

God and Prayer

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“Lord, teach us to pray”, his disciples asked, and he gave them and us the Lord’s Prayer. Early Christians prayed it three times a day. It is important to pray it most every Sunday, as it helps us pray the essentials. When I was in Ft. Worth we hosted a weekly family-style meal for about 200 of the homeless community. In the words before the meal we included the Lord’s Prayer. One Thursday as we were about to say it, one guy said to his friends around the table whom he had brought, “Here it comes!” How he looked forward each week to praying that prayer with others! We take so much for granted.

I

Let’s begin with how *Jesus* prayed, and what he said about prayer. He prayed three times a day following Jewish custom. He also got away and prayed for long periods of time in solitude. He prayed before important decisions and when crisis loomed. He blessed children in his arms. On the cross he prayed for forgiveness for his killers, and for us all.

What did he teach about prayer?

1) No show-off prayers. We do not pray *in order to be seen* and praised by others.

2) No long-winded prayers designed to get God to hear by going on and on. God already knows what we need before we ask. Our smallest prayers open the doors to God's grace.

3) Be persistent in prayer, not because God will be more favorably disposed to us the more we pray, but because our hearts are so easily closed to the presence and power of God. Our prayers do not get us closer to the door to God's heart but closer to the door of *our* hearts.

4) No embarrassed prayers. Don't be embarrassed about how little you have prayed. God, as any parent loves the sound of our voice.

II

There are many ways of praying. We often think we are bad at prayer because prayer has been defined so narrowly. Anne Lamott says most of her daily prayers are "Thank you thank you thank you" and "Help me help me help me". In her later book *Help Thanks Wow* she added another kind of prayer, Wow! The ways we offer our amazement to God when we are astonished by the sheer

goodness and beauty of life. Paul says “Pray without ceasing”. Thank you Thank you Thank you, help me help me help me, wow wow wow.

Some people use an acronym to guide their prayer: ACTS. Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication (that is, prayers of intercession for ourselves and others) I like to add a second “S” at the end, for Self-Offering, the offering of one’s life and one’s self to God, in love and in service to his world in God’s name. A C T S S.

This acronym is a good structure for private prayer, and shapes our Sunday worship prayers.

III

The mystic tradition of prayer teaches us two poles of prayer, and we need them both. The first is called the Prayer of Expression, or Prayer of the heart. This is the free, expressive spontaneous prayers of the heart to God. It is not scripted, it just flows freely. Here’s an old Jewish story that peaks to this kind of prayer:

There once was a shepherd boy who prayed every day as he tended his sheep: “Lord of the Universe I would tend your sheep for free, even though I tend others’ for pay, because I love you. Amen.”

A learned rabbi came by and overheard the boy's prayer. He scolded him: "This is not a proper prayer." And he taught him the great prayers of the Jewish faith. That night the rabbi was visited in a dream by God, who said, "You have robbed me of the prayers of one of my favorite children." The rabbi said, "What do you mean?" God said, "The shepherd boy has stopped praying."

The next day the rabbi went to see the shepherd boy and asked about his prayers. Had he stopped? The shepherd boy said, "Yes. You forbade me to pray the prayer I had been praying and I forgot the prayers you taught me." The rabbi then said, "Go back to how you were praying."

There's a second pole of prayer I call it "The Prayers of the Faith." This is the disciplined form of prayer where we pray regularly often using the prayers given us by the church through the years. This tradition of prayer helps us pray the kind of prayers we need and want to pray.

The rabbis tell a second story to support this kind of prayer. There was a small European village where there was only one clock-maker. One day he died, and there was no one to replace him. Some people's clocks began to run fast, other's slow. Some people still kept their clocks wound; others stopped using them altogether.

One day a new clock-maker moved into the village and announced that at dawn the next day, everyone could come and he would repair their clocks. And so they did, and this is what happened. He could repair the clocks of those who kept them wound. But those who stopped winding their clocks had caused the working to freeze and rust, and these clocks the clock-maker could not repair.

So, the importance of some disciplined life of prayer, as the weekly prayer of worship, help keep the clocks wound. Also collected prayers in books can help your daily praying.

When I was growing up, the first pole, the spontaneous prayer of the heart, was the one valued. Only this kind was *real* prayer. But as I've gone along in life I have discovered the importance of the second kind too, the Prayers of the Faith.

IV

So let me explore other kinds of prayer. Here are three kinds.

- 1) Talking Prayer, where we verbalize our prayer to God.
- 2) Listening Prayer, where we listen for what God is saying to us. And
- 3) Contemplative Prayer where we simply *be* with God, at a level deeper than words. In my Baptist tradition, we mostly talked in prayer, less often listened, and spend little time just *being* with God in prayer.

Toward the end of experiencing Contemplative Prayer I will lead a Contemplative Prayer Retreat on Saturday September 28th at the home of David and Janice Comer. It will be from 9 to 3. We will be inside and outside. There will be much silence. As Thomas Merton, the famous monk said, “We expect too much from talking, too little from silence.”

Here are some other forms of prayer.

1) Open-eyed prayer and closed-eyed prayer. When I grew up we were called to prayer with the words “Every head bowed, every closed.” Prayer was shutting the world out. But prayer is also letting the world in open-eyed, like the beauty of a mountain stream. The poet Wordsworth spoke of closed-eyed prayer with his words, “The world is too much with us”. The poet Edna St. Vincent Millay spoke of open-eyed prayer with her words, “O World, I cannot hold thee close enough”.

2) Walking Prayer, where the walking itself frees our minds and hearts to prayer. We could also include “gardening and prayer”. Turning the soil helps us turn the heart to God.

3) Art in Prayer, where the doing of art of gazing upon art guides our prayer.

4) Song and prayer, music as an avenue and expression of prayer. St. Augustine once said that when we sing in church, we “pray twice”, with the music and with the words.

5) The *Psalms* as a guide to prayer. They help us pray not just with our sunnier emotions, like praise and thanksgiving, but with the darker emotions, doubt, fear, despair, anguish and anger. You find it all in the Psalms. John Calvin wrote that the Psalms were “The anatomy of all parts of the soul.” Prayer is bringing all we are and all we feel to God.

6) Praying when words fail us. Paul says, the Spirit helps us then and carries the true meaning of them to God. Kathleen Norris says some of her most important prayers are these kinds, the kind when she prays to God: “I mean these prayers even if I don’t know what I mean.”

V

Lastly, let’s talk about the Mystery of Intercessory Prayer. I call it a mystery because it defies the full understanding of our minds. Moreover, we have experienced the heart-break of unanswered prayer.

Intercessory prayer is not, as William James put it: “Lobbying in the courts of the Almighty for special favors.” It is not some magical transaction by which if

we pray the right words or with enough faith God will automatically give us what we ask for.

In Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Huck says:

Miss Watson, she took me to the closet and prayed but nothing come of it. She told me to pray every day, and whatever I ask for I would get it. Once I got a fishline but no hooks. I tried for hooks three or four times, but somehow I couldn't make it work.... I set down one time back in the woods and had a long think about it. I says to myself, if a body can get anything they pray for, why don't Deacon Winn get back the money he lost of pork? Why can't the Widow get her sliver snuff box that was stole? Why can't Miss Watson fat up? No, says I to myself, there ain't nothing to it.

We all know this is not what intercessory prayer is, but what is it?

1) *It is an act of love*, pure and simple, love. In prayer, we, God and the ones for whom we pray are in the same sacred space of healing love.

2) *It is an act of faith*. Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, has been a great help to me in this. He says that when we pray, we hold God in one and the world in the other, believing that God and the world belong together. At its foundation intercessory prayer is thinking of someone or something in the presence of God, believing that there is "nowhere the love of God cannot go."

3) *Healing prayer is a ministry of the church.* This was a part of the mission Jesus sent his disciples to do. James instructs us here:

Is anyone of you suffering? Let her pray. Is anyone cheerful, let him sing praise. Is any among you sick? Let her call for the elders of the church and let them pray over here anointing her with oil in the name of the Lord....

The prayer of the righteous has great power in its effects.

So we believe, else we would not voice our concerns and pray such prayers on Sunday mornings. But are there ways we can expand the healing prayer ministry of our church?

Every Tuesday evening at the Iona Community the focus is healing prayer. It is the most moving form of congregational healing prayer I have experienced. At one point in the service all who wish to receive healing prayer are invited to come kneel in a circle. Then all who wish to lay hands on them are invited to surround them. It lasts until all who wish for such prayer have come to that circle. And what the congregation prays for each one over and over are the words,

Holy Spirit, present with us now,

Enter you, body, mind and spirit

And heal you of all that harms you.

In Jesus' name,

Amen

The words echoing over and over in the ancient church. Would you join hands with each other, and praying for the one on each side, pray this prayer after me, phrase by phrase?