

ARE YOU READY TO GROW IN YOUR PRAYER LIFE?

A SERMON FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY OF
*COMMITTED TO CHRIST: SIX STEPS TO
A GENEROUS LIFE*
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
SEPTEMBER 15, 2013
TED W. LAND, INTERIM PASTOR

LUKE 6:12-19

Are you ready to grow in your prayer life? For most of us, the question is not whether we need to grow, but whether we are ready to make the kind of commitment of effort, of time, of energy, necessary for us to grow.

How much time do we spend in prayer every day? Do we pray every time we sit at a table to break bread? That is three times a day, and maybe three minutes total. Do we pray when we are eating in a restaurant? When we grab that quick snack from the drive-in window on our way to the next appointment? When we fix that bowl of ice cream or sandwich for our late night snack in front of the television? Do we pray at night, before we fall asleep? Is it really important how many times we pray, how long we pray, how much we pray? Is the depth and breadth of our prayers more important than the length?

The old hymn *What a Friend We Have in Jesus* says it well:

-
1. What a friend we have in Jesus,
 all our sins and griefs to bear!
 What a privilege to carry
 everything to God in prayer!
 O what peace we often forfeit,
 O what needless pain we bear,
 all because we do not carry
 everything to God in prayer.
 2. Have we trials and temptations?
 Is there trouble anywhere?
 We should never be discouraged;
 take it to the Lord in prayer.
 Can we find a friend so faithful
 who will all our sorrows share?
 Jesus knows our every weakness;
 take it to the Lord in prayer.
 3. Are we weak and heavy laden,
 cumbered with a load of care?
 Precious Savior, still our refuge;
 take it to the Lord in prayer.
 Do thy friends despise, forsake thee?
 Take it to the Lord in prayer!
 In his arms he'll take and shield thee;
 thou wilt find a solace there.

Prayer, at its simplest, is just that: talking to a friend. So often, we only pray, we only call on our friend, when we need something. Now I ask you, what kind of a friend does that make us?

But you know, with a true friend, it doesn't matter. You can not see a friend, not talk to that friend for years, and then, in a chance encounter, at a ball game, a wedding, a funeral, you see each other, and you pick up right where you left off years before. I remember my father telling of a friend from whom he was separated at the end of basic training in the Army for World War II. Dad last saw Robert Prince when they were getting on troop trains going in opposite directions. That was in the late winter of 1942. They did not see each other again until the summer of 1946. When Robert came and sat down next to my father, the first thing he said was, "As I was saying before we were so rudely interrupted..."

When we talk to a friend, it isn't just to ask for something. It is to tell the friend about the joys and sorrows, the experiences, of our lives. We pour out our hearts and souls to a true friend, and they receive that outpouring, and do not criticize, do not judge, do not offer advice, but instead solace, comfort.

Many times a day, I find myself talking to God. Sometimes it is just, "Lord, Thank you!" Other times, it is to lift up a problem, a person, a need. That is often as short as, "Lord, help!" Frankly, it is rare that I spend a fifteen minute block of time in prayer and meditation.

I have come to realize in later years, that my Father, who was not a church goer, was a man of prayer. And that when he uttered the expression, "Lord, help!" it was not an exclamation or an expletive, it was a heart-felt if brief call out to the one who is our help. My Father's favorite Psalm was the same as mine: 121: I will lift up my eyes to the hills. From whence does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth."

I learned from my Roman Catholic friends more than thirty years ago that when we recite the psalms, we are praying them. And from someone else I learned the saying that when we sing, we pray twice.

The most important thing to remember about prayer is that it is a two way conversation. We are talking to our friend. But we must listen in turn to what our friend has to say to us. And this is particularly difficult, because our friend does not speak to us in ways that we can hear with our ears. We must hear with our hearts. We must hear in our souls. We must hear in the words of others, and seek in the written Word of God.

There are probably as many different ways to pray, to speak to God, to listen to God, as there are people who are speaking, who are listening.

Some people find great comfort, great meaning, in reading the prayers of others, or of reading prayers and devotions written in books. Some people find great comfort in repeating the same familiar prayer over and over. Most of us learned how to pray "Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep" as children. We taught it to our son. And, I'll have to confess, the night before my quadruple bypass surgery, that is the prayer I prayed.

We all kind comfort and hope when we say the words of the Lord's Prayer together, but I want to caution about what Jesus warned us about in Matthew 6:7, vain repetitions. A hundred "Our Fathers" or "Hail Marys" as a penance by a priest might have helped the penitent to remember the words, but I suspect that the Lord tuned out after the first couple.

The Serenity Prayer written by Reinhold Niebuhr, has been adopted and utilized by Alcoholics Anonymous, and may indeed have been written for that organization, but is a wonderful prayer to use each and every day, especially if you are at a loss for words to offer to God in prayer. There is a young lady who will appear in the Miss America contest this week who has that prayer tattooed, in letters two or three inches tall, on her side and back. She says that as a child, when she was being abused, she would read the words of that prayer, and it would give her comfort. I never thought of a prayer being tattooed on my body as a source of comfort, as an expression of faith, as a prayer in and of itself, but as I said, there are as many ways to pray as there are people who are praying.

Are you ready to grow in your prayer life? Are you ready to spend more time with your best friend? Are you ready to walk with God and talk with God in silence?

Maybe you aren't ready to make a commitment today. That's fine; there is a place on the Prayer Commitment Card to check for that. Maybe you are ready to pray in worship: not out loud, just in those silent moments, or by actually praying the words to the written prayers instead of just saying them. Maybe you are ready to pray whenever you are facing a difficult decision. Maybe you already are praying at those times. Perhaps you are already praying daily, maybe more than once. Maybe it is time to start using a devotional guide, like Daily Bread, or These Days, or Oswald Chamber's book. Maybe you can start remembering in your prayers the requests made in worship, those names on the prayer list. Maybe you can set aside that fifteen minutes a day, or join a prayer group. And maybe you are ready to step up to that final paragraph on the commitment card:

*I will surround my family and friends with prayer. I will surround my church with prayer.
Through prayer, I will find strength, power and direction to face the week. Through prayer, I will trust God with my life, my family, my job, my finances, and my immediate and eternal future.
Through prayer, I will learn to love God with all my heart and to love my neighbors.*

Mark your card, and while we sing our hymn, come and bring it to the front of the church, and place it in our Commitment Chest, where no one will ever see, and no one but you and Jesus will ever know.