

The Key to Prayer 2: Confidential Prayer

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

It'd be interesting to listen to all the mothers teaching all their children how to say their prayers, because it might be surprising how similar we all were. Ours were – God bless Dad, God bless Mom, my brother was called Desmond, so God bless Desmond and then, we had a dog whose name was Chummy and so, we blessed him as well. And then we did, “Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon the little child,” and then we did the Lord's Prayer, and depending on who was in form that night, my brother or I got to the end first. But we always did say our prayers; and I don't know what yours were like but, probably most of them are more or less the same. And so, I'd like to start there by asking you, do you say your prayers now? Do you pray now? And I put it that way because it's so easy for us to just bluff each other in a service like this. Of course we all say our prayers. I am asking you, do you pray? Do you pray every day? And probably a lot of us would say, “No, we don't pray everyday. Yes, I do pray, but I don't pray every day.” And I'd ask you, why you don't pray every day? And probably you would answer, “Well I really don't feel the need to pray every day.” Then I'd say to you “Well, when do you pray?” Maybe too many of us would say, “Well, we pray when our son has cancer or when our mother is dying or when we lose our job or when lightning strikes our neighbor's house.”

And so really, what we are saying is, we pray foxhole prayers. Foxhole prayers are prayers that we prayed when we were in the army, when we were in a foxhole and the bombs were falling all around us and we cried out for fear because we realized we were no longer in control of the situation. And the fact is that most of us tend to pray when we feel the need to pray and of course that's not the basis of prayer at all. If we pray in that sense, you can hardly even call that prayer and probably we know that ourselves. We are not very aware of whom we are praying to, we are just crying out in desperation. “God help me, help me, save me.” And we are still preoccupied; you might even say it's just we are preoccupied with our own safety, our own security. And of course it's not really prayer at all.

In fact real prayer doesn't actually need to have an overwhelming sense of need. It doesn't even have to have a great sense of reality. And I know you may rebel against that, you may say, “How could I pray if I don't feel that God is there? Or if I don't feel some tremendous reality, prayer is meaningless unless you feel something. That's why at times I like to go to an old church somewhere because you can kind of feel the presence of the ages and all the saints. Or that's why at times I like to be out on a lake in quietness because I can kind of feel the presence of God.” And you remember, several Sunday's ago, loved ones, we shared that that finally drives you away from prayer.

When you pray looking for a feeling, or thinking that you are only praying when you feel the presence of God, eventually that destroys you, eventually that drives you to distraction. And I don't want to bore you by referring to it again but you remember C.S. Lewis, when he was a little guy at boarding school, would pray a prayer and then he would think, “Have I really realized that prayer? Did I really pray it the way I prayed it last week? Did I really-really pray it? Do I feel that God heard my prayer?” And he says, “Eventually prayer became a self-torturing experience for me. I wore myself out, because I was so preoccupied with praying and then trying to examine if I'd really prayed.”

And the truth is, you don't need to have any feeling to really pray, you don't. I know it goes against our society's emphasis on existential experience and our society's emphasis on, are you enjoying yourself? Was it a good service? Was it a good prayer time? Meaning really, had you an enjoyable experience?

I know it goes against that, but the truth is, you don't need to have feeling to pray. All you need -- and I just point you to it very quickly, is in Matthew 6:6, it's very simple. It's just what Jesus says, "But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." All you need is faith to believe that, that's it. You don't need to feel it; you don't need to feel the Father's presence, you just need to go into your room, shut your door, and pray to your Father, who is in secret. And your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you.

If I could speak to the husbands; you know that your wife and your children need certain things, but just you go to God about it. You don't need to share great things with them; you don't need to share things with all kinds of friends. Go to God, privately. It's far better actually, that it's just between you and him; it really is -- far better. In a way, when you share this thing with someone else, it isn't quite that it frustrates or vitiates the prayer, but you better not. And you ladies, you know there are certain things your men need; certain things your children need; just go in privately to God and ask him for those things. And keep on asking. I think a lot of us spoil our prayer times because we pray for 3 weeks about something, no result comes, then we go to the pastor or we go to some counselor or we go to some book to find out why we are not getting an answer. That's a shame, don't you see? Don't you see what God thinks when he looks down upon us? And here we are going to somebody and saying, why doesn't God hear me? Don't you see how that breaks confidence with God?

See, God wants you to trust him. He wants you to believe that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek after him. He wants you to just come to him and pray, and pray to him alone. There is an awful lot, loved ones, that we lose in prayer because we are performing something that we think will work magic, instead of going quietly to our Father privately and asking him for something and keep on asking. George Muller was originally a German who preached for years in England, and built orphanages for thousands of children through faith in God providing the money. He built them with thousands and thousands of pounds that God brought into him in answer to his prayers. And do you realize that at the end of his life which was a long life, he died at 92 a week after he died; a man received Jesus as Savior for whom Muller had been praying for 35 years?

And you see what it says: Here is a man, who was mighty in prayer. Who had seen thousands of pounds and many orphans brought up in answer to his prayers, but he too, had people that he was praying for year after year after year and he saw no change in them but that didn't stop him. He knew what Jesus had said about this unjust neighbor that kept on being asked by his friend for a loaf and even though he hated to get up, yet because the other person kept on asking, he got up and gave him the loaf of bread. And Muller and all the men who have experienced God's answers to prayer have believed that. So loved ones, don't spoil your prayers by either looking for feelings, feelings, and feelings; am I having a feeling of God's presence, or by looking for answers in your time.

God expects you to believe him and that means, you keep on praying and you keep on praying until you die, absolutely confident that God will either answer your prayer or will change your prayer. He'll either answer it or will change your prayer. He'll either give you greater insight into it or he will give you an answer to the prayer. But what is needed is just a little confidentiality to tell

the truth. A little confidentiality between you and me and God; and less of this looking upon prayer as a game that we are playing or something that we do right. "Am I holding my mouth right? No I am not. Should I close my right eye and wink my left eye?" No, don't get silly about prayer. And you may say, "But Pastor, aren't there right ways to pray?" But God is going to show you those, you know that. You know how silly it is to work out how is the best way to approach your Mom, after you've been absent from her for a year or months. You don't go to somebody else and ask, how should I express my love for my Mom, you do what comes naturally. It's the same with our dear Father. He actually is dying for a direct line between you and him; and all the time you are putting things in place. So many of us were brought up in Catholicism and we said all the priests were in a place between us and God. That's just an excuse, you know. We are always putting things between ourselves and God.

We are trying all kinds of books, all kinds of methods, all kinds of techniques, all kinds of counseling, all kinds of advice, all kinds of other people's successful ways -- don't, just go to God. Yes, he knows you, he knows how foolish you are, he knows how stupid you are, he knows how inexperienced you are, he knows all that. But he will respect you, if you do what Jesus said. Go into your closet and just pray.

Now, I would point out to you that you know that is true because you had prayers answered when you knew less about God than you know now, you know that. And we all know people who are surprisingly and ridiculously irreligious people. And yet we hear them say, "Oh I remember when God answered my prayer for my mother." Because God does; God answers an honest heart that really believes in him. So to pray, you need to just believe that God is there and you need to be real with him.

Now, you remember last day, we pointed out the difficulty that you have in this next verse. It's in Matthew 6:7, Jesus is elaborating on how to pray and telling us not to make a game of it or kind of, a verbal mastery or magic, abracadabra of it, but to be real.

Matthew 6:7, "And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do" as if you thought God would be influenced by your eloquence -- "for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them." And then here is the problem, "For your Father knows what you need before you ask him." "For your Father knows what you need before you ask him." Then why ask him? I mean, why waste our time? If our Father knows what we need before we ask him, then why ask him?

Well, a good enough reason is of course, God tells you to ask him, that's good enough. He says "Ask and it will be given you." So that's enough reason. But you remember, the other reason that we mentioned last day is this amazing fact. You have free will; God has given you free will. You are free to believe in God or not to believe in God. You are free to accept him or you are free to reject him. God has given you free will, loved ones and really with all the teaching of Skinner (an American philosopher) on determinism you know that you still have free will. Yes, you are influenced by your heredity and environment, but finally, you can act against that. You can do whatever you want. God has given us free will. When he said, "Look, you can eat of any tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, do not eat of it or you'll die" -- that is a command that is given to a person who has free will.

If we didn't have free will, God wouldn't bother giving us a command. Because there is no point in giving a robot a command, because you know he won't be able to do anything that you don't allow him to do anyway. You give a command only to free will agents and God has given each of us free will. And even though God knows what you need in your life at this present time, God will not be able to

bring it to you unless you ask him, he won't. You can protest; you can say "Look brother this is game playing. If God sees that I need this change in my life why doesn't he just go ahead? Isn't he a good God? Why doesn't he just change me, whether I ask him or not? If God sees what I need in a job why doesn't he just give me that job whether I ask him or not?" Well, do you see why? It would cease to be of any importance what you wanted in life, if God did that, do you see that? It would cease to be of any importance what you wanted. If God just brought you the job that he knows you should have, you wouldn't have any free will. If God just changed you as he sees you need to be changed, it wouldn't matter what you did. Do you see loved ones, it would make fun and foolishness of free will and God would end up at the end of this life with a bunch of robots that were the result of his overruling sovereign action in your life.

In other words, God cannot do even what he sees needs to be done in your life unless you ask him. Otherwise he makes you a robot. Now, you may say, but doesn't he rain his rain on the just and the unjust? I mean, he rains whether we ask for rain or not, he rains the rain whether I get up this morning and ask for my heart to beat, he keeps my heart beating. Aren't there certain natural laws that he keeps operating for all his creatures? Yes. In order to give us the opportunity to accept him or reject him, he has given us natural life. We needed natural life in order to be able even to choose. And so, God has given us certain life actions and certain life grace that we have, whether we ask or not. But whenever you approach the redeeming grace of God, whenever you are dealing with friendship with God or acceptance with God or rejection of God with wanting to live with him forever or to live in hell forever, then free will governs your life and God will not do any thing that you do not ask him to do.

In other words, if you say "Look, he knows I have bad temper, why doesn't he just take the bad temper away?" Because he requires your will, the activity of your will to want that with all your heart; then he will take it away. But he will not make you like himself unless you want to be made like him. And that's why he says you must ask him. Even though he knows what you need, you must ask him for it. Otherwise he is not able to do it.

You remember we looked at the end of the study last Sunday at one of the verses that shows that very clearly. It's in Ezekiel 36:37. And it occurred at the time in Israel's history when they had of course, just been put into exile and their numbers had decreased tremendously and God looked down and saw that they needed to increase in number if they were to survive so that his son Jesus could be born into the world. And yet even though we knew that, you see what he says in Ezekiel 36 and 37, "Thus says the Lord God: This also I will let the house of Israel ask me to do for them: to increase their men like a flock." Now God saw that what they needed was to be increased in number and yet he says, "This also I will let the house of Israel ask me to do for them: to increase their men like a flock." So God knew they needed to be increased in number, but he would not act apart from their wills. He required some little human being here on earth to ask him to do that, among the people of Israel. And so it is in your own life and in the lives of your friends and your relatives.

God knows what they need, but he cannot act against his own will. That is, he cannot kill people, he cannot send cancer to people, he cannot destroy people and yet, he will not act apart from your will. And unless you or I ask him to do something in regard to changing people and making them like himself, he cannot do it.

Now there is another reason loved ones for it, and I'll show you it in Acts 9, and I think you'll just see the sense of it immediately as we read the historical record. It's Acts 9:5 "And he said," that is Saul you remember, on the road to Damascus. And Saul said, "Who are you, Lord?" He was

struck blind you remember, “And he said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting; but rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’” And then look at verse 10. “Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, ‘Ananias.’ And he said, ‘Here I am, Lord.’ And the Lord said to him, ‘Rise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire in the house of Judas for a man of Tarsus named Saul; for behold, he is praying, and he has seen a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.’ But Ananias answered, ‘Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to thy saints of Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call upon thy name.’ But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.’ So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came, has sent me that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized, and took food and was strengthened.”

Now do you see it? Ananias wouldn't have touched Saul with a 40 foot pole; because Saul was a persecutor of the Christians and Ananias was scared to go near him. But God's plan for Paul was to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit through the hands of an ordinary person. And the only way that could take place in a way that gave glory to God and brought Saul into a right relationship to the Father was if Ananias was free from fear to lay his hands on Saul. In other words, there are things that God intends to do in this world; but he intends out of his great graciousness to allow you be part of them. And you can only be part of them if you know what to do when. Now just reflect for a moment; the Israelites at the Red Sea; Pharaoh behind with his army. God, just by sovereign act without speaking to anyone at all, suddenly moves back the water. Yeah, the Israelites might know to go through, but can you imagine the absolute chaos that begins to take place in their lives, as they saw, for no reason at all, the laws of nature apparently being superseded? Would it have brought glory to God? They wouldn't have known why it happened. They may well have said that -- people even say today it was just a strong wind that dried up the water.

In other words, glory came to God and it was a revelation of God only because Moses was praying to the Father, and God told him to stretch forth his staff over the Red Sea, and the sea would move back. Glory comes to God only when it is seen by men and women to be God's sovereign act. If God acts apart from any of us knowing then it is attributed normally by human beings to chance or to Satan or to just the absolute unreliability of the laws of nature. Do you see it's the same with the Mount Carmel situation? If the pagan priests had set up the altar and the sacrifice, and then God by sovereign act had just sent fire down without any explanation from an Elijah who had prayed and who had talked with him, it would not have brought glory to God. It would just have seemed an arbitrary effect of nature.

Now, it's the same, loved ones, in our lives. Your friends and relatives, your colleagues at work, whom God wants to touch and he wants to do works in their lives; but no glory or witness will come to God if God by sovereign act just changes them. Unless one of us is able to see what God intends to do and ask him to do it, so that we know God answers that prayer unless that happens, glory does not come to the Father. And of course the other side is, that quite apart from God's glory, it is his great graciousness and kindness to give you and me the opportunity to work together with him, to work with him. God gives you the opportunity to work together with him to bring this world under his control and under his will. And that's why he requires you to know what he is doing.

Do you see how messy our own system is? I mean the way you and I operate? We are looking at our situations at work and we are thinking up, what do we want God to do? We are looking at the situations in our families and we are thinking "What would God want to do in this situation? And what do I think he should do?" And we end up praying what we think God should do. Now can you imagine the reality of that? The Father is here, and he has given us a can of paint and a brush, and we are looking up and we are saying, "Well, you want me to paint the chair? The chair, I'll paint the chair. No, he didn't want me to paint the chair. Oh, paint the lectern. Okay, I will paint the lectern. Do you want me to paint the lectern?" We are going around suggesting to God all kinds of things that might be good for him to do. Don't you see there is an easy way to solve that?

Lord, what do you want me to do with this paint? That's it. We have husbands and wives, we have friends and colleagues and children all of whom need God's touch in their lives and our Lord God knows what they need. All we have to do, is find out from him what they need and then ask him to do that. That's it; just find out from God what he intends to do in their lives and then ask him to do it and he will immediately act; that's it, loved ones.

It makes sense, doesn't it? He is the Father that has made the whole world. He is the Father that has made all of us. He knows what we need. It's just silliness for all us little tinkers, all us little good tryers, all us miniature fleas, to be saying "Well, should you do this, should you do that, should you do the others?" It's silliness. The Father knows, and he will tell us if we will stop making all the suggestions and we will start spending some time listening to him and finding out what he wants to do. I just point you back to that comment of old Bismarck. Didn't they call him the Iron Duke? He was just a dictator, you remember, responsible partly for the unification of Germany, back I suppose in the 19th century and Bismarck was just, to all intents and purposes, a brutal military tyrant.

And yet you remember someone said to him, what's the difference between a statesman and a politician? And he said, "A statesman is one who listens for the footsteps of God." A statesman is one who listens for the footsteps of God -- and you know we attribute to Winston Churchill some of that ability; we call it a sense of history. And we attributed it to Harold Macmillan and we attributed it to some extent to John Kennedy. We said, they were men who sensed the way history was moving and actually the way Bismarck put it was they sensed the way history wasn't working. The way God's story was moving; they listened for the footsteps of God -- that's our job. The Lord God has a will for your life and mine and for each of our friends and each of our colleagues and he is able to begin to bring it about if we will find that from him what he wants us to pray for, and then we pray, that's it.

Next Sunday, I'd like to try to talk about how we do that. Let us pray.

Dear Father, we bow before you. Lord God, we know that there isn't a bird that flies, but it is in accordance with your design and your plan. There isn't a little insect that crawls anywhere in the vast hinterland of Africa, but you know where it is crawling, and you know how many steps it has taken. Father, we know that you know all things. And we realize that you know all about us, and all about our friends, and that there isn't a problem that they have that you have not already seen a solution for. And so Father, we bow before you now. And we ask you Lord to begin to show us what we are to ask you to do. We ask you Father to show us what you want to do in our own lives and the lives of our friends and colleagues. So that we may take part with you in your great plan to bring us and everyone for whom we pray, under your will, and into the plan that you already had for us from the beginning of the earth. Father, we thank you, that prayer is so simple, and we thank you

Lord that you are God, and you are in charge and you are the boss and the Lord of all. And we bow to you and acknowledge that and commit ourselves to praying in accordance with your will. Now the grace of our Lord Jesus, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us, now and evermore. Amen!