

There was an inscription that was put up on the hospital in New York during the Civil War. Fortunately, the inscription was then embalmed. This inscription was written to help people to see that there is no such thing as un-answered prayers.

*I asked God for strength,
that I might do greater things,*

*I was made weak,
that I might learn humbly to obey.*

*I asked for health,
that I might do greater things.*

*I was given infirmity,
that I might do better things.*

*I asked for riches,
that I might be happy.*

*I was given poverty,
that I might be wise.*

*I asked for power,
that I might have the praise of
men.*

*I was given weakness,
that I might feel the need of God.*

*I asked for all things,
that I might enjoy life.*

*I was given life,
that I might enjoy all things.*

*I got nothing that I asked for,
but everything I had hoped for.*

*Almost despite myself,
my unspoken prayers were
answered.*

*I am, among all men,
most richly blessed.*

Anyone who has worked at taking the Gospel seriously by exercising charitable works knows from experience that numerous years of human effort alone cannot produce the same kind of sanctity in us as we see in the saints.

The conclusion is obvious: we're all called to the heights of prayer, the indispensable and most important means that makes growth in sanctity possible.

This conclusion is indeed true because in addition to their heroic virtue, all the saints are known by their prayerfulness. Ultimately, their prayerfulness is what enabled the saints to be receptive to God's grace to thus grow in sanctity.

If we don't pray, we'll become 'prey' (P-R-E-Y)!

St Teresa of Avila – who received private revelations from God on how to pray – is a good saint to turn to on the topic of prayer.

Speaking on the danger of not praying, St Teresa said, "meditation is the basis for acquiring all the virtues, and to undertake it is a matter of life and death for all Christians."

St Teresa provides us with a good analogy native to Spain's "Bull Running" to help us better appreciate the necessity of prayer: "Unless it is very much their own fault, souls who practise prayer walk so much more securely than those who take another road.

They are like those in the stands watching the bull in comparison with one who is right in front of its horns."

In addition to St Teresa of Avila, other saints, such as St John of the Cross, St Charles Borromeo, St Francis de Sales, and St Alphonsus Liguori, all came to the same conclusion.

Specifically, there is no over-simplification to say that the main reason devout people do not become saintly is because they lack a deep prayer life appropriate to their state in life.

We need to observe prayerful moments in our lives. St Francis de Sales spent half-an-hour in silent prayer every day. But, when he was busy, he would spend an hour in meditation.

The busier we are, the more prayer we need. Personally, when I become busier, I become more aware of my need for God.

A busy period increases my hunger and desire for God's love and guidance.

If the very busy periods in your life never increases your desire to pray, then this is a tell-tale sign that you're busy with the wrong kind of things, or that your heart is divided or in the wrong place!

If you're sincere about your desire to respond to the love of God, then you'll be honest about the obstacles to prayer.

Let me share with you what I think are the most common obstacles.

"I'd really like to spend time in personal prayer, but I don't have the time."

Really? No one has ever starved to death because of not having enough time to eat.

What's the longest time you've ever gone without food?

What's the longest time you've ever gone without prayer?

"I can pray while I work."

St Teresa of Avila said that those who have faith know "we are always in the presence of God." Nonetheless, she also said that when they practice prayer, they are "aware that [God] is looking at them."¹

Besides, our natural tendency is to be completely absorbed in what we are doing.

People who pray only while they're

working would do well to humbly acknowledge that they're too attached to their activities.

"I pray when I go to bed."

St Teresa of Avila said, "When you pray, get comfortable, but not too comfortable, otherwise you will fall asleep."

May I also suggest that God deserves our *prime time*.

You give your best time to those who love you *finitely*.

Why would you relate to God differently in response to His *infinite* love for you?

"Prayer is terrific, but I only pray when I feel an inner need... To start praying when I don't feel like it would be artificial, forced, even a sort of insincerity or hypocrisy... I pray when I feel a spontaneous desire for it."

What's misleading about this way of thinking?

If we wait until we feel the spontaneous desire for prayer, we may end up waiting until the end of our days.

That desire for prayer is very beautiful, but it's also unreliable.

There's a more noble motive for spending time in prayer which also leads us to be more faithful to prayer and to go deeper in our relationship with God; namely: the faith we have that God loves us.

"Jesus told his disciples a parable about the need to pray continually and never lose heart" (Lk 18:1).

Essentially, this parable illustrates that we should be guided by *faith*, not merely by our subjective mood. Authentic freedom does not mean being ruled by your impulses from one moment to the next.

On the contrary, being free means not being a slave to your moods; being free means being guided in a course of action by what you value the most.

That's authentic freedom.

That's integrity.

Truth, not superficial inclination, is the guide to the authentic use of freedom.

Which is the most genuine, authentic love: the kind that changes from day to day according to mood; or the stable, faithful kind that never goes back on itself?

Faithfulness to personal prayer is a

school of freedom.

It's a school of truth in love because it teaches us – little by little – no longer to place our relationship with God on the shaky, unstable basis of our own impressions, moods, or feelings, but on the solid foundation of faith – God's faithfulness – which is as firm as a rock!

Everyone wants to be able to act spontaneously, without constraint. That's perfectly legitimate: human beings are not meant to be constantly at war with themselves, always doing violence to their nature. But, this battle is at times required because one of the consequences of sin are the inner divisions we experience within ourselves where we feel drawn in different directions. But, our natural aspiration for freedom cannot be satisfied merely by giving free rein to spontaneous desire.

That would be destructive because our spontaneous desires are not always directed to what is good; they need to be deeply purified and healed.

Such inner-healing is also a fruit of prayer that we can always count on.

¹ *Way of Perfection*, Ch. 26, nos. 3 & 5.