

Working Out (Sermon on the Mount #9)
Matthew 6:5-8, 2 Peter 1:3-11
January 10, 2016
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Peter, James, and John, like Andrew and Philip and Jesus himself, got up every morning and entered into a time of prayer known as the *shacharit*. That word means “morning light”, and just as their fathers and grandfathers had done, they welcomed each day with a time of prayer. Each afternoon, they and other faithful Jews would find time to pause for the *mincha*, or mid-day prayers; and at day’s end the *maariv* would be said – the prayer of nightfall.

These prayers, proscribed in the *Talmud*, had been a part of Israel’s history for centuries. So when Rabbi Jesus begins his sentence in the Sermon on the Mount by saying, “when you pray...”, His followers know something of which he is speaking. For these disciples, prayer is not “if” or “should”, but “when”. Prayer happens. And in this teaching, Jesus is apparently not only instructing them as to how to pray, but indicating that his expectation is that even in the new age that is revealed by his coming amongst us, prayer belongs. There is nothing about the incarnation that changes the need for God’s people to pour themselves out to the Lord in prayer.

So *when* we pray...what is supposed to happen? What does prayer look like for a follower of Jesus?



Prayer is *personal*. That is to say, it is not a performance. Jesus cautions his disciples against the practices of the “hypocrites” – people who pray in order to be

seen by other people. The Greek word *hypokritēs* originally referred to actors on the stage – people who read lines that were not their own in order to be seen and heard by an audience. Jesus is saying that our practice of prayer is not for the benefit of any earthly audience, but rather an attempt to communicate with the One who created us.

I say that with the full realization that I am skating on some pretty thin ice here. If you take a look at the bulletin you have in your lap, you'll see that in twenty minutes (if you're lucky), we'll enter into the "Prayers of the People". That's when you'll all be quiet and I'll speak. If we're not careful, we may find ourselves tempted towards hypocrisy, wherein I'm up here talking, not to the Lord, but to you – or, even worse, to myself.

There is room for public prayer – provided that we realize and remember that we're talking corporately with the Lord, and not merely about God. One analogy that I have for public prayer is when both Sharon and I are talking on the computer with our granddaughter. We're both here, and only one of us is talking – but the purpose of the talk is to communicate with the one on the other end of the line – not for me to impress my wife with what a fantastic grandfather I am.

And public prayer is not limited to our Sunday worship, is it? When we type "Amen" on those Facebook posts, or send out a tweet indicating that "our thoughts and prayers are with the victims...", are we really engaged in prayer? Or are we wanting to be seen and noticed as being the kinds of people who might engage in prayer? It's not wrong to do these things – but we need to ask *why* we are doing them.

According to Matthew, Jesus uses a word here that is found nowhere else in the Bible, and, so far as we can tell,

nowhere else in ancient literature. He talks in verse 7 about heaping up empty phrases, and he uses the word *battalogo*. Because nobody can find this word anywhere else, its meaning is uncertain. You may recognize the end of that word as *logo*, related to *logos*, meaning “word” or “study.” The Greek word *battalizo* means “to stutter”, and most translators believe that Jesus is saying that prayer is not about making up words just because they sound good, but rather, prayer is about communicating with our Creator. We don’t pray to hear ourselves speak anymore than we pray to be heard by others.

Not only is prayer *personal*, but it is to be done with the intention of *pleasing God*. German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that people who get caught up listening to their own prayers will find that they themselves are the answer to their prayers – we aren’t really interested in taking the time to wait for God to listen to us, so we listen to ourselves and then move along...¹

In prayer, we are invited to bring ourselves alongside of God in order that God might help us to experience life on God’s terms, and so that we might come to see things from the perspective of the Eternal, rather than our own lives.

For example, a few weeks ago a friend of mine asked if we could go fishing together. My friend knew that fishing was something that brought me great joy, and she recognized that fishing is something that I know something about. In asking, she indicated a willingness to fit the trip into my schedule; as we went, she followed my footsteps and my actions, and was very teachable. While she asked a lot of questions, she also did a lot of watching and a lot of listening – all in the hopes that this mystery called “fishing”

¹ *The Cost of Discipleship* (1963 Macmillan paperback, p. 182).

would be more understandable to her, and that, perhaps, we might even be rewarded with the joy of a shared meal and fellowship of the table. Do you see what I mean? My friend brought up the idea of fishing to me in a way that demonstrated respect, love, and hope.

Now, contrast that friend with another, who called and said, “Listen, Pastor Dave, I’m in charge of the bake sale next week, and I need you to get me two pies by Friday.”

I like pies as much, or more, as I like fishing. There’s joy to be had – but the second friend was not interested in relationship or any kind of involvement – for friend #2, the request was simply a means to an end: fill the table at the bake sale and have a good fundraiser.

Please understand that there’s nothing wrong with asking a friend for a favor or running fundraisers. But the first conversation was more like prayer ought to be. The second conversation was based on utility and transaction, not on intimacy and shared life experience. Like the best of friendships, prayer is not a way for us to get stuff, or to get stuff done.

Prayer, at its best, is a way to open ourselves to the Lord in a way that is pleasing to him. It is an acknowledgement that he knows us better than we know ourselves, and therefore we approach God with a mind to getting ourselves to where he is, rather than demanding that he show up and do what we need him to do right now.

And along those lines, then, prayer is not only *personal* and *pleasing to God*, it *prepares us* for faithful living. That is to say, when I rise to offer prayer to God, the primary purpose is not to alert the almighty to something that may have otherwise escaped his notice.

“Lord, there are people starving to death in Africa right now...”

“WHAT?!?!? Why wasn’t I informed? I mean, I’m over here worried about finding you a parking place yesterday and taking care of the Powerball, and now you tell me people are hungry?”

“Lord, my mother has cancer...”

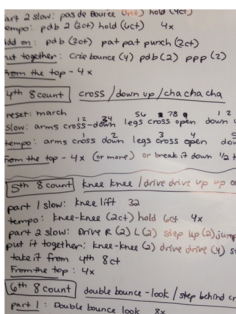
“Cancer? Holy moly! Last I knew she was headed for a screening. When did this happen?”

Do you see? If what we say is true – that is, if God really is all-powerful and all-knowing - then we can’t pretend that the purpose of prayer is to make sure that God gets the news about the latest natural disaster or health report.

So if prayer is not meant to catch God up on all the news, what’s it good for?

What if the purpose of prayer is to train us as people who are useful as we seek to join God in bringing about God’s intentions for the world? I think that is what Peter is getting at in the letter to his friends that you heard earlier. He offers a list of practices: faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, patience, service, kindness, and love. These are the means, says Peter, by which God’s people connect with God and become blessings to the world. But this list is not a vague set of notions – it’s a concrete set of attributes that are found in the heart of God. And the way we become people like that is by working out.

This is a set of steps that comes from one of the exercise groups that meets at the church. People are concerned about being fit and healthy, and they want to strengthen their heart and other muscles. So they



come in here and they follow some steps and work together find that it makes a difference in their lives. If I tried to do these steps at the pace the class does them, I'd die – because I'm not training myself. For the folks in the group, though, it's attainable because exercise is about doing a number of things that they know how to do in a way that increases the likelihood of their being healthy people.



²Similarly, prayer is given in order that we might grow in our ability to become pliable and useful in knowing God's heart and therefore in living God's intentions in the world.

We don't pray about hungry people to make sure that God doesn't forget them... when we pray about hungry people, sooner or later we find ourselves caring enough about their hunger to want to raise money, or to encourage them, or to change the structure in our world so that hunger is satisfied.

When we do it right, we find that praying for a church that is healthy and strong and engaged and ready to demonstrate the love of God to the world might just lead us to a place where we say "yes" when someone in the congregation invites us to join in a ministry that shapes a world that is more reflective of God's intentions for it.

When we read Jesus' cautions about how *not* to pray, there is a sense of fear that might be present – how can I pray out loud when Jesus warns us against that? What if I *am* piling up phrases? What if I screw up my prayers? I know – most of you really don't like praying out loud because you don't want to make a mistake.

² *A Prayer for Those At Sea*, Frederick Daniel Hardy, 1879

We'll talk more about how we can pray next week. For this week, I'd like to close with an encouragement to not get too hung up on it. My sense is that if you ask questions about how we ought to pray, then your heart is moving in the right direction.

Again, to quote Bonhoeffer:

In the last resort it is immaterial whether we pray in the open street or in the secrecy of our chambers, whether briefly or lengthily, in the Litany of the Church, or with the sigh of one who knows not what he should pray for. True prayer does not depend either on the individual or the whole body of the faithful, but solely on the knowledge that our heavenly Father knows our needs. That makes God the sole object of our prayers, and frees us from a false confidence in our own prayerful efforts.³

Thanks be to God! Amen.

³ *The Cost of Discipleship* (1963 Macmillan paperback, p. 183).