

Sermon

## *The When and Where of Effective Prayer*

### **A Time for Prayer**

I would like for us to think about the significance of time in the Christian life. Although we do not all have the same amount of wealth, or even of talents or abilities, we all presently do have time. We may not all have the same amount of quantitative time. Some may live longer than others, yet at this moment we all have time.

To talk about giving our lives to Jesus, to talk about living the Christian life and all that goes with it, is ultimately to talk about time. We do not all have the ability to give God the same quantity of money, just as we do not all have the ability to dedicate to Him the same talents. But we do all have the same amount of time at any particular moment.

We have, it would seem, two choices. We can choose to dedicate what time we have either to God or to ourselves. Jesus told a story about a man who went out to plant a field (Luke 8:5-15). In those days they didn't drill the wheat into the ground with machinery; rather, they broadcasted it. That is, they simply threw it out by hand. Those with practice could accomplish this in a fairly even manner. Of course, no matter how proficient a person became at broadcasting the seed evenly in the prepared areas, some of the seed would fly in out-of-the-way places.

In Jesus' parable, some seed fell on the roadway, where the birds ate it. Others fell on the stones by the edge of the field and dried up because there was no soil for the roots. Others fell among thorns. The thorns overshadowed the plants and choked them out.

Jesus explained that the seed in the story represents the World of God. The various environments where the seed fell are the situations of our lives.

Think for a moment about the seed that fell among the thorns, or as we could say, among the weeds. Jesus later explained to His disciples that by thorns He meant the cares of this life that choke out spiritual growth.

A popular grass often used on Florida lawns is called St. Augustine. It is very thick and grows by sending runners across the top of the ground. A person can plant plugs of this grass, which will soon spread until it covers the whole area. The lawns in many Florida neighborhoods are seeded with a fast-growing, common native grass called Bahia. Bahia is thin and not particularly pretty. If you happen to have a neighbor who invested his money in the St. Augustine variety, believe it or not, in a few years your neighbor's nice St. Augustine grass will simply spread across your front lawn and choke out the Bahia. Of course, you can speed up the process if you also put in some plugs to encourage things along.

So now your lawn is the coveted St. Augustine grass. But you have to be careful, because there are other grasses continually trying to choke out the St. Augustine. One of these is called India crab grass. This grass is very persistent. If it is allowed even a

small start, it will climb across the top of the St. Augustine. As it gets thicker and thicker, the sun isn't able to reach the St. Augustine, and it dies out.

For many people, their spiritual life isn't going anywhere because it is simply being choked out by the cares of this life. Remember, life is about time. If we are going to have a spiritual life that is thriving, we will have to spend time at it. If we are going to have a good golf score, it requires practice, and practice is about time. If we are going to make progress in any area of our lives, we are going to have to spend time at it.

The truth is, our lives are reflected in what we spend time on. It may sound too simple, but the person who seems to have a growing, meaningful Christian life is the person who is spending time at it.

The cares of this life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century are all but choking out the spiritual lives of countless people. These days both parents may be working. The children are under enormous pressure, inasmuch as their social lives tend to be outside the home. We start the day early and go to bed late. We seem to have a high standard of living in this country as far as material things go, but a very poor standard of living in the things that really matter.

What it boils down to is this: To be able to pray effectively, we must allocate time. Remember, time is the raw material of life. If we want a spiritual life that means anything, if we want to experience what it means to be a victorious and growing Christian, we must set aside time to make it happen. Everything takes time, and

the Christian life is no exception.

Some people think they can pray while doing everything else, like breathing. Ordinarily, we don't have to stop what we're doing to breathe. Although it is true that we can do other things and be praying at the same time, we can't be thinking about other things and be praying at the same time. Effective prayer happens when we set aside time to pray, time when we are not doing anything else.

People who are growing spiritually, who enjoy what it means to be overcomers, and who know the meaning and power of prayer, are people who set aside a special time every day for prayer alone with God. These people have learned that the Christian life goes best when they begin the day with God. So, too, if we want to pray effectively, we must make time for it.

### **A Place for Prayer**

To experience the true joy of communion with God, we also need to have a special place for prayer. The Bible says Jesus would often go off to a place where He could be alone. This is logical, because when a person is trying to spend quality time with someone, they should be alone with them. The two go off someplace where there are no other people and things to distract them. Of course, we can pray to God in any place and at any time. But the most effective and meaningful time is that which we have spent alone with God in a special place.

It is no secret that marriages thrive when the husband and wife have special quality time together at special places. It is the same in our relationship with Jesus. Jesus had

special places for prayer. Others must have known where those places were, because Judas knew where He would be praying when he lead the crowd to arrest Jesus.

The text in Matthew 6:6 says, "But thou when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou has shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly."

Of course, Jesus is not talking about a literal closet; He is talking about a special place to be alone without distractions.

To be alone with God is not easy. Prayer and time spent alone with God is a discipline. We have to work at it to make it happen. We need to be careful, though, because we can be alone with someone physically and not really be there at all. We can be thinking of other things while communing with God. So getting alone with God in a special place doesn't mean it is going to be easy from there on. We must learn to concentrate. We must know what we doing there and why.

It is very hard to concentrate in this day and age. We are more accustomed to being distracted. We are so used to being distracted that many of us do not know how to be alone and may even feel uncomfortable when we are alone. This is because we are used to having the radio playing, the TV on, or the kids interrupting. We are not accustomed to being in the silence of our own contemplation.

But when we are alone with God, we must learn how to be silent and endure and enjoy

silence. Remember, the Scriptures tell us, "Be still and know that I am God." It is not in noise and hoop-la that we get to know God best, but in the stillness; deep within our own hearts is where we find Him. As we make plans to move forward in our prayer life, we will want to have a special place where we go for our quiet time with God.

### **Understanding the Presence of God**

When we talk about being alone with God, we speak of being in His presence. Think for a moment about what it means to be in the presence of God. How do we go about being in the presence of someone we do not see or who, to our five senses, is not there with us? We do not ordinarily begin a conversation with someone until we are in their presence. A heart-to-heart talk is impossible unless we perceive the person we are talking to is present.

God cannot be seen with our eyes, nor under regular circumstances is He heard with our ears. He cannot be touched with our hands. In other words, our physical senses do not reveal God to us. This is because God is not physical but spiritual. It is possible to enjoy someone's presence when they are not with us physically. We often do this by telephone or by email. We don't actually need to be with someone to feel their presence. We can think of a person as being present even when they are not so near if they can see or hear or share themselves with us in some way.

An American missionary who spent years serving in South America shared an experience that illustrates this very well. During the time that he was living abroad, the most efficient way that missionaries had of keeping in touch with their loved ones at

home was by short-wave radio. The missionary was what is referred to as a Ham Radio operator.

One day, he related, a fellow expatriate came to him to ask a favor. It seems this man had promised his wife that on their 20th wedding anniversary they would publicly renew their vows. Their 20th anniversary was coming up, and there he was in South America on a short assignment and she was in the United States. His special request was would the missionary be willing to help the couple renew their vows over the short-wave radio. Of course, the missionary would be delighted. And so, arrangements were made for the couple and the pastor-missionary to meet at a certain short-wave frequency at a certain time of day. All went well, and the anniversary promise was kept. The pastor-missionary related how touching it was to lead the couple in renewing their vows even though they were more than five thousand miles apart.

When we think of experiencing someone's presence, in the final analysis isn't it essentially an inner experience? When we are in a friend's presence, isn't the realization, the enjoyment, and even the significance of their presence something that takes place within the heart? A friend may be on the other side of the room or on the other side of the world, but the real experience takes place in the heart.

Jesus said to the woman at the well, "God is spirit and those that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth." (John 4:24) This gives meaning to the words we read in Luke 17:21 that the kingdom of God is within us.

In another passage Jesus said, "I will love him and will manifest Myself to him; My Father will love him and We will come to him and make Our abode with him." (John 14:23) And so in a way we cannot yet fully understand but can appreciate, we may experience the presence of God deep down in our own consciousness even though our five senses don't perceive Him. As Scripture says, "Whom having not seen we love" (1 Peter 1:8). Friends, this mysterious but real experience is made possible by the Holy Spirit.

We may think that if Jesus were only here physically, the Christian life would be easier. But would it? He was here physically one time, and yet the people that knew Him either loved Him or hated Him. To some He was just an ordinary person, perhaps even a disappointment. But to others He was the Son of God. That is the way it is today. In fact, Jesus told Thomas that those who would believe on Him without seeing Him would have an even greater blessing than those who had seen Him in person.

When the Bible teaches that God is present everywhere, it means wherever in the universe we may be, God knows all about us. It teaches us He is accessible and that He can hear us, and loves us, and helps us no matter what our need.

Though distance does not separate us from God, one thing that will separate us is sin. Sin doesn't make it impossible for God to see us, but rather it makes it impossible for us to discern His presence. For this reason, the most important factor in being in the presence of God is that we must be in an attitude of repentance, with our sins confessed, and with the knowledge that, having confessed our sins, He is faithful

and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness ( 1 John 1:9).

God is accessible to us wherever we chance to be. He is as near in one place as in any other. If we seek Him with all our heart, the Scripture tells us we will find Him (Deut 4:29). All of this is so we might understand that when we go to a place where we are alone to be with God, we will actually be able to have the reality in our spirit of being in His presence.

### **Communion Is a Two-way Street**

What does it mean to communicate with God? Prayer is our communicating with God, but communication must be a two-way street. We must not only communicate with God, we must let Him communicate with us. It is very important to bear in mind that the basis for all of God's communication with us is the Bible.

There are many millions of clocks and watches in the world that are measuring time, but the fact is there is only one real way to measure time and that is to calculate the movement of the stars. You and I may have a clock or a watch that tells the time, but actually it may not be the accurate time at all. Although clocks were made to tell time, they do not control the essence of time. God is in charge of that. It is God, then, not my watch, Who is in control of the passage of time.

Although God may communicate with me in my heart or in my conscience, this should not be considered reliable unless it is measured by the Bible. Just as our watches may stop or gain time or loose time and so not give the correct time at all, so we must

not depend on an inner voice to guide us as to what is right and what is wrong.

While it is true that the Holy Spirit communicates with our hearts, the Scriptures clearly tell us that we cannot trust our own hearts. It tells us there is a way that seems right to us, but it is wrong (Proverbs 16:25). God's thoughts and ours are not on the same wave length (Isaiah 55:8).

In our communion with God, the Bible must be the yardstick by which all our thoughts and ideas are measured. One man was heard to say that if God wants him to keep the Sabbath, He would reveal it to him. Friend, we must be careful. That is like a person who is given to telling lies saying that if God wants them to tell the truth He will reveal it to them! Where does the Scripture figure in to this kind of reasoning? God has already revealed His will to us, and He has done so in His Word. Prayer is not so much to discover the will of God as it is to receive strength to obey it.

Our tendency is to impose our personal morality on the Bible. Do you know what I mean by that? We will generally look to the Bible to justify the way we personally think and live. This is why almost any would-be spiritual leader will have some text to prove his or her point.

Of the myriad of voices today, who can we believe? The only safety we have is being in a continuing attitude of repentance. A person who is doing something he knows is wrong and refuses to give it up but rather rationalizes or justifies it, should not trust his inner voice, nor can he be trusted to teach others. He will inevitably craft a theology to match his personal morality.

We need to remind ourselves again and again that the method God has chosen to communicate with us is through His Word. When we go to prayer, we must have His word as the basis for all we will do or say during that time alone with Him.

### **Giving God the Time of Day**

When should we pray? The problem we sometimes have in giving time to God is that we say we don't have time. This age is one in which we seem to have time for everything but for what really matters. When it comes to spending time with God and our families, we seem to run out of time. Most of us have time for everything we want to do, but not much time for anything else.

The flip side of this is that we really don't have time for everything. Activities consume time, and time is finite. Just as it is possible to overload a truck so it breaks down, just so it is possible to overload our lives.

The llama is a pack animal native to South America. It has been said that the llama will sit down and accept a load; but if a certain amount is exceeded, the animal will simply not get up. In the same way, if we know our life to be overloaded so there is no time for God, we had better not go on until we have lightened the load.

We need to recognize our own limitations. There are only 24 hours in a day. Nothing can be added to our already full lives unless we are willing to take something out to make room for it.

This is why the devotional life so often collapses. We try to fit God in along with everything else already there and then wonder why it doesn't seem to work. When we try to put God in on top of everything else, He will soon slide off. Anything we do in our life requires time, and so we must provide it a time slot. If God is going to have a place in our lives, we must give Him time. This means if we wish to spend time with God, we will have to give up time we used to spend doing something less important. We will have to give prayer and time with God a priority we have not given it heretofore. Inasmuch as we have time for the things we consider important, we will have time for God when God is seen as important to us.

Our heavenly Father wishes we would give Him back some of the time He has given us.

The practical fact is that if we spend only a little time with Him, He can give us only a little help. But if we will spend much time with Him, He will give us much help.

We are very much creatures of habit. We prefer doing things without thinking very hard.

We often decide what we are going to do in a particular instance and then put ourselves on auto pilot. But when it comes to faith and morals, our instincts are usually wrong. We may have a good sense of direction or of business, we may have many other\_natural abilities, but a person doesn't have a natural instinct to do what is right. Someone said that when we get into a problem, if we will decide what to do and then do the opposite, we will probably come closer to doing the right thing!

You have heard it said that we ought to think before we speak. This is surely true. But the fact of the matter is, very few of us do so. Imagine what would happen if we were to say a little prayer before we make a phone call, or if we were to say a little

prayer when someone is about to come into the office to talk to us? What would happen if we were to say a little prayer when the kids are about to come home from school, or our spouse is about to come home from work?

Salvation in Jesus Christ is a process by which we pass from death unto life. By that I don't mean just physical death. The fact we are often not sensitive to the way we treat each other or the way we react to how others treat us is causing untold and unnecessary grief. The average person doesn't realize they are doing something wrong until it has already happened. Imagine what it would be like if we could be aware, before we said or did something, that we were about to make a mistake, and then if we would cry out to the Lord. Believe you me, He would hear us. He is waiting and anxious for that type of prayer.

Most of the suffering in our day-to-day lives is because we do not pray as we should. We have learned not to stick our finger in the blades of a fan or on a hot iron, but we don't seem to understand the way we talk to our spouses could very well be destroying our marriages little by little.

Perhaps in other generations we could get by on Mama's or Grandma's prayers. But not in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century! If we are not spending quality time every day alone with God, the problems and complexities of life in this generation are going to overwhelm us.

Some people think they can stay ahead in the rat race. But the fact is, in the long run unless we are in an on-going communication with God, unless we learn the true meaning of prayer, the rats will win!