



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“WHY PRAYER?”

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 7:21-23

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, June 22, 2008.

This summer I would invite you to come along with me on a prayer pilgrimage as a part of morning worship. I intend to use my time in the upcoming sermons to speak very candidly and carefully about the problems and possibilities related to prayer. I have resolved to do this for a number of reasons.

1. To begin with, many of you in recent months have asked if I would preach or teach a series on prayer. The number of requests only confirms what I have known and encountered through out thirty-six years of ministry and that is that so many people feel inadequate and ineffective and embarrassed when it comes to prayer. They assume that they must be doing something wrong and are hoping there is some technique, some unknown discipline, some magical formula that will transform their experience and their practice of prayer.

On many occasions over the years as women and men have been considered for church office I have been pulled aside and asked confidentially: “If I agree to serve and if I am elected you won’t call on me to prayer aloud will you? I am terrified at the thought of praying in front of people.” And I am quite certain that many more persons have entertained this fear than have expressed it.

However there is no need to be embarrassed over this felt inadequacy because we are in good company. Even our Lord’s disciples requested of Jesus, “Lord, teach us to prayer as John taught his disciples.” (John 11:1)

2. Yet another reason for tackling the topic of prayer is rather personal. It is the fact that time and time again over recent months I have been prompted by situations and circumstances to think about, to read about, and to reflect upon the importance of and efficacy of prayer. This has occurred so often that I have come to believe that the Spirit is at work in this enterprise. After all coincidences are just God’s way of remaining anonymous. I believe that God’s spirit does have something to say about my prayer life and yours. I believe that prayer has been given scant attention in the life of many of us as individuals and as a church and the time has come to bring prayer from the sidelines to center stage.

In April I went on my annual retreat with my Reformed Theology Study Group to Washington D.C. where we spent a wonderful week reading and discussing classic works on prayer written over the centuries by such spiritual stalwarts as John Calvin, William Temple, George Buttrick, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Howard Rice, Richard Foster, Philip Yancey and Leighton Ford. I have read and absorbed so much in recent months that most of the ideas and insights I will share with you were surely inspired and prompted by these works and I commend them to you. (See Bibliography at the sermons conclusion)

Of course, the subject of prayer can not be covered in a lifetime, much less in a summer. And while we will look at a number of aspects of prayer we surely will not resolve all of its mysteries. Nor should we think to do so is either possible or desirable. Prayer remains one of faith's mysteries.

During the course of my ministry here with you since 1997 we have given renewed emphasis to some of the basics of church life and personal discipleship. We have instituted numerous Bible study opportunities. Each year you have had wonderful opportunities to study Biblical books and Biblical themes and even to read through the Bible in its entirety. We have underscored and enhanced our Christian Education programs over these eleven years and have exemplary programs now available for children, youth and adults. We have invigorated and expanded our commitment to missions, both local and world wide, and have seen an exponential growth of people and resources committed to causes beyond the wall so this congregation.

I suppose that if there is one arena where we have seemed to have failed, or at a minimum to have lagged behind, is in our lack of acceptable growth in stewardship and in giving. Yes we have more than doubled our budget but the continuing dilemma for me is the mystery as to why so many of our members give so little of their resources. Thank God for the generous minority who make the life and ministry of First (Scots) possible through their sacrificial efforts. Without them we would be eliminating programs and ministries that touch the lives of countless people.

So you may be wondering, why don't I deal with stewardship over the course of this summer? Some of our staff might be wondering why don't we deal with a seeming lack of commitment among our members that we have encountered so often. Why focus on prayer if stewardship and commitment are our greatest challenges and our consuming weakness?

And, what is more, haven't we in recent years begun a church-wide prayer chain? Haven't we begun quarterly services for healing and wholeness, haven't we instituted prayer groups like our Prayers of Concern ministry that meets on Mondays? Haven't we begun a ministry of Prayer Partners who are available for prayer after morning worship? Don't we have women engaged in prayer on a weekly base for the city, the state and the nation? Don't we encourage people to attend workshops and training sessions on prayer? And the answer to all of these inquires is emphatically yes. But as is the case with stewardship and personal commitment, there seems to be a distinct minority of our members who engage in any intentional prayer efforts. And thus our potential once again out weights our performance.

3. What is more, I am convinced that if we could get more of our people committed to a life of prayer, the stewardship issue and the commitment issue would resolve themselves. And this really brings me to perhaps the greatest reason I wish to reflect with you on prayer this summer. I am convinced that poor stewardship and a lack of personal investment in the Kingdom of God is not finally a material problem, a time problem, or a knowledge problem. It is a rather a spiritual problem and I have come to believe that the greatest indicator of our spiritual health or lack of the same is the shape and character of our life of prayer. Nothing so reveals our knowledge of God or our knowledge of ourselves as our practice of prayer.

A few weeks ago while visiting our daughter and her husband in Denver, Colorado we decided to visit a nearby Methodist church on Sunday morning. The scripture lesson for the day was the one I read from the Sermon on the Mount a few moments ago. The preacher took a completely different approach with the text than I will take today, but that scripture lesson spoke to me and reflects a great truth that we are likely to forget and a great challenge for which prayer maybe the best solution.

In so many words Jesus reminds his listeners as I remind us here this morning that having the right words, believing the right things, even doing the right deeds is not sufficient in an of themselves. Our Lord's words may serve as an ominous warning to good religious people like us here today. In our own way we too cry out "Lord, Lord"; we too preach or prophecy in Christ's name; we even do good and powerful works in Christ's name, but the question is not whether or not we know and obey Christ but whether or not he knows us. You see, the Christian life is not simply another religion characterized by ritual and regulations, by creeds and deeds, as important as they may be. No, the Christian life is primarily a personal relationship --- a personal relationship with the one who has created and redeemed us and who dwells within us through his Spirit. The fear I have when I hear this portion of our Lord's sermon is that perhaps I have been giving more attention to talking about God than in talking with God, to knowledge about God rather than a knowledge of God, to a religion rather than a relationship. I don't know about you, but speaking personally I know that I have given only a fraction of my time an attention to nurturing my fellowship with and my relationship to the living Lord. Prayer has largely been for me a duty, a discipline, and even a professional obligation. But I want it to be more. I want prayer to be as natural, as refreshing and as fulfilling as a conversation with one that I love and in whose presence I delight. I want my prayer life to be the occasion where the Lord and I become better acquainted, where we can affirm our mutual love and where we can discover the other's heart and soul. I want it to be the place where we share our burdens and our passions. I want my prayer life to move from the right side of my brain, as it were --- the rational, the disciplined, and systematic side, to the left side of my brain which is far more intuitive, mystical and experiential. You see, what I think about prayer is not nearly so important as what I do about it.

Even though in the coming weeks I will deal with many misconceptions and problems and possibilities related to prayer, my goal is not simply to answer frequently asked questions. I agree with the late David H. C. Read who once wrote that "The best sermon on prayer is not the one that offers answers to our questions but one that incites us all to do it." ("The Living Pulpit" July – September 1993, page 11.) So ultimately this is my fondest hope for our summer series on prayer.

Now to be sure, prayer is a duty as well as a free choice for those of us seeking to follow Christ. Jesus is not only modeled a vital prayer life but many of his teachings and experiences are concerned with prayer. We will consider some of these in the weeks to come, no doubt.

Suffice it to say at this point of introduction that prayer is not, as many assume a charm, a talisman or a learned mechanism for getting the things we desire and for convincing God to come around to our way of seeing thing. In the final analysis the greatest benefit of prayer is not the results but the relationship, not the gifts we desire but rather the Giver we come to know in a more intimate, intentional, and fulfilling way.

Today and perhaps again in weeks to come, we will sing a hymn I have loved from childhood and one that regrettably does not appear in our current hymn book, "Prayer is the Soul's Sincere Desire." The hymn's lyrics composed by the Scottish poet James Montgomery remind us in some memorable phrases that prayer is more than the words we speak. In truth prayer is the "soul's sincere desire" the language of the heart "unuttered or expressed." Prayer is what "trembles in the breast" and prompts our tears and fears. It is in truth "the Christian's vital breath," the Christian's "native air." Prayer is the primary arena in which God and his children engage and meet and share with each other, finding their communion, their confidence, their delight and their peace in the process. Prayer is the place where love is shared and honest exchange occurs. And apart from a life of prayer our faith will simply remain academic or theoretical or superficial or bland, or all of the above. A person who never prays will never comprehend the nature of stewardship or the meaning of commitment

because this person will have no true knowledge of God nor any accurate assessment of who and what they are.

So let us together commit ourselves over the summer to this pilgrimage of prayer, a pilgrimage where none of us are experts and where all of us are beginners. And let us together discover or perhaps rediscover what prayer can mean for each of us and for all of us together.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Works on Prayer I Recommend:

Leighton Ford, The Attentive Life

Philip Yancey, Prayer

Richard Foster, Prayer

Henry Emerson Fosdick, The Meaning of Prayer

William Temple, Christian Faith and Life

George A. Buttrick, Prayer

Henri J. M. Nouwen, Making All Things New

John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion (Vol.XXI, Ch. XX)