

When You Pray

1 Chronicles 17:20 Psalm 25:4-6 John 17:20-25

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As we journey through the Season of Lent we will focus on prayer, penitence, and almsgiving. Today we will focus on prayer. The sermon this morning includes some thoughts, some scriptural teachings, and hopefully some things that will stimulate your thinking during the following week. It is NOT everything you always wanted to know about prayer. That would take us a lifetime.

As we gather in worship every Lord's Day, we begin with an Invocation, an entreaty to our Lord to be present in our service of worship, to move among us and to speak to us as God desires. Later in the service, we include a Pastoral Prayer, at which time the Pastor lifts up before the Lord, as much as possible, the needs and concerns of those in the congregation, the concerns about our country, and the concerns about our world. At the close of the worship service the Pastor says a Benediction, a Good Saying, a blessing, over the people as they prepare to leave.

Today I would like for us to focus on our personal prayer life. When we talk about prayer there are always more questions than answers.

- How should we pray?
- Is there a body position that we should assume?
 - Should we kneel?
 - Should we bow our heads?
 - Should we close our eyes?
 - Should we raise our hands to heaven?
 - Should we dance or sway our bodies?
- Should we pray in rituals?
- Should our prayers be extemporaneous or prepared?

What should we include in our prayers? Maybe our prayers should include:

- Our praises and acknowledgment of the goodness and power of God
- Our acts of contrition -- asking for forgiveness
- Our thanksgivings
- Our petitions, our wishes
- Maybe contemplation upon the Holy Scriptures
- Blessings
- Our honest feelings -- God knows them whether we voice them or not

Probably no one prays more honestly than children.

Listen to some examples:

Dear God, I bet it's very hard for You to love all the world. There are only four people in my family, and I can never do it.

Dear God, thank You for the baby brother, but what I asked for was a puppy. You can look it up.

Dear God, please put another holiday between Christmas and Easter. There's nothing good there now.

Dear God, Cain and Able wouldn't kill each other if they each had their own rooms. That works with me and my brother.

Dear God, is the Pastor a friend of yours or do You just know her through the business?

All of us have probably heard people pray prayers that so moved us, and we thought, "I could never pray like that." The daily prayer of Mother Teresa of Calcutta is one of those prayers. She was a person who ministered to the sick and dying castaways of Calcutta. As you hear the words of her prayer, remember that she was rescuing from the streets of Calcutta those who were dirty, smelly, disease ridden, and dying. Each day she prayed:

Dear Jesus, help me to spread Thy fragrance everywhere I go. Flood my soul with Thy spirit and love. Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly that all my life may only be a radiance of Thine. Shine through me and be so in me that every soul I come in contact with may feel Thy presence in my soul. Let them look up and see no longer me but only Jesus. Stay with me and then I shall begin to shine as You shine, so to shine as to be a light to others. Amen."

We can get discouraged because we believe that our prayers don't measure up to that kind of praying. But there is encouragement to be found in the Scriptures. When we examine prayer as it is found in the Bible, it is most often individual, spontaneous, often an unorganized form of petitioning, and sometimes bargaining. In other words, simply conversations between the person and God.

When we read the prayers in the Old Testament, we realize that they were prayers that had purpose, but beyond that, there is great variety. Perhaps they will help us to see that there is no formula for praying that we must follow. When we read through the Scripture it is evident that the nature of prayer evolves and develops over time.

In the creation story it is God who initiates the conversations with Adam and Eve in the garden. God comes every day to talk with them. It was a time of visitation with them.

We also find God taking the initiative with Abram. Abram and Sari lived in the country that is now known as Iraq. Abram would most likely have worshiped the moon god as did the rest of the people in that culture. The changes in the moon represented birth, growth, decay, and death. The changes of the moon set the yearly calendar. The moon was thought to be the source of fertility for crops, herds, and families. It was God who proffered the invitation to Abram, and to his wife Sari, to enter into covenant with God, to be righteous people, and, as a result, become the parents of the nations of the world.

Moses sang a prayer of praise to God, its content helping the people remember God's great deliverance. Moses prayed a prayer of blessing over the Hebrews before they crossed into the Land of Promise.

Joshua, the successor of Moses, had a conversation with God in which God gave him encouragement and instructions about leading the Hebrews into the Land of Promise.

In the Book of First Samuel, we have recorded the prayer of Hannah, a distraught woman who prayed for a child. In time, her prayer was answered by the birth of Samuel who became a prophet of God to King David.

There are the prayers of the prophets. There are the prayers found in the Psalms.

There is no holding back of human emotions as these prayers are voiced; there is no fear of offending God by what these people said. They simply say what they mean and mean what they say. They argued with God; they blamed God; they praised God.

As we read through the Gospels, we begin to understand how important Jesus thought that prayer is. Again and again, Jesus went away by Himself into a quiet place, a secluded place, a place where He would not be disturbed, and prayed to his Father. Wouldn't we like to listen in on those conversations?

This morning a recorded prayer of Jesus was read. It was a prayer for his disciples gathered around Him, and a prayer for his disciples of all the ages. It was also a prayer for us. Because of the example of the prayer life of Jesus, the disciples had some of the feelings of inadequacy that we sometimes have. Remember that they were observant Jews who prayed three times a day, morning, afternoon, and evening, but they wanted Jesus to teach them to pray the way that He prayed, the way that would have meaning to them.

Jesus gives them an example of what would be included in a meaningful prayer. And so, we have what we call the Lord's Prayer that together we pray every Lord's Day.

It is fair to assume that the disciples would have seen those who prayed long and loud prayers that were prayed to impress others about how religious they were. Matthew records some things that Jesus had to say about prayer. We read in the New Testament scriptures the admonition of Jesus, saying, "When you pray, you are not to be as the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners, in order to be seen by men. Truly I say to you they have their reward in full." In other words, they have the praise of others.

Written in today's English, in the translation called *The Message*, which was translated from the original Greek by a Presbyterian theologian, Dr. Peterson, we read, "And when you come before God, don't turn that into a theatrical performance either. All these people making a regular show out of their prayers, hoping for stardom! Do you think God sits in a box seat?"

The modern English version continues, "Here's what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won't be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace."

Our prayers are to be a two-way conversation between us and God. And strangely enough, as we pray "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," we may find that it is us who will be changed rather than God who will be convinced to do our bidding. We may find ourselves praying honestly that God will do within our lives that which is best for us, not simply what we ask.

May this Season of Lent be a season of continual conversation between us and God. This week voice some child-like prayers.

Amen.