

WHAT DO I SAY AND DO WHEN I PRAY?  
FINAL SERMON IN SERIES ON QUESTIONS PEOPLE ASK ABOUT PRAYER  
ROMANS 8:26-27                      JOHN 14:12-17

SEPTEMBER 29, 1985

Grandpa passed his granddaughter's room one night and overheard her repeating the alphabet in an oddly reverent way. "What on earth are you up to?" he asked. "I'm saying my prayers," explained the little girl; "but I can't think of exactly the right words, so I'm just saying all the letters. God knows what I am thinking so he will put them into words for me." We smile, but the girl may know more than we realize!

This sermon concludes the series on Questions People Ask About Prayer. This series has been a productive journey for me. Judging by comments I have received, many of you are finding the series provocative and stimulating. The question which is the subject of this morning's sermon is: what do I say and do when I pray? Do I repeat prayers? Do I say the alphabet? Do I sit in silence? This is an important question for many of us. Royal Spiedel in his article, "The Power of a Simple Prayer" (Circuit Rider, July/August 1984, pg. 8) writes:

Most Christians go through life trying to find a meaningful manner of relating to God through prayer. Without meaning, no manner of prayer will be practiced very long. Yet, without prayer life wears thin, faith wanes, and there is no powerful relationship with Jesus Christ.

First, let's look at the question: what do I do when I pray? When you pray, pray to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. You may feel that is obvious. Of course, we pray to the God of Jesus; but, do we? Ted Jennings in his fascinating article, "Prayer: The Call for God" (Christian Century, April 15, 1981, pg. 410) says that prayer is talking and listening to God, but too often we talk to ourselves. Jennings is especially hard on us who pray public prayers. He writes:

The most astonishing aspect of prayer, though the one most likely to be forgotten, is that it is speaking to God. Prayer is not giving ourselves a "pep talk," nor is it a liturgical form for talking to ourselves. I cannot count the number of times I have sat in a pew and have heard a "pastoral prayer" addressed to the congregation, one that made "announcements" and told me what I ought to feel, think, believe and do. Is it any wonder we forget that prayer is speaking not to ourselves but to God? Is it any wonder that our prayers don't seem to "go anywhere"?

How many times have you heard prayers that ask God to help us feel, help us do, make us aware, etc.? Such prayers are sermons to people, rather than prayers to God. Have you noticed that I rarely pray a public prayer after the sermon? I omit that prayer in order to avoid the temptation to preach the sermon again. I've heard too many preachers preach a sermon and then preach it all over again in the prayer, just in case we didn't get the point his first time around!

What to do in prayer is to pray to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; not pray to ourselves nor pray to some god other than the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and Jesus Christ. When I read or listen to some prayers, I wonder whom they are addressing! When you pray, are you speaking to Santa Claus, O Great Magician, some personal, private deity, a distant alien being, some anonymous Supreme Being, an unidentified "Man Upstairs," an idol like Success or Popularity or Wealth, or an idol of your fancy? Or, do you pray to the Lord of creation, the God who acts, the God who loves, the God who calls, the God who revealed himself through the pages of the Bible and ultimately through the person, Jesus?

When we are not clear as to which god we are addressing, we not only are wasting our time, we are putting ourselves in a vulnerable position. Morton Kelsey in The Other Side of Silence is quite emphatic in his warning about destructive forces in the spiritual world. He writes (pg. 37), "Most people who turn inward find a war going on within them between the powers of destructiveness and the force of light, the Risen Christ." There are unfriendly forces, energies, spirits at work. Call them evil, call them Satan, call them the works of darkness, or whatever. Not everyone or everything is friendly to you, and that includes the spiritual world as well.

Therefore, Christians pray to God in the name of Jesus Christ. We pray our prayers "in the name of Jesus" or "through Jesus Christ our Lord." We pray in the name of Jesus to identify the God to whom we are speaking. Out of all the possibilities of deities (spelled with a small "d") out there, by praying in the name of Jesus we are focusing on the God of Jesus. By praying in the name of Jesus, we are opening ourselves to the Holy Spirit. By praying in the name of Jesus we sensitize ourselves to the Bible and are more likely to pray in tune with the Scriptures. The Bible is our authority in spiritual matters.

We invoke the name of Jesus for protection. We ask God in the name of Jesus to protect us from unfriendly forces. We put on the armor of God to shield us from the negative thoughts of enemies in this world or in the spiritual world. When you become serious about communicating with God, entering the inner world and seeking a personal, living and dynamic relationship with God, it is imperative that you pray not just to any god, but to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The second part of the question today is: What do I say when I pray? This question is especially crucial when we remember Paul's admonition to "Pray constantly." (I Thessalonians 5:17) In this series I have been defining prayer as the act of communicating with God--talking and listening, expressing and receiving. The listening part of prayer is sometimes called "meditation." But, this question about what to say in prayer is referring not to the listening act but to the speaking act of prayer. Paul told us to pray without ceasing. What do we say?

The lesson today from Romans is helpful and comforting. The Holy Spirit does our praying for us. Relax! Trust the Spirit to take the words, even if they are the letters of the alphabet, and go beneath the words to the meaning which lies underneath. Romans 8:26: "The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words." The bottom line is relationship. The

goal of prayer is to enjoy a personal, living, dynamic relationship with God. God wants to enter into relationship with you. The basic underlying yearning need of all humans is to be in relationship with our Creator. The words of prayer are not that important. The Holy Spirit receives our stumbling and stuttering and enters into relationship with us.

Now, how do you begin? It's like going on a blind date, what do you say? Or, meeting an important business contact for the first time, what do you say? In prayer, how do you begin? Do you have to create a unique, special prayer every time you wish to pray? Then, how do you pray without ceasing?

There is a rediscovery in our day of the prayer practices of the spiritual giants of the past, like Theophane the Recluse, a 19th century monk, bishop and spiritual director. He observed that when we begin to pray, thoughts jostle in our heads like mosquitoes. To stop the jostling and help the mind focus on God, he taught his followers to pray a simple prayer repetitively. Some people use the Lord's Prayer. Roman Catholics pray the Rosary. Some are rediscovering an ancient prayer of the Eastern Church--the Orthodox Church--called the Jesus prayer. It goes something like this: Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner. We Protestants are suspicious of repeated prayer, especially when the repeating becomes mere habit or "heaping up empty phrases" as Jesus warned against. But the purpose of repeating a prayer is to allow the mind to focus on God, rather than focusing on the words of the prayer. Then the Holy Spirit can take control and do your praying for you.

Ron DelBene, an Episcopalian priest, in his book, The Breath of Life, (beginning on page 27) urges us to discover our own breath prayers. The breath prayer is a short prayer of praise and petition. It is a prayer of the breath and a prayer of the spirit. Just as breathing goes on naturally within our body without our consciously thinking about it, so prayer can go on naturally within our being. The breath prayer is a way to have on your lips what is in your heart. You can then pray without ceasing.

We often use short prayers in times of stress, need or joy. We may pray: "Jesus, help me"; or "O God, hear my prayer"; or "Thank you, dear God." These prayers seem to rise spontaneously from within us. They are natural expressions. These prayers are personalized prayers and arise out of need.

Each of us has a personal unique breath prayer. It is already in our hearts. In order to develop a more meaningful prayer life, the task is to discover what that prayer is and then pray it constantly. A monk was well known for his prayer life. Someone asked him how he had reached the point where prayer was constant. He replied, "Looking back, it seems that the prayer has always been deep in my heart. Once it was like an underground spring covered over with a stone. Then one day Jesus came along and removed the stone. The spring has been bubbling ever since."

Last winter I participated in a two-day retreat with Faye Oliver, author and well-known retreat leader in our area. She taught us about the breath prayer and led us in a simple exercise to help us discover our own individual breath prayers. Since that time I have prayed my breath prayer throughout each day--when I awaken in the morning, while I am stopped at traffic lights, when I am stressed, when I am joyful. It is freeing and relaxing to have a

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prayer to pray without the pressure of having to create a new one each time. Praying the breath prayer allows the mind to relax and concentrate on God rather than on the words of the prayer.

Would you like an opportunity to learn more about the breath prayer? Would you like to discover the deep prayer of your heart and bring it to your lips? This afternoon at 5:30 I will meet with you in the Wesley Room. I will describe the breath prayer in greater detail and then lead you in a simple exercise to help you discover your own prayer which you may use to be constant in prayer. If you cannot come this afternoon at 5:30, and would like to meet with me another time, please tell me or write on the attendance pad and I will schedule another time as well.

There is an exciting adventure called prayer waiting for you. Some of you are old-hands at prayer and enjoy a deep, rich relationship with God. Some of you find prayer frustrating as if the prayers don't go anywhere. Some of you may be new Christians or at least new at praying. Don't be discouraged. God wants to enter into relationship with you, and the Holy Spirit will intercede.