

Matthew 6:5 “And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁷ “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that 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.

⁹ “Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

¹⁰ Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread.

¹² And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

We Believe: Prayer

Matthew 6:5-13

Prayer is often described as an obligation, and I think that is a big mistake. When we see prayer as an obligation, something to feel guilty about when we don't do it, that spoils our entire feeling about prayer. Too many books and preachers tell us we should pray. Why don't we pray more often? How is it we don't have time to pray? It's like your mother asking why you never call. We picture God disappointed in us because we never call, and when we do, we try to get off the phone as quickly as possible.

Let's be clear. Prayer is NOT something we do because we ought to. It is NOT something we do because God is disappointed with us when we don't. Prayer is not an obligation, it is a privilege. Prayer should be understood the way Jesus teaches us to understand the Sabbath. Taking a day of rest each week is a gift, not an obligation. As Jesus puts it, the Sabbath was made for us, not we for the Sabbath. We're not supposed to get legalistic about the Sabbath, and we're not supposed to get legalistic about prayer. It is made for us, not us for prayer. It's a gift, not a duty. It's a chance, not a burden – a chance to come into the presence of the Creator who invites us to call him Abba, Father.

The first thing I want us to hear in this sermon is that we need to stop feeling guilty when we do not pray as we ought, as though God is disappointed that we haven't called lately. Jesus did not give us the Lord's Prayer because God needs us to pray to him. He gave us the Lord's Prayer as a gift, a chance to talk to his heavenly Father who has adopted us so that he is our heavenly Father, also. Stop feeling guilty.

Now, we also need to be clear that not taking advantage of this gift, this chance, is also like not taking advantage of observing a Sabbath. Without a day of rest, thinking we can keep going on our own strength, we dry up, we weaken, we burn out, we grow distant from those closest to us. The Sabbath may be made for us, but when we don't take the opportunity to rest, we are the ones who lose, and prayer is that way, too. No one should come into God's presence because we feel like we ought to. We come into God's presence because *we can*. It doesn't meet God's needs, it meets ours. Sleep doesn't need us; we don't go to bed at night because we ought to. We sleep because we can, it's a gift, when we don't, everything else in life gets harder. Prayer is the same way. We pray because we can, and when we don't, everything else in life gets harder.

Martha Moore-Keish teaches at Columbia Seminary, and has written a very good book on the meaning of prayer. She says,

"When asked to describe prayer, many Christians portray it as a conversation between a person and God. Prayer is surely a kind of conversation. It involves genuine give and take, genuine ability to [listen] to the other. This underscores the importance of silence, of listening, in prayer. ... The image of prayer as conversation helps us to see that praying involves real [relationship]. But this is not a relationship of equal parties; it is a relationship of creature to Creator."¹

Just because we are able to have a conversation with God does not mean that we see ourselves as equals with God. It is more like placing ourselves in the arms of the one who made us and sustains us at every moment. Our quote on the front of the bulletin reminds that, like everything else in our faith lives, we can't even pray without the Spirit working to help us. We do not know how to pray as we ought...but the good news is that we don't have to worry about that because the Spirit of Jesus Christ intercedes for us, turning our meager thoughts and words into holy conversation with the Most High God. As Moore-Keish says, *In prayer, we may speak, but eventually we realize that the words we offer are not even ours to begin with. They come to us from beyond ourselves.*

John Calvin said that prayer is the chief exercise of faith, the first and most important part of living out our faith. And just as faith is a gift to us from God, so is prayer. The Spirit not only intercedes for us, he actually inspires us to begin with. Again, Moore-Keish says it well: *If prayer is the "chief exercise of faith," then it is the activity by which God's Spirit works through us to draw us more and more closely into knowledge of God's goodness. Prayer in the end is not an isolated dimension of Christian life, but a basic attitude that shapes the whole of Christian living.*

¹ Moore-Keish, Martha L. (2010-11-05). *Christian Prayer for Today*. Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

She ends her book with these words: *This is who we are, at the core of our being: beloved creatures, intended not for estrangement but for communion with God, filled with the life-giving Spirit, restored by the work of Christ, and set free to live in the world as if this were truly so.*

So, if I may, I'd like to share a personal story that summarizes for me what prayer is about. All of the theological explanation is fine, but, deep down inside me, this is the memory I have that comes to me more often than any other when I pray. I have just turned 13 years old. My parents, sisters and I have driven to visit the Fulks family in Ohio. One evening, we are all gathered at Uncle Ross's farm for supper. The adults are at the house, men sitting outside talking, women inside preparing the meal (this was 1967, and that's how it was back then). My sisters, cousins and I are in the barn playing, climbing into the hayloft, having a great time. It is as though it were yesterday.

I am sitting on the tractor, and some cousins are in the hayloft and a half-dozen are to my right, standing in the feeding trough where the cows eat. Some loose boards lie on the floor of the trough, and the kids are standing on those boards. Suddenly a couple of cousins begin to scream, and then a couple more. I look over and see wasps flying in a cloud around them. Everyone realizes they've disturbed a wasps' nest under those loose boards and we all begin to run in a screaming panic out of the barn.

As I jump down from the tractor, I realize that Lori, the youngest cousin in the barn at 4 years old, is stuck in the feeding trough. She can't get out and she's getting stung over and over again, and she's crying and screaming. I rush over, lift her out of the trough, and carry her as fast as I can go from the barn to the house...maybe fifty yards, but it seemed like a mile. The wasps are chasing us. As I'm running across a two-by-twelve board that serves as a bridge over a tiny brook, I feel a wasp land on my neck. Somehow I manage to take one arm out from under Lori, swat the wasp off my neck, and stay on that board.

The men see us all running and screaming, and figure out what is going on. Most of them begin to scatter, except for one man: Uncle Dan, Lori's daddy, who is standing there, with his arms out, ready to take his daughter from me. I run toward Dan and hand Lori off to him as I continue to run away from those relentless wasps, around to the other side of the house, until finally, the wasps give up. Uncle Dan takes Lori in the house where her mother and aunts tend to her while Uncle Dan kills the wasps still on her. She had stings from head to toe.

To this day, I am Lori's hero, and she tells me so every time I see her, including this week when we talked about this story. But the clearest and most important picture in my mind from that whole event is of Uncle Dan, standing there with his arms held out, ready to take Lori from me as I ran by. He is Lori's father; he will do what I cannot; he will take care of her. All I can do was give her to her father.

Now, we can talk about all sorts of formal theological doctrine about prayer but, deep down in my heart, for me, prayer is running toward my heavenly father like I ran toward Uncle Dan. He is there; he knows what's going on; he knows what I need; and he stands with his arms out to do for me what I cannot do for myself, whether it is someone I am praying for that I can lay in his arms; whether it is my own burden of worry, or pain, or guilt that I can let go of, knowing he will know what to do with it. This is the experience in my life that most closely resembles my understanding of prayer. Me in a panic, my best isn't good enough to handle the situation; all I can do is run – run away from the problem, the threat, and run toward God, knowing that's all I have to do, run toward God, and God will handle it from there.

Anne Lamott says that there are only three kinds of prayer necessary for the Christian life, and each one can be as simple as one word. Those three one-word prayers are: HELP, THANKS, and, WOW.

Asking for HELP is like running from the wasps toward the house.

THANKS is our gratitude when the cry for help is answered.

And, WOW is for those moments when we look back and see that, in spite of how poorly we prayed, God was there anyway, providentially at work, bringing good out of bad, putting us in the right place at the right time to pick up someone stuck in a feeding trough being stung all over by wasps, and giving us the ability to somehow carry them to their Father.

Wow.