

# The Divine Basis of All Acceptable Prayer

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of recognizing the divine basis of all acceptable prayer, which is rooted in the moral excellencies and glories of the Lord Jesus.*

**Scripture:** Exodus 30:34

**Topics:** "The Nature of Prayer", "Co-operation with God"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the divine foundation of acceptable prayer, highlighting that true prayer is rooted in the moral excellencies of Jesus Christ, which must be present in our prayers for them to be effective. He explains that prayer encompasses five aspects: communion, submission, petition, co-operation, and conflict, with communion being the foundational element akin to respiration in our spiritual lives. Submission is described as an active alignment with God's will, while petition involves asking with faith and assurance. Co-operation with God is presented as the ultimate purpose of prayer, ensuring that our requests align with His divine plan. Sparks warns against the dangers of mechanical prayer and the importance of maintaining a living relationship with God through prayer.

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## Transcript

As we contemplate the great ministry of prayer, I think it would be most helpful if at the outset we were reminded of the Divine basis of all acceptable prayer. Before we come to what may be more technical we must recognize the spiritual foundation of prayer, and that has to do with the ingredients and the sacredness of the incense which was to be burnt upon the golden altar referred to in Exodus 30, verse 34 onwards.

It is not my intention to take up these ingredients for exposition, but simply to note that the Lord stipulated certain things for the sweet spices, and then made a very strong statement in relation to them: "...ye shall not make to yourselves according to the composition thereof; it shall be unto thee holy for the Lord. Whosoever shall make like unto that, to smell thereto, shall even be cut off from his people." That is the basis of all acceptable prayer. As we know, the sweet spices, the ingredients of the incense, typify the moral excellencies of the Lord Jesus: His graces, virtues, merits and worthiness. The incense is not the prayers of the saints, but the merit and worthiness of the Lord Jesus put into the prayers, mingled with the prayers, and becoming that which brings the prayers in effectiveness and acceptance to the presence of God. There is completeness here, inasmuch as the ingredients are fourfold: the completeness of the graces and virtues and moral excellencies of Christ. And then, as you notice, salt (which always speaks of

preserving things in life) is to be mingled with these other ingredients, and that seems to me to suggest that even the presentation of the moral excellencies of the Lord Jesus is always to be free from merely cold formality, which means death, and must remain a living and vital thing. It is so possible for a contemplation of the Lord Jesus to become a mechanical and formal thing, something which we accept in our minds as necessary and true, so that we come mechanically upon the merits of the Lord Jesus, when the Lord wants the thing to be continuously alive. With every fresh coming to the Lord there should be a fresh appreciation in life of the Lord Jesus. The salt is to keep things from death, to keep them in life, to keep them fresh and to keep them keen, and we are required to have an abiding keenness and aliveness of appreciation of these excellencies of the Lord Jesus. If it is so, then prayer is acceptable and effectual. The salt is not one of the ingredients, but something added in, and that something is that which is incorruptible.

Then we have the very definite stipulation that nothing like this was to be made by man himself or for himself. There was to be no imitation of this, and there was to be no private and personal appropriation of it by man. It was to be held always unto the Lord and to be holy to the Lord, and an infringement of that rule meant death. As we know, on one occasion the offering of false fire resulted in judgment and death. So here we are told that if this thing were made by man, an imitation of it made for himself and for his own personal ends, he would be cut off from among his people. The moral excellencies of the Lord Jesus cannot be imitated. Man cannot have them in himself, and anything feigned is unacceptable to God. There are no excellencies, and there are no glories like those of the Lord Jesus.

Here we have God most definitely and positively saying in effect that there is a uniqueness, an exclusiveness about the character of the Lord Jesus which is unapproachable by man and altogether apart from the very best that man can make of himself. God sees in the Lord Jesus that which is not anywhere else, and for any man to come imitating the merits of the Lord Jesus means death for that man. There is no ground of approach to God in our moral glories, and it is an awful blasphemy to talk about the sacrifice and the laying down of life on the part of men for their fellow-creatures being on a par with the laying down of His life by the Lord Jesus. That is utter blasphemy, and it must come under the most utter judgment of God. No! God sees nothing equal to the moral excellencies of His Son and forbids us to try to bring anything which is an imitation of those, a man-made thing, which does not recognize the uniqueness of the Lord Jesus.

So the ground of all acceptable prayer upon which we approach the Father is that of the moral excellencies and glories, and graces, and virtues, and merits, and worthiness of the Lord Jesus. That is very simple, but it is basic, and we do have to recognize that before we can get anywhere in the matter of prayer.

### The Five Aspects of Prayer

Now we are able to go on with the subject of prayer itself. In the first place I want to say a little about the nature of prayer, or that which makes prayer, from its different standpoints. And while there may be many other aspects, I think we may say that prayer has five main aspects: communion, submission, petition, co-operation and conflict. Prayer is each one of these, and prayer in its fullness requires or involves all of them.

### Prayer as Communion

Firstly, prayer is communion, prayer is fellowship, prayer is love opening the heart to God, and that is the foundation of all true forms of prayer. We may liken it to the two main activities of our human bodies. When we speak of the activities of these physical bodies we speak of what is organic, and then of what is functional. Organic trouble is a very serious thing, but a functional trouble may not be so serious, and prayer as communion takes the place of the organic in our bodies. One part of our organic make-up is our breathing, which we call respiration. Now, you never stop to think about that! You never reason that out and say: 'Shall I take another breath?' 'Shall I breathe?' or 'How many more breaths shall I take today?' You may do that over a meal, for that is functional, but you never do it over your respiration, for that is organic. You may discuss whether you will walk, or talk, or think, and you may tell yourself that you will stop thinking, or walking, or talking. That is functional. It is controlled and deliberate, but you do not do that over your breathing. That goes on. But if your respiration should give out, your walking, talking and thinking would give out, so that respiration is basic to everything else.

And prayer as communion is in the spiritual life what respiration is in the physical. Communion with God is a sustained thing, a thing like breathing which goes on, or should go on. It differs altogether from those periodical functional activities such as feeding. Respiration is quite involuntary and not just deliberate. We may call it a habit, and a habit is something which easily eludes the full consciousness of the one who is addicted to it. We do things habitually without being aware at the time that we are doing them. When a habit is fully formed it is just an unconscious part of our procedure, and communion with God is that - something that goes on. Prayer as communion is just that: we are in touch with the Lord and we spontaneously and involuntarily open our heart to Him. That is the first foundational thing in all prayer, and that is something to which we shall have to give attention. While we never discuss the question as to whether we will breathe or not, there is such a thing as developing right breathing, and in this sense we shall have to give attention to our breathing.

I think that of all the people I ever met who exemplified this organic life in fellowship with God, Dr. F. B. Meyer was outstanding. It did not matter where he was or what the circumstances were, he would suddenly stop, perhaps in dictating a letter, or in a conversation, or in a business meeting, and just say: 'Stop a minute!' and he prayed. And that was his habit in life. He seemed at any moment to be in touch with the Lord. It was like breathing to him, and I believe it represented one of the secrets of the fruitfulness of his life and the value of his judgment in the things of the Lord. Only those who had close touch with him, especially in difficult executive meetings, knew the value of that spiritual judgment which he brought to bear upon situations, and it seemed to come to him just like that, as out from the Lord.

Well, that is prayer in its foundation. It is communion, it is fellowship and the spontaneous opening of the heart to the Lord. It is not the whole range of prayer, but it is life lived at the back of all deliberate activities, life in touch with the Lord, and it is a very, very valuable thing. All other prayer is so much more effective if we have that. It is so different from life being just a matter of prayer in emergencies, and emergencies are very often much more critical than they need be because we have to find our way back to God instead of being there. I think that very often the Lord allows emergencies to come to us in order to restore fellowship with Himself which has been lost, and in the Lord's mind the abiding fruit of such an emergency is that we should not lose that fellowship again. We should keep hold of it.

#### Prayer as Submission

Then, secondly, prayer is submission, and here we must be aware of the possibility of a contradiction in terms. Prayer is submission. Passive inaction in what is called trust is not prayer. We have heard people

speak of trust, which for them means just passivity and inaction, but it is not prayer. Submission is always active, not passive. Submission always involves the will; it does not dismiss the will. Now carefully keep hold of that. Many people think that just trustfully leaning on the Lord is submission, and their address to the Lord takes its character from such a state, but that is not prayer. Unquestioning acquiescence in things as we find them is not submission, and it is not prayer. Submission means getting into line with the Divine mind. That may mean conflict, it will almost invariably mean action, and it will bring in the volition. Prayer, from whatever standpoint you regard it, is always positive. It is never passive. Trust is another thing and does not come into the realm of prayer. Faith comes into the realm of prayer, but faith is always an active thing and never a passive thing. Faith may require a battle, and it very often does, to get to a place of rest, but the 'rest of faith' is not what we have called unquestioning acquiescence. The 'rest of faith' means that the last stage of adjustment to the Divine mind has been reached. Submission is not merely the suppression of desire, but the bringing of desire into line with the Divine will, and, if needs be, changing desire. Desire may be a very strong thing, a mighty propelling force, but a propelling force ought to be so much under control that it can be switched into the direction of an arresting force. To propel a train, a tremendous amount of power and force is required, but a modern train is so arranged that the mighty propelling force which carries it forward can in a moment be switched to its brakes to pull it to a halt. In prayer, where submission is in view, that is very often what has to be done. That strength of desire has to be arrested in one direction and brought into another direction, perhaps from propelling us forward to bringing us to a standstill in the will of God. That is submission. You see, submission is an active thing, a positive thing.

I anticipate that there will be many questions in this connection, but it is very important to recognize that prayer in its second aspect is submission, which is a positive thing. It is not just collapsing before God and saying: 'Well, I trust that everything will turn out all right. I just acquiesce in things as they are and leave it with the Lord.' Submission is coming positively into line with God's will, God's desire and God's mind. That very often means the deepest conflict, and sometimes heartbreak, but it is necessary. We will touch that again later.

#### Prayer as Petition

Thirdly, prayer is petition, request, or asking. That is all the same, whichever word you prefer. Here we touch what is perhaps the major aspect in the activity of prayer. Undoubtedly it has the largest place in Scripture, and it really defines the meaning of the word 'prayer.'

From a scriptural standpoint prayer is rightly taken to mean petition, and if you go through the Word of God you will find that prayer represents petition in an overwhelming measure. Perhaps we do not need very much argument along that line to prove or persuade that it is so, but I am quite sure that before we are through we shall see that a note of emphasis is necessary, for, after all, our main problems arise in the direction of asking, in the realm of petition. We shall go on praying, of course, and we shall go on asking, in spite of them all. I trust that we shall, but it is as well for us to have the ground well laid for petition, for request, for asking, and for us to recognize clearly, and be fully assured, that there is an objective efficacy in prayer. I do not doubt but that all of us at some time or other have a little catch in our prayers of request and asking because of a little mental something that comes in and undermines certainty. What I am talking about is the objective efficacy of prayer, that is, prayer which has power to change things objectively and not merely have an influence upon us inwardly, prayer which brings answers outside of ourselves. Petition, request, asking, as set over against all false arguments, such as: Divine omniscience makes prayer unnecessary; God knows everything; He knows what He will do, how He will do it, and He knows

the end of all things from the beginning, so why pray? Or again: Divine goodness makes prayer superfluous. God is good, compassionate, merciful and longsuffering. He will only do the best, for He is love, so prayer is superfluous. Why petition the Lord to do good, to be gracious, to show kindness and to do the best for us? Why not trust the goodness of God? Prayer is superfluous. Or once more: Divine foreordination makes prayer useless. If God has settled things eternally, predestination holds good, so it is useless to pray. Or, running alongside of that, Divine sovereignty - the fact that God rules and overrules, He is in the throne of government and has all things in His hands and in His power - makes prayer lack of faith. Why ask, why pray, why petition, why request, when all things are in God's hands and He is ruling and over-ruling, governing and directing in His sovereignty? Once more: the Divine vastness of law and purpose makes prayer presumptuous. It is presumption to ask God to change things when He has fixed everything according to His eternal laws and things are moving in correspondence with a set order. It is presumption to expect the Lord to go out of His order, or to ask Him to do so. (See chapter 4.)

Now, you may not have put things like that, and those questions may never have arisen in your minds in that way, but I venture to suggest that, whether those words have been in your mind or not, whether you have put things like that or not, what is contained in them has from time to time crept subtly into your prayer-life, has affected it and taken some of the grip out of it. When you have been praying an indefinable something has crept in: 'Well, the Lord knows what He will do so why should I beseech Him? The Lord is good and gracious, so why should I ask Him? The Lord knows the end from the beginning, so why should I not just trust Him? The Lord's purposes are fixed, so why should I begin to wrestle with Him to change things? He will work out His purpose and He is of set mind, so who can change Him?' Prayer is affected, if not by the actual framing of the language mentally, by that sense of contradiction which comes in. All these things creep into the mind or heart and have a tendency to deter or weaken in the matter of prayer, and we have to deal with these more fully as we go on. We must recognize that the modernism of our time does set aside the objective efficacy of prayer and only gives to it the place of a subjective value, that is, its salutary influence upon the one who prays in making a change of, perhaps, demeanour, or mind, or reason, by certain qualities of reverence and such like.

Before we take up some of these things more fully, let me say that there are two things to bear in mind always in petitional prayer. The first is the basic need of the other two aspects, communion and submission. For petitional prayer, in which, after all that I have said, we believe, and with which, after all, we shall go on, nevertheless the basic need is communion with the Lord so that prayer does not resolve itself into merely asking God for things, but comes out of a heart-fellowship with Him. And it needs submission, so that our petitions are not for our own ends or personal desires, but, having been brought by submission into line with the Divine will, are based upon oneness with the mind and will of God. You will find that I am only putting in another way what is made perfectly clear in the Word of God, namely: "If you shall ask anything according to His will." That is submission.

Then the other thing to bear in mind in petitional prayer is that, in view of all the mental difficulties which I have mentioned, it becomes pre-eminently an act of faith. It is these mental difficulties which very largely make petitional prayer an act of faith. Yes, argue if you will along all these lines, about the sovereignty of God, and predestination, and so on; nevertheless, we believe that God will change things. In spite of all the arguments which would undercut and weaken prayer, we are going on asking. That makes petitional prayer pre-eminently an act of faith. You may say that is a very cheap way of getting out of it. Well, we have not finished yet, but that is the conclusion at which we have to arrive. We do not want to get out of this cheaply.

## Prayer as Co-operation

There are yet two other aspects of prayer, one of which we will deal with in this chapter, and the other we will leave for later.

The fourth aspect is co-operation, and this is the governing object of prayer. It gets behind everything else and will set us right as to praying and to prayer in all its aspects. Communion, submission, petition and conflict are all adjusted and set right when we recognize that prayer is co-operation, for all these other aspects and phases of prayer are for co-operation. Co-operation is the motive, the truth, the life, the liberty, the power and the glory of prayer. The motive of prayer is co-operation with God. What prayer is in truth is cooperation with God. To have life in prayer we have to recognize that it is co-operation with God, and we get life when prayer is entered into as co-operation with God. If we are not in co-operation with God we may be sure that we shall have no life in prayer. If we are really cooperating with God we shall know we have life in prayer.

Liberty in prayer comes along the line of co-operation with God, and it is not until we get that adjustment, that coming into line with God's purpose, that we 'get through,' as we say. Immediately we get into line with the purpose of God and actively co-operate, then we get movement and there is liberty.

In the same way the power of prayer is related to co-operation with God. Co-operation with God is power in prayer. Think of Elijah, and others, coming into co-operation with God and the resulting effectiveness of their prayer. What is accomplished!

And then the glory of prayer. Prayer becomes a glorious thing when it is really intelligently and spiritually a matter of co-operation with God. Co-operation eliminates selfishness and everything that is merely personal. That is one of its chief values, for it means that prayer should bring us into the Divine plan, the Divine method, the Divine time and the Divine spirit, or disposition. All these things are important - not only to know the plan, but God's method of fulfilling His plan; not only to know the plan and the method, but to come into God's time; and then, not only to be on that executive side, but to be in a right spirit for the thing when the time has come, to do it in the Spirit, in the demeanor of the Lord. All that is co-operation. We may be in a right thing, in a right way, at a right time, and yet not be helping the Lord because we are in a wrong spirit that is not the spirit of the Lord. Prayer in co-operation with God is to make adjustment in all these matters.

There are three factors which are essential to prayer. Firstly, desire; secondly, faith; and thirdly, volition, or will. I just make that statement and leave it as it is.

Then when we put together communion, submission and petition we have co-operation. When they go together and are adjusted to each other, in line with each other and with the Divine will, then you have co-operation.

Perhaps, in closing that phase of things, we might remind ourselves that very often the Lord calls for an initial exercise on our part before He comes in on His side. He very often requires an initiative from us in the matter of desire, of faith and of volition. It is like the drop of water that has to be put into the old-fashioned pump to produce the stream, and you do not get the flow until you have given the pump something. And the Lord just calls for that on our part which may be, in comparison, a very little, but which makes it possible for Him to come out in His fullness. Very often prayer at its commencement represents exercise of will, faith and desire on our part, and then the Lord responds to that. It may be that the Lord

does not respond until He sees the desire put into faith's deliberate action of the will to get through to Him. There is very often a good deal of discouragement met with at the commencement of prayer, and the danger is that we should give up too soon because we do not seem to be getting anywhere. The Lord is just asking for that drop of water to start the flow!

So far we have only mentioned four aspects of prayer, and have referred to some of the difficulties which arise in connection with them, but we have not cleared up those difficulties. We shall give two whole chapters to the fifth aspect of prayer, and then proceed to deal at greater length with the difficulties by way of seeking to answer them. These difficulties, however, are really only in the realm of the mind, and while they may sometimes get in the way of faith, faith will triumph over them, and leave behind a history of mighty things in spite of them.

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