



Sermon of July 25, 1999



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"FOR THOSE WHO CAN'T PRAY"

Genesis 32:22-31

Romans 8:26-39

Have you tried to pray, and found it difficult? The words hard to come by? Or, have you ever been asked to pray in public, and panicked, saying, "I can't do that"? Well if you have had that experience, and most of us have, then we are amazed when we hear someone stand up in public and deliver a beautiful, eloquent, lengthy prayer.

I heard about a man down in Texas who was a "professional prayer." For a fee he will come to your convention, meeting, or club, and give an invocation. His pious eloquence has made him famous, and earned him a very fine living. He pleases his audience. They give him an ovation after his invocations.

Something is not right about that. Can we really call that prayer?

Or this. Years ago in Boston an article appeared in the newspaper, which said, "Rev. Parker prayed the finest prayer ever delivered to a Boston audience."

There is something wrong with that, too. Although I lived in Boston for a while, "where the Cabots speak only to the Lodges, and the Lodges speak only to God." I know there is a class of Bostonians who would not be surprised if prayers were addressed to them.

But prayer is supposed to be addressed to God. There is that famous anecdote about Bill Moyers when he worked for Lyndon Johnson. Johnson asked Moyers to pray before a meeting, which Moyers did. Johnson interrupted him, saying, "Speak louder. I can't hear you." Moyers replied, "With all due respect Mr. President, the prayer is addressed to God, not to you."

It may be possible to make your prayer beautiful, polished, and eloquent, if you prepare it for an audience. But prayer is addressed to God, in which case you may be speechless. Speaking to God is a terrifying prospect. Annie Dillard suggests that if churchgoers really considered whose presence they were invoking in worship on Sunday morning, if they really expected God to show up, they would hand out crash helmets at the door when they came in.

If we are going before an audience to offer prayer, we can prepare, rehearse, seek to impress. But if we are coming before God in prayer, it may be like our Old Testament lesson.

The scene is the River Jabbok. Jacob is on his way to face his brother, Esau, from whom he has been estranged for years. His brother Esau, the last time they were together, threaten to kill Jacob because of his treachery.

Jacob has led a less than exemplary life. He has lied. He has cheated his way to the top. Now he is there, at the top. He's got everything that he wants, except self-respect, a sense of worthiness, a feeling of genuine fulfillment about his life, and a right relationship with God. To get that--and he knows this--he has to come to terms with God. He has tricked his dying father. He has cheated his brother in order to get the father's blessing. But now he knows that if he is to get what he really wants, which is God's blessing, the fulfillment of his life, the sense that his life has a purpose and worthiness, he must call upon God. He must pray to God.

Now look at the scene. His caravan comes to the River Jabbok. He sends his family, servants, his possessions, his animals, all across the other side of the river, as if to safety. He remains on the near side, alone.

The text says that he wrestles with a man until daybreak. But this is an ancient story. It comes from a time when they did not make the distinction between the inner world of spiritual experience, and the outer world of physical reality. They were the same, and it was all real, all of one piece.

So this is a dream. The ancient Jews knew that when they told the story of what happened at the river. Jacob prayed to God, asked for God's blessing. Which in order to receive, the proud Jacob had to confess his sins, acknowledge his dependence on God. He could not do that. This rebel, this independent, self-sufficient, successful entrepreneur, who had outwitted everyone, got

whatever he wanted whenever he wanted it, has now come up against God, and thus has come upon that one who cannot be tricked, or lied to, or cheated, or deceived, or bested, to whom we all must yield. So it is a struggle.

Charles Wesley, in one of his greatest hymns, "Come O Thou Traveler Unknown," captured this scene. He interpreted it brilliantly. He saw Jacob wrestling with God, and finally Jacob crying out:

Speak to my heart, in blessing speak,
Be conquered by my instant prayer.
Speak, or thou never hence shalt move,
And tell me if thy name is Love.

If prayer is encounter with God, then maybe we ought to expect something like that. If it is genuine encounter, in which you lift up your life to God, honestly, to ask God's blessing, and ask God's direction in your life, then maybe it will be something like Jacob wrestling with God all night long, a sleepless night.

Now we turn to the New Testament lesson, Paul's letter to the Romans. It begins with a similar understanding of prayer. There is nothing in this passage about eloquence, or ease, or comfort. Nothing here about a "sweet hour of prayer." Paul says, "We don't know how to pray." He is obviously talking about the same kind of prayer that the Old Testament lesson in Genesis is talking about, honestly standing before God, just the self and God.

If you are asked to give a prayer, say an invocation before a club or a meeting, and you have been given a month's notice, then you can write it out, polish it, memorize it, then deliver it, and that's the end of it. But that's not what the Bible is talking about when it talks about prayer. Prayer in the Bible is the individual going before God. I know of no incident in the Bible in prayer, where someone goes to prepare a manuscript just to get it right, so that God will be impressed with what they say.

It doesn't work that way. It is more like wrestling than speech. Paul places that confession, "We don't know how to pray," in an affirmation of grace. Listen to the whole passage.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.

That is just amazing. It says that prayer is not something that you do. The impulse to pray is there because God is already at work in you. That means that God is not just the one who hears your prayer, God is the one who prompts your prayer. You pray because God wants you to seek him. You would not be seeking God if God had not already found you.

That is why Paul says it really doesn't matter what you say. Throw anything up there. Stumble around. Use bad grammar, split your infinitives, dangle participles, stutter, mumble. It doesn't matter. Just groan, even. That's the word that Paul uses, just groan, or sigh. Because God's hearing your prayer doesn't depend on your eloquence. It depends on God's grace, which is already at work in your life.

Paul couldn't get over God's grace. He talks about it over and over again, especially in the letter to the Romans. He says we cannot save ourselves by our own efforts. That is why God sent his Son into the world, to save us. Here he says we don't even know how to pray by our own efforts, so God sends the Spirit "to intercede for us with sighs too deep for words."

The rest of this passage is Paul's most eloquent exposition of God's grace. He is saying God's grace is everywhere. This passage is the basis for what came to be known as the Doctrine of Predestination.

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.

That is the source of it. Later theologians, like Augustine and Calvin, especially their disciples, would translate that into a system that will explain everything. They say, "It's just predestination." God arranged it that way. But Paul is not interested in systems. Paul just freed himself from the rigid system of the Jewish Law. He is here singing, or celebrating, this amazing discovery, that our life is completely surrounded by grace. That is why next he says:

If God is for us, who is against us?...For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Nothing can separate us from God, not even our inability to pray. For the impulse to pray is itself the prompting of God. If we try, and we fail to find the words, "the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words."

I came across some wonderful illustrations of this in rabbinic literature. There is an old Jewish legend about a little farmer boy who had been left an orphan at an early age, and was unable to read. But he had inherited from his parents a large, heavy prayer book. It was now his. On the Day of Atonement he took the prayer book into the synagogue and laid it on the desk. Then he prayed, "O Lord of Creation, I do not know how to pray. I do not know what to say. So I give you the entire prayer book."

There is another legend about an old man in the same town, who overslept and missed the service on the Day of Atonement. Which means that the prayers that were offered for the people did not include him. Not knowing how to pray himself, he devised this plan. He repeated the letters of the alphabet over and over and over again, and then asked God to arrange them in the words of an appropriate prayer.

Those rabbinic stories are consistent with Paul's teaching that the Spirit intercedes for us. Both the prayers are acceptable because of the faith of those who offered them, because our prayers do not depend on our eloquence, but on God's grace.

Which was put so wonderfully in this poem by Stephen Crane, which I included as the Meditation in the Order of Worship. I commend it to you for your devotions.

There was a man with tongue of wood
Who essayed to sing,
And in truth it was lamentable.
But there was one who heard
The clip clapper of this tongue of wood
And knew what the man
Wished to sing,
And with that the singer was content.

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,
that we might be servants of others,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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