

Lord, Teach Us to Pray

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the fifth Sunday after Epiphany, 7 February 1988. Scripture Lessons: Job 7:1-7; Psalm 147:1-11; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

About eleven years ago, Elvis Presley died. What I remember most vividly about the news of his death was that he was found dead in the bathroom. That struck me as a quite undignified place to be found dead. I distinctly remember giving instructions to Kay that if ever she were to find me dead in the bathroom she was to drag me out and prop me up in a kneeling position by our bed and open the Greek Testament in front of me. Then she could call for help and the obituary would read, "Presbyterian Minister found kneeling in prayer at his bedside." Unfortunately, though, the business of life too often crowds out daily prayer. I don't know about ~~you but I need to renew my commitment to a daily time of prayer.~~

One of the most frequent excuses for not taking time for daily prayer is, "I don't have time." But Jesus was every bit as busy as we are and yet he took time to pray. In the first chapter of Mark we see a day in the life of Jesus. He began the day preaching in a synagogue. That afternoon he visited the home of Peter. While there he healed Peter's mother-in-law. Then he spent all evening healing people and casting out demons. It was a busy day for Jesus. He must have felt emotionally and physically drained when he went to bed. But "very early next morning he got up and went out. He went away to a lonely spot and remained there in prayer." He couldn't carry on a ministry of constant self-giving without the renewal that comes from personal contact with God.

Daily time spent with God in prayer will help us face anything as well. But how do we begin? Many of us want to have daily devotions but we don't know how to start. Well, let me suggest that you begin small. Set

aside 10 or 15 minutes every day this week to get to know God better. Decide on a particular place and time to meet with Christ every day this week.

Keith Miller, an Episcopalian lay-person, gives some suggestions about how to spend that time. *First, take a minute to relax.* Take a deep breath and realise that God who loves is there with you. Ask him to calm your heart and make you receptive to his will. *Second, read a passage of Scripture.* Ask what the passage says about the God you've entrusted your life to? What's God telling you in this passage?

Third begin to pray. Begin with *adoration*. Tell God that you love him or that you want to love him. Many Psalms are helpful at this point, like Psalm 103, "Bless the Lord, O my soul and all that is within me, bless his holy name." ~~Draw on the resources of the past. The church has a rich~~ treasury of prayers. Our own church has recently published a new resource to encourage daily prayer. It contains many prayers, both old and new, which can prime us for prayers in our own words. When I'm spiritually dry I turn to an ancient prayer of adoration like the *Te Deum*, "We praise thee, O God; we acknowledge thee to be the Lord. All the ^{earth} ~~earth~~ doth worship thee, the Father everlasting...." As I repeat that prayer it often becomes my own ^{and} ~~ad~~ love for God is awakened in my heart.

After adoration comes *confession*. Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Be specific about your sins. Don't simply pray, "Lord, forgive my sins." Be honest and specific. Sometimes I have to frankly admit to God, "I don't really love you much today. In fact I'm angry with the way you're running this world." Sometimes I have to confess, "Lord, I told a lie today. Forgive me." This kind of honesty is absolutely necessary if we're going to grow spiritually. If I believe God

loves and accepts me despite my individual sins I can be free and open with him. I can accept myself because I know God is more ready to forgive than to punish.

After adoration and confession comes *thanksgiving*. Again I try to be specific when I pray. I thank God for the fun I had wrestling with the boys on the living room floor. I thanked God that no one was seriously hurt when I had that accident several weeks ago. I thank God for the many kindnesses people have shown me that day. As I search for daily blessings in my life I become more aware of how good God is.

Next we turn to *supplication* or *petition*. I pray for others and myself. For many years I've kept a prayer list on a little piece of paper in my Bible. It reminds me to pray for people I might otherwise forget. I also pray for the world and the church beyond Oxford.—Here's where the *Mission Year Book of Prayer* is so useful. Here's also where the morning paper comes in handy. As I read the headlines I can pray specifically for the leaders of the world in the decisions they face every day.

Adoration, confession, thanks, supplication. The first letters of the four parts of prayer I've mentioned form the word *ACTS*. *A* is for adoration. *C* is for confession. *T* is for thanks. *S* is for supplication. Sometimes a little mnemonic device like that can help us in our daily prayer.

But why pray? Some people argue that prayer makes you feel better. Others argue that we should pray simply because God tells us to pray. But perhaps the greatest reason to pray is that Christ likes to spend time with just us. In Dr. Robert Boyd Munger's booklet, *My Heart, Christ's Home*, a young Christian let's Christ come into his heart. He shows Christ around

the various rooms in his heart. They come to the living room. It had a fireplace, comfortable chairs, a bookcase and a quiet atmosphere. The Lord says, "This is a delightful room. Let's meet here every morning before the business of the day begins." The young Christian can think of nothing he'd rather do than spend a few minutes every day with Christ, so he promises, "I'll be here every morning early." Every morning he came downstairs to the living room. He'd take the Bible from the bookcase, and discuss what he read with Jesus. But little by little, under the pressure of work his quiet times with Jesus shortened. He got too busy. Finally he began to miss a day, then several days. One morning as he rushed down the steps he glanced into the living room and saw the Lord sitting there alone. He was embarrassed. He thought, "He's my guest. I invited him into my heart and yet here I am ignoring him." With downcast eyes he went in and said, "Have you been here every morning?" "Yes," Jesus said. "I said I'd be." Even more ashamed the young man asked forgiveness. Jesus responded, "The trouble with you is this. You think of the quiet time with me only in terms of your own spiritual growth. You've forgotten that this time means something to me also. Remember, I love you. I've redeemed you at a great cost. I desire your fellowship. Don't neglect this time, if only for my sake." The truth that Christ wants our fellowship can do more to transform our quiet of prayer than anything else.

I challenge you to begin tomorrow to spend some time alone with God in prayer. Use the daily devotionals in your bulletin. Read a Psalm or begin with the Gospel of Mark which we'll be reading nearly every Sunday throughout this year. Get a copy of our churches, *Daily Prayer* and use it. My own prayer life is faulty and flawed. But if I'm ever to pray well, then I need to pray daily, whether I feel like it or not. It takes obedience,

discipline, and hard work. There aren't any short-cuts to instant ecstasy. Beginning and ending each day with prayer isn't necessarily *real* prayer. It's only like the finger exercises young piano players practise. Without those finger exercises the student will never be able to play the piano with freedom and joy. And without the finger exercises of a daily discipline of prayer we'll never be able to pray with freedom and joy as a child of God.

Let us pray: Gracious God our heavenly Father, thank you that you hear our prayers. Thank you that you sent Jesus to break down the barriers between us and you. Come into our hearts through your Holy Spirit so that we'll be able to make full use of this marvelous way of communication with you. Forgive our reluctance to pray often. Give us the ability to pray naturally. Hear us for Jesus' sake. Amen.