



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“7. WHAT DOES PRAYER CHANGE?”

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 7:7-11; James 5:16b

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, August 31, 2008.

A graduate student at Princeton University, in a quandary over what topic to choose for his doctoral thesis, approached the famed professor Albert Einstein and asked: “What is there left in the world for original dissertation research?” And Einstein is reported to have replied: “Find out about prayer. Somebody must find out about prayer.”

Well, over the course of this summer we have been trying to find out a little more about prayer, to examine what the Bible says about it, to consider various expressions of it, to reflect upon what others have said about it throughout the ages, and hopefully to practice ourselves. As we draw this summer series to a close, I especially am aware of the fact that we have barely scratched the surface. Prayer always has been and will remain a profound mystery, the depths of which we shall never fully plumb. Books by the thousands have been written on prayer. I have a complete bookshelf up in my study filled with some of the more noble efforts towards this end. I have read that the Bible itself contains some 650 prayers and at least one prayer appears in each of all Paul’s epistles, except for Titus. Doctoral theses have examined the topic long before and frequently since Einstein’s request. Yet, we continue to struggle to comprehend the problems and possibilities of prayer. And struggle we must! This effort is both confounding and gratifying but I must confess that it has stretched and expanded my faith over the course of this summer. I have found, as I hope many of you have, that while all of my questions have not been answered I have discovered a deeper companionship with the Answer-er. This alone makes the effort worth while.

We began this study back in June by acknowledging that dis-ease and discomfort felt by so many people when it comes to prayer. Yet, I argued that prayer is central and essential in our life as disciples, not simply because God commands it, not merely because Jesus exemplifies it, but because it is necessary if our life with God is ever going to move beyond the religious to the relational. Apart from a vital life of prayer our faith will likely remain academic, theoretical, superficial, or bland --- or perhaps all of these!

Next I suggested that the first purpose of prayer is simply to know God --- not to gain favors or to pursue our own ends or even to get results, and certainly not to advise the Almighty as to how to govern the universe.

Continuing this idea in our third message, I spoke of prayer as seeking God’s face, or better acknowledging God’s presence in the midst of our daily routines and circumstances. Prayer is consciously placing ourselves in God’s presence throughout the day it is far more than the words spoken, which is where most of us place far too much emphasis. Prayer includes silence and listening as well as verbalizing our thoughts. It is more about love than it is about language. It is consciously paying attention to God’s presence in all circumstances. Note, if you will, Mary Oliver’s poem on our bulletin cover it was shared with me by one of our Elders.

In the next three sermons I focused on Biblical principles which ought to characterize our life of prayer. First there was praying with confidence or expectation, knowing even as we pray that God is capable of doing any and all things. Nothing is beyond God's power but some things are outside of God's purposes. But what is more, we also expect God to do what is best for us and others even though we ourselves may never see or comprehend what this is. And this faithful expectancy requires patience, humility, trust and submission. I love the prayer by Bishop Westcott that appears on the back of our bulleting today:

O Lord God, in whom we live, and move, and have our being, open our eyes that we may behold Thy Fatherly presence ever about us. Draw our hearts to Thee with the power of Thy love. Teach us to be anxious for nothing, and when we have done what Thou hast given us to do, help us, O God our Saviour, to leave the issue to Thy wisdom. Take from us all doubt and mistrust. Lift our thoughts up to Thee in heaven, and make us to know that all things are possible to us through Thy Son our Redeemer. Amen.

Secondly, we are to pray with persistence as Jesus points out on several occasions. After all, it is our very persistence in praying that reveals our sincerity, that deepens our faith, that underscores our human frailty and our dependence upon God, and which strengthens our bond with the God who loves us unconditionally and sacrificially. Our persistent praying also is a continual reminder of our work together with God or we dare not pray for this we are personally unwilling to work toward or sacrifice for. Prayer, you see, is no lazy person's substitute for effort or labor.

The third principle or characteristic of a vital life of prayer is what I described as praying from a partners perspective. This carries forward the idea of working together with God. I suggested that we misunderstand and misappropriate Jesus' words to his disciples that if we but ask for anything "in his name" he will do it. This is certainly not to be taken literally as so many people interpret this text. To pray "in Jesus' name" is not to mention his name in closing our prayers, as if this is some magical formula but rather praying in Jesus' name means praying as Jesus did and does, praying for what Jesus would pray for and praying above all else that God's will shall be done in us and through us. To ask in Jesus' name, therefore, is to ask for what Jesus would ask, to value what Jesus would value, to want what Jesus wants. It is not a means for bringing God around to our perspective and our purposes but rather a means of submitting our wills, our wishes, and our purposes to God's way.

This morning in conclusion I would raise with you the question on everyone's minds when it comes to prayer. Does it make any difference when we pray, and if so how so? Or perhaps better does prayer really change anything, and if so what?

When I was young a plaque hung on the wall of our home, made by my mother in one of her extended hospital stays. It said "Prayer changes things." This was a popular expression at the time and also appeared on billboards and bumper stickers. Prayer changes things! Do you believe that? If so, what things does it change?

Does prayer somehow change God? Does it change God's nature, God's disposition, God's character, God's decisions? It is an interesting theological question. On the one hand there are passages saying that God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. Theologians speak of God's immutable, infinite, and eternal nature. In Malachi 3:6 we read: "For I the Lord do not change."

Now if you are one of those people believes that “the Bible says; it I believe it; that settles it!” --- then you have a considerable dilemma. Why even ask God for anything if the Lord does not change and if God’s purposes and plans are firmly and finally fixed for all eternity?

We are not the first generation of Christians to ask these things. The third century church father Origen, framed the dilemma this way:

First, if God foreknows what will come to be and if it must happen, then prayer is in vain. Second, if everything happens according to God’s will and if what He wills is fixed and none of the things He wills can be changed, then prayer is in vain.”

Of course, Origen remained firm in his conviction that God did not and does not change.

On the other hand, the prophet Hosea has God saying, “My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused” when trying to determine Israel’s fate. There are at least four incidences in the Old Testament where it is reported that God “relented” or “changed his mind” over some promised judgment. And there are countless Biblical references in which God seems to respond to the pleas and petitions of his people --- for healing, for help, for deliverance, for forgiveness. So what are we to make of this?

One way to resolve this issue I first heard when I was attending a church camp in Mississippi during Junior High school. Dr. Norman Harper was our guest preacher for the week and one evening when he was responding to questions from the group a young man asked: “If God has already determined who is saved and who is not, why I should I pray for my friend who is not a believer?” Dr. Harper responded: “You should pray for your friend because God may also have determined that you would offer that prayer that would be a part of your friend’s experience of salvation. That is to say, God determines both the means and the end.”

Another way to resolve this matter of God’s changelessness and God’s response to our prayers is to say that why God’s character does not change God’s experience and God’s responses must change in accordance with his immutable nature. God is not some distant, aloof creator, some manipulator of his world and its inhabitants. Rather, God is more like a parent who hears, considers, and incorporates his child’s requests into his plans and purposes as he deems best.

The great truth that two few praying people realize is that it is not God who is changed by our prayers but rather we ourselves who are changed. This is the great emphasis of John Calvin on prayer, how it effects the one praying. Fred Anderson, then pastor of the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City wrote in “The Living Pulpit” (July – Sept. 1993), “Unless you are prepared to change, don’t pray.”

Does prayer work? --- I am often asked. My answer after engaging in this summer study is, “No, prayer doesn’t work . . . but God does work and often uses our prayers in his working.”

Does God answer prayer? Well, it all depends on what you mean by “answer”. I believe that God answers not the petition, but the person; not the prayer but the pray-er!

God looks into our hearts, listens to our longings and our loves as well as our pleas, and knows what we truly need whether we can see this or articulate it. And God always responds in accordance with his immutable love and his good and eternal purposes.

What then does prayer change? It doesn't change God's nature or God's character but it does influence how God carries out his purposes in our lives and in our world. I have a friend who says that he never offers prayers of petition nor does he ask God to do anything other than to forgive him, to accept his thanks, and to make him receptive of God's will. He readily admits that he does not always understand God's will or even know what is best for himself and for those he loves. He just figures that God knows best and he must be able to accept that despite what happens. Now this attitude may seem noble at first but the problem is that God directs us to pray for what we want and need, to be specific and even personal. "Give us this day our daily bread," Jesus said in teaching us how to pray. As we pray specifically God looks into our deepest longings and our fervent desires to be sure, but the very asking also enables us to get in touch with what genuinely matters to us. Our praying helps us to discern our own values and indicates our interests and our commitments.

And when we find ourselves praying specifically we also find ourselves being changed even transformed. "Pray for you enemies" Jesus said. If you do that, my friend, and do it genuinely, expectantly and persistently, your attitude toward that enemy and your treatment of the enemy will change. If you pray for your church, your involvement in it and your support of it will necessarily change. If you pray fervently for the poor, for victims of injustice and discrimination, for the ill and the disadvantaged --- your very lifestyle will change as well.

Consequently, the world itself will be changed by God through the divine agency of prayer. Can I prove this? No. Do I believe this? Yes! It is apart of my faith and faith once again is "the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1)

An off quoted statement usually attributed to Archbishop William Temple is, "When I pray, coincidences happen; when I don't, they don't." Call them coincidences if you wish. Call them occasions when God chooses to act anonymously or call them signs of God's signature on the events of life. I just know that my mother's plaque from so long ago was accurate --- "prayer changes things," from individual attitudes to national, even eternal destinies.

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