoever we ask will be given to us. Gradually we get to feel that it is a truth we can prove from experience. Prayer is infallibly answered: that is all there is to it. People pray, and God listens. People present their needs, and God removes those needs. They place their requests at the feet of God, and God grants them.

Contest.

In fact, a man who prays gets to feel a little like one of the characters in Sir J. M. Barrie's charming book, "The Little White Bird."

David, the little boy, is with his guardian in Kensington Gardens. David's young friend is playing with him. They are jumping, each trying to outdo the other. The improvised athletic contest interests the guardian, who finally says:

"I'll give a shilling to the boy who jumps the farther."

They both grit their teeth, exert their young muscles and jump. David jumped quite a bit farther than his little friend.

David looks embarrassed. He wants the shilling very much indeed. But he holds back his hand. Then he shakes his head vigorously.

“Sorry, sir, but I can’t take it. You see, sir, I cheated.”

“Cheated?” His guardian is dumbfounded. “Why, David, you couldn’t have cheated. I watched you both. You tried fairly, and you won fairly.”

“Not fair” David replies. “I cheated. I was bound to win. You see, before I jumped, I prayed.”

Glorious Cheating.

And as life goes on, the man who prays begins to feel that he, like young David, in a kind of glorious way, has cheated. Like the ancient David, he has winged his pebble with the power of God. He has fought life’s battle with the backing of invisible legions of angels. Life has been a success in all the finest sense of success, because God has been on his side. Prayer has made him stronger than the strongest of his adversaries. Prayer has been the unseen power that drove through the impregnable obstacles and scaled the insurmountable walls.

The Murderer and the Nun.

Some few years back, the country was shocked by an appalling murder. A young man killed a little girl in a most bestial way. The lad’s relatives called upon a young attorney to handle the case. Almost reluctantly the attorney took it, though the murderer’s chances were zero and the attorney had to leave his home city to defend him.

Before he left, he called on his sister, a nun, who, because of ill-health, had for a time been relieved of active duty. He told her of the case and how slight the chances were of winning it. The sister smiled and said:

“Do what you can for the boy. And if you can’t save his life, maybe you can save his soul!”

The young attorney almost laughed aloud.

“That sort of murderer? Why, he has no morals and certainly no faith. What can I do for his soul!”

“Try,” said the nun. “You work on the case. I’ll pray for his soul.”

The attorney found the lad’s case utterly desperate. He refused to co-operate. He was sullen and bitter. He was clearly guilty, and quite callous both to his crime and the consequences that lay ahead. The attorney did his best, but the idea of doing something for the murderer’s soul persisted in his consciousness: Pious idea, he thought; but what’s the use of wasting time on it?

Victory.

The case swept along to a certain conclusion. The murderer sat sullenly through the lawyers’ duels. Witnesses piled on facts. He didn’t care. He made no effort to face either the present or the future.

But the nun prayed for the criminal who did not pray for himself.

Then, one evening, he sent for his lawyer. His whole manner and attitude had changed. He sat quietly and almost with a smile.

“I just sent for you,” he said, “because I don’t want you to push my case. I want to die. I did it, and the least I can now do is to give my life to God as a return for my crime.”

The young attorney looked at him in astonishment. A return to God?

“Would you mind getting me a priest?”

A priest came. The young man took religious instructions, became a Catholic, took his sentence of death with a gesture of willing submission, and walked up the gallows steps into the presence of a forgiving God. The nun had won just another of the countless miracles of prayer.

Across the Table.

Across the operating table from the nun stood a surgeon. They had worked together for years, this famed surgeon and the nun who handled his more difficult cases. As they operated, the doctor would often look up at her quizzically and say:

“Funny, Sister, but in all our operations we’ve never yet found a soul, have we?”

The nun always replied simply: “We’ll find yours before you die, doctor. You can’t get away. I’m praying for you.”

To which he had one stock answer: “You’d better save your prayers for someone that’s a possibility. I’m not.”

He left for a holiday, and, after the lapse of a few days, the word came back to his hospital that he had suddenly been taken violently ill and had died. The nun went to the chapel and made her great act of faith:

“I’m sure, dear Lord, that You saved his soul. At the end You gave him the Faith.” And then, womanlike, she added: “But could You let me know for certain?”

God did let her know. After a few hours the word came. He had been taken to a hospital run by nuns; himself sent for the priest. He had been baptized, received the Last Sacraments, and died.

In the chapel, the nun who had prayed knelt again, this time in gratitude. “Thank You, dear Lord, for his soul,” she said.

Another miracle of prayer was counted up.

Instances Pile Up.

As a priest moves through life he comes constantly in contact with these miracles of prayer — men becoming Catholics as the result of a lifetime of prayer by a devoted wife; apparently hopeless illnesses turned, with miraculous speed and completeness, from their normal course back to health; careers shaped towards success as a result of a retreat spent before the careers were entered upon; dangers sharply deflected; death stayed as if by a lifted hand; difficulties swept away whose solutions seemed absolutely beyond human power; success caught up out of certain failure. From experience the priest grows to feel more and more certain that Christ made no idle promise when He said: “If you ask the Father anything in My name, He will give it to you.”

Gradually he becomes convinced, by a kind of experimental proof, of the power of prayer and God’s infallible answer to prayer that comes from deep faith and childlike confidence. Prayer cannot fail.

It Doesn’t Work.

At this point the individual is likely to enter a protest.

“That’s not true. I asked for that important favour, and I didn’t get it. I’ve been praying for this grace for years, and God has not answered. I know a wife who prayed all her life for the conversion of her husband, and he died without the Sacraments. We can see all around us that God does not answer prayers.”

God does not always give people the thing for which they pray. That is obvious. In fact, it is wonderfully fortunate for us that He does not. Besides, God does not always let us know that our prayers are answered. He leaves, in some cases, the full answer to be learned in eternity. Yet His promise remains. He will answer all prayer.

In fact, it might be clearer if we reworded slightly the truth that God grants whatever we ask. It might be better if we put it this way: No prayer is ever wasted. Every prayer is heard. We may be absolutely certain that if we ask anything from God, He will give us what we ask or something better.

“But I Want This.”

At that, something like a groan arises from human hearts. So that’s the joke! We ask for something. We don’t get it. We get something better. “Who,” protests the person who wants this particular thing very, very much — “who wants something better? I want this thing I am asking for. I don’t want any substitutes. I want just this, and God is not answering my prayer if He thinks I am going to be satisfied with something else.”

How lucky it is for us that God does not always give us what we ask for! We should be in the worst possible position if we could control what comes to us along life’s way. For we cannot see the future. We have no real way of knowing what is going to be for our good. When it comes to picking things for ourselves, it is astounding how badly we pick and how mistakenly we plan. On the other hand, the thing we did not want nor plan nor expect may be exactly the blessing that makes us wonderfully happy and remarkably fortunate.

God Knows Best.

God sees the future. When I lay a request at His feet, He might be quite the cruellest of beings if He granted it. The man on whom this young woman has set her heart might, if she married him, turn out to be the very person who would wreck her life. Health at this moment may seem enormously important. Yet sickness may be (as experience has shown it to be in thousands of cases) the blessing which crowns life with its richest achievements. Wealth or success may sometimes bless a life; there are times when, if it were given in answer to prayer, either wealth or success would wreck a life, spoil a home, drag children down into ruined lives, and destroy a family.

Parable.

Let’s put the case in the form of a parable, a parable which illustrates the difference between the future as we see it and as. God, Who sometimes loves us too much to grant our request, sees it.

The important government election is just ahead. Two candidates are running, and the fight between them is intensely bitter.

The mother of one of the candidates is a devoted Catholic, and her heart is set upon seeing her son successful. He has been a grand young man who moved along in his career honestly and honourably, and with the success that he won only by his eloquence and brilliance of ability. His

opponent, on the other hand, is a notorious grafter, a man who has sold out to the worst elements of the community.

So, as the election draws near, the mother goes to the neighbouring church and kneels before the Blessed Sacrament.

“Lord Jesus Christ,” she prays, “You promised that whatever we asked the Father in Your name would be granted. Now I am asking this in Your name. My son must be elected. I can’t bear to see his opponent victorious. I ask in Your name that my son may win.”

On leaving the church she feels absolutely confident that her prayer will be granted.

Failure.

The day of the election comes. Her son is defeated by the slightest of margins. Quite clearly trickery and corruption have settled the election. Her prayer has been beaten by the crookedness of gang politicians. Her son has lost by a few hundred votes because he is honest, and in spite of her prayer.

She walks back into the church, and this time she stands. She looks up at the tabernacle and cries:

“So that is the way You keep Your promise? Never again will I believe in the power of prayer. You have deceived me. You did not keep Your word.”

The day of the inauguration dawns. The mother and her son stand on a balcony overlooking the line of march. Bitterness is in her heart and fierce resentment, almost less against the victorious candidate than against the God Who had failed to answer her prayers. Down the street comes the motor-cycle escort. Then the militia and the uniformed marchers. Finally, the open car in which rides the young man who has tricked her son out of office, smiling and lifting his hat to the crowds who acclaim him.

The Answer.

The car reaches the balcony. The mother’s arm tightens reassuringly around the shoulders of her son. She so hates all that man in the motor stands for!

Suddenly there is a little flurry in the crowd. A man cuts out, leaps on to the steps of the automobile, and, before anyone can make a move, empties an automatic into the body of the man in the car. Without a sound the victorious candidate slumps forward and slips to the floor. The police rush forward, their clubs swinging wildly at the head of the madman who has killed the winning candidate, not because he personally disliked him, but because in his insanity he hated all government and struck at this man whom he saw placed as a ruler above him.

And the woman on the balcony catches her son to her heart in an agony of fear and a quick spasm of gratitude. The crowd pays no attention to the door of the house that opens nor to the slightly wild-eyed woman who crashes her way through them towards the church.

She flings herself down on her knees before the tabernacle.

“O Lord Jesus,” she cries, “my thanks to You for answering my prayers, but not in the way I asked it. How terrible if You had let him win and I should thus have lost him! I prayed for a winning candidate and instead You have given me a living son.”

We Can’t Foresee.

We are so completely ignorant of the future that we are often praying for the success of someone who, if our prayer were answered in the form in which we put it, would thereby be doomed to lifelong misery and eternal failure. We ask for what would be the worst things we could possibly have. But God mercifully refuses to grant us our request. It would be cruel and brutal if He did not refuse. That does not mean that our prayer is wasted. It simply means that it has been transferred to some other account. Instead of what we ask, God gives us something that is really for our good. Any other course would be out of keeping with the goodness of God and His fatherly interest in His children.

Hence, the man who wisely makes any request of God always adds, either in words or in the sentiment of his will: "I am asking this, with submission, of course, to Your knowledge of whether or not it is a good thing for me to have. If it isn't, I will be quite content with whatever You send as a substitute." That is only the commonest of common sense. It is the mere admission that we can't see the future and that we have the most surprising faculty for setting our hearts on what is going to be terribly bad for us.

Nor Always See.

God does not always let us see the results of our prayers. There is no simple process like putting a dollar in the slot and getting the article we want. God tests our faith as God invariably tests the faith of His friends. He does not always answer prayer visibly. People die without any sign of conversion. The prayers for their conversion are not lost. That we shall find in eternity.

"Whatsoever you ask," Christ said, and in this case we pray for something that is clearly good. Of course, God cannot force even the conversion of a man. But we can be absolutely sure that the man got grace and that God has cared for his soul. Our act of confidence in God is the magnificent tribute of a child to a Father Whose word he accepts even when he has, as in this case, no clear proof that the word has been carried out.

Prayer is never wasted, never lost, if it is said with the proper dispositions of heart. Unfortunately, many people say prayers as if they were a series of formulas possessing magic properties. Their prayer is so lacking in the essentials of a decent request that if it were addressed to a fellow man it simply could not be granted.

Sincerity.

Prayer must be sincere. We must really want the thing for which we ask. Surprisingly enough, we frequently do not. That is especially true when people pray to be delivered from some insistent temptation.

They pray, "Lead us not into temptation," but they are mentally adding, "However, don't take me too seriously, Lord. It's true, I don't want to be led into temptation in this sense; I don't want to fall. But temptation is rather exciting, a bit of an adventure, and I'll play around a bit, if You don't mind. Just see to it that I don't commit serious sin. I don't want to get into real trouble. Lead me not into temptation, but do let me have a little fun playing around on its fringes."

Well, there is nothing surprising about their fall. The surprise would be if they didn't fall. They never really wanted the thing they prayed for. They were quite fond of temptation.

"Let God Do It."

So, too, you'll find people praying for someone's conversion, or for success in examinations, or for the triumphant outcome of some enterprise. They want this favour. Yes, they think they really do. But what they mean is simply this: "I want it, Lord, enough to let You take it in hand and do it for me. But if You expect me to lend my shoulder to the job — well, I don't want it that much" God would be delighted to bring about this conversion if He saw the person who is praying for it doing anything to help the conversion along. He would give real light in examinations if He saw the student making any serious effort to master the subject. He would be delighted to crown with success an enterprise in which He saw this person taking enough interest to work hard and use the ordinary decent means that are necessary to promote its success.

Co-operate, Not Substitute.

But if the person is not interested enough to make some effort himself towards getting the thing he wants he really doesn't want it. The fat man sitting at the table gorging himself and then lolling back in an armchair has no business lifting his eyes to God and saying: "Please reduce my waist-line." Really, he only thinks he wants a reduced waistline; he wants it only if God will substitute a miracle for diet and exercise. The student who loafs through a semester and then spends an hour before the Blessed Sacrament begging for an "A" in his subject isn't fooling God. He really doesn't want what he asks for; at least, he doesn't want it enough to do anything but substitute one hour of prayer for two hours a night of hard study.

We prove that we want a thing by using the normal means of getting it. God co-operates with the man and the woman who combine effort with prayer. God never expected to substitute a series of miracles for the work declined by the lazy person who puts the whole burden on God's shoulders.

Convinced.

If we expect our petition to be answered, we must come convinced that God answers prayer. Imagine a man approaching a friend and saying: "Now, I'm going to ask you to do this for me, but I realise it's just a waste of time. You are not going to do it for me, I'm sure of that." The friend would be so insulted that ten to one he'd turn on his heel and walk away. We don't prelude a request with an insult.

Yet that is a not uncommon approach we make to God. "God, I'm asking You for this, but I hardly expect to get it. Maybe You'll give it to me, but I'm not too hopeful."

Old Tale.

There is the famous old story of the woman who read that if a person had faith enough he could say to a mountain, "Remove yourself," and the mountain would obey. She decided that this would remedy a situation that she found very annoying. A neighbour had a tree that hung far over the fence into her yard. It was an old tree and it constantly rained leaves and twigs and bark into her trim little garden. Moreover, its shade was so dense that where the shadow fell upon her garden, nothing would grow.

So she decided to see what faith could do.

Standing at the window, she looked out into the yard and focussed all her powers upon the offending tree.

"Humph!"

“Lord,” she said, “You promised that, if we had faith enough, we could move mountains. I have faith enough. I have so much faith that I am saying to that tree: ‘Remove yourself to the other side of that neighbour’s yard. Lord, I believe You’ll do it. When I awake tomorrow I expect to find the tree completely changed. That’s how strong my faith is.”

She slept peacefully and awoke in the morning. Her first act was to rush to the window to see the effect of her faith on the tree. The tree was exactly where it was the preceding night, still dropping twigs and heavy shade into her garden. Her faith had not worked.

She gazed in disgust for a minute and then she snorted.

“Humph!” she said. “That’s just what I expected.”

Prelude With Insult.

Too, too many of us start our prayer with the insulting prelude: “I’m asking this, but if You don’t give it to me, that’s just about what I expect.” In that case, the miracle would be if God worked against our incredulity. Even Christ did not perform His miracles in those cities which refused Him their faith. Recurrently in the Gospel we find that in certain places He did no healing and performed no wonders “because of their lack of faith.” God can hardly be expected to answer the prayer of a person who really does not believe that God answers prayer.

Asking God to Sin.

It is astonishing to find people praying to God for things which are wrong and sinful. That always sounds a little like the ignorant brigands who came to the priest to ask him to bless the daggers they meant to use in assassinating their enemies.

It is really only fair that a man stop to inspect the morality of the favour he is asking God.

Is there anything wrong or sinful in what he asks? He may be asking God to become partner in a shady business enterprise and to bless with success a dishonest deal. She may be asking God to facilitate a relationship that is not pure or to prosper a love affair that is far from honourable and fine.

Is there on his own part an honourable intention in what he does? Does he ask this because he feels it will be for the good of himself and of others? So much of motive, good and bad, is mixed into everything we do. The young woman who prays for a fur coat because she has grown fiercely jealous of her rival may think she needs the fur coat to keep her warm. She is really asking God to wrap it around her jealousy. A young man who asks for success in an examination because he wants to strut before the college as the chap with the big brain is hardly asking God to further a noble ambition.

Hence, it is a good idea to ask oneself why one wants this or that favour. God can hardly be expected to further our vanities and our selfish ambitions. He would be a poor sort of Father if He did.

“Gimme.”

What, I ask myself, will I myself do with this thing if I get it? Often enough, like children, we reach out our hands for things which, if we got, we should find utterly useless. The “gimmies” are the commonest of human diseases. Just the desire to have, to get, to possess dominates so much of our striving. If the already attractive girl begs God to make her hair curly; if the millionaire torments

God for a few extra millions; if the man and woman who have much already pester God for more — for things they don't want and can't really use — they are just imposing on His goodness.

An honest investigation of what we ask of God might make us more than a little ashamed of the selfishness and self-seeking and petty greed and vanity that inspire a great many of the requests that bring us running in prayer to God. If parents often smile in amusement at the requests of their children, and if later on they come to marvel that children can keep asking for so much and developing such a series of demands, we cannot help but wonder what God thinks of the clamours and petitions and petty grabbings of His children.

Even to the Ungrateful.

We have no record that Christ ever refused a miracle because He knew that people would fail to thank Him. He cured the ten lepers though He was fully aware that only one of them would return. His miracles were for all men though only twelve men threw in their lives with His cause, none of whom were among those He had touched with the deep benefit of a miracle.

So probably God will go on bestowing His generous answers to prayer even when those who receive the favours never so much as toss Him a nod of thanks.

But have you ever stopped to figure how many people promise the most extraordinary things if God will give them this or that? And once they have received this or that, and frequently these and those as well, they give their promise not a second thought. They promise novenas of thanksgiving, Masses to be said at definite altars, acts of charity and mortification — anything they think will add a sort of bribery to their prayers. They get their request, and they pay none of their debts. Or they stop payment after a few paltry instalments. How many unpaid debts must be written in the accounting books of God!

Forgetful.

Promises are easily forgotten. That is not surprising. But the crass ingratitude that accompanies and follows our prayers is simply astounding. The fervour with which we pray is usually matched by the complete coldness that follows God's granting of our request. We weary ourselves, and, as far as we can, God Himself with our demands. God is surely never exhausted by the vehemence of our gratitude.

Probably God does not hold this against His thoughtless children. Parents continue to be generous even to selfish boys and girls. Yet even a generous parent in time grows a little weary of hearing nothing but requests that are never followed by even a wave of gratitude. And one cannot feel that God must give His favours, if not reluctantly to the ungrateful, then at least far, far more willingly to those who thank Him sincerely and from their hearts.

“In My Name.”

Christ uses the expression, “Ask in My Name.”

When the phrase, “In the name of” precedes a proper name, that name has a special significance. We remember when Ethan Allen stormed the British fort at Ticonderoga, he thundered on the gates with, “Open in the name of Jehovah and the Continental Congress.” By which he meant that back of him and his ragged men he felt he had the power of God and the might of the newly-united States battling for their liberty.

“In the Name of Christ Your Son” is not, then, just a formula. It is not something to be rattled off thoughtlessly and casually. The Church uses the phrase in all its important prayers. At Mass, the great prayers end with the invocation, “Through Christ Our Lord. Amen.” The meaning of this is clear. Back of the prayers and the petition, those who pray feel that they have the power and approval of Jesus Christ. They ask, not of themselves alone, but in partnership with the Son of God, Whom the Heavenly Father cannot refuse.

The man who prays, as he calls upon the Name of Christ, really enters into a sort of partnership with Jesus.

“Heavenly Father, I ask You for the conversion of my wife, through Christ Your Son.”

And Partnership.

There is tremendous meaning in this.

Says the man: “I am asking for the conversion of my wife, and I’m doing this in partnership with Christ. More, I am asking Christ to intercede for me. He loves souls. He died for souls. He wants the soul of my wife. So I feel safe in asking Him to intercede with You, Heavenly Father, to win this soul for His cause.”

Naturally, then, when we ask Christ to co-operate with us in gaining a request, we must regard the request as something important. We must see in it something significant enough to be of concern to Christ. We should almost be able to recognise it as one of the things which were close to the Heart of the Saviour.

Of Real Concern.

That is broader than it first may sound. All that works for the salvation of souls, Christ wanted and wants. What concerns human happiness is dear to Him. The peace and joy of His followers, their health and prosperity, in so far as these do not interfere with their eternal destiny, are His concern. So there is a wide sweep to the interests we are safe in taking to Christ. Broad, indeed, are the concerns into which we may invite the partnership and co-operation of the Saviour of the world.

It does seem a little absurd, though, to invite Christ to co-operate with us in obtaining some trifling favour. The girl who prays that a night at the party will be full of suitors is a quite natural girl. The girl who prays that Christ may safeguard her from sinning or being the occasion of sin to anyone at the party is praying according to the Heart of Christ. The young man who prays that dad will let him have the car tonight is really involving the God-man in a pretty trifling business. The young man who, as he starts a motor trip, prays that he may return safely and in the grace of God, brings to the attention of Christ something that interests Him enormously.

He is Interested.

Still, it will not do to restrict this too narrowly. God is interested in us with a fatherly interest, and what may be trifles in themselves matter to a father if they are of even passing concern to his children. Christ is our elder Brother, and fine elder brothers don’t regard as trivial and frivolous anything that engrosses the interest or enthusiasm or inspires the fear and causes the worry of his little brother and sister. We are safe in trusting our affairs, all of them, to God. As we grow in wisdom, we are more likely to judge what is important and what is too trifling to engross our interests or to call upon the attention of the God of heaven and earth.

“Magic Formulas.”

In all this the difference between real prayer of petition and the spiritual “magic formulas” must be clear. Quite a bit of superstition sometimes creeps into the lives of very good people. They hear somewhere that if you say such and such a prayer for thirty days you’ll get whatever you ask. A novena to such a saint is sure to get a husband. A definite prayer to this apostle works like the hocus-pocus of a magician and pulls money out of empty hats. If you say a certain prayer in a certain way every night, you can go pretty much to the dogs, but in the end the formula will work and you’ll be snatched from the burning. It isn’t particularly a matter of prayer, but of a particular prayer. The quality of the prayer, its faith and intensity, is not important; but its quantity is essential.

God never promised that He would answer a petition just because it was backed by a certain prayer, however lovely, said a definite number of times. There is no magic charm attached to a formula even repeated a mystic number of times. There is room here for dangerous superstition.

Quite obviously, there are prayers so worded, either by Christ Himself or the Church or holy men, that they powerfully and beautifully present our needs to God. They say eloquently what we ourselves might say falteringly. The repetition of these prayers is efficacious, not because they have some mysterious power coming from the telling-off of a mystic number of prayers, but because each time they are said the petition is expressed forcefully and with a deepening impression on the person who makes it.

Spirit Counts.

It is the intensity of the spirit back of the prayer that matters. A prayer of petition may be said only once and yet be said with such faith and desire that it is sufficient to move the Heart of God. A formula may be thoughtlessly repeated a hundred times, some beautiful prayer may be rattled off seven times seven or nine times nine without any effect whatsoever. It is not said with faith, with hope, with real desire, and with a remembrance that we are calling in as our ally and intercessor the Christ in Whose name prayer must be recited if it is to be efficacious.

Power.

God has given to men a powerful force in prayer. Modern Protestantism of the liberal stripe has often taken the attitude that prayer is really a sort of release for the soul. It is a consoling thing, they maintain, for a man to ease his mind by talking about his soul or his needs. But prayer, they insist, has no real force or efficacy. It does not reach God. If it did, it would not affect Him.

That is not what Christ taught. He taught that through prayer we could ask for every gift, whether it be the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity, or the daily bread upon our tables. We could use prayer to storm heaven and secure its treasures from God’s willing surrender. With prayer we could pound at the gates of God and win admission. Prayer was long enough to reach to eternity. It was strong enough to win the alliance of God’s angels and saints. It was persuasive enough to influence God in man’s favour. And through it we could win untold graces and blessings and favours for ourselves and for the whole human race.

Certainly, we can hardly be grateful enough to the merciful God Who has given us this power. We can do no less than use the power as readily as He would have us and with that power win for ourselves the things that make life happy and eternity sure.

For All.

But a deeper insight into prayer at once inspires us with unselfish courage. We will use this power for others. We can pray for the whole world. Far from hugging this powerful gift to our own hearts, we will use it to win blessings for the world that does not pray, forgiveness for sinners who do not ask forgiveness, faith for those who have never heard the Name of Christ, or who have heard it only to turn away to life's trivial pursuits, strength and God's willing assistance for all mankind.

But one thing is sure — however we use prayer, prayer was meant by Christ to be the source of God's countless gifts to men.

And prayers are answered. We have Christ's infallible promise for that. Our knowledge of the fatherly Heart of Our Lord assures us of that. The experience of advancing years proves that nothing is truer.

God's part is clear. The only thing that remains is for us to use the power of prayer as Christ meant us to do. That way lie riches for our souls and blessings for our bodies, peace and grace for our dear ones and salvation for the world. That is the way by which we march into the treasure house of God, held open in expectation of our prayerful coming.
