

WHY PRAY?

a sermon preached by the Reverend Dr. tom Collins

Santee (SC) Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 27:1-9; Luke 11:1-13

This is a sermon on prayer, and no subject I have chosen over the years of my preaching has drawn a more favorable response than prayer. I am convinced that that is not so much a commentary on my preaching as it is on the deep yearning for people to learn how to pray.

You are not alone. Jesus' disciples saw him praying and said, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." Eugene Peterson, a retired Presbyterian minister who lives in Montana and who spent many years in the parish before he began teaching at Regent College in British Columbia, has made the astounding statement that the only job of a pastor is to teach his parishioners to pray.

As you know, prayer is not peculiar to our faith. Many religions practice prayer. Perhaps we can say that it is the one public act that defines a person of faith, whatever that faith may be.

Prayer is our umbilical cord to God, but unlike the one attached to our mother, we should never seek to have the one to God severed. God always has us in his gracious grip. He holds us close to him. But prayer is the way we hold on to God.

Let me tell you about my best friend. He's my college roommate whom I met 50 years ago. Our lives have been completely different, and yet we have tried to stay in touch with each other. I say "tried." There have been rather long periods when we couldn't see each other, so we couldn't have a close relationship, at least not as close as we would have wanted. Johnny was always there, but I couldn't be with him and his wife. One day when we were together I realized that we had spent those 30 years or so telling the same stories over and over again, stories which almost invariably had to do with our college years. We had retold those stories so many times that I started to wonder if they really had happened. Had we embellished

them over the years? Could we separate truth from fact? Were they actually as exciting as we made them out to be?

You see, because we were separated by distance and occupations and objectives and goals we couldn't remain close, not as close as we wanted to be, so we drew on that one time in our lives when we were close, those three years we spent in college in Brett Hall.

We pray to keep God in our lives *now*. Prayer does not hark back to a previous season in your life, perhaps a time when you were in Sunday School or a youth group or a time when you were an officer. Prayer keeps you in touch with God *now*.

So at its heart prayer is communication. And we need to be careful here because when we say "communication," we must remember that that word always implies a two-way street. Prayer is not just talking to God; it is also a time of listening to God. If you don't talk to God *and* allow time in prayer to listen to God, your relationship to God may find its best times in the past, as Johnny and I have possibly experienced over the years. All healthy relationships need communication. Prayer keeps you in that healthy relationship with God now.

A week ago on Saturday Leslie and I quietly celebrated our fortieth anniversary of marriage. We've been talking to each other for forty years, actually longer than that. Most of the time it's been happy talk. Sometimes it's been angry talk. (It always amazes me how often such a bright woman can be wrong!) Most of the time we delight in our conversations, and often we are so comfortable with each other that we can sit in a car or our living room for hours and not say a word.

But here's the important thing. I couldn't talk to her today if I hadn't talked to her over the years. At least our conversation would not be marked by the same kind of intimacy and understanding. You see, the woman I married is not the woman I am married to now. Nor am I the same person. We have changed, and we stayed together over the years because we

communicate. Our friendship with God remains alive and vibrant because we pray consistently. It's how we keep together.

Some of you have committed to memory the Twenty-third Psalm. I love two lines in that poem. The first is "My cup runneth over" because I think it best describes my life. The second is "he restoreth my soul." It says "my soul." Not my body. That's slowly wasting away. Not my mind which obviously is not as good as it used to be. But my soul! That's as hearty as it's ever been. The years cannot and have not diminished my soul because I have been renewed and restored by the power of prayer. In prayer God speaks to my soul.

Last Sunday I used as my text a verse of scripture from the Sermon on the Mount (in Matthew 6): "Do not be like them [the Gentiles], for your father knows what you need before you ask." So why pray? God knows everything before we even ask. And can we actually twist God's arm? Can we wrestle a blessing out God as Jacob did?

The answer is "no," unless we are praying according to God's will. We cannot force God to violate his own nature or will in order to indulge our will. God is not a genie who says, "Your wish is my command?"

But that's why we pray. The more we pray, the more we understand God's will. Prayer, then, is communication with God that aligns our lives with the life of God. Did you hear that? Prayer, earnest and consistent prayer, aligns our story with God's story.

For several months there was a billboard on Route 26 West just before the Summerville exit. It's no longer there. I wish I had the exact wording of that billboard. I don't, but it went something like this: "Get your story in line with God's story!" Isn't that beautiful? Most of us think we will have a successful or happy life if we write our own story, but what God wants is for us to get in line with his divine story, but we can't do that unless we know God's story.

Which means we need to read the Bible, the autobiography of God, and then practice prayer. Prayer aligns our souls with God's narrative. We are called to live out God's story, and when we do that, it becomes our story. Prayer keeps us in touch with this God whose story we should want to live. God knows what we will ask before we ever ask it, but prayer allows our story to fall in line with his.

Prayer, then, is communication, both talking and listening, but it is also alignment. It is getting in sync with God, so that two stories --- yours and God's, one human and one divine --- lovingly mesh together.

Let me tell you a story about the Hebron Grace Home¹ where great ministries are taking place in our own backyard. Leslie and I had dinner with the delightful women there just two days ago. I then went across the pond to fish. There I heard the sound of laughter coming from the gals who are embarking on a new journey. I thought that odd, but then it quickly became a voice from God. Each one of those women had arrived at Hebron Grace in sadness and was now knowing gladness. They were getting their lives in sync with the life of God. Prayer does that for us. In prayer we tie our lives into the intricate weavings of God. We know communion. We communicate. We speak and listen. That's why we pray.

¹ Hebron Grace Home in Santee, SC is a Christian, in-house, free ministry to women struggling with addiction.