

PRAYER

Many of you have heard my story but for the benefit of those who haven't I'll give you a brief synopsis.

For the first 43 years of my life I was an atheist. I couldn't comprehend how otherwise intelligent people could believe in Christianity. I thought they had some sort of character flaw. It wasn't until something I read got me interested in the scientific debate between evolution and Intelligent Design, that my mind began to open up to the possibility that maybe we were created and not just some accident of nature. After a couple years of study, I began to realize that there is far more evidence for creation than evolution and that, ironically, it takes far more faith to believe in evolution than to believe in a creator. This led me to study the different religions and I discovered, again through science, that the only plausible religions were theistic religions...Islam, Judaism and Christianity. Here again evidence ruled out Islam as the teachings of Mohammed can be demonstrated to be false. Therefore, he is a false prophet. In addition, we know exactly where he is buried. That left Judaism and Christianity, which most of you know that the central difference is the Resurrection of Jesus. As Paul put it, without the resurrection your faith is useless. But here again, there is so much evidence, direct and indirect, that it takes very little faith, if you're open minded, to believe that the resurrection is an actual, historic event. But even after all of that I still couldn't put my faith in Jesus because I had one last stumbling block...prayer!

Yep, you heard me right, "prayer". Prayer just seemed like nonsense to me. Have you guys ever seen the Saturday Night Live when Al Franken did the skit "daily affirmations by Stewart Smalley". "People are mean to me but *I* like myself". You know; "I think, therefore, I am" stuff. To me, sitting around praying and heaven forbid, praying out loud and then thinking that someone or something might answer me....well, I thought that the men in white coats might show up and shoot me full of Thorazine.

But here again, science came to the rescue. In my constant dwelling into things religious, I ran across a study done here in Kansas City at Saint Luke's Hospital. It was a double blind study (I think Bryan may have mentioned this before) that showed that prayer actually benefited patients recovery time. Secondly, I read an article in Reader's Digest (big print, of course) while sitting in the Doctor's office, about a new field of study called Neuro-theology. Essentially, the article stated that there is a segment of our brains that is accessed by prayer and that the blood flow to that area of the brain is restricted during prayer, giving the prayor a feeling of well being. And from that some researchers have concluded that we were designed for prayer.

In addition, I read the following passage in the Bible that also helped me a great deal:

Mat 6:5-8 **5**"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. **6**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. **7**And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. **8**Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

To me this is the quintessential passage on prayer. Almost everything you want to know about prayer is contained in this passage. I'm going to get into it in a little more detail in just a minute but what this passage and former information showed me is that prayer works on two (and probably more) levels. First, prayers work on the God level by petitioning God for super-natural intervention or intercession. How this works, I have no earthly idea and will never know while in this dimension but there are far too many examples of it working that I don't need to know how it works only that it does work. Besides, it's logical that if God is out side of the universe, as the Big Bang shows, then God is in a different dimension than us and any intervention into our dimension would by definition be "super-natural" and incomprehensible to us (but that's a talk for another time).

Secondly, prayer works on a personal level. By praying consistently, you are occupying your mind with God and his will for your life. In essence you are reprogramming your mind away from your self and your human nature, and more to the ways of God. I think that is why the Apostle Paul said, "Pray continually".

Ok, let's go back to the passage. The first part says, "**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.**" To me this part points out some of the inherent problems with corporate prayer. So many times, when people pray in a group it's more about impressing others or not saying something stupid, and less about God. I know for me that is true. Whenever I prayer in front of others, which I don't always feel comfortable doing, I first rack my brain to think of something profound to say so I won't look foolish. And then when a get "nothing" I just try to get out of there with as little damage to my ego as possible. On rare occasions, I feel comfortable enough to actually say something selfless and heartfelt.

I have to tell you a quick story on me. I had taken Alpha as a non-believer but I was afraid to express my reasons for my non-belief because I was afraid I would hurt the faith of the new Christians who were in attendance. But later, after I had worked through my issues (mainly prayer), I decided that maybe my story might help people so I signed up to be an assistant Alpha small group leader. However, when 300 people signed up for Alpha, they didn't have they luxury of assistant leaders so I started off with my own a group of 24. The first night, they wanted the leaders to arrive early to get acquainted. So they get us all in this room and let us know we're going to pray. They want us all to hold hands and take turns praying about the night.

Now, you have to understand; I was raised in Iowa and nobody prayed but the Minister (we didn't even have Pastors) and there certainly wasn't any audience participation going on except for the Doxology and the Lord's pray. And there was definitely no "agree'n"

going on either....no “amen’s” or “yes, lord”. So you can see that they were quickly approaching the outer limits of my comfort zone. But I said to myself, “you’re a big boy, you can handle this”. Now the rules of pray session was that as soon as you were done praying, you squeezed the hand of the person next to you. So the first guy starts praying but as soon as they start praying the leader of Alpha, Jeff Kirby (some of you may remember him from his sermons here early on), started “agree’n”, saying things like “yes, Lord” “thank you, Lord”. And then other people started agree’n and before you know it there was more agree’n going on then praying. At that point they had sprinted past my comfort zone. I wanted to run out of there like my hair was on fire. But I sucked it up and stayed put. But when that lady next to squeezed my left hand, I bet it wasn’t a nano-second before I squeezed the hand of the person to my right!

While I lived through the experience to pray again, I would like to make two points about that story. First; I have come to appreciate the “agree’n” that sometime takes place in group prayer. It was just so foreign to me but I’ve come to realize that it is special that we have a church with worshippers from different backgrounds, and that all these different worship styles add to the overall to the worship experience. Shoot, you’ll even hear me now and then piping up with an “amen” (can a get an amen?!)

Secondly, I had a distinct impression from that prayer session that most of the people there were speaking to each other and not God. Now, I know that some people are able to prayer in a group setting without feeling self-conscious ... I know Bryan and Darren, and others I know are able to do this. Maybe it’s something that comes with practice and is part of the sanctification process. Now I’m not saying that corporate prayer is bad as there are many examples in the New Testament of the apostles and disciples praying together. But in any event, I don’t think anyone should feel unworthy if praying in front of others makes them uncomfortable. The passage above and the next one make that clear.

“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.”

I just love this passage. There is so much in it. First, pray by yourself alone where no one can see or hear you. Why, because Jesus, the author human nature, knows that people are self-conscience and egocentric, and when you’re off by yourself, neither one of those come into play. Now, if you haven’t done this before, the first few times you may still feel foolish. I remember the first few times I did this; I was always on my guard that Kathy might walk-in on me. Now think about it, even if she did, would she care that I was praying? ...no, but in my warped little brain, I was still self-conscience enough that if she did and asked me, “what are you doing”, I probably would have pretended like I was looking for a sock or something stupid like that. I can tell you that the more you go off and pray by yourself, the more natural it becomes and the less self-conscience you are about it.

Now, let’s get to the praying out loud part. Jesus makes it very clear we are to pray out loud....”go to your room and close the door..” why? So no one can *hear* you. I don’t

know where the idea came from that prayer should be silent. It must've started with the monks who made a vow of silence. I think they prayed silently to pretend like they were praying so that they could get some shut-eye. Unless you're some kind of freak of nature, silent prayer, *as a sole means of prayer*, is wrong on so many levels. First, who can pray silently for more than a few minutes (seconds in my case) without woolgathering or falling asleep? Second, when you pray silently you tend to think *about* God and not talk *to* God. Think about that the next time you pray any length of time silently. By praying out-loud, you are having a conversation with God in the first person and it becomes much more personal. Lastly, Jesus modeled prayer for us and he did not do it silently. Have you ever wondered how the disciples were able to quote Jesus' prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane and elsewhere? It's because he prayed out loud. All throughout this passage he refers to prayer as something you do with your vocal cords. People prayed out loud in Jesus' time. Now, obviously, there are times when silent prayers are appropriate. I must admit that most of my prayers are silent but are also very short and in situations where praying out loud would not be appropriate; short little prayers like prayers, like, "Please Lord, keep me from getting angry" or "please Lord let the Royals win!" (Remember pray about everything and pray continually.)

Now, for the last part of this passage:

“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.”

Have you ever wonder if some pastors have read that passage. I think they leave that passage out of seminary bibles. I'll give you a little trick just in case you find yourself in a situation where a pastor is bab... is giving a long prayer. Repeat under your breath what he says right after each passage. You'd be amazed at how well this works. Instead of working on your grocery list in your mind, you actually follow what is being prayed and start anticipating the words. Try it sometime.

Anyway..... isn't that last part of the passage curious? "For the Father knows what you need before you ask him". What is that all about? Why pray then? What's the point? Well, there are two points I think need to be made about this last part. First, God is omnipresent and is not restricted by time; so obviously, he would know what's happening in your life. Secondly, Jesus is telling us to pray anyway. Why? Because he knows that we need a relationship with God and to do that we have to talk *to* him. In addition, this points back to the personal level of prayer. We pray because it benefits us and changes us with the help of the "Spirit of Truth".

Now, I don't want to give anyone the wrong impression, that I'm some kind of prayer warrior. On the prayer scale, going from no prayer to a prayer warrior, I'm about this far up. But it is something I'm working on and striving to cultivate.

One thing that really helped me with this was the 24/7-prayer vigil that we held in June. To be honest, I signed up out of obligation. Since Bryan gave me the “figure head” title of chairman, I felt like I needed to participate.

So I signed up for 9 pm, not too late but late enough so that I wasn't taking a slot from the ladies who didn't feel comfortable going after dark. The first night wasn't too bad. I closed the door, turned on music and read, and prayed when the spirit moved me (remember; the door was closed and the music was on). So along about the 4th day I noticed the early Friday morning hadn't filled up yet so I signed up for 4 am. And then I noticed that Bryan filled in the hour before. So, since Bryan had been filling in for all the empty slots all week, and being the nice guy that I am, I decided, what the heck and signed up for that one also. So, I go to pray at 9 pm Thursday night but can't really get into it because I'm stewing about something from earlier in the day. So when I get home, I'm still stewing until 1:30 am when I finally fall asleep. I sleep for an hour, get up and go to pray at the church. I wasn't really diggin' the idea of going to pray for 2 hours with no sleep. I thought I might just close my eyes and “pray silently” for a couple of hours. But a funny thing happened, I prayed for God's guidance and leading and before you know it my two hours was up. It was probably one of my most exhilarating Christian experiences I have had. I prayed, I listen to music, I meditated on what I had read and then prayed some more, and then I outlined much of this talk along with several others. Instead of being tired all day, I was jazzed and didn't go to sleep until about midnight, later than anyone in the house, which is very unusual for me. I normally follow Ben Franklin's adage, ‘early to bed, *late* to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise’. So I would encourage all of you to sign up for the next 24-hour prayer vigil. It is a very non-threatening and easy way to begin or work on your prayer life.

Now where does all this leave us? Well obviously, we as Christians should be praying not only for others but also for ourselves. Because it's God's will and design for us to pray. And as with all things we are told to do, it's not because God is some-kind-of tyrant but because it is what's best for us.

I'll finish with a quote from the Apostle Paul, “Be joyful always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances...”

Amen