Sermon Title: Prayer: A Personal Conversation with God
Sermon Text: Selected texts
Aug 2, 2009

Introduction

A five-year-old said grace at family dinner one night. "Dear God, thank you for these pancakes...." When he concluded, his parents asked him why he thanked God for pancakes when they were having chicken. He smiled and said, "I thought I’d see if He was paying attention tonight."

A little girl, dressed in her Sunday best, was running as fast as she could, trying not to be late for Bible class. As she ran she prayed, "Dear Lord, please don't let me be late! Dear Lord, please don't let me be late!"
As she was running and praying, she tripped on a curb and fell, getting her clothes dirty and tearing her dress. She got up, brushed herself off, and started running again. As she ran she once again began to pray, "Dear Lord, please don't let me be late! But don't shove me either."

People pray more often than they realize. The exclamation, “O my God” though in the category of profanity is an expression of prayer. The Supreme Court ruled in the early ‘60’s that prayer in public schools was inappropriate. In spite of operating from a hard core secular base, the media is very quick to say “our thoughts and prayers are with you.” Really. What does that mean? To whom are they praying? Does anyone think these talking heads actually take time to pray for the people?

Christian prayer is to the God of the Bible and is the means by which the believer is connected with God 24/7. I’m defining prayer as a personal conversation with God. We all engage in conversations every day and realize there are two parts to prayer: talking and listening. Both are important. We don’t enjoy engaging in a conversation where it is strictly a one-way street. If you send a text message, wait for a reply and don’t receive one, how bad is that? What does that say about the other person’s interest in you? Some of may think of prayer as only sending text messages to God, not interested to know if God has a response that might not be what you or I want. God has something to say to us, too. That is primarily in the Bible, but it is also in a direct subjective communication of his Spirit with our spirit.

The starting point of the conversation is to become a child of God and that is accomplished through prayer. I want to be very clear at this point because here is a lot of misunderstanding in our culture today. This prayer is a particular prayer. I assume that most people have at some point uttered a formal prayer. And many assume their prayer was answered by a higher power.
We might call that kind of prayer, temporal prayer. We pray for a job. We pray that our cat won’t die, or Aunt Hilda’s bunion won’t hurt so much. That’s simply life stuff. Prayer that brings a person into God’s family as a son or daughter requires a prayer of saving faith.

The prayer that brings forgiveness of sin and puts a person in a right relationship with God is a prayer of repentance and faith in Jesus as the only Savior. An incident in Jesus life is found in Luke 18:10-13 illustrates this prayer: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’
“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’
“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The prayer that brings anyone into a personal relationship with God through Jesus requires humility—understanding that they are sinners in the sight of a holy God and there is no amount of good works or righteous actions they can do that will change their status. Everyone needs a Savior and the only Savior of humanity is Jesus of Nazareth. He alone paid the penalty of sin and offers forgiveness as a totally free gift to be received by faith. An ancient prayer of our forefathers expressed it this way: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” It’s known as the “Jesus prayer”. You can pray that prayer right now where you sit and God will have mercy on you through Jesus Christ. However, this is not exclusively a prayer to become a Christian, this is a prayer believers need to utter frequently, for we are sinful and this prayer brings that home with clarity!

- Prayer is Not Optional

This series is about cultivating the priorities of Christ. So, did Jesus pray? Read these verses with me in unison as they appear on the screen.

Mark 1:35, ”Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.”

Matthew 14:23, “After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray.”
Matthew 24:36 “Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, ‘Sit here while I go over there and pray.’”

Since Jesus found it necessary to spend time with the Father, it follows if we are to cultivate his priorities that we, too, will take the time to pray. None of us has the time, we must take it. That means we choose to pray rather than watch a TV soap show, sports, the history channel, or whatever. A central concept that came out of the Reformation is the priesthood of believers, meaning that every person who is a follower of Jesus has direct access to Jesus without going through a human priest or praying to Mary. Psalms is the book of prayers.

Psalm 3:4 David recorded: “I cried out to the LORD, and he answered me from his holy mountain.”

Jeremiah 33:3 “Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.” This is both an invitation given by God to his people as well as a command that we call or pray. God wants us to come to him with our requests.

Jesus highlighted the problem we all have when it comes to prayer. As he wrestled with his coming death in Gethsemane, he came back to find the disciples asleep. He said to them, “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak” (Matthew 26:41).

In John 16:24 Jesus required that we approach God in his name: “Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.” This is why prayers are concluded with “in Jesus’ name,” or “through Christ our Lord,” and so forth.

Paul adds this instruction about what our attitude should be when we pray. In Philippians 4:6-7 he writes: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” How do we live without anxiety over the unknown of tomorrow paralyzing us or creating stomach ulcers? As Phillips translates it, “Tell God every detail of your needs in earnest and thankful prayer.” It isn’t so hard to earnestly tell God our needs or what is bugging us; it is something else to do so with a heart of thanks. This isn’t a masochistic thanking God for the pain. That’s nuts. It is being thankful that nothing comes to me without his permission and his grace is adequate to empower me to cope with it.
Psalm 91:1-2 expressed it this way: “Those who live in the shelter of the Most High will find rest in the shadow of the Almighty. This I declare about the LORD: He alone is my refuge, my place of safety; he is my God, and I trust him.” God put that in the Bible for us to pray. When filled with anxiety, pray those words, they are God’s word and we know we are praying the appropriate thing when we pray back to him his own statements.

Here’s the 24/7/365 statement on prayer from 1 Thessalonians 5:17: “Pray without ceasing.” The word means without interruption. It’s a mindset of focus on God as the true center of my daily life, not an add-on or appendix.

- **Prayer Brings Enormous Benefits**

John 15:7 Jesus assured us: “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for anything you want, and it will be granted.” That’s a true whopper! The conditions: remaining in Jesus and allowing his word to remain in you.

James 5:16 states: “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.” This verse is one of the foundation verses for our position in the Alliance on physical healing.

1 Peter 3:12 reads: “For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer.” The righteous are those in right relationship with God through Jesus. It doesn’t mean you have to be without fault or be sinless before God will listen to your prayer; if that were required, we’d all be up a creek with a paddle.

*Nave’s Topical Bible* lists 53 specific answers to prayer in the Old Testament with nine in the book of beginnings, Genesis.

- **How to Pray**

There are multiple forms of prayer. We’ll only cover three

- **The Prayer of Adoration**
We practice weekly the prayer of worship. During my leave this summer I heard a magnificent chorale of loving adoration.

My God I love you
Not because I hope for heaven thereby
Not yet because I may not die eternally.
O my Jesus you embraced me upon the cross
For me did bear the nails and spear and manifold disgrace.
Why then, why, O blessed Jesus Christ
Should I not love you well?
Not for the hope of winning heaven or of escaping hell;
Not with the hope of something gained
Not seeking a reward;
But as you have loved me,
O ever-loving Lord!
E’en so I love you, and will love,
And in your praise will sing
Solely because you are my God and my eternal King.

- The Prayer of Confession

A beginning point in prayer and a constant need for each of us is the prayer of confession. Some of you may be familiar with Augustine’s great work from the fifth century, Confessions, in which he was very candid about his life. The great prayer of confession in the Bible is Psalm 51, David’s prayer after confronted with his sins of adultery and murder. The heart of that prayer is verse 10: “Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a loyal spirit within me.”

However, the opening of his prayer is the key to his confession. He understood the nature of God’s loyal love for his flawed children and the grace and mercy he extends to us. Here is what he says:

“Have mercy on me, O God,
because of your unfailing love.
Because of your great compassion,
blot out the stain of my sins.
Wash me clean from my guilt.
Purify me from my sin.
For I recognize my rebellion;
it haunts me day and night.
Against you, and you alone, have I sinned;
have done what is evil in your sight.”
The loving apostle John gives us this assurance in his first letter, verses 9-10: “But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness. If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts.”

We’ll pause now for you to bring your sins to God and ask his forgiveness.

**SERVICE OF COMMUNION**

- **Prayer for Personal Needs**

Jesus gave a story in Luke 18:1-8: “One day Jesus told his disciples a story to show that they should always pray and never give up. ‘There was a judge in a certain city,’ he said, ‘who neither feared God nor cared about people. A widow of that city came to him repeatedly, saying, “Give me justice in this dispute with my enemy.” The judge ignored her for a while, but finally he said to himself, “I don’t fear God or care about people, but this woman is driving me crazy. I’m going to see that she gets justice, because she is wearing me out with her constant requests!”’

“Then the Lord said, ‘Learn a lesson from this unjust judge. Even he rendered a just decision in the end. So don’t you think God will surely give justice to his chosen people who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will grant justice to them quickly! But when the Son of Man returns, how many will he find on the earth who have faith?’”

The central lesson of this story is our persistence in prayer based on the assurance that Jesus is just and fair and will respond to our prayers with justice.

- **Prayer for People Without Christ**

Paul provides an important insight into how we can pray for family and friends who have yet to commit to Jesus. Their salvation is not reluctance on the part of God to act, but we are engaged in the reality of an enemy whose goal is to take people to hell with him. Here is what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:3-4: “If the Good News we preach is hidden behind a veil, it is hidden only from people who are perishing. Satan, who is the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don’t believe. They are unable to see the glorious light of the Good News. They don’t understand this message about the glory of Christ, who is the exact likeness of God.” How do we pray in line with that clear revelation of the behind-the-scenes activity? “Lord Jesus, you are the only one who can deliver people from spiritual blindness. For your glory and the salvation of __________; I resist Satan’s work of blindness and ask you Jesus to enable them to see and understand the truth of your love and grace.”
I’ll close with a brief comment on the model of the Lord’s Prayer, or more properly, the disciple’s prayer. Let’s read this prayer as found in Matthew 6:9-13 (NLT) together:

Our Father in heaven, may your name be honored.  
May your Kingdom come soon.  
May your will be done here on earth, just as it is in heaven.  
Give us our food for today, and forgive us our sins, just as we have forgiven those who have sinned against us.  
And don’t let us yield to temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

There are six elements seen in Jesus’ prayer:

- Praise (9): “Your name be honored.”
- Explicit commitment to God’s will and purpose (10): “May your kingdom come, your will be done.” We aren’t telling God what to do.
- Specific request for personal needs (11): “Give us our food for today.”
- Ask to be forgiven (12): “Forgive our sins.” Here are four points on confession:
  - In Psalm 139:23-24 David asked the Holy Spirit to reveal every sin
  - Proverbs 28:13 states: “He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.” We must be specific.
  - Jesus stated in Matthew 5:23-24 that we are to make restitution when we have wronged others.
  - 1 John 1:9 assures us of God’s gracious forgiveness and we need to accept that forgiveness and move on and quit beating up on ourselves.
- Pray for other people (12): “Just as we have forgiven others”
- Pray for protection (13): “Don’t let us yield to temptation but deliver us from the evil one.”

There are many other ways we can insert variety into our prayer time with solitude, prayer walks and practicing lectio divina. You can pick up on this when we offer a spiritual formation class in the future.

**Wrap Up**

The knee-jerk response to crisis is to pray. It was so in Columbine a decade ago, 911, and more recently Katrina. Every news event of a tragic occurrence becomes a general call to prayer. It is so with all of us. God is our ultimate recourse, but walking like Jesus means it ought to be our daily, moment-by-moment mindset and habit.
Hebrews 9:27 reads, “Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.” The word for judgment comes from the Greek krisis. We get our word, crisis from it. We face a lot of crises in our lives and often they are tragic. No crisis will be greater than what we face after death. No tragedy is greater than an eternal human being sent to hell because he or she refused to trust in God’s Son as Savior and Lord. Standing before Jesus as judge will be the final crisis.

The Bible says now is the time to get ready for that crisis. The old prophet said to prepare to meet God. Getting connected with God begins with a prayer of repentance as we turn from our independence and sin and place our faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Lord Jesus, I am a sinner. I ask you to forgive my sins and come into my life to change me from the inside out. I receive you as the gift of eternal life. Thank you for saving me.