

Prayer: the Human Element

The Element of Desperation

See Mark 10:46-52

September 3, 2006

Introduction to “Prayer: The Human Element”

As a new follower of Jesus people told me over and over that the Christian life is hard and prayer is really hard. Prayer is work, they warned me. Prayer is sweat and toil. They even gave me books about all the great “prayer warriors” of the faith: this guy woke up at 4:00 in the morning and prayed for two hours; another famous prayer warrior prayed for three hours every day and then felt terrible that he couldn’t do it longer. But all of these prayer warriors had one common theme: prayer involves agony. Prayer was about as much fun as three-a-day high school football practices. You hate it. You sweat a lot. It may even make you nauseous, but you do it anyway. You work through the pain and the agony. And if you grow weary or discouraged, a coach would come beside you and yell in your face, “You’re loafing, Woodley! You’re weak. Get the lead out.” So you’d dig down deep and try harder.

I’ve changed my mind about prayer. Prayer does involve spiritual discipline, but it’s much more than sweat and agony. It’s a relationship with our Heavenly Father. There should be ease and comfort and delight in this conversation. God is the one who put his Spirit within us which cries out, “Abba! Father! (See Galatians 4:6-7). So, yes, God is holy; yes, we should tremble with awe and adoration and even a healthy fear. But more than anything prayer is a conversation with God. Prayer is God’s gift and invitation to us. The 15th century mystic St. John of the Cross defined prayer as wasting time with God. We could also say that prayer is the chance for ordinary human beings, saved by God’s grace, who want to hang out with their dad. Over the next five weeks we’re going to explore the human element of prayer.

Scripture Reading → Mark 10:46-52

Prayer Begins with “I Need”

Sometimes the words “I need” just slip out of our mouth. We try to avoid those two words. I’d rather say “I’ll give” or “I’m in charge” or “I’m okay.” But “I need” sounds so dependent, vulnerable, and at times, even downright desperate. We try to arrange our lives and our relationships so we can avoid those scary two words but sometimes they catch us by surprise.

It happened to me this summer. I was casually eating a sandwich on a park bench in Wheaton Chicago, talking to a good friend named Kevin. He asked me about a friend of mine named Doc, a man who used to be my mentor and main encourager for over a decade. “You know, it’s been eight years since Doc died,” I said quietly. “What do you miss the most about him?” Kevin asked. Much to my surprise, with a lump in my chest I

blurted out, “I need someone to tell me I’m doing okay in life. That’s all.” I tried to take the words back. I tried to give a more appropriate answer, a proper and religious answer, but it was too late. I need. It was so powerful, direct, simple and strong that it shocked me. And then I wondered: why was I so embarrassed? What is it about saying “I need” that makes us almost cringe with shame? It makes us feel dependent and vulnerable.

Of course this impacts our relationship with God because prayer (not all of it, of course, but at least some of it) is rooted in need. Some of the most common Biblical words to describe how we approach God are “cry” or “cry out” to God. The main Hebrew word in the Old Testament for cry out is *zawak*, which literally means to shriek. Two other Hebrew words for cry out to God mean to holler (*shawvah*) and to creak or make a shrill sound (*rinnaw*). The main New Testament word for crying out (*kradzo*) means to croak (like a raven) or to scream. They never mean a polite, nice, sweet request – “Uh, God, if you’re not too busy and you’re coming by this way anyhow, would you mind dropping in and giving me a little help?”

Let me give you a few examples: the first time “cry out” is used in the Bible to describe our relationship with God is found in Exodus 2:23. After that it becomes habitual: someone is always crying out to God. The Psalms – the ancient prayer book of the Bible – are filled with people in trouble who cry out to God (see Psalm 120:1; 130:1; 138:3; 141:1; 142:1).

So we can make a few conclusions about prayer: (1) it’s not always neat or pretty – sometimes it’s very messy; (2) it’s not always quiet – sometimes it’s very loud; (3) it’s not always calm – sometimes it’s very passionate. Prayer involves coming to God in the mess of life, the confusion of life, the pain and agony of life, and crying out for help. Prayer begins with these words: **God, help! God, I (or we) need you!**

On the one hand, this is a relief because it’s easy to assume that before we pray we need to get our act together. We need to get spiritually fit. We need to wash ourselves off. Listen to one of the first “rules” about prayer: “Prayer begins where we are, not where we think we should be.” My friend Tim Jones, who has written a great book called *The Art of Prayer*, quotes this rule of prayer and then says that “no conviction has done more to free me to turn to God ... God wants *me*. I do not need to put on airs to try to give myself a spiritual makeover to talk with God.”

My daughter was the messiest eater I’ve ever seen in my life. She would smear everything – spaghetti sauce, chocolate pudding, strained beets and squash – all over her hands and feet and face and for her grand finale she’d take the bowl and dump it over her head. Then she would lift her arms to me and say, “Help me, daddy. Take me out of this chair.” That’s how we come to our heavenly Father. In Christ because of Christ and through Christ we come to God the Father just as we are. Prayer implies freedom – the freedom to live as children of God, the freedom that comes from the blood of Jesus, the freedom of the Spirit to cry out “Abba, Father!” Prayer is not just saying prayers; it’s being with our Heavenly Father.

But this also assumes something else about our lives: trouble. Psalm 22:11 says, “Trouble is near.” The great Yiddish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer once said, “I only pray when I’m in trouble, but I’m always in trouble, so I’m always praying.” Sometimes people will ask me, “How are you doing? Are you staying out of trouble?” Just once I’d like to say something like this:

What kind of question is that? Are you kidding? Do you live in the real world? I’m always in trouble. I’m a flawed human being trying to raise four small human beings called children. Am I in trouble? You bet. I’m trying to love well – my wife, my friends, my enemies, the poor – but I have a reservoir of selfishness inside my heart. Am I in trouble? You bet. I’m trying to listen to what the Bible calls “God’s still, small voice” but there are so many other voices and distractions that sound appealing. Am I in trouble? You tell me. I’m trying to live like Jesus and there are so many un-Jesuy parts to my personality. I’ve lived 47 years as an addict to my favorite sins and I can’t seem to shake some of them no matter how hard I try. Am I in trouble? You bet. In the years ahead I will face suffering, trials, misunderstandings, grief and loss. It’s a given: Jesus promised it (see John 16:33). Am I in trouble? You bet. As a church we have a seemingly impossible task: a bunch of flawed and broken human beings who each want their own agenda need to die to our selves so we can love one another and then shine like a beacon of light in this community, starting and sustaining a revolution of hope and compassion, drawing all men and women to the find healing and satisfaction in Jesus. And quite often we live under the illusion that we can actually do this in our own power and wisdom. Are we all in trouble? You bet. The Bible says that we – every follower of Jesus – are involved in an intense spiritual battle, that we “wrestle not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil” (Ephesians 6:12). You’re no match for this. You’ll go down every time. Are we in trouble? You bet. We have another enemy: it’s called Death and we can’t defeat it and every day we’re getting a little closer to the poisonous “sting” of death. Are we in trouble? You bet. So, all in all, in answer your question: yes, I’m in big trouble. And how are you?

One great writer (a man named O Hallesby) on prayer put it this way: “Prayer is for the helpless. I never grow weary of emphasizing our helplessness for it is the decisive factor not only in our prayer life but in our whole relationship with God.”

Of course, here’s the amazing good news: when we unabashedly admit our need, when we cry out to God from the depths of our need, God hears our cry. When we cry out, God pays attention. Exodus 2:23 says, – “and their cry for help ... went up to God. God heard their groaning.” See also Exodus 3:7-9 where God said, “I have heard them crying out...And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me ...” If you look at Psalm 107, you’ll find one line repeated over and over again: “They cried out to the Lord from their distress, and He saved them from all their troubles.” Clearly, God is moved by our need and our trouble. Our cry pierces His heart.

Prayer is God’s great invitation to come to Him in the midst of our trouble and receive God’s resources: “Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things that you do not know” (Jeremiah 33:3). God is abounding in love and power. God issues the invitation. All of this seems so simple, doesn’t it? All the pieces seems to fit

together with such precision: (1) God is able and willing; (2) we're in trouble and we need God; (3) God invites us to come to Him. What could be clearer than that? We should rise up, jump into God's arms and declare, "Yes, I'll come. Yes, I'll ask. Yes, I'm here with my hands open wide like a giant basket ready to receive strength and wisdom and hope from God." So what's the problem? Why is prayer so difficult? Why don't we come?

First, we're proud. We've been taught not to ask; asking makes us look bad, incompetent, incomplete, needy, broken, and flawed – and we just can't go there. So we say to ourselves, "*A little religion is nice. A thin layer of Christianity – that's even better. But desperation? That's a strong word. I'm not desperate. I'm not that ragged. After all, what would people think of me if I was desperate? I may face a few troubles, but I can work it out. I don't need God – at least not that bad.*" And then Jesus tells us, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Nothing! We don't want to admit that we're really desperate. It wounds our pride. But the Bible is clear that we're desperate in this sense: we cannot save or fix or heal ourselves. We need redemption and redemption is always an outside job. We need a Redeemer. And that's where the Gospel intersects with our life: ...

Secondly, we're insecure. So we say, "*Who am I to approach God and ask for what I need? The universe is a vast place and I'm a speck on a speck of a planet. If God is really there, why would he care about me?*" We may even build an entire theological justification for this: God is important. God is really busy. Our spiritual leaders may tell us, "Look, God has important things to do and you're coming to him because you have some puny needs? You are really a selfish brat! God must get sick of your constant gimme, gimme, gimme all the time." It's true that God grows weary of our incessant asking for luxuries. Do you recall the Janis Joplin song in which she asks God for a Mercedes Benz because all her friends drive Porsches? God isn't our puppet. He doesn't always answer our prayers the way we would like them answered. God's mind is not our mind, the Bible reminds us. But don't forget, God is Abba, daddy, father. He wants us to get over our insecurity.

I have what's called the "middle child syndrome." As the middle of seven kids – with three loud older siblings and three loud younger siblings – I learned the role of the middle child: don't ask because no one is listening anyway. This has damaged my relationship with God. God wants us to come boldly and confidently. Christ has paid the debt for our sins. Jesus has removed the list of charges against us (see Colossians 2:13-15). Now there is only one way to approach God: "In him (Christ) and through faith in him, we may approach God with freedom and confidence" (Ephesians 3:12).

So the two great barriers are pride and insecurity. That's why I love Bartimaeus in Mark 10. Now when kids dress up in their favorite Bible character, almost no one chooses Bartimaeus, but I love him anyway. Notice his lack of pride. He's a mess: blind, ragged, poor. He's begging for every scrap he can get. He's desperate and not afraid to admit it. He heard that Jesus was passing by so he began to shout, "**JESUS, SON OF DAVID, HAVE MERCY ON ME!**" He's completely inappropriate and indecent. People start

telling him to shut up. “Many rebuked him,” it even says in verse 48. “Hey, buddy, you’re making a fool out of yourself. Shut up! Calm down! Simmer down right now! Be respectably religious – like us.” Bartimaeus will have none of this shallow piety: he cries out (*kradzo*) even louder, “**JESUS, SON OF DAVID, HAVE MERCY ON ME!**”

In verse 49 we read that “Jesus stopped.” This is actually amazing. Back in verse 32 we read that “they (Jesus and his disciples) were on their way to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way.” This is an intense scene. Jesus is on a mission, a quest to go straight into Jerusalem so he can die for the sins of the world and rise again to bring new life to all of creation. He’s on a BIG mission, a colossal world-transforming assignment. He doesn’t have time to stop. With fire in his eyes and passion in his gut and a lump in his throat, Jesus rolls like a tank into Jerusalem. He’s leading the way. But then, all of a sudden, something makes him stop dead in his tracks. Why does he stop? Someone is crying out to God. Some poor beggar finally knows how to cry out to God. Some desperate beggar shrugs off all the naysayer’s and the respectable people who pray with calm, cool precision and he actually dares to cry out to God. And this desperate beggar knows how to ask. He’s not shy. In the presence of Jesus he doesn’t have a shred of insecurity. He experiences total freedom and confidence. So when Jesus asks, “What do you want me to do for you?” he simply says, “I want to see.” This desperate beggar isn’t poor anymore: he’s in the presence of the King. This is better than Bill Gates asking you, “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus is loaded with spiritual riches (see Ephesians 1:7 and 1:18). So Bartimaeus asks – boldly, confidently, without hemming and hawing or apologizing or justifying. He just asks. This is the element of desperation in action.

So prayer is, first of all, an incredible invitation from an incredible God. A generous, good, and holy God, who is our Father through Christ, invites us to come. We’re in trouble. We need help. So we cry out, “God, help. I need you. We need you.” That is the essence of prayer. God says, “Get over the illusion of your independence. Get over your pride and your insecurity. You were born a needy human being; you will most likely die a needy human being; and between those two great bookmarks of birth and death you will live as a needy human being. So get over it. The secret is out: you need. You really are desperate. But I am also generous. So come. Ask. Cry out.”

What happens when we begin to cry out to God?

- (1) It transforms our worship. We are people who are open and hungry before God. We’re expectant. We’re thirsty, desperate people who come ready to receive. There’s an old African-American prayer that goes like this: “Lord, we come to you ...” As we cry out, as we see God respond and act it enriches our praise and worship. We become not only people who are thirsty and open and expectant; we also become people who have been touched and changed by God’s power. I cried out; God heard me; God touched me; God helped me. Isaiah 12:5 – “Sing to the Lord, for he has done glorious things; let this be known to all the world.” Psalm 40:1-3. When you cry out to God and you see God respond, you will have a song in your heart – no matter what kind of music you hear on Sunday morning. You’ll have a story. You’ll have an overflow of love and praise and worship.

- (2) When you cry out to God, as you begin to pray like a desperate man or woman – it makes you sensitive to the outcry of others around the world ... This isn't just private piety, Jesus and me kind of relationship. It changes the way you treat other people.
- (3) It makes a precious gift possible: authentic community. Rouault.
- (4) In a strange way, the prayer of dependence, or the prayer of desperation, begins to infuse us with supernatural power and strength. 2 Corinthians 12. Ron's e-mail.