

## DOING WHAT DISCIPLES DO:

### “PRAY”

Matthew 6:5-13

Dr. J. Howard Olds

September 17, 2006

Did you hear about the five-year-old boy who announced to his parents that he never wanted to pray again? When his mother probed the kid's unbelief, she got this simple explanation. "I prayed and prayed, and prayed for a new puppy dog, and all I got was a new baby brother." Well, prayer does have its problems. We ask for guidance and all we hear is silence. We get what we want and wind up not wanting what we get. Unlike Garth Brooks, we don't always find it easy to thank God for unanswered prayers. Prayer is a mystery, yet over 80% of Americans pray and over half of Americans pray every day. Even one-fifth of the atheists in this country say they pray daily. Prayer is the soul's sincere desire, unuttered or expressed, and prayer is more than that. It's the "more than that" dimension of prayer I want to discuss with you today.

### **PRAYER IS COMMUNICATION WITH GOD**

When I try to give couples tips on communication skills, I talk about two basic things, assertiveness and active listening. By assertiveness I mean the ability to clearly ask for what we need and express what we feel. For most of my life, I have been too timid and theologically protective to do that in my prayers. I didn't want to be disappointed nor have people disappointed in God. So, I toned my prayers down to generalities and good feelings. I prayed for presence instead of power, for comfort rather than divine intervention, for meaning instead of miracles. All this is good and right and the pastoral thing to do. Lately, my prayers have changed. I beg, bargain, plot, plead, and promise. I try to make a deal. I debate with God as friends sometimes should, and do. My prayers are not so theologically correct, but they are real.

The Bible encourages us to ask, seek, and knock, to make our requests known. Jesus said call on God like we would a friend at midnight when an emergency arises. Jesus said the prayers of persistent widows will be heard.

Of course, the other half of communication is active listening. By active listening, I mean the ability to clarify, hear, and really understand what the other party is saying. The reason most of us fail to hear from God is that we never stop babbling long enough for God to get in a word edgewise.

Wesley said, "He speaks, and listening to His voice,  
New life the dead receive;

The mournful, broken hearts rejoice,  
The humble poor believe.”

When it comes to prayer, are you a good listener?

### **PRAYER IS CONCERN FOR OTHERS**

Since the beginning of time, people of compassion have wanted for others more than they could provide themselves and that has led them to intercessory prayer. *“Pray for one another so that you may be healed; the effectual, fervent prayers of the righteous avail much”* (James 5:16). Jesus said, *“I pray for them. ...for those you have given me, for they are yours”* (John 17:9).

It is an affirming and humbling experience to receive the prayers of others. Prayer is love unspeakable. Love communicated through the prayers of others lifts us, fills us, strengthens us, and encourages us. Maybe you have to experience it to really understand the floating feeling that comes when others pray.

Prayer connects us to one another. Being prayed for is a reminder that we do not belong to ourselves. We are part of a community. Our living and dying intricately impacts other people. They’ll know we are Christians by the way we handle our troubles.

There is a great debate going on in this post modern world about the power of prayer. While it is refreshing to watch prayer documentaries on TV, and read scientific studies about the impact of prayer on health, we need to be reminded that prayer is neither a show to be watched, nor a science to be studied. Prayer is a relationship to be enriched, a relationship with God, and a relationship with all human kind. So let us behold its mystery and bow in humble adoration.

### **PRAYER IS COMMUNION THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT**

The disciples came to Jesus and said *“Teach us to pray.”* People come to me and say, “I don’t know how to pray. Could you help me?” Prayer is not an art to be mastered; it is a relationship to be experienced. Prayer is not primarily our striving for God. Prayer is God coming to us. As surely as God searched for Adam and Eve in the Garden, so He looks and longs for us. Let not our guilt and embarrassment over sin keep us apart.

Paul put it this way: *“We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us. He, who searches our hearts, knows the mind of the Spirit”*

(Romans 8:26).

What if prayer is not duty and hard work, but rest and relaxation? There is a place of quiet rest. It’s near to the heart of God. This kind of prayer has historically been called centering prayer. It’s reflective prayer. It’s realizing that God is within us,

closer than the air we breathe, nearer than our conscious selves.

In our noisy, competitive, demanding world, could we not use some quiet contemplation with a God like that? God is in every breath we take. Breathe deeply and know God.

### **PRAYER IS CEASELESS AWARENESS**

*“Pray without ceasing”* (I Thessalonians 5:17). How can anyone do that? Even monks have to eat and sleep. Unlike monks, most of us are called to be in the world though not of the world. What if unceasing prayer were easier than we think?

Author Barbara Bartocci, has a new book entitled, Grace on the Go: 101 Quick Ways to Pray. Among her suggestions are these:

- Give an alarm clock “Alleluia” when the alarm clock goes off. Mentally commit to living in gratitude for the day.
- Practice shower power. As you soap and rinse, pray to be cleansed from all feelings of anger, resentment, bitterness, or regret.
- Make a red light act of contrition. Use a red light as a call to prayer. Use the moment to think about your day. One of our Sunday school classes has been challenged to use red lights as a call to intercession.
- Do nighttime taps. Offer thanks for the day, pray for what you hope will come to pass. Express sorrow if you’ve hurt another in any way. Relax. Sleep well.

### **PRAYER IS A CALL TO ACTION**

St. Augustine said, “Pray as though everything depended on God. Work as though everything depended on you.” John says, *“We have confidence before God because we obey his commands and do what pleases him”* (I John 3:22).

The things, good Lord, we pray for, give us the courage to work for.

If I pray for my daily bread, let me find the courage to see that others are fed.

If I pray for forgiveness, let me discover the grace to forgive.

If I pray for the Kingdom of God to come, let me learn to live by Kingdom values.

If I pray for peace, let me be a peace maker.

If I ask to be shielded from temptation, let me not play around with it on my own.

Did you see the B.C. cartoon where one of the prehistoric characters says, “God, please grant me one request. Destroy my worst enemy.” The request barely got out of the guy’s mouth when a bolt of lightning strikes him and incinerates him on the spot. In the final frame, a voice comes from the ashes saying, “Let me rephrase that

request.”

Even though we don't always get the words right and our motives are mixed, may prayer become an integral part of our lives, for our sakes, and the sake of the world.  
Amen!