

Prepare the Way for the Lord...with Prayer

*(Psalms 119:145-152) I call with all my heart; answer me, O LORD, and I will obey your decrees. {146} I call out to you; save me and I will keep your statutes. {147} I rise before dawn and cry for help; I have put my hope in your word. {148} My eyes stay open through the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promises. {149} Hear my voice in accordance with your love; preserve my life, O LORD, according to your laws. {150} Those who devise wicked schemes are near, but they are far from your law. {151} Yet you are near, O LORD, and all your commands are true. {152} Long ago I learned from your statutes that you established them to last forever.*

In our Advent services this year we have been focusing on the three ingredients which Martin Luther said that God uses to grow theologians. Those three ingredients, or three disciplines, if you will, are: meditation, prayer and testing. Or as they are sometimes called by their Latin names: *Meditatio*, *Oratio* and *Tenatio*. (Wait a minute. Is that the second sermon in row where you heard a little Latin used? I guess Pastor Scherbarth and I are both trying to get some use out of those 5 years of Latin we took.) Anyways, these are three things that God uses to not only grow theologians. He also uses them to grow Christians. Through meditation, prayer and even through the trials we face in life, God draws us closer to himself. He deepens our relationship to him. He strengthens our faith and prepares us for that day when we will meet our Lord Jesus face to face—which is one of the reasons we are focusing on these three things during the season of Advent.

Advent is a time of preparation. It's a time to prepare our Christmas decorations or our shopping lists, but rather, a time to prepare our hearts for the coming of the King—whether we're looking ahead to the celebration of Jesus' first coming that's the babe of Bethlehem or whether we are preparing for the reality of his second coming as the judge of the universe. In either case, Advent is a time to clear away all of the peripheral items in our lives and get back to the basics. Get back to spending some quiet time with God.

Last Wednesday, Pastor Wardell taught us how to do that through the art of meditation. No, not by sitting cross-legged on the floor and emptying our minds with the word OHMMMMM. Rather were talking about filling our minds with the word of God. Taking a short section of scripture and reading it over and over again. Letting it sink in and kind of percolate through our minds. Asking ourselves, what is God saying to me in this passage? What does God want me to confess to him? What does he want us to believe about him? What does he want us to do as his child? Meditation is all about letting God speak to our hearts through his word.

But now, once God has spoken to us, it's only natural for us to want to respond to him, to share our cares and concerns, to offer our thanks and praise. We do that, of course, by making use of something called prayer. And really, that's what we want to focus on today. As we draw ever closer to the coming of the Christ, let us...

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So, tell me, how would you rate your personal prayer life? Would you say that you are a really good pray-er? You devote yourself to spending a considerable amount of time offering intercession for the people in your family, in your church, your nation, your world? You are what

some people refer to as a prayer warrior? Your prayer life everything that God wants it to be? If it is, well then, praise the Lord for the devotion he's worked in your heart.

On the other hand, as you think about your prayer life, maybe you are more like me. When I think about all God's wonderful invitations to come to him in prayer, when I hear God say, "Ask and it will be given you," when I hear him say, "Call upon me in the day of trouble and I will deliver you," when I hear Jesus say, "My father will give you whatever you ask in my name," when I hear the Apostle James say, "the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective," when I stack up all those promises on one side and then compare them to how often my prayers are short or superficial or rote and without much thought, or maybe non-existent altogether, then, I realize that my prayer life is not what it should be. Or as one of my Seminary professors one once said, "*The gap between the way things should be and the way they actually are is most intense in our devotional life when it comes to prayer.*"

Tell me can you relate to those words? Have you felt like your prayer life is really lacking? You've tried to devote more time to prayer. You've tried to be disciplined in making your prayer lists. But then you get busy and it all goes by the wayside. You see and hear of other people who seem to have these dynamic prayer lives and you compare yourself to them and you feel like such a failure. You think, "Why can't I be better at prayer?"

In fact, maybe when you heard that we were going to talk about prayer today, you found yourself thinking, "Great. There's something else I should be doing more of, something I should be better at, but I'm not." My friends, if you've ever experienced feelings like these, you are not alone. I expect that there are times when every Christian feels like his or her prayer life is entirely inadequate. Times when we feel like we have not been faithful in our prayer lives.

So, what's the solution to this common problem? Is it just to try harder to pray more regularly? You know, kind of recommit yourself to being more fervent in prayer? No, the first step is to...repent. That is, to join me in confessing even though God tells us to pray without ceasing, we have disobeyed him. To admit that too often, we've closed our eyes to the words of Saint Paul who said, *I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercessions and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority. (1 Tim. 2:1)*. If we're honest with ourselves, we'll admit that we're all guilty of neglecting the privilege of coming to God in prayer.

But once we've acknowledged our failure to be faithful in our prayer life, the real key is not to focus on ourselves. The real key is not to say, "This is what I'm going to do better. I'm going to redouble my efforts to be a better prayer." No rather, the key is to focus on Jesus. Why do I say that? Two reasons. First, because Jesus is the one who gives us the model for how and when and what to pray for. Think of how many times Jesus turned to his Father and prayed, "Father, heal this person." Or Father, forgive them, or Father, protect them from the Evil one." And of course, always with the attitude, "Not my will, but yours be done."

But there's an even more important reason to keep our eyes focused on Jesus when it comes to our prayer lives. It's simply this. Remember, when Jesus offered those perfect prayers to his Father in heaven, when he spent the entire night in prayer, when he prayed even for his enemies, you realize, Jesus did all those things for you. In other words, we did all those things in your place. And now, through faith in Jesus, God gives you credit for what Jesus did in his prayer life. Do you realize what that means? It means that when God looks at your less than perfect prayer life, he sees Jesus' perfect prayer life. For Jesus' sake, God doesn't look at you and say, "Well, your prayer life really stinks. Why can't you be more faithful!?" No, for Jesus' sake, God looks at you and says, "Not only are you perfect in my eyes, but so are your prayers."

For Jesus' sake I absolutely love the prayers you bring to me for Jesus' sake and in Jesus' name. You have complete access to my throne of grace night and day. ”

But not only has Jesus given us access to God, not only has his perfect prayer life covered our imperfect prayer life, but we can know that in Jesus we have someone who continues to pray for each one of us to this very day. What does Scripture say? *Jesus always lives to intercede for us (Hebrews 7:25)*. In other words, Jesus is not only offering perfect prayers in your place. He's offering perfect prayers on your behalf. He's pleading your case before the throne of God. And you can be sure that the Father is always answering Jesus' prayers.

In the end, isn't that what compels Christians to come to God in prayer? Yes, God commands us to pray—both for our needs and the needs of others. But more importantly, he gives us the privilege of coming to him in prayer. First, he makes us his children and then he delights to bend down and listen to what's on our hearts. Our sighs, our sorrows, but also our thanks and praise.

And when we find ourselves wondering, “But what should I pray for? And what words should I use to speak to God?” Do you know what God says? He says, “Why don't you use the words I gave you?” In the Bible, we not only have examples of prayers that are pleasing to God, prayers like Mary's Magnificat, or Jesus' High Priestly prayer, or of course the words which Jesus taught his disciples to pray, which we know as the Lord's prayer. But even more important than those specific prayers are really all the words of Scripture. Scripture itself tells us what we should be praying for. Look at almost any portion of Scripture and you'll find a sin that you need to confess to God. You'll find gift that you can thank God for. You'll find a need in your life or in the life of someone that you can ask God to meet.

In fact, this is where meditatio and oratio come together. When you take time to meditate on a portion of God's word, you inevitably find things you want to and need to be praying about. As an example, last Wednesday, Pastor Wordell invited us to meditate on these words from Philippians chapter 4 verses 4 to 7.

*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! {5} Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. {6} Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. {7} And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

Now ask yourself, “What do those words invite me to pray about?” I don't know about you, but those words lead me first of all to confess, “Lord, forgive me for all the times that I'm not joyful, times when my gentleness is not evident to all.” That confession of sin can also be turned into a petition to God. “Lord, help me become more joyful. Help me show my gentleness in how I interact with people or how I deal with the anxieties of life.”

But meditating on the Word of God not only gives us something to confess, and something to request. It also gives me something to profess. In other words, when our prayers are centered on what God says in his Word, our prayers give us something to believe. Think about it. When in our prayers, we call to mind God's promises, when we, in effect, repeat from our lips the promises God has made to us in his Word, when we say, for example, on the basis of Philippians 4:7, “God, you said you would guard my heart and mind with your peace which transcends all understanding,” well then, God is more than happy to answer that prayer with a resounding, “Yes, that's exactly what I'll do. Believe my promise, my dear child!”

Isn't that our relationship to God is all about? It's a dialogue that we carry on with our heavenly Father. God speaks to us in his word, and we in turn speak to God through our prayers. God gives us his promises in the Holy Scriptures. And then in our prayers, we cling to those

promises and hold God to them. In that way, we see that those two things go together. Meditation and Prayer. Meditatio and Oratio. Or in the words of the psalmist, "*My eyes stay open through the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promises.*" (Psalm 119:148).

My friends, during this Advent season, spend a little extra time meditating on God's Word. Bring to God whatever is on your heart. And know that God will not judge you by how deeply devoted you are to him. Rather, he'll judge you by how deeply devoted Jesus is to you. Jesus offered up his life in order to give you full access to your Father in heaven. Cherish the privilege of coming to God in prayer as you eagerly await the Coming of his Son in glory. Amen.