

WHY PRAY?

by Ray C. Stedman

And he told them a parable, to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor regarded man; and there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Vindicate me against my adversary.' For a while he refused; but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor regard man, yet I will vindicate her, or she will wear me out by her continual coming. And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will vindicate them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?" {Luke 18:1-8 RSV}

It is significant that this word on prayer from the lips of Jesus immediately follows Luke's account of his second coming, the parallel passage to the *Olivet Discourse* in the Gospel of Matthew. Our Lord moves immediately from his word concerning his coming to this word concerning prayer, indicating the direct correlation between watchfulness and prayer.

This teaching on prayer employs the metaphor of contrast. All of us are familiar with the vivid way metaphor can set truth before us. The most frequently employed form is comparison. We are continually using it, likening one thing to another. Sometimes comparison can be very vivid, as, for instance, some of the modern similes: "as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs," or, "as helpless as a trombone player in a telephone booth." But contrast is an equally excellent way to emphasize truth and make it vivid, and this is the form our Lord employs in this teaching on prayer.

When I was in college I had a roommate who was six feet seven inches tall, and weighed 265 lbs. But his nickname was "Tiny." This is a frequent form of contrast, calling constant attention to an outstanding characteristic. What poor fellow, possessor of a shiny, hairless pate, has not been called "Curly" at one time or another?

The subject of prayer is brought into sharp focus by our Lord by use of three deliberate contrasts:

There is, first, a contrast of principles. Luke is careful to indicate the point Jesus intended to make. He says, "He told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart," or, as the King James {Version} has it, "not faint." Here Jesus boldly confronts us with an inescapable choice: We must either pray or faint, one or the other. Either we learn to cry out to an unseen Father, who is ever present with us, or else we must lose heart, to faint. There is nothing left for us then but to muster up the best front we can and make our way through life without fire or without hope. It is one or the other; there are no other alternatives.

Some may challenge that. They say, "What about these people who seem to find much *joie de vivre* without being Christians? Have they not discovered a way by which life can be meaningful and exciting without recourse to prayer or to religious faith?" Perhaps such a claim is worthy of some brief examination, at least. Who has not seen such people and wondered if perhaps they have not found another alternative, another answer? Yet when we observe carefully, those who seem to have found the secrets of life, who appear to live in an exciting world of adventure, romance and external interests, are we not frequently surprised by seemingly sudden evidences, unexpected by the general public, of periods of tremendous losing of heart, sudden manifestations of fainting. Think for example of men like Ernest Hemingway, Jack London, and other literary idols who appeared for many years to have captured the secrets of intense living but who ultimately demonstrated that all along there was an inner fainting, an inner losing of heart. Is there anything more pathetic today than the tortured groping of millions of people frantically trying to find life? And not simply the aged, those who have had their fling at life and have nothing left, but this condition is found as frequently among young people with life seemingly stretching ahead of them, waiting to be lived.

Some of us are still tremendously, profoundly impressed by the testimony the other night of three young men who had been snatched like brands from the burning, from the world of crime and homosexuality that is so prevalent in our day, and who gave us such a starkly realistic revelation of what life in that world is.

This last week I have had three young men in my study, all of them under twenty years of age, and each of them in his own way expressed to me his view of life. Each told me in words sometimes faltering, sometimes eloquent, that he had found life dull and without challenge. All three were looking for a light to follow, a cause to live for. Having not even reached the age of twenty, life lay ahead of them, dull, gray and uninteresting, uninviting.

Why? Is this not the harvest of a very wide-spread philosophy today -- the idea that we live in an impersonal universe, which is nothing but a great, remorseless machine, obeying relentless laws in comparison to which we tiny, human creatures are nothing but transient pygmies? Where did this idea originate? Does it not come from our enthusiastic enthronement of an agnostic science as god? Of course, we all owe a great deal to true science. Our vaunted comforts and luxuries, even our necessities, come to us through this avenue. But science is in grave danger of being exalted in the eyes of many as a kind of God. We have built an altar to science, and burned incense before it. But the trouble with this god is that it is hollow, a god which has no heart, no bowels of compassion. Science cannot feel, or laugh, or show compassion. It can only analyze and measure, dissect, speculate and weigh. And the universe that is seen through the eye of such a god is likewise impersonal, cold, relentless, distant.

The result is that we have in our own day, more than at any other time in human history a generation that has been raised without a Heavenly Father. The agony that we hear is nothing but the cry of orphaned lostness. This is why the great thinkers who write from this point of view inevitably end up as pessimists. They give expression to what has been so eloquently termed, "the tragic sense of life." Read it in Bertrand Russell and other leaders of modern thought. And is not our continual mad carousel of amusement and pleasure only an anesthetic which is intended to dull ache of an empty heart? Jesus is right when he says there are only two alternatives: either we pray or we faint, one or the other.

Beyond the things which science can measure and weigh and analyze, beyond this cold, impersonal universe which appears about us, Jesus says, is a Father's heart. Around us are a Father's arms and we are to cry out to him, for in Christ his voice has already called to us. We are to answer like a child crying out to his father. For, like a child, we do not always know what is wrong with us. Helmut Thielicke suggests that sometimes a child can only look at his mother with great, appealing eyes and cannot say what is wrong but his mother usually knows, for she takes hold at the right place. "Like a father pitieth his children," the Scripture says, "so the Lord pitieth them that fear him" {cf, Psa 103:13 KJV} and cry out to him when they are in trouble, even though they may cry out about the wrong thing. Nevertheless, when we cry out, a Father hears, and a Father's strength moves to act on our behalf.

This is the whole point of the story Jesus tells, and it is obvious that he intended a contrast of persons:

There is, first of all, the widow and the judge. What is more proverbially weak and defenseless than a widow? Any writer who wants to portray some scheming rascal out to deprive someone of his livelihood usually depicts his victim as a widow. In contrast to the widow there is the judge. Who can be more hard-boiled and unyielding than a judge, and an unrighteous judge, especially? Here is a tough, hard-bitten, self-centered old skin-flint with a heart as cold as a bathroom floor at two o'clock in the morning! And the widow has a persecutor, someone who was harassing her, plaguing her, making life difficult. She appealed for help but the judge couldn't care less. He was utterly unmoved by her pleas, nothing could reach him. He was a godless judge so there was no point in appealing to him on a moral basis, there was no moving of his affections with that lever. And he had no regard for man, so that there was no political pressure that could be brought upon him to influence him. In view of the judge's hardness of heart, the case for the widow was absolutely hopeless. Nothing she could do would move this man to intercede in her case.

Nevertheless, Jesus said, she found a way. Womanlike, she proceeded to make life utterly miserable for him. She gave him no rest day and night. She was continually before his court, hounding him, harassing him,

plaguing him until finally the judge was forced to act. He granted her request and she got what she needed! Right here lies the whole point of the story. What is Jesus after? He is simply indicating that this widow found the secret of handling reluctant judges! She discovered, in other words, the key to power. She found the one principle on which even a reluctant judge would act, despite his formidable defenses. Now, says Jesus, prayer is the countering principle which is the key to the Father-heart of God. Persistent pressure was the key to this unrighteous judge, perpetual prayer is the key to the activity of God.

When, like the widow, life appears to us to be hopeless and useless, when we are victims of forces which are greater than we can manage (and who of us has not felt life to be this?), when no openings appear in the wall of pressure which rings us about, when there is no answer to the inescapable problems before us and there is no end in sight but certain failure of loss, Jesus says there is one way out. There is a way to the place of power, there is a way to a certain solution of our problems, there is an answer to the unbearable pressure. It is the answer of prayer; of simply crying out to a God we cannot see but whom we may rest upon, a Father with a father's heart and a father's tender compassion and a father's willingness to act. Prayer, he says, always stirs the heart of God, always moves God to act.

Obviously there is another contrast intended here, for Jesus particularly says that God is not like the unrighteous judge, that he will not delay an answer to our prayers, that he does not require continual battering to get him to move.

"Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will vindicate them speedily." {Luke 18:6b-8a RSV}

It is sometimes taught that Jesus is here encouraging what is called "prevailing prayer," which is often another way of describing an attempt to belabor God, to give him no peace, to picket the throne of heaven until we get the request we want. This is an absolutely un-Biblical and totally un-Christian attitude in prayer.

Some years ago an article appeared in the newspaper concerning a man who announced that he was troubled about world conditions, particularly about moral conditions in this country, and had determined to fast and pray until God sent a great awakening, a sweeping revival to correct the moral degeneracy of the day. He announced that he would keep on even until death, if necessary, expecting God to move. The papers carried the story day after day. His strength began to fail and he grew weaker and weaker and finally was confined to his bed. Bulletins were issued each day following his condition. He was evidently a man of unusual determination, for most of us would have quit after the third day and settled for a good beefsteak, but this man did not. He went on with his fast until he actually died. The funeral was widely covered and many lauded his remarkable persistence.

Was that really prayer? No, it was not! It was an attempt to blackmail God. This man was holding his own life as a pistol to the head of God and demanding all his money! He was insisting that God move on his terms and according to his time schedule. That is not prayer.

Jesus says God is not an unrighteous God demanding that we wheedle and struggle and persuade him to move. He is not grudging. No, prayer is forever the cry of a beloved child to his father, and frequently it is the cry of a lost child who does not know his way, who is lost in dark woods, with noises in the bush, strange, frightening noises. The child may cry out to be led to an open road or to be home safe in bed or at least to see a light in the distance so he can know his way, and that prayer, that particular prayer is not always answered that way, for God is a Father and, as Jesus said in another place, he knows already what we have need of before we pray. Paul reminds us that we do not know what we have need of, we do not know what to pray for, that is our problem, but God knows. The Father knows and because he is a father he knows that it is not yet time to answer in that particular way or that it is even the best thing to do or sometimes even the possible thing under the circumstance. No, it is true, that answer may indeed be long delayed, but there is no delay at all in an answer to our prayer. This is what Jesus is saying, that when we cry out there is immediately an answer, without delay, speedily God rushes to the help, to the succor, of his child. The answer is the squeeze of a Father's hand on ours, the quiet comfort of a Father's voice, the reassurance of a Father's presence even though the woods are still dark and the noises are louder still. There is an immediate answering reassurance

that the Father is with us and in his own time and way will lead us to the house and put us safely in bed or bring us to the light again.

"And will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will vindicate them speedily." {Luke 18:7-8a RSV}

Jesus ends his story with a sudden word that comes as a third contrast, the contrast of practice.

"Nevertheless, when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?" {Luke 18:8b RSV}

Notice, Jesus does not say, "When the Son of man comes, he will not find faith on earth," nor does he say, "When the Son of man comes, he will find faith on earth." He leaves it as a question hanging in the air, uncertain, unanswered. But there is no doubt about one thing in this account, and that is the faithfulness of the Son of man. All the doubt is in the latter part of the sentence. He does not say, "If the Son of man comes," but "When," for this is one thing that is absolutely certain. It does not rest upon man, his faithfulness or his faithlessness, it rests only upon the sovereign choice of God, and all the processes of history are bringing this to pass. There is not the slightest doubt that God is ready to do exactly what he says he will do in any circumstances, at any time. There is with him no shadow of turning, he is not a respecter of persons, there are no divisions or discriminations among men with him, none whatsoever. God is utterly faithful. It is man who raises the doubts.

After all, what is behind this frenzied clamor that we meet today after the gifts of the Holy Spirit, these meetings that are held to pray for power or for tongues or for revival or for something else? Is this not really a subtle attempt to blackmail God, or at least to blame him for our weaknesses? Are we not saying, "Lord, the trouble is you have not given us all we need. You have not made available to us everything. You are holding back, you are reluctant, you give but grudgingly and often won't give us what we lack. If we only had this, then we could work for thee." Jesus is saying, No, no, that is not true. It is not fair to put the onus on him, for God is utterly faithful. There is nothing lacking from his side, there never has been. But, he says, let me ask you this question, is it possible, it is not remotely possible that men prefer weakness to power, that they prefer anxiety to peace, a frenzy to rest, doubt to confidence, fear to faith, or malice to love? Is it possible that when the Son of man comes he will not find faith on the earth?

Notice how he puts that? He does not say, "When the Son of man comes, will he find men praying?" No, it is "When the Son of man comes, will he find faith?" for prayer is faith expressed. True prayer is not pleading or cajoling a reluctant God, never! That is never prayer! Prayer is believing, prayer is faith, prayer is thanking instead of complaining, trust instead of trying, rejoicing, accepting, appropriating, receiving -- that is prayer.

"Well," someone says, "in view of this, if there is a Father out there, and he is eager to give and knows what we have need of, and especially since we're so apt to pray the wrong prayer anyway, why bother to pray? Why doesn't he just give it to us without prayer?" This is an objection that is frequently raised, and the answer is that the purpose of prayer is to bring us to an understanding of the program and the purpose of the Father. All of us know couples that have stopped speaking to each other. Such a marriage is a disintegrating union, it is a dead relationship, the bleak ruin of a love that once was there but now is gone. Living relationships require speech, they must be expressed, there must be interchange, there must be a flow of words for it to be a live, fruitful, vital relationship.

So prayer is an absolute, vital necessity in the interchange of a child's heart with the Father. This is why Jesus asked the question. When he comes, will he find men exercising this blessed privilege? Will he find them expressing themselves, pouring out everything without halt or hindrance, unto the Father? Uttering the resentments as well as the joys, the complaints, the feelings of the heart in its deepest moods, all, everything, poured out unto him -- will he find men like that? That is the true expression of faith and to fail in this is inevitably to stop talking with God and to start talking about God.

When men talk about God, instead of with God, they are manifesting a deteriorated faith, for the purpose of all faith is to bring us into direct, personal, vital touch with God. The mark of a decadent religion is invariably that

men are deeply engrossed in discussion about God, often in very cultured language, employing esoteric phrases, and spending hours in lengthy, theological debate about the nature and character of God. But as Luther very aptly put it, "You that manifest a concern about religion, why don't you pray?"

Prayer

Our Father, these words of our Lord Jesus have made us aware of the lack of faith in our lives. We cry out to you now in our weakness and our failure to exercise faith and say, O Father, teach us to pray. Teach us to be men and women who depend continually upon you, who are pouring out to you every aspect of our life without hindrance, without reservation, telling you all things, and listening to you about all things. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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