

“FILLING THE HALF-FILLED CUP, PART 2”

Prayer is our Gift to Others

Let’s review the First Presentation, for just a few minutes. In Luke 11:2-4, Jesus uses His own prayer guideline to teach His disciples how to open, in their lives, His treasured gift of prayer. He says:

“Father, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread;

You will remember the Acronym that I mentioned earlier. P-R-A-Y In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus encourages us to respond to God with:

Praise

Receptivity

Admission of our honest thoughts and feelings

Yearning for God, God’s strength, and God’s personal love.

Now we come to the final two letters in the Acronym

E is for EXAMINE

R is for RELATE

E is for EXAMINE:

When I use the word “Examine”, I mean that, when we pray, we need to evaluate where it is that forgiveness needs to happen in our lives. Let’s think of the people whom we need to forgive.

That sounds awkward and undesirable, but that is actually the way Jesus advised His disciples to pray. Listen again:

Jesus said: *“Pray like this: “...forgive us our sins, for we
Ourselves forgive every one who is indebted to us; and lead
us not into temptation.”*

Jesus was clear that the horizontal and vertical dimensions of forgiveness are spiritually fastened together, and always will be, something like the shape of His Cross.

It will help us if we take this teaching from the Lord’s Prayer, and lay it at the foot of Jesus’ Cross. Imagine Jesus saying to us: “When you kneel at my Cross, and look up, and say Lord, will you forgive me one more time?” Can you see that some of the people who have hurt you, are kneeling there too, and looking upward? “Reach out”, Jesus says, “And touch them, and walk over to the ones who are very distant, those who have turned away from you, and forgive them as well.”

Pray like this, Jesus counsels:

“...forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive every one who is indebted to us.”

Note that Jesus doesn't say, “You have to earn forgiveness by forgiving those people you'd rather pummel and punish.”

No, in this prayer, Jesus is telling us that forgiveness is a gift, with every person's name on it. Jesus says: “If you try to keep such a gift to yourself, it crumbles in your hands.

Return to the Crucifixion Hill for a moment, and look at the faces of the other people who are there. Your spouse is there. And your sister...your mother,...your father,...your brother,...your son,...your daughter,...your friend,...your boss,...your employee,...your enemy. Out on the edge are those people everybody hates, those monsters who crush other human beings, and sandwiched in amongst those billions of people, are those you have given up for lost.

How do we include, in our prayers, those we are trying to forget? Maybe there is one step that we will have to take before we forgive, and that is accepting God's forgiveness in Christ for ourselves. In your next period of prayer, go to John's Gospel, chapter 10, and read verses 10 and 11:

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

Read this passage slowly, and tenderly, and then, spend some time in silence and prayer visualizing a strong, youthful Man who had most of His life and a promising career still ahead of Him, a Man who owed you nothing, a Person you really didn't know all that well, a Person whom God called, “Son.” Imagine that Person dying for you. Spend some time in prayer knowing the Good Shepherd laying down His life for you, and see if it doesn't make all the difference in the world in your capacity to forgive other people.

It may be that this is a time in your life when you are hitting one of those spiritual brick-walls, and you get no relief at all when you try to feel forgiven. Some time ago, my friend Reuel Howe helped me to get over a wall like that. Some nameless piece of guilt was stuck in my soul, like a kernel of popcorn pressed between my teeth. I couldn't get it out. I went to Reuel, and I pleaded: “What do you do when you can't feel forgiven?”

He gave me an amazing answer. He said: “I act forgiven. I live as a forgiven person, and, in time, my feelings catch up with my life.” I tried it, and it worked for me too.

Jesus said, “Pray like this: “...forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive every one who is indebted to us; AND lead us not into temptation!””

Those last five words are the key to the whole process of praying to forgive and or be forgiven. Some have translated them: “And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

Certainly it would be much easier to forgive if no one ever tested just how far our forgiving might go. Wouldn't you settle for a moratorium on any more trials laid on you by other people? On the other hand, God has never once let go of me when I was slipping or stumbling, or someone else was pushing me down.

Some manuscripts of Luke add a sentence to the end of the Lord's Prayer” “And lead us not into temptation, but save us from the Evil one. When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness at the beginning of His ministry, over and over, He prayed, and God gave Him strength. In the terrible trial in the garden of Gethsemane, when He wrestled with the choice of whether or not to go to the Cross, He prayed, long, and hard! And God empowered Him to actually die for other people, and even to say, as His life was draining away, “*Father, Abba, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*”

When we pray to forgive and to be forgiven, God answers, and we can say with Jesus: “With men and women, it is impossible, but with God, all things are possible.”

E is for EXAMINE. In prayer, we need to examine our need to forgive, and to be forgiven.

R is for RELATE

Let's recall that, in Luke 11:2-4, Jesus uses His own personal prayer to teach His disciples how to pray. Yet the pronoun, which He advises them to use, almost seems out of place in an individual prayer. We would expect Him to say:

“Pray as I pray...
‘Abba, hallowed be thy name
Thy Kingdom come.
Give me each day my daily bread.
And forgive me my sins, as I also forgive...,etc.

Instead Jesus says: “*Pray like this: ‘Give us each day our daily bread.*”

Prayer, by its very nature, is for “us”, a very large group, in which, most definitely, I am included. Jesus viewed daily bread and the Bread of Life and “Bread for the morrow”, as Bread for the world.

On the one hand, when, we remove the barriers between us and God by praying, God takes the initiative and pulls down the barriers between us and others. One retreat participant who had been working tenaciously on his relationship with Christ, said, after an eight hour spirituality retreat: “In this event, I realized that the focus of discipleship is compassion to people, and my discovery came in a most unexpected way, as I prayed in solitude.

On the other hand, when I pray alone, I need to consistently remind myself of the “us-ness” of prayer. I find myself easily slipping into the habit of one apocryphal pray-er who began to pray by saying:

“God, bless me and my wife.
My son John and his wife.
Us four, and no more.

Which, in time, degenerated into: “Bless us two, and that will do.”

Which finally became: “God, bless only me, Cuz that’s as far as I can see.”

Of course there are times in life when one’s personal load is so heavy, that all we can manage is, “O God, help me. O God, strengthen me.” We can be gentle with ourselves when that happens and God understands, and the Holy Spirit is praying in our behalf all the time, Paul says in Romans 8. I find that God worms and wiggles other people into my prayers even in the times of darkness.

However, I can close off my opening to others unless I keep on reminding myself that prayer is not just God’s gift to me. It is also my gift to others.

Two processes help me to relate my prayers to others. One is to sensitize myself to people when I pray and the other is to connect with them.

You may have your own ways to become aware of others, in your prayers. I hope you will share them with us during our spontaneous, or planned, group interaction times. I’m going to add some suggestions:

1. Focus your praying on listening to God. That process will motivate and teach you to listen to people. In the summer of 1980, I had the privilege of teaching a class at Synod School. Each day the class members spent 30 minutes of our total 1 and ½ hours of class time in individual prayer. We emphasized listening prayer, seeking to sensitize ourselves to God in Christ through Scripture. One of the class members had been a truck driver for some thirty years prior to his retirement. His first name is Walt. At the end of the week, I asked the class members to share something concerning their experience of daily prayer. Walt shared with the rest of us what this experience meant for him. He said, “I have realized that all through the last thirty years, I have been missing an opportunity. Whenever I went into a Truck Stop to eat a meal, I noticed that if there were 20 available tables, there would be one driver at each table. Truck drivers are some of the loneliest people on earth, but we would never admit that to each other. I often wanted to put a sign on my table which read as follows, “I am a Christian and I will listen to anything you want to say to me, except your romantic achievements and how fast your truck will run.” “But I never did it. Somehow, this week’s praying has given me both the desire and the courage to start doing that kind of listening. Now that I am retired, I’m going to find some new ways to hear people

and make up for lost time. First thing, when I get home, I'm going to start regular visits to my friends who live at a nursing home."

2. If possible, pray in a place where the world is still close enough for you to see, or touch, or feel it. One of my favorite prayer places was the boiler room of the church building where I last worked. No one interrupted me, and I was praying in the one room that connected with all the other rooms in the building. We are making this retreat in a place where you spend many of your ordinary days to remind us that God's purpose in retreat is to deepen our day by day relationships and to strengthen the community with whom we live and worship. If it works for you, pray in a place that is heavenly and earthy at the same time.
3. Create a symbol of the world's presence and include it on your Worship Center, along with the Cross and the Bible, or whatever else you have chosen. On retreat, we will each be using an on-paper symbol created by another retreat participant. You can easily fashion your own for continuing use.
4. Take the daily newspaper into your prayer time.
5. After you watch the TV news, or while you are watching, pray for the people who are pictured and described.

When you pray, sensitize yourself with anything that will call to mind your relatedness with other people. And connect yourself, as well.

The tried and true method is through Intercessory Praying. Add your energy and love to the powerful love God already has for other people.

One day my colleague Mary Smith and I were talking about the value of Intercession. "Why pray for others, when the Omnipotent God already knows their needs?" we asked each other. We decided that our prayers provide a channel for God to use in reaching others which God would not have if we were not praying for them. Then, we reflected on how we grow closer to the people for whom we pray. Mary added that, when other people pray for her, their prayers lift her and strengthen her, and often, she doesn't know that they have decided to name her in their prayers.

Many people keep a prayer list for their prayers in solitude, which becomes a consistent reminder of our connectedness. By this time, my prayer list has become a kind of Intercessory Prayer anthology, and I have to force myself to occasionally remove a few names, and to lift up a portion of the list each day.

Another way to connect our prayers with others is to become part of a Prayer Group, or to form one, if none is available. Let solitude be linked with a fellowship of prayer. I have also discovered that I need a Spiritual Partner, one other person with whom I meet on a regular basis. He helps me to keep praying, and often we pray together.

"Pray: 'Give us each day our daily bread,'" Jesus says. We need to be careful to avoid gimmickry in prayer and to refrain from trying to "program" God. Perhaps the best advice I can give is:

1. In prayer, challenge yourself, and be gentle with yourself. You and I probably need most of the emphasis on: Be gentle with yourself. If my spiritual posture in prayer is receptive to God in Christ, then the Lord will fill my cup so full that, with some kind of regularity, it will overflow. In prayer challenge yourself and be gentle with yourself.
2. I hope I have given you some workable suggestions, but, as St. Theresa of Avila has said, "The best way to pray is the way you pray best."

In fact, we do our best job of making our prayers a community relationship when we remember that we, ourselves, are included in that work "us" which Jesus uses.

One of the purposes of prayer is to help us listen to ourselves. Jesus knew His own true wants. At His deepest moment of anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane, he prayed, *"Father take this cup away from me. I don't want to be crucified. I don't want to go through what you have in mind."* That kind of self awareness was crucial for Jesus, before He could say: *"Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."* Robert Sabath, in an article in Sojourners writes: "We are not to let our own needs determine our actions. But neither are we to act without knowing our deepest feelings and wants." (We need not refuse to admit who we are and to meet our own legitimate needs.) Listening and talking to God enables us to be in touch with ourselves.

As part of your praying, once each week or so, do a Self Affirmation Inventory. Thank God for all of the ways in which you are a gift. Really take some time with it. Elizabeth O'Connor says that "...Christ Jesus is very pleased with what He has accomplished in us. We are the ones who are disappointed." In your praying you can join Jesus in congratulating you. It is part of praying that God will give us our daily bread.

R is for RELATE.

As we move now toward our second period of Prayer in Quiet Solitude, I'm going to ask you to make a Symbol of Compassion to be shared with another retreat participant, either anonymously, or by identifying yourself. Please make a symbol, either by writing words, or drawing a picture, or in some other way, of a compassion concern which you have in your community or in the larger world – a person, or a group, or an issue that concerns you and for which you want to request compassionate prayer. You can sign your name if you wish, but that is not required. (Allow time for the above!!!)

Prayer is God's gift to us, and our gift to others.

P is for PRAISE

R is for RECEIVE

A is for ADMIT

Y is for YEARN

E is for EXAMINE

R is for RELATE

As we move into our Second Period of Prayer in Quiet Solitude, let us pray together the Lord's Prayer, in the version familiar to each one.

Before you go to your solitude place, please pick up a Symbol of Compassion from the Worship table. Do your best to choose someone else's symbol.