

“LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY: (#1) THE BREATH OF LIFE”

(Luke 11:1-4)

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[PROP NEEDED: “Prayer” SermonSpice Video]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 2-21-10]

–I–

1. [Traditional Service ONLY:] Read Text: Luke 11:1-4 and Pray.
2. [WATCH “PRAYER” VIDEO – On-the-street interviews with persons about prayer from SermonSpice.com (Time: 3:10)]

A–So, what’s *your* experience of prayer been like?

B–I know that in my own life, prayer has been essential not only for my discernment of God’s *will* (e.g., to know what He *wants*) but also (as was said in the video) for my own general *peace of mind*, as well.

C–For instance, I’ve found that when I *neglected* prayer, I found myself more frustrated and more frazzled about things, & generally disconnected from God –like He’s distant & aloof.

3. Well, Jesus knew this, and it’s why when he was here on earth, not only did he spend time in prayer *himself*, but (as we find in today’s scripture), he spent time teaching his *followers/disciples* to pray, as well. [Contemp. Service ONLY: Read Luke 11:1-4 from MSG]

A–So, what is it about prayer that’s so vitally important in our lives as people of faith?

1–E.G., *What* is its purpose and role? *How* do we go about doing it? And in what ways are we to understand God’s responses to it?

2–Well, these are some of the questions we’ll be addressing in a new series starting today called “Lord, Teach Us to Pray.”¹

B–And my hope is that through our time together not only will we come to better understand the nature, purpose, and meaning of prayer, but also be better equipped to actually *practice* it in our daily lives. (*Refer to bulletin Sermon Notes*)

–II–

4. Let’s start by talking about **WHAT prayer is and WHY we need it** in the first place – especially since (as some have correctly noted) the Bible says God already knows our needs before we ask² – so what’s the point?

A–To answer that, we need to remember that as human beings, you and I are created for relationships – relationships with other humans, as well as a relationship with the one we as people of faith call “God.”

B–And yet, for *any* relationship to develop & remain strong (whether among humans or between humans and God), there has to be communication and interaction between them, right?

1–The last few weeks I’ve been extremely frustrated about the fact that my schedule has not allowed me much time to spend with my wife and daughter.

2–And the result is that I’ve been a grouch about it! I haven’t made the time to have quality communication and interaction with them, and its affected not only my relationship with *them* but also with others.

C–Well, it’s the same in our relationship with God – if we want a close, vibrant relationship with our heavenly Father, then there has to be communication and interaction.

D–And *that* is precisely what Prayer does, and it’s *why* as people of faith need it.

5. So, what I’m saying here is that prayer is not some “magical” means for us to get what we want from God, or a way for us to somehow “change God’s mind” about something, or to “inform God” about something that He already knows anyway!

A–No. *Prayer is simply a way for us to build, maintain, and deepen a healthy relationship with Him as our heavenly Father* – a means for our spirit to communicate and interact with God’s spirit. ³

1–The great prayer evangelist E.M. Bounds wrote that “*Prayer is the contact of a living soul with God.*” ⁴

2–And the founder of Methodism John Wesley once called Prayer “*The grand means of drawing near to God...*” ⁵

B–So in this sense, then, prayer is not so much for *GOD* as it is for *US* – to help keep *our* relationship with Him fresh and alive, so that we can better understand *His* actions both in our *world* and in our *own lives*, even when His “actions” don’t directly “answer” the specific petitions in our prayers.

C–In the words of author Tom Albin, “*The purpose of prayer is not to solve my problems, to get my needs met; these are the products of prayer. The purpose and the power of prayer is in the relationship [with God], not in getting results.*” ⁶

6. Now, just as *human* relationships require specific things in order be healthy and vital, so does Prayer in the course of our relationship with God. Let me mention three – **three dimensions of biblical prayer**, if you will:

A–The first is one we usually think of: ***Speaking*** (i.e., talking to God).

1—And yet, *Christian* prayer includes a fundamentally *different* kind of speaking than what is often thought appropriate when speaking to a deity...

2—...Because the Bible says that when we pray, we're to call God "*Abba*" (which, from the Aramaic, is most closely translated as "*Daddy*").⁷

3—In other words, when we pray our speech shouldn't be in flowery words (as a servant might use to talk with a powerful King), but instead should use common, everyday language like a son/daughter would in talking with a loving parent.⁸

4—So, speak to God in a way that comes naturally – be yourself!

B—And yet, biblical prayer includes more than just speaking; it also includes ***Listening*** (some people call it "meditation").

1—Too often today, we make prayer into a *monologue* in which *we* do the talking/asking, and *God* is supposed to simply listen to *our* requests.

2—But how many of *you* would stay in a relationship where *the other person* did all the talking (all the time) and you never got a word in? Probably not many of us!

3—That's why I believe it's helpful to think of Prayer as a *dialogue* in which *we and* God both talk *and* listen.⁹

4—In my own prayer life, there are certainly times where I tell God what I'm thinking or wanting, but the most meaningful times I can recall are times when I simply sat quietly, waiting intently to hear & sense what God might be trying to say *TO* me.

5—E.G., sometimes this has taken the form of a gut feeling that wouldn't leave; other times a Bible verse would "jump out" at me as I was reading; and still other times my senses would suddenly pick up on something around me (something I saw, heard, smelled, or touched) – all of these are ways to "listen" to God.

C—But I think the most important dimension of biblical prayer (one that's really implied in the first two) is that of simply ***Being with God*** – spending time with Him; I have a friend who calls this "*hanging out with God*."

1—You know, my wife and I's first date was actually to a Bible study here in metro Atlanta that drew about a thousand people every week
(And that was *before* I was a preacher - I was in pre-law at the time – so she figured I was "harmless" in taking her to a Bible study)

2—But I'll be honest, on that first date, it didn't really matter to me *where* we were going – what mattered was just *being* together; "hanging out" together.

3—So let me just say: it doesn't really matter *what* you do to "hang out" and "spend time" with God – just do *something*...

- (a) Take a “prayer walk” around your neighborhood, letting your spirit talk and listen to God as you go;
- (b) Walk around a park, admiring the beauty of God’s creation;
- (c) Listen to some great Christian music in your car, or on your iPod, and sense God’s presence as you listen or sing
- (d) Visit the beach or mountains and tune your heart to see and hear God there.

4—However you do it, “*practice the presence of God*”¹⁰ in your life by simply being with Him – hanging out with Him, resting in Him and enjoying His company.

–III–

7. Now, let me wrap up by inviting us all to do a simple exercise that I think summarizes well WHAT prayer is and WHY we need it: ...take a deep breath in... **[BREATHE IN SLOWLY...]** and now breathe out... **[BREATHE OUT SLOWLY...]**

A—It felt good, didn’t it? What would happen, though, if we stopped breathing? ...We’d die, wouldn’t we?

1—And what would happen if we didn’t get enough oxygen through our breathing?

2—We’d start getting dizzy, disoriented, couldn’t function properly – in medical terms it’s called “*brain asphyxia*.”

B—Well, in a very real sense, just as our physical bodies can’t do without breathing, so our spiritual bodies can’t do without Prayer– it’s literally the “*Breath of Life*” for our souls.¹¹

C—And just as a lack of breath can cause “brain asphyxia” in our bodies, so the neglect of our prayer life can cause “spiritual asphyxia” in our souls.¹²

8. So here’s my question for today... How’s *YOUR* spiritual breathing these days?

A—Is it strong and vibrant? Are you consistently taking in deep breaths of the life-giving oxygen supplied through a healthy relationship with God?

B—Or do you suffer from “spiritual asphyxia”–shortness of breath, disorientation & dizziness caused by irregular or spasmodic breathing, leading to a lack of God’s presence.¹³

C—You see, however strong your spiritual life is, today is a great day for a “breathing treatment” – a chance either to renew your relationship with God, or perhaps even to start a new one.

9. So following my prayer, I want to invite all of us forward simply as a way of committing (or recommitting) ourselves – especially during this season of Lent – to being people of prayer; of being more intentional about taking in God’s presence through the “*Breath of Life*.”

10. *[PRAY and invite congregants to altar to commit or recommit themselves to being more intentional about their prayer life, especially over these next six weeks of Lent]*

ENDNOTES:

1. I share this series in part because the last 15-20 years has seen a resurgence of interest in prayer as a tool for daily living in our culture, as evidenced by the popularity of various prayer guides and books about prayer such as Bruce Wilkinson's The Prayer of Jabez several years ago. A survey in the year 2000 by George Barna revealed that 90% of Americans believe not only that a God or supreme being exists, but that He answers prayers prayed to him – 83% of Americans say they pray during the week, and 82% of them believe that it has a direct affect on their lives (George Barna research, cited in Campus Crusade For Christ webpage, "*Prayer, A Solution For A Problem Of Academic Proportions,*" May 1, 2001 –www.uscm.org/aboutus/pressreleases/20010501.html).
2. Read Matthew 6:8 ("*Your Father knows what you need before you ask him*").
3. Romans 8:26-27 says it this way: "*The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.*" In the same way, Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard once said that, "*Prayer does not change God, but it changes [the one] who prays*" [Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813-1855), cited in Bob Phillips, Phillips' Book of Great Thoughts & Funny Sayings, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1993), p. 251]. "*Prayer is not a device for getting our wills done through heaven, but a desire that God's will may be done on earth through us*" [Croft M. Pentz, The Complete Book of Zingers (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1990)].
4. E.M. Bounds, A Treasury of Prayer, compiled by Leonard Ravenhill (Bethany Fellowship, 1961), page 30.
5. John Wesley, cited in Colin Williams, John Wesley's Theology Today, p. 132.
6. Tom Albin, Growing Christians Series: Teach Me to Pray, Graded Press, 1985, page 18.
7. Read Mark 14:36; Romans 8:15; and Galatians 4:6.
8. Although it might seem intimidating to think that we can talk intimately with the ruler of the universe, remember that Jesus made it possible for us to do exactly that. As the writer of Hebrews 4:16 encourages, "*Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with BOLDNESS, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need*" (See Also Hebrews 10:19-23).
9. Even "intercessory" prayer is NOT a time to "get God's attention," but to simply receive GOD'S guidance about OUR response to a given situation. As James Mulholland explains, "*Prayer is uniting our will with the will of GOD. It is not an attempt to get God to do our will. It is desiring to do what delights God. It is discovering that what pleases God will ultimately bring us joy, as well. It is following in his footsteps even when he leads where we fear to go*" (James Mulholland, Praying Like Jesus: The Lord's Prayer In A Culture of Prosperity, HarperCollins Publishers, 2001, p. 63).
10. "*Prayer is nothing else but a sense of God's presence*" (Brother Lawrence, cited in Tom Albin, Growing Christians Series: Teach Me to Pray, Graded Press, 1985, p. 7). "*Prayer is fellowship with God*" (Maxie Dunham, cited in A Way of Praying, World Methodist Council, 1982, p. 6).
11. Founder of Methodism John Wesley referred to it this way in his comments on I Thessalonians 5:16-17 (See Colin Williams, John Wesley's Theology Today, p. 134). Another similar metaphor is described by the great 19th-century evangelist Andrew Murray (1828-1917): "*Prayer is the pulse of life*" (Murray, cited in Edythe Draper, Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992). Entry 8946).

12. In fact, founder of Methodism John Wesley used to say that the lack of prayer was the most common cause of something he called “*the wilderness state*” of Christianity -- a sense of spiritual dryness/purposelessness that most Christians experience at one time or another in our life.

13. This is why British Methodist evangelist Samuel Chadwick once said that, “*The one concern of the devil is to keep Christians from praying. He fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work and prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil,[and] mocks... our wisdom, but he trembles when we pray*” [Samuel Chadwick (1860-1922), The Path of Prayer].