

Embracing Your Purpose

Prayer & Partnership

Genesis 3:8-9; Matthew 6:6-18

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Bethany Church

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It was an impulse. I don't know why I did it. No thought crossed my mind. There was no warning. I was poised to depress the gas pedal on the van I was driving, but instead I jammed on the break. The van that was creeping forward stopped rather than accelerated. In a split-second I realized that my life had been spared. A vehicle raced across the intersection at high speed. It would have hit my door. The accident would have been serious if not fatal.

How many of you have ever experienced a near miss like that? That wasn't my first. Nor was that my last. Let me ask you what you think? How many of those inexplicable moments of impulse and protection are related to someone's prayers?

Let's go further. How does prayer really work? What happens when we pray? Why do so many prayers go unanswered? Are we even asking the best questions? To unlock the truth and potential of prayer what questions should we ask? In the next several weeks, you will be introduced to a dimension of life that can revolutionize your world. No matter how many sermons you've heard, books you've read, or experiences you've had, these next weeks will open for you a whole new world, if you'll let them. I can only show you the door; you must open it.

I discovered that prayer is the door to embracing your purpose, your call, your reason for living. Wrapped up in that little English word that we pronounce "prayer" are critical, life-changing and world-shaping actions. That's because you and I were created to be companions and partners with God. We, unlike the rest of creation, were made in the

image or likeness of God. We were not made simply to be reflections like a mirror or copies like mimicking clones. We were created to be full-size companions with God. More than that, we were created to be children of God and partners with God.

In the seventh verse of Genesis two, we received the breath or spirit of God and became living and also spiritual beings. In verse 15, God gives Adam work to do. God places Adam in this beautiful garden and gives him the task of caring for God's creative work. In verse 16 God talked to Adam; and Adam heard from God. The two communicated. In verse 19, God presents every earthly creature to Adam, and Adam defines the world. God and Adam are working together. Eve comes into the picture and into this fellowship and partnership in verse 22. They lived as partners with God

In Genesis three, verse 8 and 9, we get a glimpse of what life was like before sin separated human beings from God. God strolled in the garden expecting to converse with Adam and Eve. It was the cool of the day. Probably evening. God called to Adam and Eve. There was no barrier between God and humanity. There was a continuing conversation and companionship. There was no covering, no suspicion, no distrust, no fear. Instead, there was a partnership in their work and life on earth.

Prayer is the best word we have in the English language to describe the kind of communication necessary to sustain and enjoy this partnership or companionship with God. As a child-partner of God, prayer describes the on-going conversation necessary to live out that identity. Prayer describes the behavior that cultivates and sustains a companionship.

When we do not pray, we forget our identity and the essential work we have on earth. We forget that we are God's children entrusted with God's creation. We forget that we are God's partners in our life on earth. We neglect our essential task and responsibility as children and partners. That task and privilege is communication.

Biblically, prayer, in its essence, is conversation, listening and speaking with God. It is not merely speaking, and it is not merely listening. It is both. When Jesus taught on prayer, he taught this understanding.

Christ taught about our child identity. I can not recall a single time that Jesus addressed God as God, nor can I think of a single time where he taught his followers to do so. Instead, Jesus always, always, always emphasized our relationship to God as His children when he engaged in or taught on prayer.

So many of us treat prayer in a different way than Jesus. We see prayer primarily as "entreaty" rather than "conversation." We see prayer as a means of getting what we want. The very word we use, "prayer," carries that sense.

The English term "prayer" was derived from a French term that meant to *entreat someone*. It was related to the Latin word "precarious," which means *dependent upon*

entreaty. Thus, when people thought of prayer, they thought of entreaty, the way that they can get things from God.

Subconsciously, most of us think of prayer in those terms. Consequently, there are arguments over whether God hears the prayers of Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, witch doctors and so on. By that, people question whether there is any favored group in getting what you want from God, or do religious beliefs affect how favorably your entreaty will be viewed.

Instinctively, people know that all entreaties are not viewed or responded to in the same manner. I learned that as a kid in school. I noticed that there were people who could ask for things and get it. They exuded confidence that they could obtain things that I couldn't get. They had an approach that was different than mine. They would carefully approach the teacher or the adult we wanted something from. They knew how to ask and turn a refusal into a "maybe" or a "later," or even a "if you really feel that strongly - okay." They were savvy. They developed an art of entreaty.

For many of us, that is what it means to grow in prayer. It is growing in the art of entreaty. It is learning the approaches to God that brings results. People know that there are ways to effectively entreat others. Professionals, like lobbyists, are employed. Because there is an art to entreaty, people think of prayer in terms of formulas. What formula will produce? Some advise, "We better praise God; that will soften Him up by following His rules." Others suggest, "We better invoke Jesus' name; that's the tip Christ gave us." Prayer becomes a formula.

Jesus never discouraged anyone from entreating God. In fact, he told people, "Ask and it will be given to you" (Matthew 7:7, Luke 11:9). "Ask for anything in my name," he encouraged his followers (John 14:13-14; 15:7; 16:24).

The act of entreaty acknowledges our dependence upon God and is welcome and encouraged by Jesus. But the art of entreaty is often no more than manipulation or magical formula. It makes God out to be a celestial bellhop and servant to our passions. When Jesus taught the Lord's prayer, he was not offering us a formula to get what we want. He was calling us to embrace our purpose. Even as Adam and God were partners in defining this world, we men and women are called to partnership with God in redeeming this world.

Prayer is not manipulation of spiritual powers; it is conversation with your maker and father. Jesus taught us to pray "our Father." Jesus was not telling us that God is male. The image of God is male and female, both! Jesus was telling us that we are God's children. Your earthly papa may have hurt you, abused you, ignored you, belittled you, rejected you or abandoned you; but there's good news. You have another papa who never abandoned you. Your earthly papa is flawed, but your real papa is utterly good. He made you, loves you, hurts with you and calls to you in compassion. Your God's child; your God's creation; your God's companion; and your God's partner in His business. Your divine papa is motivated by a creative and pure love. Prayer is conversation with your

genuine Papa! We men at best are flawed shadows of your genuine Papa; and some of us have fallen to demonized caricatures. You won't be healed by calling God "Mama." You must face how we have failed both you and the Papa we were to represent. You will be healed when you recognized the specific sins against you and forgive us each of them.

Only in the context of forgiveness can you know the power and joy of and identity-based prayer. Only as you forgive will you be able to recognize the wonder of your stature as God's child and the nature of your true Father. Only as you forgive will you develop a trust-based prayer life. Only then can you see the actual goodness of God and refrain from not using prayer as a form of manipulation. Only then will you develop the kind of relationship that does not succumb to formulas and babbling in efforts to get your prayers answered. Only through forgiveness is your heart ready for partnership-based prayer and partnership-oriented living. Only then will you truly desire God's rule, recognize your role and embrace a common concern.

Jesus' prayers were full of entreaties, and they punctuated every aspect of his life. Jesus lived every facet of his life in conversation with the Father. The gospels make it obvious that the conversation never ended. Jesus prayed without ceasing. Jesus claimed that he could do only what he saw his father doing; and frequently in the gospels we catch glimpses of his prayers and petitions.

Jesus's prayers preceded times of decision and work. Jesus spent the night in prayer and then chose his twelve disciples. While Jesus was praying, the Spirit came upon him like a dove. When he went up the mountain to pray, he was transfigured.

Jesus's prayers prevailed in accomplishing great things: the raising of Lazarus, the expelling of crippling spirits, the provision of needs, and the blessing of people.

As disciples of him, that's our work. That's our privilege. You God's own child. It's your call to be in conversation with him about your life and the redemption of this world. Why aren't you celebrating your identity? Why aren't you filled with trust? Why aren't you passionately pursuing this incredible relationship? Why is prayer difficult for you? Why does it get shoved back with lower priorities? Don't you understand your partnership? Or have you been wounded? Have you bought Satan's lies about you and God? The truth will set you free; and confession and forgiveness will restore your partnership.