

Prayer
“The Disciple’s Prayer”
Matthew 6:11-15

July 4, 2010
The Reverend Fitz Neal

As we get started this morning, I believe it is at this point in the Disciple’s Prayer (otherwise known as The Lord’s Prayer) that we need to ask and answer a question that we all have. If God is sovereign and all-powerful why do we need to pray at all? If God knows what is good for the world and what is good for us and is going to bring that into existence through his will, one way or the other, then why should I pray?

That question, going unanswered, leads people to pray general prayers simply saying, “O Lord, whatever your will is...just go ahead and do it”, never engaging in the kinds of specific prayers that Jesus does invite us to pray. So if God is all sovereign and God is loving and just, if God knows all things that are going to happen, indeed then, why pray? Once again I believe a very good answer to that question has been given by C. S. Lewis.

He answers that question of, “Why Pray?” by saying, “It’s really a question of why do anything at all.” It’s not just about “Why Pray?” It’s about, “Why do anything?” If it is God’s will, for example, C.S. Lewis says that your hands be clean (and it is God’s will), then why wash them? If God intends them to be clean they’ll come clean of their own accord if God is sovereign. Right? In fact, why get dressed in the morning if it’s God’s will that you be provided for then God will see to it that it is happening. Why put on your boots, why do anything at all?

And then he says something very famous. C. S. Lewis writes: “You see God has not chosen to write the whole of human history with his own

hand. Most of the events that go on in the universe are indeed out of our control—but not all. It is like a play in which the scene and general outline of the story is fixed by the author but certain minor details are left for the actors to improvise. It may be a mystery why God should have allowed us to cause any real events at all but it is no odder that he should allow us to cause them to happen by praying than by any other method, underscoring yet once again that God has not written all the details of human history including all of the details of your life, nor all of the details of the life of the world as we know it.”

And God has invited us into his marvelous work of salvation and redemption through prayer. Other means are a part of it as well, but primarily, when we pray, God invites us into his work. We have real work to do. THAT is why we should pray. That is why this portion of the Disciple’s Prayer is so important.

There are two tablets, if you will, of the Lord’s Prayer—that which begins with a focus on God and God’s concerns—but then, the second tablet of the Lord’s Prayer, the one we’re in today, takes us into our concerns. There are three concerns that Jesus says we are to pray for. We are to pray for practical needs, we are to pray for our relationships and we are to pray about issues related to suffering. Let me begin by saying this: let it be clearly stated, “We are to pray for OUR concerns.” For our concerns as human beings and for our concerns at an individual level. For some reason it is assumed that it is okay to pray for other people, but NEVER for yourself. I don’t know how to be more plain on this...**that is hogwash**. It is false humility. It is spiritual pride. You are invited by Jesus, here and in other places to pray for your own needs. Isn’t that good to know, to be clear about? So please know that Jesus says that along with praying for the world, along with praying for others, pray for yourself, pray for your family.

The first thing we are to ask for is our practical needs. Jesus says, “Give us this day our daily bread...” It really means, “Give us our bread that is necessary for existence for this day.” Are we only supposed to pray

for actual, literal bread? No, that is a metaphor that Jesus is using. It's not literal. It has to do with all our practical needs.

As Dale Brunner points out, "Bread costs money. Money requires work. Work requires good government, good business practices and good labor practices." Therefore, when Jesus tells us to pray for the bread that is necessary for our existence for each day, he is telling us to pray about our work, about the whole range of issues related to business practices, decisions and culture; about the weather; about our "do lists" and schedules for the day; about our families—our kids, our grandkids, our great-grandkids, our health, our rest, our daily decisions, frustrations and anything else that ever comes to mind that has to do with day-to-day living. All of that is contained in that one phrase.

If God numbers the very hairs that are on our heads, is there anything so important that we can't bring it before the Lord? No. And since it's the fourth of July, let's go back to that one area on the list. Bread requires money, money requires work and one of the things that work requires is good government. We're supposed to pray for our country. I hope you pray for our country.

Last Christmas after Laurel and I had been flooded out of our apartment, we were graciously given a place to stay for the holidays by Bob and Barbara McFarlin. In their home there is a painting. That painting depicts the freedom trains that rolled across East Germany in 1989, October 1989—right before the Berlin wall fell. The trains were loaded with people who wanted to make it to freedom. Who wanted to be in the West, where they knew freedom was. They were loaded onto trains and were being hauled across East Germany. Can you imagine their anxiety as they were on the trains? Would they be stopped? Would they make it to the West? Would they be hauled off to prison just because they wanted a different life? The painting shows one of the trains rolling past a United States Army checkpoint. It shows the people smiling joyfully—waving at the soldiers who smiled just as excitedly and are waving back—and on the faces there is complete joy. And here is what the people on the train said. (I want you to

listen to this—this is what we stand for.) They said, “When we saw the American soldiers we knew we were free.” Pray. Pray for our leaders. Pray for the people who have challenging and difficult decisions to make at a challenging time in the life of the world and in the life of the country. Pray for firefighters. Pray for policemen, judicial officials. Pray for workers and others throughout our country, who serve. Pray for our military personnel who serve day and night, sometimes far from home and loved ones, often wondering if those back home remember them, often in danger.

Then Jesus said we are to pray for relationships. This is what the forgiveness part of the Disciple’s Prayer is about. Love is the glue that holds human life together and love comes from God who is its source. We also know that we fail in that love in small ways almost every day and from time to time, in large ways.

God knows that without his power and help in forgiveness, love will grow cold or sometimes turn into hatred or even bitterness. Jesus makes forgiveness a matter of daily prayer. Forgiveness from God leads to forgiveness extended to and received from others. It is the grace and power of God that enables us to forgive. We can’t forgive anyone without God’s help. That’s why we pray about it. It has to come from the graciousness and the mercy of God. This, along with everything else in our lives is a place where we must have the power of Jesus Christ, resurrected from the dead, to enable us to do it.

Let me also come back to that whole discussion that Jesus engages in about debts and slip-ups. He uses two completely different words in the Disciple’s Prayer and then his discussion of forgiveness afterwards. In the Disciple’s Prayer he says, “Forgive us our debts.” That was a very serious word and the rabbinic literature of the time that did not have to do with money. It had to do with our moral debt that had been built up over time to God that we owe. That’s what that word refers to. Jesus is the first one to say, “O Lord as we ask for your forgiveness we extend it to and receive it from others.” The two go together; it’s a very serious thing. That’s what we need God’s help with.

But then when Jesus explains it, he uses another word—a word that means “slip-ups.” And he says, “For if you do not forgive other people their little slip-ups, how can God forgive your slip-ups?” Very specific language. It’s not the BIG debts; it’s the little things that happen day-to-day. The two go together. What does this mean? It means that God is being understanding with us. It means that Jesus is using a more gentle word the second time. We bring our serious sins before God and ask for forgiveness; asking that God would deal with them.

This then, according to Jesus, should lead us in the direction of seeing other people’s sins in the proper light. Other people are not perfect; therefore we can treat their sins as slip-ups. Our forgiveness of God leads to the consequence of being able to release other people from what they owe us. Therefore, let me say this as clearly as I can; I believe that this passage in the Disciple’s Prayer is not “conditional” but “consequential.” Here’s what I mean. Many people treat this as conditional...“I can’t forgive those people who have sinned against me...my sins are held against me by God. And some people have some sins they struggle with sometimes for decades, to forgive. They are doing the best they can but they feel like they haven’t been able to do it and so they are worried that their sins are constantly, for decades, held against them. Is that what Jesus is saying here—that this is conditional? No, he’s saying it’s consequential. When we experience God’s forgiveness it leads to the consequence over time, of our ability to be able to release people from what they owe us. They really are slip-ups, and we can forgive them. But sometimes, there are really horrific sins that have been committed against some of us; acts of meanness, hatred; sometimes even violence and abuse. In those situations I believe as we receive God’s forgiveness and lean in to our life of prayer and grace in God, God takes us by the hand and leads us in the direction of being able to forgive, which sometimes can take a long time. Forgiveness does not mean warm feelings all the time or excusing the wrongs of others or acting as if it’s all okay...no it’s not! It simply means not seeking vengeance and releasing the other into the hands of God who is just.

This is a prayer that enables us to move in the direction of forgiveness. Let this prayer be the Gospel of grace as it's clearly meant to be; not a scolding from God, which is clearly what it is not intended to be. Our forgiveness leads to the consequence, over time, of releasing others from what they owe us. It's about relationships.

Then Jesus tells us to pray about those areas in which we experience suffering. Jesus knows that we need to pray about the challenges of life which happen constantly. We need help when the frictions and the frustrations of life put us into a place of being tempted to cave into despair. When we are tempted to cave into despair we will also be tempted to turn away from God and to trust ourselves instead of trusting God. That is the most serious temptation of all. So we are to pray about these kinds of things. Let me give you an example from our life—Laurel's and mine.

In the last two weeks, here's our list of things that have happened to us:

- ✚ We bought a brand new grill—it broke.
- ✚ I have a new weed-eater with a new yard. It's not brand new, but it's only been used maybe fifteen times—it broke.
- ✚ We have a printer downstairs. We use it a lot because we do a lot of work at home and we print out a lot of things—it broke.
- ✚ Our e-mail accounts at home wouldn't work.
- ✚ Laurel's car started leaking oil ominously on the floor of our garage.
- ✚ Our cat of 18 years disappeared.

This is all in the last two weeks. Now I don't mean to whine or complain, but WE WERE BEGINNING to WONDER what was going on. Dealing with the little frustrations of life that can sometimes add up can put you in a place where you are tempted to say, "What good is it to pray? What good is it to follow God if I don't get a reward in return?" Ever thought that way? And that's not the way it works. Did God cause our grill to break? Of course not. Or the weed-eater to break? No. But these things do happen, and they can lead us into a place of temptation. Sometimes the sufferings are much more serious. Whenever that is going on, the prayer is not that

God would not lead us into temptations, God never does that, but that God would lead us through being our guide more than giving us guidance, into a place where our trust can be deepened. The little things count, and so do the big things. The place where we apply our faith day-to-day is in matters primarily of our own household life and our work places. This is where Eugene Peterson says, “We practice resurrection day after day.” The little things matter to God, and so we should bring them to the Lord in prayer.

Then Jesus adds one aspect to the suffering that we do need to look at. Sometimes, in life, there is downright evil. It does exist. Sometimes that evil simply is human evil. When people lose touch with reality or maybe don’t have a conscience—they can engage in great evil inflicted upon other people—it does happen. Sometimes that evil is spiritual in nature. Jesus says pray in those situations for deliverance. Pray for protection or for rescue. Whenever you see it; whenever you feel it; whenever you know it’s there, pray for God to do what only God can do, and that is deliverance. This is where we, as God’s people practicing a priestly role upon the earth, standing between God and a world that is sometimes in danger, we pray. Not just for ourselves but for everyone we know and for the world around us.

Let me give you an example. What’s going on right now on our Mexican border to the South is downright evil. It’s related to the drug trade, we all know that. We have a tendency here in our places of safety to say, “Well, if they weren’t involved in it they’d be okay.” But innocents by the thousands are being gunned down. Do you think for a moment that that’s just human sin? By no means. There is something spiritual going on that has crossed the line. It should be one of the matters of prayer for Christians around the world. “O Lord, deliver them. Once again raise up good people; cause the wicked to be exposed and caught.” And so, that’s what Jesus asks us to pray for; practical needs; relationship needs; and matters of suffering which sometimes can go into areas that can be very serious indeed. We have a great God; a mighty one who has given us this way to pray.

Once again I have a prayer assignment for you. This one is easy and achievable. I'm asking that you would, if you so desire. If you don't want to participate in the prayer assignment, that's really okay—there's grace in all of this—but if you'd like to go a little bit deeper in organizing a prayer life just a little bit more, at the information booth there's a little daily prayer list with a place for you to write in requests in each area. Practical needs; relationships; and areas of suffering, and simply bring them before the Lord this week. I think maybe we can do this one. I didn't ask you to write five hundred word prayers on each one. But above all, let us remember the heartbeat of what is going on when Jesus gave us this Disciple's Prayer. He invited us to enter into the holy of holy places where the triune living God beats his marvelous great heart of love for the whole world and all of creation to kneel there before the Lord asking, praying, and working with God for the redemption of the world. To receive in those moments of prayer the assurance that God's arms of love and protection are wrapped around us and the world. That even when bad things happen God is at work and that we are called to pray. And so this morning I invite you to enter into a life of serious committed prayer; to use the Lord's Prayer as your outline and in those times when you cannot pray, to kneel or stand before the Lord and recite the Disciple's Prayer. And when you do, let it be that song in your heart.