

## **DWJD: Pray**

3<sup>rd</sup> in series on “The Jesus Priorities”

Luke 11.5-13 Matthew 6.5-6

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(Scripture intro) During this season of Lent, we are immersing ourselves in the priorities that Jesus clearly demonstrated, in his teaching and in his doing. This week, just by sheer count, the third priority is prayer...

When we spend some time with Jesus in the Gospels, we find several inter-related principles for prayer, and some which might seem contradictory. By the way, for this series, we have each week a summary of the message, which is in the bulletin. Here are the principles of praying from Jesus that we'll look at today: Pray Alone, Pray Persistently, Pray in the Presence of Others, and Pray Simply. Let's unpack these

1) Pray alone. In Mark 1.35 we read “...a great while before day, Jesus rose and went out to a lonely place and prayed.” In Luke 6.12 it is reported that “...all night Jesus continued in prayer to God.”

This will be “counter-cultural.” There is for us the same temptation to distract ourselves by filling our mind with noise, as there has been in ages past; except now we have so many ways to accomplish this. Is there always a television in the background, a radio on, the streaming of flotsam and jetsam from our computers and “smart phones”?

Here is wisdom from Anthony Bloom, who ended up as one of the top leaders in the Russian Orthodox Church (in Beginning to Pray, Brazos Press): “Settle down in your room at a moment when you have nothing else to do. Say ‘I am now with myself,’ and just sit with yourself. After an amazingly short time you will most likely feel bored... Why is this so? It is so because we have so little to offer to our own selves as food for thought, for emotion, and for life. If you watch your life carefully you will discover quite soon that we hardly ever live from within outwards; instead we respond to incitement, to excitement. In other words, we live by reflection, by reaction... We are completely empty, we do not act from within ourselves but accept as our life a life which is actually fed in from outside; we are used to things happening which compel us to do other things. How seldom can we live simply by means of the depth and the richness we assume that there is within ourselves.”

Prayer is not just a formula of words, or a series of desires springing up in the heart—it is the orientation of our whole body, mind and spirit to God in silence, attention, and adoration (Thomas Merton). Prayer in this dimension “is an opening of the self so that the Word of God can break in and make us new” (Joan Chittister)

2) Pray Persistently.

For this dimension of prayer we have some of what can only be described as strange or unexpected examples from Jesus. Luke tells about showing up at a friend's door at midnight, and banging on the door, asking to borrow three loaves of bread to feed some unexpected visitors. This friend is tucked away warmly in bed, and does not want to get up—even for a friend! That is one strange part of the story for me. I

imagine most of us here would indeed get up in the middle of the night for a friend, even if we do not feel happy about it in our heart. But in the story Jesus tells, the friend at first says “Get lost!” Is God really like that?! That does not seem to add up to the picture that Jesus paints us of God. As I have pondered this story however, I wonder if the persistence is more for our sake, than for God’s. In other words, we are the ones whose conception of what is happening in prayer needs to change.

An imaginative story that I recently heard tells about a young man who raised his eyes to heaven in prayer and said, “O God, grant me happiness.” God replied, “No. I give blessings. Happiness is up to you.”

The young man considered this and asked, “O God, take away my pride.” God answered, saying, “No. Your pride is not mine to take away; it is yours to give.” After a pause the man said, “God, help me grow.”

“No,” God responded. “I will not make you grow. I will prune you, so that you will bear fruit.” The young man persisted, “God, please spare me from pain.”

“No,” said God. “Pain draws you away from worldly cares and draws you closer to me.”

The young man considered this and then tried again in earnest. “O God, take my handicapped child and make her whole.”

God said to him, “No. Her spirit is whole. The body is only temporary anyway.”

The young man asked God for all things that he might enjoy life. But God replied, “No. I gave you life, so that you might enjoy all things.”

The man became frustrated and complained, “God? Don’t you love me at all?”

And God assured him, “I do. I gave you my only Son, so that if you believed in him, you would have eternal life.”

The man was quiet for a long time. He finally raised his voice once more in prayer and said simply, “God, help me to love others as much as you love me.”

“Okay,” said God, “You’re finally getting it.”

### 3) Pray in the Presence of Others.

Here is one of the contradictory-seeming bits of advice. Did not we just talk about the value of praying alone?! Here we find that, like many of the deeper dimensions of life, this is not an “either-or” kind of choice, but a “both-and” kind of reality. There is a place for both, and a value in both.

Douglas Steere observes that “in the cosmos we are the guest, and God is the host.” If think about this at all, that makes sense, but we can easily forget and reverse this, thinking that we are the host, and that it is up to us to invite God here. God is not on the borders or the edge of life, but at its center. The only question is how aware of this truth we will become, and how we will allow ourselves to be shaped by the implications.

We pray in the presence of others in worship, which puts us in touch with the accumulated wisdom of the spiritual journeys of those of many generations past. One example are the “Collects” we are using this Lent: from the Book of Common Prayer of the Anglican Church (our own roots), compiled by Thomas Cranmer, but many of which came from the centuries before.

#### 4) Pray Simply.

Because of Jesus' clear ability to pray, his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray." Jesus gave them a model prayer, which we call the "Lord's prayer." Jesus was not so much saying "pray these exact words," but "here's one example of how to pray." We notice that there is intimacy, praise, humility, seeking God's kingdom, daily needs, and temptations as elements.

John Wesley: "Whether you like it or no, read and pray daily. It is for your life; there is no other way: else you will be a trifler all your days. Do justice to your own soul; give it time and means to grow. Do not starve yourself any longer."

Did you notice one other thing that Jesus suggests, at the end of the Luke passage? He said that in comparison to God, we human parents are "evil", even though we are, if I say so myself, pretty darn good. God wants to give us good gifts even more than we want to give them! And the good gift that Jesus mentions God wanting to give is the Holy Spirit. Prayer is not finding ways to get what we think we want, but to open ourselves to be changed in ways we cannot imagine. May that happen for us.