

## Pray for the Living and the Dead

Lectio Divina: Luke 11: 5-13

Spiritual Work of Mercy—to pray for the living and the dead. We pray for others that good things may happen to them, we pray for success for their plans, we pray that God will strengthen them in their trials, we pray that God will come to their assistance in their suffering, that he would alleviate hardship and until then that he would help us to bear it with love and patience. We also pray for the dead, that they would be made worthy to enter heaven to be with God in eternal peace and happiness.

This kind of prayer and this work of mercy is called intercessory prayer. An intercessor is one who acts or speaks on behalf of others. When we pray to God for others, we are intercessors for them. We are not intercessors by our own merit; we are intercessors because of the one High Priest, Jesus Christ, who has made intercession to God the Father on our behalf. As Christians, our prayers are united with the eternal prayer of Jesus Christ to the Father. This is expressed in the celebration of the Mass, where our petitions are caught up in the sacrifice of Christ to the Father. It is because of the merits of Jesus Christ that our prayers have effectiveness and why it is very good to pray for others.

Who does this work of mercy apply to? It applies to everyone; both the living and the dead. Do you know of anyone who does not fit into one of these two categories? It is impossible to pray for each person individually; but think of the people whom you tend to pray for. If you're like me, you pray a lot for yourself, for family and friends. But sometimes our prayer can seem a bit selfish or self-seeking. And it is beneficial both for us and for others to go beyond our usual prayer intentions and to include a broader range of people who are in need of our prayers.

Prayer changes the way we see the world, especially people around us. As Christians, we are called to sanctify every aspect of our life. If we offered to the Lord everyone we encountered throughout the course of each day, we would start to see people and events differently. We would become more loving, more merciful to them. We would begin to see the Holy Spirit at work in everything around us.

When we pray for someone, God establishes a special relationship between us and that person even if we don't personally know him or her. When we pray for someone, it is as if we share in his or her afflictions and also in his or her joys. Many people have told me that they are praying for me, and I am always very humbled and filled with gratitude when I hear that. I know that they have a part in my own spiritual journey. I know that their prayers help strengthen me in times of trial. In times of blessing, I owe God thanks for his grace given to me through the help of many prayers. When we pray for others, we are expressing a holy and true solidarity with them.

Some people expressly ask you to pray for them. What are they really saying to you when they ask this? They believe God listens to your prayers. What a humbling thing when someone asks you to pray for them! How can you refuse? You would never say, "No, I can't pray for you." You would most certainly say yes. You almost want to embrace them. This reaction must be similar to what Our Lord experiences when people approach him in their need; or when people ask the Blessed Mother or any of the saints to pray for them. How can they refuse one in need? Let this help to increase our trust and confidence in the Lord's goodness and mercy, so that we may pray with confidence. "Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask anything of the Father, he will give it to you in my name. Until now you have asked nothing in my name; ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full." (John 16:23-24).

How should we pray for others? "But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (Matthew 6:6). Prayer is an intimate conversation between you and the Beloved Lord that secret inner room of the heart. When people ask you to pray for them, they are asking you to remember them in that very place of intimacy between you and God. What a precious gift we give to people when we pray for them! It is easy to pray for our friends, as our Lord said. And it can be hard to pray for our enemies, those we need to forgive, yet our Lord commands us to do so. To let them into our "holy place" and offer them to the one we know will show them mercy, even if something in us wishes that they would not receive it. But let us remember Jesus on the Cross who forgave the Good Thief. Even in his last moments of life, Jesus could not refuse this prayer. Through prayer, may our hearts be changed to be like the Lord's.

When the disciples asked the Lord to teach them how to pray, he gave them the Our Father which places us in a spirit of childlike confidence in the God's goodness. The message of Divine Mercy reminds us to have this childlike trust and boundless confidence in the goodness and mercy of God.

It's easy to wonder sometimes, do my prayers even matter? What can they accomplish? God does not need my prayers to do anything. My prayers cannot change God's mind. It is true that God does not need our prayers. He is all-powerful, and can do everything without our asking. But he *wills* to accomplish things with our prayers. In other words, it may be the case that God wants to heal someone of an illness, but he wants to do it with the help of your prayers. He desires that a certain person who has been away from the faith for a long time would return to him, but he will do it with your prayers. Someone will convert on their deathbed, and your prayers are instrumental in his or her conversion. Someone will be prevented from falling into a grave sin, thanks to your prayers. Prayer allows us to take part in God's merciful love to the world. And his mercy can take many forms: grace, physical or spiritual healing, strength and perseverance, peace, and the other fruits of the Holy Spirit.

But what if our prayers don't work? What if they aren't answered? We have to remember that prayer is not "getting God to do something." It is a way for us to cooperate in his work. We always pray that God's will be done. If it isn't in accord with God's will, then we must trust that it is better off not happening. When our prayers aren't answered, our time was not wasted. Through our prayer, we grow closer to God, our hearts are changed, and we learn to love as he loves.

We pray for the dead; nothing imperfect can be in the presence of God, yet we believe strongly in God's mercy. Purgatory is the name given to the place where souls go who have died in God's friendship but who still must be purified before they enter heaven. Their purification is passive, and they cannot assist themselves. It is important to pray for them on the last leg of their journey toward heaven that they may receive the fruit of God's mercy, eternal life. They in turn as part of the suffering Church pray for us with love and gratitude. They assist us by their prayers. It is easy to forget about the souls in purgatory, but it is a great work of charity to pray for them.

While on earth, we are away from home, and we need help that nothing may hinder or harm us on our pilgrimage to heaven. Everyone needs grace from God which is acquired partially through prayer. This is why we pray for the living. "Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects." (James 5:16).

Let us conclude with Hebrews 4:14-16, which encourages us to practice this spiritual work of mercy, to pray for the living and the dead: "Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Discussion Questions:

1. Who do you typically pray for, and who do you think you should include in your prayers?
2. Please share an experience of prayers being answered, or prayers not being answered and what you learned from that experience.

Homework: Ask the Holy Spirit who else he wants you to pray for, and then pray for them.