

Chapter 6.03 Relation to God: Submission and Prayer

I know what Christians mean by “a personal relation with Jesus” or “accept Jesus as my personal savior” but it still seems odd to me. It seems off the mark, as if they get half the idea but not the whole idea, and they blow up the half they do get to make up for the half they don’t get. So this chapter is not about accepting Jesus as your personal savior. It is about having a relation with God if you can.

Submission.

If you believe in God, then what do you do? Believing in God leads people to want to acknowledge God and their belief in God, at least to themselves. To acknowledge God is to accept that God is bigger and smarter than you, and implies you should follow his guidance. To accept all this amounts to submitting to God. Not to think in terms of submitting is contradictory and is to fool yourself. Many people acknowledge God and yet cannot submit to him. Submitting is a hard step. Many people cannot take this step, especially people who think it demeans their independence, intelligence, or integrity, or who think submitting makes them like servants. It is hard to value political-personal freedom as do Americans and to submit to religious authority too. When people think of submitting, they fear they have to follow all the rules of an established church, even rules that they do not agree with or cannot follow, such as not using birth control.

People want to think of their relation with God as like that between an adult child and a respected elder parent. They do not like to think the relation is like that between an adult to minor child, boss to employee, slave to master, or even professor to student. God sent us out on our own and he expects us to make our own decisions, even if we are wrong sometimes. God expects adults, not simple-minded minor children. People expect the kind of relation with God that goes with the expectation by God for us that we are adults.

This idea of the relation with God as between two adults owes a lot to modern middle class ideals under successful self-government and successful capitalism. We are citizens under God, not subjects under God. We get our ideas of our relation with God from the world we live in. Even so, I think this idea of a relation with God is largely correct. Just because we get our ideas about God from our other social and natural relations does not mean the ideas are wrong. The problem is that this idea of a relation with God can mislead us about our own abilities, nurture pride, block a deeper relation, and prevent us from seeking help that we need. So I want to place this modern idea of a relation with God as a relation between two adults in the context of the bigger relation that I call “submitting”.

Jesus spoke of God as “Father”, and he used the familiar-respectful term “Abba”, like “Dad”, when talking to God or about God. (Jesus was not overly-familiar and did not use terms that trivialize God, such as “daddy”). Submitting to God is like accepting that your parents can help even adult children in a tight spot. Sometimes even adult children need help with the mortgage, hospital bills, or legal fees. Even if parents cannot help with money, and even if they cannot bail you out entirely, parents can help in other ways. They can make sure you do not get lost. If you are lost, they can help you find your way back. They can give advice based on their greater experience. Eventually, submitting to God leads you

to feel you are in touch with something much bigger even than cosmic parents. When you do submit to God, the submission will not frighten or demean you, and you can accept the idea of submitting without fear.

I do not think God condemns to hell people that want to follow Jesus but do not know how to submit or cannot submit. I do not know what God does with people like that but I am pretty sure they do okay.

To submit to God is a hardship but it does have rewards, so it is worth the effort if you can do it. For both the hard part and the rewards, see below.

Other religions require submission. "Islam" means "submission". A "Muslim" means a person who submits to God, the same God as for Jews and Christians. Even non-theistic Buddhists go to the Buddha, Dharma, monks, and the fellowship of other Buddhists for refuge and guidance. Hindus have to recognize something greater than themselves even if they also think they are identical to that greater being eventually. The idea of "karma" entails the idea of submission. Taoists seek the Tao because it is greater than themselves and they want to go along with it. New Age people with animal spirit companions submit to that idea. Many ideologies, including Marxism, Political Correctness, feminism, Gay Liberation, and "the free market solves everything" require submission. Secular groups, even academia, require submission, often to a greater extent than God does. I would much rather submit to God than to any secular organization or ideology.

Standard Christians call submission "finding God", "accepting God", "coming to God", and "making a relation with God". Those terms are fine as long as we know that we do not have to accept the standard Christian idea of the Trinity when we submit to God and we do not have to accept the teachings of any particular established church. At the same time, keep in mind that standard Christians are not all half-crazy because they "find God". As in other religions, they might be on to something too.

Submitting to God is not like Abraham willing to sacrifice Isaac. If God asked that of me, I would say "no". It is not like agreeing to have sex with somebody to get them to quit annoying you. It is not like the movie "The Good Girl". It is not like "ratting out" your best friend to save your own skin. It is not like kissing the ass of a bully or of your boss. It is not like selling your soul to your job. If you ever read "The Story of 'O'", it is not like that. Submitting to God is much less demeaning than other submitting we often do, and submitting to God can go a long way toward helping us not to do the other worse kinds of submitting. Usually people recognize God and submit to God when they realize they are not self-sufficient, when they are in pain, need help, are sick, or when somebody they love is sick. That is fine. I see no reason why that should disincline God to accept you. It is too bad we have to wait to be in pain to submit but people are like that. I hope the relation continues beyond the immediate need.

I was a combination. I had strong allergies and asthma as a child, so all along I recognized my insufficiency. I also probably have a predisposition to feel the presence of imaginary spirits, and that trait supported my childhood belief in God. The childhood belief never went away. On the other hand, I am arrogant about my intellect, as a youth I quickly adopted Western diffidence to religion, and I tried to convince myself that God was not important. Seeing the hypocrisy of many standard Christians kept me from submitting. Living with Buddhists and Muslims did not incline me one way or the other although it

did help me to see that traditional religious people can be okay despite some hypocrisy. I faced hard events during which I called on God and God seemed to answer. Just after my wife, Nitaya, and I were married, she was diagnosed with cervical cancer. With surgery, she survived. I learned you cannot make bargains. A year or so after, I had to accept that I could not tolerate academia yet academia was the only job option open to me. At the time, academia was a mental trap for me, and I needed a way out of the trap but had none. I told God I would accept any guidance he would give me on that problem and on any aspect of my life. The combination of cancer and academia led me to submit. After that, I faced other hard events but they led more to confirmation than to new submission; I do not recount them here.

I do not know what my submission implies for other people being able to submit. I intensely dislike authority that does not live up to its own standards and I will not submit to it. I grew up among the least submissive people in the world: Western Americans (not Reagan-ite imitations), Oregonians, working class Americans, and Cretan Greeks. Many among us would rather die than submit to any person. Western Americans might be spiritual but are not religious, take pride in being non-religious, and sometimes are hostile toward organized religion. Submission is not part of their spirituality unless it is submission in some New Age sense or to a martial arts teacher. I learned typical academic diffidence, and typical rock-and-roll diffidence, toward any religion. Religion was for un-cool idiots. Even so, when I understood what I really believed and that I had to be consistent with myself, the next steps followed naturally. My case is not "If I can do it anybody can do it" because I do have a childhood history of religious feeling and I do have a tendency toward religious experience. Nor was I ever staunchly anti-religious and so had a "flip over" kind of conversion. But I am not the most likely candidate, and a lot of people like me cannot submit to God. So, if I can do it then you probably can do it too.

Accept First.

I don't know how to advise people who are thinking about believing but are not sure. I don't want to argue with atheists. Never do what is not in your heart. Never believe because you think it is the right thing to do or you think religion is socially useful. Believe only because you think the religion is true. You cannot believe so as to save your soul if you do not independently think what you believe is true. You cannot believe because you think it is good for society. You cannot believe because it would make your parents happy or your partner happy. Never make a contradiction in yourself. Never replace one contradiction with another. Better to live with the true contradiction that is in you than to replace it with a contradiction you get from theology, hipness, politics, the culture wars, or somewhere else. Honest atheism is better than dishonest belief. God is much more likely to forgive an honest mistake than to forgive dishonest self-serving orthodoxy.

People that do not believe sometimes have trouble stepping over the line because they intuitively know that belief implies submission, and they intuitively understand submission - maybe better than people who have always believed and who never consciously had to submit. Non-believers hesitate, not for the intellectual reasons that atheists raise, but, because, in their gut, they do not want to submit. Think of it this way: Believing in God is like accepting that we live under the rule of law when we live in democracy. We give up the right to be the final authority on some matters. Some laws we do not like, such as against marijuana, but we obey them anyway because they are part of the package. Most people who live in democracies don't want to accept all the laws; they don't want to submit to the idea of a democracy even though they gain the benefits of living in a democracy. The problem with not submitting to God when you

really do think there is a God is that you divide yourself and make yourself sick. Not believing when you really do believe is worse than having to give up a few egotistic things. It is much worse than submission.

Don't worry about submission right away. Think about accepting first without thinking about submission. Read books by people like you, by people like you but not exactly like you, by atheists, and by tortured Christians who no longer believe in orthodoxy and so search the gospels for every little detail that might guide them. Read books by sincere people who have to come to faith as adults. Don't dive into books by zealots and Bible bumping conservatives. Think about what is right and wrong. Think about what might change if you did believe in God. Does God want you to do anything wrong? If you understand the lessons of Jesus and accept those, then you will worry less about believing or not believing; then belief will either come naturally or it will not. Submission might come after that or it might not.

Warning: Hardship and Growth.

The relation that grows out of submitting to God is bigger than the help you get for any particular crisis and a lot bigger than any bargaining. You get more than you bargain for, both easy and hard. The growth that comes through submitting is one of the best ways to have a relation with God, the only way I discuss in this book.

The Hard Part.

Contrary to the great expectations pushed by popular evangelists, some people who submit find their lives get harder. This topic is odd because it smacks of divine intervention, testing, and initiation rites; it is not like that. So it is worth clarifying the hardship that comes from submitting, first by dismissing what seems to be hardship but is not. Hardships often come with rewards, so this subsection mixes in description of some rewards along with the hardships. The next subsection deals more directly with the rewards.

Submitting to any religious authority often causes people to act "more moral"; greater moral behavior usually annoys somebody; and the somebody can make your life harder - but that is not an important hardship that submitting leads to. Submission to an institution causes you to follow the ideas of the institution, and other people outside the institution get annoyed at you for that. Even rebel rockers conform and submit when they adopt the rebel code, and people make fun of rockers for that. People make fun of believers in God. That is not an important hardship that submitting to God can lead to.

The biggest hardships come because you might need to make internal changes and do some reordering. In submitting, you have to decide and you have to commit. After submitting, you have to keep on making decisions. Some people have never made critical decisions or commitments before in their lives. Submitting to God forces you to understand decisions and commitment in general. (Which does not mean Jesus is the god of commitment and responsibility.) You realize that a big part of being human is to decide and commit sometimes. I think submitting is like becoming a parent of your own identity. You have to take other people seriously as people, not just as means to your ends. You have to take all creation seriously. You can still be normal and have fun but you cannot be mindlessly selfish.

Unlike as with having children, your life can become simpler. You might give up some friends or situations. It is not a question of giving up bad influences; you just lose interest in some things while gaining interest in others. You want to give up things that you once used for diversion. You don't have to get "wasted" anymore just because you are bored, have nothing to do, and can find no better satisfaction. You can get wasted when you really want to. You do not need people just for distraction. It gets harder to look at porn because you see actors in it as people. You see that some people are bad for you, even if they are fun, as Sandra Bullock finally did in the movie "28 Days". You might change direction in your career. Other people give up on you even when you still share much in common.

I don't think you can submit to God just as a way to cure a problem such as alcohol although I might be wrong. Maybe wanting to cure alcoholism can lead you to submit, and then submission might help. But there are alcoholics who sincerely believe in God and who submit to his authority but still can't stop drinking. I think God will help you with a problem if you ask, and you do not even have to submit to get the help. That happened to me. God does seem to help some alcoholics stop drinking. Don't blame yourself or God if you submit to God and then can't stop drinking. It is not a case of "I just don't believe hard enough". Sometimes things turn out that way. Some problems are really hard. I don't know why. After submitting, you are honest with yourself and you see other people more clearly. The honesty leads to greater clarity and consistency. The honesty with yourself leads you to be more honest with others. You cannot exploit people much anymore. I do not think a normal person can be completely honest or consistent so you do not get weird about it, just somewhat simpler.

Honesty can be painful, not just a little painful, but really painful. Sometimes it makes your stomach hurt and makes you gasp. You do not quest for perfection but you do see a lot of faults in yourself and you want to correct what faults you can. It is hard enough to do something about the faults that you can do something about, and harder to bear the ones that cannot be corrected, especially the ones that hurt other people. It does not make you crazy; you learn to live with it.

The honesty did not lead me to be too much more forgiving. Probably that is a flaw in me. I still see idiots, liars, users, and selfish people as they are. They are not saints in beggar's clothing, saints who do not know it yet, or instruments of God sent to strengthen my faith. They are just obnoxious. I still dislike people that I used to dislike. I still don't know how to make them behave any better. Probably other people become more forgiving and kinder than me.

The honesty and clarity do not lead you to know exactly what to do all the time. Submitting does not make you able to get out of every situation on top, or even to be able to get out. It does help with many situations.

God gives some rare people projects after they submit. The projects are like the tasks in "Joan of Arcadia" or "The Blues Brothers". They do not require you to be a busybody, and they almost never require you to build an ark. You do not hear voices that give you assignments. You just see things to do that you did not see before. You also give up projects that waste your time and annoy the world, such as fighting to get religious scenes off public land or fighting to get religious scenes on public land – see "Charlie Wilson's War". You are not called upon to solve every problem that ever was and to save the world single-handed. It becomes harder to ignore situations such as hungry children or a disaster. Giving to charity does not seem cheesy. You might start recycling. You might volunteer. You might

actually talk to people that are stupid or ignorant or not chic. In one of my self-given projects, I had to find out if social science could really help with the problems of the world – I found out it can help, but not as much as social scientists think, and probably not enough in time; and I found out I was not able to help hardly at all. Another self-given project was to write this book for anybody who might benefit. You do not always succeed well. Sometimes you fail. That is alright.

Despite the projects, you do not necessarily gain a purpose in life or see the core meaning in life. You just know you have work to do. You stop worrying as much about the grand meaning and purpose of life.

You gain a greater feeling of integrity and some more confidence but you do not necessarily gain a stronger notion of yourself. You gain better perspective on yourself, and that makes you both more confident and less like a braggart. If you are really smart, talented, athletic, or good in business, then you see that you are not special, and that even you can make only a modest contribution. If such modesty helps you see, then you do gain a stronger notion of yourself through that. Some people only realize they have an eternal soul when they submit to God but submitting had the opposite effect on me. It made me realize I am created and finite, and that I am eternal only if God wants me to be. You are what you are, and you have to make do with that.

You worry that you are causing hardship for the people that you love and even just for the people around you. That understanding might be the biggest hardship. You try not to cause people trouble if you can help it.

The Rewards.

I do not know if being a parent is as satisfying as all the horrible annoying post-1980 parenthood movies paint it but submitting to God is satisfying. That makes up for some of the hardship.

Honesty is painful but it is also useful and satisfying. Consistency is easier than self-delusion, rationalizing, and covering up contradiction. You come to accept that you cannot have your cake and eat it too. You get to know better what you want and you do not feel bad about going after it as long as it is ethical. If you want to stay home from work, you do not have to make yourself sick first and then miraculously recover after the phone call; you just stay home from work. If you want a drink for fun, you drink; but you also stop when drinking is no longer for pleasure. After you realize that stealing from work is not revenge against “the man”, you give up stealing; but you also don’t miss the booty. Laughing is more fun, laughing at anything.

You clearly realize that it is not all about you, that you are not the most important thing in the world, and you should shut up and be useful. The insight is not stultifying but moderately liberating. You realize the importance of working together. People who still think they are important seem funny, sad, and hurtful. The fact that people in general cannot work together well seems sad. You understand better the balance of competition and cooperation. Advocates of both unbridled capitalism and do-gooder socialism seem selfish and stupid. Understanding your limitations does not preclude you from asserting yourself or being a leader if you have to. It only means that you assert yourself for a reason other than to promote yourself.

You do feel that God is watching over you but not that God is watching out for you. I never felt particularly protected. You still are subject to accidents, disease, the bad actions of bad people, and poverty. You have some greater ability to deal with those problems but they do not become non-problems shrunk into nothingness by a sea of blissful godliness.

You get guidance. God gives you insight, advice, and sometimes he gives you the means to finish projects. God teaches you, although I am not always sure how, and I am not able to explain. You learn more from what happens in life, both good and bad. You see more, so you learn even from what does not directly affect you.

In some ways, the best thing is that you have somebody to talk to when you pray, for which see below on prayer.

Even though you are energized to follow Jesus and to try as hard as you can to be useful, the burden of saving the world is lifted from your shoulders, for which see below.

When you find other people that understand, you also have other people to talk to; but that happens not as often as I would like. It is hard for me to make friends, and it has not gotten any easier. Finding people who understand, even if they don't see it just like you do, is like finding somebody who "gets" the music you like or the drama you like. Formal religion tends to blind people so they do not seem to understand submission. Many Christians that talk about "giving yourself to God" or "having a personal relation with Jesus" have no idea what I am talking about. Belonging to a liberal church does not always help. Sometimes spiritual but non-religious people have better insight. Some religious people get caught up in the idea of a mission from God, and that is just creepy. Real submission is more like the "Blues Brothers" or "The Unforgiven" than like a movie about Jesus or like Jedi fighting Sith. After submitting, other religions become clearer. Zen, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism make more sense. Determining which religion is most correct seems less urgent. I appreciate more the sister religions to Christianity: Judaism and Islam. I appreciate philosophers, poets, and some mystics more although I still see a lot of that as self-indulgent and misguided. I can understand their struggle to make sense of life-as-a-whole. I understand mystic experience such as "we are all one" and "I am God too" but I do not think it is correct or that we can live our daily lives that way.

God and Me Again.

After I told God that I needed help with academia, I think I got help, but it was not fun and it was not easy. I never did well in academia. I dislike authority too much. I think professors should be priests of the truth, and they are not. I was always too much the Oregon hick. When I tried to be a professor, I did not get tenure. Yet my wife and I stayed around academia and we kept trying to help with issues of ecology and economic development. We also stayed poor. In the long run, failing at academia has been good because I did not turn into a nice excusable version of someone that I do not like, and my intellect remained alive outside academia as it never would have inside academia. The choices I had to make helped me understand my situation better and helped me be more decisive in general. Rather than take my intellectual, existential, and daily order from academia, I had to create them for myself. Having to do that was a great blessing. It was also painful, sometimes very much, usually more for my wife than for

me. It is hard to grow old poor anywhere but maybe especially hard in America if you are formally well educated but have few marketable skills.

God did not deliberately made it hard for me to get a job in academia so I would grow spiritually and become more aware of world issues. My own personality caused my lack of material success. If God lent a direct hand, maybe it was in these two ways. First, some activities are highly worthwhile in themselves but require a strong commitment of time and mental power to the exclusion of other activities, for example working on the environment, development, pop culture, theoretical analysis such as formal biology or anthropology, doing martial arts, doing some spiritual practices such as Zen and meditation, having children and a family, or having a big group of entertaining friends. It would have been easy for me to pursue one or more of these, even outside of academia, and get lost. To get lost in them might have been wonderful if it did not also stop me from working toward other insights that are more important, such as in this book. In the right place, such activities are blessings but in the wrong place they are traps. Until I "got my head on straight", for me, they were traps. I kept out of traps, and God helped me to keep myself from traps, until I did think straight. Second, God helped keep me from totally self-destructing until I could figure things out. He helped keep me from isolation, despair, drugs, and debilitating illness. I had some medical problems, and God helped me heal before I died from them. How much you wish to see the hand of God depends on your preconceptions.

Clever Divine Planning.

I think what happens is something like this: God has already set up the world so we can learn a lot from it and so most of us can get by if we are not too ambitious. God did not set up the world so we can be assured of finding happiness here, but only so we can probably find ways to be useful and to continually grow. When we submit to God, we become more aware of the ways in which we can learn from the world and can be useful. We use what was already here without expecting it to bring us bliss. We realize we will make mistakes, mistakes will hurt us and other people, and we can only learn some lessons of life from mistakes. That hurts. Even so: "Seek and you will find; knock and the door will open for you". When we go through all this, we feel as though God is carefully guiding us personally in a tailor-made personal training program even though it is really only a generic program for anybody who submits. If God adjusts the program for me personally sometimes, that is great, but likely not necessary, and I am not sure how I would know. Even if the program is generic, it is good enough for we humans, and we can still feel that God watches over the process with satisfaction. Eventually you stop feeling the need to have God baby you through the business and you feel confident about using the world to get something good out of it and to give back too. The process can take years or decades, so be patient.

An atheist can argue that the feeling of personal growth might be real but it has little to do with God. The projects come from our own sense of morality and from the real needs of the world. If God does not obviously intervene to protect us, and we do most of the work on our own, then the idea of God (dharma-karma or Tao) adds little, and the illusion of God (dharma-karma or Tao) only opens the door to confusion. I cannot logically overcome this argument. I know all that the atheist says but his-her argument still does not feel right. I know I evolved to feel God is a part of the story whether he is or not but I still feel that way. To leave God out of the story would make me feel self-contradictory. The feeling of a relation with God is not like the feeling when I pursue an intellectual project or when I wonder about the morality of bank bailouts.

God's Plan.

I have met many people who think God has a plan for the world, the United States, and for them in particular. Especially people feel this way after they have "found God". They like to point out the many ways in which God has guided their lives such as by helping them buy the right car, get the right occupation, and find the right spouse. This is a comforting feeling. Most of us would like a divine parent. I have felt this way many times when something good came along unexpectedly or something unlikely worked out. When you and your spouse really get along, it is easy to feel that God brought you together. I can make up reasons why people evolved to feel as if God micromanages their lives but those reasons are not very relevant to whether this feeling is true. I wish it were true but I doubt very much that it is. God set up the world so we can make some good use of it, enjoy it, help out, and make ourselves better. It is unlikely God set up the world so you can feel right about becoming a dental assistant or about your petunia bed. I recall an old couple who found a puppy, didn't want it, asked me to find a home for it, and then changed their minds because they felt God had sent the puppy to them. They were alcoholics, and would not have taken good care of the puppy, so luckily the puppy had a good home somewhere else before they saw the hand of God wagging the puppy's tail. I can't guess what the puppy thought about God's plan.

Mostly we feel this feeling because it gives us energy to go ahead and do what needs to be done. If the feeling works that way, and does little harm otherwise, then I see no reason to fight against it. It is like fighting human nature again. Talking about it can be charming, and it does make you wonder. On the other hand, if you pick your friends only among the people who think God has a plan for you, them, your country, and the world, and who share with you the details of how God helped you pick the right vacation spot, then you should reconsider. If you pick your friends only among people who want to crusade violently for God's plan, then you should stop.

Not Getting Rich.

In the Tanakh (Old Testament), God gave to some people worldly success, material wealth, big families, love, and power. I doubt God ever really did that. I think the people who had their scribes write the Bible made sure their scribes said that God gave their ancestors those gifts and God gave them those gifts. This idea is a powerful recruiting tool, and is used by most religions. Whether God ever really did that in the past is not relevant now because God does not do that now. I don't know if the coming of John the Baptist and of Jesus changed God's ideas about worldly success for followers but I am certain God does not give worldly success to his followers now. God does not reward you with worldly success if you love him enough, and only if you love him enough. If you have done well, I doubt God led you to make a good real estate deal, buy gold, buy stock in Apple, buy the winning lottery ticket, or get born in the ruling family of a country that sits on a puddle of petroleum. I doubt God will do anything like that for you in the future. I am certain success is a not sign that God loves you in particular, your church, or your political party. I wish God did give worldly rewards to his followers and that he would single me out for a big gain; it has not happened yet. If it does happen, I doubt I will see the hand of God, but I will be thankful.

If thinking that God gives worldly success helps you to do good, does not make you arrogant, does not lead you to harm nature or society, and does not lead you to look down on others, then thinking this way

is probably natural, not bad, and does some good. It is good to be thankful to God for benefits, realize the large role that luck played even if you have genuine skill, and realize how deserving other people are. Yet thinking that God gave you what you have, especially that he gave it to you because you are such a sincere deserving believer, inevitably leads to serious errors. Think carefully when you find yourself thinking this way.

Some Christian televangelists refer to the Old Testament, say God wants to make his believers rich, and say they can get God to make you rich if you only give the televangelists a donation as proof of your belief and as seed money. They provide testimonials. All this is wrong. If there is a hell, then these televangelists likely will go there. You should stop thinking like this. If you have some spare money, donate to a food bank.

Prayer.

Prayer can help with submission if you do not think of it as stereotypical prayer. As a child, I prayed in my own way, and I never thought of how other people pray. I never took the standardized prayers at Church to be the best prayers or the only way to pray. As a young man, when I began to meet traditional Christians, I was disappointed to learn that many of them prayed primarily with standardized prayers and could not pray any other way. I never pray in standardized prayers. I think that odd. I have read prayer books, and I think many of the ideas in the prayers are great, but I could not memorize the prayers just to make sure I got the ideas. The only standardized prayer that I know is the "Lord's Prayer" or "Our Father".

Think of prayer as conversation. You do not have to ask for anything. You can talk about what a nice day it is. You can complain that your bunion hurts without really expecting God to do anything about it. You can ask for advice without always asking for a solution. You can ramble on, and very likely will. You can pray to clear your mind and order your mind. Do not worry about what to say or how to say it. Begin "Hello, God, it's me here" if you want. It does not matter. Just begin and ramble about anything at first. You do not have to pray only for other people or only to end world hunger. You can ask for advice about what car to buy, although I doubt you will get much of an answer to that question.

A good way to start is by venting a problem. If you are angry at your boss, at a fellow employee, your brother, your spouse, your children, or the President, then just blow up and vent to God. God probably won't do anything about it, but you can vent anyway. After you calm down, you can think about other things. Feel very free to ask about sick relatives and friends, or with help with an illness or a problem.

You do not have to be on your knees, especially if your knees hurt. You can sit down, lie down, or stand up. You do not have to stick out your hands like antennas. There is no special time. You do not have to do it at the same time every day. You do not have to do it before you go to sleep. You can do it at work for five minutes when nobody knows what you are doing. You can do it instead of watching a spot of mindless TV. You can do it during a long run of commercials. There is no minimum or maximum time. Three minutes to begin is a lot. You might not want to do it for more than twenty minutes until you get really comfortable doing it.

Anybody who has ever meditated will see that prayer is a lot like meditation, and I do not think there is anything wrong with that. I have no desire to distinguish them or to say that one is always better than the other. I am pretty sure you can do both because I have, although not at the same time. I think they help each other. You need something that will clear your mind, get you to think straight, and help put you in perspective. I think prayer is better than meditation for that, and I think meditation can actually divert you from that goal; but I do not push the issue.

Prayer can be like meditation too in another way, especially if you use prayer to vent, and for this you need a warning. Your mind will empty out during prayer, and you might have some unusual thoughts. Strangely enough for being connected to all-good God, you might have bad thoughts during prayer. If you are venting at your boss, you might suddenly realize how much satisfaction it would give you to bury the claw end of a hammer in the top of his-her skull. You might realize you have a crush on a fellow employee. If you are a man, you might realize you envy women, or, if you are a woman, you might realize you envy men and have a crush on another woman. This is all normal. Just because you feel these things does not mean you have to act on them. This is part of being a mixed human being. This is part of what you get guidance about. Just let them pass, and go on to more pressing issues.

Feel free to get angry at God. Yell at him about how miserable the world is, and how bad a job he is doing. Tell him how to do it better. Think through the issues as you argue with God. How would you really do it better?

Try thanking God for a good job too. You can count your blessings as in the old Depression era songs, and you can also thank God for things that have nothing to do with you and that you might not even enjoy, like fly fishing or tuna casserole. Thank him for all the children that get well even if you do not know them. Thank him for all the self-indulgent crazy academics that do not believe in him.

Most of the time, your prayer will not frighten you. It will bring you satisfaction and peace. You will learn how to return to what you think is important. God will likely guide you to return to what he thinks is important.

You do not have to submit to pray. If you are angry at God at first, then it is not likely you will submit to him, although you do have to acknowledge him to get angry at him. If you keep praying over many weeks, eventually you will see what submission is all about, and submission will not be so hard. But you never have to submit just because you pray.

Some people pray but feel no connection to God through prayer even though they might believe in God otherwise. I am not sure what to say because I never had that problem. You probably should try at least twenty times before you give up entirely, and you might want to come back to it again after waiting a few months. Even if you feel no connection with God through prayer, you might want to pray as a method of therapy or mind training. There are a lot worse methods of mind training. If you really cannot get anything, then you might want to try meditation and forget about prayer. If meditation and prayer don't work, try art, sports, or current events.

It is not necessary to pray to have a relation with God or to submit to God. I think a lot of people go through life like that. People that cannot pray have to use intellect and gut feelings for everything. They

have to use reason more than most people do. They have to decide what is right or feel what is right, and hope that God intervenes indirectly in their decision making process without being asked. I am not sure how long you have to try praying before you give up on prayer and decide to take this path.

Praying to Jesus.

I think many standard Christians pray to Jesus. I pray only to God. I talk with Jesus. I sometimes ask Jesus for advice. I do not pray to him as to God. The attitude is different. Jesus is like a sibling, like Wally from "Leave it to Beaver". He is not like "Big Brother" from the novel "1984". God can and will respond to you directly, and you should not be afraid.

This is a touchy point. You should be able to have a direct relation with God. If you do not, or cannot, something is wrong. You might not be able to overcome what is wrong, you will not go to hell if you cannot, and you might have a good relation with God anyway even if you pray primarily to Jesus; but still something is wrong. To use Jesus as a god, or as an intercessor, is wrong because it blocks a direct relation with God. If you have to do it, do it, but try to get directly at God. At least once a month, try praying directly to God and only to God.

Protestants make the same point toward Roman Catholics by saying that Roman Catholics should not use saints as intermediaries, that praying to saints is like praying to lesser gods, it is a kind of idolatrous polytheism, and it blocks a far more important direct relation with Jesus. Roman Catholic arguments that saints are mere go-betweens, like a loving mother to a hard father, and that saints are always officially only human, do not carry weight with Protestants because people might know all that in their heads but are carried into the error of idolatry anyway. I apply the Protestant argument to anything that is not God, and Jesus is not God. At the same time, I know that I am only human, I have faults, and there is no point in kicking people to force them to do what they cannot, especially if forcing them to do what I think is right keeps them from doing what gives them greater benefit. I do not pray to Jesus but I do like to talk to Jesus sometimes. Understand the situation, and then do what you can.

Hero Mouse.

People are afraid that believing in God will turn them into a wimp. That might be a little true but it is not mostly true. Believing in God settles an internal conflict, which tends to unify you and give you more energy, which tends to make you braver, more confident, and more effective. If you have been bullying other people as a way to make up for insecurity, or if you have been using self-righteousness as a way to bully people, then believing in God can make you less a bully. Believing in God can make you more empathetic but it does not mean that your feelings are always subordinate to other people's feelings.

In C.S. Lewis' Narnia books, one of the heroes is a mouse who is highly skilled with a sword. You can see him in the second of the Narnia movies, "Prince Caspian", and the third, "Voyage of the Dawn Treader". He is a miniature D'Artagnan from "The Three Musketeers" ("Musketeer" sounds like "mouse-ke-teer"). The sword-wielding cat "Puss in Boots" in "Shrek" is a variation on the same theme. The mouse has a big chip on his shoulder. He imagines insults where there are none, and challenges anybody to a duel at the drop of a handkerchief. He is annoying. He is also loyal, honest, brave, dependable in a fight, and knows teamwork. If he is wrong, he admits it. He will not do what is not

honorable. The ship "Dawn Treader", sails metaphysical seas searching for heaven. When they find it, not all are allowed to enter right away. The first allowed into heaven is not the captain, wise person, or ruler, but the mouse. A good heart can be more important than a good head. Part of having a good heart is being an active person when you can to the extent you can. That is what believing can change you into, not into a "mousy" mouse but into a brave mouse. Lewis certainly romanticizes the story, and his version owes as much to Homer and to Mother Goose as to the Bible, but the basic idea is true enough.

God Bears the Burden.

It helps to know that you do not have to save the world all by yourself if you submit to God. All you have to do is to try really hard at the best things you can think of. If you do that, and a lot of other people do the same – whether they believe in God and Jesus or not – then the world will get better, and you might save the world. If you do not save the world, it is not your fault. When we feel Jesus' message, the whole world becomes our family. If we do not save the whole world, it is like letting our family be ravaged by bandits. Even if we tried really hard otherwise on other good projects, we could not bear to see our family ravaged, and our guilt would not go away. That is the burden of the bodhisattva in some kinds of Buddhism. But it is not really our burden. In the end, it is God's burden and his problem. If other people do not act decently, it is not your fault; it is their fault and God's fault.

We are not spared the burden of saving the world because Jesus already saved the world or because God will make sure the world does not fall into evil. If Jesus did already save the world in some way, he did it by showing enough people what to do so that they will collectively save the world through their efforts – whether they believe in him as God or not. Jesus did not save the world by magic. If we do not save the world by acting on Jesus' message then Jesus did not save the world either. The world might not get saved in the end. The world really could fall into evil for a long time. That is part of the real risk we face by living in the real world. God will not intervene to stop Nazis, Communists, fascist capitalists, PC people, Family Values people, various religious fundamentalists, terrorists, or to stop overpopulation and ecological abuse. If it gets done, we have to do it. If we do not do it, it will not get done. God wants us to do it for ourselves. If we do not do it, he will not do it for us. He will let us lie in our own bed. But if the task is too much, and we fail even though some of us genuinely tried, then the fault is not ours but God's.

Fortunately, we might be able to save the world if we all pull together, and if we learn how to design institutions so that people seeking their own self-interest eventually serve the welfare of the whole.

Apparently some Christians are burdened with great guilt because they cannot save the world and convert everybody. Some liberals have the same guilt although they do not think of converting everybody to Jesus but to some other belief system. I went through some liberal guilt when I was young, and I am still frustrated that people do not see simple truths of shared humanity and nature. But I do not feel guilty like I used to and I do not feel the urge to convert everybody to my point of view. I would be happy if people would just act a bit better. Maybe part of the "good news" of Jesus is that we do not have to feel guilty like that anymore.