

Matthew 6:5-18 March 28, 2010 Sixth Sunday in Lent
Second Baptist – Lincoln
Pastor Steve Wisthoff

Real Prayer

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.

⁹ "This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,

¹⁰ your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us today our daily bread.

¹² Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.'

¹⁴ For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

¹⁵ But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

¹⁶ "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.

but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Who taught you to pray? Was it in a class? Maybe a book? I doubt that it was. More than likely, you learned to pray from those around you. You learned from your mom or dad who sat in quietness with head bowed and eyes closed. You may have learned it in Sunday school or youth group. It was more likely in the example of hearing the teacher pray, or hearing the pastor pray in worship. It has been observed that prayer is more likely CAUGHT than TAUGHT. This was certainly true with Christ and the disciples. Jesus taught his disciples to pray what we call the Lord's Prayer.

As we begin Holy Week with the celebration of the Triumphal Entry of Christ into Jerusalem, our minds flash ahead to Thursday evening when Jesus was experiencing the agonizing emotional torture in the garden.

While he agonized, his disciples slept. These are the same disciples who he taught to pray. He said to them in the garden, “Couldn’t you pray with me for just one hour?” Jump ahead six weeks to the upper room in Jerusalem in the days leading up to Pentecost. There the same disciples who couldn’t stay awake and pray, spent several days in prayer.

Can you picture this timeline? They were taught to pray by Jesus early in the gospel of Matthew, they slept during Christ’s agony in the garden, then they prayed earnestly for days after which the Holy Spirit came upon them with power. Do you think that maybe it took a while for prayer to seep into the lives of those first disciples? Does it not take a while to penetrate our lives, as well?

In today’s scripture, the disciples come to Jesus wanting to be taught how to pray. If we were to learn from our leaders and churches today, what would we learn about prayer? Perhaps we would conclude that God is hard of hearing because prayers are loudly proclaimed from the pulpit with concisely pronounced words and high language. Some might believe God is from 16th century England with all the THEEs and THOUs and words like “Doeth” and “Goeth.” I knew a former pastor where I once served that loved the King James version of the Bible and he also prayed in the king James version. Some might conclude that when we pray, we should add the word “Just” to give it special meaning and reverence. *“Lord, just help us to just be your children and just sing your praises.”*

No matter what the form of our prayers look like, I think in many ways, there is something more important missing from our prayers, and that is BOLDNESS. The Bible has several references to being bold in our prayers. This is really another way of describing praying with FAITH. Eph. 3:12 says, *“¹² In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.”* Boldness is feeling a sense of freedom and confidence as we go to God. It is not shyly going before God mumbling, “Lord, if you wouldn’t mind, and if you have the time, could you do me a little favor and help me out?” I John 3:21 says, *“²¹ Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God.”*

Again in I John 5:14, we read, “¹⁴ *This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.*”

So coming before the Lord with boldness and confidence equals FAITH.

There is a vast spiritual resource that is ours. Do we tap into that resource when we pray timidly? If Christ were bodily present here on Sunday morning and we could see him, would we not be more inclined to do as those in first century Palestine?

Remember the lame man brought to Jesus? He and his friends who carried him could not enter the house where Jesus was, because there were too many people. His friends carried him to the roof, removed the roofing material and lowered the man down into the room at the feet of Jesus. Was that done timidly? It seems like a pretty bold move for them to do this. Imagine the dirt and sticks dropping down from the roof onto the heads of the people below. What about the woman who was desperate for her daughter to be healed of an evil spirit. When Jesus said, “*Is it right to take bread out of the children’s mouths and cast it to the dogs*”, the woman boldly replied, “*Yes, Lord,*” she said, “*but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.*” (Mt. 15:27) How’s that for boldness!

We can also have confidence that when we go to him in prayer and ask him for an answer to prayer, he will give us what is best. Listen to this text on the generosity of God: ¹⁰ *For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.* ¹¹ *Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead?* ¹² *Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?* ¹³ *If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”* (Luke 11:10-13)

Not only should we pray boldly, but we should pray honestly and authentically. In the text today where Jesus taught the disciples to pray, he gave examples of the “unauthentic prayers.” Some of those prayers might be ones we pray. Jesus is saying it is the prayers of the hypocrites. Those who stand in places of prominence so everyone will hear them. Those who act righteous saying, “I’m so thankful Lord that I’m not like those sinners.”

Some would fast (go without eating as a form of a spiritual discipline.) but they did it so that others would see them. They would put soot on their cheeks in a certain way so that their cheeks would look sunken and they would appear famished.

I can assure you, prayer is never to be a show. It is an authentic call to God. Jesus gives them a better model for authentic prayer. He says to go into your closet and close the door.

Each Sunday morning we have an invocation, a pastoral prayer and a benediction. Is this praying publicly like the hypocrites? Not if it is authentic and real. Certainly, there is biblical support for this kind of prayer. There has always been public prayers on behalf of the people since the time of Moses. We find this in both the O.T. and the N.T. It is called corporate prayer. Even this can turn into a show or a cold, impersonal mantra.

Prayers become unauthentic when they are not from the heart. They are just words. It is unauthentic when it is selfish (When it is all about supplication [GIVE ME] prayer), but do not contain praise and adoration for God. It is unauthentic when it is used to impress others. Sometimes pastors have a tendency to use their prayers to preach or reiterate the main point of their sermon. It is unauthentic when our hearts are not pure. James 5:16 says, "*The fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.*" A REAL prayer is one that seeks the heart, mind and will of God. God knows our heart, do we try to know his heart?

The past several weeks, we have been asking the question, IF CHRIST WERE BODILY PRESENT WITH US, HOW WOULD IT CHANGE THE WAY WE LIVE. Let's ask this question: *Were Christ to be bodily present in our church this Sunday, we would experience the privilege of authentic prayer* If Jesus were here, wouldn't we speak directly to him, looking into his eyes and experiencing his holy presence? Wouldn't our words be more personal than the cold, sterile prayers we rattle off?

If Jesus were present, our prayers would be authentic. As you know, while we can't see him, he is here in our worship. Let's pray and worship knowing he is here and know that he knows our heart. AMEN.