

THE PRAYER LIFE OF A LAYMAN

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Matt 7:7-11

Prayer is by all odds the most misunderstood, misused, and misinterpreted force in the world.

Dr. Leslie Weatherhead, minister of the Great City Temple in London, England, recalls how he, as a boy of 15, experienced a grave disappointment in prayer. He wanted very much to pass a certain school examination. He remembered the Bible said whatever we ask in Jesus' name shall be done, and thinking that meant every little thing one might desire, he fervently prayed for success in his examination. When the results were announced, he found he had failed. His faith in prayer was sadly shattered.

A few years back, there was another incident which cast grave doubts in the minds of many about the value of prayer. Perhaps you remember the case of little Cathy Fiscus, out in California. She had been playing in an open field when she fell into a narrow well which had been left uncovered.

Frantically, a crew of workmen dug away at the earth in an effort to free her. The story was front page news. Millions of people prayed for her safety. When, at last, the rescuers reached her, she was dead. Indeed, she had already been dead for several hours, hours during which literally millions of prayers were being offered on her behalf.

Now, all this has its effect. In fact, none of us can escape the impact of it. We cannot help but ask the question, "Why?" The only difference between the person who is wise in the ways of prayer and the person who is not, is the kind of "Why?" he or she asks. The skeptic's question "Why?" is one that raises serious questions about the faithfulness of God, and the dependability of prayer itself. The skeptic's attitude is one of, "See, I told you it wouldn't work. Why pray?"

The Christians "Why?" is of a totally different nature. It is one that asks, "Why will people continue to misunderstand, misuse and misinterpret the meaning of prayer? How long will they continue to

think of God as some sort of ‘Cosmic Bellhop,’ whom they can badger into doing what seems right to them? When will they learn that real prayer is cooperating with God rather than some sort of magic string-pulling which makes God cooperate with them?”

An even greater tragedy is the fact that vast oceans of prayer which are offered up prove to be ineffective. Why is that? There are several reasons.

For one, many people look upon prayer as a religious duty rather than a privilege and delight. To them it is always a last resort, used only after every other possible avenue of help has been explored.

Still others look upon prayer as a kind of spiritual first aid. They view it as something applied in times of real emergency. And even then, instead of joining Samuel in praying

“Speak Lord, thy servant listens” (I Sam 3:10G),
they blunder into the presence of Almighty God and blurt out,
“Listen Lord, Thy servant speaks!”

Perhaps the strangest of all attitudes toward prayer which people have is a feeling of fear that possesses many folk when they think of praying. In some mysterious way, they tighten up inside whenever someone suggests it might be a good idea to pray about the particular issue before them. It almost seems as if they look upon prayer as a sign of weakness when, all along, it is a sign of strength.

In one of his books, E. Stanley Jones points out,

“The strongest character that ever walked our planet prayed. His first public act was to stand on the banks of the Jordan river and pray. His last public act was a prayer, ‘Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.’ Between that first and last act, his whole life was saturated with prayer.”

The strongest character who ever lived, the man who changed the whole course of history, was not ashamed to pray. No! Prayer is not only strength for the weak, it is fortification for the strong.

Why pray? I think that central question can best be answered by taking a circular route, by asking and answering, at least in part, two other fundamental questions: “What true prayer is not” and then “What true prayer is.”

What True Prayer Is Not

Dr. John Sutherland Bonnell has a very poignant paragraph on the question of what prayer is not.

He says:

“First off, prayer is not a blank check on which God’s signature appears, guaranteeing us anything upon which we may set our hearts. Infinite wisdom does not put itself at the mercy of the whims and foibles of finite men and women.

“Second, prayer is not a rabbit’s foot or other charm used to preserve us from misfortune. During the last war, some such talisman was carried by many soldiers to bring them good luck. This was not an expression of faith. It was a reversion to primitive superstition.”

“Third,” Bonnell says, “prayer is not a parachute project to be reserved for us to use in some extreme emergency.”

Or as I like to put it, prayer is not some kind of escape hatch we can expect to bail us out when we find ourselves in a predicament that is over our heads.

“Fourth,” to continue Bonnell’s list, “prayer is not a child’s letter to Santa Claus. It is not just an appeal devoted to securing things. This type of prayer is often given a central place in our thinking. While the saints and seers and mystics, who were experts in prayer, regarded petition for material things as legitimate, they unfailingly relegated it a secondary place.

“Fifth, true prayer is not an attempt to change God’s mind, or to bring Him around to our way of thinking. It is not a bludgeon to be used to overcome the divine reluctance. It is not a campaign to persuade God to do something He otherwise would have left undone.”

Prayer is not a device for getting our wills done on earth through heaven.
It is a desire that God’s will may be done on earth through us!

Finally, Bonnell says,

“Prayer is not an escape from duty. It is not some kind of magic which makes up for our slackness or failure to do our job.”

God will never do for us what we can do for ourselves. As a matter of fact, the very opposite is true. It is always our extremity that is God’s opportunity.

Now, these six fallacious ways of looking at prayer are by no means exhaustive, but their removal will help clear the way for a constructive, true and Christian understanding of what prayer really

is.

What True Prayer Is

I have discovered a little formula which has helped me very much in understanding the nature of true prayer. It is the little word: ACTS. The four letters stand for four words which outline the content of true prayer.

Adoration.

Confession.

Thanksgiving.

Supplication.

Adoration

The first characteristic of prayer is adoration. If you will take the time to analyze the model prayer which Jesus gave us, you will notice it begins with a note of worship:

“Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.”

Likewise, it closes with a word of praise:

“For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.”

Worship, then, is part and parcel of prayer. Suppose a husband never said anything to his wife except when he asked her or thanked her for something. What part of their conversation would be missing? Why, the part she enjoys the most. Those little words of quiet adoration,

“Gee, you look pretty in your new dress” or

“I’m sure proud of you when we’re with other people” or

“I’m so glad God gave me you” or, just the simple

“Honey, I love you.”

But what of our conversation with God? Of course we will be bringing before Him our petitions and our words of thanksgiving for the blessings He has wrought. But if that is all there is to our prayer life, we are omitting the very first element of all: adoration. And who shall say this is not the part God values most?

More than that, who shall say this is not the part we need most ourselves? It is in those moments of deep worship that our minds become keenly alert and sensitive to the difference between right and wrong. We become aware of our imperfections. The wrongs in our lives stand out in bold relief. This enables us to better shape our lives in keeping with His will.

Worship, then, is the very growing edge in the transformation of an individual. It is in those holy moments that “new spiritual tissue is formed as the new Adam gradually replaces the old Adam.”

As someone has said so beautifully,

“Worship is a person in the process of passing from mortality to immortality.”

The first character of prayer then is praise and adoration.

Confession

The second is a natural consequence of the first and it is confession. As I have said, we cannot be long in the presence of God without a growing sense of our imperfection. The very glory and majesty of God tend to drive us beyond the pinnacle of the Mount of Pretense which we so often rest upon, and it drives us into the Valley of Confession. Here again is a characteristic of prayer which is greatly misunderstood.

To appreciate the place and importance of confession, we need to recognize confession implies humility, a virtue which, in God’s sight, is of tremendous value. D. L. Moody tells of a farmer who took his boy out into their wheat field to see if it was ready for harvest. The boy pointed to a bunch of wheat stalks standing straight and tall.

“These must be the best ones,” he said to his father, “see how straight they hold up their heads. Those other can’t be of much value for their heads hang down.”

The farmer plucked the stalk of each kind and said,

“You’re wrong, my son. This stalk which stood so straight is lightheaded and almost good for nothing. While this other, which hangs its head so modestly, is full of the most beautiful grain.”

Is this not true in life? How often, if we but take the time to give it some thought, we discover the biggest boaster is one who feels most inadequate inside. The biggest bully is the one who has the greatest sense of his insecurity. And likewise, the one who commands our highest admiration is the one who is least aware that there is anything about them worth admiring.

So often our words of confession are vague and general. We pray, Oh God, if I have sinned this day,” or “Dear Lord, show me where I have done wrong,” as if we didn’t know, as if we weren’t fully aware of when, where and to what extent we have sinned.

There is nothing very mystical about this business of confession. In fact, it is quite logical. There is a little three-point outline that has helped me in this matter. Perhaps it will be of help to you. Sins committed in private should be confessed privately. Sins committed in public should be confessed publicly. Sins committed against God should be confessed to God directly.

Let’s look at them in reverse order. Sins committed against God should be confessed to God directly. Actually, this means we are to confess all sins to God because, as we learned in our study of Leviticus a few weeks ago, all sin, is wrong done to God. If we sin against our brother or sister, in the last analysis we are sinning against God, for each of them, be they male or female, was made by God and belongs to God and bears on their image the stamp of God.

When, as individuals, we sin against ourselves we are, in the last analysis, sinning against God, for we too were created in His image. Our body is also the temple of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the first step in the prayer of confession is to recognize that all sin, both public and private, should be

confessed to God directly and, I might add, privately.

Second, sin committed against a particular person should be confessed to that person. How often we have short-circuited our prayer life because of some feeling of ill will we're holding against a brother or sister. That doesn't mean we must be perfect in order to pray effectively. But what it does mean is that a sense of unconfessed sin is a hindrance to real prayer and, if we have wronged our brother or sister, we must go to that person directly with our confession of that wrong.

Finally, sin committed in public should be confessed publicly. If the wrong we have done has had wide-spread ramifications and its effects have resulted in harm to other people, we have a holy obligation to confess that wrong in public in order that our desire for forgiveness and our willingness to make restitution might be known by those whom we have wronged.

This, then, in the spirit of Christian confession.

Sin committed in private is to be confessed privately.

Sin committed in public is to be confessed in public.

Sin committed against God is to be confessed to God in private.

Thanksgiving

The third ingredient in prayer is thanksgiving. This seems axiomatic. And yet, how often we omit any word of thanksgiving in our conversation with God.

God may not need to receive our thanksgiving, but we need to give it. A few years back I thanked a fine layman for serving as a personal worker in one of our crusades. He said, in a sense of real Christian humility,

"I wish you wouldn't thank me, it was my privilege. I don't need to be thanked."

Of course, he was right. We can only wish for many more like him who would serve with that same spirit. But, in that gracious humility, he forgot one thing. While he did not need to receive

my thanks, I needed to give it! The first sign of a degenerating relationship is when we begin to take one another for granted. And the spirit of thanksgiving between two people is just as important as it is between us and our God.

Some have asked the difference between thanksgiving and adoration or praise. Here's a simple formula which has helped me:

We thank God for what He does, for the numerous blessings He bestows upon us.

We adore and praise God for who He is, our "maker, defender, redeemer and friend."

Supplication

The final phase of prayer is characterized by the word Supplication.

Some of you will remember our talking about supplication in one of the Hour Of Power sessions last fall. We discovered that supplication is not merely the presenting of our petitions to God. This is our modern idea of the word. But, it is grossly inadequate. In its original sense, the word had nothing whatsoever to do with the idea of begging, pleading or enticing. Actually, it meant to fold or bend, to become supple. Malleable. And that is the sense in which it must be used in prayer. It is the act of folding or bending our will to God's.

It is not a matter of saying to God, "Give me," but rather, "Make me." The story of the prodigal son is a case in point. He said to his father, "Give me." His petition was granted. But it lead to a life of prodigality which landed him among swine, coveting their husks, and miserable. When he changed his prayer and ceased asking for things and began to confess his unworthiness, when he prayed, "Father, make me," he was richly blessed. To be sure, it was a long road which the prodigal traveled from "Give me" to "Make me," but only then did he receive his Father's best.

If in some wonderful way I was suddenly granted one wish, if I could have the answer to one great heart's desire, I could only wish with all of my heart that each of you whom God has entrusted me for light and guidance might learn the secret of supplication. If I had a thousand

Aladdin lamps, that would be my wish. I would wish that you might know the delight of living when your will is bent or folded to the will of God, and you walk in union with the One whose only concern is your joy and welfare.

And so you see, there is an answer to the question, "Why pray?"

If prayer is an act of adoration and through worship we praise God for who He is, and if in the process we experience a holy intimacy with God which reveals our imperfections and makes it easier for us to fashion our lives according to His will, then we need to pray.

If prayer is an act of confession, a time when we can conquer the mountain of pretense and descend into the valley of remorse, and by confessing our sins remove the barriers to victorious living, then we need to pray.

If prayer is thanksgiving, an expression of our gratitude to God for He does for us day in and day out, and if we need to give thanks even though God may not need to receive it, then we need to pray. And --

If prayer is supplication, the bending of our will to His, and if it be true that no greater prayer has ever been prayed than that which was expressed in the simple words: "Thy will be done," then we, indeed, need to pray.

I think this bit of prose bundles up all I have been saying in a little package you can take away with you this morning:

"He asked for strength that he might achieve,
He was made weak that he might obey.
He asked for health that he might to greater things,
He was given sickness that he might do better things.

He asked for riches that he might be happy,
He was given poverty that he might be wise.
He asked for power that he might have the praise of men,
He was given weakness that he might feel the need of God.
He asked for all things that he might enjoy life,
He was given life that he might enjoy all things.

And so, while he received nothing that he asked for,
Yet he received everything he hoped for.
His prayer was answered.
He is, of all men, most blessed.”

Jesus said:

“Ask, and it shall be given you. Seek, and you shall find. Knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For everyone that asks receives, he that seeks finds, and to him that knocks it shall be opened” (Matt.7:7).

Wow!