

"DOES GOD HEAR US WHEN WE PRAY?"

INTRODUCTION We come today to the last in a series of three sermons all of which have been cast in the same form. You'll recall that the subject of the sermon two weeks ago was "Why Bother About God?" and that last week we tackled the question "How Do We Know There Is A God?" The question that forms the subject of this sermon is "Does God Hear Us When We Pray?" Now I think that all of you realize right now, in the very beginning of this sermon, that my answer is certainly going to be in the affirmative. But I feel it's not quite enough to simply say "Yes...God hear us when we pray" and to say nothing more. I think it's good for us to think about this question just like we've thought about some of these other great questions of God during this Lenten season, and perhaps in the course of things, something will be said that will shed some light on a question that's been for many people a very baffling mystery. At least I hope so. And so the question this morning that is before us is this: Does God Hear Us When We Pray?

Every once in a while you meet a person in the church who has very little use for prayer. He sees very little value in the whole thing. You might say he's had some sour experiences with prayer and has turned his back on it. Sometimes his experiences will follow this pattern. He was taught how to pray as a child. He was made to say his prayers as a growing boy. He continued to pray as a teen-ager. But then something happened. Somewhere along the line he got out of the habit of praying, perhaps it was in the service, or perhaps in his college experience. But at any rate he gradually stopped praying. And the result was that by the time he really entered into the adult years of life, he had stopped praying altogether. He still believe in God. But he finds it difficult to believe in a God that hears and answers prayer. And I suppose if this person were to try to explain why it was that he stopped praying especially when he had been in the habit of praying in his earlier years, he might say something like this:

"Well.....it's difficult to explain. In fact I'm not sure whether I can put my finger on the reason. But I suppose part of it was that my prayers were never answered. Sometimes I felt like I was on one end of a telephone and that there was no one on the other end. It's like writing letters to Santa Claus....I use to write letters to Santa Claus when I was a child. But then I gave them up too. None of my letters were answered."

In all of this, I think this person is trying to say that he had serious doubts in his mind as to whether God heard him when he prayed. They're serious doubts. Honest doubts, and it may be that some of you have had such doubts, and not being able to find the right answers to these doubts, you've giving up praying altogether. You still believe in God, but you find it difficult to believe in a God that really hears you individually. But back to our question: Does God Hear Us When We Pray?

DIFFICULT TO VISUALIZE I suppose one reason why we wonder about this is because it's so difficult to visualize. At least it is for me. I think all of us tend

to picture God in human terms. We all visualize him as something of a super-human being. Perhaps you picture God as the great Senior Partner of your life sitting at his desk receiving calls from all over the world. One person wants a child made well. Another person wants a part in a Broadway play. A person in prison wants to be set free. A person - a farmer wants rain in order that his crops won't be ruined. Another person - a tourist wants the rain to stop so that he may enjoy his vacation. And meanwhile calls go up from this side of the world that the Russians may be destroyed. At the same time calls go up from the other side of the world that the western powers may be eliminated. And so when you really stop to think about it - the great number of people, the great number of calls, some of them the same, some different, some cancelling out each other - while the whole business just seems to take on an element of the fantastic. It's not only difficult to comprehend, it's difficult to imagine. And so you come to the conclusion that it's just too much for any one person to handle, even if that person is something of a super-human being. And not being able to visualize, you put it out of your mind altogether, and eventually you stop praying.

But on the other hand, you may have a less personal picture of God. Your image of God may be the God of the sun, the moons, the stars, the God who is the great cosmic executive keeping the universe in good running order. And yet even with this picture of God there are difficulties. You find it difficult perhaps to imagine how such a great God could ever be concerned with your needs and problems. Your problems are important to you, but you seriously wonder if they're important to Him. You began to have serious doubts as to whether this great force that has created the Milky way is even aware of you and your needs. You wonder if he really cares if you recover from your illness, or whether you pass an examination. In this picture of God, it's not that it's too much for him to handle, it's just that he's above it all. Your problems are beneath him. You worship him, but it's difficult to visualize him singling you out for special favors and concerns, and not being able to visualize it, you put it out of your mind altogether, and eventually you stop praying.

And so you see that whichever of these pictures of God you may have, the fact is that it's very difficult to visualize a God that hears you individually. You come to the conclusion that he doesn't hear you, and if he doesn't hear you, then there's really little sense in spending time in prayer.

WE'RE BOUND TO VISUALIZE Well....so much for our background. Let's see if we can't begin to work our way out of this predicament. Let me suggest some ideas that may be helpful. To begin with, I would say this, that all of us are bound to visualize. All of us, by virtue of the fact that we're human beings, are bound to draw these pictures of the mind. There's nothing wrong with this. It's natural. And sometimes the greater a thing is, the more we depend upon the pictures of the mind in order to comprehend it. For instance: take the equator. What do you picture in your mind when you think of the equator. I imagine that most of you picture a black band running right around the globe. Or for instance: what do you picture when you think of the north pole? If you're like I am, you perhaps see a big white pole sticking up out of the top of the earth. These are pictures. And when it comes to God, we find ourselves drawing pictures in our mind of him. There's nothing wrong with this I suppose, but I would say this: **THAT THE BIGGER YOUR PICTURE OF GOD, THE BETTER OF YOU'RE LIKELY TO BE.** In

other words you're on much safer ground I think if you picture God as the great cosmic executive, than if you picture him as something of a Senior Partner in the business of life. Of course, both pictures have their drawbacks, but the bigger the picture of God that you have in your mind, the better off you're going to be.

And I think this too, that as we grow in years and in understanding, our picture of God ought to be growing. The trouble with so many of us is that we're trying to feed our spiritual lives on a picture of God that was given to us back in the third grade of Sunday School. And sometimes it's no enough. As mature thinking people, we ought to be reaching out into the depths of God's nature until he becomes more vast, more majestic, and more wonderful than he was for us when we were children. So don't be afraid to let your mind's picture of God grow and change. And if you need support for this turn to your Bible. The very thing takes place in the Bible. Certainly the picture of God that we have in the opening book of Genesis, walking through the garden of Eden, confronting Adam and Eve in the cool of the day, is not the same picture of God that we have in the last book of the New Testament. Here we find God as the great cosmic energy of love making all things new. This change and this growth in your conception of God is not only good, but it's essential especially in this day of rockets and projected trips to the moon. Your picture of God should be big enough to take in everything in the universe, and it should be coherent with the best in science, philosophy and psychology. If it isn't big enough to take in all of these things then you may end up in the long run losing your picture of God entirely. So this is my first suggestion: Don't be afraid to picture God, but on the other hand remember that the bigger your picture of God, the better off you're likely to be!

A LIVING SPIRIT WITHIN YOU Now my second suggestion would be this. Try to picture God, if you will, as a living spirit within you, and not as someone who is far removed from you. Try to picture prayer if you will, not as a long distance phone call, but as an intensely local local to someone who is within you. I began to wonder this past week as I was developing this idea whether this was New Testament religion. And then I was reassured by one of the Apostle Paul's great thoughts. It was Paul who said: The body is the Temple of God. And so let's think of it in this sense. When a person prays it's as though the particles of life which he is were becoming part of aware of the whole of life. It's difficult to visualize this, and I know these terms are far from being perfect, but let's think of it this way. You're alive. There's no doubt about this. There's life in you. This spark of life created you and fashioned you into what you are. And when you pray, it's as though that spark of life that's in you is reaching out to the life that has made all living things, the sun, the moon, the stars, and everything else. And it's not at altogether impossible for you to believe, at least it isn't for me anyway, to believe that this life that took the trouble to create us is aware of our troubles and our needs.

SOMETHINGS YOU CAN'T VISUALIZE And then, third, remember this that there are some things in life that you can't visualize no matter how hard you may try. And yet we seem to know that they're true. It's difficult to picture the splitting the atom, and yet we know it's true. It's hard for me to visualize these rockets that are flying around the earth, but we know that it's true.

And although it's hard for us to visualize God answering our own individual prayers, we seem to know it's true. We've felt it. We've talked to people who have experienced it, and perhaps in some high moment of life we've experienced it too.

But now let me just say a word or two to those who feel that God never answers their prayers. Don't always expect an immediate answer to your prayer. Prayer doesn't work that way. You expect an immediate answer to a telephone call, but don't expect the same things to happen in prayer. And remember this too that the answers to prayer come in the COURSE of event, in the WAY things work out, in the way things happen to YOU. And perhaps we need to be reminded of this fact too that the answer to our prayer may not always be the answer we wanted, expected, or hoped for. We can't expect to get our own way in prayer anymore we can expect to get our own way in other areas of life. It just doesn't work that way. In these desperate moments of life when we're driven to our knees for help, something does happen however. We may not get what we wanted, but ~~we get~~ our spiritual equipment gets sharpened up and pointed up and we somehow receive the strength to come through the experience.

I like to close my sermons by bring together all the threads of thought and tying them up in a neat logical fashion. Sometimes this is difficult, and I'm not going to try to do it today. Rather I'd like to close with a story and a poem by William Butler Yeats. It's about an old, faithful Irish priest by the name of Peter Gilligan. He's getting on in years, and it's not quite as easy as it once was for him to get around and visit all of ~~ux~~ his parishoners. On one occasion, after a long hard tiring day, just as he was getting ready to relax in his own cottage, there came word that one of the men in his parish was dying. The wife wanted hi to come over right away. Peter Gilligan complained to himself that he didn't want to go, but he knew that he had to. And so he went upstairs to his room to kneel down to say a prayer before he went on his mission. He asked God to bless the soul of the dying man, and to give him the strength to be of some use in this mission. And then lo and behold he fell asleep while kneeling by his bedside in prayer. The hours of the night came and he continued to sleep. The hours of the morning awakened him, and he cried out to himself, "Oh...the man will have died" He got up from the kneeling position and hurried downstairs and then hurried over to the cottage of the dying man. He knocked on the door, and the woman opened the door. And she said to him, "Oh Father...thank you so much for coming again. My husband died last night just after you left. There was such a peaceful smile on his face when he died"

Peter Gilligan was puzzled. And then he realize that somehow, in the mystery of God, this woman and her husband had believed that he had been there, and that God had made up for his shortcoming, and had answered his prayer. And what Peter Gilligan felt and thought as he walked away from that cottage that morning, I'm sure that some of you have felt and thought, when in spite of all appearances to the contrary, you know that somehow the great God of the universe heard your prayer and answered it.

He who hath made the night of stars
For souls who tire and bleed,
Sent one of His great angels down
To help me in my need.

He who is wrapped in purple robes,
With planets in his care.
Had pity on the least of things,
Asleep upon a chair.

Let us pray:

Help us Our Father, in our prayers to draw closer to Thee.
Help us always to be honest and real, saying no more than
we really think and really want. Help us to keep reaching
outward and upward to a more perfect image of Thee, so that
~~shall we grow~~ we may grow to be more like Thy Son our
Lord in whose name we pray. Amen.