Before We Ask

"Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him." Matthew 6:8

My mother was a prayer warrior.

When I was a boy, I would sometimes lie awake at night listening to two very different sounds coming from my parents' bedroom. My father was snoring. My mother was praying.

She could pray for hours.

There are Christians like that. They seem to have been given an unusual capacity for sustained prayer. Most of what they do is never seen. They pray in secret, bringing people, families, churches, pastors, missionaries, illnesses, sorrows, and needs before God. Few people will ever know the influence their prayers have had upon the lives around them.

I have always admired them.

But there can be an unintended consequence when you grow up listening to one of them.

You begin to wonder whether that is what prayer is supposed to look like.

Prayer has never come easily to me. Even after more than sixty years as a Christian, it remains one of those areas in which I can readily feel guilt and dissatisfaction. Have I prayed long enough? Often enough? Earnestly enough? Shouldn't someone who has walked with Christ this long be better at this by now?

Then come the words of Jesus:

"Your Father knows what you need before you ask him."

Before we ask.

That changes the way we understand prayer.

Prayer is not informing God about something He does not know. It is not persuading a reluctant God to become interested in us. It is not presenting a sufficiently thorough list so that nothing escapes His attention. Before the first word leaves our lips, our Father already knows.

That does not make prayer unnecessary. It makes prayer relational.

A child speaks to his Father.

Sometimes that means an extended time alone with God. Sometimes it is a sentence spoken while driving. Sometimes it is thanksgiving that rises almost spontaneously. Sometimes it is confession. Sometimes it is nothing more than, "Lord, help me."

And sometimes we do not even know what to say.

"Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought." Romans 8:26

God anticipated even that.

Scripture does not describe mature Christians as people who eventually overcome every weakness in prayer. Instead, it tells us that the Holy Spirit meets us in our weakness.

There is no criticism here of the prayer warrior. The church needs those quiet saints desperately. Somewhere today, someone is probably praying faithfully for people who will never know their names. Their ministry may be among the most important ministries in the church precisely because almost no one sees it.

But their gift must not become everyone else's standard.

Our Father is not measuring our prayers against someone else's prayers. He is not counting minutes. He is not waiting for eloquence. He is not withholding His attention until we have demonstrated sufficient devotion.

He knew before we asked.

Perhaps, then, the question at the end of the day should not always be, "Have I prayed enough?"

Perhaps a better question is this:

Have I learned to live before the Father who already knew what I needed before I asked?



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