

The Divine Conspiracy

“Prayer – The Sequel”

Matthew 7-11

February 19, 2012
The Reverend Fitz Neal

This is prayer: the Sequel. In his most famous sermon, Jesus returns to prayer. For him, prayer is not a topic to be discussed, nor a subject to be studied, but a practice so central that he changed prayer forever. Before Jesus, prayer was largely by rote, was formal, and was practiced three times a day - morning, noon and night. It was lengthy, long, drawn out; it was a duty.

After Jesus prayer is different. It is a relationship; it should not be by rote or ritualistic. It can and should be practiced anywhere at all times; it should be a place of personal encounter with God and a refuge.

If you look at the Sermon on the Mount structurally the Lord's Prayer - (actually it should be called the Disciples' Prayer – The Lord's Prayer is in John 17...). The Disciples' Prayer is right at the center of the Sermon.

Prayer is central to the life of discipleship. It is not a specialized practice for the few. It is the regular happy habit of all followers of Jesus. Prayer should neither feel like doing a 1,000 push-ups – something unattainable except by the 'super-spiritual', nor should prayer be a meandering through life with a few thoughts thrown in God's direction here and there – flabby, with no structure or discipline.

Prayer is easy to talk about more than we do! There have been many times that I've been with a group for prayer and we spent much more time sharing prayer requests than we did praying! We would talk for 45 minutes and pray for 3! How often do we say "I'll pray for you", more as a way of ending the conversation than by any real commitment – and then never pray for the person at all. Almost as though we are taking the Lord's name in vain?

Prayer

When it comes to prayer, the basics always apply:

- **Set aside a time and a place for prayer.** If at all possible make this a special place in your home. Make sure this is a practice for your whole family. This is NOT that hard to do, even when life is busy. As I reported something Dallas Willard once said to a mentee, "Ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life."¹
- **Pray out loud.** This is what keeps the mind from wandering. This doesn't mean praying out loud with others, necessarily. Some of us really have a hard time with that ... it makes some so self-conscious to pray in front of others that they just can't. What I'm suggesting here is praying out loud just between you and God. This was the norm in Jesus time.
 - Here's a freebie – try this with Bible reading, too. We are the first generation in history not to practice reading out loud as a regular habit. Winston Churchill, for instance read voraciously, but almost always out loud in his study.
 - I suggest that families read the Bible out loud together at home. I suggested this one time in another church, and a father came to me a month later and reported with wonder how their whole family life had changed ... his two daughters, a first and third grader at the time, loved, *loved* reading the Bible out loud with mom and dad. This led naturally to talking about prayer requests, which led – without planning it – to the family praying about those requests.
- **Form a prayer group.** What is it about a prayer group that works? Jesus *did* say, "*Where two or three are gathered together, there I am in the midst of them.*" Perhaps you could gather a few friends once a month for an evening of sharing requests and then make sure you pray! Or maybe you can meet with some fellow workers at the office a half hour early and pray once a week. There are some prayer-groups that meet regularly here at Columbia.

¹ Dallas Willard - spoken to John Ortberg

- I think we can make this too hard. Look, take the initiative – call up some friends, gather on some kind of regular basis, and pray for each other.

These are just a few reminders. I don't share them lightly. It's a growing conviction for me that one of the biggest gaps for churches today is a lack of any real prayer.

Prayer is our most important work. This is where God has invited us into his work of saving the lost. And let's never forget what God is up to: God is about the work of salvation for a messed up creation. God has invited all followers of Christ to join him in this work. The most practical and powerful way we do that is to be with God regularly in the work of prayer.

I call it work, yet earlier I talked about the relationship of it. Am I contradicting myself? No. There are few things more relationship-building than when we band together with others in accomplishing a satisfying and important task.

Worship is one of our tasks - it does make God known to the world. That's why the ancient ancestors of the church called it leiturgia - which means the work of the people.

Prayer is the other.

Prayer and Justice

Especially when we arrive at the place of justice. Last week we learned that justice is the goal of Christ's teaching. Justice is when God's will IS done in human affairs.

Justice is the goal of mercy and faith - it leads somewhere. God is saving the world! It begins at home in our relationships in our households, circles of friends and church. We are supposed to deal with ourselves first, applying God's grace to our failings until we are able to help our neighbors with their smaller ones.

This is the place to stand to move the world! This is where the world is changed. It starts small. But then it DOES lead to the big issues!

That's why Jesus comes back to prayer. Our relationships are where justice begins. Prayer is where justice goes forth. This is THE post to which we have been assigned by our Master – we stand between God and a world in need. What God calls us to do in that post is pray before we do anything else.

And let's remember one thing: it's not that God is limited to our prayers in order to work; it's that God has invited us into his work through prayer. God is at work in the world. We join him in that work first and foremost through prayer.

THAT'S why Jesus is simple and direct here. He issues a command, not a suggestion: *"Ask, seek, knock. For everyone who asks receives, whoever seeks finds, and when you knock, things open up."*

Here are the practical applications:

- **Ask** - be specific!
 - A prayer Journal is important here. Write your requests down.
- **Seek** - search things out. This is the reflective, Bible-shaped, a wide awake practice of faith.
 - Is there a part of the world God is drawing you toward? For me it's North Africa. I don't know why but I've always been drawn to pray for those countries.
 - Issues that make you pound the table? I hope there ARE! List them! PRAY!
- **Knock** - This doesn't mean a polite tapping. It means a pounding on heaven's door!

You put these three together as Jesus presents them and what you get is what Dale Bruner calls aerobic prayer - it is brief, frequent and intense! And it's the kind of prayer that brings God's will into life. It's the work of justice. Like last week, this is a place of leverage – given a fulcrum and a big enough lever, one person can move the world. This is a place to stand to move the world ... prayer.

A Prayer Box

Have you ever seen a prayer box? A few weeks ago at the funeral for Linda Walters, I saw one for the first time. Here's a picture, and here it is.

It has a small opening in the top, with no way to retrieve anything that's put in it. The way it works is that you take a piece of paper, write a prayer on it, fold it up and put it in the prayer box. No one takes the prayers out and looks at them. No one takes them and prays over them. They are known only to the pray-er and to God.

I think it's a wonderful symbol of what Jesus is talking about here - simple, honest, coming to the Father with our needs and the needs of others. Since God alone knows what you are asking for – ask away! He knows how to answer or not answer, or have us wait.

Here's an explanation of the box...

The Prayer Box – My Story

My story begins in early summer, 2002 with my son starting his recovery from alcohol addiction. He asked me to build him a “God Box” (also referred to as a Prayer Box). It was to be about five inches on all sides with a small hole in the top through which a written request to God could be placed. The message would be totally personal, could not be seen by anyone (but God) for any reason. Well, with this box built, I placed the first prayer, which said simply, “Dear God, save my son.” Soon, the order was for six more boxes, then two, four, and so on for the past nine years. As of Christmas 2011, my son has given out over 150 Prayer Boxes to friends facing problems of all kinds, worries or fears or the unknown, or to anyone he feels could benefit. Oh yes, and on November 1, 2011, he celebrated his eighth year of sobriety.

The material used to build the Prayer Box is from old discarded fencing. It is severely weathered, split, generally falling apart and has no commercial value. With the rough face of these boards shaved away, revealed is the most beautiful range of colors and patterns that I have ever seen, certainly not found in new wood. All boxes have a clear finish with no stain ... no steps are taken to hide the aging process or improve upon the

beauty that God intended. The old is made new; the promise is that we too, can have a fresh start.

Lent is right around the corner – it begins this week with Ash Wednesday.

I'm asking that we take the season of Lent as a church and make Thursday our day of prayer every week for Lent. For those who are able and interested, I'm asking that you fast for one meal that day, preferably lunch - and instead of eating or going out to lunch with friends - pray. Just skip one meal in order to focus your attention on God and what God is calling you to pray for. Don't worry – you'll get hungry but you're only skipping one meal. Every time you have a pang of hunger, rather than get a snack – pray.

The Church will be open for prayer on Thursday Mornings at 6:00 a.m. and at noon. I'll be there at noon. Anybody who wants is welcome to come and pray.

Let's do this thing – ask, search, knock.