

Returning to Biblical Prayer

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Introduction.

- A. Now that we're entering the tail end of the year, I decided to put aside the sermon series that have marked every month for the past five months and begin preaching stand-alone sermons again, at least for the time being. Believe it or not, when I sat down at my desk back in mid-August to figure out what this sermon needed to be, it took me a little while to come up with an idea because I've become so used to just doing the next item in the series. Sunday morning sermons, though also stand-alones, are not particularly hard to come up with. I just preach on what people ask to hear or obviously need to hear before they lose their souls.
- B. It's a bit more challenging, though, to come up with Sunday evening sermons. In the first place, as far as I know, just about all the folks who habitually come on Sunday night are not in imminent danger of being lost. That means that their spiritual problems, though still present, of course, are subtler, and that very subtlety makes it more difficult to address them from the pulpit.
- C. In any case, as I was considering the problem and praying about it, it occurred to me that prayer itself was precisely what I needed to preach on, because realizing God's will about prayer is something that just about every Christian struggles with. Typically, we pray in three main times: during church services, before meals, and when we think we need something. Now, there's nothing wrong with prayer during any of those three times, but there is something horribly wrong with prayer ONLY during those three times. Just off the top of my head, I would guess that if those three areas define our prayer lives, we're only paying attention to about 10 percent of what God tells us about prayer. Now, that's not good, exactly, but it does give all of us an amazing opportunity for growth. Let's take advantage of this by returning this evening to Biblical prayer.

I. A New Attitude Toward Prayer.

- A. In returning our prayer lives to what God wants them to be, the first thing that we have to do is develop a new attitude toward prayer itself. We need to understand what the Bible says prayer should be used for, not just what we think it should be used for. In today's religious world, there is a movement among those who claim to be Christians called the gospel of health and wealth. The basic idea is that if we have enough faith, God will make us materially rich, and there are preachers out there who preach on this literally every Sunday. We have a lot of problems doctrinally with what these preachers say, but perhaps the biggest objection we would want to make is that they take God's spiritual promises to us and turn them into material promises instead.
- B. Too often, though, we suffer from essentially the same problem in our prayers. When we ask God for things, we focus on the material, not on the spiritual. Once again, material needs are needs we should pray about, but they should not be what our prayers concentrate on. Compare Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:14-16. He's not concerned with the outer man; he's concerned with the inner man. So too should we be. The most important thing in our lives, friends, is not our job or our family or even our health. It is our growth in Christ, and if we are not praying most of all about that, it shows that our priorities are terribly out of balance.
- C. Just as we should pray for spiritual things, we should also learn to thank God for all that He does for us, both spiritually and even physically. For example, consider the instruction of the Hebrews writer in Hebrews 13:15. For some reason, when we read this text, we tend to naturally assume it is discussing song worship, but these words apply with equal force to prayer. Indeed, in some ways, prayer is better suited to this continual sacrifice than hymns. When we're in a meeting at work, for instance, it's probably not quite the thing to burst into a song of praise to God, but silent, heartfelt prayers of thanks are never inappropriate.
- D. This pattern of thanksgiving is spiritually important because it reinforces our dependence on God in a way that perhaps no other form of prayer does. It's one thing to ask God for something that we need; it's another thing completely to thank Him for something that we know He did for us and that we couldn't have gotten along without. We daily need the help and the blessings of God, friends, and thanksgiving makes us admit it.
- E. This cycle of prayer and thanksgiving also leads us to see the importance of prayer in another area, which is expressing and reinforcing our faith. Football season is finally here, and that means that I'm going to be spending the next three months following the ups and downs of the Missouri Tigers. I hope that the Tigers will win their division this year; however, I do not have faith that they will. I have been disappointed so many times by that football team that I refuse to get emotionally invested in them again, because if I do, they will crush me again, and I will wander around for a week thereafter muttering to myself and kicking things.
- F. Our attitude toward God needs to be completely the opposite of that. We can safely rely on Him because He will come through in the clutch, and when we stick our necks out and start praying to Him in faith is when we really start growing as Christians. Look what James says about the importance of faith in prayer in James 1:5-6. We come to God in prayer to express our faith that He will help. Then, when He does, His reply inspires more faith, so that we will return the next time and pray even more boldly. Prayer keeps our faith growing.

- G. Finally, though, we need to change our attitude toward prayer by looking at prayer as a way to change our perspective. Left to ourselves, we tend to believe that we are the hub of the world, that everything revolves around us, and therefore that it is our abilities that have the greatest impact on the course of our lives. Not only is this view quite self-centered, it is also quite frightening. If my life depends on me and what I do, what about all the areas where I don't know what to do or aren't strong enough to face my problems?
- H. Through prayer, we can shift our perspective from a physical focus on ourselves to a spiritual focus on God. Paul describes this shift in Philippians 4:6-7. Sure, we might be confused, but God knows exactly what to do. Sure, we might be inadequate, but God is omnipotent. When we use prayer to explore these things for ourselves, we can pass from the anxiety that dominates the world into the peace that calms the Christian.

II. A New Attitude Toward God.

- A. Just as important to developing a new attitude toward prayer by seeing those things, though, is developing a new attitude toward God. Too often, in our prayer lives, we treat God like the Bureaucrat on high. We word these very formal, lifeless petitions to Him that show no evidence of an actual relationship. Worse still are the times when we treat God like an ATM. We just spit out our requests as quickly as we can, go on to something more interesting as quickly as we can, and assume that God is going to take care of it for us.
- B. We see a completely different view of God presented in 1 John 3:1. Friends, there are few titles of God that we use more and think about less than "Father." It's like when we say "Father in heaven," in our minds, the "in heaven" part cancels out the "Father" part. The reality is far warmer than that. God has adopted us into His family, not because He had to, but because He wanted to. He asks us to call Him "Father" because He wants us to see Him in the same loving, caring, protective role that the best earthly fathers fill, only more so.
- C. Most of all, though, God asks us to call Him "Father" as a way to express His yearning for the relationship that He wants us to have with Him. It's always so cute to me to watch the little kids come racing up from the basement after Sunday morning Bible classes, clutching their little craft projects that they're so eager to show off. This has happened every week since I've been here, and likely every week everywhere I've been, yet in all that time, not one little kid has ever shown me his or her project. Why? Because I'm not their parent. If we truly believe that God is our Father, brethren, why don't we constantly run to Him like that? Why don't the events of our lives fill us with the consuming desire to share them with God, not because we want something, not even because we're thankful for something, but just because? We all need to work on that.
- D. One part of grasping what it means to have God as our Father is by understanding the depth of His concern for us, more concern than we ourselves are good at showing sometimes. Like many men, I tend to be a problem-solver. When Lauren tells me about something that's bothering her, I look for a solution. If it's obviously not something I can fix, my natural response tends to be "OK; why are you telling me this?" Clearly, I need an upgrade in the sympathy department. Thankfully, brethren, God is a lot better at compassion than I am. Look at what Peter tells us to do in 1 Peter 5:6-7. On a daily basis, we need to come trustingly and humbly to God with our problems. Not only do God's problem-solving abilities far exceed our own, but even if it's a problem that isn't going to get solved any time soon—the death of a loved one, for instance—God will grieve with us and will supply us with the strength and the healing we need to keep going.
- E. Similarly, we need to understand the element of friendship that needs to be present in our relationship with God. Look at what Moses writes about his own contact with the Almighty in Exodus 33:11. Now, this is quite a rare accolade in Scripture. Other than Moses, the only other man called "the friend of God" in Scripture was Abraham. Can we rightfully describe ourselves as friends of God? If not, why not? God has already done the heavy lifting for us. He has bridged the unimaginable gap that separates man from God by the sacrifice of His own Son. Perhaps the real problem is that we aren't as interested in God as He is in us. Perhaps the real problem is that we are too busy with the minutiae that clutter our lives to spend lots and lots of time getting to know God, really know Him, through His word and through prayer. Just like we find it awkward to make conversation with strangers on earth, so we find it awkward to talk to God because we haven't made friends with Him first. Let's remedy that, brethren. Let's do what we need to do to build our friendship with God.
- F. If we do all these things, we will find ourselves fulfilling the commandment of 1 Thessalonians 5:17. This is one of the shortest verses in the Bible, but what a pattern of life it describes! It calls to mind a discussion I had with my friend Erin when I was in college. I was trying to persuade her to come to services with me, and I was telling her about how the Lord's church tries to do everything that the Bible says. Erin knew a little bit about the Bible, and so she shot back with, "The Bible says to pray without ceasing. You don't do that, do you?" I then tripped all over myself trying to explain that "without ceasing" didn't really mean "without ceasing," but looking back on it today, I think Erin was more right than she knew. Certainly, literally every second of our day cannot be spent in prayer. I think we'd need multiple personalities to do that! However, prayer needs to be a constant in our lives, a steady pulse of communication with God that we share in naturally because that's who God is to us. Only if we do that can we get as much out of prayer as we should.

Conclusion. If you're not a Christian and you want to share in the benefits of prayer, become one today.