

“KEEP ON PRAYING AND NEVER LOSE HEART”

The Spirituality of Christ - Prayer

By Bill Vamos

Lecture #1

His eyelids covered Him with a blanket of darkness and He slept like a well-fed baby. Yet His muscles stood at attention. Even His ears seemed to be straining to listen while His slow, relaxed breathing protected His slumber. There was strength in His ruddy face, as though nothing could cool the burning hope with Him. A heavy, chopping wind churned the water into a frothing quagmire. Dark, snarling waves clawed against the boat and climbed inside, surrounding the paralyzed passengers with nameless blue terror.

The voice wavered and bellowed at the same time: “Teacher, don’t you care that we are about to die?” He crawled up from His cushion, steadied Himself and stood in the knee-deep water. To the wild and boisterous wind, He commanded, “Be Quiet.” To the grinding, grueling waves He said, “Be still.” The wind died down and there was a great calm. Then Jesus said to His disciples, “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” The spirituality of Christ is rooted in His relentless, unfettered, total faith in God – in who God is, in what God has done, and in what God will do. Christ lived as one for whom God is everything.

Yet, He was neither naïve nor sugary in His approach to people. For Christ, spirituality is trusting God when the wind is out of control and waves are blinding white madness. Spirituality is moving mountains and turning a crucifixion into an empty tomb, into the ultimate victory. Christ is the one truly spiritual person because nothing stopped Him from trusting God. Yes, He cried in despair: “My God, why have you forsaken me?” He heaved a sweaty, gulping prayer in a garden, “Let this cup of crucifixion pass from me.” And, He lost patience with His bewildered disciples. However, Christ Jesus trusted God in the midst of the wind and the waves with Himself.

He spoke honestly of His fears and weaknesses and offered them to God. So His Heavenly Father could turn fear and weakness into faith.

Nobody worked harder or faced more menacing odds. Constant pressure assaulted him: pressure to heal, to teach and to explain His teaching, to wrestle with demons and blindness and hunger, and always to view on every side the cynical, two-faced treachery of the church leaders of His day, the scribes and Pharisees. In the midst of His won inner struggles and the incessant demands of others, Christ coped and grew and loved, because He loved God. God for Him, is the center of life! And Christ can and will enable us to trust God as we live in communion with our Lord.

Where did Christ’s faith originate? God gave it to Him. God used several resources to grow faith in His only begotten Son. We will concentrate of five of these touchstones of trust, in our classes this week:

1. Prayer

2. Scripture
3. Support
4. Refreshment
5. Compassion

God used prayer to shape and to deepen Christ's faith. In John's Gospel, the 17th chapter, verse 20 and 21, we hear Christ praying as follows: "I pray...that they all may be one, even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us..." How did Christ grow His faith so much that He could be one with the Father God? He did it by praying in solitude.

Someone has suggested that Christ would not be called to be pastor of any of our churches today because He was always wandering off the job for a few days alone with God. Being with His Heavenly Father kept Him aware of the reality that He was nothing apart from communion with God.

In Chapter 1 of Mark's Gospel, Jesus journeys from Nazareth to the river Jordan, and John baptizes Him. The Spirit leads this promising and deeply humble leader into the wilderness where He battles Satan, and the angel's minister to Him. He calls for men to be partners in His mission. He heals a person who has been living in the sickening clutches of an unclean spirit. Immediately His fame spreads all over the surrounding region of Galilee. What does He do with this newfound popularity? He uses it as an opportunity to heal more and more people. And what comes next?

Mark 1:35 reads: "...In the morning, a great while before day, He rose and went out to a lonely place, and there He prayed."

Follow this Person who spoke and loved and listened like God, and you will see why He could celebrate oneness with His Heavenly Father. Try for just a few minutes being Christ and living out His prayer life. It would feel something like this:

After saying good-bye to the people, He went away to a hill to pray.
(Mark 6:46)

And after He had dismissed the crowds, He went up on the mountain Himself to pray. When evening came, He was there alone. (Matthew 14:23)

But so much the more the report went abroad concerning Him, and great multitudes gathered to hear and to be healed of their infirmities. But He withdrew to the wilderness and prayed. (Luke 5:15, 16)

In these days He went out to the mountain to pray; and all night He continued in prayer to God. And when it was day, He called His disciples, and chose from them twelve, whom He names apostles...A great

multitude of people...came to hear Him...And all the crowd sought to touch Him, for power came forth from Him and healed them all.”
(Luke 6: 12, 13, 17, 19)

(On another occasion) His disciples came to Him and He opened His mouth and taught them saying: “...when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matthew 6:5, 6)

It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father into thy hands I commit my spirit!” And having said this He breathed His last. (Luke 23: 44-46)

As you walk with Christ through His prayer life, you can sense that He loved being with god. He wanted to be with His Heavenly father in the same way that a lover wants to be with his loved one – all the time. When Christ prayed all night long, that was certainly hard work. Yet it was also joy and a living, breathing encounter with the only One in the universe whose nature is a perfect blending of love and power.

For Christ, solitude with God took away the temptation to be dependent on the adulation and approval of other people. His faith kept growing and deepening until nothing could stop Him from trusting God.

Christ grows the same kind of faith in us, even though we keep on stumbling and falling in our journey with God. When we pray in solitude, we are dependent on God’s love. Our false pretenses and our false modesty fade. God fills our emptiness with Himself.

We discover a new kind of inner power to trust God, and at the same time, we find ourselves wanting to care about others. In the spirituality of Christ’s compassion to people flows out of communion with god. The four gospels keep painting the picture of a Person who prays and heals and teaches with the same kind of rhythmic harmony that He used when eating and sleeping and walking. Communion and compassion are like breathing in and breathing out. You can’t do one without the other.

For Christ, praying becomes an illustration of this spiritual companionship. Some of His most intimate praying happens with other people nearby, i.e.:

“...He took with Him Peter and James and John and went up on the mountain to pray, and as He was praying, the appearance of His countenance was altered and His raiment became dazzling white...” And there follows the story of the transfiguration. (Luke 9: 28-36)

Later, He "...went as was His custom, to the mount of Olives,...and He withdrew from (His disciples) about a stones throw, and kneel down and prayed, 'Father, if Thou are willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but Thine, be done.' And when He rose from prayer, He came to the disciples and found them sleeping for sorrow, and He said to them, 'Why do you sleep? Rise and pray that you may not enter into temptation.'" (Luke 22: 41-46)

Christ wanted His disciples to realize that praying together is an act of intimacy and power. He once said, "...if two of you agree on earth about any request you have to make, that request will be granted by me Heavenly father. For where two or three have met together in my name, I am there among them.' (Matthew 18:19, 20)

Christ saw the face of God in the faces of people. Sometimes He shared His praying with others. And sometimes His praying reached up to god and reached out to people at the same time. Christ's prayer for His disciples, which fills the entire 17th chapter of John's gospel, asks that His followers may have the same trust and closeness with each other as Christ Himself had with god. There is a great sense of family in this prayer. Christ is praying for His own and each one is precious to Him. It is as though He prays, "Heavenly Father, treasure them as you treasure me." Then He takes another giant step of faith, and asks that all who hear His good news may be one.

Christ had a gripping trust in God and endless caring for people. Even as He hung on a cross, He was able to combine trust and caring in prayer. His words have echoed from every mountain and across every valley on earth: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

Nothing stopped Christ from trusting God. And the primary reason for this unshrinkable faith is that Christ was certain that the masterful, creative script which god has written for His people will still be acted out, even though all of the actresses and actors keep on missing their lines. Christ's total trust in God is rooted in the future – in His certainty that Christ Himself will come again. Of course, our Lord trusted God in the present too. But each day He had to start over. There were sick to heal, more and more people to teach, and more enemies trying to trick Him. So Christ rooted His trust and His praying in the future, when, one day (as the second letter of Peter tells us) there will be new heavens and a new earth, the more of justice. (II Peter 3) And Christ lived as though the new creation were already here. Christ wants us to know, that when prayer is the heartbeat of living, God enables us to live today as though His Son's second coming has already happened.

In Luke's gospel, the 17th chapter, verses 20 and 21, we read some astonishing words:

Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, he answered the, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be

observed; nor will they say, 'Lo, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you."

The future kingdom of God, for which we long, is in the midst of us in Christ. The Christ whom we now serve, is the King of the future. When Christ comes again, there will be a sudden, total and unmistakable recognition that, ever since Christ first came into the world, the just and compassionate and peace-filled kingdom of the mighty and everlasting God has always been here.

Luke continues, from verses 22 through verse 37 of his 17th chapter, to record other of teachings on Christ's second coming. Then he presents the first 8 verses of the 18th chapter as follows:

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 because this widow bothers me, 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?"

Again the spirituality of Christ lifts up relentless faith in God. Verse 1 radiates with poetry and power. "...keep on praying and never lose heart". This is the kind of faith that keeps on stirring us to persistent prayer. Specifically Christ wants His disciples to faithfully pray that unforgettable prayer which He taught them, "Thy Kingdom come". Day after day, pray Thy Kingdom come, Christ commands. And when we do so, we trust that God will never stop answering prayer, until that day of days "when the Kingdom of the world shall become the Kingdom of our Lord and of The Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever."

Luke 18:8 shows us that the faith which inspires persistent prayer is full of vitality and endurance. It outlasts everything but the love of God. Christ says: "...when the Son of man comes, will He find faith on earth?"

When we keep on praying and refuse to give up on Christ's promise to return to us, then nothing stops us from trusting God. Yes, we slip and trip and fall, but we stay on the road and keep looking ahead. And what is amazing is that we discover, walking right beside us, the One who is yet to come. "When the Son of man comes will He find faith on earth?" "Yes, Lord, you will. Only let us pray as you have prayed and as you have taught us, and we will see you not only in the future, but here and now. We will see just what kind of friend you are, not only to us, but to everyone. Christ did not allow the brokenness of life to cut Him off from either God or people. He got angry, as we do.

People's greed and egotism hurt Him to the point of tears, tears that come when other people let us down. He felt disappointment. He wanted to give up. But He let all of these experiences be part of the curriculum of His relationship with God and with us.

He invited all of the riff-raff that live inside people, all of the losers, rejects, and just plain obnoxious ones that live with each of us and the world to the banquet table of His Kingdom.

That is part of the hidden purpose which Paul is writing about in Ephesians 1:9, 10:

God did what he had purposed, and made known to us the secret plan he had already decided to complete by means of Christ. This plan, which God will complete when the time is right, is to bring all creation together, everything in heaven and on earth, with Christ as head.

But here is more to the spirituality of Christ.

Christ Jesus also allowed us to drive a wedge between ourselves and God and each other, by killing Him. Paul says, "our release is secured...thru the shedding of Christ's blood." When Christ Jesus died and then rose from the dead, God released us from bondage. In the cross and resurrection, division, disunity and human chaos were stripped of their real power. It is now true that no matter how much we divide ourselves within or trample each other, all we can possibly accomplish by these insanities is to provide God with unbelievable opportunities to create the unity of His universe.

And this is not a naïve notion that evil is actually good. No, evil remains, with its ugly greed, its cruel violence and its deafening apathy. The difference since Jesus' crucifixion is that evil has lost the power to be victorious. The spirituality of Christ tells us that God is victorious.

Today, the ominous cloud of nuclear war hangs over us, and even by its treat, already visits humanity with a kind of death, the death of purpose in life, the death of the heroic. (Why be a hero if the world is going to kill itself?) We say, "What if it happens, the war to end all wars – it would be the greatest tragedy of all time!"

Yes, it would be a tragedy of unimaginable proportions. But we Christians need not be paralyzed by the fear of it or panic into a condition of permanently running away from the thought of it, because the truth is, there is an even greater tragedy than World War III. And it has already happened – when God became human, we killed Him. We purposely tore up and threw away the greatest gift we have ever received.

And what does God do but take this most destructive action we humans could devise and turn it downside-up and outside-in. He turns death into life. He turns our rebellion into resurrection and thereby, makes divisiveness the raw material of unity. That is God's way of loving. And that is the heart of the spirituality of Christ.

I believe that kind of resilient, stubborn, determined love makes all the difference in the world in the way we perceive and experience our lives in today's turbulent world. When we can see that Christ Jesus and His resurrection life-style is the purpose hidden within all of life, and commune with Him ourselves, we begin to see through the world's shadows to the light of Christ. Then, we keep on praying and never lose hope.