

September 21, 1980
Matthew 6:5-13(NE)
Norman S. Ream

PRAYER AND ITS USES

"Pray without ceasing." --I Thessalonians 5:17

I dislike repeating myself, but I think it is again necessary to preface the sermon with a word concerning the series of which it is a part. It is a series in which, for reasons I have explained before, I am sharing with you something of what I do not believe as well as that which I do believe. If, therefore, anything I say in the first half of this sermon tends to alarm you, bear with me until I get to the latter half of the sermon where I will seek to be more positive.

This morning, as a slight change of pace, I would like at the very outset to make a positive affirmation. I strongly believe in prayer and its efficacy, and I do not believe that any prayer, if it is sincere and honest, if it comes from a pure heart and right spirit, can ever be considered wrong or be looked on with disfavor by God. Assuming that all prayer is of that sort, I would strongly agree with St. Alphonse Ligouri, founder of the Redemptorist order of the Roman Catholic Church, who once wrote,

"No one was ever lost who prayed; no one was ever saved who did not pray."

Prayer is of central importance to the religious life and, therefore, of central importance to all of man's life.

II

I have often heard Protestants criticize Roman Catholics for praying to Mary and to the saints. But if we do not believe that Jesus is God, then we ought not pray to Jesus. God is the giver of every good and perfect gift. For that reason I do not believe we should direct our prayers to Jesus, but always to God.

Jesus directed all of his prayers to the Father and never suggested that we pray to anyone else. The object of prayer for Paul is always God and never Christ. All the collects of the Western Church are directed to God, in the name of Jesus Christ. They are never prayers to Jesus. Because habits are difficult to break, I do not believe we should teach our children to pray to Jesus, but to God.

Secondly, because prayer has a special function, which we will discuss more fully later, I do not believe it should be used to instruct God. I must say that many ordained clergymen I have known, as well as laymen, tend to use it that way. Their prayers are often not much more than a recitation of world events and a plea to God to save mankind from the consequences of those events. I am sure you are acquainted with such prayers:

"Lord, there is a typhoon in Japan, a plague in India, an earthquake in Guatemala; save thy people from these disasters."

If we believe God to be omniscient then he knows all of these things and there is no need to tell him about them. We have more important uses for prayer.

I certainly do not believe that we should use prayer to try to get from God what we want, as I pointed out in the first sermon of this series,

"I... do not believe God can be wheedled, and cajoled, and begged until finally he will give us all that we pray for... I do not believe God is the kind of God who will give us what we want if we just ask for it often enough, and I hope he is not that kind of God. I want him to give me what he in his superior wisdom knows is good for me and for my loved ones, not what I in my ignorance am often tempted to ask for."

Prayer should not seek the satisfaction of our own will, but of God's will. An example of such misuse of prayer comes from the year 1880 when an officer of the Salvation Army in England was bidding farewell to seven women lieutenants who were embarking for work in America. This was his prayer:

"Lord, these ladies are going to America to preach the Gospel. If they are fully given up to it, be with them and bless them and grant them success. But if they are not faithful, drown 'em, Lord, drown 'em!"

We either smile or frown at such a prayer, but forget that many of the prayers in the Book of Psalms are of that precise kind. Psalm 55 is but one example. Speaking of his enemies, David prays:

"May death strike them, and may they perish in confusion, may they go down alive into Sheol; for their homes are haunts of evil."

You never find such a prayer on the lips of Jesus.

Finally, I do not believe that prayer should consist only of words, especially great quantities of words. As Jesus put it in the Sermon on the Mount:

"In your prayers do not go babbling on like the heathen, who imagine that the more they say, the more likely they are to be heard. Do not imitate them."

But many Christians do!

The text of this sermon comes from the words of Paul, "Pray without ceasing", or as it is translated in the New English Bible, "Pray continually". If Paul means that we should direct our words to God unceasingly, then I will opt for the conclusion of Jesus that that is mere "babbling". But I do not believe that is what Paul had in mind. Paul had a much deeper understanding of prayer and the spiritual life.

III

That brings us to the positive and to some assertions concerning what I do believe about prayer. The root meaning of the word "pray" is, of course, to ask, beg, entreat, implore. However, in Christian prayer everything depends on what it is we ask for.

Here we look not so much at what the Bible says about prayer, but at the example of Jesus' own prayers, especially the greatest of all models, the Lord's Prayer. Heed what it emphasizes--not man and his need, but God and his will; "Hallowed be thy name", "Thy kingdom come", "Thy will be done". Secondly it asks for the bare necessities of life: "Bread for the day". Then it asks for that which shall preserve the fellowship between man and God; "Forgive us our sins", "Deliver us from evil", "Do not leave us when we are tempted".

This, for me, is the primary purpose of prayer--to establish a meaningful fellowship with God and continually maintain it. The biggest misuse of prayer is that we are so constantly talking to God and so seldom listening. Our prayers so easily become monologues in which God has no part.

When Paul admonished the Christians of Thessaloniki to "pray without ceasing", he was advising them to keep their thoughts fixed on God continually, not to talk unceasingly. Only a monk in a monastery can do that. But you and I, caught up in our busy, technological society, need regularly to pause and bring our attention back to God, or he can easily be lost to us.

My own interest in prayer dates back many, many years. I have been advocating the use of meditative prayer and reflection during most of my ministry. For five years I met with a group of skeptics in another church urging them to engage in what the saints call "the prayer of simple regard", where we take moments throughout the day and send fleeting darts of our thought Godward just to remind us that this is God's world and we are the children of God.

Finally one day an engineer in that group told me that he had actually tried this method. His boss had phoned him and told him he was coming to see him in a few moments and his boss was a very difficult man. No one seemed able to get along with him. My friend was upset by the thought of the coming interview and then he thought, "I will do what Norm Ream keeps recommending. It certainly can't do any harm." So he closed his office door and just for a couple of minutes he composed himself, put himself into the presence of God and reminded himself that God was always with him. He reported to me later, "Norm, it really works. I had a great meeting with my boss and now we're getting along splendidly." I won't guarantee that kind of result 100% of the time, but I do know that this method of prayer does work. It creates and maintains a deep and meaningful fellowship with God.

There is only one way in which you can find out whether or not it works; you must try it. You don't have to tell God your problem, he knows what you need before you ask. You don't need to tell God what he should do, he is far wiser than you are. Just put yourself in his presence, become aware that he is there, that he cares, that he desires to help you. Let him have His way instead of you always seeking your way.

In my own life of prayer I seldom use any words. I seldom ask God for anything except for forgiveness and for insight. Rather I use prayer to become aware that I am not alone, God is with me. The better I come to know him, the better I will know myself and what I can and ought to do, and I try very hard always to conclude my prayer, "Thy will be done." That, I confess, is not always easy.

IV

Prayer has been a very rich and meaningful part of my religious life. It is, I believe, the Christian's most neglected resource. It is the means by which we have fellowship with God and avail ourselves of his power. It is, as Gerald Heard has put it, "The supreme mental activity of man."