

WHY AND WHEN SHOULD I PRAY?
SEPTEMBER 8, 1985

FIRST IN SERMON SERIES: QUESTIONS PEOPLE ASK ABOUT PRAYER

I am preaching a series of sermons on prayer because, as one cynic put it, "There is a place for religion in the church." We are rediscovering that there is a place for religion! The church, at least the mainline denominations, likes to get on bandwagons and ride along on secular parades. We joined Freud's parade and practically worshipped psychology. When T-groups, encounter groups, and sensitivity training were popular, the church joined that parade. We did such a great job copying our culture that we forgot to do what is our unique role; namely, putting people in touch with God.

But, "people are incurably religious," according to Morton Kelsey in his excellent book, The Other Side of Silence, (pg. 13) from which I will quote extensively in this sermon series. Because the church forgot its unique role, many people have gone elsewhere to find God--mind-expanding drugs, Eastern religions, meditation groups. "It is no wonder," Kelsey indicts, "that both young and old turn to some place outside the church to find a way that can bring them into contact with a deeper dimension of life."

Perhaps the best outreach ministry to the community is to provide a place and opportunities where people can find religion! It is not that easy to find religion in churches. How many times have you heard of people leaving a church because their "spiritual needs were not being met?" Oh, you can find psychology in a lot of churches. I heard of a series of sermons on how to get to sleep! You can find platitudes in church. Years ago one visitor told me, "It's so wonderful coming to a church where you can find religion. I go to a Methodist Church where the point of last Easter's sermon was that we should all get out and vote in the November election." Oh, you can find fads in the church, but how often can you find religion? Am I being too harsh and cynical? I suppose I am exaggerating to make a point. But, I include myself in the indictment. When was the last time you heard a sermon, a series of sermons, or some good, solid, helpful instructions on prayer, for example?

This series is an attempt to reclaim prayer. Let's bring prayer back to the church. Let's make prayer an important ingredient of our Christian experience. What is prayer? Prayer is the act of communicating with God--a two-way communication: talking and listening, expressing and receiving. Many differentiate between prayer and meditation; but, until I learn differently, I use the word "prayer" to cover both. Some say prayer is talking to God and meditation is listening to God. I feel they are two sides of the same coin--expressing and receiving. Meditation is not a new phenomenon. The Psalms have long admonished us to "Be still and know that I am God...Wait on the Lord." Herbert Puryear in his book, The Edgar Cayce Primer, describes the relationship between prayer and meditation (pg. 150), "We pray in order to meditate and we meditate in order to pray." Two sides of the same act. When I use the word "pray," I include also the act of listening and receiving. You may isolate that act and call it meditation if you wish.

I preach this sermon series--as with most sermons--to myself. The questions I will address are my questions as well: Why and when should I pray? Does my prayer really affect others? How does God answer? What do I say and

do when I pray? These are elementary questions, basic questions. Let's look at the question for today. Why should we pray?

We pray because we need a living, dynamic, personal relationship with God. We are incurably religious. We need God.

We were created by the loving Spirit we call God. We belong to the spiritual world as we belong to the material world. Kelsey wrote (pg. 9), "Most people are aware of dreams, intuitions, visions, hunches and other experiences that give a glimpse of something in addition to the physical world."

We are restless, as Augustine said, until we rest in God. The Christian gospel--the good news--is that God loves you and wants to be in relationship with you. As Kelsey points out, this gospel is unique and different from most Eastern meditation (pg. 1). He writes, "The basic difference between the two is whether one sees ultimate reality as a Lover to whom one responds, or as a pool of cosmic consciousness in which one seeks to lose his identity." Eastern religions teach you to detach yourself, lose your personhood or individuality and merge with the Cosmic Mind.

Jesus taught us to call Ultimate Reality "Father" or even "Daddy." Jesus taught us that Ultimate Reality is like a father waiting for you, then rushing from the house, running down the road with arms outstretched, tears streaming down his face, to meet you coming home, calling you by your name--you, uniquely you with all your wrinkles, pimples, blemishes, mistakes, failures--rushing to you, embracing you, hugging you, welcoming you home. There is a basic difference between much Eastern meditation and Christianity. In the Christian experience, God loves you personally, individually, and enters into personal relationship with you, welcoming you into the spiritual world.

How we humans long, yearn, strive, and hope for that relationship with God; but often we don't recognize what the longing represents, and so try to fill the emptiness with things, possessions, drugs, alcohol, or "busyness," believing, "If I'm only busy, I won't have to think or face the depression, the abyss." As Kelsey says (pg. 96), "Most modern life is a studied attempt to avoid ever being alone, faced with the reality of the inner world."

The longing for God, the need for a personal relationship with God, is universal. When one's daily life is centered on survival--finding food for the next meal--the need is not quite so apparent. But, when one has time to reflect and sufficient wealth to satisfy the basic needs, then the deep longing of the heart is felt. A friend asked me once, "Aren't you nervous preaching to a Palo Alto congregation, to people with all that education and success, to scientists and engineers, to Stanford professors and students?" I thought about that. Who am I? How presumptuous of me! But, I don't pretend to knowledge I don't have. I am not preaching to impress an academic community with my knowledge. I preach the same gospel here that I preached in the open-country church in Minnesota, the town church in the San Joaquin Valley, in Japan and Australia. I preach the same gospel, for people are the same everywhere. Underneath the outward differences, underneath the success, underneath the academic degrees, are persons in need of a living, dynamic personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Why should we pray? Because we personally need God and because our church also needs God. I believe a church is only as effective as its people pray. I

believe a church is strong only as it is strong in the Lord. I believe a church will be about the business of religion when it realizes its need for God. Author Unknown has written, "The church has many organizers, but few agonizers; many who pay, but few who pray; many resters, but few wrestlers; many who are enterprising, but few who are interceding...The ministry of preaching is open to a few. The ministry of praying is open to every child of God." Brothers and sisters, pray for our church, pray for yourselves. We need God.

When should we pray? The answer is obvious, so obvious it slips by. Pray when you feel needy. Isn't that obvious? There's a ridiculous idea floating around. I've even heard it in sermons. It goes something like this, "I shouldn't pray when I'm in need if I haven't prayed faithfully when I'm not in need. I shouldn't go to God only when I'm in need." Have you heard someone say something like that? Isn't it ridiculous? As if you don't have enough guilt, that idea lays more guilt on you when you want to pray. Foxhole religion, they call it. They try to make a guy stuck in a foxhole--frightened because bombs and bullets are flying over his head-- feel guilty because he wants to pray. If it takes a foxhole to get you to pray, then that is what it takes. Pray! Don't ever feel guilty about praying!

Sometimes you get a glimpse of the kingdom, a glimpse of the spiritual world when you encounter an experience of great love; then pray. Sometimes the sight of the ocean or a redwood or Yosemite evokes the wonder and majesty of God; then pray. Sometimes a severe emotional and mental crisis convinces you of your need for God. As Carl Jung observed, behind every neurosis lies one's separation from that reality of which all living religion speaks (Kelsey, pg. 47). Whatever the occasion that evokes in you the thought of God and the need of God, take advantage of it and pray.

Another popular and false idea of prayer is the following: "Prayer is the response to a sense of the presence of God; therefore, I pray when I feel God near me." Have you heard that statement? Ted Jennings states forcefully that that statement is the opposite of prayer. He says that you pray when you feel God is absent, not when God is near. I heard Jennings speak and he also wrote in a Christian Century article, "Prayer is rooted not in our sense of God's presence, but in our sense of God's absence." (Christian Century, April 5, 1981, pg. 410) We pray not when we are strong but when we are needy.

When you are filled with a sense of God's presence, offer praise, rejoice, give thanks, and celebrate. Of course, praise can be a prayer, but I'm talking here about prayer as the cry of the soul, the longing for a relationship with God. The psalmist anguished, "How long, O Lord, will you hide from me? How long?" Prayer is invocation, invoking God's presence. Prayer is petition, asking God to meet your need. Pray when you hurt. Pray when you cry. Pray when you feel isolated and lonely. That's when you should pray.

Pray when you feel God's absence in the confidence that God will answer because the fact that you feel the need to pray is in response to God's initiative. When you stray, God searches. When you sin, God will forgive. A beautiful picture of Christ is given in Revelation 3:20, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If you open the door, I will come in, eat with you and you with me." The fact that you feel in need is the knock of Christ upon your heart. God is breaking through the barriers. The shell is cracking. Pray

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then in the confidence that God hears and will respond.

In that simple act of prayer, you enter the kingdom, the spiritual world. Your new life begins. John Magee in his book, Reality and Prayer, writes (pg. 42-43), "The spiritual life is not to be found at the end of a long set of spiritual exercises and disciplines; it comes at the very beginning. Do not look for the kingdom afar off; it is 'within you.' Every step of the pilgrimage is accompanied by the One who initiated the journey."

Why should you pray? Because you need a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. When should you pray? At the moment you feel the need.