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VADE MECUM, VOLVENTIBUS ANNIS

THE MAYANS
SAN ANTONIO,
TEXAS

Degree 10

Number 303

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Spiritual Progress Through Prayer

— A SERIES OF EIGHT MASTERFUL LESSONS
FOR YOUR GROWTH THROUGH EFFECTIVE PRAYER



LESSON ONE

Mayan Revelation Number 303

— Making An Intelligent Approach To Prayer

IN THIS LESSON:

WHAT IS PRAYER?

MAINTAIN BROAD INTERESTS

AN ART TO BE MASTERED

FIND JOY IN DOING GOD'S WILL

PENITENCE IS ESSENTIAL

BELOVED PERFECTOR:

BEFORE you is the first of a new series of Lessons. They deal with our opportunity for SPIRITUAL PROGRESS THROUGH PRAYER.

Although at times prayer may seem as easy as the cry of a child for help, it may also be as baffling and profound as a philosopher's statement about the Ultimate. We always face the temptation to continue to pray in the same manner in which we prayed in childhood. But the Creator who has provided for growth of our physical bodies intends for us to experience intellectual and spiritual growth as well. This requires study and practice. It calls for not only a desire to know more about the power of prayer, but for a willingness and determination to apply each principle of prayer as it is learned.

Of course all of us have prayed and do pray. Yet we realize that often we rise from our prayers feeling as weak and bewildered as before we began. Then we, like the disciples, should call out, "Lord, teach us to pray."

When men and women have followed the teachings and the example of the Master they have learned how to pray as spiritually mature persons. That is what you desire to do. So approach these Lessons with an eager mind and a humble spirit.

The hymn writer James Montgomery expressed a profound truth in the lines:

"Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,
Uttered or unexpressed."

Yet an acceptance of the universality of prayer should not lead us to take prayer for granted. It should not blind us to the need to learn new ways to discipline our minds and to sensitize our spirits as we enter the gates of prayer.

Endeavor to approach your Maker intelligently. Strive with each passing year to better understand God's purposes for your life. Find the ways by which you can be more consistently sustained by His Presence. Day by day seek God humbly and sincerely. Earnestly pray:



PRAYER

Father, save me from complacency, or discouragement. Make me eager to know more of Thy nature and Thy purpose for my life, and for all men. As I study these Lessons let me launch out on a quest for further insight into the principles that govern the realm of the spirit. Open my mind so I will gain more understanding. Warm my heart so all barriers of self interest will melt away. Strengthen my will

so I will go on praying even when I do not seem to get any answer to my petitions. And grant me the assurance and the spiritual power that come to all who seek Thee in spirit and in truth. In the Master's name, I pray. Amen.



WHAT IS PRAYER?

PRAYER at its best is more than a feverish cry to the Almighty for help. It is more than the perfunctory repetition of religious phrases. It is more than the audible expression of the faith of our childhood, or an echo of petitions our parents made to God.

Prayer can be true communion between the human mind and the Divine Mind. Because the differences between individuals are real, our concepts of the Eternal One vary; but every man and woman has a desire for contact with God. Augustine expressed it in the immortal words: "Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless until they find rest in Thee."

This desire prompts us to pray. And our Heavenly Father is always ready to listen and to speak to us. When praying we do not need to assume a special pose, or to repeat formal phrases in order to gain His attention. A short, simple prayer is often as effective as a long, beautiful one. The Bible gives us examples of varied ways in which the great spiritual leaders of ancient times talked with the Lord.

Many went to the temple to worship. We read in II Kings 19:14-16 that "Hezekiah went up into the house of the Lord, and...prayed before the Lord, and said, O Lord God of Israel...thou art the God, even thou alone...Lord, bow down thine ear and hear."

Frequently prayer was uttered under the open sky. We read in Genesis 24:11, 12 that the servant of Abraham, inspired and moved by loving concern for his aged and feeble master, "made his camels kneel down without the city by a well of water at the time of evening...and said, O Lord God of my master Abraham, I pray thee, send me good speed this day, and shew kindness unto my master Abraham."

We know that David prayed when he was out on the hillside caring for the sheep. He prayed in many other places as well. The sixty-third Psalm begins: "O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee; my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is; To see thy power and thy glory, so as I have seen thee in the sanctuary. Because thy loving kindness is better than life, my lips shall praise thee."

In the sixth and seventh verses we get further insight into the prayer practices of the Psalmist, for he says: "When I remember thee upon my bed, and meditate on thee in the night watches. Because thou has been my help, therefore in the shadow of thy wings will I rejoice."

We can commune with God while sitting quietly in a garden, or while kneeling in a church. We can pray while standing erect before an open window,

or - as David - we can turn our thoughts toward the Lord while lying in bed, and we can remember His power and His goodness "in the night watches". We can use wakeful hours not for useless worry and fretting, but to gain the guidance and renewal that comes through prayer.

Whatever place you choose for prayer and whatever posture you assume - whether sitting, standing, lying down, or on your knees - remember that you need not strive to persuade God to do what you want Him to do. Prayer is not a tool for shaping God's will. The Lord is eager to give you all things which are best for you. He knows your needs even before you mention them. He is seeking you even before you seek Him.

Then why take the time to pray? Because prayer is the doorway into God's Presence. Prayer is the channel through which He can enter your life.

So approach prayer in a mood of high expectancy. Think of God as One who cares for you personally and as a Living Being who is ceaselessly reaching out to give you the knowledge and the power you need. Turn toward Him. Be willing to accept what He offers - not only guidance and strength, but confidence and tranquility.



AN ART TO BE MASTERED

IT is a source of encouragement to know that God is seeking, seeking, ever seeking us. We can believe the promise: "Behold I stand at the door and knock; if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and sup with him, and he with me." - (Revelation 3:26)

God stands knocking at your door and mine. If we invite Him in - if we seek His Presence in prayer - He will tell us how to use the resources which He has put at our disposal. He will share our conversation and it will become more elevating. As we discuss our plans and our aspirations with Him we will find that what had been obscure or perplexing has light thrown upon it.

We know that we need the insight and guidance and strength that God alone can give, but all too often we fail to intelligently seek it. When we do not take the trouble to learn the techniques of prayer we are able to claim only a fraction of the benefits that could come from talking with God. If one wants to understand chemistry, he studies the various elements. If one desires to become an accomplished musician, he practices hour after hour on the instrument he wishes to master. If we would become seniors in the school of prayer we must be consistent in our study and our practice.

Your efforts to pray will be rewarded every day if you are humble and sincere. But study the lives of devout men who, to a remarkable degree, have known the Presence and the Power of the Divine and you will realize that there are many levels of prayer. To reach those which are highest requires mental alertness, discipline of the emotions and regularity of practice.

As you approach God let your greatest longing be a fervent desire to spend a few minutes in His Presence. Be sure this exceeds any wish to get something from Him. Petitions have their rightful place in prayer, but joy in having fellowship with your Heavenly Father, and praise and thanksgiving to Him, should come first.

Strive to push from your mind those thoughts that form a barrier between you and your Maker. If there is self-pity, jealousy, a grudge, or prejudice in your heart, this may blind you to God's Presence. So make an effort to erase all trace of these as you enter the time of prayer.

No doubt you will find it easier to direct your attention to the Eternal if you seek a quiet place. Many people have testified that the habit of going to a specific spot at the same time every day has enabled them to quickly slip into the mood of prayer. On the other hand, some have found that they can block off diverting thoughts and that they can earnestly pray while travelling on a crowded bus or plane, or while busy about routine tasks.

At times, what appears to be a distraction, such as a severe disappointment, or the illness of a child, can be turned into the instrument which draws us closer to God. By supreme effort it may be possible for a man or woman to pray at any time or in any place. But this is not easy. Where there are distractions, prayer at the highest levels is rarely achieved. So do not fail, whenever it is possible, to seek every day, at least briefly, a quiet spot for meditation and prayer.


The repetition of the Lord's Prayer, or reading from a book of devotions, may lead you into the spirit of prayer. Whenever beauty, or music, or great literature draws you nearer to God it becomes a valuable approach to prayer. But none of these, or the repetition of someone else's prayer, majestic though it may be, should ever become a substitute for prayer itself. Remember that real prayer is not words, but communion with God.

The Master said: "When thou prayest, enter into thy closet and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. But when you pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do." (Matthew 6:6,7)

Let the sunrise or the evening star, a symphony or a hymn, a poem or a Psalm, be the bell that calls you to prayer. Then push diverting thoughts aside as you become keenly conscious of the greatness of God and the wonder that He loves you personally. This should make you feel humble, and sorry for any word or deed that is unworthy of a child of God.



PENITENCE IS ESSENTIAL

 HENEVER we become aware of the greatness and goodness of God we are pained by our shortcomings. Then it is natural for us to ask for forgiveness; and we are indeed blessed if at the same time we are able to accept God's mercy, which we have been told is far beyond what we could

reasonably expect or deserve.

A small slip from accepted ethical standards, or failure to grasp a single opportunity to be generous and kind, can torture the sensitive soul as much as some grave misdemeanor would disturb one who is not striving to live nobly. So the need for penitence and forgiveness is not restricted to those who have committed gross sins. It is necessary for each of us as we approach God.

Another Lesson in this Series will bring instruction in the ways by which forgiveness can help to heal any broken, tortured personality. Here it is sufficient to stress the place penitence should have in our thinking as we approach God. Remorse for our failures, and an eagerness to be forgiven by the Father, is essential if we would have our prayers lift us to higher levels of living.

Jesus gave us the parable of the Pharisee and the publican to dramatize this truth. We have come to think with contempt of any person who was called a Pharisee, so we must be reminded that the Pharisees were a respectable class of people in their day. They considered themselves to be honorable and religious, as no doubt you and I do.

The temptation to feel proud and self-righteous plagues most of us. We need to stop glorying in our small achievements and to minimize our own good deeds. Let us remember that it was not of the man who was self-righteous because he felt he had kept the laws and had faithfully observed the times of prayer, but of the one who cried out, "God be merciful to me a sinner," that Jesus said: "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one that exalted himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted." (Luke 18:14)



MAINTAIN BROAD INTERESTS

*I*T is revolting to us to think that any devout man could pray: "God bless me and my wife, my son John and his wife; us four, no more."

Yet if our prayers were recorded on tape some of them would reveal a scope of interest little wider than this. We must constantly examine our attitudes to see if we are becoming narrow and self-centered.

The Master taught us to pray: "Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Jesus knew that if a man or woman was to enter into close fellowship with the Eternal he needed to translate attributes of the Omnipotent into personal terms. So he took the word ABBA, used within the home when addressing the father of the family, and told his followers to call Jehovah by this name. At the same time he instructed them to pray for all men, but not to limit their interest to their own personal needs; not to ask God's blessing upon only those of their own tribe or nation.

AS YOU SEEK TO MAKE A MORE INTELLIGENT APPROACH TO PRAYER
KEEP THESE TEACHINGS IN MIND. BOTH CAN SERVE AS HINGES TO
SWING WIDE THE DOOR INTO THE PRESENCE OF GOD.

You may have difficulty comprehending DIVINE LOVE. When you think of the ALMIGHTY it may be hard for you to imagine that One so great can take a personal interest in your problems. So whisper, "Father, my Father." When all about you seems dark, remember that you are God's child; and put your hand into His.

Never forget that He loves every other child of His also. Avoid becoming entangled in selfish desires for, if you do, this will create a great gulf between you and God. Preoccupation with narrow interests may prevent you from having true fellowship with the Father. It may spoil what would otherwise be a beautiful and rewarding prayer experience.

If allowed free rein, self-concern can become like an octopus which would fasten its tentacles upon us, drag us down to the depths, and suck away our life. If it has even a small grip upon you, shake it off by turning your attention to the needs of others.

In every prayer take a moment to think of those beyond your immediate circle of family and friends. Over and beyond what this may do for them, it will lift YOU to a higher level. It will minimize your own problems and limitations. It will make YOU more at one with God, your Father.



FIND JOY IN DOING GOD'S WILL

WHEN one reads the lives of the saints one senses again and again that even when they were deprived of common, everyday comforts they experienced a joy that other men seldom attain. When they were beaten and thrown into prison they were not only calm but radiantly happy. They found a strength in prayer that sustained them through the trials they had to face day by day. They found a joy in fellowship with God which was reflected in their faces as they went about their tasks.

This was true of Paul and Silas, and many followers of Christ in the first century. It was true of Ghandi. It was true of Olin Stockwell and others who more recently have suffered for their convictions.

Remember always that the joy in doing God's will is not reserved only for those who are called upon to suffer. It can come to the farmer who ploughs and plants well, and cultivates carefully, cooperating with God to bring forth a good harvest. It can come to the mother who cheerfully cares for her home, and with endless patience leads little feet into paths of noble service. It can come to the teacher who, while instructing his students in history, or English, or science, opens their eyes to the wonders of God's world and to their obligation to become partners with the Creator. It can come to the wealthy businessman, or to the humble servant; to the busy merchant, or to the person who has retired. It can come to whoever will take the opportunity that is before him and use it as



CONCLUSION

THE longing to let God's will be your desire and goal can come through the approach to prayer outlined in this Lesson. First, take delight in fellowship with your Heavenly Father. Praise God and thank Him for His goodness and love. Follow this by a recognition of your limitations and a desire to be caught up into His greatness. Ask forgiveness for anything you have done that is small or unworthy; or for any failure to respond to a noble impulse. Be willing to use all you have and all you are in God's service. Do these and you will experience deep and abiding joy.

If you have allowed formal petitions to become a substitute for true communion with God, resolve that you will begin today to seek God's Presence with greater sincerity. If you have been content with the prayer habits of your childhood, begin to make a deeper approach to prayer. Strive to develop the prayer practices that are worthy of a spiritually mature man or woman. Do not neglect the privilege of regularly meeting God in devotions.

In the coming weeks you will learn of techniques that will enable you to pray more effectively when they are mastered. In the meantime, please follow the five rules that will help you to enter into God's Presence and to gain from Him the help you are seeking.

1. Choose a definite time and place in which you will daily have communion with God.
2. Begin your prayers by praising the Creator for His goodness. Thank Him for all He has done for you. Dwell upon His greatness and His limitless power.
3. Remember that God has an interest in you as a person. Talk to Him quite naturally as you would talk to your own mother or father, or to your closest friend. Tell Him whatever is on your mind. He cares for you. He is eager and ready to give you the wisdom and the strength you need.
4. Pray for others as well as for yourself. Strive to widen the circle of people for whom you pray.
5. Trust God. Leave your worries with Him. Arise from prayer with a determination to follow whatever insight you have gained and to go forward with faith. Remember: YOU ARE NEVER BEYOND THE REACH OF GOD'S LOVE AND CARE.





AFFIRMATION

In quietness I will seek God's Presence. I will find joy and strength through fellowship with Him. When I leave the place of prayer I will remember that He is guiding and sustaining me as I go about the common tasks I must do day by day.



Blessings,

Your Instructor.