**The Meaning of Prayer**

**1. Prayer as Communion with God:** “Keep yourself in the love of God” (Jude 23).

The Christian’s God desires to be to everyone an inward and abiding friend, a purifying and teaching presence in daily life, the One whose love continuously leads and supports us.

Prayer joins with thinking and acting as the core practices of the Christian’s life, through which we keep ourselves in the love of God. Everything related to abundant life in this world and everything related to our eternal destiny is built on this foundational element of faith—communion with God: the Christian’s experience of God’s love, God’s constant guidance, and God’s companionship. Prayer is communion with the God who is our friend.

“Prayer” is not the same as “praying”. “Prayer” is to “praying” as “sin” is to “sinning”. In the Bible, sin a condition of human life, whereby we live separated from God. This separation, sin, causes self-centeredness and generates sins—words and deeds that are contrary to God’s purpose for us. Opposite to this, now that Jesus Christ has once and for all ended the separation (Romans 8), making the love of God accessible to all, prayer is the condition whereby we experience companionship with God, in which humans keep themselves in the love of God, and experience God’s constant guidance and support, through praying, thinking and acting.

The distinction between, on the one hand belief in a God who walks with us as a friend and constant companion and, on the other hand, belief in a God whom we must constantly please by obedience to his laws is what distinguishes Christianity from other religions. Those who practice other religions or even practice Christianity poorly engage in a laborious climb toward their God. Through their prayers, obedience and religious rituals (by following a righteous path), they seek to curry favor, to ingratiate themselves with God, who would otherwise be displeased with them.

Christians see their prayers, their thinking, their actions, not as evidence of their love for God, but as evidence of God’s love for them, of God’s presence with them. Prayer is the condition of having our life defined by God’s love and finding our motivation and inspiration for living in keeping ourselves in that love. In one of the most important verses in the New Testament, Jude states this central tenet of Christianity very simply: “Keep yourself in the love of God.” Prayer is the act of keeping ourselves in God’s love.

In this sense, true prayer is a habitual attitude, the continuous consciousness of God’s love with us, not just the virtuous occasional act that we call praying. As the Apostle Paul writes: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

Consider this modern parable on meaning of prayer as communion with God:

A man had two sons. One considered his father to be a last resort when he was in critical need. He never came to him for a friendly conversation, never sought his advice and was never comforted by him when he was in need. When he went to college, he wrote home only when he needed money. He lived his life with utter disregard for his father’s character or purpose and turned to him only when he was desperate.

Now his other son saw his father’s love as the supreme motive for his life. His father was his friend. His gratitude toward his father made him want to live his life in a way that was pleasing to him. He confided in him, was advised by him and kept him close to him, and when he was in trouble, he came to his father out of a naturalness born of a long habit, sharing his concerns with him as he had shared with him every aspect of his life.

**2. God’s Concern for the Individual:** “Surely goodness and mercy will pursue me until my life’s end” (Psalm 23)

Prayer presupposes that God takes a personal interest in us. The Bible affirms this. God know the stars by name (Ps 147:4); God numbers the hairs of our head (Mt 10:30); not one is forgotten in the sight of God (Lk 12:6). God is like the shepherd who seeks even one lost lamb, a woman who seeks after one lost coin, or a Father who welcomes back his lost son (Lk 15); it is not God’s will that one should perish (Mt 18:14); God pursues us with his goodness and mercy (Psalm 23). St. Augustine said, “God loves every one of us as if there were but one of us to love.” How can we learn to live in this reality—that God loves us personally?

We might think that God is too occupied with big things to care about my issues (e.g., the universe, the major issues and crises of our time). As knowledge moves toward omniscience, however, it become more specific and intensive, not less. Consider those who are experts in their fields: a librarian oversees a large collection of books, but can tell you something about many of them; an expert on China can provide a broad introduction to the country, but knows the country in its minute details). We know that the forces of nature are both general and specific: the force of gravity, for example, does not just exert a general pull on all objects, but, as each individual object falls, the earth rises imperceptibly to meet it (at a width of two wavelengths of light). Likewise, the fact that God is omniscient, does not mean that God is not concerned about you, or does not know you intimately, or cannot respond simultaneously to the cry of every human soul.

As Christians, prayer is the personal appropriation of the faith that God cares for us as individuals. It is one thing to know that someone is your friend; it is another to enter into and regularly cultivate a friendly relationship with him or her. Many in the church fondle their credal maps. They know their theology, are able to recite Bible verses, and argue fine points of doctrine. But they never actually travel the road marked out on the map, by entering into a friendship with the God who cares for them, who has a purpose for their lives. We make earnest with our faith only through habitual communion with the One who is constantly present with us.

Imagine yourself, right now, standing before God, fully exposed, completely known, yet fully accepted and loved. Imagine the feeling of relief and gratitude, the release of fear and shame, the inspiration to live better, the desire to learn more, the overwhelming yearning to stay there with Him. Prayer means that we can experience this life-giving presence every moment of our lives.

**3. Prayer and the Goodness of God:** “Teacher, grant us that we may sit, one on your right hand, one on your left, when you come into your kingdom” (Mark 10:35-38).

One of the most common misconceptions of prayer is that prayer is a practice that involves getting God to do our will, a demand on God to do exactly what we want. In this sense, prayer is begging, coaxing God to bend toward our own desires. The Christian view of prayer is the opposite. Prayer is giving God the opportunity to say to us, to give to us, and to do through us what God wants. Prayer does not change God’s purpose, but releases it. The first view of prayer is a denial of God’s goodness, an assertion that we know better than God what is best for us. The second view of prayer, the Christian view of prayer, acknowledges the limitations of our knowledge and believes that in God’s presence, in our daily walk with God, through our praying, our thinking and our working, God can both provide a way for us address the difficulties that we face and capture the opportunities through which we will thrive. In this sense, while we may feel that God has not answered our specific prayers, we can know that God is always answering us, the pray-er. God provides what we need.

**4. Difficulties with Prayer:** “My God, My God. Why have you forsaken me?” (Psalm 22).

Many of us feel a practical disappointment with prayer. We’ve had times when our prayers went unanswered. We’ve felt abandoned by God. This happened when our motives were pure and the cause was just. It’s hard to understand why God did not answer. For others of us, we may believe in God with our whole hearts, but are unable to feel God’s presence with us. We may feel that our prayers are bouncing off the ceiling or that we are just speaking works into the air. Others have intellectual objections: there are the laws of nature, cause and effect, that cannot be set aside. We might as well just accept whatever comes to us, without bringing it to God. What can we say about our difficulties with prayer?

a. Sometimes we don’t have a mature understanding about what prayer is. Many of us learned to pray when we were children. We prayed to a Santa Claus God, whose job was to give us anything we asked for, particularly if we were good. And so we pray only when we want something or when we are desperate. And then we are disappointed when we don’t get what we ask for. We are like those who David describes in the Psalms, “They are at their wit’s end; then they turn to God (Ps 107:27-28). This is not the meaning of Christian prayer and it would benefit those who pray like this need to grow in their understanding of prayer.

Our understanding of many things has matured through the ages: music—from tom toms to symphony orchestras; medicine--from leeches to genetics; science--from walking on earth to walking in space. We’ve learned some things. But often spiritually, we still live in BC rather than AD. Our religious prayers are the same as those of ancient pagans, whose rituals were intended to bend the gods to their will or enlist the gods in their causes. The Christian God is different and our communion with God requires a more mature understanding of who God is and what God wants for us. To pray in Jesus’ name means to pray in ways that align us with God’s purposes which may be hidden from us. Consider Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, who comes to God with the intensity of a blood-stained face, asking if there might be a way to avoid the crucifixion. But in the end, he joins his plea with his affirmation of trust in God’s purposes, “not my will but yours.” Consider the Apostle Paul who prayed that God would remove his “thorn in the flesh,” A prayer that was never answered; but Paul would later say, “I have learned to be content in whatever state I am in.” Again, God may not answer the prayer, but God answers the pray-er.

b. If we are separated from God by shame, by addictions, by bad habits, by our own unrepentant self-centeredness, a wall of separation between us and God may prevent God from answering our prayers or just as likely keep us from seeing the answer that God has provided.

c. We haven’t practiced. Imagine if the first time you hit a golf ball, you concluded that this was all there was to it. And from then on, you learned nothing more about it: you repeated all the habits, the same mechanics, and the poor results remained for the rest of your life. Now imagine the budding golfer, who studies golf, who gets a coach, observes the swings of great golfers, who habitually practices and continuously discovers new ways to hit the golf ball, mastering different shots. Which one will be the better golfer? We can stay stuck in poor spiritual habits or we can grow in our friendship with God, more and more recognizing God’s guidance and comfort.

d. We are not ready. There have been times in my life when I asked God for something and did not get it because I wasn’t ready for it or god has something else for me that was better. Finding a woman like Andrea is one of those lifelong prayers that was only recently answered, because I wasn’t ready!

e. We can’t see the big picture. Sometimes God has a purpose that is being worked out in ways that we don’t understand and may never understand in our lifetime. Someday, God will tell us about it.

f. The laws of nature are not absolute, why pray? The laws of nature exist alongside the laws of human causation, which can be put to use to bring something into existence that heretofore was considered impossible. Moreover, if humans can use the laws of nature, why can’t God use these same laws to work something that we might consider today to be miraculous? God can do whatever God wants to do and is working things together for good for those who love him.

g. We don’t feel the presence of God. We are all different. We have different types of personalities and different gifts. In music, not everyone is Beethoven. In sports not everyone can throw a football like Tom Brady. There are spiritual giants, who seem to have a direct connection to God and regularly feel God’s presence and guidance. And there are others, who will experience God in other ways, through their friends and loved ones (through those who are the human face of God, whose words and touch are God’s). We can experience God’s presence in oour thoughts, or through our actions, while we’re working on something we may experience a moment of inspiration or the deep passion and joy of getting something important done. Prayer joins with thinking and action, and human friendship and love as ways that we communion with God and experience God’s presence in our lives.

h. Sometimes God just wants us to do it ourselves and gives us the power to answer our own prayers.

**5. Prayer as Dominant Desire**. “That I may know him and the power of his resurrection and so attain life.” (Philippians 3:10)

Just like human friendship, in our friendship with God, there are many expressions of communion: petition—asking God for help; adoration (“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me”, Ps 103:1), confession (“God I am ashamed, my guiltiness grows up to the heavens”, Ezra 9:6), consecration (“Teach me the way of your law and I will observe it with my whole heart”, Ps 119:33), thanksgiving (“My God I will give thanks to you forever”, Ps 30:1,12), intimacy (“How precious are your thoughts to me O God!”, Ps 139.17).

Like the ocean beneath many waves, behind all forms of prayer is the depth of human desire—an ambition, which reveals the craving of a man or woman after God or after evil. The fundamental question for Christian is this: When you pray, what are you after? What is your demand on life?

Your prayer, as the dominant desire of your life, is the measure of your inward quality. What are you hungry for? It’s an important question, because the outcomes we often experience in our lives reflect our intentions. If with your whole heart and soul you want money, this desire organizes your thoughts and actions to get it. Desire or intention, gathers up our scattered resources and competencies and focuses them to achieve its end.

It is an important question for us, because if we think of prayer as dominant desire, we can become at once convicted about the superficiality of our prayers. If we pray, “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven,” what are we doing about it? Do we really mean it? Is that really our dominant desire? Are we like those who Jesus describes who stand on the street corner and shout many words in hopes that other might respect their religiosity, or are we in that quiet place, in communion with God, where aligned with the purpose of God for our lives, everything that we are good at, everything that we are learning, all our power and all our love is focused on achieving something that we know God wants us to do?

**6. Prayer as a Battlefield.** “Create in me a clean heart O God and renew a right spirit within me.” (Ps 31:6-13)

Here the Psalmist is praying for a cleansed and empowered personality. Prayer is the battlefield on which with God we fight to annihilate everything that makes us less than what God wants us to be. When we commune with God, and align our dominant desires with the purposes that God has for us, we encounter all kinds of problems—self-doubt, shame, regret, addictions, practical obstacles, bad habits or even the public image of ourselves that we try to maintain even with our closest friends. Many who have achieved something great have come to understand the process of achievement as a battle. To achieve something great, we fight not just with outside forces, but very often within ourselves—a battle we carry on in our most secret places. Prayer is that place where we can confront our fears and doubts and call into alliance with us the power of the loving, almighty God, which reestablishes our confidence in God and in ourselves. All our secrets are known to God. Even when we don’t know how to pray, the Spirit of God is praying for us with groanings too deep for works, leading us toward what is good. So why not tell God everything.

**7. Unselfishness in Prayer.** “Unceasingly I make mention of you in my prayers” (Romans 1:9).

Of all the forces of human life that go into the making of dominant desire none is more important than love. It is possible to pray unselfishly for oneself: “Lord help me to learn X, so that I can better serve my wife and children.” Often, in an intimate way, the welfare of our family and friends depends on our own growth.

But unselfishness in prayer is not satisfied alone with praying for ourselves, even for the sake of others. It involves specifically praying for others. Jesus prays for children, for the sick, for the blind, for his disciples, for those who crucify him, for the laborers in the harvest, for the whole community of believers.

Paul expresses this beautifully in Ephesians 3:14-19: “For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

When we pray for others, we join with the eternal purpose of God for them. God wants us to lay hold of him in inward prayer, aligning our dominant desires with him, until our intercession on behalf of others becomes an effective ally of God’s will.

In the central square in Merida, Mexico, there is a magnificent cathedral. A friend of mine and I were in Mexico on a mission trip and one afternoon we went over to Merida to see it. We were seated toward the back, when an old woman sat down in the pew next to us. Her clothes were tattered, her hands were gnarled from what looked like terrible arthritis. Her face was scarred. Just one look at her and I thought, “God what must she have been through in her life. What must she be going through now.” But as we sat there, immediately, we noticed that her face was lifted up and radiant, her hands reached out toward the image of Christ near the altar, and softly, again and again she whispered, “Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.” My friend spoke Spanish and reached over, put his hand on her shoulder, and asked her, “What is it that makes you say, ‘Alleluia’? Without hesitation, she answered, “Dios está conmigo.” “God is with me.”

This is the meaning of prayer.

11-17-19, House Church

Great teachers and writers helped me with this presentation. Call me if you’d like to talk about it.

Paul Feiler, 713-256-9039, pfeiler51@gmail.com