

## Conversation with God

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“Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors”(Matthew 6:12).

When we talk to people, we call it “conversation.” When we talk to God, we call it “prayer.” But prayer, we are told, *is* conversation with the Lord. We can learn more of the meaning and value of conversation with God by examining our conversation with others.

Because of the powerful influence of the five senses, we are sharply aware of the “things” around us. Myriads of sensations pour into our minds, dominating thought. The natural body captures a considerable amount of our conscious thought. We seek food, comfort, pleasures; the attractive, the luxurious, the valuable.

We need only reflect on how much of our conversation is above time and space to be conscious of an imbalance. How much time is spent on the meaning and purpose of what we are doing? How often do we seriously evaluate actions and desires? How frequently do we lift our minds above appetite to contemplate purpose—the direction of life? What part of our year is spent in serious concern over serving the good in the neighbor? Indeed, how often do we think about heaven, about what is truly good and just about the Lord?

Analyzing our past conversations for value and content is not confined to what is uttered by the lips or received through the ears. Much of what we speak is said to ourselves! The steady stream of words and ideas passing through our consciousness is seldom verbalized. But it is conversation nevertheless. Our thoughts are actually expressions of our affections. *We think about what we love all the time.* A thought, expressed audibly or not, is a form of our real self, which is what we love.

Communication is normally considered a two-way street. It involves talking and listening. We can learn to know ourselves by an honest evaluation of how much of one we do, compared with the other. Even when another is talking, how much do we actually hear? Is the neighbor drowned out by our private thoughts?

Our own private thoughts—how private are they? Nearly every waking moment is full of an endless stream of talking within ourselves. We ask questions of our memory; we debate issues back and forth about actions. We plan, we review, we calculate, we draw on our imagination to experience some future event even before it happens. And, all the while, we are perfectly convinced that we are alone, unobserved, unheard by another. But is that true?

The Heavenly Doctrines for the New Church explain the spiritual world. Our unspoken thoughts and feelings dwell in that world. But is this a world that we live in alone? We are told that all thoughts and affections flow in *from* that world and do not originate in our own minds. We read that spirits are constantly near us, influencing our lives from moment to moment. Can we be confident that no one hears our thoughts?

Does the Lord hear us?

Certainly there are times when we think we don't even hear ourselves! When we wish to pursue some end that we know is selfish and evil, we can quickly collect a number of specious arguments to justify our actions. It is as if we can cleverly shout down all arguments to the contrary, and delude ourselves, and become deaf to any counter arguments—all within the confines of our own private spiritual world. Evil loves can fill our understanding with a dozen arguments for our actions, blocking out any two-way conversations even with our self, our better self.

And, because of the appearance of living in isolation, within our secret world of the mind, we can deceive ourselves into an illusion that we are free from detection!

There are the other times, too, when we wish we were not so alone. We have been struggling with a difficult decision. We finally resolve to uphold a principle rather than succumb to what is convenient or easy. This may engulf us in a deep loneliness. If only a friend could know what we have been through! But, alas, there appears to be no one who knows of our efforts. We are alone, or so it appears.

Even Emanuel Swedenborg felt his thoughts were private. He wrote: “Before I had been instructed by living experience, I had supposed, as do others, that no spirit could possibly know the things in my memory and in my thought; but that they were solely in my possession, and were hidden” (*Arcana Coelestia* 2488).

But now this great illusion has been penetrated! The appearance of our solitary mental experience is now exposed. By means of the Heavenly Doctrines, given through Swedenborg, who lived in both worlds at the same time, we can now remove self-deception! Swedenborg reports: “I can attest that the spirits with man know and take note of the smallest things of his memory and thoughts; and this much more clearly than the man himself, and that the angels know and take note of the ends themselves, how they bend themselves from good to evil, and from evil to good” (*ibid.*).

Revelation from the Lord states the truth in unequivocal terms: “Let no man any longer believe that his thoughts are hidden, and that he is not to render account of his thoughts and of his deeds according to the degree and the quality of the thoughts that have been in them” (*ibid.*). {189}

Such sobering knowledge can become a “hard saying.” We are not alone in our thoughts! They are shared by countless numbers in the spiritual world who hear our every notion. They can even know our deepest loves and intentions. So what is left to hide? If spirits and angels can penetrate our minds, how much more can the Lord Himself be aware of our inner world. He is omniscience itself.

This concept, once accepted, can have a profound influence on our conversations with God. The words given in the sermon on the mount take on new meaning. Those who pray ostentatiously appear ridiculous! Some offer mere repetitious words. But those who converse with the Lord in

the quiet recesses of their minds are given immediate reward. Answers, Divine words of wisdom, flow in from a loving Father.

Once we set aside the conviction that we are alone in our thoughts, we can begin the serious work of conversing with the Lord. Once we begin talking to Him, we assume first of all that there is a God and that He listens to us. We believe He is all-wise and always present. We accept the fact that the Lord hears every word of our mental speech. Furthermore, prayer usually assumes that there is a merciful God: He forgives us when we err and ask for His mercy. And we acknowledge that the Lord is all-powerful, when we pray seeking some blessing.

What should we pray for? How do we talk with God? What are the “rules” of conversation? By becoming a student of the Word we can soon learn how to pray, what to ask for, and how it will be heard. We seek the impossible if we ignore what the Lord will do for us according to His own laws.

The clear message from the three-fold Word is undeniable. We are asked to love the Lord as He loves us. And we are to love the neighbor. But these loves are gifts coming from the Lord. The Lord is all-wise and all-merciful. We need not waste our breath on prayers that ask for things, honor or praise. The Lord already knows what we need to lead us to heaven. He is ever mindful of our lot. He monitors every moment, every step along life’s journey toward heaven. Asking for material things or events to take place only shows what our loves and ambitions are.

It is quite natural, however, to be confused in conversations with God. It is hard to separate the natural desires of the senses from eternal goals. We are not used to talking about eternity with others or with ourselves. Why would it be easy to do so when we talk to the Lord? But this does not excuse us. For the Lord has taught us how to pray. He taught us the Lord’s Prayer, which contains all that we need to ask of Him. But we must come to understand something of the meaning of these Divine words.

For example, our text reads: “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” If we were to create a prayer, and we often do, we might simply say, “Forgive us our debts.” We believe that if the Lord will forgive us, we will be happy today, and eventually be happy in heaven to eternity. But that is not what the Lord instructed us to do. He puts the words into our mouth to repeat to Him: “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” These are difficult words to say. This means, literally, do not forgive us, Lord, as long as we hold grudges, seek revenge, harbor bitterness. To forgive others who have done injury to us, who hate us, who seek to harm us—that is the challenge! It means *we* must forgive, show mercy, understand and even forget the trespasses of others.

We are further told to pray: “Deliver us from evil.” That means we ask the Lord to remove selfish desires for rebuttal and revenge, to take away loves that prevent forgiveness of our fellow human beings, to replace our ambitions for preserving self-pride by fighting evil with evil. We are to ask the Lord to fill us with renewed desire to forgive others. We ask God to deliver us from evil yearnings by removing them from us. We invite Him to enter when we, as of ourselves, begin to resist temptations. We pray that He will plant a new love within us. We ask for the birth of a new will—we seek His gift of regeneration.

And, wonderful to say, as our evil loves are gradually replaced by heavenly ones, we will find our conversation with others, and with ourselves, changing! We will not be so preoccupied with treasures upon earth, that are quick to decay. We will be more conscious of the *eternal* needs of our neighbor and of ourselves. Our thoughts and conversations will center more on the good in our neighbor and the evils in self, rather than the reverse. Our private thoughts will begin to abhor lustful fantasies. We will rise above preoccupation with sensual appetites. Our goals will encompass values that exceed time and space, and we will begin to enjoy the blessing of heaven even while on earth.

Let us listen to ourselves more carefully, in open conversations and in those that take place in our minds. Let us listen to the Lord as He speaks to us. We read in *Arcana Coelestia* 2535 that the Lord “reveals” Himself to us through our inner thoughts, bringing hope and consolation. We can then prepare for prayer, by first forgiving those who have trespassed against us. We can search out an evil, a trespass against the Lord, and work on its removal. Then, and only then, will the Lord heed our prayers. And He will grant our requests for mercy, forgiveness, and life everlasting. Then our life, both in thought and deed, will be one continuous prayer to God, the Giver of all.

*Amen.*

Lessons: Matthew 6; *Arcana Coelestia* 2535