

## THE USE OF QUIET

Predictably, some of you said you liked it when, a couple of weeks ago, I mentioned current-event topics in the sermon. So I decided to preach a series of sermons on the most current, relevant, dangerous, dramatic subject I know: Prayer. Nothing can change our lives faster, or more unpredictably. Nothing can challenge, redirect, inspire, or motivate us more powerfully. Nothing else can scold and uplift us at the same time – judge and redeem us simultaneously. If you are bored, listless, depressed, discouraged, feeling unwanted or unloved, you are not a person of prayer. (I am not talking about clinical depression, of course; just ordinary, down-in-the-mouth depression – pouty and complaining.) You may have been a person of prayer in the past, or maybe usually you are, but something has turned it off. Spending time in the presence of God is the most surprising, exciting, fulfilling, and dangerous thing we ever do.

Prayer is one of those strange areas of the Christian Life that everyone expects everyone else to be better at than they are. If we get angry or upset with somebody, we suspect they have not been praying – at least not lately. When we ourselves are troubled or recognize that life is not going well, we frequently become conscious that we have not been praying very much lately either. Then we are often caught halfway between thinking it wouldn't do any real good anyway, and suspecting it might very well get everything back on track. We are not always sure which would be worse.

Non-Christians just assume that all Christians pray – unless, of course, they really are hypocrites. And while non-Christians may disdain or mock prayer for themselves, they have very little respect for Christians who do not take prayer seriously. A prayerful life, after all, is one of the most basic aspects of the Christian Life, at least from the outside looking in.

One of the strangest things of all, from my perspective, is the widespread belief that “prayer” is a fairly simple subject – that anybody can be “good at it” in just a few minutes if they simply decide they want to be. Many assume the subject to be rather boring, wondering what would be left to say on the subject after ten or fifteen minutes of conversation. Over and over, through the years, I have received a rather “fishy stare”

at the suggestion of going away for an entire weekend to a prayer retreat. “What on earth would we do for an entire weekend?” is the frequent response. I mean, how long does it take to bow your head, close your eyes, fold your hands, and say, “Now I lay me down to sleep ...”?

We all know better, in our right minds. Communication with the Almighty has to be the most important activity a human being can engage in. Why we would resist such contact has to be glaring and obvious to anybody who gives it more than ten seconds of thought. If we are sometimes nervous about talking to a boss, a wife, a child, a policeman, or a judge, how will we feel about a conversation with the Creator of the Universes? If somebody says to you, “I love to pray. God is my buddy. I have no qualms whatsoever about going into the presence of God” – what do you know for sure? That they have it rigged so they get to do all the talking. They think God is the audience. People who love to “come to the Garden alone” know it can never turn into Gethsemane because they have removed all the speakers. They only allow a microphone in their prayer closet. No incoming mail, just outgoing instructions and requests. Some things are not very satisfying when you do them all by yourself. Prayer is one of them. It requires dialogue. Life with God has endless dimensions, all of them frightening because they are so laden with excitement and possibilities and roads we cannot see the end of. Why else would there be such emphasis on faith – on trust? It is called the Christian FAITH precisely because life with the Living God is so appealing, so scary, and so unpredictable and out of our control that, without the primary decision to TRUST God, there is no possibility of walking this Path.

First, without trying to persuade, cajole, or prove anything, let me remind you of three things I take to be self-evident. We do not always act well on things we know, but I hope that these things are self-evident to all of you as well.

1.) If every member of this church prayed earnestly and sincerely every day, it would transform our fellowship beyond our wildest dreams. Lots of you *do* pray earnestly every day, and the transformation is taking place. But my guess is we are at about half-mast. Half of us, imperfectly but with conscious intention, work to maintain a daily prayer life. Probably another twenty-five to thirty percent of us are sporadic. You care, but have not yet realized what you are up against. You want to be natural instead of spiritual, and think you can plug in whenever you

get in the right mood. Have you ever kept track of how long it sometimes is between times? Do you recognize yet that there is intention behind all the distractions? You have heard that SIN is separation, and maybe you even agree with that mentally, but you “don’t get it” yet.

2.) We cannot be the church if we do not pray. It does not come from human wisdom, good programs, effective evangelism, or anywhere else. The church is the body of Christ – Christ is the Head. If we do not take orders, guidance, and instruction from our Head, we are not the church. We may do some good things. People may like us. But we are not the church.

3.) To be the church, each member must pray individually. But eventually, we must learn to “pool” our individual devotion into the prayers of the faith community – praying as members of the Body – that Christ may guide the Body as well as the individual members. I have barely mentioned this level or kind of prayer in our fellowship before. Like Noah, I send out a dove from time to time, but I do not open the doors until I see the olive branch. Even if it is a great idea, if we try it before its time, we only get to drown, or at least get very wet to no purpose.

Let’s go over some of the basics of individual prayer. I will run the risk of insulting everyone’s intelligence by going back over the elementary principles. If you are far advanced, you can tune me out and use the time to pray. Or if you prefer, you can meditate on the sin of not teaching others what you have discovered. (“Freely you have received – freely give.”)

There are many categories and areas of prayer: Corporate Prayer, Intercession, Meditation, Confession, Adoration, Begging and Pleading ... to name a few. They all have their place and importance and, to some degree, their own internal structure and method. I simply want us to be clear: I am not trying to cover the whole subject, not even trying to touch on most of it. I will attempt to speak about only the most basic and foundational level of prayer. All other levels of prayer, to be effective, must know and work off of the basic level, so let’s talk about that first.

Basic Prayer is the praying you do in private, every day, in your room or someplace where you are unlikely to be interrupted. Because I can read minds, I know that thirty-five of you are saying to yourselves right now, “There is no place and no time when I can pray and not be interrupted.” I am very sympathetic. It is hard to live in chaos and keep sane. Probably, in fact, you are not keeping very sane. It is often a kind

of chicken-and-egg thing. We do not pray ... and so we cannot hear the guidance that would help us to order our lives ... so we would not have to live in so much chaos ... so we could pray. But sympathy or no sympathy, we cannot pray very often, or for very long, unless we put God first. It is a principle of life, and an axiom of the Christian Life, and the first rule of prayer. We cannot pray if we will not put God first. If there is any way that life can bribe, threaten, steal, interfere, belittle, or distract us from a relationship with God, it will! That is a sure and certain promise. There are no exceptions. We put God first, or we do not have a relationship with God and never come to know God. The sayings are endless, and the experience is overwhelming from one end of human history to the other. "God will put up with almost anything, but God will not put up with being put in second place."

All of us, when we stop to consider, do find times and places to be alone. We do find time to pay bills, watch television, eat, drive to work, wash and dress ourselves. If we do not have time for God, then we do not want God in our lives very much – not yet ... not enough. "*You will seek me and find me when you search for me with all of your heart.*" (Jeremiah 29:13) "When you are ready and willing to put me first – when you finally comprehend that nothing else is going to go right, or be true, real, or satisfying without me – then I will come to you. I AM alpha and omega. Put ME first."

Basic Prayer is the praying we do in private, every day, in our room or someplace where we are unlikely to be interrupted. As is so often true, the first step is preparation. *Where* are you going to pray? *When* are you going to pray? Figure it out. Nobody can do it for you. You have a body; you need someplace to park it if you are going to give God your undivided attention. If you are not going to give God your undivided attention, you have not put God first yet. I like to pray when I drive, and I often do. But if I tried to do Basic Prayer while driving, I would get into an accident every time. God does not mind chatting with me if we already have the hookup – already have the decks cleared and the wrinkles between us ironed out. But if I "chat with God" without laying the foundational prayer first, I am just talking to myself. In your case, that might be pretty valuable; you may not have listened to yourself for quite a long time. But in my case, it gets pretty dreary.

Okay, so you have a place and a time where you are going to "report in" every morning. Who said anything about "morning"? There are

exceptions to almost every rule. The first rule is: If we want a prayer life, we have to put God first. There are no exceptions. But about five percent of you will be exceptions to the principle that it is best to *begin* the day with prayer. Basic Prayer is best in the morning, before we have wasted our day. Other kinds of prayer are fine all through the day. About eighty percent of us think we are in the five percent until we try it out for a while. Report in every morning, when your day begins. "*Hearken to the sound of my cry, my King and my God, for to thee do I pray. O LORD, in the morning thou dost hear my voice.*" (Psalm 5:2-3)

Basic Prayer needs no flowery words. It is the simplest and most difficult of all prayer. The words themselves do not matter, but the thought – the feeling, the intention – is this: "**God, my life belongs to YOU. What do You want me to do with it in this present time? If You can get it clear to me, I promise ahead of time that I will do it – I will obey.**" Often, of course, we have our own specifics to bring to clarity and add into this statement. But that is the message, every single morning. Then when we have said it clearly and made that promise – and we are as clear as we are able to get about our own situation – we stop talking and go into as quiet a listening mode as we can manage. In no hurry, staying in an attitude of humble willingness, we gently sift the incoming thoughts, like a fisherman waiting for a strike. And when we feel that tug on the line, we reel it in with whatever skill we can manage. And then the real game begins.

That is all there is to it. Even so, a good deal of the time it is still too much for us. Like, that very first phrase: "God, my life belongs to YOU." That is the trigger. If we do not pull it, the prayer never fires. I have spent countless hours in my prayer time (not in prayer – in my prayer *time*) trying to get that simple phrase said and meant. I have no trouble believing it with my mind. The Creator does have ownership over the creature. I want a godly life, I keep saying to myself. *Believing* it is simple. *Meaning* it is something else again. Almost invariably, I find myself trying to corrupt the simple, crucial phrase. A loophole here, a contingency there; a little waffle here, a little wobble there. Until God finally says, "Maybe we should try it again when you can get serious." It is not a punishment. It is not a scolding. It is just the way it is. "I cannot help you if you will not trust me." As an old saint used to say to me, "If you're going to play blackjack with God, *always* say 'HIT ME.'"

## THE USE OF QUIET

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Two simple tasks (not easy – simple): 1) remembering which one of us is God; and 2) sifting the thoughts until we can distinguish between the machinations of our own minds, and the thoughts the Spirit is putting into them. We make prayer infinitely more complicated, and even sometimes useless, whenever we try to escape the pressure of these two necessities: getting the ownership rights cleared, and listening for the guidance. And alas, when we are new to prayer, we do not even realize that *escape is our aim*. We only know that the prayers go dry, or get endlessly contorted and complex – or we know we are only talking to ourselves.

If you want to be a person of prayer, you have to know and come to terms with the fact that all of your natural side wants to be in control and stay in control of your life. This natural side will do everything it can come up with to interrupt, deceive, make fun of, talk you out of, make you afraid of, tell you it is only your imagination, etc., etc., etc. This never goes away. Conversion makes a choice between our natural and our spiritual natures, but the natural side does not disappear. Years of practice give us practice. That should make us better at avoiding the traps and games of our natural side. But if you pray, you are into the conflict. If you practice singing for years and years, does it mean you do not have to breathe anymore? No, it just means it *sounds* like you do not have to take a breath when you sing. For those who pray, the decision is made and repeated every morning: Whose life is it – Yours or mine? Who has the final say in all my affairs – You or me?

You understand why it would be a very different thing – a different affair, a different drama going on – if every member of every Christian church was a person of prayer? The church would be a faith community on the inside, not just a religious institution on the outside. We would be less predictable. We would certainly be less comfortable, and far more enthusiastic and excited. I suspect we would be much more focused on fewer goals. Many people think we would all be poor, but I suspect we would be richer and have far more resources for our mutual efforts. Why? Simply because some of our present interests and needs would fade into insignificance, as more meaningful goals caused us to devote our energies and resources to the hope that is set before us.

But the truth is, no amount of beautiful intention, no picture of how good life could be, no persuasion – no matter how powerful or logical – can give us motive enough or discipline enough to be people

## THE USE OF QUIET

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of prayer for very long. It is one thing to make a right decision. It is another to act according to that decision. It is still another to keep true to that decision over time: day after day ... year after year ... through thick and thin ... in happy times and sad times ... when it is easy and when it seems dim, harsh, or pointless. Only a taste of The Presence – a falling in love – only knowing Him can keep us faithful.

## ENEMIES OF PRAYER

There are little enemies of prayer, like distraction, or feeling unworthy, or being undisciplined. They can do as much damage to our relationship with God as the big enemies, but we will talk about them some other time. The big enemies of prayer are ignorance, pride, and distrust. If you cannot get through the big enemies, you don't even get a chance to wrestle with the little ones. My suspicion is that most of us know about, and know what to do about, pride and distrust – which is not to imply that we always *do* it. But let's talk about ignorance.

In the sense I'm using it today, "ignorance" is not about being stupid; it is not about being slow, or having no information. It is about what some of the old saints (fourteenth century) called, "The Cloud of Unknowing."

Some people like to do jigsaw puzzles. A card table, a little fire in the fireplace, maybe a bit of a storm on a wintry night, some popcorn, and maybe a person or two that you love. And there are all these little pieces all over the table, and you try to put them together so you can see the big picture. Interestingly, some people, even wanting loved ones present in such a scenario, want to put the puzzle together all by themselves. Why is that? On the other hand, why *any* of it? I mean, it's really pretty strange. You have the picture to start out with. Somebody has to go to a lot of work to cut it all apart and mix up the pieces in the first place. Then you spend all that time pretending you are achieving something by putting the pieces back together again so you can see the picture that was already there in the first place.

Yet games reflect life. We are always trying to put the pieces together so we can see the larger picture. Maybe if we can learn to do it on the card table, somehow it will help groove our minds to do it better in real life. In any case, every breakthrough – whether in physics, chemistry, biology, geology, economics, or theology – every breakthrough comes when somebody puts the picture together more clearly than it was seen before. In real life, we always have some of the pieces in the wrong place and are just trying to pretend they fit because it's the best we can do at the moment. But it is an ignorance, an *unknowing*. And when it suddenly occurs to us that we can shift this piece over to that place ... and a couple of those go over here ... and then the whole picture comes into

better focus. Everything fits better and works better, and it is also more beautiful. *Beauty* is one of the hints. I think I must be one of the slowest ones to learn this.

Nevertheless, for example: “Making love” in certain contexts – in some situations – really doesn’t fit the bigger picture. Some of the pieces may be there, but too many are still missing or are in the wrong place. We can pretend the pieces fit, but they do not. We can pretend everything is fine on the outside, but the inside knows better. And “making money” by certain means and methods doesn’t fit the larger picture. It sometimes takes years to realize that even if we can cheat on the outside, what we become on the inside is what shapes our lives. You don’t have to rob a bank to become mean, nasty, and critical; besides, robbing a bank takes courage. And living to get my own way – being my own god – doesn’t really fit the larger picture. I am simply saying that a lot of life is about getting the pieces in the right place, and seeing the bigger picture more and more clearly.

No surprise, but Christianity does not work very well for a lot of people because they do not see the larger picture. They do not have the pieces in the right places. Naturally, our world is still quarreling over who has the right picture, and how it really would work best. But we each get to live with the best picture we can find. And we still get to shift to a better picture every time we see how the pieces go together better.

In my view, Christianity is not primarily about institutions, structures, rules, or organizations. They exist, but they are only helpful if they serve the larger picture. Christianity is about each individual coming into a personal relationship with God – a relationship that is vibrant, alive, and always changing, deepening, growing. In my picture, all faith community – the church – grows from and depends upon each individual’s personal relationship with God. If we try to change that around, which most of our world does most of the time, and make the church (or the organization, or the rules, or the belief system) primary – and *hope* that the individuals will find a relationship with God if we get the structures right – then I think the pieces are in the wrong place and the picture is way out of focus. The primary, crucial, most important thing is each individual’s personal relationship with the Living God – scary as that is ... unpredictable as that is ... beyond the control of this world, and all of its threats and structures, as that is.

So what is the picture? Put the picture together: Jesus had lived and preached among us. Jesus had been crucified because of the jealousy, animosity, fear, and anger of our human response to Him. Jesus had risen from the dead by the power of God. And still there was no church! We already had His ministry, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter, but the church had not been born yet. Not until Pentecost.

What hints did Jesus give us about this pattern – the true picture? *“I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you. I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you.”* (John 14:16-18) Can you let the piece go into place? No other piece goes in this place.

John says the disciples were given this comfort the night of the Last Supper, just before Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion. In parallel passages from Luke, Jesus reiterated the message to His followers after His resurrection: *“And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high.”* (Luke 24:49)

*“And while staying with them he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, ‘you heard from me, for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’ He said to them: [‘Will you please stop trying to mind everybody’s business but your own, and getting all off track?’] *‘It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But **you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.**’*” (Acts 1:4-8)*

Can you let the piece go into place? No other piece goes in this place. But sometimes we like to step back and see how it really fits in the larger picture. Step back six hundred years! The prophet Jeremiah: *“Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant [a New Testament] with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the*

*LORD: I will put my law within them; and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*" (Jeremiah 31:31-33) Can we fail to feel Pentecost in that prophecy? Well, we *should* go back two thousand years before Jesus – to the call of Abraham – and notice everything in between, but in twenty minutes on only one Sunday ... can we fail to feel Pentecost in that prophecy?

Why do we call it the “New Testament”? When do we think Jeremiah’s message started to come true? PENTECOST! When did Jesus’ ministry truly culminate? When do we begin to see what Jesus was really doing, what He was about, what He came for, and how He thought it would actually begin to happen in a world like ours? PENTECOST! Have you started putting the pieces together yet?

*“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.”* (Acts 2:1-4)

Up to this point, Jesus is the story; Jesus is the hero; Jesus is the focal point and, in a sense, is carrying it all and doing it all. But that is not going to make it down through the ages, and it is not going to transform or redeem life for the people – unless they get into the story too. The mission and the ministry of Jesus culminate at Pentecost, not at Easter! Jesus *enacts* the meaning of the communion meal; Jesus infuses – He enters – His people: all who will receive Him. From this point on, what Jesus means – and all that He wants to accomplish – is carried by His People because He is *in them* and *with them*. It is the birthday of the church – Pentecost. Do not be confused by the imagery. The flame is the emblem of the Holy Spirit. The tongue of flame that rests upon each individual is the best way Luke knows how to say that each one received the Holy Spirit – that each one “knew” the reality of Christ’s presence within: leading, guiding, comforting, empowering ... just as Jeremiah had envisioned it. And John the Baptist too: *“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”* (Mark 1:8)

No other piece can fit in this place. They are not writing bylaws, or electing officers. They are not buying land, or putting up buildings. They are not forming organizations, or developing programs, or teaching their children. They eventually will, but that is all secondary response. Whenever and wherever these secondary things become the primary

focus, the Faith will weaken and, if it persists, die. We need to see the picture – put the right pieces in the right place. The Crucifixion is NOT how Jesus saves us. It only gets our attention, shows how much He cares – breaks through all the shields of our animosity, fear, and alienation from God. This is absolutely necessary to reach us, but it is NOT how Jesus saves us. Nor is the Resurrection how He saves us. It establishes our hope. It gives us confidence in the future, and assures us that Jesus is authentic; that God is backing Him; that He is the Life, and the Truth, and the Way; that we can trust Him. This too is absolutely necessary, but it is NOT how Jesus saves us. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit – being with us, going with us, guiding and comforting and scolding and empowering us through all the days of our own journeys here – THAT IS HOW HE SAVES US. *Immanuel*: God with us! Only, not in future promise. In present reality. Pentecost is the birthday of the church. Up until Pentecost, Jesus is the story. But from Pentecost on, WE ARE IN THE STORY TOO! We are in it with Him. He has come to be with us – and in us. Remember? *“I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you. Yet a little while, and the world will see me no more, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.”* (John 14:18-20)

Have we put this piece in its proper place? No other piece will fit here. Without this piece, there is no picture. Without this piece, none of it works. Without this piece it is just fluff and theory, and we are still in charge of our own lives. And there is no redemption, no transcendence, no life with God.

That’s okay with some people – lots of people, in fact. If you can belong to the right clubs and organizations, have a decent job and pay your bills, love your family and your friends and live to a ripe old age ... that’s sufficient. What more could any person ask? Only, that is not Christianity, not anywhere close to it. And it is not enough for some of us. The heart hurts too much, the soul sees too much, this place is too partial, broken, mindless, and evil, and we are too far away from home.

And so the pieces start fitting into place. First and foremost – and primary to everything else – we are people of prayer. Otherwise we just follow each other. Otherwise it is just the same old song, one more verse. If we are Christians, then first and primary and before all other things, we are people of prayer. We are not “loving” first. We are not well-liked, successful, ethical, or well-educated first. Primary to

all other things, we are people of prayer. We put God first, and we stop neglecting our prayers.

Why? Because we finally see the picture, and we see the pieces in their proper place. Because we finally notice that this was not only the strategy and purpose and plan of our Lord at Pentecost, but it is the very core and essence of who He is. It is what made Him *what* He is. Apart from prayer, Jesus of Nazareth – Jesus Lord and Christ – is not possible, or even conceivable.

From the baptism ... to the forty days in the wilderness ... to the all-night vigils ... to the Garden of Gethsemane – the pieces keep falling into place. Above and beyond all other things, Jesus was a man of prayer. It was the way He prayed that made Him different. His theme was not love, but obedience to God on this personal level of prayer. Love for God was behind His obedience, to be sure. Obedience came from love and trust for God. But the startling thing about Jesus' WAY of Life was His obedience to God. "*Thy will be done.*" Not my will ... and not anybody else's either – not Peter's will, or my mother's will, or the High Priest's will, or the will of the whole Sanhedrin. And they were all competing for Jesus' allegiance just as hard as they knew how.

When the pieces click in, we realize that the truly astounding thing about Jesus was that He lived to please nobody and nothing – except God. This man of love loved only at God's command. By His hours in prayer, He saw the world and the people through God's eyes, and knew that they were both better and more lost than they had any awareness of themselves. He did not use prayer to heal, as if it were a magic wand or something. Rather, because He was a man of such profound prayer, He could see how to heal – and some of you could too, if you would pray as He did. We don't all have the same gifts, but we all have the gifts we were given. Most of us don't know them or use them because we don't have the time to pray like He had. And yes, because He was a man of prayer, Jesus got into more trouble than any of us have ever known.

And I find it interesting that Jesus – the Christ, the Son of God, the all-time ACE of spiritual power, wisdom, discernment, and faithful obedience – knew Himself to be so confused, so uncertain, so troubled, and so conflicted with warring motives that He found it necessary to spend hours and hours in prayer. Jesus knew for sure that by Himself, He was not wise enough or good enough to direct His own life, or to be of any real benefit to others. And so He became a person of prayer –

one who let God live through Him. Surprisingly, this did not destroy His individuality or ruin His personality. It released Him to become who He truly was. But you and me? We are so good and loving and wise – so naturally tuned to God – that a few stray moments are sufficient to keep us on course and obeying our Father’s will? Christ have mercy. God forgive us.

Do you know what the will of God is for your life? Not just in broad, general terms, but in specifics? Not just in high-sounding ideals, but in terms of detailed, pinpointed decisions and actions? Everything Jesus ever said or did – implied or stated – promises a New WAY of Life in which we are no longer in charge of or running our own lives. A WAY wherein our whole focus is turned inward, to the guidance of the Holy Spirit – and our outward behavior is more and more an obedient response to the Holy Spirit within, not a response to all that beckons and pleads and cajoles from without.

Pentecost is the birthday of the church. The church is the people of Christ – the people who live by prayer – the people who have received His Holy Spirit. You do not *go* to church. You *are* the church. Let the pieces fall into place.

## DISTRACTION, DISOBEDIENCE & DOUBT

Last Sunday we identified three of the big enemies of prayer, and talked about one of them. Today we will identify three of the lesser enemies of prayer, and talk about seven or eight of them. If you handle the big enemies but do not deal with the lesser enemies, your prayer life is still destroyed. We have to get used to the idea that if anything in this world can steal us away from a real and genuine relationship with God, it will. That is why people of prayer come to believe in Satan. They realize that evil pervades our world and that we have to convert: turn so completely away from our natural ways, and so completely toward our life with God, that all the atmosphere and wiles and bullying of Satan cannot keep us from our God. Evil, of course, is not always cruel and ugly. Evil is anything that destroys – anything that prevents the creature from connecting to the Creator. So why do I call some problems “lesser enemies”? Only because they are more subtle – less overtly rebellious.

**ITEM:** The world we live in is separated and alienated from God. If it were not so, our world would not display the chaos and suffering and hatred and uncaring that it does. Yet the people of the world don't drop everything they must in order to go running back to God – in order to get back in touch with the source of LIFE, love, meaning, forgiveness. Isn't that what we would logically expect? Yet generation after generation, most of the world seems oblivious to its plight. It's somebody else's fault, or it's nobody's fault, or we can rise above it, or we can find a safe corner somewhere and let the worst go by. Prayer is eagerness and hunger to get back in communication – back in tune with God. Therefore, prayer goes against the grain of all natural life here. Naturally, we are not aware of our SIN – our alienation from God – at first. We are born here, so the alienation seems “normal” to us. But try praying on a steady basis for a while and see what happens. I mean, of course, the kind of prayer that turns our lives back over to the influence and guidance of God.

**ITEM:** We are born into this world – and the way it runs, and how it thinks, and how it goes about survival. But when our world talks about “survival of the fittest,” is it thinking about survival for ten or fifteen years here, or survival in terms of eternity? When we think in terms of a few years of survival here on earth, we are on the level of what Paul calls “the natural man.” Therefore, it can never seem “easy” or “normal” or

“right” to spend much time in prayer. I know many people, for instance, who actually feel guilty if they spend much time in prayer. They hardly get their eyes closed before their conscience starts bothering them. They should be *doing* something important, not just sitting around gabbing with the Creator. What if somebody should “catch them” just sitting with their eyes closed, “doing nothing”? So we are constantly excusing ourselves from our prayers. “Excuse me, Omnipotent, Omniscient One, but I don’t have time to talk with YOU right now. I have to go do the laundry ... get the kids to school ... finish that report for my boss ...” It doesn’t sound very dark or mean or ugly, does it? But what if that is all it takes for Satan to keep us away from God our whole lives through?

**ITEM:** Most people like their religion on a simple, third-grade level. How is it that gifted, complex, highly intelligent creatures always want a God who talks like Tarzan? “Me Tarzan, you Cheetah. Be good. Stop cheating. I bring you present for Christmas.” Not around here I hope, but if you listen to people talking about Jesus, it comes clear that mostly they think He is very spiritual but not very bright. They reduce His stories and teachings to the third-grade level at every opportunity. They confuse Him with a well-meaning schoolmarm who goes out to the playground and thinks all the problems can be solved by telling the children to “kiss and make up.” “All I ever needed to know I learned in kindergarten.” “I’m a great research scientist because when I was six years old, I played ‘Button, button, who’s got the button.’” Acting simplex is one of our best defenses against God. Not much conversation can take place, no subtleties can be considered, no difficult situations can be discussed.

**ITEM:** The enemies of prayer are frequently subtle and devious. They are also deeply ingrained and effective, or the whole world would have long since become a praying, loving, united community. People want life to be good – they want to get together, they like to help others, they believe we should all cooperate for a better world. What makes it so hard? Why do we keep doing so much damage, when we want to do so much good? Tell Peter or Augustine or Luther or Paul or Jesus that prayer is for kindergartners. If we are serious about being people of prayer, we have to go into it realizing that trying it twice for ten minutes is not going to make it. It is prayer – dialogue with the Holy Spirit, personal relationship with Jesus Christ – that is the transforming process in our religion. Other things may impress us, but prayer is what *changes* us, gets to us – makes a difference in how we feel, what we value, how

we decide, what we do. If you do not pray, you cannot change – except to conform more and more to the world around you.

If you are new to prayer, I can promise you that when you first start into a prayer discipline, you will become irritable and resentful. You will make some blunders and mistakes trying to be obedient. You will sense some new attitudes that seem to be heading you toward being more “self-centered” or “superior.” In short, very quickly you will realize that you were much better off before you started to pray, and that this is doing no good and you should quit. How do I know this will happen to you? I trust Satan. But if you trust God, you will stay with it. And if you do not waver, fairly soon you will break through the first cloud-bank of resistance and realize that a vast and wondrous and incredible WAY of Life lies before you. And in one lifetime, if we stay faithful, we get to explore one tiny little corner of it. That comes with the realization that, despite some setbacks, there is Another Being of enormous patience and caring ... eager and longing to walk this WAY with us.

So what about the lesser enemies of prayer? If you practice prayer on a regular basis, you will run into them all, over and over. So why do I talk about them? I cannot do your praying for you. Better if I just stay faithful to my own prayers, and let you get on with yours. But I do know people who get discouraged because nobody warned them it would be so difficult. Or they think something is wrong with them because it is not easy or simple, with soft music playing in the background all the time. Remember Luther, seasoned old warrior of prayer, hurtling the inkwell across the room to dash against the far wall, so frustrated that Satan could still get into his head so strongly after so many years. Some of you do not much admire Luther, crusty old bastard that he was – and full of flaws, as he well knew. But his life was on the line and at risk most every day of his life, and not many human beings have stayed more loyal and faithful to Jesus. You expect God to start a Reformation with Casper Milquetoast?! Anyway, some spiritual mentors have helped me greatly and saved me much time and confusion, and mostly I try to pass on to others what they tried to teach me.

### I.) DISTRACTION

In our culture, we train our bodies, stuff our brains, work hard on techniques for organization – including time management. But we do not *train* our minds. The mind is like a spoiled child, unless we teach it certain skills and disciplines. The mind runs off in any direction that

catches its fancy; it thinks anything it wishes; it shifts subjects at the first distant hint of boredom; it even goes on automatic pilot and only *appears* to be conscious. “What did you say your name was?” “Are you listening to me?” “Yes, of course dear.”

What chance does God have to guide us if that is how well we listen in our prayers? DISTRACTION is a major issue in any prayer life. We can keep all the disciplines of setting aside prayer time and even pray two or three hours a day. But it will not do any good at all if, inside the quiet body, the mind is running wildly around in all directions. We must train our minds to focus – teach them to stay with one subject – peeling away layer after layer until they get to the heart and core of things. Hard work, and nobody else can see it.

“Should I take this promotion, change jobs, or stay where I am until the project I’ve been working on for three years is completed?” How long do we give Jesus to come up with the guidance? Three minutes? Two days? Sometimes the guidance is right there and we know it. But most of the time, we have to do our own homework before the Spirit can get us onto some wavelength where we can comprehend the guidance. How many motives are involved? How many fears? What is at stake? Who are the players we know about? Where are we trying to color the picture, or pretend things?

I am not talking about all the unknowns. And I am not talking about a simplex listing of pros and cons. Our minds are capable of great depth and discernment, if they will obey us when we ask them to go to work on an issue or a subject. It is amazing how much more we know than we thought we knew if, with focus and concentration, our minds will go to work on a subject we have asked them to ponder. But if they are not trained, they scamper about, or spin in endless circles. We call it DISTRACTION.

Some people bow their heads and close their eyes but there is hardly a sound so small or insignificant that it cannot break their concentration. No squirrel moves in the forest without interrupting their prayers. And on the inside, meaningless wisps of foolish desires without substance or destiny float across the screen of their minds in rapid succession. How do I know these things? Please don’t ask.

Leo Tolstoy wrote that when he was a teenager, he wanted very badly to join a group of boys whom he admired and looked up to very

much. The initiation rights to join this club were as follows: You had to stand on a certain street corner, under a certain streetlamp, for one hour – and *not* think of a white bear. When you had trained your mind well enough to do that, then you were in the club – you were worth talking to, worth getting to know.

We have to spend considerable prayer time training our minds, or our prayers are forever shallow. Practicing the piano takes more than just flopping your hands at the keys. DISTRACTION is one of the lesser enemies of prayer. Lesser because it does not seem, at first glance, to be attached to any great evil. Yet it still has the power to destroy a meaningful relationship with God. It can, of course, be noticed that, as a culture and as a people, we actually work hard to keep ourselves distracted. We hate silence. Everywhere we go, we turn on noise. We are proud of our too-busy schedules. We brag about having too many people we are trying to please. Is there anybody here trying to serve less than fourteen gods? DISTRACTION is not the simple, friendly, harmless little problem we try to pretend it is. Can you think of anything more diabolical than a cell phone, for people who already have too little time for God? Please do not throw your cell phone away; that is not the point. But who is in control? *That* is the point.

## II.) DISOBEDIENCE

Why isn't DISOBEDIENCE ranked among the big enemies of prayer? If it is defiance or rebellion – subcategories of PRIDE – it should be. But I am talking about a much less arrogant, less conscious disobedience. We set conditions and put borders around our lives before we even go to our prayers. Without realizing it, we censor the areas and subjects on which the Spirit is allowed to converse with us. Any message beyond the borders, any instruction beyond our safety net – our “feel-good” zone – automatically shuts off the headphones.

Let's put it the other way around: Our prayer lives will be essentially dull, lifeless, and without power until we agree ahead of time to be open, willing, and obedient to *anything* – absolutely *anything* – God may have to say to us. That means not just getting past the big angers and resentments, but getting aware of and putting aside all the subtle little ways we hold God at arm's length. Many of them are excuses, and they wear humble apparel ... and God likes humility, right? “I'm not really very smart.” “I don't have a college degree in that subject.” “I have a family to feed.” “That would require money I don't have.” “If you had asked me

when I was younger (and listening even less) ..." "Nobody is going to pay any attention to me." These, of course, are all things God doesn't know and never thought about.

So what is left to talk about, when almost everything is impossible, unreasonable, or out of my league? Remember Moses? "Gee God, this is all very inspiring and all, but you forgot one thing: I'm not a good speaker. Sorry, it's totally impossible." Only, Moses did not cut and run. Moses was not in too big a hurry. Moses stuck around for the other side of the dialogue. And God said: "Hey Moses, who made your mouth?"

If I could promise you beyond the shadow of a doubt – if you knew it to be true, without equivocation or qualification – that if you come back to this sanctuary this afternoon at exactly 4:10 p.m. and sit in a pew quietly and reverently, God will speak to you beyond all confusion, doubt, or uncertainty, and that:

- a.) God will tell you exactly what is okay with your life and what needs to be changed;
- b.) God will tell you what he expects you to do, and what he wants you to accomplish in the next seven years of your life here on earth; and
- c.) God will tell you what is pleasing him and what is displeasing him about the way and manner in which you are now living.

If I made that promise – and if you knew it to be true – I wonder how many of you would be back here at 4:10 this afternoon. (Oh sure, we all think "Yes!" But about 3:30 this afternoon, when it sinks in ... )

The strange thing is, with only slight changes, I can make that promise – and somewhere inside, you know it is true. Not at 4:10 this afternoon, perhaps, but if you mean business, and clear the decks of your life for God, and pray in willing openness each morning, God will communicate with you on all these matters, and more.

You see, our world tries to pretend that God is hard to find – that God hides – that all of us really want a personal relationship with God, but God plays hard to get. Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Jesus ... is God playing hard to get? God does everything imaginable – and many things

unimaginable – except directly break our free will. God always takes the initiative. God is always dogging our steps, lasso in hand, and only at the last minute says, “But only if you agree and want it.” All the haunting spiritual urges in your heart and soul; all the eagerness to be used and make a difference; all the love you feel and hardly know what to do with; all the dreams, waking and sleeping, that have to be shut down and turned off; all the beauty that calls to you in music, or art, or friendship, or concept – and every day that you are not too hung over or too exhausted to see straight – you think that is all coming from you? It is God calling to you. God is not the one hiding!

Finding God and getting God to speak to us have never been the real problem. Trying to lose God ... trying to pretend God is not there ... trying to get God to keep quiet ... insisting that God keep his distance and stay on safe, undisturbing subjects – *that* is our problem! “*Adam, Adam, where art thou?*” “Leave me alone; I’m trying to sew these damn fig leaves!”

When we go to our prayers and “hear” nothing, it is always (!) because we have gone into prayer with so many restrictions and keep-off signs hanging all over us that there is no point in God trying to communicate with us. God simply waits in silence. God is not in a hurry. Time is not running out for him.

### III.) DOUBT

Distrust, mistrust, lack of faith – there is a level of DOUBT that is among the big enemies of prayer. But there is a much softer, lesser kind of doubt that does not imply any rebellion or defiance. We sometimes use “doubt” to refer to vague inner feelings of anxiety, dread, fear: we cannot make up our minds; we are afraid to move; we simply do not trust God or LIFE in this matter. This kind of doubt picks up all the leftovers from our distraction and disobedience, and tries to form them into a sensible-sounding excuse for staying exactly the way we are and doing things in just the way we have been doing them. Doubt is always gonna ... always just about to ... but there are a couple more questions ... and then a couple more. “I’m not quite sure about this detail.” “Shouldn’t we check out this one last item?” “I’m almost ready, but first ...”

Such doubt will not move until it is ninety-nine percent sure – and on the inside, it rests content in the knowledge that in this world, no important decision is ever more than eighty percent sure.

Once again, most of the world has hoodwinked itself. It thinks the big problem is doubting God: doubting God's existence; doubting if God is good or really cares. That is a smoke screen. We use it to cover up our *real* doubt. Most of the time, we do not doubt God; we doubt ourselves. We are not worthy. If we finally do connect with God, it will only lead to a disappointment so massive we won't be able to endure it. If we get into this LIFE with God, we will prove to be so clumsy and inane and inadequate that even God will throw us away. So we keep finding one more reason to hold back, and then another, and then another.

It is Satan's voice: "You are no good." His ancient name is The Accuser.

That is, of course, why it takes the grace and mercy of God in Jesus Christ to break us loose and give us enough faith, hope, and love to go for the New WAY. It does not depend upon us. It depends upon Him! We only have to want it. He will see us through. We are not too smart to goof, or too wise to fail, or too holy to sin. We are not angels, and this is not Heaven. But the WAY is New, and it is built on prayer, and we are invited to walk it anyway. None of it was our idea. The invitation comes from Him. As Jesus said: "*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.*" (John 15:16)

Ephesians 6:10-20  
Colossians 1:3-4; 1:9-14; 4:2-4

## INTERCESSION

We will get to the Scripture readings in a minute. First I want to see if I can get us all on the same subject. If I can manage that ... remember from now on that you believe in miracles.

“Pray for me.” The phrase is not unfamiliar. Today, one often hears it said in jest. Even more often, it is thrown out with a slight hint of embarrassment or with the unmistakable flavor of one who does not really expect to be taken very seriously. Sometimes, indeed, the phrase comes with a profound and pleading earnestness. But however this phrase comes, it is seldom said and heard with mutual understanding.

If someone says to you sincerely, “Pray for me,” what is your personal reaction? If nobody ever says that to you, you might also wonder about why that is. Do none of your friends or relatives or workmates think of you as somebody who might pray for them? But assuming that people do ask you to pray for them, what is it precisely that you feel they are expecting of you? Is it some kind of superstitious rite with a fuzzy kind of comforting sound to it? Is the person saying, “Wish me luck,” only in religious language? Is the person saying, “I need extra power and guidance from God, and you can help me get it if you are willing”?

Have you ever said no to a person who asked you to pray for them? If a friend asked you for money and you didn't have any to give them, would you write them a bad check, just so you wouldn't have to disappoint them to their face? If a friend asked you to please come help them with some project or chore and your calendar was already committed for that time, would you tell them to count on you and then not show up? You would feel badly about treating a friend that way. But friends will tell each other almost anything about prayer, because ... well ... you know ... it isn't going to make any real difference anyway, right? Besides, the real benefit was in my telling them I would. Then they know I care about them. Whether I actually do it doesn't matter ... right?

Anybody who takes the Christian Life seriously knows that a bad prayer is a lot more serious than a bad check. I do not believe in the fires of Hell, but if I did, the people who would roast in them would be

the people who promise to pray and then never bother. To take the most important help of all and turn it into the cheapest and least significant help of all – does the most damage of all. Among the many idiocies of our world is the assumption that the most important help you can give to an eternal soul is money, clothes, food, medicine, and advice. So all across the world we have caring, compassionate people who will go to great lengths to give money, clothes, food, medicine, and advice to people in need. But only a very tiny handful care enough to give the greatest help of all.

Quite apart from the value and power of prayer itself, people can turn it into a thing of no significance by refusing to take it seriously. Inherently, prayer is the most important and the most difficult favor one friend can ask of or do for another. Only, the greater the value, the more a thing can be cheapened. And the more power a thing has to help, the more power it has to injure.

[Read today's Scripture Reading]

For the past several Sundays, I have been trying to hint at some of the principles and practices of the most basic, foundational level of prayer – the kind of prayer that undergirds the entire Christian pilgrimage. Such prayer is a confrontation between us and the Eternal Spirit of Jesus Christ which, in and by the grace of God, becomes a dialogue wherein we find our lives judged, sifted, lifted, and shaped toward God's design and plan for us.

There are many other dimensions to prayer. But all of them depend upon and grow out of this foundational kind of prayer. It is essential for us to keep aligning our own lives to the Holy Spirit each day – and to do that before we go fooling around with prayer's other dimensions. This is a warning. The higher we climb, the harder we fall if we are careless. I do not wish to be pushing us too far, too fast. I have pondered and prayed about whether this series on prayer is too soon. As always, we are caught between need and readiness. And all of us are not in the same place. So if you find yourself bored or sleepy during this sermon, please feel free to daydream or doze off. It may be the Spirit's protection.

This morning we are going to talk about Intercessory Prayer – praying for other people. Please remember the Golden Rule: *Do not do unto others what you have not bothered to do for yourself.* (Did I get that right? Righter than some of you do!) All over the landscape, there are

people who consider it noble to pray for others, and selfish to pray for themselves. In comparison to that, the Galatians were brilliant. [*“You stupid Galatians!”* (Galatians 3:1)] If you will not let God into your own life, how are you going to be God’s instrument in somebody else’s life?

It is imperative that we tune our own lives with the Holy Spirit before we claim the privilege of praying for others. Intercession presupposes that this work has already been done – not in perfection, but in the present moment and to the best of our humility. If somebody is praying for me but the content and context come from their own will, needs, and desires – how *they* see me and what *they* want my life to be like, instead of how God sees me and what God wants my life to be like – thanks a lot!!! I am already killing *myself* with that kind of garbage. I certainly don’t need another load of it from anybody else!

Intercession requires that we try to see another person – to understand another person – in God’s presence. The phrase is impossible, but you understand the intention and the humility that comes with it: to see another person “through God’s eyes” – from God’s perspective. It is never perfect or possible, but the willing intention is still incredible. To this day, I remember the staggering impact when it happened to me with Mariana. Probably when we were dating, it was clearer who she was ... or who would ever fall in love? But you get married and, without realizing it, start seeing a person in terms of what is happening: what you need, what you want, what’s going well, what seems scary, plans for the future, how about the children, and on and on. Pretty soon, the role and the function and the images we project onto the other person are all we can see. Then one day I was praying for Mariana (I cannot remember why), and the Spirit put a picture into my mind of her true identity. I was thunderstruck! I mean, I knew she was a lovely person, and I loved her, and all the rest – but I was thunderstruck! All this time, I was living with this incredible creature and did not even realize it – did not admire, appreciate, or comprehend it. I mean, I did – in lots of ways – as the world understands such things. But it was so far from the real truth, so far from appropriate to the reality.

I am trying to say that the first task of Intercession is to get beyond our own views and agendas. Remember Second Corinthians? *“From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old*

*has passed away – behold, the new has come.*” (II Corinthians 5:16-17)  
We must try, however imperfectly, to get on God’s wavelength in regarding this other person. Otherwise, how can we be helping with anything except our own will?

Of course, this is a lot of work. It is also highly presumptuous. By the way, the entire Christian Faith is highly presumptuous: Chosen People, loved of God, instruments of the Holy Spirit, destined for eternal life. There is no way to be *more* presumptuous. So get used to it. Being loved by the Omnipotent God is too high for us mortals. We can only try to remember whose idea it was, and stay as grateful and responsive as we are able.

Intercession is born of the desire to see people (or sometimes events) as they ought to be – that is, as we suppose and believe God intends them to be. Intercession believes that because it is the will of God, it can become reality. One step further: Intercession is to throw one’s own spiritual resources (puny as they often seem to us) into the fray – and, we hope, on God’s side.

Intercession is the astounding and gigantic claim that people can participate with God in bringing God’s will to reality in and for the life of another person. In the Scripture reading this morning, we come upon Paul speaking to his fellow Christians in the context of this amazing claim and without even batting an eye. Paul assumes that if the Ephesian Christians pray for him, he will be more effective. Paul tells his Colossian friends that he prays for them constantly, and he fully expects these prayers to have a strong effect on them.

It raises a lot of questions, doesn’t it? Here are a few: Doesn’t God care for all people even more than we do? And won’t God do everything possible for every person, whether or not we urge or plead for it in our little prayers? So what benefit or purpose could there be to our praying for another person?

Some people say that the real good that comes, when we pray for others, is the effect it has on us. Praying for others often changes our attitude toward them. We get off our knees and treat them differently, and do things for them we would not otherwise have done.

Certainly that does happen, from time to time, to everyone who prays sincerely. But that is a side benefit and not the purpose of

Intercession. It also evades our question, and implies or states that there is no real benefit to prayer itself – that is, we could achieve the same purpose by merely being thoughtful. And Paul was not expecting the Ephesians or the Colossians to pack their suitcases and come help him do his ministry. He expected their prayers to provide him with a special power inherent in the prayers themselves.

People believe in the power of Intercession because they have seen it work, not because they can explain it. On the other hand, we do have to have some concept of what we are trying to do or we cannot get far enough into it to even learn. So do not try to “accept” or “believe” the non-explanations I am about to give. Instead, try them out! See what happens. Five things:

- 1.) **FINISH YOUR OWN PERSONAL PRAYERS FIRST.** Turn to Intercession only after renewing your own allegiance and obedience. Some of you only half heard this, and will neglect it. But it is crucial.
- 2.) Bring to mind the person for whom you want to pray.

[Please allow me to interrupt myself a minute. My impression is that most people would be halfway through their prayers by the time they got to this second step. That is, they bring to mind the person for whom they wish to pray, and instantly jump to requests and petitions: “Dear God, do this and that for this person. Make them stop this; help them to do that. Make them well. Keep them safe ...” and so forth. Now, you can pray for a lot of people if this is the way you go at it – ordering God around on their behalf. I personally don’t think it does the other person any good – and I suspect it always does *us* some harm – to think we are in charge of bossing God around. But if you think it does some good, go right ahead.]

Back to step #2: Bring to mind the person for whom you want to pray. Bringing them to mind may take from five minutes to an hour, and sometimes more. You are bringing this person to mind in the presence of the Holy Spirit – allowing the Spirit to help you “see” this person, teach you about this person, instruct you about the situation or the condition of this person. And what you are really seeking is **PERMISSION TO PRAY** for this person. Maybe the timing is wrong. Maybe somebody else is already on this case and doing it better than you can. Maybe you have blind spots that will prevent you from being effective for this person. Most of the time, we do not know the details. What we *do* know is that

God is God, and we are only servants. We do not do things without permission. You cannot just pray for anybody you want, any time you want. Who do you think you are?!

Did we create this person? Do we hold their life in our hands? Do we have the blueprint to their eternal destiny? Do we love them with a perfect love? Have we power or wisdom enough to go messing around in their psyche, sure we can fix them to be better? Whatever happened to reverence, humility, obedience, discipleship? Even moderately intelligent humans know that messing around with the environment can lead to disastrous consequences. But we can rush into other people's lives and fix them all up in a jiffy, and even tell God all about what he ought to be doing for them?

Again, Step #2: Bring to mind the person for whom you want to pray, and meditate about them until you **GET PERMISSION TO PROCEED**. Often, you will not get permission to proceed. Then thank God for his care for them, and ask if there is someone else or something else you should be paying attention to. If nothing comes to mind, move on.

3.) Let us assume the person is in focus, and you have permission to proceed. The checkpoint, by the way, is that you are in a "place" where there is no judgment, only empathy – and you are aware of this person's worth and identity far beyond what you have ever known before. Now you try to focus – in the Spirit's presence, and with the Spirit's help – on what it is that you are going to try to send to this person.

I can only be general in this sermon because we have no particular person in mind. But **THE MORE GENERAL YOU ARE, THE LESS EFFECTIVE THE PRAYER**. Stay with step #3 until you have distilled the essence of one thing you will try to send to this person. Some form of courage ... some form of strength ... an idea they have forgotten ... a confidence they have lost ... a specific action they need to take. Usually you will need to put this into some crisp image or phrase that will not go vague or "wobble" when you send it.

4.) Now you are ready to **SEND**. Meaning, the real Intercession is about to begin. Now: You ask for the Lord's help, you get as comfortable as you can, then you beam whatever signal you have distilled straight toward the person you are praying for. Repeat: With all the focus you can manage, with all the confidence and energy of your whole being, you send the message to the person you are praying for. You keep sending for

as long as you can maintain concentration. When you feel the concentration starting to weaken – when the focus starts to break up – move to step #5.

Before *we* move on to step #5 this morning – just to be sure we are being clear: In all other forms of prayer, God is the focus. In Intercession, the person you are praying for is the focus. The “prayer,” so to speak, is directed not at God but toward the person for whom you are praying. You and God have already talked it over and coordinated to the best of your ability. You are sending your own power and energy to the person you are praying for, and TRUSTING GOD to boost that many times beyond your own power.

Why is God boosting your channel to this person? Why does Jesus come in human flesh? Why can children sometimes get through to other children when adults cannot? God is always trying to make the God-to-human connection, but sometimes it is hard, as you all know – especially when we are hurt, confused, afraid ... when we need it most. And sometimes human-to-human connections are more basic, and if God has faithful human servants, he can use us as channels to get his love and power through – often with remarkable results. Humans sometimes call it miracle.

5.) When you are finished, **CLOSE THE GATE**. Do not try to keep the focus when it starts to weaken; you only start sending less valuable energy. Never just walk away from Intercession without closing the channel. If you leave the gates open, junk can start floating back and forth either way with no monitor. Close the channel. Thank God for the privilege of caring about this person with him. And turn the person over to God’s care. That means you are forbidden to worry or fret or muse or be anxious for or about them. Having established the link, and even though you formally closed it, if you go on thinking about this person, there is the danger that you will inadvertently open the channel back up, at least partially – only now you are sending worry, anxiety, negative stuff ... undoing part of the good you did. Let go. Turn it over to God. Go do something a lot less important, like make money, or reform the government, or feed the hungry.

The word “intercede” is not really accurate, if that word bothers you. Intercessory Prayer is the common phrase used when we refer to praying for other people. Many words, as you know, change meaning over time. “Intercede” means to plead on behalf of another – to step

## INTERCESSION

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between – like Moses stepped between the wrath of God and the people. I have great regard for Moses, but my theology comes from Jesus Christ. I do not think we need to protect people from God. If we can help God get through to them, or us, everything will be unspeakably improved.

I want to mention that God does grant us free will. If you are praying for a person and they begin to sense the influence and do not like it, they can shield from it. Looking back, I realize that for years I was shielding from prayers trying to get me to stop smoking and drinking. I mention it because sometimes you will be aware that a person is shielding and that your prayers are not doing any good. If this becomes clear, you might consider directing your energy where it will be appreciated and used.

I know that we have only scratched the surface on the subject of Intercession this morning, and that for some of you, many questions have been raised. An old saint (Winn Hall) took six months to teach me a little piece of what I have tried to tell you this morning about step #2 alone. I am sorry if I have confused you. But we need to get into this area of the Christian Life. I have already waited for over three years before mentioning it to most of you. God knows when the purpose of this church will depend upon it.