

CAN YOU REALLY LEARN TO LIKE PRAYER?

PSALM 77:1-15

Do you like to pray? Be honest now... do you enjoy praying? There's a story about a TV reporter and crew doing a story on Jerusalem's Wailing Wall. The Wailing Wall is thought to be the only section of the Jewish Temple still standing today. Devout Jews go there to pray. On several occasions, the TV crew were struck by the passionate prayers of one old Jewish man they saw come there often. On their last day in Israel, this TV crew got curious and asked this man, "What is it you pray for so fervently?" The old man thought for a moment and said, "I pray for health, for happiness and for peace in my land." "I see," said the reporter. "You don't look that healthy. Are you happy?" "Not really," admitted the man. "And your homeland is in turmoil," observed the reporter. "Do you really believe your prayers are heard?" The old man paused and said finally, "Sometimes, it's like talking to a wall." Frankly, that may be how you feel about prayer. It just feels like you're talking to a wall!

We're in the midst of four messages on prayer – a series I'm calling "Hard Questions About Prayer." We all believe prayer is important and every follower of Jesus should do it. But often there can be a serious gap between what we say is important and what we actually practice. The fact is we talk more about prayer than we actually pray. There's another reason I want us to think about prayer. I believe that our church is on the verge of good, great things that can only be fully accessed or realized through prayer. I believe we need a Holy Spirit inspired baptism in prayer as a congregation – not something I guilt you into coming out to, not another program for a program's sake. No, this would be something that we are led into by God's Spirit and it would be sustained and empowered by Him.

Let's read our text for today. Asaph, the author of this psalm, was a gifted poet and musician who apparently had a leadership position in the organized worship of God that occurred at the Jewish Temple. It seems evident from what we just read that he'd gone through some kind of very discouraging time in which he'd been filled with despair. But he found in and through the activity of prayer an effective way to deal with his distress. Look again at v. 11-12: "I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago. I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds." (Psalm 77:11-12 NIV) Each of those verbs – remember, meditate, consider – speak about the same activity. Each of them refer to something I'd like to call "the devotional life." By the devotional life, I mean an ongoing attempt to interact with God personally – to spend time with Him - through prayer, scripture reading, meditation and worship on a regular basis. Can you really learn to like that kind of stuff? Yes. It's how you have a relationship with God. God has created you to find your ultimate enjoyment in Him. So, to the degree that you can learn to enjoy prayer, to the same extent you will learn to enjoy God. This morning I want you to think with me about the devotional life. First of all, think with me about...

THE MEANING OF THE DEVOTIONAL LIFE

A key word for prayer and the devotional life is used in this psalm - the word "meditate." Now when I hear that word "mediate, meditation", my first reaction is negative. I immediately envision someone sitting in the lotus position with eyes closed chanting, "Ommmm" over and over again. Meditation has a kind of Eastern mysticism flavor to it, doesn't it? But biblical meditation – Christian meditation – is something very different than what some in our culture practice. Trendy meditation is preoccupied with one's self; Christian meditation is preoccupied with God. To meditate simply means to consider, to perceive and to search out the meaning of life from God's perspective. It's a way to think God's thoughts after Him. It's opening yourself to how all of life – joyful and tragic events, relationships with others, nature – can become a vehicle through which God speaks to you. It's learning how to recognize His voice in the circumstances of your life and how to discern when the Holy Spirit is speaking into it.

To meditate on God and the things of God is taken for granted in the Bible. For instance, we read, "I lie awake thinking of you, meditating on you through the night.... I remember the days of old. I ponder all your great works and think about what you have done." (Psalm 63:6, 143:5 NLT) When you meditate, you mull something over in your mind; you weigh its significance; you consider its aspects. You do that in ordinary, everyday aspects of your life – when you buy a car, when you decide to accept a new job, when you consider where to go on vacation. But do you ever meditate on God and your relationship with Him?

Did Jesus meditate? The four Gospels make it clear that He spent extended periods of time with God. He would often spend the whole night in prayer alone with God in some isolated place out in the hills. It's safe to assume Jesus meditated often and regularly. That's an irony, isn't it? If there was anyone who ever lived that didn't need to pray it would have been Jesus! After all, He was God in human flesh. And yet you find Him practicing this very robust devotional life. Jesus' teaching on prayer was simple and direct. He said, "But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you." (Mt. 6:6 NLT)

There are several important assumptions in Jesus' statement. First, a devotional life for a Jesus follower isn't optional. He says, "when you pray" not "if you pray." Second, a devotional life needs solitude to be effective. Jesus says, "Go away by yourself, shut the door behind you and pray to your Father in private." Third, there's the suggestion that a devotional life becomes habitual - "Go away by yourself. Shut the door behind you. Pray to your Father in private." Then Jesus says that those who do this will receive a reward. What's the reward? It's a deeper, richer, more satisfying relationship with God Himself. God is His own reward. If you're made to enjoy God – and you are – and prayer is the means by which you access that relationship with God on a regular basis – and it is – then, by all means, you can really learn to like prayer because it's the means by which you come to enjoy what is most enjoyable: God Himself!

How do you meditate? What do you do? There are many ways to meditate upon God and your relationship with Him. The most common way is prayer – just talking to God out loud or silently in your mind. You praise and thank Him. You pour out your heart to Him. You confess your sins. You lift up your needs and the needs of others. But prayer also involves listening to God, too. It's amazing what will come into your mind when you're just quiet and say, "Lord, is there anything You want to say to me or that You want me to do?" God will begin to impress people on your mind or He'll remind you of something you need to do. Those are leadings of the Holy Spirit – one way God communicates with you.

Another important way to meditate is to interact with the Bible in some way. That involves, at the very least, reading it with regularity. It's amazing how many Christians just never get around to actually reading the Bible! Your Bible ought not to be some sort of occasional or optional reading material like the daily newspaper. The Bible is the Word of God. It's one of the most important ways God communicates to you. Some people try to read the Bible through in a year. Others like to read it more slowly and reflect on it that way. Some folk find memorizing Bible verses can be an excellent form of meditation. I often take a Bible passage I'm reading and turn it into a prayer back to God.

Stuart Briscoe, a pastor and author, recalls an experience when he was doing some work on an airplane with an open Bible in front of him. A stewardess came up to him and said, "You know, four years ago the Bible was a dead book to me. Then something happened – I can't explain it – but I can't get enough of it. I devour it." "I know what happened," Briscoe answered. "Have you ever read a book that was boring, but then one day you met the author? Afterwards, you picked up the same book and said, 'I know who wrote this,' and it become an exciting book to you." "Yes," said the stewardess, "that's what happened to me when it comes to the Bible. I met the Author." When you meet the Author of the Word of God, He begins to write it into your heart instead of hitting you over the head with it. You begin to desire it; not resent it.

Meditation can be practiced in many ways. On occasion, I enjoy singing hymns or choruses to the Lord in my own time with God. Sometimes I write out my prayers or journal my thoughts – that brings a kind of focus and concentration to that can be helpful. I like to read a few pages of a book that challenges and enriches my thinking about God. The technique isn't what matters. Some will work for you; others won't. The crucial issue is whether you have a devotional life. Do you meditate? Do you spend time with God one on one so that He can speak to you and you can speak to Him? Now, secondly, think with me about...

THE OBSTACLES TO THE DEVOTIONAL LIFE

I can think of at least four obstacles. The first one is the fear of irrelevancy. When there are already so many demands upon your time, setting aside an additional slice of a day to pray, meditate, read the Bible and think about God

can feel like a colossal waste of time. Sitting around trying hard to think deep thoughts about God can seem like an impractical luxury. Who's got time for that? Did you know that I struggle with that as much as anyone here? There's always another message to develop, another person to visit, or another phone call to make. You could say I'm paid to pray; nevertheless, it can seem irrelevant and impractical a times even to me.

I've been challenged by the lives and words of great Christians when I'm tempted to cave into this fear of irrelevancy. Martin Luther, who God used so powerfully to bring reformation to the Church back in the 16th century, made this statement: "I have so much to do that I cannot get on without three hours daily in prayer." He reminds me of what I'm prone to forget. Being busy isn't a good excuse to pray less. The busier you are the more you need to pray. Why? Because the busier you are the closer you need to stay to God so that you can access His strength and energy and not get destroyed by the stress of a busy life.

Here's a second obstacle: the fear of legalism. Perhaps you grew up in a home or a church where everything was rules, rules and more rules. Along the way, you developed a healthy revulsion to a rule-based relationship with God. And so when you hear that you ought to read the Bible regularly and pray often, your initial reaction is, "No, thanks! I just don't need more rules." God hates legalism, too. But you know as well as I do that not much happens of any real value in this life if it's approached with a haphazard, inconsistent mindset. Your devotional life – spending time with the Lord – can be consistent without becoming legalistic. It can become a wonderful habit without becoming a lifeless ritual.

Sometimes, a fear of legalism can just be a thin disguise for another obstacle – the fear of discipline. You and I need to move beyond offering occasional 911 prayers. What's a 911 prayer? "Lord, please help me with that presentation at work today. Thank You. Amen.... God, please help little Johnny get over the flu. Thank You. Amen.... Jesus, please help me do OK on that test today. Thank You. Amen." All too often our prayers are selfish and treat God as if He's only there to meet our needs. Isn't it OK to offer 911 prayers? Of course, it is! But if spending time with God is firing off random 911 prayers whenever you're faced with a desperate situation, you have a lazy, undisciplined devotional life. Discipline isn't your enemy. Many times we resist discipline because we think it robs life of its joy and spontaneity. But the fact is that discipline properly applied to your life allows you to experience a deeper level of joy. You might hate practicing a musical instrument, but you enjoy the ability of playing it well. You might hate working out and watching what you eat, but you enjoy a leaner body and better health. You might hate to study, but you enjoy good grades.

Have you noticed that some folk can be tremendously disciplined in some area of life, but neglect the most important aspect of all life – your relationship with the God of the universe? Here's a person who's almost fanatical about exercise, but he can't spend time with God regularly. Here's another person who's rigorously

disciplined about how she performs her job, but making prayer habitual appears to be beyond her ability. Make no mistake – developing a meaningful devotional life demands personal effort and energy. It's work! Some days you'll succeed; others you'll fail. But don't give up. Stay flexible. If you feel like you're in a rut, try something new that might bring freshness into your devotional life. Risk. Experiment. Grow. But keep at it – day in and day out, month after month, year after year. The more you do it, the more you'll like it. The more you pray, the more you'll develop a taste for prayer. The more of the Bible you read, the more God will give you a taste for His Word. If all of your prayers are 911 prayers, don't go home today all defeated and discouraged. Instead, make a commitment to spend five minutes with God each day. Those five minutes will become ten, the ten will become twenty. If you stay at it, God will give you a taste for Him.

A fourth obstacle might be the biggest one of all. Ultimately, it's the fear of having to deal with God. Something inside each of us knows that if you make the effort to seek and experience the presence of God on a regular basis, things will have to change in your life. Sins will have to be confessed and renounced. Ungodly attitudes will have to be surrendered up. Goals and ambitions will have to be examined and perhaps altered. Make no mistake – this is a very legitimate fear. God is not about the status quo. God isn't a soft touch, an indulgent grandparent or a fawning parent who tolerates a spoiled child. God will not leave your life well enough alone. God does demand change and not just once or twice – but over and over again. Then, why bother to spend time with Him? Because that's where the joy is! If you want the best the universe has to offer, it's found only in God. Finally, let me say something about...

THE VALUE OF THE DEVOTIONAL LIFE

First, it makes your relationship with God stronger. It's easy to forget that God is a Person. Every person is designed for relationships. No relationship happens automatically. Every significant relationship in your life demands that you work at it and nurture it. For instance, if you want a healthy marriage, you have to set aside time to nurture that relationship. There has to be regular opportunities to talk together, to dream together, to work out inevitable conflicts and to celebrate life together. Any healthy relationship – marriage, parents and kids, significant friendships – are the result of intentional time spent together so that you can come to know one another better. It's the same principle when it comes to God.

Asaph had a real relationship with God. The early verses of the psalm describe him as being troubled, unable to find peace, depressed, sleepless and beyond words. That leads him to ask these questions. "Has the Lord rejected me forever? Will he never again be kind to me? Is his unfailing love gone forever? Have his promises permanently failed? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he slammed the door on his compassion?" (Psalm 77:7-9 NLT) Haven't you asked those same kinds of questions about life and God? Somehow, Asaph had those questions answered when he meditated on God and considered who God

is and what God had done. Spending time with God won't stop painful stuff from happening to you in life. But a devotional life will allow you the opportunity to work through those questions and doubts in such a way that you will emerge with your faith even more firmly intact than before. One value of a devotional life is that it will make your relationship with God stronger.

Here's a second value. It's a continual reminder of God's greatness. Asaph cries out God in the midst of whatever distress he was facing. He then begins to remember, to meditate and to consider. What happened then? Well, he tells us. "O God, your ways are holy. Is there any god as mighty as you? You are the God of great wonders! You demonstrate your awesome power among the nations. By your strong arm, you redeemed your people..." (Psalm 77:13-15 NLT) Asaph was reminded of the many miraculous ways God had delivered his people in the past. God had shown up and come through over and over again. Maybe that's one reason God has given you the power of memory. You can remember what God has done for you in the past. The longer you walk with the Lord, the larger your memory bank becomes of the many ways God has been faithful to you and has done miracles in your life. That gives you comfort, renews your trust and gives you new energy to live for Him. Another value of a devotional life is that it provides a continual reminder of God's greatness.

There was a taxi driver in Charlotte, NC who picked up a man one night who appeared to be troubled and desperate. The man asked to be taken to the corner of Providence and Queen streets there in the city of Charlotte. For a long time, he just sat in the taxi with the meter running. The man said nothing – just stared. The next night the same exact thing happened with the same man. By the third night, the taxi driver became suspicious. He happened to notice a supermarket across the way and he thought that perhaps this man might be casing out the place for a holdup. So the taxi driver said to the man, "I need some cigarettes; I'll be right back." While he was in the store, he called the police. When the police arrived at the taxi, they asked the man why he came night after night just to sit at this particular corner.

The man pointed to a window in the Myers Park United Methodist Church – a gorgeous, beautifully back-lit stained glass window. He said, "I never had much religion. I didn't even know how to pray. My wife is very sick and the doctors tell me she is real bad. But then I found this window. Something about its light gives me strength and peace, and somehow just looking at it I find the words to pray." Now, I don't know what that man prayed. That doesn't matter. But I do believe that he received the peace and strength he sought. Why? Because he became present to the presence and power of God. That's all a devotional life is – a decision to spend time with God. And the result is the gift of God Himself and the strength and peace that comes through Him. Can you really learn to like prayer? Yes, you can. And if you want the best this universe has to offer, yes, you must.