

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)