



Gospel / Life

Toward A Spirituality Of Freedom

New Creation Teaching Ministry: Tuesday Night Studies 2011, Seacliff Anglican Church

Study 27: The Gift of Prayer

Through this term we are going to give consideration to the matter of personal spirituality. We will look at prayer, meditation on Scripture and temptation as the three means by which God our Father works in us and on us to conform us to the likeness of His Son. Personal spirituality is *not* about what *we* do to make ourselves more spiritual! Personal spirituality *is* about what *God* does to go on filling us with His Holy Spirit. Personal spirituality also is not *simply* about *private* spirituality: it also involves our interactions as persons with others in corporate activities. Prayer, meditation on God's word and temptation operate not only in our private lives, but in our lives together.

The main danger that faces us (due to a legalistic edge to our inherited Pietistic culture as South Australian Protestants) when we consider the matter of personal spirituality is that we think in terms primarily of "ought" or "should". We *ought* to pray more; we really *should* read the Bible every day. These means of spiritual growth become then more a demand on us than a gift to us. And the more we see them this way, the more dreadful they appear to us and the less appealing they are to enact in our lives.

In fact, prayer, meditation and temptation are part of the gift of God to us. Moreover, as commands (and there *are* commands about prayer and meditation on God's word) these are actions that express the inner reality of the life of the Spirit's freedom in us. The Spirit expresses Himself in the command; the Spirit, and His freedom, has already been given to us to whom the command is addressed; and so when the command comes, by the Spirit we recognise the freedom that the command delineates. Obedience to the command to pray is the acceptance of the gift of prayer, the surrender of ourselves to the Spirit.

Would we pray if the command, "Pray at all times", was never given? Well, yes we would, because we pray not simply because "we have to—God told us to", but because the Spirit dwells in us and leads us in prayer to God the Father. If the Lord and the apostles had never given directives about prayer, the first person in the church who ever said, "Let us pray" would have been recognised by all as speaking by the Spirit of God.

Discussion: Recall a time you have prayed with another person and been deeply enriched or blessed by sharing in their prayers. What was it that struck you? How did it make you think of your own praying?

Prayer Is Not For Professionals

One of the richest experiences of prayer I have had was praying with an older woman, a friend who had been a pray-er for many, many years. Saying grace and then praying with her after a meal, I was struck by the depth and reality of her praying. I wish I could describe it adequately. Her prayers were not theologically loquacious; in fact they had such simplicity of language that any person could understand them. But they were not simplistic prayers: they resonated with deep knowledge of God and His ways. Now, if I had said any of this to my dear friend, she would have undoubtedly thought I was flattering her, and that my comments were loaded with honey more than truth. She did not see herself as a Christian superhero; she knew herself to be weak and frail. Recently I found this quote from Karl Barth about our encounter with God:

We encounter God 'as those who are inept, inexperienced, unskilled, and immature.... The invocation "Our Father", and all the Christian life and ethos implicit in this invocation, can never at any stage or in any form be anything but the work of beginners.... Spiritual life begins at the very point where spiritual skill ends.' (Karl Barth, *The Christian Life*, via Ben Myers)

We come to prayer not as professionals but as amateurs (French *amateur* "lover of", from Old French and ultimately from Latin *amatorem/amator*, "lover"). We come not as teachers but as learners. And just when we may have thought we had become somewhat "expert", life throws up circumstances, challenges and difficulties that test us beyond what we had known before and we know that we are no equal to the task. The disciples asked Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray (Lk. 11:1)." And we find we come to prayer this way too, and all the time. The truth is that we don't know how to or what to pray (Rom. 8:26), but in our frailty, weakness, brokenness, the Spirit comes alongside us and makes His prayer our own. At times this praying is not even in words, but in groans, cries, tears and longings.

The Lord Jesus, Man Of Prayer

The Gospels record a number of things about prayer from the life and teaching of Jesus. Firstly, and perhaps most impressively for us, we see that Jesus himself was essentially a man of prayer, because he was a man filled with Spirit of God. Jesus' prayed in adoration and thanksgiving in joy, intercession (on behalf of others) and supplication (for his own needs). His prayers were to his Father (Matt. 11:25-26; 26:36, 42; Mk. 14:36; Lk. 10:21; 11:2; 22:42; 23:34; 23:46; John 11:41; 12:27-28; the whole of chapter 17) and he taught us to pray also this way. He spoke about the Father's dealings with us being the answer to his prayer on our behalf. The Letter to the Hebrews tells us that as the risen and ascended Lord he exercises this ongoing ministry of prayer on our behalf (Heb. 7:25), and that this prayer is what saves us, i.e. keeps us in the saving love and grace of God in Jesus Christ

This truth about Jesus as the man of prayer is not simply exemplary. The gift of the Spirit is the gift by which the Father and the Son come to dwell in us. The gift of the Spirit is the gift that unites us with Jesus Christ. And so by the Spirit, Jesus himself puts his yoke on us, and teaches and trains us in carrying his load of prayer. He includes us in walking alongside him, learning from him as he prays for and in us.

Discussion: Read Psalm 145. For what does David adore God? For what does he thank Him? For what does he ask Him?

Adoring God

When we ask God to teach us to pray, the Spirit of God in us is prompting us to do so in order that we may be better able to express adoration to Him who is our deepest love. All love expresses itself in adoration, and part of the joy and struggle of love is finding richer, fresher, truer ways of speaking that adoration. Where this drive towards greater adoration dries up—when we take the other person for granted—love dwindles. In pushing towards deeper, fresher, truer adoration, we find out more and more the grandeur and glory of God who has made Himself ours in Jesus Christ.

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, he began by pointing them to adoration: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your Name.” To *hallow* is to hold something as holy. Prayer begins by delighting and wondering at the holiness of God’s own Name. His Name is the very essence of who He is. Prayer begins by amazement and joy—relishing, trembling, overflowing—at the truth of the being of God Himself. Psalm 145 picked up this in the opening verses:

A psalm of praise. Of David.

I will exalt you, my God the King; I will praise your name for ever and ever.
Every day I will praise you and extol your name for ever and ever.
Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; his greatness no-one can fathom.

One generation will commend your works to another; they will tell of your mighty acts.
They will speak of the glorious splendour of your majesty,
and I will meditate on your wonderful works.

They will tell of the power of your awesome works, and I will proclaim your great deeds.
They will celebrate your abundant goodness and joyfully sing of your righteousness.

The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love.
The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.

All you have made will praise you, O LORD; your saints will extol you.
They will tell of the glory of your kingdom and speak of your might,
so that all men may know of your mighty acts and the glorious splendour of your kingdom.
Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and your dominion endures through all generations. (Psa. 145:1-13)

Psalm 148 teaches us that, in the adoration of God, we find we are mystically joined with unseen praisers and adorers. Amazingly we summons them and lead them, but we find in doing so that their praise has been sounding forth from eternity. Firstly (vv. 1-2), before God in perpetual adoration are angelic hosts. These angels aid us in our worship and adoration. “Angels, help us to adore Him—ye behold Him face to face!” We must take this presence of angelic worship as a given—not seeking to “make it happen”. There are those who, in the kindness of God for particular moments, are given insight into the presence and worship of angels. But whether we are given that insight or not, the fact is that the ministry of angels is to enrich and aid our worship of God.

Then, the created order is in a constant paean of praise to God. Creation has been subjected to futility because of the sin of humanity, and without our liberty from sin, death and the devil, it cannot reach its full liberty. And yet, even now in this subdued state, still creation sings out its unheard songs of praise to the Lord. Trees clap their hands, floods lift up their voices, mountains and hills skip like lambs. From the celestial giants of sun, moon and stars, through all the events of weather, to the great sea creatures, the myriad air and land creatures, the various geological formations—all raise their particular voice in praise and adoration of the God who made them and who through Jesus Christ is leading them into the glorious future of a heavens and earth

filled with the righteousness, the glory of God, this glory and righteousness permeating every cell, every atom of creation.

Our adoration is deeply personal, but also it is corporate. Kings and all peoples, princes and rulers, young men and maidens, old men and children—each brings in their adoration a vision of the glory of God that enriches and blesses and teaches the other so that the adoration grows and expands. More, when our sight is dim, when our praise is low, when our hearts struggle to find the love shed abroad in them by the Holy Spirit, the praise and the adoration of others works and serves for us. Most importantly there is the full-hearted love and adoration of Jesus Christ for His Father.

We praise you, O God; we acknowledge you to be the Lord.
All the earth worships you, the Father everlasting.
To you all Angels cry aloud, the Heavens, and all the Powers therein.
To you Cherubim and Seraphim continually cry, “Holy, Holy, Holy; Lord God of Hosts, heaven and earth are full of your glorious Majesty.”

The glorious company of the Apostles praise you.
The goodly fellowship of the Prophets praise you.
The noble army of Martyrs praise you.
The holy Church throughout all the world acknowledges you;
The Father of an infinite Majesty;
Your honourable, true and only Son;
And the Holy Ghost the Comforter.

You are the King of Glory O Christ.
You are the everlasting Son of the Father.
When you undertook to deliver humanity you did not disdain the Virgin's womb.
When you overcame the sting of death, you opened the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers.
You sit in glory at the right hand of God the Father.
We believe that you shall come to be our Judge.
We pray you, therefore, help your people whom you have redeemed with your precious blood.
Make us to be numbered with your Saints in glory everlasting.