

## WHEN YOU PRAY

Once upon a time there was a man who loved hunting. He wasn't a Christian; in fact he would usually go hunting on Sunday mornings while everyone else was in church. One day he was hunting for bears. As he trudged through the forest he came upon a large and steep hill. He climbed the hill and, just as he was pulling himself up over the last outcropping of rocks, a huge bear met him nose to nose. The bear roared fiercely. The man was so scared that he lost his balance and fell down the hill with the bear not far behind. On the trip down the hill the man lost his gun. When he finally stopped tumbling, he found that he had broken both legs. Escape was impossible and so the man, who had never been particularly religious prayed: "God, if you will make this bear a Christian I will be happy with whatever lot you give me for the rest of my life." The bear was no more than three feet away from the man when it stopped dead in its tracks, looked up to the heavens, and then fell to its knees and prayed in a loud voice: "Lord bless this food of which I am about to partake. Amen."

Matt 6:5 "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.

Jesus starts here by saying "WHEN you pray...". Notice that He did not say "IF you pray...". Prayer is not an optional part of the Christian life. Communication is an essential part of any relationship and our relationship with God is no different. Prayer is essential. It is like breathing. Today I want us to talk about HOW we are to pray. When we pray our prayers are to be:

### 1. Sincere (vs. 5) – why you pray

Prayer is simply communication with God. Our prayers should never be a performance. When we are praying with other people we can easily lose our focus in prayer and forget why it is we are praying and who is supposed to be the center of attention. When other people are listening our prayers can quickly turn from personal communication to public performance.

Have you ever noticed that your language changes when you know that others are watching or listening to you? The other day I saw a TV commercial. A guy was on his front porch with his cat. The cat was purring and he was being very affectionate and talking with it, until he realized that his golfing friend was standing there watching him. Then the cat got thrown to the side. That is the difference an audience makes.

When Naomi and I lived in Kuwait there were many times when we were aware that our phone was being bugged – we knew there was someone (probably secret police) listening in to the conversation. I found this out the first time when I was asking Naomi for directions to a certain part of town. I kept trying to sound out what the area was called ... SHUWA SHUAT SHUIS and then in perfect Arabic heard someone say in the background SHUWAIKH! I said thank you and hung up. My phone conversations were never the same after that, knowing that someone was listening.

The prayer preceding all prayers is "May it be the real I who speaks." -- C.S. Lewis

In the NIV the word used for sincere is the Greek word ANUPOKRITOS which means “without hypocrisy”. Hypocrisy is pretending or being an actor on a stage. When the focus of your prayer shifts from God to others you can slip into hypocrisy.

The word sincere comes from the Latin SINCERUS meaning clean or pure. Some have argued that it originally came from 2 words SINE meaning “without” and CERA meaning "wax." Years ago, a potter would often put his seal, or stamp, upon a completed vessel with the words SINE CERA. This meant that to his knowledge there was no flaw in that work. If a potter did crack a vessel, he would carefully patch that flawed vase or bowl by filling in the crack with wax. Then he would glaze it over. But it did not merit the stamp "without wax," because it was not a flawless piece of pottery.

A little girl who asked her granddaughter to her birthday party. When asked to say grace before her birthday lunch she prayed "Dear Lord, thank you for Mommy and this good food. Thank you for letting Grandma come here today." Then pausing to peek at the mother said "And please Lord, let us have a good time at 'Toys R Us' this afternoon."

I am not saying that public prayer is not important. It is great to pray with others. It is an important part of our public worship services. What I am saying is that prayer should bring glory to God and not us. In all public prayers we need to remember our focus; who are we praying to and who we are praying for.

I am known as a person who gives short prayers when asked to pray before meals. I was once asked “why was your prayer so short, don’t you believe in prayer?” I do believe in prayer. I just don’t think it takes a whole lot of words to simply say "Thank-you". I like what Moody said:

A man who prays much in private will make short prayers in public. -- D.L. Moody

## 2. Secret (vs. 6) – where you pray

In prayer it is easy to lose our concentration because of everything going on around us. This is why the environment where we pray is very important. You should choose a place where you will not be distracted and where you can concentrate on what you are saying. Habakkuk gives some great advice on prayer:

Hab 2:1 I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint. 2 Then the LORD replied: "Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it."

WITHDRAW – I will ... station myself on the ramparts

WAIT – I will stand at my watch

WATCH - I will look to see what he will say to me

WRITE - write down the revelation and make it plain

Habakkuk first found a solitary place – the ramparts. He waited there in prayer listening for God. This waiting was not simply passive but active. He was not simply WAITING but also WATCHING. When God did speak He was ready to receive it and write it down so it would not be forgotten.

Martin Luther had a puppy who was at the table looking for some food from his master, and watched with open mouth and motionless eyes. Luther said, "Oh, if I could only pray the way this dog watches

the meal! All his thoughts are concentrated on the piece of meat. Otherwise he has no thought, wish or hope."

Job learned the importance of finding a place to spend time alone with God. He lost his children and possessions. The council of his wife was "curse God and die". For 37 chapters his friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophath each sat with him and gave their words of advice. Finally in Chapter 38 Job turns his attention to God and from the storm God speaks.

In prayer we seek to silence the voices of men and turn our attention away from the things around us to the Holy God who sits in heaven. When you are in the middle of a storm you do not set your course by the waves or by things on the waves but by the shore. In battle it is important to listen to someone who is above the field of conflict – one who sees the overall picture. The same is true in life. In prayer we turn our attention to the Rock of Ages who can never be shaken.

When an observatory is about to be built, the site selected is always on some high mountain. The aim is to find a place where there is a clear, unobstructed view of the heavens. Similarly, coming to God in prayer requires a clear vision from the highlands of holiness and separation, the pure sky of a consecrated life.

### 3. Simple (vs. 7-8) – how you pray

Simplicity is also an important component of prayer. Prayer is difficult enough without complicating it with all sorts of preconceived ideas about how you should pray. Prayer is communicating with God as you would communicate with a friend. Prayer does not have to be drawn out and long. God is not impressed with our theology or our vocabulary or the volume we speak at or the number of words we use. The important issue is that you are communicating what is on your heart to God.

Be yourself. Be natural before God. Do not pretend to emotions you do not feel. Tell him whatever is on your heart and mind with whatever words are most natural to you. You do not have to speak to him in "religious" language about "spiritual" matters only ... Speak as naturally and as easily as you would to a friend, since God is just that.... This natural expression of yourself is the guarantee that you can go on to a creative, free, and mature relationship with God. -- John B. Coburn

A prayer is not holy chewing gum and you don't have to see how far you can stretch it. -- Lionel Blue

Never use a gallon of words to express a spoonful of thought.

Remember that prayer is not pleading with God to do something He really does not want to. God wants to spend time with you and get to know you. God loves you and wants only what is best for you. God will either give you what you ask, or something far better.

Prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance; it is laying hold of his highest willingness. -- Archbishop Trench

Don't ever tell John 'Tex' Teixeira that prayer doesn't work. Tex spent his life as a fisherman in the channels of the Hawaiian Islands. After a full day of fishing on a deceptively calm night in 1967, Tex was awakened by his panicked friends. The boat was sinking. By the time Tex got to the deck, there was nothing he could do except order everyone into the water. His lifeboat was gone so the eight men on board the fishing vessel had only life jackets and inner tubes to keep them afloat.

All eight of the men knew they were in big trouble. The currents in the channel were sweeping them into the open ocean. But as night approached it seemed that their salvation was near. Bouncing up and down in the inky sea, the men thought they could make out the lights of a boat in the distance. Two of the men decided to swim toward the lights. It turned out that they weren't boat lights at all. They were the airplane warning lights on the top of Koko Head, a far-distant mountain. The two men were never seen again.

By morning the situation had worsened. One of the inner tubes was losing air. The men had no food or water. The planes that passed overhead could not see them bobbing in the middle of the Pacific. It was then that Tex decided to call a prayer meeting. No one objected. With all hope gone, the group of tough, self-sufficient sailors had only one place to turn. They huddled together in their life jackets and inner tubes and, with loud cries, pleaded a simple prayer for God to intervene.

The moment the last man finished his prayer, Tex looked up. "A stick!" he cried out. The stick was standing vertically out of the water. It appeared to be a fishing buoy or a marker of some kind. If they could get to it perhaps someone might come along to check it and find them. At the very least, it might support the ones who were losing air in their inner tubes. Using all of their energy to fight the current, the men paddled toward the stick.

Suddenly the stick began to move rapidly in their direction. The six men stopped paddling, stunned and puzzled. Seconds later there was an incredible whoosh that seemed to pull the ocean out from under them. At the same moment, a monster emerged from the depths. It was a nuclear submarine. The hatch opened and the captain of the sub came to the observation deck as the men in the ocean screamed wildly. They had been rescued.

Huddled below deck and nursing hot coffee, the six tired survivors listened awestruck as the captain explained that it was against orders for him to surface his sub anywhere outside of Pearl Harbor and that he expected to face disciplinary action for what he had done. "But," he explained softly, "something beyond my control told me to go to the surface. I can't explain it. Something just told me to bring the sub up, right then and there. I did...and there you were."

#### 4. Structured (vs. 9-13) – what you pray

In this passage Jesus went on to say, "This, then, is how you should pray". He went on to pray a simple prayer as a model to be used in helping to guide our prayers. Structure is important because it reminds us of what we should and want to pray for.

Having an outline to follow is a good idea to help us stay on track. A helpful tool is praying ACTS – Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication. Praying through the Lord's Prayer is also a helpful tool to guide your prayers. Sometimes when I call someone I will write down all the things that need to be discussed so that I will not forget them. Writing down requests and keeping a prayer journal to see how God has answered your prayers is important.

Three North American Indians--a Navajo, a Hopi and an Apache--were speaking about how powerful their prayers were. The Navajo said, "You know, we Navajos pray for healing, and the patients get well about half the time." The Hopi said, "Well, we Hopis pray for rain, and it happens about 70 percent of the time." Finally, the Apache spoke up: "Yes, but we Apaches have the sunrise prayer dance, and it works every time."

How about all of you? What do you find that works well? Remember that the most important thing to prayer is that you do it. When you pray keep in Sincere, Secret, Simple and Structured. God is waiting to hear from you!

Brennan Manning tells the following story of an old man who was dying of cancer. The man's daughter had asked the local priest to come and pray with her father. When the priest arrived, he found the man lying in bed with his head propped up on two pillows and an empty chair beside his bed. The priest assumed that the old fellow had been informed of his visit. "I guess you were expecting me," he said. "No, who are you?" "I'm the new associate at your parish," the priest replied. "When I saw the empty chair, I figured you knew I was going to show up." "Oh yeah, the chair," said the bedridden man. "Would you mind closing the door?"

Puzzled, the priest shut the door. "I've never told anyone this, not even my daughter," said the man. "But all of my life I have never known how to pray. At the Sunday Mass I used to hear the pastor talk about prayer, but it always went right over my head... "I abandoned any attempt at prayer," the old man continued, "until one day about four years ago my best friend said to me, 'Joe, prayer is just a simple matter of having a conversation with Jesus. Here's what I suggest. Sit down on a chair, place an empty chair in front of you, and in faith see Jesus on the chair. It's not spooky because he promised, 'I'll be with you always.' Then just speak to him and listen in the same way you're doing with me right now." "So, Father, I tried it and I've liked it so much that I do it a couple of hours every day. I'm careful, though. If my daughter saw me talking to an empty chair, she'd either have a nervous breakdown or send me off to the funny farm."

The priest was deeply moved by the story and encouraged the old guy to continue on the journey. Then he prayed with him, anointed him with oil, and returned to the rectory. Two nights later the daughter called to tell the priest that her daddy had died that afternoon. "Did he seem to die in peace?" he asked. "Yes, when I left the house around two o'clock, he called me over to his bedside, told me one of his corny jokes, and kissed me on the cheek. When I got back from the store an hour later, I found him dead. But there was something strange, Father. In fact, beyond strange—kinda weird. Apparently, just before Daddy died, he leaned over and rested his head on a chair beside the bed."