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- *The light of God and humans compared to candles*
- *God is equally present to believers and nonbelievers*
- *The relationship of thought and prayer*
- *Helping the soul grow during human life*

The presence that is God, the love that is God, the response that is God, the comfort that is God is with each of you as with everyone and everything, a real and overwhelming power and truth.

Your discussion and your questions tonight circle around the issue of God's response within the framework that is characterized as prayerful or not prayerful, and what the distinction is between prayer and thought, intentional versus nonintentional life. Is there more to God than what exists within the totality of creation? These are heady questions that really address a central truth that for many is difficult to understand or to even consider.

There are two main points for everyone to accept, whether easily understood or not. One is that God is greater than the collection of All That Is. The second is that you belong in your own way to the response of God. Both of these truths exist side-by-side.

God is indeed greater than all that has been created, for all that was created was created by God. You did not create yourself. The stones did not create themselves. The birds did not create themselves. The universe that you know of did not create itself. Nothing that exists has created itself. When there is creation, there is the Creator, and there is all that is a part of that creation.

We have spoken of the analogy of candles being lit and candles being reflected, and how that multitude of light sources can reinforce and strengthen. The second candle is a duplication in light and substance to the first, but the candle had to originate before it could illuminate. The candle gets its energy from something else. The light that you have originates with God, and it is that original illumination that is then expanded upon and broadened and deepened. But first there was that light. Without that first candle, without the energy of that first light's existence, nothing else can possibly exist.

Therefore, God as the Creator presupposes that in a significant way there is the presence of God, and then there is what God creates. Each of you contains that light. None of you are fully God, which you already know, but you do not have to be fully God in order to contain that light in equal measure that is God's light.

What does this mean in terms of prayer? Do you pray to one another, or do you pray to the power that is the Creator? You are asked, but not required, to pray to the Creator. There is a force, there is a presence that is beyond what is contained within each of you, yet you each have a candle, so you all are equal. No candle light is of greater significance than another, for you all share that equal light.

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Therefore, the question of whether there is a power, a presence to God that exceeds the totality of the light that each person contains can only be answered in the affirmative. The Creator stands, if you will, above and embraces all that is created. When you pray to God, you are praying to that higher energy, that higher presence, that greater love. But the prayers that you offer find a response which is always immediate. The difficulty comes when human beings expect that if God is to respond, that response can be defined in terms that each person may identify differently. But that response is present and real.

How is that response actually delivered? It is delivered in great measure through each of you. It is delivered by what resides within each of you. It is delivered in your acts of love, compassion, your presence, your listening. It is delivered through the skills that many have developed—medical skills, intellectual skills, artistic skills, interpersonal skills, skills of leadership, and skills of understanding. You each have your own way of being a part of God's response, but God's response in its totality is, as you would say, greater than the sum of its parts. Everyone, therefore, is an important component of what God's response is.

When you pray for healing, there are many manifestations of that healing, and there are many modalities to healing, but praying for healing is essentially praying for openness to the healing that is present. When you pray for healing, you are open to the healing offered by others, and that healing in its totality is also increased because of God's presence. We say that God is all love, but all love is greater than all beings exercising love. The totality of human response is less than the totality that is God's response, but it belongs to God's response.

You are loved, and you receive the response of God, whether or not you pray for it. There is no condition that is an overlay or a requirement the following of which results in the receiving of God's presence. The person who is a disbeliever, a nonbeliever, one who denies the existence, not just one who doesn't know of the existence of God, receives the same presence of God as the individual who spends most of every hour in prayer. The difference is the individual who finds engagement in intense and constant prayer is often more aware of God's response than the individual who denies the existence of God.

There are no human beings who are more deserving and therefore receive more help than others. You do not receive God's love because you believe in it, but believing in God's presence, in God's love, provides a meaning to life that is far deeper, more meaningful, than the individual who lives in denial or ignorance. There are no favorites when it relates to God's presence. The individual who does not believe, the individual who denies God, still benefits from the support, presence, compassion, and love of others.

You, each of you, can love another individual who chooses not to accept God. The fact that you provide a loving presence means that that individual will be

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strengthened by your presence, and that individual will be strengthened because of God's presence.

You do not receive God's love because you deserve it. There's no factor that defines deserving God, whether it is belief or disbelief. God's presence, God's loving care nurtures all.

Recognizing that, it is important also to understand that when you consider growth through human life, you are considering the growth of spirit, the growth of your souls through the experience of human life. The soul grows despite the recognition or the lack of recognition by a human being to which the soul is attached. But your own recognition and the acknowledgment of your soul by others enhances the soul's growth, deepens it, gives it greater meaning, and provides more opportunity for the soul to become more loving.

Your soul benefits and learns through its connection to your daily life. That connection may seem one way. The soul knows of your human life. The human life may not know of the soul, but that does not change the growth of the soul regardless of its recognition. But each of you in your own ways that differ one from another has the opportunity to help the soul's growth, to help what is truly eternal to flourish and gain in understanding. Likewise, your acknowledgment of the presence of spirit within helps give your lives meaning that goes beyond what is perceived through your senses. You enhance the soul's journey. You strengthen what is eternal. The soul enhances your journey and helps give meaning to what sometimes can feel meaningless.

Thought, the acknowledgment of someone else's existence, regardless of whether those thoughts are positive or negative, affirm the importance of that other person. We have spoken of this before. Thought has energy. Positive, loving thoughts have great energy, for they affirm, they uplift, they provide depth. But negative thoughts still acknowledge that at some level, another individual has significance. The presence of that thought, the presence of that acknowledgment, has far greater impact than being ignorant of others, of refusing to acknowledge others, of refusing to care.

The most damaging impact you can have on others is a refusal to admit to their having a place in life. There is great damage to being out of sight and therefore out of mind. Try not to forget those even whom you do not know. Think of the reality of suffering that exists worldwide—physical suffering, emotional suffering, social suffering, economic, political suffering. You do not need to provide names to all who suffer, but being willing to acknowledge that there are those in agony, and that you wish that pain could be lessened, is really a powerful thought and provides support to their souls.

If you refuse to acknowledge that others are suffering and think that all life is only what you see, you are not doing service in a spirit of love. So your awareness, just the awareness that there are those with great needs, serves the same as if you pray for them to somehow find relief, for you are giving those unspecified people a place at the table of life, and they are valued.

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When individuals are retained in prisons and jails, you do not simply forget them and assume they don't exist. You can think of them. Some are guilty, some are not guilty, but they do exist. They do have a life. You may approve of what they stood for, or you may disapprove of what they stood for, but in either case you acknowledge they exist, and it is that knowledge that carries with it the same power as prayer. But when you pray to God because you know of God, you are opening them even more to the presence that is God, the presence that exceeds the presence of all that is created.

Each of you is a part of God. All of you together are less than the totality that is God, and yet through thought, through prayer, you have the means of strengthening the sacred that lives and thrives within all.

Affirm that sacredness. Don't feel you must identify it by name. Just acknowledge that there is the candle of God in all, and acknowledge your place as part of God's response. At the same time, acknowledge that God is indeed greater than all that has been created, also recognizing all that has been created is a part of the totality that is God, and therefore all that has been created is indeed sacred.

We celebrate, we acknowledge, we affirm, we assure you of your sacred flame. Nurture it, acknowledge it, be warmed by it, and be illuminated by your own love for that flame.

Amen.