

“Getting a Charge Out of Prayer”

Series: “Recharging Your Spiritual Batteries”

February 28, 2010

Matthew 6:5-15 p. 786

This Lent we’re talking about the classic spiritual practices - the classic ways that Christians have connected and reconnected with God throughout the history of our faith. Last Sunday we looked at worship, Making a Joyful Noise unto the Lord. We said that Worship is our response to the God who has first spoken to us. Worship is reaching out to the God who has first reached out to us. Worship is loving the One who first loved us.

Today we’re going to talk about prayer - finding spiritual renewal through prayer, maintaining one’s relationship and dialogue with God, seeking oneness - Now, I’ll bet at least half of you have already had this reaction - “No, not another sermon on prayer. I know I don’t pray enough. I know I’m a lousy pray-er. You don’t have to tell me again, Preacher. I know how much I’m messing up in this area.” Many of us feel guilty about our prayer lives. Or, we may feel inadequate about our prayer life.

- “Am I doing it right?”

- “Does God hear my prayers?”

- “Would God answer my prayers if I was better at it?”

So, the last thing I want to do this morning is lay another guilt trip on you - even though it’s Lent!

Let’s see what Jesus has to say about the subject. Matthew 6 is in the midst of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus most famous sermon. It covers 3 chapters in Matthew - 5, 6 & 7. Our text this morning is the part of the message where he talks about prayer. Let’s take a look. *Matthew 6:5-15*

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. “Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

NOTE - We could spend a lot of time trying to interpret that last sentence, couldn't we? It's a very challenging statement. What the commentaries say is basically this - if we are habitually unforgiving people then that means that the grace of God hasn't deeply touched our lives. We are not standing in grace, covered by grace. The Good News of Christ hasn't penetrated our lives. But if we are genuinely experiencing the grace and forgiveness of God, then we will strive to share that grace with others. We'll realize that we are all sinners in need of grace.

Well, let's spend some time thinking about prayer this morning. As I mentioned, many of us feel bad about our prayer lives, or we feel inadequate about our prayers. But when we're feeling that way we're over-focused on ourselves and not looking at prayer from God's perspective. Prayer is not just about us! And if prayer is anything at all it's at least turning to God to strive to see life from God's perspective. Richard Foster has written eloquently, I believe, on the subject of prayer. Foster is a Quaker who's written a wonderful book on prayer, entitled, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*. I'd like to read to you a portion of the introduction.

“God has graciously allowed me to catch a glimpse into his heart, and I want to share with you what I have seen. Today the heart of God is an open wound of love. He aches over our distance and preoccupation. He mourns that we do not draw near to him. He grieves that we have forgotten him. He weeps over our obsession with muchness and manyness. He longs for our presence.

And he is inviting you – and me – to come home, to come home to where we belong, to come home to that for which we were created. His arms are stretched out wide to receive us. His heart is enlarged to take us in.

For too long we have been in a far country: a country of noise and hurry and crowds, a country of climb and push and shove, a country of frustration and fear and intimidation. And he welcomes us home: home to serenity and peace and joy, home to friendship and fellowship and openness, home to intimacy and acceptance and affirmation.

We do not need to be shy. He invites us into the living room of his heart, where we can put on old slippers and share freely. He invites us into the kitchen of his friendship, where chatter and chatter mix in good fun. He invites us into the dining room of his strength, where we can feast to our heart's delight. He invites us into the study of his wisdom, where we can learn and grow and stretch...and ask all the questions we want. He invites us into the workshop of his creativity, where we can be co-laborers with him, working together to determine the outcomes of events. He invites us into the bedroom of his rest, where new peace is found and where we can be naked and vulnerable and free. It is also the place of deepest intimacy, where we know and are known to the fullest.

The key to this home, this heart of God, is prayer. Perhaps you do not believe in prayer. You may have tried to pray and were profoundly disappointed...and disillusioned. You seem to have little faith, or none. It does not matter. The Father's heart is open wide – you are welcome to come in.”

Isn't that beautiful? Prayer is God's invitation to come home - to come home to God, to come home to ourselves - to be who we really are - Children of God. Prayer is coming home. In Jesus' day, folks didn't look at prayer that way. They looked at it as a duty, as an obligation - as a task to be done and not a relationship to be enjoyed. It's not that they didn't take prayer seriously though. In fact, religious people in the First Century prayed every day and regularly throughout the day. They were taught to say the "Shema" every morning and every night. - words from *Deut. 6:4-9* - "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord." There were other prayers known as "Shemoneh 'esreh, which means, "18." - this was a collection of 18 beautiful prayers that were to be recited 3 times a day.

In addition to these prayers, the religious leaders had come up with formal prayers for all occasions. There were prayers not only before meals, but also after. There were prayers when one saw lightening or fire or the new moon or a comet. There were prayers to be said at the sight of a river, a lake, a sea or a city. There's something very faith-filled about these prayers - it's the idea that every happening in life should be brought into the

presence of God. But what happened is that these prayers had become so organized and formalized that they had lost their meaning. It was more duty than desire. It was more labor than love. It was more reciting than it was inviting. It was more performing and not reforming. You might say it was religious without being spiritual, which is always a danger for us religious people.

There were two other things that bothered Jesus about the way that people prayed:

1. They felt that their prayers had to be long to be heard.
2. Religious folks often prayed in public in a very demonstrative way, showing off their piety for everyone to see.

William Barclay tells of a great preacher who once described an ornate and elaborate prayer offered in a Boston church, as “the most eloquent prayer ever offered to a Boston audience.” What’s the problem with that? Prayer isn’t offered to a human audience, is it? Prayer is offered up to an audience of one, God. So you now have a sense of what Jesus was concerned about. That’s why he says, “And when you pray, do not pray to be seen by others. Go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; And when you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

He seems to be saying, “Keep it simple.” K.I.S.S. = Keep it simple, Silly! I like, Keep it simple and sincere. And then he gives the disciples and us The Lord’s Prayer.

Our Father in heaven, you are holy. We honor and praise your name. May your kingdom, so that your will would be done here on earth, just as it is in heaven. Give us the food we need for today. Forgive us our sins, as we’re forgiving those who sin against us. Don’t let us yield to temptation and protect us from evil.

It’s such a short, simple prayer, isn’t it? It begins with Praise. Praise opens our hearts to God. Praise is acknowledging God and loving God. “Our Father in Heaven, Holy is your name.” “Your Character, your heart, your essence is pure holiness, O God.” It’s praise and adoration.

ILL. Rabbi Harold Kushner tells a Hassidic story in one of his books. It's about a tailor who comes to his rabbi and says, "I have a problem with my prayers. If someone comes to me and says, 'Mendel, you're a wonderful tailor,' that makes me feel good. I feel appreciated. I can go on feeling good for a whole week, even longer, on the strength of one compliment like that.

But if people came to me every day, one after another, hour after hour, and kept saying to me, 'Mendel, you're a wonderful tailor,' 'Mendel, you're a wonderful tailor,' over and over again, it would drive me crazy. It would soon get to the point where I wouldn't want to listen to them anymore. I would tell them to go away and let me do my work in peace. This is what bothers me about prayer. It seems to me that if we told God how wonderful He was once a week, even once every few weeks, and just one or two of us at a time, that's all He would need.

Is God so insecure that He needs us praising him every day? Three times a day, morning, noon, and night hundreds of people praising him? It seems to me it would drive Him crazy." The rabbi smiled and said, "Mendel, you're absolutely right. You have no idea how hard it is for God to listen to all of our praises, hour after hour, day after day. But God knows how important it is for us to utter that praise, so in His great love for us, He tolerates all of our prayers." Kushner then says, "God does not need our flattery, but we need to become the sort of people who know how to be grateful."

Prayer does that. Prayer can remind us to be the kind of people we want to be.

- to be grateful
- to be loving as God is loving.
- to be forgiving as God is forgiving

Prayer not only puts us in touch with God, it puts us in touch with ourselves! Our Father in heaven, you are holy- "Hallowed in your Name!" May your kingdom come. May your will be done here on earth, just as it is in heaven. "Thy Will Be Done" is at the heart of all our prayers, as we seek to align our lives with the will of God. Kushner says this, "Religion is the attempt to serve God. Magic is the effort to manipulate God." The heart of religion and being a spiritual person is striving to align our lives with the will and ways of God.

Well, I could talk about prayer all day, but that probably wouldn't get us much closer to God than we are now. So instead of me talking more

about prayer, let's spend some time in prayer together. I'd like us to use the Lord's Prayer as our model prayer, which it is. In Luke's Gospel when Jesus introduces the Lord's Prayer he says, "When you pray, pray this:
" But in *Matthew 6* Jesus says, "Pray then in this way." "Pray like this. Let this be prompting of things you need to say to God. Pray about these things, in this manner."

So, let's do that. I'll say a phrase of the Lord's Prayer and suggest ways that we can pray in this way to God. So, again, let's be in a spirit of prayer. Please sit up straight. Focus on your breathing. I'll pray a part of the prayer and give you time to put it in your own words. Let's try it:
Lord Jesus, you gave us this simple, wonderful prayer as a model and a guide for us. Help us to pray it this morning.

"Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be your name. "Holy is your name, O God." Worship and praise God in your heart.

Your Kingdom come, your will be done.

Give us this day our daily bread. Your daily bread might be any number of things this morning - healing, peace of mind, reconciliation, financial stability, strength and hope - whatever it is, express your needs to God. Forgive us our Sins, O God.

Draw near to God in a time of confession - those things we've done that we never should have done, and those things we've neglected to do that we ought to have done. Forgive us, dear Lord, and compel us to forgive others as best we're able, because your grace has touched us and made us whole.

Lead us, O God, not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Ask God to be your leader, your guide, your shepherd.

Together: "For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen."