

Session 1: LEARNING THE LANGUAGE OF GOD

1. This is my own definition: *PRAYER is any intentional activity meant to orient us to God* (turn us toward God).

This differs from my private definition of *BLESSING* only in that prayer is intentional activity by which we seek to turn ourselves toward God, while a *BLESSING* is anything – intentional or accidental, chosen or unchosen – which has a consequence of turning us towards God. (That is why some tragedies can turn out, in the end, to be blessings.)

2. Praying is the expression of our desire for a relationship with God. Praying is not about achieving anything.

We have to avoid “setting goals” for ourselves in prayer, like we might do if we’re trying to lose weight, or learn Spanish, or build a business. This also means trying not to “evaluate” our prayer life, or assess our “progress” in prayer, except to the extent that we can observe prayer’s long term effects on our daily living. (And by “long term” I mean over a period of years.)

Praying is more akin to being in love. When we’re in love, our only goal is to spend as much time as possible in the company of our beloved. —Five minutes talking on the phone with our sweetheart about whatever interests her is a happier time than an hour of conversation with somebody else about a hobby we share in common.

3. I was serious about prayer when I was just a kid. This is probably because my mother was serious about prayer, and she got me started. God was always real to me, and I believed God was always present, always listening. Though I also had some badly distorted ideas about God that took many, many years to get rid of. (For more than half my life I prayed and behaved as if God were a kind of “critical parent” . . . like my father and mother were! I felt like God was always looking over my shoulder, saying “Tsk, tsk, tsk. That’s not good. You have to try harder and do better!”)

4. Brought up in a conservative evangelical Protestant family, my early formation as a praying person grew out of that tradition, which always links Bible-reading with prayer.

Catholic tradition, Orthodox tradition, and Anglican tradition all link Scripture and prayer, too. But I had been praying for many years before I learned about how this works in all the different traditions.

5. The Bible shaped my way of knowing God. Over a long period of time, the New Testament taught me to understand “the language of God”: JESUS, the “Word made flesh”.

But we’re always learning that language! We get more proficient as we continue to read Scripture and pray and time goes by, but there’s *always* room to grow. We never become “masters” of the language.

6. In fact, we’re in danger when we get the idea that we’re “experts” or “masters” of prayer. Somewhere in one of his books Thomas Merton wrote that as soon as we get the idea that prayer is “a ladder that we’ve climbed to the top,” we demonstrate that – in fact – we’ve fallen all the way back to the ground.

There *are* indeed people who are proficient in prayer and able to help others, but the ones I have known are pretty modest and don’t regard themselves as special.

And I most certainly do not put myself in their company. I have been praying for many decades, and I have learned some things that I hope I can pass along to you, but I’ve been a very slow learner!

7. Some of you may have been in my class a year ago on Brother Lawrence's *Practice of the Presence of God*. To me, Lawrence is a model "pray-er." He kept it simple and he stayed humble.
8. In a profound sense, prayer is always a *gift*. Our relationship with God is not built from our side to His. It starts with God seeking us.
9. That's why some people say that "prayer is *received*, not made." God loves us unconditionally and He is always inviting us into deeper communion with Him.
10. I will conclude by saying that the one thing I want to emphasize at this session is this: the faithful reading of Scripture is the necessary context from which we will grow in our knowledge of the "language of God."

So: I recommend that you spend some time every day reading the Bible – and I say *reading*, not studying. Maybe "listening to God speak through the Bible" is the best way to think about it.