



PSALM 86:1-10, MATTHEW 6:5-21
FEBRUARY 1, 2015

FIRST LUTHERAN, MARSHALL
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Prayer

Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we believe and in believing we obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our bible passage for today forms the middle section of the Sermon on the Mount that fills all of Matthew 5, 6 & 7. As we heard last week, Jesus began this long sermon with the *Beatitudes*, the *Blessed R's*, those challenging statements:

-blessed are the *poor* in *spirit*,

-blessed are those who *mourn*...really? *Blessed??*

They make us think about what it truly means to *be blessed*. And, in fact, the *beatitudes* do give us an inspiring glimpse into the **holy possibilities** of how **God's** vision for life can actually become real in **our** lives, can actually be **good news** for how **our** lives unfold.

Then we come to **today's** passage, which is both the *center of* and *central to* everything else that is said **before** and **after** – and, not surprisingly, the central part of the message is Jesus teaching his disciples (and every Christian since!) what we have come to call *The Lord's Prayer*.

But before we get to that famous prayer, *before and after it*, Jesus makes some specific **commands**:

When making an **offering** to God, Jesus warns us:

Do not sound a trumpet before you...

And when talking about people **praying**, Jesus commands:

*Do not pray on street corners, like the **hypocrites** do...AND*

*Do not heap up empty phrases as the **Gentiles** do...*

Let me make a personal remark here: We've talked before about how it's *fairly easy* to **publicly** keep the 10 Commandments:

- we don't worship other gods,
- we honor our parents,
- we usually make it through the day without **killing** someone...

Then, just after the beatitudes, Jesus tells us that

- whenever we *think* something bad against our neighbor,
 - whenever a *lustful thought* flits through our empty heads,
 - whenever a *feeling of envy* tugs at our **hearts** –
- we're just as guilty of breaking the commandment as if we had committed the sin publicly.

So what I want to say is this: I am very proud of how well we all are keeping these commands of Jesus in today's lesson:

I've never heard anyone here sound a trumpet when they put their offering in the plate to show how **generous** they are; and...

I've never seen any of you praying on the street corners so that everyone can see how **holy** you are;

And I've never seen anyone with a frown on their face to show how much it hurts to fast in support of some prayer...

Doesn't it feel good to think that we're keeping at least **SOME** of the Lord's commands???

And yet, that's not the point here, is it? I guess the question to ask is this: if we're not **guilty** of breaking these commands...

are we really to be commended for:

-**not** calling attention to the **gifts** we give...

Or are we guilty of **giving** only when we **think** of it...

-**not** praying in public...

Or are we guilty of ignoring God's command to pray always?
-**not** calling attention to a **cause** we support...

Or are we guilty of **never** fasting, **never** denying ourselves as we pray for *someone* or *something*?

As we all know, prayer is a good thing, an incredible gift to help us be in relationship with God. Yet, prayer is also something we often neglect - I know I do.

So let's take a look at prayer. **What are some of its benefits, some of the things it does?**

The truth is that prayer **changes** things. **First**, it changes...us, the *person who prays*. When we pray, we submit our will to God, and that act of humility throws the door to our hearts wide open for the work of the Spirit.

Prayer also changes the way we hold on to our *worries and cares*. I've mentioned that one of the foundational precepts of my life is a line from Alcoholics Anonymous philosophy: *Let go and let God...*

Only when we can bring our cares to the foot of the cross – AND THEN LEAVE THEM THERE! – can we truly begin to trust that God has received them – and is responding to our requests.

Thirdly, prayer changes **God's relationship** with us. It **deepens** that connection. A relationship can only grow to the level of intimacy that we are willing to share intimate things. As we communicate with God, sharing our:

-thanks and praise,

-hopes and fears,

-needs and desires,

only then does our trust in God grow.

Finally, prayer has an effect *on God*. That's a pretty bold statement but it's born out continually by the biblical witnesses. When the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness, they continually got in trouble for worshiping idols and ignoring God. That would make the Lord **angry**, he'd announce a punishment, **Moses** would pray and...often God would **change** his **mind**!

This shows not only the power of our prayers to **move** God, but it **also** gives us an **incredible** glimpse into God's passionate love for us! When we dare to love someone, we make ourselves vulnerable, right? We place our hearts in the hands of the one we love and, literally, we *hope to God* that they take care of it.

The same is true for God. By loving us God, has made himself **vulnerable** to us.

It **hurts** God when we use his name to curse, swear, lie or deceive.

It **hurts** God to be ignored when we forget to pray.

It **hurts** God to watch us hurt each other/ignore someone in need.

In Isaiah 65 there is a lament from God who is in anguish because the Israelites are not praying. Says the Lord through the prophet: *I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, 'Here I am, here I am,' to a nation that did not call on my name.*

Make no mistake: God wants, God invites, God implores, God **commands** us to pray – for our sake...but also for God's!!

Now sometimes people neglect prayer because they say it doesn't work. Often, what they mean is that they prayed for something that did not come to pass. I'll always remember one thing from a Lutheran Youth gathering I attended when I was in high school. The speaker assured us that God **always** answers prayer...but that answer can either be: "**Yes, No, or Wait**." The trouble is, we don't **like** to be told **NO** and we **can't stand** to **WAIT**.

Terry Fretheim, a retired professor at Luther Seminary, suggests that we might avoid part of this struggle by talking about God “**responding**” to our prayers rather than “**answering**” them. God **always** responds to our prayers...even though we don’t always get the answer we **want**. God always wants and wills what is **best** for us, **even** when that doesn’t fit with what **we** think is best.

Other times we neglect prayer for the very simple reason that we feel like we don’t know how to pray...and we don’t want to “get it wrong.” But really there aren’t many ways to pray *incorrectly*. Certainly it’s wrong to pray like the pompous Pharisee in Jesus’ parable who thanked God for making him a wonderfully religious person so **unlike** the rotten sinner standing next to him. But other than that I think God is pretty much delighted whenever and for whatever we pray.

So let’s use every chance we get to pray to God. As Jesus said, it doesn’t have to be a long prayer, you don’t have to use flowery language, and it certainly doesn’t have to be perfect.

Work to set your mind on automatic so that when you wake up to the alarm you can hit the snooze button and spend a few minutes in prayer to start your day. Take a moment at meal times or coffee breaks to call upon the name of the Lord. Devote some time in the evening or at bedtime to reviewing your day and, as the song says, *Take it to the Lord in prayer*.

Prayer is a gift that has the power to change:

- the person who prays, by opening up our hearts
- the way we hold on to worries and concerns,
- it deepens God’s relationship with us,
- and it blesses God, even affecting the decisions God makes.

Our Father in heaven...is eager to hear from you. Amen.