

PRAYER (PART 2)
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I

Last week I started a sermon series on prayer, and I talked about so-called “natural prayer,” which is basically when we ask God for help, and I said there’s nothing wrong with it. It’s honest and heartfelt. It shows a basic level of belief and trust in God’s power and goodness. And there’s tons of scriptural support for it, like the psalm we read last week.

But I also talked about how natural prayer has its limitations. If we never explore other kinds of prayer, if we only ever go to God when we need something, our relationship with God will tend to be very one-sided and transactional. Instead of treating God like the living being God is, we can end up treating God like a vending machine, who’s only there to respond to our requests.

So what we want to do is expand our repertoire. We want to branch out and try forms of prayer that build a more mutual relationship with God—a relationship that’s not about *getting* something, but about *becoming* something, as Howard Rice puts it; a relationship that helps us grow in faith and evolve as human beings.

But like I said at the end of last week’s sermon, a lot of us have a hard time getting there. We struggle to make prayer a regular part of our lives, and what often ends up happening is the same thing that happens when we go on a diet or join a gym. We start out strong, and for a while we stick with it, but then our motivation starts to fade, and we find ourselves praying less and less often, until eventually we give up altogether and feel really guilty about it. How many of us have gone through that cycle? It’s super discouraging, and it makes us feel like bad Christians.

II

Today what I want to do is talk about some of the reasons why we fall into that cycle, and why it’s so hard to keep up our motivation. What are the things that make sticking with it so difficult? What are the snags we run into?

The first thing people always point to is time—or rather the lack of time. We’re all busy these days. We’ve all got work and school and sports and a million other things demanding our attention. And when we do have a few minutes left over at the end of the day, all we really want to do is crash on the couch and watch Netflix. I’m sure

you've all been there, and so have I. I'm no different. So I get it. I know how easy it is to put my spiritual life on the back burner. But I also know that if something is important to us, we'll make time for it, no matter how busy we are. If we enjoy something, and it's meaningful to us, we'll find a way to squeeze it into our schedules.

So being busy doesn't help, that's for sure. But I don't think busyness alone explains why we have trouble praying. I think there are deeper reasons, and one of them is something we don't often think about—at least not consciously. It has to do with how we see God—what kind of mental image we have.

Howard Rice says we start having problems with prayer when our image of God becomes distorted, and we have a picture of God in our minds that's somehow negative, because naturally what that does is make us want to keep our distance from God, and push God away. And I'll give you a couple of examples.

In one of my classes in seminary, we got into a discussion one day about inclusive language and why it's important to use more than just masculine imagery for God. And some people saw it as just political correctness. But there was one woman who explained why it mattered to her on a personal level. She said she grew up with a father she was afraid of because he was cold and strict and a severe disciplinarian. And she and her family went to a church where God was only ever referred to as Father, and that made it hard for her to have any kind of positive feelings for God because every time she heard that language, all she could picture was someone who punished her for every little thing she did.

So for most of her life, she didn't pray, and it was only when her image of God changed that she was able to have a prayer life. She started going to a church that mixed in feminine images of God, and that gave her permission to think of God as a warm and loving grandmother, as her own grandmother had been. And from that time on, she said, prayer was something that soothed her, and calmed her, and gave her peace.

Another example is a woman I met years ago when I was a hospital chaplain. Her husband had had a massive stroke, and he was on a ventilator, and the doctors were telling her there was no chance he'd ever regain consciousness. He had zero brain activity. But she had a pastor who kept telling her that miracles happen, and if she just prayed hard enough, God would heal her husband, and he'd wake up and be fine. So she prayed non-stop for a week, and at the end of that week her husband died, and she was devastated—not only because of the loss, but because, in her mind, God had ignored her cries.

I don't know whatever happened to that woman, but I think an experience like that would have to have a profound impact on how you see God—and not in a good way. And I think that would make anyone a lot less eager to pray. Why would you want to

pray to a God who was heartless and didn't lift a finger to help you when you needed it the most?

III

So the image of God we have in our heads is directly related to the quality of our prayer life. If we see God as cruel and uncaring, that'll kill any desire we have to pray. If we see God as loving and gracious, that'll make us want to get closer to God.

What we want to do, then, is base our image of God, not on broken human relationships and bad theology, but on the truth of who God really is. And as Christians, we find that truth in Jesus. For us, he is the fullest disclosure of God's nature. When we look at him, we're looking at the literal embodiment of God. When we see him healing the sick, we're seeing God's compassion. When we see him break bread with sinners, we're seeing God's grace. When we see him lay down his life, we're seeing God's love. Like Jesus puts it himself in the gospel: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

That's the God we'll make time for in our busy lives, and that's the God we'll open our hearts to in prayer. So think about how you see God, and ask yourself how that might be effecting your prayer life—for better or worse. And then be sure to come back next week, when we'll wrap up this series by talking about finding balance in our prayer life.