

MAKING WORSHIP REAL - PART IV

“You Hold The Answer To Your Prayers”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Matt. 8:14-15

The main character in John Bojer's book, *Great Hunter*, is a peasant farmer whose name is Pierre Troen. He lives in a rural community surrounded by farmer friends. One of his neighbors is a vicious man who is hated by all of the people in that area.

One day, Pierre Troen's daughter is attacked and killed by the dog belonging to this heartless neighbor. The man does absolutely nothing to show any sense of regret and makes no attempt to relieve Pierre Troen's sorrow. The rest of the neighbors gather together and plot to destroy him by denying him seed for his land, thus making it economically impossible for him to live.

The father of the little girl objects, saying this would not do anyone any good, but the neighbors persist. As the weeks pass, the barren field becomes more and more of a burden to Pierre and so, one night, he goes out in the darkness and, by the light of the moon, sows his enemy's field. When his friends asked him why, he reasons it this way, “I sowed my enemy's field so God might exist.”

At first hearing, Pierre Troen's statement seems brash. It smacks of conceit and we recoil from it. But think it through and you'll conclude he spoke the truth. God cannot exist in this world unless He exists in human hearts. He does not dwell in granite hills and dogwood trees. The inanimate things of nature do not house Him, His people do. “Know ye not that your body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit?” (I Cor.6:19).

It is said that “God works in mysterious ways His wonders to perform.” Perhaps the most mysterious fact of all is that He uses human agencies to perform His deeds. He works through people to accomplish that which must be done. No, Pierre Troen was not being brash or bold when he said, “I did what I did that God might exist.”

For God cannot exist in this world unless He exists in human hearts and His healing balm cannot

be spread upon the gaping wounds of mankind unless it is administered by human hands.

Now, all of this is by way of introduction, for this morning I wish to present for your consideration another phase of worship, a great spiritual principle which is so important it cannot be ignored. We have sought to give it place in your consciousness by calling the fourth phase of our new order of worship The Period Of Thanksgiving And Discipleship, for worship does not end with introspection and confession.

To merely experience the calming influence of a moment alone with God is not enough. As our text so beautifully illustrates, following a period of passive silence must come a time of positive service. When the healing hand of Christ has stilled the tempest of our soul and quieted the aching in our heart, then we must rise up and minister to others and to Him.

When Jesus first came in contact with Peter's mother-in-law, she was in great personal need and we read that “Jesus touched her and the fever left her. And she arose *and ministered unto them* (italics mine)” (Matt.8:14-15).

During The Period Of Introspection and Confession, as we celebrate the Sacrament of Silence, the last faint embers of those inner fires which enflame us are be smothered. The storm which has raged within us throughout the week is stilled.

But that is not the end of worship. The text goes on to say, “And she arose and ministered unto them.” There was a calm. And then, there was a period of service.

All of our efforts here on Sunday morning to experience the closeness of Christ through quietness and meditation will be abortive unless it issues in discipleship. Jesus said, “Why call ye Me Lord, Lord, and do not the things I say” (Luke 6:46). Our blessed Lord does not desire so much to be adored or praised or worshiped as to be followed, obeyed and served. He wants to be taken

seriously. For, as George Buttrick says in one succinct sentence, “The ritual of worship without some serious attempt at worthy living is a painted lie.”

There must be those luminous hours when the soul of the Christian is swept into the stratosphere of the Spirit. Every one must have those high moments which Tennyson describes so vividly in *The Holy Grail*.

“And then streamed through my cell
A cold a silver beam,
And down the beam stole the Holy Grail,
Red rose with beadings in it, as if alive,
'Til all the white walls of my cell were
Dyed with rosy colors leaping on the wall;
And then the music faded, and the Grail passed,
And the beam decayed, and from the walls
The rosy, quivering died into the night.”

There is a place in our religion for such holy experiences as that. But if our moments of reverie are not translated immediately into an attempt at worthy living, then the incense of our worship becomes a stench in the nostrils of God. “Why call ye Me Lord, Lord, and do not the things I say.”

We must prove our worship by the test of deeds. That does not veto the importance of adoration. I'm not saying do away with one and cleave to the other. It is not either/or, but both/and. Worship and conduct are inextricably one. Jesus proved that. He spent long hours, sometimes many days, in the adoration and agony of prayer. And the lesson is plain. Without the inner power of prayer, noble living is well nigh impossible. But, in addition, by word and deed, Jesus clearly affirmed the worth of work.

His parables abound with illustrations of the importance He put upon making the most of what you have and using to the utmost the abilities you possess.

His parable of the Talents, or the story of the two sons, or the parable of the Pounds, vividly portray the fact that Jesus did not minimize the importance of man's activity in the building of the Kingdom of God.

James put it this way: “Faith without works is dead” (James 2:17). In other words, there is a very real sense in which You Hold The Answer To Your Prayers. As devout Christians, you join each Sunday in praying,

“Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Again and again you lay before God your petitions on behalf of those who are spiritually unenlisted. Hardly a week passes but what I'm told of people who are praying for the progress of our church, who are holding up the hands of their pastor by lifting up their hearts in prayer.

But how can the Kingdom of God come upon earth unless those who pray for it are willing to pay for it? How shall those who are spiritually unenlisted know of Christ's saving grace except someone tell them? How shall the work of our church progress and our prayers for a growing ministry through it become reality unless we add toil to our tears and work to our worship.

We hold the answer to many of our prayers. For, as someone has said,

“God has no hands but our hands
No feet but our feet
No voice but our voice
Through which to declare
His message of healing to the world.”

Out of adoration and confession must come discipleship. Because we are truly thankful for the

forgiveness which God has given to us, we must give our very selves to Him in return. And when we do that, we often become the agency through which God answers our own prayers.

Let me show you how it has worked right here in Morgan Park. For years, there were those who saw the hindrance to growth because our Sunday School lacked adequate facilities. Many of you prayed that God would make it possible for us to have the equipment which was so badly needed.

But, before those dreams could become a reality, you had to submit your prayers to the test of deeds. You had to work as well as worship, and pay as well as pray.

There is nothing mysterious about the fact that today we have some of the finest facilities for children in the city of Chicago. For, as Edgar Guest explains in his poem,

“God builds no churches, but by His plan
Such building is the task of man.”

Because you took your own prayers seriously and submitted them to the test of deeds, because you gave, today there stands upon this corner a shiny example of the fact that you held the answer to your prayer.

Another illustration is the Program for Progress. Anyone with eyes could see the tremendous needs of our community. The gaping loopholes in the ministry of our church were evident to all. The hindrances to progress in the form of inadequate and antiquated facilities were inescapable. And we prayed for a greater church. We longed for a wider ministry. We petitioned God for a fresh out-pouring of His power which would result in the winning of men and women for Christ.

In truth, we held the answer to our prayers. And because hundreds of you worked and planned, sacrificing long hours of your time and energy, because you gave our prayers were answered. Our church moved forward to the greatest year in its history.

Again, many have been your prayers for the people in our community who are outside of Christ

and His church. Time and time again we have heard people lay before the throne of grace their petitions for other people. Great have been your longings that more and more people might come to share the blessings which have been yours through Christ. And, a few people came.

But, when over 40 men in our church began to take their prayers for other people seriously, and submitted them to the test of deeds, and went calling in homes witnessing in “a winsome way to win someone” to Christ, the following Sunday we saw 29 men and women walk down the aisles of this church confessing their faith in Christ and their desire to cast their lot with us. You held the answer to your prayers and were, in fact, the means God used to bring them to pass.

This principle is equally true of the plane of the individual.

You may have prayed for a sense of forgiveness. You may have longed for a feeling of oneness with God and a freedom from the intolerable burden of your guilt. But that sense of forgiveness did not come. Perhaps one reason is that hidden within your heart, is an unforgiving spirit towards others. Remember our Lord's model prayer taught us to say:

“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”

Or, as some people pray it:

“Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”

But, if you are unwilling to forgive, it is highly possible that deep down inside you are unwilling to be forgiven. If you do not know how to forgive, in all likelihood you will not know how to receive forgiveness. Here again is a case in which you hold the answer to your prayers. If you would be forgiven, then you must learn to forgive.

Perhaps you have prayed for the understanding of others. You have wondered why other people do not seem to like you. You have felt excluded from the intimacy of the social circle. You have thought other people did not understand you. Of course, you had perfectly logical reasons to explain your own personal idiosyncracies. But, perhaps you've been impatient of the quirks of

others. Perhaps you've been quick to criticize the faults of your fellows. As a result, your own lack of understanding for others may have been a hindrance to your prayer. And only you can remove that barrier, for You Hold The Answer To Your Prayers.

Perhaps you have prayed for faith to believe. Again, You Hold The Answer To Your Prayers. The law of life is that things beget their kind. This is true of every area of life. In the realm of the physical, for instance, pear trees produce pears. Grapevines produce grapes. Carrot seeds produce carrots.

It is also true in the realm of the spirit. Love produces love. By using it, it grows. Humility produces humility. By exercising it, it grows. And faith produces faith. If you use the little mustard seed of faith which God has placed within your heart, it will produce more faith. And, if you continue to use it, it will grow bigger and bigger until the spirit of faith literally permeates your entire nature.

But, if you dwell upon your doubts, if you think only of the things which you cannot know, if you emphasize what you do not believe, then your faith will shrink. It's entirely up to you. You Hold The Answer To Your Prayers.

Every blessing which God has promised His children is hinged upon the test of deeds.

“Give and it shall be given unto you.”

“Seek and ye shall find.”

“Knock and it shall be opened unto you.”

Every one of these promises is preceded by a key which we alone can turn.

We must give if we would be given to. We must seek if we would find. We must knock if we would have the door of truth opened to us.

One reason most agnostics cannot find God is for the same reason a thief cannot find a policeman.

If we would know God, we must seek Him. And the man who casually prays, “Oh, God, if there is a God, save my soul if I have a soul,” and then does absolutely nothing to give God a chance to speak to his heart will never find God. He holds the answer to his prayer, but refuses to use it.

On the other hand, if a man soberly prays, “Oh, God, if there is a God, I want to know you, and if Jesus is your Son, I want to follow Him,” and then does everything within his power to give God a chance to reveal Himself through quiet meditation, through regular worship, through the reading of the scripture, through an honest, thorough self-analysis and soul-searching which results in a forsaking of his sin, that man will find God and will follow Christ. For the key to God's promise is, “If with all your heart you truly seek Me, you shall surely find Me.”

One of my favorite authors, Fulton Sheen, points out that true prayer is not passive. It is active collaboration with God and it implies an act of the will, a desire to grow and a willingness to make whatever sacrifice is required so our prayer might be answered. He points out that to pray in any other way is simply to make our prayers a list of things we would like God to give us but for which we are willing to do nothing.

A woman may enter the grocery store with a long list of items she desires, but if she is unwilling to pay the prescribed price, those items will never be hers. She holds the answer to the fulfillment of her desires even as you hold the answer to your prayers.

Prayer does not change God. When we pray, we do not force God to do things He otherwise would be unwilling to do. Prayer changes things. The things in our lives which are wrong. And when these hindrances to spiritual power and growth are removed, we make it possible for God to bestow upon us the multiplicity of good things which He has longed to give us all the time.

Bishop Sheen points out there are those who say, “Praying does no good.” And, there's an element of truth in the statement. For when it's made by those who are unwilling to let God

answer their prayers through the agency of themselves, then the statement, “It does no good to pray” is true—but only for them! Their prayers are ineffective, not because God refuses to hear them, but because they refuse to fulfil the first condition of prayer which is a willingness to change the things in their lives which are out of line with God's laws.

Prayer is dynamic, but only when you are willing to cooperate with God. If a man decides to pray for release from the savage slavery of alcohol, he must be prepared to work with God unreservedly for complete freedom from that addiction.

In a very real measure, that man holds the answer to his prayers. If he is unwilling to rid himself of the resentments, fears and guilts which have driven him to drink, then even God can not help him. God's greatness to bless is linked to our willingness to be blessed! God will not do for us what we can do for ourselves. He will not make a harvest grow without our planting the seed.

This is, as Bishop Sheen points out, a conditional universe in which we live. To bring about a desired effect, we must proceed along the road of its cause. God will not make the sun to shine through a dirty window, but it will shine through a window if it is clean. God will not give us knowledge if we are unwilling to study. But if we study, we will know. And, in the spiritual realm, we have this promise of our Lord:

“Ask and it shall be given unto you, seek and you shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you”
(Matt. 7:7).

Millions of blessings hang from heaven on golden cords and in prayer, you possess the sword which can cut them down. Whether or not you will wield that sword effectively depends on you. For You Hold The Answer To Your Prayers. Remember that when you pray.

When you ask God for His forgiveness, remember that to be forgiven you must also learn how to

forgive.

When you plead with the souls of the lost, remember God may be waiting for you to go to your neighbor with a witness of what Christ means to you. You may be the channel through which His grace is to flow into your neighbor's life.

When you pray for our missionaries who struggle under unbelievable handicaps to proclaim the message of Christ to hungry hearts in other lands, remember that by paying for those who do the things you do not do, you are actually making possible the happy fulfillment of your praying.

As you look about this corner of God's vineyard which we call Morgan Park,
as you see the gaping loopholes in some of our church program,
as you wrestle with the problems we face in communicating with our neighborhood and
as you lift your heart to God on our behalf, remember that by giving your time, your talent, your training, and your tithe to the work of this church, you are helping to answer your own prayer.

One day D. L. Moody, the great evangelist who later became an important educator here in the city of Chicago, called a group of laymen together for a conference. He presented the needs of the Moody Bible Institute for more and better facilities. Their buildings were overcrowded and totally inadequate. Something had to be done. After telling them of the need, he called them to prayer. They asked for guidance. Many pleaded with God to show them what to do and how to do it. They sought His direction in the manner in which they should promote the work and organize to collect funds.

When they finished praying, Mr. Moody asked what they felt God would have them do to make their prayers come true. He gave them a moment to think it over and when the collection plate was passed, the few men present had oversubscribed the entire cost of the new building. They held the answer to their prayer.

In a large sense, so do you. From Sunday to Sunday as you celebrate the sacrament of silence,

as you cross the threshold of the eternal and lay before God your petitions, remember that immediately following is The Period Of Thanksgiving and Discipleship when you may make your worship real by submitting it to the test of deeds. You Hold The Answer To Your Prayers.

For after a period of calm, must come a time of service.

“He touched her and the fever left and she arose and ministered unto them.”