

# What True Prayer Is

John Bunyan

Prayer is a sincere, sensible, affectionate pouring out of the heart or soul to God, through Christ, in the strength and assistance of the Holy Spirit, for such things as God has promised, or according to his Word, for the good of the church, with submission in faith to the will of God.

In this description there are these seven things. Prayer is (1) a sincere; (2) a sensible; (3) an affectionate, pouring out of the soul to God, through Christ; (4) by the strength or assistance of the Spirit; (5) for such things as God has promised, or, according to his Word; (6) for the good of the church; (7) with submission in faith to the will of God.

1. For the first of these, it is a *sincere* pouring out of the soul to God.

Sincerity is such a grace as runs through all the graces of God in us, and through all the actings of a Christian, and has the sway in them too, or else their actings are not regarded of God. David speaks particularly of sincerity when he mentions prayer: 'I cried unto him with my mouth, and he was extolled with my tongue. If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me (Ps. 66:17, 18). Part of the exercise of prayer is sincerity, without which God does not accept it as prayer. (Ps. 16:1-4). 'Ye shall seek me and find *me*, when ye shall search for me with all your heart' (Jer. 29:12, 13). The want of this made the Lord reject the prayers of those mentioned in Hos. 7:14, where he says, 'They have not cried unto me with their heart,' that is, in sincerity, 'when they howled upon their beds.' It is rather for a pretence, for a show in hypocrisy, to be seen of men, and applauded for the same that they pray. Sincerity was that which Christ commended in Nathaniel, when he was under the fig tree. 'Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile' (John 1:47). Probably this good man was pouring out his soul to God in prayer under the fig tree, and that in a sincere and unfeigned spirit before the Lord. The prayer that has this in it as one of the principal ingredients is the prayer that God regards. Thus, 'The prayer of the upright is his delight' (Prov. 15:8).

And why must sincerity be one of the essentials of prayer which is accepted of God? Because sincerity carries the soul in all simplicity to open its heart to God, and to tell him the case plainly, without equivocation; to condemn itself plainly, without dissembling; to cry to God heartily, without complimenting. 'I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself thus; Thou hast chastised me, and I was chastised, as a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke. (Jer. 31:18). Sincerity is the same in a corner alone, as it is before the face of all the world. It knows not how to wear two masks, one for an appearance before men, and another for private use. It must have God, and be with him in the duty of prayer. It is not a lip-labour that it regards, for sincerity, like God, looks at the heart, and that is where prayer comes from, if it be true prayer.

2. It is a sincere and *sensible* pouring out of the heart or soul.

It is not, as many take it to be, a few babbling, prating, complimentary expressions, but a sensible feeling in the heart. Prayer has in it a sensibleness of diverse things; sometimes sense of sin, sometimes of mercy received, sometimes of the readiness of God to give mercy.

(1) A sense of the want of mercy, by reason of the danger of sin. The soul, I say, feels, and from feeling sighs, groans, and breaks at the heart. For right prayer bubbles out of the heart when it is overcome with grief and bitterness, as blood is forced out of the flesh by reason of some heavy burden that lies upon it (1 Sam. 1:10. Ps. 69:3). David roars, cries, weeps, faints at heart, fails at the eyes, loses his moisture (Ps. 38:8-10). Hezekiah mourns like a dove (Is. 38:14). Ephraim bemoans himself (Jer. 31:18). Peter weeps bitterly (Matt. 26:75). Christ has strong cryings and tears (Heb. 5:7.) And all this from a sense of the justice of God, the guilt of sin, the pains of hell and destruction. 'The sorrows of death compassed me, and the pains of hell gat hold upon me: I found trouble and sorrow. Then called I upon the name of the Lord' (Ps. 116:3, 4). And in another place, 'My sore ran in the night' (Ps. 77:2). Again, 'I am bowed down greatly; I go mourning all the day long' (Ps. 38:6). In all these instances, you may see that prayer carries in it a sensible feeling, and that first from a sense of sin.

(2) Sometimes there is a sweet sense of mercy received; encouraging, comforting, strengthening, enlivening, enlightening mercy. Thus David pours out his soul, to bless, and praise, and admire the great God for his loving-

kindness to such poor vile wretches. 'Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits. Who forgiveth all thine iniquities, who healeth all thy diseases; who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with loving-kindness and tender mercies; who satisfieth thy mouth with good things, so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle's' (Ps. 103:1-4). And thus is the prayer of saints sometimes turned into praise and thanksgiving, and yet is still prayer. This is a mystery; God's people pray with their praises, as it is written, 'Be careful for nothing, but in every thing by prayer, and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God' (Phil. 4:6). A sensible thanksgiving for mercies received is a mighty prayer in the sight of God; it prevails with him unspeakably.

(3) In prayer there is sometimes in the soul a sense of mercy to be received. This again sets the soul aflame. 'Thou, O Lord of hosts,' says David, 'hast revealed to thy servant, saying I will build thee an house; therefore hath thy servant found in his heart to pray unto thee' (2 Sam. 7:27). This provoked Jacob, David, Daniel, with others, not by fits and starts, nor yet in a foolish frothy way, but mightily, fervently, and continually, to groan out their conditions before the Lord, as being sensible of their wants, their misery, and the willingness of God to show mercy (Gen. 32:10, 11; Dan. 9:3, 4).

3. Prayer is a sincere, sensible, and *an affectionate pouring out of the soul to God*.

(1) O, what heat, strength, life, vigour, and *affection* there is in true prayer! 'As the hart panteth after the water-brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God' (Ps. 42:1). 'I have longed after thy precepts' (Ps. 119:40). 'I have longed for thy salvation' (Ps. 119:174). 'My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God' (Ps. 84:2). 'My soul breaketh for the longing *that it hath* unto thy judgments at all times' (Ps. 119:20). O what affection is here discovered in prayer! You have the same in Daniel. 'O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, hearken and do; defer not, for thine own sake, O my God' (Dan. 9:19). Every syllable carries a mighty vehemency in it. This is called the fervent, or the working prayer, by James. And so again, 'And being in an agony, he prayed more earnestly' (Luke 22:44). He had his affections more and more drawn out after God for his helping hand. O how wide are the most of men with their prayers from this prayer! Alas! the greatest part of men make no conscience at all of the duty; and as for them that do, it is to be feared that many of them are very great strangers to a sincere, sensible, and affectionate pouring out their hearts or souls to God. They content themselves with a little lip-labour and bodily exercise, mumbling over a few imaginary prayers. When the affections are indeed engaged in prayer, then the whole man is engaged, and that in such sort that the soul will spend itself, as it were, rather than go without that good desired, even communion and solace with Christ. And hence it is that the saints have spent their strength, and lost their lives, rather than go without the blessing (Ps. 69:3; 38. 9, 10; Gen. 32:24, 26).

All this is too evident by the ignorance, profaneness, and spirit of envy that reign in the hearts of those men that are so hot for the forms, and not the power of praying. Few among them know what it is to be born again, to have communion with the Father through the Son; to feel the power of grace sanctifying their hearts. For all their prayers, they still live cursed, drunken, whorish, and abominable lives, full of malice, envy, deceit, persecuting the dear children of God. O what a dreadful judgment is coming upon them! a judgment from which all their hypocritical assembling themselves together, with all their prayers, shall never be able to help them against, or shelter them from.

Prayer is a *pouring out* of the heart or soul. There is in prayer an unbosoming of a man's self, an opening of the heart to God, an affectionate pouring out of the soul in requests, sighs, and groans. 'All my desire is before thee,' says David, 'and my groaning is not hid from thee' (Ps. 38:9). And again, 'My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? When I remember these things, I pour out my soul in me' (Ps. 42:2, 4). Mark, 'I pour out my soul.' It is an expression signifying that in prayer there goes the very life and whole strength to God. As in another place, 'Trust in him at all times; ye people, pour out your heart before him' (Ps. 62:8). This is the prayer to which the promise is made, for the delivering of a poor creature out of captivity and thralldom. 'If from thence thou shalt seek the Lord thy God, thou shalt find him, if thou seek him with all thy heart and with all thy soul' (Deut. 4:29).

Again, prayer is a pouring out of the heart or soul *to God*. This shows also the excellency of the spirit of prayer. It is the great God to which it goes. 'When shall I come and appear before God?' And it argues that the soul that thus prays indeed, sees an emptiness in all things under heaven; that in God alone there is rest and satisfaction for the soul. 'Now she that is a widow, indeed, and desolate, trusteth in God' (1 Tim. 5:5). So says David, 'In thee, O Lord, do I put my trust; let me never be put to confusion. Deliver me in thy righteousness, and cause me to escape; incline thine ear to me, and save me. Be thou my strong habitation, whereunto I may continually resort: for thou *art*

my rock and my fortress; deliver me, O my God, out of the hand of the unrighteous and cruel man. For thou *art* my hope, O Lord God, *thou art* my trust from my youth' (Ps. 71:1-5). Many speak of God; but right prayer makes God the hope, stay, and all. True prayer sees nothing substantial, and worth the looking after, but God. And that, as I said before, it does in a sincere, sensible, and affectionate way.

Again, prayer is a sincere, sensible, affectionate pouring out of the heart or soul to God, *through Christ*. This 'through Christ' must needs be added, or else it must be questioned, whether it is prayer, though in appearance it be never so eminent and eloquent.

Christ is the way through whom the soul has admittance to God, and without whom it is impossible that so much as one desire should come into the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth (John 14:6). 'If ye shall ask anything in my name;' whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, I will do it.' This was Daniel's way in praying for the people of God; he did it in the name of Christ. 'Now therefore, O our God, hear the prayer of thy servant, and his supplications, and cause thy face to shine upon thy sanctuary that is desolate, for the Lord's sake' (Dan. 9:17). And so David, 'For thy name's sake—that is, for thy Christ's sake— 'pardon mine iniquity, for it is great' (Ps. 25:11). But now it is not every one that makes mention of Christ's name in prayer that does indeed, and in truth, effectually pray to God in the name of Christ, or through him. This coming to God through Christ is the hardest part of prayer. A man may be sensible of his condition, and sincerely desire mercy, and yet not be able to come to God by Christ. The man that comes to God by Christ must first have the knowledge of him; 'for he that cometh to God, must believe that he is' (Heb. 11:6). And so he that comes to God through Christ, must be enabled to know Christ. Lord, says Moses, 'show me now thy way, that I may know thee' (Ex. 32:13).

This Christ, none but the Father can reveal (Matt. 11:27). And to come through Christ is for the sinner to be enabled of God to hide himself under the shadow of the Lord Jesus, as a man hides himself under a thing for safeguard (Matt. 16:16). Hence it is that David so often terms Christ his shield, buckler, tower, fortress, rock of defence (Ps. 18:2; 27:1; 28:1). Not only because by him he overcame his enemies, but because through him he found favour with God the Father. And so God says to Abraham, 'Fear not, I am thy shield' (Gen. 15:1). The man then that comes to God through Christ must have faith, by which he puts on Christ, and in him appears before God. Now he that has faith is born of God, and so becomes one of the sons of God; by virtue of which he is joined to Christ, and made a member of Christ (John 3:5, 7; 1:12). And, therefore, he, as a member of Christ, comes to God; I say, as a member of Christ, so that God looks on that man as part of Christ, part of his body, flesh, and bones, united to him by election, conversion, enlightenment, the Spirit being conveyed into the heart of that man by God (Eph. 5:30). So that now he comes to God in Christ's merits, in his blood, righteousness, victory, intercession, and so stands before him, being 'accepted in the Beloved' (Eph. 1:6). And because this poor creature is thus a member of the Lord Jesus, and under this consideration has admittance to God; therefore, by virtue of this union also is the Holy Spirit conveyed into him, whereby he is able to pour out his soul before God.

4. Prayer is a sincere, sensible, affectionate, pouring out of the heart or soul to God through Christ, *by the strength or assistance of the Spirit*.

These things so depend one upon another that it is impossible that it should be prayer without a joint concurrence of them; for though it be never so eloquent, yet without these things, it is only such prayer as is rejected of God. For without a sincere, sensible, affectionate, pouring out of the heart to God, it is but lip-labour; and if it be not through Christ, it falls far short of ever sounding well in the ears of God. So also, if it be not in the strength and by the assistance of the Spirit, it is but like the sons of Aaron, offering strange fire (Lev. 10:1, 2).

I say that which is not petitioned through the teaching and assistance of the Spirit cannot be 'according to the will of God' (Rom. 8:26, 27). There is no man nor church in the world that can come to God in prayer, but by the assistance of the Holy Spirit. 'For through Christ we all have access by one Spirit unto the Father' (Eph. 2:18). Wherefore Paul says, 'For we know not what we should pray for as we ought; but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to *the will of God*' (Rom. 8:26, 27). And because there is in this Scripture so full a discovery of the spirit of prayer, and of man's inability to pray without it; therefore I shall in a few words comment upon it.

'For we.' Consider first the person speaking, even Paul, and, in his person, all the apostles. We apostles, we extraordinary officers, the wise master-builders, some of whom have been caught up into paradise (Rom. 15:16; 1 Cor. 3:10; 2 Cor. 12:4). 'We know not what we should pray for.' Surely there is no man but will confess that Paul and his companions were as able to have done any work for God, as any pope or proud prelate in the church of

Rome, and could as well have made a Common Prayer Book as those who at first composed this; as being not a whit behind them either in grace or gifts.

'For we know not what we should pray for.' We know not the matter of the things for which we should pray, neither the object to whom we pray, nor the medium by or through whom we pray; none of these things know we, but by the help and assistance of the Spirit. Should we pray for communion with God through Christ? Should we pray for faith, for justification by grace, and a truly sanctified heart? None of these things know we. 'For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God' (1 Cor. 2:11). But here, alas! the apostles speak of inward and spiritual things, which the world knows not (Is. 29:11).

Again, as they know not the matter of prayer, without the help of the Spirit; so neither know they the manner thereof without the same; and therefore he adds, 'We know not what we should pray for as we ought;' but the Spirit helps our infirmities, with sighs and groans which cannot be uttered. Mark here, they could not so well and so fully succeed in the manner of performing this duty, as these in our days think they can.

The apostles, when they were at the best, yea when the Holy Ghost assisted them, yet then they were fain to come off with sighs and groans, falling short of expressing their mind, but with sighs and groans which cannot be uttered.

'For we know not what we should pray for as we ought.' Mark this, 'as we ought.' For the not thinking of this word, or at least the not understanding it in the spirit and truth of it, has occasioned some men to devise, as Jeroboam did, another way of worship, both for matter and manner, than is revealed in the Word of God (1 Kgs. 12:26-33). But, says Paul, we must pray as we ought; and this we cannot do by all the art, skill, cunning, and device of men or angels. 'For we know not what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit;' nay, further, it must be 'the Spirit itself' that helps our infirmities; not the Spirit and man's lusts. What man of his own brain may imagine and devise, is one thing, and what they are commanded, and ought to do, is another.

Many ask and have not, because they ask amiss; and so are never the nearer the enjoying of those things they petition for (Jas. 4:3). It is not to pray at random that will cause God to answer. While prayer is making, God is searching the heart to see from what root and spirit it arises (1 John 5:14). 'And he that searcheth the heart knoweth,' that is, approves only, the meaning 'of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God.' For in that which is according to his will only, he hears us, and in nothing else. And it is the Spirit only that can teach us so to ask; it only being able to search out all things, even the deep things of God. Without which Spirit, though we had a thousand Common Prayer Books, yet we know not what we should pray for as we ought, being accompanied with those infirmities that make us absolutely incapable of such a work.

5. Prayer is a sincere, sensible, affectionate pouring out of the heart, or soul, to God, through Christ, in the strength and assistance of the Spirit, *for such things as God has promised* (Matt. 6:6-8).

Prayer is only true when it is within the compass of God's Word; it is blasphemy, or at best vain babbling, when the petition is unrelated to the Book. David therefore in his prayer kept his eye on the Word of God. 'My soul,' says he, 'cleaveth to the dust; quicken me according to thy word.' And again, 'My soul melteth for heaviness, strengthen thou me according unto thy word' (Ps. 119:25-28. See also verses 41, 42, 58, 65, 74, 81, 82, 107, 147, 154, 169, 170). And, 'remember the word unto thy servant, upon which thou hast caused me to hope' (ver. 49). And indeed the Holy Ghost does not immediately quicken and stir up the heart of the Christian without, but by, with, and through the Word, by bringing that to the heart, and by opening that, whereby the man is provoked to go to the Lord, and to tell him how it is with him; and also to argue, and supplicate, according to the Word. Thus it was with Daniel that mighty prophet of the Lord. He, understanding by books that the captivity of the children of Israel was nearing its end, then, according unto that word, he makes his prayer to God. 'I Daniel,' says he, 'understood by books,' viz., the writings of Jeremiah, 'the number of the years whereof the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem. And I set my face to the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes' (Ch. 9:2, 3).

As the Spirit is the helper and the governor of the soul, when it prays according to the will of God; so it guides by and according to the Word of God and his promise. Hence it is that our Lord Jesus Christ himself did make a stop, although his life lay at stake for it. 'I could now pray to my Father, and he should give me more than twelve legions of angels; but how then must the Scripture be fulfilled that thus it must be?' (Matt. 26:53, 54). Were there but a word for it in the Scripture, I should soon be out of the hands of mine enemies, I should be helped by angels; but the

Scripture will not warrant this kind of praying, for that says otherwise.

It is a praying then according to the Word and promise. The Spirit by the Word must direct, in the manner, as well as in the matter of prayer. 'I will pray with the Spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also' (1 Cor. 14:15). But there is no understanding without the Word. For if they reject the word of the Lord, 'what wisdom is in them?' (Jer. 8:9.)

6. *For the good of the Church.*

This clause covers whatsoever tends either to the honour of God, Christ's advancement, or his people's benefit. For God, and Christ, and his people are so linked together that if the good of the one be prayed for, the others must needs be included. As Christ is in the Father, so the saints are in Christ; and he that touches the saints, touches the apple of God's eye. Therefore pray for the peace of Jerusalem, and you pray for all that is required of you. For Jerusalem will never be in perfect peace until she be in heaven; and there is nothing that Christ more desires than to have her there. That also is the place that God through Christ has given her. He then that prays for the peace and good of Zion, or the church, asks that in prayer which Christ has purchased with his blood; and also that which the Father has given to him as the price thereof. Now he that prays for this, must pray for abundance of grace for the church, for help against all its temptations; that God would let nothing be too hard for it; that all things might work together for its good; that God would keep his children blameless and harmless, the sons of God, to his glory, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation. And this is the substance of Christ's own prayer in John 17. And all Paul's prayers run that way, as one of his prayers eminently shows: 'And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge, and in all judgment; that ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere, and without offence, till the day of Christ. Being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ unto the glory and praise of God' (Phil. 1:11). But a short prayer, you see, and yet full of good desires for the church, from the beginning to the end; that it may stand and go on, and that in the most excellent frame of spirit, even without blame, sincere, and without offence, until the day of Christ, let its temptations or persecutions be what they will (Eph. 1:16-21; 3:14-19; Col. 1:13).

7. And because, as I said, prayer *submits to the will of God*, and says, Thy will be done, as Christ has taught (Matt. 6:10); therefore the people of the Lord in all humility are to lay themselves and their prayers, and all that they have, at the foot of their God, to be disposed of by him as he in his heavenly wisdom sees best. Yet not doubting but God will answer the desire of his people that way that shall be most for their advantage and his glory. When the saints therefore pray with submission to the will of God, it does not argue that they are to doubt or question God's love and kindness to them. But because they at all times are not so wise, but that sometimes Satan may get advantage of them, as to tempt them to pray for that which, if they had it, would neither prove to God's glory nor his people's good. 'Yet this is the confidence that we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us; and if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him,' that is, we asking in the Spirit of grace and supplication (1 John 5:14, 15). For, as I said before, that petition that is not put up in and through the Spirit, is not to be answered, because it is beside the will of God. For the Spirit only knows that, and so consequently knows how to pray according to that will of God. 'For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man but the Spirit of God' (1 Cor. 2:11). But more of this hereafter.