

9. More than Prayer
With Christ in the School of Prayer
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Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Introduction to the Morning Lesson

This is the last of nine sermons in our series, “With Christ in the School of Prayer.” So we conclude today the sermons about prayer but I hope very much that we don’t conclude our praying. In fact, I hope these sermons will motivate us to keep praying more and more.

I must say what a profound effect these sermons have had on me whether or not they have helped you. In preparing them I not only had time to read and study about prayer but I made more time to actually pray. Two things have become even clearer to me than before. First, prayer is a learned discipline. In that sense, it’s a lot like running. The Nike ad is trite but also true: “Just Do It.” Thinking about running or reading about running does very little good. You have to get out and run. So too with prayer. Just do it. Just pray.

Second, I’ve learned and relearned that prayer should not be seen as something religious because we’re all busy and we tend to confine our religion to certain places and occasions. Prayer is or should be closer to eating and breathing than to religion. It’s what we need in order to live in the fullness of the presence of God.

Our text today is Matthew 6.16-18, the three verses in the Sermon on the Mount that immediately follow Jesus’ teaching of the Lord’s Prayer. Here our Lord teaches about a discipline that follows and connects to the discipline of prayer.

Matthew 6.16-18 (NRSV)

“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Introduction

Even though the text is about fasting, I’m not going to say much specifically about it. Fasting is an important discipline that God’s people have often found helpful to focus their attention more fully on the things of the Spirit, but it is not very commonly practiced by folks like us. Even though our word *breakfast* is obviously an abbreviated form of “breaking the fast,” it hardly functions like that any more. For breakfast all too often follows an overly large supper which gives way to a late night, second-helping of dessert, and then a 2:00am ingestion of cookies and milk to settle our heartburn from the big supper so we can get back to sleep. Then a few hours later we wake up and “break the fast.” Yeah, right.

But I’m not going to talk about fasting. When Jesus spoke about it he made the point to not show off our spiritual disciplines. Don’t paint your face so you look even hungrier than you are. Don’t put your spiritual devotion on display or call attention to it because our

devotion is done for God. God sees it and will reward it. We don't have to parade or flaunt our spiritual discipline before others.

But don't ignore it either. That's the point I do want to make today. There does need to be spiritual discipline in our lives. Our lives with God begin with amazing grace: "I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see." Our lives with God end with amazing grace: "When we've been there ten thousand years ... We've no less days to sing God's praise." And in between the beginning and the end there is amazing grace: "'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home." Amazing grace at the beginning, all through the middle, and at the end.

But what is grace supposed to call forth in us? Discipleship. Discipline. They're the same thing. It isn't earning our way to heaven; grace gets us to heaven. But when we are filled with God's grace, we learn godly discipline. That's what I want to talk about today: "More than Prayer" means the discipleship or discipline that surround and connect to the grace-filled life of prayer.

Spiritual power is presence, not magic

When we think of discipline or devotion, we tend to think of ability. We get better at the things to which we are devoted. "Practice makes perfect," we say. The more you run, the stronger your running. The more you practice the piano, the better you will play the piano. As I said a moment ago, even prayer is a learned discipline. We have to do it and the more we do it the better we will be.

This is the positive side of discipline. Whatever it is, when we work at something we get better at it and more powerful with it. But frequently there is also an unintended and negative consequence, especially with regard to spiritual disciplines. When we get better at them we can begin to think that our increased power comes from ourselves. But with spiritual disciplines in general and prayer in particular, we must always remember that the power comes from God, not us.

This is the point of an essay C. S. Lewis wrote, talking about prayers not being answered. "Prayers are not always ... 'granted.' This is not because prayer is a weaker kind of causality, but because it is a stronger kind. When it 'works' at all it works unlimited by space and time. That is why God has retained a discretionary power of granting or refusing it. Except on that condition prayer would destroy us. It is not unreasonable for a headmaster to say, 'Such and such things you may do according to the fixed rules of this school. But such and such other things are too dangerous to be left to general rules. If you want to do them you must come and make a request and talk over the whole matter with me in my study. And then — we'll see.'"¹

The more we pray, the better we'll pray but the power of prayer and other disciplines remains in God. This is hard for us because we overestimate our powers and maintain an unshakeable belief in our ability to set goals and attain them as quickly as possible. Kathleen Norris says she once received a mailing from a group of New Age witches who stated, in a

¹ C. S. Lewis, "Work and Prayer," *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1970) 107.

kind of creed, their belief that “I can create my own reality and that sending out a positive expectation will bring a positive result.” Norris writes, “I suspect that only America could have produced Pollyanna witches, part and parcel of our pragmatism, our addiction to self-help and ‘how-to.’ No wonder we have difficulty with prayer, for which the best ‘how-to’ I know is from Psalm 46: ‘be still and know that I am God.’”² Spiritual power is always God’s power, not our power.

This is why prayer and the power of prayer are different than magic. Magic is the power to make things happen and humans have always been fascinated with magic or the appearance of magic. I suspect our fascination with magic is one of the attractions of the Harry Potter series, as expressed now in five books by J. K. Rowling and in three movies. The sixth book is due out sometime in 2005. Harry is a young teenager who can do magic, *real* magic. He has power to make things happen. And kids particularly, who often lack power, like “one of their own” having power to make things happen, especially against mean adults.

I mention this because I think we may, often unconsciously, think of prayer and other spiritual disciplines in the same way. We want them to be magic to be able to do things, to give us power. But that is not what spiritual disciplines including prayer are all about.

Think back to one of the things that happened when Jesus was gathered with his disciples the night before he was crucified. According to Luke, after the meal which became the Lord’s Supper, the disciples argued about which of them was greatest. (Luke 22.14-27) Can you imagine that? Yet Jesus didn’t just “fix” them, not even Peter whom he knew was going to deny him. Jesus could have fixed them, even Peter. But it would not have advanced them towards being who they needed to be. So showing great confidence in God, Jesus said to Peter, “I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” (Luke 22.32)

Dallas Willard says, “How earnestly Jesus longed for Peter to come out right in his time of testing! But he left him free to succeed or fail before God and man — and, as it turned out, before all of subsequent human history. He used no condemnation, no shame, no ‘pearls of wisdom’ on him. And he didn’t use supernatural power to rewire his soul or his brain.”³ It was just: “I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail.”

The point of prayer and all the disciplines connected to it is not to magically fix us. Or to fix others. We practice spiritual discipline so the presence of God in our lives can shape us into who we are supposed to be, so we can also strengthen our sisters and brothers.

Kathleen Norris describes a Benedictine friend, a gentle, thoughtful man who has been in constant physical pain for years and is now confined to a wheelchair. He says of prayer, “Often, all I can do is to ask God, ‘Lord, what is it you want of me?’ From him I have learned that prayer is not asking for what you think you want but asking to be changed in

² Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998) 61.

³ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1998) 240-241.

ways you can't imagine. To be made more grateful, more able to see the good in what you have been given instead of always grieving for what might have been. People who are in the habit of praying ... know that when a prayer is answered, it is never in a way that you expect."⁴ That is true of all the spiritual disciplines. They change us in ways we do not expect.

Conclusion

When I began this prayer series, I told of a woman who wanted to learn about prayer. She went to the bookstore and bought everything they had — fourteen books. But before long she gave up. "It was too complicated," she told a friend. "Now I'm learning Yoga." I also mentioned that I counted 76 books in my own library related to prayer but that books are not where we start with prayer or any of the disciplines. We start by doing them.

Nonetheless, one of my delights throughout these weeks has been reading in many of those 76 books. One of them is entitled *If I Could Pray Again* by David A. Redding. In the early 1960s *Life* magazine proclaimed him "one of the most eloquent younger voices in the U.S. pulpit today." I don't know if that was true and I don't know if *Life* was a reliable guide for such things. But Redding's book is filled with poem prayers or prayer poems, depending on how one reads them, and some of them touched me in powerful ways. Here's one of my favorites.

O God,
 Prevent me from prayer
 Unless I intend to take it seriously,
 And to expect results;
 Help me to handle prayer
 As I would high explosives,
 Not as child's play.
 Someone's waiting, dying for me
 To say a prayer.
 Help me to pray to win — to pound
 And pull at Your heartstrings
 Until the door of heaven comes off
 And the power's pouring down
 With enough miracles
 To make the bare hard ground
 Green with new-found life again.⁵

The power of which Redding wrote is not the power of magic. It is the power of the presence of God. When we open ourselves to it, it will make even the bare, hard ground of our hearts green with new-found life again. I pray that may be so for you increasingly in all the days ahead. And also for me.

⁴ Norris, 60-61.

⁵ David A. Redding, *If I Could Pray Again* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1965) 110.