

God's Mailbox

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The question for the day is this, “Why do we pray?”

Can you imagine what kind of relationship would exist in a marriage where two partners didn't talk to each other? What if one partner talked but the other refused to answer?

Today, I would like to talk to you about the primary thing that nourishes our relationship with God. This is basic, fundamental stuff. Something we should all feel the need for.

When Einstein was once asked about future research, he said, “Find out about prayer. Someone must find out about prayer.”

Back in the 80's, there was a movie, “Let It Ride.” – The previews showed Richard Dreyfus on his knees praying, and you could see the clubhouse and the race track in the distance. A scene in the movie had him throwing money in the air and saying “God likes me! He really, really likes me!” Do we do that? Do you feel closer to God, blessed, when your 401K goes up?

Do we feel close to God because our prayers were answered when we found a parking place, or the light changed so we wouldn't be late for an appointment?

Do we regard prayer as something we send from the visible world into the invisible world like an email in hopes that someone will receive it?

Do we use prayer as a good luck charm? Remember years ago the song about the hot-rod Lincoln? One of the lines went, “Topped a hill, passed a truck, whispered a prayer just for luck.” When we do that, we regard prayer as a form of transaction. “I prayed this, now you have to do that.”

We humans want so badly to take complex issues and make them simple. Maybe we want to reduce something complicated down to its lowest common denominator so we can put it on the shelf and not having it hanging over our heads. We do that with God all the time.

The theological writer Philip Yancey interviewed many people to find out what they thought about prayer. He got all kinds of answers, but all too many said they didn't really find it satisfying. They rarely felt the presence of God. Yancey said he encountered a huge gap between the theory of prayer and the practice of prayer.

Advances in technology confuse our feelings about prayer. In centuries past, farmers prayed for rain and today we watch the weather channel and work with our irrigation systems. We used to cry out to God when a child fell ill. Now we pick up the phone. In developing third world countries people spend little time wondering about prayer and more time actually praying. Prosperity dilutes prayer. How can you pray for daily bread when your pantry is fully stocked?

Einstein was right. We need to learn about prayer. How do we learn to pray? Simple answer, we learn to pray by praying. A child learns to talk by imitating the parent who speaks to him in a language he doesn't understand yet. Prayer is where God and humankind meet and it involves 2 questions: Why doesn't God act the way I want him to and why don't I act the way God wants me to? Prayer is where those two questions come together.

How much of your prayer is about you and how much is about God? We need to understand what God wants from us more than what we want from God. No matter what you may think your needs are, your greatest need is a personal encounter with God. Maybe you think it is useless just to pray about God when there is so much you need to ask for. Understand God, and just maybe your requests will start sounding like God's requests. Praying tells us who and what God is as well as what God wants. Prayer is where you encounter God; not just sitting in a pew and listening to someone preaching from a pulpit.

In order to approach God in prayer, we must come to him just as we are. How often do we go to God in prayer without bringing out our inner self? Without admitting how helpless we really are? Pretending we have no faults? Bringing your ego into prayer is like hitting a brick wall. You're just talking into the wind, with no one listening. We are human and God is God. When you truly accept that, the conversation with God begins. It is a real humbling experience and we will not connect to God if we are too proud to be humbled. God wants us to be our authentic self, just as we are. It is so liberating to know that God encourages me to face into my dark side in my prayers. Know that you can trust God with your secrets.

Prayer is the gift of the Spirit. We are empowered to pray. Often we wonder how to pray, when to pray, and what to pray. We can become very concerned about methods and techniques of prayer. But finally it is not we who pray but the Spirit who prays in us.

Paul says (Romans 8:26-27): "The Spirit ... comes to help us in our weakness, for when we do not know how to pray properly, then the Spirit personally makes our petitions for us in groans that cannot be put into words; and he who can see into all hearts knows what the Spirit means because the prayers that the Spirit makes for God's holy people are always in accordance with the mind of God". These words explain why the Spirit is called "the Consoler."

Don't worry about having the right words. God hears more than just words. He hears what you feel and think. He knows the deepest parts of you that you never make known to others. With casual friends, we reveal and discuss casual things. The deeper the discussion becomes, the deeper the friendship. How deep is your relationship to God? You want to really talk with God? Don't hold anything back. He wants the real you, not something you place before him like a billboard and say, "Here I am, this is all you get!" And yet we want Him to reveal all of Himself to us. What hypocrisy we try to sell! We must trust God with what He already knows. Ever see a person putting up the front of doing something wonderful and generous when all along you know how rotten he really is? You say defiantly to yourself "You don't fool me! I know who you really are." Could God see us with such defiance? He could; you're not fooling Him; but He doesn't. He forgives. The paradox of prayer is that it requires a serious effort on our part while at the same time it can only be received as a gift. Our prayers cannot organize, plan, or manipulate God. And without a discipline of prayer, we cannot receive Him, either. Prayer takes practice.

I spoke earlier about prayer requests. Is it wrong to go to the Father with requests? If we are following Jesus example, remember His prayer in the garden. It was all requests. But it was all put in the context of working within God's will. We do not tell God things he does not already know. We don't remind Him of things he has forgotten. He is simply waiting for us to care about things He cares about already. Jesus says He no longer calls us servants, because a servant does not know the master's business. Instead, He calls us friends because He has passed on to us everything the Father passed to him. We must know the master's business. Prayer does that for us. We should be in a partnership, a tight friendship with prayer, because prayer is the language of that friendship. That partnership should be so tight we can't see who is doing what, God or the human partner.

We should ask God to show us what He is doing today and tells us how we can be part of it.

John 15:7 says: "If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask what you will and it will be given to you." Abiding in Christ means staying in contact with Him. You must do it deliberately. Like all relationships, it requires work. Arrange your life around time for prayer.

How many of us are baseball fans? How many of us have been to a professional ball park? Imagine the last time you went. If you went with someone, you probably shared the feelings of excitement when you saw the crowds, when you walked up the entrance ramp and caught your first glimpse of the field, when the players came out. Can you remember what the crowd sounded like? Chances are, everyone was on about the same page. So, maybe you went by yourself. Did that diminish the enjoyment somewhat? It would for me. What if the people sitting around you were busy talking about food, cars, their last trip to the doctor? Would you be distracted? Maybe. What a blessing to have someone with you who is seeing the same thing, sharing the same feelings. Does prayer do that for us? Should we ask God to help us see what He is seeing? Try this; next time you have a request, try to envision why the request is needed. Look into the background and see why it matters to you. Maybe that 'why' would put you closer to what God sees rather than the request itself. If we ask and don't get what we asked for, ask why. Ask yourself what is it that I really need? Ask why your request doesn't fit God's will. Talk to God, really talk to Him, and then listen. Keep asking why and build on the answer you get. Hopefully, you and God will soon be looking at the same thing. Like the marriage example I mentioned in the beginning, relationship is the key.

What about requests that simply have no answer? We ask for an end to hunger, end to war, better lives for others. Yes, God wants that, too. So many tragedies are because people make the evil or wrong choice. It's why the holocaust happened. Think of life as a symphony. God is the composer. Christ is the conductor. The Holy Spirit brings the musicians together in harmony with the composer. But some don't listen to the melody. They play their own version, use their own rhythm.

But do we ask why did he not prevent the earthquake, the tidal wave, the hurricane? These are things over which we have no control and are not the result of man's sinfulness. Why do they happen? I don't have a clue! I have no answer for you as to why God lets these things happen, but He does want us to talk to Him

about them. I don't know the correct explanation. But I know what the incorrect answer sounds like. It's not because God has stopped loving us! One of the greatest themes in the bible is that God identifies with suffering. If you doubt it, just look at the cross. In a world of pain, how could we worship a God who is immune to pain?

Should we wrestle with God? You bet! Tell Him your disappointment. If you hate something, tell Him! Demand an explanation! God is big enough to take your anger and He knows that sometimes anger is needed to get it all out where you can see it. Be angry, but ask for understanding. Always try to see it through His eyes. The bible is full of protests lifted up to God telling Him that justice and mercy do not rule the earth. So, in your anger, know that you are in the company of the prophets. They were angry, just like you. But their faith endured. Ask God to keep your faith in Him alive.

I sometimes have the sense that I pray and no one is listening on the other end. We know that God cares for us more than we care for ourselves. He does not play guessing games with us. If the spiritual dryness we feel is because of some failing on our part, He will make it clear to us. Keep praying! Don't toy with vague doubts. Clear your mind and listen for His small still voice.

Christ simply asked that you give him your whole self and He will give you a new self. The hard part is handing yourself over to him, but then the new self is the easy part, the happy part. You won't have to worry about doing the right thing; it will be part of your natural self and you will not have to give up any part of it to be happy.

We find the strength and courage to do this by communicating with God thru prayer. That's when we will look at God and the world in a different way. If your life has been a long, endless bad dream, faith and prayer will change that and it will be the most beautiful morning of your life.

So, when people ask you, "Why do you pray?" The best answer a Christian can give is, "Because Jesus prayed."

If Jesus is not the main issue in your life, talk to Him. He's already there waiting and he's ready to listen.

Amen