

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

### **2. Prayer's First Purpose**

*Jeremiah 9:23-24; Philippians 3:4-11*

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Last Sunday in worship I began a sermon series for this Lenten season that will continue through Palm Sunday and which is devoted to the mysterious but central issue of prayer – what it is and why it matters, what are problems and possibilities related to prayer.

I shared with you last week some of my reasoning for devoting six weeks to this topic. Historically and liturgically the two main purposes for this forty-day period beginning on Ash Wednesday and concluding on Easter morning are two-fold, both of which relate to our life together in this congregation and in this time of transition between the leaving of your former pastor and the calling of a new one. The first function of Lent was to prepare candidates for baptism and confirmation for an eye of discipleship and membership in the Christian church. This was life's greatest decision which would impart all of their subsequent decisions of significance such as what they would strive to be and become – what would be their vocation or calling, how would they invest their time and energies, and resources, would they choose to enter into a lifetime marriage and with whom, what would be their priorities and commitments in life. All of these subsequent and important issues would be shaped by the decision as to whether Jesus Christ would really see both their Savior and their Lord, as they would profess at their baptism and or confirmation. So, preparation was in order.

And secondly, Lent also served the purpose of calling upon those who already were baptized and confirmed disciples and church members to re-examine the character and quality of their own service to Christ and his church in light of the mystery of the cross of Christ and in response to the grace and mercy they had received.

Both of these historic purposes of the Lenten season fit well with the life of this church at present. Not only are we preparing our confirmands for their profession of faith and reception into the active membership of the church, but we are reviewing our membership rolls here at First Pres trying to re-engage those who have either slipped away or intentionally backed away from their commitment to Christ and his church. And it may be that some need to be removed from our membership roll if they have no intention or desire to be a committed disciple and faithful church member as once they promised.

Doing this is part of my charge and responsibility as an Interim Pastor in preparation for the arrival of your new pastor. In the past two weeks we have discovered that while we have over 2800 members on the roll over 900 of these persons have not, so far as we know, attended worship or participated financially or personally in the life and work of this church for at least two years.

The only corrective for this apathy and absence that I know of is challenge each and every one of us to re-connect to the one who gave his all for us at Calvary and renew our personal relationship to Jesus as Savior and Lord.

And so far as I am concerned, at the heart of this personal relationship is our time spent with the Lord in prayer. As I said last week, apart from a life of prayer our relationship with Christ is not very personal and will remain academic, theoretical, superficial or bland and maybe all of those. So prayer matters a great deal for any person who dares to be a disciple or desires to be a member of Christ's church.

When I started preparing this sermon for this Lenten season I wondered what to entitle today's message, when my wife handed me a magnet that had been on our refrigerator for years which I had never noticed along with the photos, grocery lists and reminders that occupy that space. She said, "You may have a better plan for this in your office." At any rate, the magnet's message contains the substance of today's sermon. It said: "The first purpose of prayer is to know God."

I have become fully persuaded of this great truth. But I am also convinced that most people, people like myself and perhaps like you, have overlooked this great truth with the same kind of nonchalance and lack of awareness that I had showed with respect to the refrigerator magnet.

Would you agree that the first purpose of prayer is to know God! In our passage from Jeremiah today the Lord declares that if we are to boast about anything, let it not be those things the worlds admires — wisdom, strength, or riches — but rather let us boast that we "understand and know the Lord." And the apostle Paul adds later in Philippians that all those things in which he took pride prior to his conversion he now considers rubbish when compared with the "surpassing worth of knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection." Yes, knowing God is life's greatest quest and blessing and prayer's first purpose is what enables this to happen.

Here is a truth that is found in the scriptures and has been the testimony of God's people throughout the ages, but it is a truth that can only be experienced. I can not argue you into believing this or otherwise convince you that the first purpose of prayer is to know God.

You must discover that for yourself. Someone once asked Samuel Johnson what he considered the strongest argument for prayer and he replied, "Sir, there is no argument for prayer." By that he did not discount the importance of prayer or mean to suggest that it was irrational. Neither was he being flippant. He only meant to suggest that only personal experience and not intellect or reason could confirm prayer's importance. As you can see by the prayer of confession we used this morning, a prayer which John wrote, he took his faith and prayer with utmost seriousness.

Regrettably, most people today and even most believers fail to understand or appreciate prayer's first purpose. Instead we have childish, immature notions that prayer is simply a means to either get what we want or convince God to do as we please. The first purpose of prayer has been overlooked in ignorance or ignored in practice. We sometimes act as if God is rather like a "Cosmic Bellhop" as one of my seminary professors put it, a bellhop who is always waiting to meet our every need and give us the best of service. If God's service pleases us we may even give him a tip, though in church we usually refer to this as a tithe. And if God fails to please us or serve us as we deem best then we take umbrage and go elsewhere with our business.

Harry Emerson Fosdick used the analogy of treating God like Santa Clause and presenting him with our request list of the things we want and need. As childish and as spiritually immature as this may be, many of us have never moved beyond it. To be sure, Jesus speaks of the childlike attributes of sincerity, confidence and trust, but being childlike and childish are two completely different things. Paul says, "When I became an adult I put away childish things," but some of us have never gotten to that stage with respect to our prayer life.

Is it any wonder people give up so easily on prayer? When prayer doesn't "work" we forsake it. Most us stopped asking Santa Clause for things years ago.

Mark Twain's philosopher/theologian Huckleberry Finn struggled with prayer and came to the conclusion that there was nothing much to it.

*Miss Watson she took me in the closet and prayed, but nothing come of it. She told me to pray every day, and whatever I asked for I would get. But it warn't so. I tried it. Once I got a fish line, but not hooks. It warn't any good to me without hooks. I tried for the hooks three or four times, but somehow I couldn't make it work. By and by, one day, I asked Miss Watson to try for me, but she said I was a fool. She never told me why, and I couldn't make it out no way. I set down one time 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 on pork? Why can't the widow get back her*

*silver snuffbox that was stole? Why can't Miss Watson fat up? No, says I to myself, there ain't nothing to it.*

Well, of course, if prayer is just about getting what we want and advising God as to how to run the universe, there isn't much to it. (But this is the topic for yet another sermon in this series and I'll leave this discussion till later.) On the other hand, if prayer is first and foremost about gaining a knowledge of God and a knowledge of ourselves, if prayer is a vehicle for enhancing our friendship and fellowship with God then there is a great deal to it indeed. And the person who understands this will approach prayer in a completely different frame of mind and with a different set of expectations. Prayer then becomes a sacred privilege, not a burdensome duty and not a way of transacting business with the divine.

Listen to how Fosdick expresses this in his classic work of *The Meaning of Prayer*.

*Prayer here is not a burden to be borne, an obligation to be fulfilled, something that is due to God and must be paid. Prayer is a privilege; like friendship and family love and laughter, great books, great music, and great art, it is one of life's opportunities to be grasped thankfully and used gladly. The man who misses the deep meanings of prayer has not so much refused an obligation; he has robbed himself of life's supreme privilege — friendship with God.*

Phillip Yancey in his book entitled *Prayer* refers to prayer as the currency of the diving relationship. The Bible speaks of Abraham and Moses as friends of God and describes David as "a man after God's own heart." The interchanges between these Old Testament divines and God, call them prayers if you will, seem always to be honest and sincere and on occasion filled with argumentation, anger and angst. But exchanges like this occur among friends even when one is a mighty, omniscient and holy being and the other a weak, conflicted sinner. Jesus fleshes out this relationship and this kind of prayer life. And he even went so far as to call his followers, not his servants but rather his friends. Why? "Because a servant does not know his master's business." But with our Lord there is shared work, shared knowledge and shared devotion.

Sometimes we do not fully appreciate what a radical change Jesus brought about in our understanding of God and in our approach to God. Prior to Jesus most Jews believed that God's presence resided more fully in the temple than anywhere else. And of course, one went to the temple to pray if at all possible. The Samaritans believed that Mount Gerazim, not Mount Zion, was actually the preferred place of worship and the seat of God's presence. Remember Jesus' conversation with the women at the well in Samaria? Yet Jesus taught that the time was coming and indeed had already arrived when prayer and worship would be in spirit and in truth. Prayer doesn't require a particular place, a particular posture, specific words, or a specific

ritual. Prayer only requires a desire to be in the presence of God and to enjoy a genuine relationship with God. Intimacy with God can only occur when we practice and pursue this presence and this relationship.

Of course, we all remember those old prayers and old scenes from the scriptures where God seemed to intervene on a regular basis in the lives of his children, even violating the laws of nature, science and reason to accomplish miraculous things. Stopping rivers, defeating enemies, defying disease and even death. Prayer in the Bible seems at times to be a prelude to the miraculous. Now I for one still believe in miracles yet ordinarily God works through the laws that God set in place in thus our prayers are not so much the means for achieving the impossible or the implausible as they are an avenue through which we enter into a more intimate relationship with the sovereign and holy Lord behind all laws and all human events.

Jesus makes this clear by his own example and through his instructions. Phillip Yancey (page 63) says that Jesus set the pattern for prayer as “a continuous mode of friendship” and virtually invented private prayer. No Old Testament figure ever addresses God in such a personal and intimate way as “father” and yet Jesus does so at least 170 times in the gospels and taught his disciples to do the same. Thus prayer is more about intimacy, more about fellowship and friendship, than it is about achieving certain ends. It is more about coming to know God personally than to understand God intellectually.

In Port Hope, Canada there stands a monument to a poor, unselfish working man who invested his life and resources in serving people who were in no position to repay him. Born in Dublin, Ireland in 1820 and a graduate of Trinity College, Joseph Scriven certainly knew sorrow and disappointment through out his life. In 1845, prior to immigrating to Canada, his bride to be died in a drowning accident the day before they were to marry. After moving to Canada, he fell in love once again, but his second fiancée became ill and died before they could marry as well. No one was aware of the fact that Joseph Scriven had any poetic gifts until shortly before his own death a friend had discovered a poem he had written and had sent to his ailing mother back in Ireland.

*What a Friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!  
What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!  
O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear,  
All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.*

*Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?  
We should never be discouraged; take it to the Lord in prayer.  
Can we find a friend so faithful who will all our sorrows share?  
Jesus knows our every weakness; take it to the Lord in prayer.*

*Are we weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care?  
Precious Savior, still our refuge, take it to the Lord in prayer.  
Do your friends despise, forsake you? Take it to the Lord in prayer!  
In His arms He'll take and shield you; you will find a solace there.*

*Blessed Savior, Thou has promised Thou wilt all our burdens bear  
May we ever, Lord, be bringing all to Thee in earnest prayer.  
Soon in glory bright unclouded there will be no need for prayer  
Rapture, praise and endless worship will be our sweet portion there.*

Prayer:

Eternal God, while we will never understand you fully, help us to know you truly and may our life of prayer enable us to commune with you as friend to friend finding in this friendship our peace, our strength, our hope and our life. Amen.