

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.’”

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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

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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.