

"THE PURPOSE OF PRAYER"

INTRODUCTION

There is bound to come a time, sooner or later, when you want something desperately, and you know that you cannot get it by your own efforts. For instance, someone you love is dangerously ill, and you want him to get well; or you are out of a job and you want one; or you have lost your grip on life and you want to get it back. When that time comes, the chances are that you will pray and you will ask God to give you the thing you so desperately want. Whether you are in the habit of praying regularly or not, when a time like this comes, I think you will pray almost instinctively, simply because you cannot help it.

DEVELOPMENT

Two things are likely to happen. In the first place, if you pray for what you want and you don't get it, and you certainly will not always get it, you're likely to give up prayer and say that you tried it once when you needed help badly and it didn't work. This is the experience Huckleberry Finn once had. Remember it?

"Miss Watson" he said, "took me in the closet and prayed but nothing come of it. She told me to pray every day, and whatever I asked for I would get it. But it warn't so. I tried it. Once I got a fishline, but no hooks. It warn't any good to me without hooks. I tried for the hooks three or four times, and I never could make it work. By and by, one day I asked Miss Watson to try for me, but she said I were a fool. She never told me why, and I couldn't make it out anyway. I set down one time back in the wood, and had a long think about it all. I says to myself, if a body can get anything they pray for, why don't Deacon Winn get back the money he lost on pork. And why can't the widow get back her silver snuffbox that was stole? Why can't Miss Watson get fatted up? No I says to myself, there ain't nothing to it."

But then in the second place, if you do get what you want, and there will be times when you do get what you ask for, you are likely thereafter to use prayer to prevail upon God to do something which you think he would not otherwise do.

Both results are bad. On the one hand, to give up prayer leaves you that much poorer and deprives you of one of the great resources of life. And on the other hand, to use prayer makes you proud and presumptuous and puts you in the position of presuming to dictate to the Almighty and telling him what he ought to do. And both of these undesirable results seem to me to stem from a mistake that you made in the beginning, and the mistake was in thinking that prayer is a way to get something you want, like a child's letter to Santa Claus. It isn't.

Let me put in a parenthesis here, before we go any further in this sermon on prayer and I shall ask you to hold it in your minds, not only during this sermon but in the one that will follow next

Sunday. We often get something as a result of prayer. Let no one forget that. But that is not the same as to say that we pray in order to get it. That is a distinction with a real difference. Do you see it. And I sincerely believe that if people will grasp that difference it will make their prayers stronger, more meaningful and more effective. Our Lord, I am sure, never thought of prayer primarily as a way of getting God to do something.

THE PRIMARY PURPOSE OF PRAYER

This brings us then to the primary purpose of prayer. If the primary purposes of prayer is not to get something, what then is it? THE PURPOSE OF PRAYER IS TO BE WITH SOMEONE. It is the cultivation and expression of a relationship. The primary purpose of prayer is to be with God.

In one sense, of course, we are with God all of the time. I suppose there are times, as a matter of fact, when we should like to get away from him entirely, to go off and be on our own. It would be a great relief to some people, less embarrassing. The fact that we are continually in the presence of God is one of the most reassuring and at the same time one of the most frightening thoughts that can pass through our minds. However, we are not conscious of Him unless we deliberately stop to think about it.

Think of it this way if you will. It's something like the sun, if we can reduce this matter to a smaller one. We are in the sun all of the time. We live and breathe because of the vitality that comes to us from the sun. If the sun burned out, we would disappear within a short period of time. We are in the sun all of the time, but we don't stop to think about it very much. Oh, we may happen to think about it if we've had several days of wet weather, and no sunshine at all. But normally we don't think about it very much. You don't look up in the sky every morning to see if it's there; you take it for granted that it's there. There are those times when we do stop to look up - a beautiful sunrise, or sunset. Or it may be you have an interest in astronomy, and you know that you can't understand the movement of the other heavenly bodies unless you study them in relation to the sun, and so you study the sun deliberately, and carefully.

God is something like the sun. We don't think about him very much because we're too busy thinking about the things he has given us to do - our homes, jobs, activities. And I think God wants it to be so. But there are times when we must stop to think about him, and think of our lives in relation to him, for if it is true that we cannot understand the movements of this earth apart from its relation to the heavenly bodies, how much more is it true that we cannot understand our little fragmentary lives apart from Him who is the source and goal of all life?

Prayer, therefore, in its most elementary sense, is simply stopping to think about God. It's a great deal more than that, don't forget, but that's a good place to begin. And let's face it, it's a hard place for us Americans to begin, for it is almost impossible for us to stop what we're doing long enough to think about God. We're on the go practically all of the time, and we think that there is a virtue in being busy. The busier a person is, the better we think he is. It's hard for us to stop and think about God.

HOW CAN WE THINK OF
SOMEONE WE CAN'T SEE

The purpose of prayer is to be with God.
Prayer is stopping to think about God.

Granted that we are able to accomplish the task of bringing ourselves to a stop, what do we think about? You ask, how do we think about someone that we can't see? Actually when you come right down to it many of you are doing this sort of thing all of the time. For instance, someone you love is living in a different part of the country, or in a different part of the world - a child, or a parent, or a brother or sister. You don't think about that person all of time. You can't; you have too many other things that have to be done. It wouldn't be natural for you if you did. You go about your normal life. But there are times, times so precious to describe, when you do stop to think about that person even though you can't see him. There may be things around the house that remind you of him - books, clothes, toys, presents. They all say something about the person. Your eyes linger upon those things. And then, of course, from time to time, you get letters from that person, messages in which he tells you about himself and what he's doing, and what he hopes to do. Then too, perhaps there is a picture of him on your dresser and you look at that. It brings the face back to you; not that you need a picture to remind you, but it does, nevertheless. You can almost hear him speak.

Of course, no analogy is perfect, but I think that this one may give us a clue to our thinking about God. We do not think about God all of the time, but when we want to think about Him it helps us to look for the things that remind us. What are some of them? We see something of God in the out of doors. At least I do. I'm sure you do to. You walk along the beaches of the sea in the summer time and if you are fortunate enough to be on a beach that isn't too crowded, you may say to yourself, "The sea is his and he made it". It reminds you of the vastness of God. Or if you're spending time in the mountains, you look at those glorious hills, and you say to yourself, "And the strength of the hills is his also". The steadfastness and the changelessness of the hills remind you of the steadfastness and changelessness of the everlasting God who made them. You go out late at night and look up at the stars and think of his beauty and power. Or you see things growing in the fields at this time of year, and you think of his life. But suppose you live in the city, perhaps in one room. You can't look at the sea, or at the hills, and perhaps not even at the stars, certainly not at the fields. What then can you see that will remind you of God the way a man's belongings bring him close to those who love him? Look at the wood in your furniture, Where did it come from? Think of the tree before it fell, one of God's most perfect creations. Think of the seed when it fell in the ground, and how it grew, silently, slowly, continually through the years, so much from so little. And if you can't stretch your imagination that far, put your finger on your own pulse and feel the steady beat of it. Don't worry whether it's going to fast or to slow. The point is that it's beating. What makes it beat. It is God's power that pulses through you and through every living thing.

We have also something comparable to a man's letters. Through sensitive minds and spirits that have been tuned to the purposes of God, he has been able to communicate something of His purpose to us. These messages are in the Bible. If you want practical suggestions, and I am trying to be practical here today, my suggestion is that you never begin your prayers without reading the Bible, and read it not only intelligently, but receptively. Let it speak to you. Read

between the lines of it, just as a mother reads between the lines of a letter she gets from her son.

Over and above these things, we have a picture of God. You say a picture of a Divine Being. Yes, just that. A picture of God in Jesus Christ.....an expression, a representation of his character. This is what the infinite God is like.

And so what we have been saying here this morning, if I may begin to bring it all together, is that prayer is first and foremost the practice of being in the presence of God. When Jesus spent the whole night in prayer, what do you suppose he was doing. I find it difficult to believe that he spent the whole night asking God for this thing or that thing. He was being with God, his Heavenly Father, enjoying him, getting to know him, relating himself and his work to him, and thinking of the entire world in relationship to him.

Your prayers, I think will not mean much to you until you begin from this end. It takes time and effort, but it is well worth it. YOU'll have spells when you neglect prayer, letting it get crowded out by other things. It happens to all of us. But you will come back to it, the way you come back to a person you love, to a person who feeds and fills your life. Don't worry when nothing happens. It has always been that way with people who pray, even the great ones. Don't keep looking for results. You don't do that in any of the great human relationships in life. You enjoy the relationship for what it is. You do your part, take the results with gladness and surprise, should there be any. Why should it be any different with your relationship with God. He is much more than a bank account on which you can draw when in need. He is your Father - on whom you can lean, and to whom you can turn, and for whom you can live at your best.

The primary purpose of prayer is not to get something, but to be with someone. Prayer is stopping to think about God. Then do we never ask for anything. Of course we do, and this is what we shall think about next Sunday morning.

LET US PRAY: O Thou invisible God, whom we cannot see yet whom we know, help us to see the reflection of thy goodness and power in the things thou hast made. Give us the will and the mind to read thy message that has been preserved for us in the Bible, and heold before us continually the picture of thy everlasting love in the face of Jesus Christ. And give us the grace in the midst of the confusi n of this world, to stop from time to time whatever we are doing to think about thee. Amen