

## **Prayer: Its Problems and Possibilities**

### 1. Why Prayer?

*Matthew 7:21-23*

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Greensboro, North Carolina  
March 3, 2019

Beginning this morning and continuing through Palm Sunday I will be doing a sermon series for Lent on the subject of prayer, its problems and possibilities, what it is and why it matters for those who would be disciples of Jesus Christ. You may well be wondering why. You may be concerned about the wisdom or the propriety of devoting some six Sunday sermons to the same topic of prayer. So, let me share with you my reasoning for this emphasis as your Interim Pastor. And there are several reasons behind this decision.

One reason has to do with the season of Lent itself and how the church through the centuries has historically and liturgically understood this forty-day period between Ash Wednesday and Easter. There were two primary purposes for Lent, the training and preparation of candidates for baptism and confirmation and secondly, the encouragement of all members of the congregation to renew their dedication and commitment to Christ and his church.

While I will not necessarily be using the assigned lectionary passages for this series of sermons on prayer it should be noted that the texts for Lent provide an opportunity for disciples to examine or perhaps re-examine themselves in relation to the mystery of the cross and in light of the grace we have received through our own baptism and confirmation. That is to say, Lent should be a time when we are either preparing to become disciples or re-examining the quality and character of our discipleship and commitment.

And of course, this responsibility and privilege fits perfectly with one of my primary tasks as your Interim Pastor. While it is always appropriate to examine the character of discipleship whether it is during Lent or not, this is critically important during the time of a church's transition between pastors. It is incumbent upon me and the Session to review the rolls of church membership, to try to re-engage those who drifted away for one reason or another, to remove those who have no intention or desire to live out their discipleship as a part of this community of faith, and to challenge all the rest of us to take our membership and our discipleship more seriously. In the coming months you will hear us talking a great deal more about discipleship than

membership. They should be one in the same but we all know that in truth they are not. My suspicion has been that there are hundreds of “members” on the roll of this church who so far as we know, have not been present for worship, have not received Christian instruction, have not contributed personally or financially to the life and work of this congregation, have not shared in fellowship with us, and have never committed to a ministry of their own within the church and the community (see the announcement from our *Book of Order* in today’s bulletin.)

This suspicion was verified this week when we asked Jennifer in the church office to do a little statistical research. She reported that while we have some 2,839 “active and affiliate members,” some 935 of them, so far as we know, have not attended worship or participated financially or personally in the life and ministry of our church.

And here is the thing, and another reason for this focus on prayer, I am concerned that while it may not end there, all genuine discipleship begins with one’s personal relationship with and commitment to Jesus Christ as both Savior and Lord. And to be quite frank about it, apart from a life of prayer there cannot be much of a relationship and it is unlikely that the commitment will be as vital and as effective as it ought to be.

What is more, in every church I have ever served people have confessed to me their felt inadequacy when it comes to prayer. They have admitted that for different reasons they pray seldom if at all. There is nothing wrong with admitting that. Change often begins with honest confession. And those who struggle with prayer are certainly in good company. Even our Lord’s disciples struggled with it. According to *Luke 11*, one of Jesus’ disciples was bold enough, honest enough to come to him privately, maybe speaking for the group, with the request. “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” (*Luke 11:1*) Knowing your felt inadequacy, acknowledging that your life of prayer leaves much to be desired is perhaps a good starting point for those who want more out of this relationship with and personal commitment to Jesus.

We will be electing a new class of Ruling Elders this morning and I was reminded that over the years the number one concern most potential candidates have shared with me is that they fear someone will call on them to pray in public. They say public speaking is the number one fear of men, but I would bet that public praying is even more frightening.

The brief portion of the Sermon on the Mount that was our gospel lesson for today is both instructive and disturbing. Jesus is presenting his disciples then and now with a haunting truth we would do well not to ignore. Jesus seems rather dismissive of what we often think is quite important as persons of faith – having the right words,

believing the right things, even doing the right deeds. Yet Jesus indicates something more is required, and his message may be an ominous warning to good religious people and active church members like most of us here today. Any yet Jesus says that despite doing all these good things and saying all the right words, He didn't know them.

In our own way we too cry out "Lord, Lord;" we too preach or prophecy in Christ's name; we even do good and powerful works in Christ's name, but the question is not whether or not we know and obey Christ but whether or not he knows us. You see, the Christian life is not simply another religion characterized by ritual and regulations, by creeds and deeds, as important as they may be. No, the Christian life is primarily a personal relationship – a personal relationship with the one who has created and redeemed us and who dwells within us through his Spirit. The fear I have when I hear this portion of our Lord's sermon is that perhaps I have been giving more attention to talking about God than in talking with God, to knowledge about God rather than a knowledge of God, to a religion rather than a relationship. I don't know about you but speaking personally I know that I have given only a fraction of my time and attention to nurturing my fellowship with and my relationship to the living Lord. I confess that for me prayer has largely been for me a duty, a discipline, and even a professional obligation.

But I want it to be more. I want prayer to be as natural, as refreshing and as fulfilling as a conversation with one that I love, and, in whose presence, I delight. I want my prayer life to be the occasion where the Lord and I become better acquainted, where we can affirm our mutual love and where we can discover the other's heart and soul. I want prayer to be the place where we share our burdens and our passions. I want my prayer life to move from the right side of my brain, as it were — the rational, the disciplined, and systematic side, to the left side of my brain which is far more intuitive, mystical and experiential. You see, in the final analysis what I think about prayer is not nearly so important as what I do about it.

Even though in the coming weeks I will deal with many misconceptions and problems and possibilities related to prayer, my goal is not simply to answer frequently asked questions. I agree with the late David H.C. Read who once wrote that "The best sermon on prayer is not the one that offers answers to our questions but one that incites us all to do it." ("The Living Pulpit" July – September 1993, page 11.) So ultimately this is my fondest hope for our Lenten series on prayer. This series will prove to be worthwhile not if you simply know more about prayer six weeks from now but if it has become an indispensable practice and privilege for you.

Now to be sure, prayer is a duty as well as a free choice for those of us seeking to follow Christ. Jesus is not only modeled a vital prayer life but many of his teachings and

experiences are concerned with prayer. We will consider some of these in the weeks to come, no doubt.

Suffice it to say at this point by way of introduction that prayer is not, as many assume a charm, a talisman or a learned mechanism for getting the things we desire or for convincing God to come around to our way of seeing things. In the final analysis the greatest benefit of prayer is not the results but the relationship, not the gifts we desire but rather the Giver we come to know in a more intimate, intentional, and fulfilling way.

Today and perhaps again in weeks to come, we will sing a hymn I have loved from childhood and one that regrettably does not appear in our current hymn book, "Prayer is the Soul's Sincere Desire." The hymn's lyrics composed by the Scottish poet James Montgomery remind us in some memorable phrases that prayer is more than the words we speak. In truth prayer is the "soul's sincere desire" the language of the heart "unuttered or expressed." Prayer is what "trembles in the breast" and prompts our tears and fears. It is in truth "the Christian's vital breath," the Christian's "native air." Prayer is essential for a vital relationship with God. Prayer is the primary arena in which God and his children engage and meet and share with each other, finding their communion, their confidence, their delight and their peace in the process. Prayer is the place where love is shared, and honest exchange occurs. And apart from a life of prayer our faith will simply remain academic or theoretical or superficial or bland, or all of the above. A person who never prays will never comprehend the nature of discipleship or the meaning of commitment because this person will have no true knowledge of God nor any accurate assessment of who and what they are. It is not only a matter of how we know God but how God comes to know us better.

To be sure, the subject of prayer cannot be covered in a lifetime, much less a six-week sermon series. And while we will look at a number of aspects of prayer we surely will not resolve all of its mysteries or wonders. Prayer will forever remain one of faith's mysteries. In a radio broadcast back in 1939 Winston Churchill famously said of Russia what I would say of prayer: "It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma."

So, can we commit ourselves over this season of Lent not only to examining and reflecting on aspects of prayer but actually to the practice of prayer as individuals, couples, and families. If we do that as a community of faith we may just discover a deeper fellowship or a richer relationship to our Lord and a stronger commitment to what God would have us to be and to do. And if that were to occur every aspect of our life together in this congregation would be more effective, more fulfilling, more faithful, and more transformative of us and others.

In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.