

## “Prayer and You” (Part 2)

This is the second of three messages on prayer. Last week I tried to get across the point that prayer is not getting God to *give us* what we want, but allowing God to *make us* what *He* wants. Yes, Jesus and the Bible tell us to ask God for things in prayer – but the primary purpose of prayer is to keep alive and deepen our relationship with God.

Let’s spend today and next week highlighting some facets of prayer that can help us maintain a daily prayer experience that can be enriching and rewarding. We will begin today by thinking about ***honesty in prayer***. I said in the previous message that some of the ideas for these 3 sermons are from a book by a pastor and psychologist, Cecil Osborne. Osborne suggests that *the real prayer we pray is not what we say but what we feel!*

He tells of once entering a business venture that was something of a disaster. He had prayed about whether to become a partner in it. To do that, he needed additional funds. So he prayed: “Lord, if You want me to enter this partnership, provide these needed funds. If not, I’ll take it that You don’t want me to get involved in this.” Well, in a short time, the funds came, almost miraculously! But from the first the project was a fiasco. Finally, after consuming much time trying to untangle some messes, and losing out financially, the whole thing went down the drain. He had used the time-honored method of “Lord, if You want me in this, ‘open a door’, provide a way; if not, I take it to mean no.” Looking back, however, he realized what had happened. He really wanted to go ahead with the venture. So his real prayer was, “God, I want to make this investment; please say yes!” He comments, too, that he also realized that if he had only used his God-given intelligence, checked with more knowledgeable people in that field, and checked more into the background of his partners, he would have saved himself from a lot of trouble. (He discovered afterwards that one of the partners was a bit dishonest).

Do you ever pray for guidance, and say, “Lord, show me what to do”, but you already know what you want, and hope God approves? Over the years, I have bought lot of cars and trucks. That’s my thing (my weakness). Before buying I have often prayed, “Lord, do You want me to buy this or not?” But I’m sure some of the times when I went ahead and bought the vehicle, I had already made up my mind and just wanted God to agree with me. I can’t honestly say He was leading! *The real prayer we pray is not what we say, but what we feel.*

This holds true in situations where we may feel an obligation to pray, but our heart’s not in it. This can happen with *prayer lists*. We have a list of people on our prayer list. Maybe we feel an obligation to pray for each person every day. It’s a good thing, but often the intensity is not there. I admit, sometimes I skim over my prayer list, naming each person. But I’m not really burdened for them. So, my *real* prayer is: “Lord, I mentioned Larry’s name, but I really am not feeling much concern for him at the moment.” “Lord, I said a prayer for Jean, but I’m mostly praying just out of a sense of obligation.” So, perhaps it’s better to focus on 2 or 3 people on the list, or even just 1, and try to really pour yourself into a heartfelt prayer for this person, or these persons.

Take *world hunger*. We may pray “that the hungry of the world be fed.” But our real prayer is: “Lord, I really feel sorry for people who don’t have enough to eat. Please send other people to

help!” A positive alternative would be to pray, “Lord, give me a genuine concern for people who are undernourished, and show me how I can help.”

I have attended perhaps thousands of *church meetings* over the years. Often, as the pastor, I’m asked to start a meeting with a prayer (although I try to avoid always having the pastor pray). Many times I’m glad to be at the meeting, looking forward to what we’re going to be doing. But to be honest, there are times when I’d rather be home, or doing something else! But I go ahead and have a nice prayer, asking the Lord to be present. But what I’m really feeling is: “We’ll just probably talk and talk and wind up doing nothing, as usual.” Or, “I hope I can get home in time to catch some of the Flyers’ game!” Maybe a more honest prayer would be: “Lord, I’m not thrilled to be here, and maybe some of the others feel the same. But help us tonight to spend time on things that matter, and help us *do something that will make a difference.*”

Here’s a rather intriguing example of what I’m talking about. Suppose I am praying for *healing*, but *unconsciously I want to be ill!* You say, why would anyone want to be ill? Well, perhaps to avoid unpleasant responsibilities, to get attention, to get pity, to remain dependent. So, the real prayer is: “God, I want to be sick, so I don’t have to work...I want to remain ill so people will take care of me...I want to stay depressed because I’m afraid to face my responsibilities.” So, even though I pray to be healed, my real prayer is to stay sick, and that’s probably what will happen.

Praying when the feeling is not there can easily happen in *church services* – with printed prayers, or during the morning prayer time. Do you remember what we prayed for in the opening prayer? During the prayer time, did you feel caught up in the joys or concerns? The challenge for our prayer times during worship services is to have us all concerned and praying and invested in this time of corporate prayer. Cecil Osborne has said that the *spoken prayer* must be in harmony with the *inner feelings* or the prayer is largely a waste of time.

***Jesus talked about sincerity and intensity in our praying.*** He said, “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matthew 6:7-8). The Greek word translated, “empty phrases” means to babble. In fact, the New International Version of the Bible picks up on this meaning of the Greek word: “When you pray, do not keep on *babbling* like pagans.” Saying words without the feeling behind them, is just praying “empty phrases”.

By now you may be thinking: “Does this mean I shouldn’t bother praying unless I’m sure I have this strong intensity of feeling behind the prayer? That would eliminate a lot of prayers! Aren’t you’re putting too much emphasis on *feelings*.” I hear you! I am *not* suggesting we always have to wait for the right feelings before we pray. If we wait for feelings to come, we might never pray! And sometimes *feelings will follow* if we discipline ourselves to pray for something or someone. I am just suggesting that our praying will be much more alive and effective if we pay more attention to feelings, and not just words.

Let me move on to say something about *praying for others*, and how honesty and our feelings and intentions relate to that. *Sometimes when we pray for others, we are actually praying for them to change, to suit us!* I once went to a group of Christians, wanting them to pray for a loved one who was seriously ill. I had never met any of these people before. We got in a circle, and as we prayed, apparently one of the people felt I should be baptized in the Spirit (as he envisioned that), and that I should speak in tongues. He prayed that I would let go of my pride, and be yielded to God. The entire prayer experience turned sour for me. I resented this attempt to evaluate me and to change me so I could do what he thought I should do.

Two women prayed every day for the husband of one of them to stop drinking alcohol. Some weeks later he said he was through with liquor, and he did stop. But his wife had a habit of nagging him. One day, after his wife complained, “That’s the third time I’ve told you to take out the garbage”, he went out and got drunk, and continued to drink, in spite of these two ladies praying even harder for him. The point: At no time did the wife ask if she in any way was contributing to her husband’s drinking problem.

Contrast this story with the wife of another alcoholic, who also prayed for years for her husband to stop drinking. Later she said, “I was unaware at the time that I was masochistic, a martyr of the worst kind. I didn’t realize that I triggered most of his drinking bouts with my complaints.” She had come to understand that deep inside she *needed* to be abused. Even though *consciously* she wanted her husband to be sober, *unconsciously* she had a deep need to be punished for unresolved guilt feelings going back to her childhood. Later she said, “I no longer pray for my husband to stop drinking. I pray about *my own* attitudes. If I can bring them into harmony with the spirit of Christ, I will be a better wife, with no unconscious need to be punished or abused. If he changes, as I hope he will, it’ll be on his own initiative. I’m not trying to change him. I’m in the process of changing *myself*.” *Let’s not use prayer as a weapon to try to get people to change in a way that suits us!*

Does this mean we shouldn’t pray for others to be changed? Of course not. When we truly love people we will ask God to deliver them from things that may be hurting them or destroying them, or praying that God will meet their needs. But when we pray for others, it is best to pray that they become the person *God* wants them to be, not the person *we* want them to be. And it’s good to also ask how *we* might need to change in order to relate to them in a more healthy way.

Let’s shift our focus here and talk about ***the importance of faith when we pray***. The Book of James tells us how important faith is in our praying: “If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord” (James 1:5-7). In Hebrews 11 it says the beginning point in our even approaching God is to believe He exists and blesses those who seek Him: “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Hebrews 11:6). God wants us to seek Him! He wants to give us good things!

Jesus talked about the importance of *faith* in our praying. “Jesus answered them, ‘Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours,’” (Mark 11:22-24).

What a promise! Ask for *anything*, just *believe* you will receive it, and God will give it to you! The truth is, a lot of people have tried that, didn’t get what they asked for, and wound up being disappointed, or even disillusioned, and maybe even began to doubt Jesus, or the Bible. So how can we interpret these words of Jesus that seem to promise so much, but at times deliver so little?

These words of Jesus have to be interpreted in the light of *all that Jesus and the Scriptures say* about prayer. For instance, we are to pray “in Jesus’ name” – which means to ask for things consistent with His character, to ask for things of which He would approve. Jesus *never promised* to give us things that are foolish or hurtful or selfish. The Book of James echoes this: “You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with *wrong motives*, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures” (James 4:2-3). We need to understand Jesus’ promise in the light of these restrictions and parameters.

I have to be honest and tell you that I’ve struggled over the years with Jesus’ words, “Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you receive it, and it will be yours” (Mark 11:24). I don’t fully understand them. We ask for good things, and have faith, and yet it doesn’t happen! Tony Evans is a well known megachurch pastor, author and radio personality. Recently, Dr. Evans’ wife, Dr. Lois Evans, died of cancer. One of their sons, Jonathan, spoke at his mother’s memorial service. I was a powerful, very emotionally moving talk! He admitted that he had been mad at God. People all over the world were praying for his mother’s healing. They claimed the promise of Jesus mentioned in Mark 11:24. Yet she died. But then, he says, God spoke to him, and God reminded Jonathan that His ways are not our ways, and God’s thoughts are not our thoughts, and that God is still sovereign.

I don’t understand it all, but here’s the thing: ***faith is important when we pray, and sometimes we can ask and believe and receive in remarkable ways!*** *Let’s not strip the power from Jesus’ promise of what can happen when we pray believing prayer!* We can come “boldly, to the throne of grace” (as it says in the Bible)!

A few days before Christmas Nancy and I had dinner with a husband and wife couple with whom we recently developed a friendship. Still getting to know them, we learned that they had been unable to bear children. Finally, they decided to adopt a child, but they were running into all kinds of obstacles. The wife, Millie, told us that she prayed, “OK, Lord, we’ve tried. I’m turning it over to You.” What resulted was an absolutely remarkable story of how God led her to someone who led them to someone else who knew a young lady soon to give birth, who was looking for adoptive parents. In a short time, they had their adopted baby! Nancy and I were amazed as we listened to Millie’s account of what happened. She said, “I asked, and I just believed.” *Faith is so important!*

I said at the beginning of this series of messages that some of the ideas for these sermons I've gotten from a book by Cecil Osborne. In the book he suggests something intriguing on this matter of faith and believing when we pray. He talks about *the power of visualization in prayer*. He relates how he preached one Sunday on prayer, saying that if what we desire is in harmony with the basic will of God, in keeping with Jesus' teachings, and if it will harm no one else and can add to our own well being or another's well being, and if we want the will of God for our life, we can receive what we want if we can visualize it! To visualize something means that we can see it on the screen of our mind as an accomplished fact.

Many in the congregation accepted this idea on an intellectual level, he says, but at least one person felt its truth on a deeper level. A college student came up after the service. "You're going to the Holy Land this summer, aren't you?" Dr. Osborne said, "Yes, in July." "Mind if I go along?" Dr. Osborne said, "Not at all. I'd be delighted." Then Dr. Osborne added, "Wait a minute. Where are you going to get the money for this trip?" The student replied: "I don't know, but while you were talking about visualizing in prayer, I suddenly visualized myself in the Holy Land. I could see myself walking through the Damascus Gate into the old city of Jerusalem. I think I meet all the tests you laid down, and I do want the will of God for my life."

A few weeks later Dr. Osborne saw the young man and asked, "Jerry, how are you coming with your plans for the Holy Land trip?" "Fine," he said, "I'm still going." "Have you found out a way to get the money?" Jerry responded, "No, but I can still see myself walking through the Damascus Gate." Time went on – still no money. The deadline for making reservations was getting close, and to make a long story short, Jerry got the money. Contact was made with a lady who "just felt" she should give him the money. She wrote out a check on the spot. He *did* walk through the Damascus Gate, exactly as he envisioned it in mind.

In one church I served a young boy in the congregation was playing a basketball game in a gym. At one point he fell and hit his head against a wall. Later that evening he went into a coma, and was rushed to the hospital. Days and weeks went by, and he was still unconscious. A few of us who visited him decided we would talk and pray for him *as if* he were hearing everything we said. We visualized Scott being awake, talking again, though the doctors gave no assurance that this would ever happen. He was in that coma for weeks, several times near death. But the day came when what we visualized in our minds as we prayed really happened: he regained consciousness, and even though the road to recovery was long and hard, he regained a good portion of his health back.

Now this is not a psychological gimmick. *God* brings it about, not our visualization. But visualizing our request *as actually happening* can be a way of expressing our faith when we pray. It can help to foster a *positive, faith-atmosphere!*

*Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.*  
*Community United Methodist Church*  
*February 9, 2020*

