

Three Simple Rules: A Pattern of Prayer

1 Thessalonians 5:12-22

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GR FUMC

Our sermons, during this Lenten season, have each begun with a short interview. Rev. John Francis spoke with us about what he believe the “mark of a Methodist.” Three of our youth told us what they thought about “doing no harm.” Fred Keller offered his thoughts on “doing good,” and last week several of our elder members spoke to us on video about how they have stayed in love with God. This week, in the last of our series on the Three Simple Rules, we’re going to hear from a non-member, an *outsider* if you will. He is our not-too-distant neighbor, Rob Bell, founding pastor of the Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville. He speaks to us today from an edited version of one of his Nooma tapes – a series of short, thought-provoking and discussion-generating videos. This one is called “Open.”

Rob, we’re studying a book written by Reuben Job called *Three Simple Rules*, about John Wesley’s three rules for the Christian life. The last one is all about staying in love with God. He says that prayer is a key part of doing that, that if you really want to live as a Christian, you need to have a strong prayer life. But so many of us are confused about what prayer is. Is it a way of asking for what you want? What are we supposed to say when we pray and what should we expect to get back? What did Jesus say about prayer? How did he do it?

Synopsis of Rob Bell’s statements in the video clip:

Prayer, for Jesus, was neither passive acceptance, nor an active, rebellious attempt to control the future. It’s about being open to God, being honest with God. The Psalms demonstrate brutal honesty: people shaking their fists at God, challenging God. That’s OK. God can handle what you’re thinking and feeling. Prayer is

being honest with God, letting God know everything that's going on with you, even the angry parts.

In his praying, Jesus assumes he's going to be part of God's answer. Sometimes people say that God didn't answer their prayer. Maybe *they* are the answer. Don't ask God to feed someone's who's hungry when you have food.

That's great, Rob, but can you be more specific? Can you recommend the words that we should we use? Is there some way of starting or ending a prayer that would be helpful for all of us here? And how often would you recommend that we pray? Once a week? Once a day? And if you're saying that the answers to our prayers might not be what we expect or even want, then what's the point? Why should we pray at all?

Bell:

The Bible says we should pray unceasingly. It's not a rote ritual. Prayer is a way of seeing and being. It's the way you see everything going on; it's meditating and listening. Prayer is when you never stop asking the question "What is God up to right here and now, and how can I be a part of it?"

Prayer is tapping into the same energy that formed the universe. It gives us a bigger heart. Praying changes things, but prayer changes us. It makes us better people.

Thanks, Rob! We know you're a busy man and we appreciate being able to talk with you!

Prayer seems like such a simple thing...and yet all you have to do is begin talking about it and you run into so many complicated and complicating questions. Does God answer prayer? Why does it seem that sometimes God does answer prayer and at other times God doesn't? One person's cancer goes into remission, another's doesn't. Did the first person have more prayers being said for her? Better prayers? If God can and does answer prayer, then why does God only do it some of the time? Why not all of the time? And if the course of human events was all written at the very beginning and our lives

simply unfold in the manner that God dictated they would before we were even born, well then, why bother praying at all?

One reason we pray is because Jesus prayed. In the middle of his busy schedule, with needy, suffering people pressing in on him, while traveling by foot on long, dusty roads from town to town, Jesus made prayer a priority. The disciples noticed it. They saw that he often withdrew to lonely places and prayed alone. It was central to his life and ministry; he prayed on good days and on difficult ones. Jesus was nourished, sustained, and encouraged through it.

When the disciples asked him to teach them how to pray, he gave them a very simple, very direct model: Abba, Daddy; your name is holy; may what you want happen here on earth just as it does in heaven; give us the bread we need to survive; keep us away from evil and forgive us, as we forgive others.

It's not only a simple, direct prayer; it's an honest one. Here's what we need: to have bread, to be kept safe from evil, to be forgiven. It's an honest prayer and it speaks of a willingness to be part of God's plan. I need forgiveness, Lord, and I'm willing to be a forgiver, as well.

Well that seems doable: simple language, an honest statement of need, a willingness to act towards others as God wants be to. But it doesn't answer our questions: what does prayer do? What results do our prayers get? How often should we pray and under what circumstances?

If we turn to today's text, Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica, the answer is more than a little intimidating. Paul's teaching about prayer is found in a longer section about how the Christian should live in general:

“Admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice *always*, pray *without ceasing*, give *thanks in all circumstances....*”

Does he really mean it? *Always* rejoice? *Never stop* praying? Give thanks *no matter what*? Philip Yancey says he used to read this passage “in a fog of guilt, imagining saints who prayed through the night, building up calluses on their knees.” He reports on a 4th century Christian sect called the Messalians, who took Paul’s words literally and recruited surrogate pray-ers to pray on their behalf while they slept. Apparently there’s a group of nuns in Wisconsin who have been praying in shifts nonstop since 1878. Is *that* what Paul means?

This letter to the Thessalonians is probably the earliest of all his letters in the New Testament. Written in the 5th decade, just twenty years or so after Jesus’ ministry, the church can hardly be called a church: it’s a rag-tag group of Jesus followers trying to live out their faith in an indifferent if not hostile culture. Paul’s instructions to them are intended to guide them in the right direction.

But...Always? Constantly? In all circumstances? Is this a new form of legalism which demands prayer twenty-four hours a day? Certainly not from Paul, the man whose whole life changed when he grasped the notion that salvation came through grace, not by following laws. No, at the heart of this constant rejoicing, praying and giving thanks that Paul is advocating is what David May calls “the spiritual disposition of persistence. It is a value,” he says, “which beats like a steady pulse in every activity of living in community and society. It has to do with a *chosen and cultivated* long-term attitude of

the heart.” Paul is not proposing yet another impossible criterion of holiness; what he seeks is “a rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks that demonstrate long-term attitudes of the heart.”

In other words, the key to prayer isn’t how you do it, or when you do it, or how much you do it, or what you get as a result of it. The key to prayer is the attitude of your heart: its persistence, its openness, its willingness to engage in an honest, face-to-face, intimate relationship with God.

Eugene Peterson, the author of the Bible interpretation called *The Message* once gave this example of prayer “Suppose yourself with a person whom you very much want to be with a friend, a person important to you. The dinner is in a fine restaurant where everything is arranged to give you a sense of privacy. There is adequate lighting at your table with everything else in shadow. You are aware of other persons and other activity in the room, but they do not intrude on your intimacy.

There is talking and listening. There are moments of silence, full of meaning. From time to time a waiter comes to your table. You ask questions of him; you place your order with him; you ask to have your glass refilled; you send the broccoli back because it arrived cold; you thank him for his attentive service and leave a tip. You depart, still in companionship with the person with whom you dined, but out on the street conversation is less personal, more casual.

If this is a picture of prayer, then the most important question is: which character is God? Is God the person across the table from you, or is God the waiter? If God is the waiter, then God is essential but peripheral. You can’t have the diner with out him, but

he is not an intimate participant in it. He is someone to whom you give order, make complaints, and maybe at the end, give thanks.

In this case the person across the table from you, the person in whom you are so absorbed is yourself. Your moods, your ideas, your interests, your satisfactions or lack of them. When you leave the restaurant you forget about the waiter until the next time. If it is a place to which you go regularly you might remember his name...but you might not. Is this prayer? Not really. It is occasional, perfunctory, one-sided, almost a commercial transaction.

If, on the other hand, God is the person across the table from you, then this is a different kind of prayer entirely. In this case, God is the one for whom we set aside time for intimacy, for the deepest and most personal of conversations. At such times the world is not banished, but it is in the shadows, on the periphery. Prayer is never complete or unrelieved solitude; it is, though, carefully protected, skilfully supported intimacy.

When we are able to engage in this kind of prayer, we find that we no longer demand or expect or even think in terms of “results.” What we seek now is relationship; and what we find is a God who also longs for relationship. One who longs to interact with us, who takes us to a place of intimacy where we can be alone together. We find a God whom we can grow to love and trust, and from whom we can seek forgiveness.

[“The Lord’s Prayer,” no author given]

“Prayer is at the center of a transformed life,” says Reuben Job at the end of *Three Simple Rules*. “The Wesleyan way of living is inconceivable and impossible without a regular and disciplined practice of prayer. Such a disciplined life of prayer will be as diverse and as distinct as our fingerprint. But for all of us it will be a turning Godward in

response to God’s invitation to a relationship that is eternal and immediate at the same time.”

So how does one start? Try breathing. The novelist Sue Monk Kidd describes how she learned to pray by breathing after she read about the ancient “Jesus prayer,” a simple prayer from the Gospels that is just one sentence long:

‘Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me,’ I said a little shyly. Then I said it again. I said it for nearly five minutes, just letting the words happen to me. Below the window I watched the traffic, the squirrels jumping under a tree, students hurrying to class, and I said the prayer blending it with my breathing. ‘Lord Jesus Christ,’ on the in-breath... ‘have mercy on me,’ on the out-breath. I said it slowly, silently finding a rhythm that seemed to slow everything.

“Kidd found, with practice, that the prayer took on a life of its own. She could continue to pray at one level even while carrying on a conversation or doing chores. She would apply the prayer to a stranger on the road or when talking to a friend: ‘Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on *him*.’” [Yancey, p. 317]

It comes when there are no other words, when you don’t know how to pray or what to say. I have come to think of this prayer as living within me, beating like a heart. It is not in my thoughts all the time. That would be an utter distraction.... It returns during the days, sometimes rising up spontaneously. Other times I call it up when I dress or sit at a stop sign, or wait at the hairdresser. Any place at all we can breathe it in and out, always with gentleness.

It's just as Rob Bell said: Prayer is neither passive acceptance nor actively trying to control the future; it's being open, open to God and God's will for the world. It's a way of seeing, the way you see everything in the world. Prayer gives us a bigger heart. Praying changes things, but prayer changes us. It makes us better people.

So let's start. Repeat after me: Lord Jesus Christ...have mercy on me.

Now say it to yourself, quietly or silently. "Lord Jesus Christ" as you breathe in; "have mercy on me" as you breathe out.

(Time of silent prayer)

O gracious and holy God,
give us wisdom to perceive Thee,
intelligence to understand Thee,
diligence to seek Thee,
patience to wait for Thee,
eyes to behold Thee,
a heart to meditate upon thee,
and a life to proclaim Thee;
through the power of the Spirit
of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

[Benedict of Nursia]

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