

Home-Made or Ready-Made?¹

At the end of his life, Lewis wrote a book on prayer published posthumously under the title *Letters to Malcolm*. In chapter two he begins to talk about private prayer, dealing with the subject of home-made versus ready-made prayers. Home-made prayers are prayers that we pray using our own words. Ready-made prayers are those that we pray using the words of others, such as The Lord's Prayer. Lewis challenges his fictitious friend Malcolm to broaden his mind and include more ready-made prayers in his devotional life.

Lewis claims that he tried to pray without words, with only mental images, when he first became a Christian.² He soon realized, however, that he could not do this effectively all the time. But, Lewis

¹ *Letters to Malcolm*, pp. 9-13.

² Lewis also mentions not needing to use names in prayer. See *Letters to Malcolm*, p. 18.

maintains, words are only a secondary aspect of prayer. They are like an anchor or the movement of a conductor's baton. Words canalize worship so that our prayers don't simply become puddles.

It doesn't matter who first put the words of a prayer together. Our own words harden into a formula the more we pray on a regular basis. And if we use ready-made prayers on a regular basis, we will find ourselves pouring our own meaning into those words.

Lewis avows that he uses his own words as the staple with a modicum of the ready-made.³ A ready-made form can't serve for our intercourse with God all the time any more than we can use ready-made forms to converse with other human beings. However, ready-made forms have a few positive things to be said in their favor. First, they keep us in

³Lewis notes that variety in our approach to prayer is helpful from time to time. See *Letters*, p. 245 (20 October 1952).

touch with sound doctrine. Second, they remind us of what things we ought to ask. Third, they provide an element of the ceremonial.

When we don't use any ready-made forms, we tend to get too cozy with the Almighty. Lewis contends it is important to keep in mind God's transcendence as well as His proximity. We need balance in our prayer life. Fourth, ready-made forms set our devotions free, and they keep our minds from wandering so much in prayer. Finally, ready-made prayers keep us from being too eaten up with the concerns of the moment.⁴

Prayers to and for the Dead

Regarding prayers *to* the dead Lewis queries, "If we can ask for the prayers of the living why can't we ask for the prayers of the dead?" If we believe in the Communion of the Saints, which most Christians

⁴ See *Letters*, p. 239 (1 April 1952).

confess in The Apostles' Creed, and if that means communion with saints both living and dead, why can't we ask for the prayers of both? After all, the dead are still alive to God in Heaven.

Lewis notes that devotions to saints also have the benefit of reminding us that we are very small compared to them, how much smaller compared to their Master. But there is also a danger in asking for the prayers of the dead. We may end up viewing prayer as a system by which we try to pull the right wires to get what we want from Heaven. Lewis asserted that he had no plans to take up the practice himself.

However, Lewis maintains that all Christians should be agreed about praying *with* the saints. As it says in the Prayer Book, "With angels and archangels and all the company of heaven." It can be encouraging to think that our little twitter in prayer is being added to the prayers of the great saints. Perhaps their prayers will drown out the ugliness

of our own or set off any tiny value they have.

Lewis answers Malcolm's potential objection that there is not a great difference between praying with the saints and praying to the saints.

Lewis claims it is all the better if that is the case because reunion with Rome may then engulf us unaware. Discussions about difference in doctrine usually separate people whereas actions unite.⁵

Regarding prayers *for* the dead, Lewis asserts that it is a spontaneous and all but inevitable action on his part since most of the people he loves best *are* dead!⁶ He asks how he can even talk to God intimately if the people he loves most are unmentionable to Him.

⁵ *Letters to Malcolm*, pp. 15-16.

⁶Lewis' one exception to this was praying for his dead wife. Doing so made him halt, bewildered. (See *A Grief Observed*, pp. 24-26.)

Lewis notes that, on the Protestant view, prayer for the dead is useless because their final destination is sealed. But, as Lewis also points out, this is an argument against praying for the living as well. He asks, “Isn’t their destiny sealed too?” And besides, can’t there be perpetual increase of beatitude in heaven, thus making our prayers for the blessed dead helpful?⁷

When & Where to Pray

Our chief prayers should not be left to the end of the day, Lewis maintains, because we need energy and concentration to pray well.⁸

He says that he prays in trains, on park benches, or pacing back streets, anything to keep from leaving his prayers until bedtime.

⁷*Letters to Malcolm*, p. 107. The one Scriptural warrant for praying for the dead which Lewis suggests is Paul’s mention of people being baptized for the dead. (1 Corinthians 15:20) If people can be baptized for the dead, why can’t they pray for the dead? (See *Letters*, p. 300 [26 October 1961].) Lewis also mentions 1 Peter 3:19-20. If something can be done for the dead, then why can’t we pray for them? (See *Letters*, p. 302 [28 December 1961].) The Protestant answer is that we can’t pray *for* the dead, nor ask for their prayers, because Scripture does not specifically instruct us to do so.

⁸ See *Letters*, p. 256 (31 July 1954).

Churches, however, pose various distractions when we seek to pray there by ourselves during the week. Often, Lewis says, they are too cold to pray in during most of the year. Or else cleaning people come along to distract one from praying. He confesses that, of course, one can't kneel to pray in strange places. However, kneeling *is* important. The body needs to be active in prayer as well as the soul. But concentration matters more than kneeling.⁹

The Why & What of Prayer

Lewis poses the important question, “Why pray when God knows all?” His answer: because in prayer we assent with our whole will to be known by God as persons.

⁹ *Letters to Malcolm*, pp. 16-18.

How important must an object be before we can, without sin or folly, allow our desire for it to become a matter of serious concern to us? And granted the existence of such a serious concern in our minds, can it always be properly laid before God in prayer? Lewis answers these questions by saying that we must aim at *ordinate* loves in our lives. We must put first things first and second things second, and so on. But we must also lay before God what is in our minds, not only what *ought* to be there. Whatever is the subject of our thoughts should be the subject of our prayers, whether in penitence or petition or both. Those who have not learned to ask Him for childish things will have less readiness to ask Him for great things. And God will help us moderate any excess in our prayers; we can ask Him to give us *ordinate* loves.¹⁰

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 19-23. Lewis notes how careful we need to be about informing God that our cause is righteous. See *Letters*, p. 168 (10 September 1939). We also need to beware of bargaining with God. See *Reflections on the Psalms*, pp. 97-98.

Festooning The Lord's Prayer¹¹

Festoonings are the private overtones we give to certain petitions.

They are the words we hang on each petition of a ready-made prayer such as The Lord's Prayer.

Lewis' festoonings to The Lord's Prayer are as follows. In *Mere Christianity* he suggests that when we pray "Our Father" we are putting ourselves in the place of children of God, we are dressing up as Christ. This may seem like outrageous cheek but the Lord has instructed us to do this. It is a good kind of pretense that will lead us to really become children of God in the fullest sense of the phrase.¹²

And, as has already been alluded to, Lewis festoons "hallowed be thy name" with the phrase "with angels and archangels and all the

¹¹ *Letters to Malcolm*, pp. 24-28.

¹² *Mere Christianity*, p. 161 ff.

company of heaven.”

To “thy kingdom come” Lewis says that he adds the meaning “may your reign be realized here as it is there.” He takes “there” in three senses: as in the sinless world, as in the best human lives we have known, and as in Heaven, among the blessed dead.

Lewis professes that he views “thy will be done” as primarily an act of submission,¹³ mainly to disagreeable outcomes, just as the Lord prayed in Gethsemane—“Not my will but thine be done.” However, he also takes it in the sense of “thy will be *done* – by *me* – here and *now*.”

Thirdly, he thinks that we may need to submit ourselves to future blessings as well as difficulties, so that we don’t look back to different blessings in the past and say “Encore!”

¹³ For more on this see *The Screwtape Letters*, p. 29.

Regarding “Give us this day our daily bread,” Lewis suggests that we can use these words to pray for both spiritual and physical needs.¹⁴

Regarding “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” we said much in our last session. Lewis confesses that the hard part about this is to keep on forgiving others every time their offense comes back into our minds.

“Lead us not into temptation.” raises the question of whether God is a fiend. Would He ever lead us into temptation? Lewis points out that the word temptation in Greek can also mean trial. He maintains that this adds a caveat to all our other prayers as if to say, “If I have prayed for anything that would lead to a time of trial, keep me from it and don’t give me what I have asked for.”

Finally, Lewis notes how he views “the kingdom” as a reference to

¹⁴For more on “Give us this day our daily bread.” see *The Screwtape Letters*, p. 126.

God's sovereignty *de jure*. God would deserve our worship whether He was all-powerful or not.¹⁵ "The power" he takes as a reference to God's sovereignty *de facto* – He *is* all-powerful. And "the glory" refers to the beauty of God that is so old and so new.

Penitential Prayer

Lewis claims that he prays for the daily dose of self-knowledge that he can handle. When his conscience won't come down to brass tacks and convict him of a specific sin, he tells his conscience to be quiet and move on.¹⁶

Malcolm points out that there are different levels of penitential prayer and Lewis agrees. There is the lower level at which we are simply

¹⁵ See also *Surprised by Joy*, p. 77, 211, 231.

¹⁶ *Letters to Malcolm*, p. 34.

trying to placate an angry deity by our penitence. Then there is a higher level at which we are trying to restore an infinitely valued and vulnerable personal relationship that has been shattered by our own sin. Both these levels are valid and needed because it is easy for the higher level to be turned into a mere feeling, whereas the lower level requires sheer action, which is more powerful than feeling.¹⁷

Lewis does not agree with the Puritans who suggest that we ought to have a permanently horrified perception of our own sin. This is not compatible with the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, etc.) or with Paul's "forgetting those things behind." Besides, Lewis says, we can't have a permanent program of emotions. Our emotional reactions to our own behavior are of limited ethical significance. We need spiritual emetics at certain moments, but not as a regular diet!¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 95.

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 97-99. It should be noted that elsewhere Lewis "rehabilitates" the Puritans as a misunderstood group. (See *Selected Literary Essays*, edited by Walter Hooper, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1979, p. 116, *English Literature*

Petitionary Prayer

Some people ask, “Why pray if the future is already certain in God’s mind?” Lewis reminds us that we must ask God for things because we are taught to petition the Lord both by precept, in The Lord’s Prayer, and by the example of Jesus Himself,¹⁹ regardless of the chances of our getting what we want. Jesus made a petitionary prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane and didn’t get what He asked for.²⁰

In his essay on “The Efficacy of Prayer”²¹, Lewis starts out by giving

in the Sixteenth Century, pp. 34-35, and *Studies in Medieval & Renaissance Literature*, pp. 117, 121-122.)

¹⁹We dare not shirk petitionary prayer thinking it is the lowest form of prayer. (See *The Screwtape Letters*, p. 126.)

²⁰ *Letters to Malcolm*, p. 35.

²¹ *The World’s Last Night and Other Essays*, pp. 3-11.

possible examples of prayer's efficacy. One is the incident where he went to see his barber in answer to his barber's prayer. The other is the example of Joy being healed in response to Peter Bide's prayer.²²

But, Lewis asks, what sort of evidence would prove the efficacy of prayer? Empirical proof is not possible—the thing we prayed for may have been going to happen anyway.²³ Invariable success in prayer would prove the efficacy of magic not of Christian prayer. The assurance that God answers prayer can only come through a relationship with Him.²⁴

Does prayer work?²⁵ Lewis suggests that this question puts us in the

²²See also *A Grief Observed*, p. 34, *Letters to an American Lady*, pp. 64-65 (June 18th 1957), and *Jack*, p. 368.

²³ See also *Miracles*, pp. 178-180.

²⁴See also *The World's Last Night*, pp. 26-27 and *Miracles*, pp. 180-181.

²⁵See also *Letters*, p. 236 (8 January 1952) and p. 226 (Undated).

wrong frame of mind. Does prayer change God? Lewis answers that our prayers don't change God's mind, but His overall purpose may be realized in a different way due to our prayers.²⁶

Lewis quotes Pascal: "God instituted prayer in order to lend to His creatures the dignity of causality."²⁷ Lewis moved a bit beyond Pascal's position between the publishing of "The Efficacy of Prayer" in 1959 and the publishing of *Letters to Malcolm* four years later. By the time of the latter, he asserted that if our prayers are granted at all they are granted from the foundation of the earth. Before all worlds His providential and creative act takes into account all the situations produced by the acts of His creatures. He takes our petitions as well as our sins into account.²⁸ And being taken into account matters

²⁶ See also *Miracles*, p. 174.

²⁷ Also quoted in *God in the Dock*, see pp. 105-106, 217.

²⁸ *Letters to Malcolm*, p. 50. See also *God in the Dock*, pp. 76-79.

more, spiritually speaking, than having our prayers answered.²⁹

The Prayer of Faith³⁰

Lewis asks what we are to do with Jesus' words in Mark 11:24, "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." How do we reconcile this promise with the fact that so many prayers are not answered affirmatively? How do we reconcile Mark 11:24 with Jesus' own prayer in Gethsemane?³¹

²⁹ *Letters to Malcolm*, p. 52.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 57-61.

³¹Lewis began wrestling with this issue at least as early as 8 December 1953 when he read his essay "Petitionary Prayer: A Problem without an Answer" to the Oxford Clerical Society. (See *Christian Reflections*, pp. xiii, 142-151.) At that time he did not have an answer to the apparent contradiction between Jesus' command in Mark 11:24 and Jesus' practice in the Garden of Gethsemane. But by the time of publishing *Letters to Malcolm*, ten years later, Lewis did have an answer. That answer is presented in what follows.

Lewis answers these questions by saying that obviously the answer to some prayers is “No,” even when we pray in faith.³² It is understandable why our petitions are refused when we so often ask for the wrong things. But why then is this great promise made in Mark 11:24? And how can you have perfect faith when you know refusal is possible?

Lewis concludes that Mark 11:24 contains truth for advanced disciples, not beginners. For most of us, the prayer in Gethsemane, “Not my will but thine be done.”, is the everyday model to follow.

Furthermore, we should not try to work up a subjective state of faith.³³ The absence of such faith is not necessarily sinful. After all,

³²See Lewis’ own experience recorded in *Surprised by Joy*, pp. 20-21.

³³See *Letters*, p. 256 (31 July 1954), *Surprised by Joy*, pp. 61-62, *The Screwtape Letters*, p. 21.

our Lord had no assurance that His prayer would be answered in the affirmative in Gethsemane. The kind of faith mentioned in Mark 11:24 is a gift. It is given to the person who prays as God's fellow worker; it is given to the apostle, the prophet, the missionary and the healer.³⁴ But perhaps this gift is given to them only on special occasions, since Jesus Himself apparently did not receive this gift in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Adoration & Thanksgiving³⁵

Malcolm taught Lewis that adoration can start, for example, from a

³⁴See also *Christian Reflections*, p. 150. Lewis also felt that if one were a better Christian one's prayers for others might be more effectual. See *Letters to an American Lady*, p. 53 (26/4/56).

³⁵ *Letters to Malcolm*, pp. 88-93.

waterfall, which is an exposition of God's glory. The pleasures we get from Nature and from other sources are shafts of glory as they strike our sensibility. Lewis professes that he has tried to make every pleasure a channel for adoration, but not simply by giving thanks for it.

“Gratitude exclaims, very properly, ‘How good of God to give me this.’ Adoration says, ‘What must be the quality of that Being whose far-off and momentary coruscations are like this!’ One’s mind runs back up the sunbeam to the sun.”³⁶ Pleasures can become “patches of Godlight” in the woods of our experience.

The contrast between adoration and thanksgiving is similar to another contrast Lewis often draws in his writings. It is like the difference between “looking at” and “looking along.” When we give thanks we

36 Ibid., p. 90.

are looking at a pleasurable or beautiful object and thanking God for it. When we adore we are looking along that object back up to God Himself. We get the idea, from *Letters to Malcolm* and from Lewis' real correspondence, that he used this method of prayer during his daily walks. He found that he could take every bird-song, every flower, every tree, every shaft of sunlight, and turn each one into a cause for thanksgiving as well as an opportunity for adoration. Lewis believed that by spending time in God's creation every day we reconstitute our souls. And in Chapter XVII of *Letters to Malcolm* he teaches us how he did it.

The Duty of Prayer

Lewis refreshingly and humbly admits that prayer is irksome!

Admitting that praying is something we *must* do, we rush on through the exercise of prayer so that we can get on to the things that we *want*

to do.³⁷ Why is this the case? Lewis says it is so for two reasons: because of sin,³⁸ and because of the difficulty of concentrating on something that is concrete yet immaterial like God. The irksomeness of prayer doesn't prove that when we are praying we are doing something we weren't created to do. If we were perfected creatures, prayer would not be a duty but a delight. We must remember that we are still in the school of prayer; we haven't graduated yet. And what seem to be our worst prayers may be our best; being nearly all will, such prayers come from the depths.³⁹

In conclusion one might ask, "Why should we read Lewis on prayer?" Because in his writings we find a compassionate fellow-traveler on the

³⁷*The Weight of Glory*, pp. 126-127. See also *The Problem of Pain*, p. 75.

³⁸ See *The Screwtape Letters*, pp. 54-55.

³⁹*Letters to Malcolm*, pp. 112-117. See also *Letters to an American Lady*, pp. 70-71, (31/3/58) and *The Screwtape Letters*, p. 39.

road to God, one who never imposes his own view, but who shares his own experience in such a way as to keep us out of the common ruts and on the main road to our destination.