

"STANDING IN THE NEED OF PRAYER"
April 29, 1990

TEXT: Luke 10:42 "One thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her."

I am not going to embarrass anyone by asking for a show of hands. But I wonder . . . How many know your cholesterol level? Judging from past conversations, I would guess that quite a few of us do. But it has not always been like that. Not so very long ago, most of us did not even know what cholesterol was. We certainly did not know how much we had.

In recent years, however, we have learned a great many things. We have learned, for instance, that a high level of cholesterol in the blood increases our risk of heart attack and stroke. These fatty particles can stick to the walls of our arteries, and can slowly shut down the flow of blood. We do not feel it, but it can happen just the same. Proper diet helps, but it does not guarantee our safety because our bodies manufacture cholesterol all by themselves. You might say it is a by-product of living. And the surprising thing is this. Even if we manage to reduce our cholesterol level, we may feel no different. But we shall be healthier just the same.

Now, a similar kind of thing can happen spiritually. John Sanford, in his book, *The Kingdom Within*, writes about a well on a farm where his family used to spend their summers. It was a good well, but no one used it after a community water system was installed. Years later, when someone tried to draw water from the well, they found, to their surprise, that it was dry as a bone. As long as the well was being used, it was continually refilled by water which filtered in through hundreds of tiny little openings in the soil. But, after years of disuse, those openings became stopped up, and the water all evaporated.

Now, it is my contention that that is what often happens when it comes to prayer. When we do not pray on any kind of regular basis, there can be a clogging of the channels somehow. You might call it a kind of spiritual hardening of the arteries. We can not feel that either, but it happens just the same. Like atherosclerosis, it, too, is a by-product of living. And it is happening to more and more people now-a-days because we are not the people of prayer our ancestors used to be.

Now some of you may be thinking, "Yes, but where does he think we are going to find the time?" When I read this morning's scripture, many of you may have found yourself sympathizing with Martha. There she was, rushing frantically around, getting the meal ready, trying to make their guests feel at home, while her sister, Mary, just sat there at Jesus' feet. Most of us probably know how Martha felt because we, too, never seem to have enough time. Not even enough to do the things we have to do. Certainly not enough to spend in prayer.

Yet, it was Mary, and not Martha, whom Jesus praised. In fact he chided Martha rather gently. He said, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her."

In her book, What Happens When Women Pray, Evelyn Christenson compares life without prayer to someone who vacuums a large room without plugging the vacuum into a wall socket. She writes, "We work, we pull, we struggle, we plan until we are utterly exhausted, but we forget to plug into the source of our power."

Your see, it is precisely because our days are so filled with activity, because we are so hurried and so harried, that we need our time with God more than ever. The other day I read about a time in 1863, when the outcome of the Civil War was still very much in doubt, and President Lincoln was coming back from a horseback ride with his friend and aide, Noah Brooks. Noticing the president's obvious fatigue, Mr. Brooks suggested that he take a rest when they got back to the White House. And Lincoln mused, "Rest? I don't know about 'the rest' as you call it. I suppose it's good for the body, but the tired part of me is inside and out of reach."

How often we feel like that, too. The tired part of us is inside. But it is not out of reach. Not out of prayer's reach. The disciples knew that. That is why they said to Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray." I wonder if you realize how strange that request sounds. As pious Jews they had been praying all their lives. And, yet, when they saw Jesus pray, they knew they had been missing something. Something very special.

They had committed their lives to following Christ, but by now they realized that they could not do so unless they could rely on more than just their own resources. They knew they needed something more. Something they saw so very vividly in him. They saw that, where they were too often timid and afraid, Jesus had a calm and trusting faith. Where they were frustrated by the needs of those they could not seem to help, Jesus was able to heal them and make them whole. Where they sometimes became angry and resentful, he was able to love everyone, even his enemies. They saw that where they compromised and denied, Jesus followed his Father's will without hesitation. Where they held back, no sacrifice was too great for him. Where they schemed for places

of honor in his kingdom, he humbly served all those who needed him. And they knew that one reason for the tremendous difference between their lives and their master's was because he prayed in a way they did not.

It is the same with us today. Like the disciples, you and I cannot expect to follow Christ without something more than just our own puny human strength. We, too, need the power that comes only from a regular life of prayer. The problem is that, for too many, religion amounts to little more than some sort of intellectual assent. Like 97% of all Americans, they are ready to say, "I believe God exists." But that is the end of it.

They do not really believe in this God of theirs. There is no sense of any personal relationship. No obligation to Him, no trust in Him, no love for Him. They believe He exists, but their belief makes no real difference in their lives. If someone could prove there is no God, they would have to change their beliefs but not their way of life.

Real belief in God means more than intellectual assent. It means a real relationship between persons. It means trust, and love, and commitment. And it makes a difference in our lives.

In his book, The Adventure of Prayer, Donald J. Campbell writes, "The difference might be illustrated thus: A man moves into our neighborhood, taking the house opposite to ours. We hear about it first, then one day we see him going to work. We now believe without any trouble that he exists, but this new knowledge makes very little difference to us. If he were to disappear the next day, it would matter very little to us. But presently we meet this new neighbor. We soon find, after talking with him and after frequent visits, that he is much more than just a man that exists. He becomes a personal friend, then a trusted friend, then we find that we love him. Gradually we find that his thoughts, his standards, his wishes, are influencing our lives. If he were to disappear now, it would make a world of difference to us. He has been a wonderful influence for good on us; he has brought us new faith and courage, and a better and happier way of living. We are far beyond the intellectual belief that he exists. We now believe in the man with our whole beings.

"So," says Campbell, "daily prayers are the daily visits which change belief that God exists into belief in God as a loved and trusted friend and guide. It changes vague religion into vital, personal faith."

That is the kind of faith we need if we want to live life at its best. That is the relationship we need in order to be what God calls us to be. We can ignore it. We can deny it. We can hide behind a flurry of activity or behind a passion for things.