

It wasn't a long conversation. It was one question from a Scribe, one answer from Jesus and a short exchange between them. Perhaps it was planned, perhaps it was a chance meeting. Either way, I believe that Scribe walked away a different person than the one who approached Jesus only two minutes before.

Chance meetings and short brief encounters make up a lot of our day. Most of the time, we don't strike up lasting friendships with strangers, we don't fall in love with them ... we chat and move on.

But every once-in-a-while, such a meeting leaves a huge impact on our lives.

Almost twenty years ago, I happened to meet an elderly Jewish couple. I don't recall their names or how the conversation got to this point, but I found out that they had been married for 75 years. I asked how they managed to have such a long relationship that still seems to be... vibrant. She told me that since it was an arranged marriage, they had to learn to love one another.

I asked how they did that.

He said that every day they prayed the Shema, and they prayed it together. I told them I was not familiar with the prayer. They both smiled, covered their eyes and prayed aloud a fairly long prayer that began.... Shema Yisrael. Adonai Elehenu. Adonai Echad. Hear Oh Israel, The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!

Now, at the time, all I came away with was prayer is important in marriage and that covering your eyes was the traditional way to pray this prayer. And frankly, I didn't give them or the prayer much thought after that.

About 15 years later, while studying and praying this Gospel, I had an "Ah-Ha" moment.

I remembered this couple. I recalled the way they prayed and what I took away from the short time we had together, and I realized that my understanding of the importance of prayer in a relationship wasn't at all incorrect . . . it was just incomplete.

Prayer is vital to the Christian life, but **what** ones prays, especially when out of devout habit, matters.

By devout habit, I am referring to the prayer or prayers that we say over the long haul.

Know that God hears all of our prayers whether we say them in distress or when times are good.

But, all too often we do not hear our own prayers

Those prayers that are said habitually, daily, or even more often, are the prayers we come to hear . . . and believe.

And when we believe them, we live them. When we believe them, like the Scribe, we are “not far from the Kingdom of God”

Our Catholic tradition of prayer, especially the recitation of a formal prayer is deeply rooted in our Jewish heritage. This type of prayer is transformative.

It does not change God, but, over time, **we** become changed.

Think for a moment about the words we will pray together soon:

Thy Kingdom Come, thy will be done.

Forgive us our sins, as we forgive others.

What around us would be different if we believed and lived this prayer? Would we live as if the Kingdom was fully in the now? Could we ever think or speak ill of another?

What about “Glory be to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit” or just the making of the sign of the cross? Would we come to embrace our God, would we come to love and accept His cross as well as our own?

“Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death”. What confidence would we have? What would we have left to fear if we do not fear death itself?

I do not pretend this type and level of prayer is easy. Carving out a few minutes a day just to be alone with God takes a degree of discipline and no small amount of desire.

But think of your daily habits, the ones you do not even notice. Which shoe do you put on first? Which hand holds your toothbrush? We have trained ourselves in these little things. Try to change one of them, and you will see how odd it feels. Experts tell us that it takes somewhere between 4 – 8 weeks of continuous practice to develop a new habit.

I want to challenge you today to start a new habit. Pray what you know, the prayers from your childhood, the morning offering, the prayer to your guardian angel. You could pray today's Gospel or commit to memory a passage of Scripture that speaks to you. One prayer, three prayers, a decade of the Rosary... if this is a new habit to you, start small. If you already pray daily, kick it up a notch.

It helps to pray during a special time of the day, preferably in a place set aside for prayer –

Begin right away. Make a stern commitment to five minutes a day from now until New Years Eve. Five minutes is not that much and you all know Christmas and New Years will be here sooner than you want to admit

When you sit down to make your New Year's resolutions, if daily prayer time has made a difference in your life – re-commit with maybe a longer time, perhaps reading a chapter of the Bible, or to add the use of a daily devotional. If prayer has not made much difference, be honest. Was your effort sincere? Consider re-committing but with a different prayer or a different time slot.

I fell out of the practice, but for many years I used to live the maxim: no bible, no prayer... no breakfast. I love breakfast. And I have decided to re-commit to that practice.

For that elderly couple, the words of the Shema prayer transformed their marriage and I am certain that transformation extended to their family and

friends, because it touched me during a three minute encounter, even if it took years for me to get it.

God is Good and thanks be to Him, He is patient.