

Prayer

Psalm 139

Philippians 4:6

“The proper way for one to pray”
Said Deacon Lemuel Keyes
“And the only proper attitude is
Down upon his knees.”

“Nay I should say the way to pray”
Said Reverend Dr. Wise
Is standing straight with outstretched arms
And rapt and upturned eyes.”

“Oh no, no, no” said Elder Snow
“Such posture is too proud.
A man should pray with eyes fast closed
And head contritely bowed.”

“It seems to me his hands should be
Astutely clasped in front
With both thumbs pointing toward the ground”
Said Reverend Samuel Hunt.

“Last year I fell in Hodgkins well
Headfirst” said Cyrus Brown.
“With both my heels a’stickin’ up,
My head a’pointin’ down.

An’ I made a prayer right there an’ then
Best prayer I ever said.
The prayingest prayer I ever prayed
A-standin’ on my head.”

Prayer is such a big subject with so many directions in which one can go that we can only engage in “surface scratching” in a Sunday morning message. We could spend a couple of sessions just talking about what God has revealed about himself that makes his perspective so different from ours. I’ll limit

myself to quickly discussing just two aspects of God that are important for us to consider. One is how complete his knowledge of you is. We just read Psalm 139; some of the things we found out were:

-He knows when you sit and when you rise

-He observes your going out and lying down

-He perceives your thoughts from afar

-Before a word is on your tongue, he knows it completely

-He saw your unformed body before you came into existence

-All of the days ordained for you were written in his book before one of them came to be

Jesus told us that God even knows the number of hairs on our heads. In my case that's not as spectacular a feat as it was when I had a thicker head of hair but it's impressive nevertheless.

That's amazing, intimate knowledge of some of the most secret things about you. Now multiply that by 7,612,587,874, the number that my computer told me this morning is the current estimated world population. God knows those same things and more about everyone else as well as you. That's whatever is beyond incomprehensible!

The other thing I want you to reflect on about God is that, while we are creatures of time, he is not. Second Peter 3:8 puts it this way:

With the Lord, a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.

God's vantage point is all-time-encompassing. We'll never completely understand that, but there it is. Imagine how different things must look from that perspective. Even I would have much better judgment if I could see the end from the beginning.

The Bible reveals God as a being who is incomprehensible and awesome and holy. You'd expect someone like that to be unapproachable except for this: for reasons known only to him, he's chosen to love us and to care what happens to us. Reading through the Old Testament one sees a picture of God as one longing for his people to love him and be in close relationship with him. It's knowing that that allows us to "approach God's throne of grace with confidence" as the Hebrews writer puts it. Prayer is the means by which we do that. It's our point of contact between the seen and unseen worlds.

We can learn something about how God feels about things by looking at Jesus' attitudes. One thing that really irritated him was wrongly motivated prayer. The celebrities of the Jewish culture in which Jesus lived were the religious leaders of the day. They did a lot of public posturing to let everyone know how devout they were. In Matthew 6 Jesus is quoted

"When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you they have received their reward

in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

It certainly makes sense that if God is looking for a close loving relationship with us he'd be put off by prayer that is just for show or public ceremony. That was the point of that silly little poem I quoted for you. Cyrus Brown with his "heels a'sticken' up" and his "head a'pointin' down" was the one who was really reaching out to God.

It's not possible to talk in any depth about prayer without considering the part that faith plays. Christianity is based on faith. At first that would seem to be its greatest weakness; how can we be sure of something that demands blind belief? As we walk with the Lord, faith begins to be backed up by experience.

When I was growing up we were all "free range kids," meaning we probably had way more freedom to wander about than was good for us. Sometimes I think it's a wonder that any of us survived to adulthood with all of the things we got into. There was a pond in our neighborhood that drew us like a magnet in the early winter. As soon as it got a skin of ice on it there'd be kids trying to decide if the ice was thick enough to play on. We'd start by throwing rocks, bricks, chunks of wood, anything we could find that was kind of heavy onto the ice to see if it broke through. Soon kids would be stepping gingerly on the shore ice. If that didn't seem too rubbery, eventually one brave or foolish youngster would venture out further. If he didn't fall through, our faith in the thickness of the ice would have grown to where we were all out there. In much the same way we gain faith in God as we experience walking with him. Hebrews 11:6 tells us "Without faith it is impossible to please Him." The big question is, faith in what?

Have you ever prayed for something and it didn't come to pass? I'd be surprised if you said "No!" Did anyone tell you that your prayer wasn't answered because of your lack of faith?

In my now fairly long life I've known many people to express a sort of equation: prayer plus a certain amount of faith equals the pray-er gets what he asked for. This is most often expressed in connection with prayer for physical healing. Some radio and TV personalities have made a fabulous living promoting this idea. If there is no desired outcome, then, of course, the fault is the sufferer's for not having enough faith. The trouble with this fairly glib approach is that it lays a heavy burden of guilt on someone who is already suffering. I had a brother-in-law, now with the Lord, who had muscular dystrophy. Over the years we had to watch as he lost his ability to walk, use his arms, and, at the end do much of anything. He was a saint if there ever was one. He loved the Lord and not only believed in healing but fervently believed that God would heal him. He prayed for that every day. So did we. He suffered as much from people foisting the "faith equation" on him as he did from his disease. More than once a well-meaning person said to him "Don't you want to be healed?," intimating that he wasn't trying hard enough to build up his faith. They were so intent on holding to their belief in the formula that they were willing to devastate someone who was already struggling mightily. Regardless of your theology, don't ever do that.

So is it true that if you pray and have enough faith you will always get the answer as you pray it? Can you think of any people of faith in the Bible who prayed for one thing and got another? How about Paul and his “thorn in the flesh,” seemingly some kind of physical malady. Paul was sure that he’d do better without it. After praying fervently for relief, Paul, in some way, came to understand that it was God’s will and it was good for him to struggle with the “thorn.”

Hebrews 11 is called the “faith chapter.” The first thirty-four verses go from one triumphant faith story to the next...just the way we feel it ought to be. It all falls apart in verses 35-40, though, and we read

There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

It almost feels like we should have a moment of silence for them, doesn’t it? It would be unthinkable that these people of faith didn’t pray for relief from the things they were experiencing, but God gave them a different answer.

There’s something I’m very sure of: if all of my days were written in God’s book before one of them came to be, then there is an already identified day that is going to be my last day on earth. When that day comes, whether I’m lying in a hospital bed or at an accident scene you can all gather around and pray for me and I will still die.

One thing I’ve thought a lot about is “intercessory prayer,” where we come to God on behalf of others. I’d like to tell you about something that happened to me. For those who don’t know me I need to explain that I’m not a pastor, not even what I would consider a lay preacher...just an elder who has something to say once in a while. In real life, back when I was gainfully employed, I was a police officer for thirty-seven years, first as a regular uniformed cop in the Twin Cities, then as an agent with the BCA, which is the detective division of the state police here in Minnesota. One of the investigations I worked on was of a pretty big auto theft operation down in Anoka County. It was a “salvage switch” operation, in which they would buy a late model wrecked vehicle, steal a similar vehicle, and switch the serial numbers from the wreck to the stolen. The principal in the operation was Randy Markley. He and his minions were accounting for about a hundred stolen vehicles a year, mostly fancy late model pickup trucks. Markley was riding high but his world came crashing down when we arrested him and other gang members and recovered a bunch of stolen vehicles.

Markley was charged with a number of felonies and his case made its way through the court system. I was to be the principal witness at his trial. I showed up a bit early that day and took a seat in the back of the courtroom, waiting to be called to the witness stand. Markley was seated up at the counsel table with his attorney. As I sat there something came over me that I had never experienced before in this

type of setting. I had an overwhelming sense that I should pray for Randy Markley. This seemed especially odd because I was feeling no particular sympathy for him...our relationship was adversarial. The last time I'd seen him I stuck my gun in his face and took him out of a stolen truck. But the feeling was so strong that I sat there in the back of the courtroom and prayed for Markley, that God would somehow reveal himself to him and rescue him from the life he'd been living. Then I got up and testified against him and sent him to prison.

I never saw Markley again and didn't think about him. Then a few years later I got a call from one of my aunts who lived in Anoka. She said "You'll never guess who the speaker was at my church yesterday." Of course I guessed Billy Graham and D.L Moody and she said "No it was Randy Markley that guy you arrested for auto theft. He became a Christian in prison and boy does he have a powerful testimony!" Technically, I suppose you could say I was involved in prison ministry; I put people there so others could minister to them.

I read Randy Markley's name in the paper once more a few years later when I saw that he'd been killed in a plane crash. Presumably he's with the Lord right now.

The obvious question is "If God wanted to save Randy Markley, what did he need me for?" The Prison Fellowship workers did the heavy lifting in ministering to Markley. My part was to pray for him briefly and send him to the place where they could get at him. My conclusion is simply that God was very kindly including me, giving me a part in a real answer to prayer that would bolster my faith. It's the same dynamic when we belong to a prayer chain. We hear of a need, we all pray and, therefore, have a stake in the outcome. When the thing we prayed for comes to pass we all rejoice that we had a part. When the answer is different than what we prayed for we all learn something about trusting God together.

Sometimes we pray and then get better answers than what we'd prayed for. I once met a missionary to Central Mexico named Bill Valley. I haven't seen him in years, but I still remember a story he told. The people he ministered to were very poor. One woman in his congregation had bought a small pig with intentions to fatten it up so it could eventually provide a large part of what she had to eat. As was the local custom, she had cut unique notches in the pig's ears so she could identify it as hers and had kept it tied up in her yard. One night the pig was stolen. Bill, the woman, and the rest of the believers prayed that the pig would be found and returned. Each time the woman would come to church, Bill would ask "Did you get your pig back?" The woman would sadly reply "No." Finally he quit asking.

One day the woman excitedly came to church and told this story: she had heard a noise in her yard late at night and went out to find an immensely fat pig with a frayed piece of rope hanging from its neck. Checking the ear markings, she realized that this was her pig, fattened up by the thief, and kept hidden until the bedraggled rope gave way. As Bill said, "We were praying for a skinny pig and God had something better in mind."

So what are we to conclude from all of this? Here's what I think: our part is to pray, God's part is to answer. Faith, at its core, is believing that God is what he says he is. He weighs consequences and ties

things together that are completely beyond us. My purpose is not to make you shy about asking but to help you deal with it when things don't happen as you prayed them.

I'm not at all promoting "Who can know what to pray for then...what's the use?," but rather praying boldly, asking for what we think we need, or someone else needs, but not being frustrated if God does it differently. There's nothing wrong with pouring your heart out to God and asking for what you desperately want. That's what Jesus did when he prayed in the garden on the night he was crucified...but he ended with "Not my will but yours be done."

Simply put, faith in God, confidence in who he is, always works. Faith that he will always do what we tell him to does not. God is so interested in us and so desires a close relationship with us that I'm sure he delights in our coming to him and sometimes does things just because we asked him to. At other times, perhaps, he loves us too much to do the things we ask.

"All we can do now is pray." You've heard someone say that...you may have said it yourself. The implication is, "We've tried everything else that we thought might work and now we're desperate and close to hopeless." That's the way things can look and feel when the weight of difficult circumstances is upon us. It's at those times that we especially need to remember that we are in close contact with the creator of the universe who loves us beyond our understanding, wants what's best for us, and knows just how to bring it to pass. And we are invited to partner with Him through our praying! It's knowing this that gives real weight to the words of James the apostle: "The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective."

Paul told the Philippians "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." As the Living Bible puts it, "Don't worry about anything, pray about everything." That's so easy to say, but so hard to do. Some of you have suffered some awfully deep hurts. We know that "All things work for our good," but sometimes we say, "How could they?" As I was pondering this the words of a song came to mind:

"God is too wise to be mistaken.

God is too good to be unkind.

When you don't understand,

When you can't see His plan,

When you can't trace His hand,

Trust His heart."

The best advice I can think of to give you is, keep on praying. Keep praying for your kids who have walked away from the Lord. God has heard every time you said their names. Keep praying for the one you care about who's received a scary diagnosis. Keep praying about financial problems or anything else that's weighing you down. When you can't trace God's hand, trust His heart.