

SERMON TITLE- "And When You Pray . . ."

TEXT- Matthew 6:1-18

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

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DATE- March 15, 2009

In our journey through the Sermon on the Mount, we took a little detour last week to deal with the topic of worry. As I had mentioned it was a detour that corresponded to our own family journey. We were specifically worried about an MRI that Janet had. What would be found?

I believe that during the times when we are actually going through things we have a perspective that is very important. Life looks very different when you are worried.

Today we have the results and they are "all clear." Suddenly all those worries have vanished. But Jesus' teaching on worry is not just about making our problems go away- as nice as that would be. Jesus' teaching is about giving us strength through those problems.

But what we skipped over in that detour was a section that also lays a foundation to Jesus' instruction, "Therefore, don't worry."

One of the reasons for the "therefore" was His teaching on prayer. So today we are looking at that.

We are going through the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew but like many things Jesus said, it came in several different contexts. Jesus' teaching on prayer and specifically on the Lord's Prayer came in at least 2 different contexts. In Luke Jesus speaks on prayer much later in His ministry and it comes with this introduction-

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples." Luke 11:1-2

That question has been echoed from the beginning of time. What prayer is is one of humanity's big questions. There are people who seem to have the answer and when you meet people like that- and Jesus was obviously one of them, people as- "teach us to pray."

It is a question that we will look at in the context of Jesus' answer to that question.

Prayer is obviously very important. Jesus begins His teaching program with instruction and later the disciples ask for a refresher course. In both cases the end product is the same- The Lord's Prayer.

In Matthew, however the LP is set in a different context. This time it is a foundational teaching that is part of the grand opening statement of His ministry.

He sets the scene for what He will say about prayer-

Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. Matthew 6:1-4

This of course says nothing at all about prayer but as we will see it is part of the set-up for that. Jesus goes on with-

And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. Matthew 6:5-6

There it is. Jesus introduces "prayer" and has linked it to what has proceeded with the word "and." The "and" links prayer to this statement-

Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. Matthew 6:1

#1. Prayer Is An "Act Of Righteousness"

For me the natural first reading of the reference to "acts of righteousness" is to distance myself from it. The context doesn't seem to be very good.

But looking more carefully it occurred to me that this was wrong. There are 2 acts of righteousness referred to here and both at very good things in themselves. These are 2 things that God's people are specifically instructed to involve themselves with.

And even the phrase itself “act of righteousness” is a good phrase. We know that Jesus is driving home the point that a “mere” act of righteousness will not be rewarded by God.

The act of righteousness falls under the category of “necessary but not sufficient.”

As God’s people we are to “do” acts of righteousness. We are to “do” them, it seems to be because we are instructed to do them.

And in the context of prayer- that means- we are to pray. We may not understand why at one level, we may not understand how [and that is why the disciples asked Jesus for instructions] and we won’t likely understand how prayer “works”.

BUT we know that prayer is something we are supposed to do. Prayer is to be one of our acts of righteousness. I think that to understand what follows fully we first have to understand this presupposition.

And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. Matthew 6:5

Jesus’ point, once we actually understand that we are to pray is very clear, however-

#2. Prayer Is Not A Performance

Now before we go further with this- let me also be very clear about something else. This is not saying that prayer as a prepared public act is wrong. We know from what follows and from Jesus’ own example that prayer as a prepared, public act is somehow challenged by this statement.

There is a natural instinct that tells us that a prepared statement is less sincere than a spontaneous. That is absolutely not true. One could more easily make the opposite case. When people speak off the top of their heads there is good reason to think that they are less, not more thoughtful and sincere than when they take the time and thought to write things out.

A similar sentiment is often expressed in terms of God’s speaking on Sunday morning. There are preachers who made it a point not to prepare too much for Sunday lest God would want to interject something at the last second.

Such thinking assumes that God either does not plan ahead or that He honours last second planning. Neither is the case.

Far from being less sincere a planned and public prayer should be thoughtful, careful and meaningful. Ryan has added a thoughtful prepared prayer to our worship service and I know this has added something important to what we do each Sunday.

The planned prayer should be like wedding vows. The fact that they are public actually makes them more meaningful. The fact that they were prepared ahead of time makes them thoughtful.

Compare that to a spontaneous expression of affection or commitment. Which is more important.

It is with that context that Jesus speaks, however. The heart of prayers- just as with wedding vows is the meaning behind them. The vows are not true because of the assembled crowd- they are true and heard to be that because of the relationship that they are addressing.

While everyone knows that this is true the problem with public events is that people start to look at the assembled crowd and miss the meaning. Weddings are a great example. A wedding is not more special by being elaborate and perfectly staged. In fact the great public face of anything has a very unfortunate way of messing everything up.

Jesus warns His followers in the clearest possible terms that the matter of prayer is the meaning behind the words.

And how does Jesus drive this point home? By sending us to our closets to sort our prayers out. Big decisions and important statements are not concocted while we are standing in the spotlight- they are the result of clear deliberate and private thought- when no one else is around- when we can sort out our thoughts without thinking about how this will look.

But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. Matthew 6:6

That is the first direct instruction Jesus give His followers in the matter of prayer.

Prayer- either public is not a performance it is the expression of what really is in our hearts.

The next thing Jesus says follows from that-

And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think 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

#3. God Is Not Deaf And He Is Not A Machine

When it is stated as bluntly as this everyone would say, “Of course God isn’t deaf!” In fact however treating God as deaf is as natural as breathing. We treat God just the same way we treat other people we are talking to.

When we say something and we don’t get and acknowledgment we assume that the person is either not paying attention or that they didn’t hear.

And what do we do next? We repeat ourselves. This is such an automatic action that many parents get into the habit of automatically saying everything 2 times- “Come here! Come here!” It is assumed in this kind of communication that the listener needs the repetition helps communication.

Jesus reminds us of something we should know. God is not deaf. We don’t have to find innovative ways to get His attention.

But there is another reason why people, and in this case the pagans, repeat themselves when they pray. It is a view of God that is something like buying a lottery ticket or shooting a shotgun. The more tickets you buy and the more bullets you fire- the better chance you have of some of them will hit the desired target.

The people in Jesus’ day did not know about machines they way we do but they did have a mechanical understanding of God. It was a view of God that said that He could be manipulated in much the way that we now operate computers. You have to hit the right keys to make things happen and if you have every watched people playing computer games you will see that they are typing madly away at their keyboards.

That is a view of prayer that was common in Jesus’ day- and it is still very alive and well in our time. But Jesus makes very clear- this is a terribly wrong understanding of what prayer to God is. In fact, I think it is fair to say- that “babbling” words are not prayers. That’s not to say God doesn’t hear or even respond- but it does mean that they entirely miss what prayer is all about.

God, like a parent, does not ignore us when we babble but, like a good parent, Jesus want us to understand who it is that we are praying to.

Jesus illustrates this with the observation that God already knows what we are asking for ahead of time. This is not an argument against praying- the way people repeatedly use this. Rather this is a statement designed to make us understand that when we aren’t getting the immediate response we are demanding- that it is not because God is ignoring us, or is deaf, or that we have somehow failed to explain our need fully enough.

This is not an argument for short prayers any more than a parent only wants really short sentences when their children talk to them. The conversation can be quite long without it being nagging.

And so it is with these introductions that Jesus now says-

This, then, is how you should pray:

- 1. Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,**
- 2. your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.**
- 3. Give us today our daily bread.**
- 4. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.**
- 5. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. Matthew 6:9-13**

This is the prayer we offer every Sunday, as a church. It is amazingly short. It does however follow the pattern of a child phoning home. Imagine growing up in a wonderful home and the going off to college. In my observation it if follows that pattern well.

1. The acknowledgment of God

Hi Mom/Dad. I’m a lucky kid to have the parents I do.

2. The recognition that things here aren’t right in the big world

Since I’ve left for college I realize that the whole world is not the safe wonderful place I grew up.

3. Asking for our needs

Thanks for sending me my allowance each month

4. The recognition that things aren’t right in our little worlds

I have screwed things up on more that a few occasions.

5. Recognizing of the danger we face from within ourselves

And in this last part prayer offers something that no parent can offer. An earthly parent can say, “If things get just too tough you can always come back home.”

That is not God’s offer to His children. Yes there will be a time when we are home- but going “home” is not a release valve for

the problems we face here. Instead God's promise to His followers is- that He will be with them in a way that no parent can offer. "Deliver us from the evil one."

Nothing fancy. Short and to the point and as we repeat it each week the words of that prayer are to go out from our spirits- just as the wedding vows must go out from those exchanging them during a wedding ceremony.

It is a wonderful prayer that has been on the lips and hearts of the followers of Jesus for 2000 years. For me that knowledge fills out another dimension of the prayer. As I pray the Lord's prayer it is going out in unison with billions of other spread over 2000 years. What a great picture.

You might think that was the end of it. We have had the prelude- we have had the prayer- but Jesus has more to say. Remember that as Jesus talked about worry that He began His "Don't worry" talk with "Therefore".

The things we have just been going through today are part of that "therefore" foundation that led to "Don't worry."

But even given that- Jesus has something that He links directly back to His teaching on prayer-

For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. Matthew 6:14-15

This is clearly linked to the part of the prayer in which we ask to have our debts forgiven but I don't think it is limited to that.

Prayer is not the end of the conversation of prayer. We are not just praying- getting everything sorted out in our heads and the world and then walking away.

No, when we get up from this conversation with God there is a direct link and responsibility that goes with us.

#5. There Is No "Amen" At The End Of The Lord's Prayer

Now when you read your own Bibles you might come back to me and say, "But James there is an "amen" in my Bible."

Indeed many Bible do- but those who study the Greek original are very confident that the original did not include "Amen" and that it was added by a scribe in the same way that notes are added to study Bibles. Every once in a while those notes are rolled

into the text the way chapters #s are added into our. There were no chapter and verse makers when Paul and the other Biblical writers wrote. It feels so natural and it even right to feel like "amen!" should be added to the Lord's Prayer but instead it moves straight into an instruction for action.

And this is one of the features of prayer- it is not a little corner of our lives divided off from the rest. Yes there are times when we must retreat into our closets and properly sort out what it is in fact that we are trying to say- what it is that we actually want.

But prayer doesn't end once that has been sorted out and we go on with things.

No what we do next follows directly from that conversation.

In this case- "Don't be praying about forgiveness" and then forget to do it. What you do next is as important a part of prayer as the prayer itself.