



Gregory of Nyssa's Sermons on the Lord's Prayer: Lessons from the Classics

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CLASSIC CHRISTIAN LITERATURE HAS NOT FARED WELL IN MODERN WESTERN societies. Since the enlightenment many have considered the past out of date or, worse yet, completely irrelevant. Over the preceding three centuries there has been a proclivity to reshape or replace previous ways of viewing the world with new and improved "modern" perceptions. At times this has been helpful, at times it has not. Science and reason have often been given authority over anything mysterious, even religious conceptions of reality. Galileo reminds us of the value of fruitful dialog between reason and faith, but at other times, for example, in discussions about human nature and God, the modern world, including the church, has tended to disregard the insights of past Christian authors.

Still, classic Christian literature retains a depth of wisdom, relevance, and power for the modern world. Gregory of Nyssa's sermons on the Lord's Prayer provide a case in point.

The sermons of Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335-394) have a classical status, first of all, because Gregory was one of the three Cappadocian Fathers (the renowned fourth-century defenders of the faith) and the brother of both Basil the Great and Saint Macrina. Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Orthodox Christians alike recognize Gregory's pivotal role in defining the nature of the Trinity and shaping early

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Christian theology. Therefore, any of Gregory's writings reveal key aspects of the development of the church and its teachings. The force of language, the compelling arguments and examples, and the straightforward instruction in his sermons likewise set them apart. These sermons still have the ability to stir even modern scientific Christian hearts to awe and fruitful contemplation.¹

I. FORM AND CONTENT OF GREGORY'S SERMONS

Classic works take on a variety of forms (treatise, biography, letter) and content (history, theology, story, poetry), but the form and content of Gregory's sermons are easily grasped by modern Christians. Gregory's sermons do not have an arcane style, which is characteristic of some classics and their translations, or an obscure content. Instead, most will find these homilies remarkably contemporary in their tone and concerns. Modern pastors in particular will no doubt wish to borrow many of Gregory's ideas for their own sermons.

II. TIMELESS INSIGHTS

Once readers engage Gregory's preaching, they soon realize that they are in the presence of no ordinary pastor. The themes often have a timeless quality, which allows a modern audience to be surprised by Gregory's remarkably contemporary analysis of prayer, human nature, and God. In fact, Gregory's classic ideas remain as fresh and as insightful today as the day they were preached. In order to make this point let us turn to Gregory's first sermon and his introduction to the Lord's Prayer.

1. *The need for prayer*

Gregory begins his first homily with the following observation, "Now, I make bold to add a little to what the Scripture says; for the present congregation needs instruction not so much on how to pray, as on the necessity of praying at all, a necessity that has perhaps not yet been grasped by most people. In fact, the majority of (people) grievously neglect in their (lives) this sacred and divine work which is prayer."² The biggest problem is that Gregory's audience doesn't even know they have a problem, that is, a need to pray.

A quick glance at any Christian book catalogue or bookstore will soon make Gregory's point. "How to" books on prayer exist by the hundreds, but few if any discuss in any depth why Christians ought to pray in the first place. Any Christian, says Gregory, can find a prayer technique, but that doesn't mean they will bend their knees or wills toward God. First, they must delight in prayer itself.

¹Readers interested in purchasing the classics can generally find the text they are looking for online at amazon.com or at one of two sites for used books, namely, Loomer Theological Booksellers (<http://www.booktown.com/loome/loome.htm>) or abebooks (<http://www.abebooks.com>).

²Gregory of Nyssa, *The Lord's Prayer. The Beatitudes*, trans. Hilda Graef, Ancient Christian Writers 18 (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1954) 21. This somewhat dated text is still the best translation of Gregory's sermons and can be readily found at www.amazon.com.

Alas, says Gregory, believers have no enthusiasm for prayer because their zealous attention is focused on a never-ending desire for more worldly goods. Hence, they display a complete lack of passion for anything heavenly. Says Gregory,

The tradesman rises early to attend to his shop, anxious to display his wares sooner than his competitors so as to get in before them, to be the first to attend the customer and sell his stock. The customer does the same; he takes good care not to miss what he wants by letting someone else anticipate him; and so he hastens not to church but to the market.³

Time spent on buying and selling usurps the time required for prayerful worship; temporal earthly treasures, therefore, not eternal heavenly rewards, consume human time and energy.⁴

Both Gregory's past and present readers squirm a bit as he continues. Lawyers and those who craft goods consider God's help to be useless: they trust the work of their own hands before they trust God, who made their hands. Teachers study and encourage students to explore various aspects of existence without ever studying prayer, which gives them access to the one who makes their existence possible. Farmers grow crops not for the godly purpose of feeding and taking care of their own or their neighbors' daily needs but to grope after gain at the expense of others. Even judges do not always pursue justice but often use their influence in order to acquire a more comfortable life. Christians pile up earthly goods and still they covet more, says Gregory, but in the end they attain less. By forgetting to pray, a Christian's primary means of access to the greatest wealth, God and all of heaven's abundance, is cut off.⁵

Still, Gregory boldly declares that there is hope. Christians must pray first and work second; then the labor of their hands will be truly divine. Or as Gregory puts it,

[T]he effect of prayer is union with God, and if someone is with God, he is separated from the enemy....Through prayer we obtain physical well-being, a happy home, and a strong, well-ordered society....[Prayer] shields the wayfarer, protects the sleeper, and gives courage to those who keep vigil. It obtains a good harvest for the farmer and a safe port for the sailor....Prayer turned the whale into a home for Jonas....[I]n this life nothing is more precious than prayer.⁶

2. The problem with prayer

After Christians finally come to desire prayer, however, they still have another problem, points out Gregory a bit despondently. Even if they spend the rest of their lives praying, their frail natures still keep them from rendering God proper due. Sin causes people to pray improperly, namely, for their own personal gain.

³Ibid., 21.

⁴Ibid., 22.

⁵Ibid., 22-23.

⁶Ibid., 24-25.

Gregory sets forth the following example to make his point: Once there was a fool, who was called before a great king who wished to do the poor person some kindness. The king implored the person to ask for whatever he needed, but the simpleton petitioned only for clay. Believers, who ask God to fulfill their fantasies for the clay of riches, profitable marriages, lands, and every kind of crazy earthly pleasure, do the same as the fool.⁷

Gregory concludes that prayer for one's own good is like asking God to embrace human passions. If, for example, Christians pray for their enemy's destruction, they are asking God to behave like a vicious human; they desire that God should give up the divine nature and literally become a savage beast. How lamentable are our prayers, Gregory cries, if they are not directed toward heaven but are focused instead on conquering, fame, lust, being victorious in lawsuits, the winning of a game, fortune, or any passion of the sinful human heart.⁸

Gregory's deceptively simple and profound wisdom, which is illustrated with such vivid examples and compelling arguments, demands his audience's attention. Both past and present readers are easily moved by these timeless insights, which convict, challenge, and encourage action and further contemplation about human nature, God, and the place of prayer in the Christian life.

III. A BOLDNESS OF INTERPRETATION

1. *Holy audacity*

Another element of a classic is its interpretive bold audacity: above we have seen Gregory's willingness to speak boldly in a way that challenges the reader and logically pushes the limits of interpreting a text. The same is true of the following example. Akin to the notion of bold interpretation is Gregory's encouragement of holy audacity. Gregory literally worries that Christians will "shut out holy audacity"⁹ from their lives, especially with regard to the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors." Grammatically speaking, says Gregory, this petition is conditional: God forgives Christians in the same way that they forgive. Strikingly, Gregory boldly admits that this principle applies both to forgiving others and oneself. Gregory declares, "Be yourself your own judge, give yourself the sentence of acquittal. Do you want your debts to be forgiven by God? Forgive them yourself, and God will ratify it."¹⁰ Christians are called to a holiness that boldly dares to forgive others and themselves, so that God will follow their example! Gregory boldly announces,

⁷Ibid., 28.

⁸Ibid., 29. Gregory at this point notes the apparent contradiction to all this when the psalmist prays for the destruction of Israel's enemies. Gregory, however, clarifies that the psalmist does not wish the destruction of Israel's foes per se, but merely seeks an end to injustice, sin, and evil. Evil is the true enemy, not people, and so Christians ought to pray for an end to vice and evil in all its forms. As for human enemies, all prayers should petition for their good and salvation (ibid., 30-31).

⁹Ibid., 72.

¹⁰Ibid., 73.

As to those who would achieve goodness, God is proposed for imitation according to the words of the Apostle, “Be ye followers of me, as I also am of Christ” [1 Cor. 4:16, 11:1] so conversely He wants your disposition to be a good example to God! The order is somehow reversed; just as in us the good is accomplished by imitating the Divine goodness, so we dare to hope that God will also imitate us when we accomplish anything good—so that you, too, may say to God: Do Thou the same as I have done. Imitate Thy servant, O Lord, though he be only a poor beggar and thou art the King of the universe.¹¹

To suggest that God should imitate the actions of those who are praying to God seems almost blasphemous, and yet Gregory’s logic makes perfect sense, even if it is more audacious than expected. Herein lies the beauty of a classic; it has a bold audacious interpretation that calls forth an audacious holiness in its reader.

2. *A sense of awe*

Behind Gregory’s audacity lies a tremendous sense of awe. An example of this comes in Gregory’s explanation of the words, “Our Father.” Gregory believes that the words of the Lord’s Prayer, since they come from Christ himself, are the greatest wisdom on earth. While discussing the words, “Our Father,” Gregory’s awe-filled rhetoric rapturously ascends,

Who will give me those wings [cf. Psalm 54:7], that my mind may wing its way up to the heights of these noble words? Then I would leave behind the earth altogether and traverse all the middle air; I would reach the beautiful ether, come to the stars and behold all their orderly array. But not even there would I stop short, but, passing beyond them, would become a stranger to all that moves and changes, and apprehend the stable Nature, the immovable Power which exists in its own right, guiding and keeping in being all things, for all depend on the ineffable will of the Divine Wisdom.¹²

For Gregory, the Lord’s Prayer especially is the wings upon which the mind through contemplation of the Divine soars into the very presence of God. Prayer inspires holy awe in the heart. Modern Christian readers upon reading these words may wonder if their world has lost its sense of awe or even if they are capable of it. Is the modern age so removed from the past that the Christian heart has lost in scientific clarity the ability, or even the reason, to lose itself in the emotion of reverential wonder?

3. *Sophisticated philosophical and theological arguments*

If any part of Gregory’s sermons puts off the modern reader, it is his philosophically/theologically sophisticated comments. Gregory’s boldness moves him to ask some difficult questions about the nature of humanity, God, and the relationship of the two. Such dialog, like Gregory’s tangent in sermon three on the Trinity,¹³ demands precise argumentation and may occasionally tax the modern at-

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., 37.

¹³Ibid., 54-55.

tention span. Clearly, some ancient parishioners nodded off during this part of the sermon, but Gregory felt the discussion important and much is to be learned from diligent study of his remarks. Modern readers, who often consider themselves to be the educated elite, may be humbled by the complex argumentation and the fact that some of his ancient audience actually delighted in such sermonizing.

Another example of this kind comes at the beginning of sermon four. Here Gregory discusses some theories about the concept of health. Gregory, after consulting a medical expert, sorts out in clear philosophical argument the latest up-to-date ideas on illness. Essentially illness was considered to be the lack of proper balance in a person's physical body. If an ill person had too much heat (a fever), she would require the balance of coolness, or a cool cloth applied to the forehead, to restore health. Modern audiences may well be tempted to dismiss this section as overly simplistic. And indeed the reader would be right to be critical about this point; however, the overall conclusion that Gregory draws about the corresponding importance of balance in the spiritual life of the Christian is still valid and clever. Gregory notes that if a person is plagued by the vice of gluttony, for example, the corresponding virtues of fasting and temperance can help a person find balance in their spiritual life. He suggests that lust may be overcome with the virtuous cure of continence and/or chastity, and so forth. How does one seek virtue? Through prayer, of course, says Gregory in a matter-of-fact tone.¹⁴ Many Christian authors down to the present day have repeated Gregory's point without hesitation. Hence, antiquated science can still provide some modern insights into human nature.

4. *Classic blind spots*

One note of caution is important to mention concerning the classics, especially in regard to the boldness of their message. Modern readers will at times notice that besides insight, there are some classic blind spots. Gregory is no exception. While these blind spots do not appear in all texts, they are generally recognizable. At the end of sermon three, Gregory makes a comment about "unbelieving Jews," implying that they have lost their birthright in rejecting Jesus, God's Son. Gregory's tone hints at an anti-Judaic sentiment, which was more the rule than the exception in the early church.¹⁵ In fact, almost all commentaries on the Lord's Prayer through the middle ages and reformation make this same claim, that only the true adopted children of God, baptized Christians, have the right to call God Father. This sentiment added to or even incited conflict between Christians and Jews down through the centuries. Such an attitude is one that modern Christians do not want to perpetuate.

The blind spots of the ancient texts are no reason to stop reading them, but modern audiences ought to be aware of these problems lest they find in these clas-

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 57-58.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 56.

sics ammunition to perpetuate hurtful and unchristian attitudes in the modern world. Rather, the classics can help reveal the origins of such destructive opinions and encourage modern audiences to find a better and more compassionate way in the present and the future.

Classic Christian texts remain valuable sources of insight, wisdom, and truth for modern Christians, especially with regard to human nature, God, and the relationship between the two. Gregory of Nyssa's sermons demonstrate that a sense of awe, boldness, holy audacity, and timeless wisdom were an essential part of ancient Christianity. Though still available to modern audiences (even if our modern place in history seems worlds apart from the days of the ancient classics), the wisdom of the past has often been ignored by the church. The classics are not without their blind spots, but when read with a careful eye they still can offer daring challenges and holy insight into the most mundane and sublime elements of Christian theology and life in any day and age. As Gregory states at the beginning of the first sermon, "The Divine Word teaches us the science of prayer."¹⁶ Indeed, building upon ancient science is one way to improve upon a modern Christian scientific worldview. ⊕

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¹⁶ibid., 21.