

OM SAI RAM

Welcome to Prasanthi Sandesh

PODCAST 251, “WHAT IS PRAYER?”

July 25, 2024

*The following text contains excerpts from Prof. Anil Kumar’s book
“Sai-Chology,” pg. 13-18.*

We often look to God with different perspectives and viewpoints. A number of questions underline these perspectives, like – Do we need God at all? If so, then why? How do we approach Him? What would be our position in not knowing or knowing Him? What is the point of contact? What is the contact between us? And so on and so forth.

The point of contact between a devotee and God, the process of contact, is PRAYER. A devotee is in contact with God through the medium of prayer. Prayer is the only means of communication between a devotee and God.

Is it necessary to pray? Why do we pray? Why **should** we pray?

To be honest, we pray when we are in trouble or when we have problems. We also pray to realise our ambitions and to fulfil our material and worldly desires for gains, success, etc. Followers of religions pray for something or other. In this aspect, prayer is nothing but a submission of requests, a memorandum of appeals and a helping hand to success. Spiritually speaking, these types of prayers are merely selfish and there is nothing spiritual about it.

Modern-day compulsions, greed and selfishness, have turned people into seekers, but of a different kind – material seekers. For such people, prayer is a sort of ‘business deal’. I offer You so many coconuts in ‘return’ for some business profit. The greater the desire, the greater the ‘bribe’ to the Almighty! Or, it may be a prayer for one’s sick relative in hospital who needs to be saved – the approach is the same: I shall offer thanksgiving on his/her recovery! This is nothing but a commercial transaction!

When we have reduced prayer to just a call of necessity and made it need-oriented can we call it prayer? Is there anything religious or spiritual about such prayers? Verily, selfishness and spirituality are opposite poles. Need-oriented prayers are completely selfish, to say the least.

So then, what is prayer? What does Bhagawan say about it? Why and how should we pray? What are the wider implications and the deeper significance of prayer? Let us analyse.

The basis of prayer is humility. I was asked (when in the 12th class in school) to offer a prayer on the School Day function and I chose the prayer (by Rabindranath Tagore)

“Where the mind is without fear, where the knowledge is free” and learnt it by heart, to recite it on School Day.

An hour before the function, the class teacher called me for a hearing rehearsal. When he heard it, he remarked that it was not a prayer and said, “You are praying as if you have caught hold of the collar of God” – ‘where the mind is without fear and knowledge is free’ – this is a violent sentiment in the prayer. He then advised that in prayer there should be humility and reverence. As you pray, have adoration, devotion and respect. When you utter the words, “Where the mind is without fear,” it is not prayerful.

This wise counsel prevails today: One cannot be loud in one’s prayer, or harsh in reciting. While in prayer, there has to be softness, sweetness, respect, reverence, worship and adoration.

An attitude of humility is the core of prayer. The one who is not humble is not prayerful. He may offer prayer, but he is not prayerful. Prayer is not reading or oratory or loud recitation to advertise that one is a devotee. Pomp and show, ego and arrogance have no place in the wonderful and holy act of prayer.

Humility in prayer gives way to submission: to offer oneself as an instrument of the Lord. We praise the Lord for everything and should not claim anything as ours – our successes, failures, credits and debits of life. But we should be worthy instruments, just like the sterilised instruments used by a surgeon – dirt and rust will not do. Hence, prayer is a submission wherein we make ourselves worthy of the Divine Mission.

Once in Kodaikanal a devotee exclaimed to Bhagawan, “I dedicate my life and offer myself unto You.” With infinite patience, Swami heard him.

Bhagawan replied, “I see. Own your life first. Do you think that this body belongs to you? No! Are you the owner of this body? No! Why? You see that which you should not see. You hear that which you should never hear. You think of that which you are not supposed to think of. You visit those places, which should not be visited. So, the senses are not under your control. The body is not under your control. And yet you say, ‘I dedicate my body to You, Oh Lord!’ How can you offer another man’s property as a gift to someone else? If I take your watch and say, ‘I offer it to you as my gift’, something is wrong with me. You should have authority. You should have every claim on that. You should be an ‘owner’ in order to dedicate. You should be an ‘owner’ in order to commit. You should be an ‘owner’ in order to donate. Without any ownership, without any claim on that, you say, ‘I offer myself...’ No, no, no!”

First assess yourself whether you are an owner or not. When can you be an owner? When you can control your sight, when you can control your audition, when you can control your taste, when you can control all your senses, then you can say, “I am the owner of this body, so I have every right to dedicate it”

So, when we submit to the Lord through our prayer, we must claim ownership first, and be the owner and master of our life. This implies control and authority of our thoughts, senses and conduct in life.

Thirdly: Surrender. Prayer is surrender. But do we really surrender as we pray? Our prayers are conditional. We offer an incentive to God to fulfil our desire and if that is thwarted, we are equally ready to blame God. Surrender means: “Thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven.” Not my will or anybody else’s will. Once we give ourselves up totally into the Hands of God, with true surrender and unconditionally, then, we have the Lord fully on our side.

In surrender, one does not evaluate or judge the results or outcome or conclusion of anything. Therefore, when one prays, it is prayer and nothing else. The result may be positive or negative – prayer is prayer. It should be remembered that we pray not for any result – we do so out of love and devotion to the Lord, to be close to Him. Therefore, preparedness, readiness for anything that might happen in life, good or bad, is prayer in the real sense.

The question therefore arises: “If I have to be prepared for any eventuality, why should I pray at all and waste time?”

We pray to have the spirit to bear suffering, the courage to bear all situations or eventualities and the spirit of preparedness to accept success and all positive things in life, in all humility. That is preparing psychologically or mentally to meet all situations, both positive and negative. That is prayer. A prayerful man is never frustrated in life. A prayerful man is never egoistic in life because he knows, “Thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven.”

God has His own Master-Plan. Things happen according to His Plan, not what and when we choose or what we prefer. In fact, prayer is a preparation to meet any situation, not a choice or a preference. Also, prayer is not conditional.

The story of Prahlada from *Bhagavata* is a beautiful illustration of the way one should pray.

Prahlada was an ardent devotee of the Lord, whereas his father, who was the king, was an arrogant atheist. In fact, in his pride and vanity, he wanted everybody to worship him as God. However, the son, Prahlada, was steadfast in his devotion to God and refused to bow down and worship his father.

When persuasion failed with Prahlada, his father, the king, started adopting violent means like throwing Prahlada in a pit of snakes or getting him trampled by elephants, but all in vain. Prahlada continued to sing the glory of God, “Narayana, Narayana.” Not once did he grumble or complain to God about his tribulations and suffering – he only repeated, “Narayana, Narayana”.

Finally, the father threw Prahlada from the mountaintop into a fire pit and into the sea. But every time the Lord was there, with outstretched hands, to save Prahlada. All the while, there was no cry for help from Prahlada.

This then, is the efficacy of unconditional prayer. Prahlada never complained or cried, nor ever reacted. He was dignified and steady in the midst of the entire crisis, meditating on the Lord. Bhagawan repeatedly relates this story on prayer.

We will enjoy more insights by Prof. Anil Kumar on the topic of prayer in the next session.

Thank you for your time,

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