

“Your Spiritual Cell Phone”

Scripture Readings:

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. (Matthew 7:7-8)

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will. (Romans 8:26-27)

When I became a Christian about five years ago, one of the hardest things I had to learn was prayer. Whenever I did it, it just felt uncomfortable. I felt like I was talking to an empty chair. I could always come up with an excuse for not praying. But a little voice in my head kept saying “Keep trying” and after a while I started to feel a little more confident and comfortable in my prayer life.

The next hurdle was praying out loud in a public setting. There was a fear that my prayers would be laughed at because to my mind they just didn’t measure up to other peoples prayers.

I remember the first time I got up nerve to try it. It was at a Disciple Bible class. We always ended our sessions with prayer time. We’d all hold hands in a circle and one-by-one pray. There wasn’t any pressure to pray out loud, but tonight I was going to do it!

When we started I was going to be one of the last to pray so I had a long time to think about what I was going to say. As it was getting closer for my turn, I started to sweat from nervousness, but I knew what I wanted to say. I was getting confident, even feeling bold.

And then the person next to me started to pray. And she stole my prayer! She was praying what I wanted to pray. Now I was in panic mode, what am I going to do now? So

when my turn came all I could think of saying was “Thank you Lord for letting me know more about you tonight.”

So why do we Pray? Why do it at all?

Let me answer that question, why pray, by asking another question. Why even bother answering the phone? I mean, let’s say it’s ringing. (ring) When the phone rings; (ring) it usually means someone wants to talk with you. And any time you have even a little inkling to pray - to respond - it means God has already called you first. His caller I.D. is on your spiritual cell phone. We never initiate a conversation with God. God is the extrovert in our prayer life - always starts out the conversation - has always initiated contact with us right from the beginning. Even in the Garden of Eden.

Before we even knew we wanted to pray, God was calling us on our spiritual cell phones. Sometimes they might not be charged up, so we don’t know God is calling. Sometimes we might turn off the ringer, so as not to interrupt a sermon - about prayer. But if you have the smallest desire right now to look up and talk with God, it’s because God has called you first, and your spiritual cell phone did a little dance in your pocket. God is calling. Jesus wants a relationship with you. The Lord has hit the redial button for you more times than you can imagine.

So what were some of the reasons (excuses) I’ve used, and maybe some of you have used these also, for not answering the call? What keeps us from responding? (And I am using the word responding as a synonym for prayer.)

What keeps you from answering the phone?

Reason #1 not to answer the cell phone

It's probably just a telemarketer and I'm too busy. OR - *Why pray when God probably is not someone I really want to talk to?*

When I started dating my future wife we didn't have cell phones, we didn't even have touch tone dialing. All we had was a rotary dial phone and having more than one phone in the house was unheard of. I used to get into trouble because I would talk with her all night. My sister, a teenager, and I used to fight over who got to use the phone. When the phone rang at night it was a mad scramble to see which one of us would get to the phone first? I usually won. Didn't matter what I was doing at the time, I just wanted to talk to her.

When my sister got to the phone first I used to think how could she do this? Didn't she know this was the most important person in my life?

Later we would always go out – just to talk – to be together. You see, if it is a lover, or a friend, you want to talk with that person. You can't wait to answer the phone! God is in love with you today. If God had a cell phone, your number would be programmed right in there. If God had a cell phone, not only would your number be programmed right in there, but if you called back, your name would have a caller I.D. special ring.

If my wife calls me, the ring is set to the Lone Ranger song ... it means I know it's her calling. If I call her, she has a special ring on her phone so she knows it's me! The ring is special so that we're sure to answer. This ring declares loud and clear that this call is not just from anyone - a bill collector, a neighbor with a complaint - No, this is someone closest to me. Someone I care about, that I want to talk with. This is not a business call about the work that waits for me at the office. This is rather a love relationship.

If you have any desire to pray right now, it means that God has hit the redial button once more, with you in mind; not as a telemarketer, but as a lover and friend. And if you

answer your spiritual cell phone that vibrates in your soul, you'll find out God is a Lover you *really do* want to talk to.

Reason #2 not to answer the cell phone:

Why answer? I thought I knew how until I read the owner's manual and now I am completely confused. OR - *Why pray? I'm not good at prayer...It's too complicated. I don't have the right words. Leave it to the experts.*

The phone is ringing. And you stand there - not quite sure what to do. Perhaps you've read so many books on how to pray; you've digested so much information about prayer that the whole idea seems daunting - or even spooky.

When I first became a Christian I used to get confused and frustrated trying to pray. I would always compare myself to the prayer warriors at church. They always sounded so good and could pray forever.

I also got confused on who to pray to. I'd hear people pray one time to God, another time to Jesus and yet another to the Holy Spirit. I asked our Pastor Wes and he said "If you want a parental conversation, pray to God. If you want to talk to a friend, pray to Jesus. If you're looking for advice, pray to the Holy Spirit. WOW!, it's that easy!

The truth is that when the phone rings in most families, the kids are the ones who rush to get it. They are excited. They really don't care how they answer. They usually just grab the receiver and say, "Hi, it's me." I wish I could respond to God honestly and genuinely with a "Hi, it's me" more often. And really just be "me" in prayer without pretense or performance anxiety as I prayed.

When I watch our grandkids pray I really get annoyed. It's so simple for them. They just pick up the receiver, and respond easily and honestly. For instance, I always try so hard

to be **SO** spiritual before I pray. Really center on the Lord; and I can get all focused instead on myself, centering on the Lord. Kids, on the other hand, just say "Hi, it's me", start a conversation and all of a sudden it's over. And that's when it seems to me that the Holy Spirit comes.

I think prayer is really a popular topic to learn about because it makes us feel "spiritual" and we can get all involved in whether we sit or stand, walk around little mazes and look at the sky, or do meditative listening, silent retreats, read an old incantation, pray the scripture, or simply cry out "God Help Me!" like when the dog vomits on the rug right before company comes - a panic button prayer - a popcorn prayer.

There's nothing wrong with any of these types of prayer. They're all good and helpful ways of responding. But let's imagine we just stopped learning about **how** to pray...And, like a child, simply responded to God, our lover and Friend with "Hi, it's me." - and, just like the psalmist, allowed ourselves to be transparent and real in God's presence - whatever "Hi, it's me" might mean on any given day.

The psalms know that there's no hiding from God. These are honest, simple, genuine prayers and God saw fit to put them in Holy Scripture. There is something sacred when the rawness and humility, and honesty, and excitement of humanity interfaces with the One who created us in just this way and knows us better than we know ourselves.

One day our greeting of "Hi, it's me" might sound something like... Praise you Lord!

You know everything I'm going to say before I start the first sentence, I look behind me and you're there. Then up ahead and you're there too... This is too much! Too wonderful - I can't take it all in! (Psalm 139: 4-6 MSG)

Another day our "Hi, it's me, God" might sound more like this:

God, you're my last chance of the day. I spend the night on my knees before you... Why do you make yourself scarce? For as long as I remember I've

been hurting; I've taken the worst you can hand out, and I've had it. (Psalm 88: 1, 14-15 MSG)

If we approached God honestly and simply, like the psalmist, we wouldn't need so many "Prayer for Dummies" books. Obviously, people who think they are **not dummies** write those dummy books on everything. The only one I haven't seen written is "How to know you're a dummy for dummies." But there couldn't really be a genuine dummy book written on prayer. You know why? Because when it comes to communicating with God - we're all dummies. There are no "good" prayers, or people who have the art mastered. There are no prayer CEO's.

The Apostle Paul, prayer warrior of them all, says

We don't know how to pray as we should...so the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. (Romans 8:26)

So God does the responding part of it for us too. Gets in there with us, helps us to be honest, in touch with Jesus, when we answer our spiritual cell phone, and helps us communicate. Sees that our well is dry and empty and helps us talk to Him.

So, while we're busy reading, and learning about prayer - guess what? The phone is ringing. And the general idea Alexander Graham Bell had is that someone would want to answer it. Why? So that we could be in relationship, have a conversation; communicate with one another even when we can't see one another.

I've learned it's best not to tie yourself up in knots about how to do this. Just speak, pick up the receiver, open the cell phone...respond, say "Hi, it's me" and communicate with a God Who loves you.

Reason #3 not to answer the cell phone:

I have bad reception. When I answer, often the line goes dead. OR - my prayers are never answered.

I wish the topic of “unanswered prayer” would stop being a topic for a couple of reasons:

First, getting answers to prayer is only a sliver of what prayer is about. Prayer is about fellowship with Jesus.

And

Second, the truth is: God always answers prayer.

The Lord never lets His cell phone, that has a special ring for you programmed in, ring more than once without answering. The Bible says that God never leaves us stranded; He eagerly waits to communicate with us, and always answers the phone when we call back:

Would you read these scriptures with me?

For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened...If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! (Matthew 7: 8, 11)

And

“Because he loves me,” says the LORD, “I will rescue him...He will call upon me, and I will answer him. (Psalm 91:14a, 15a)

The problem is that what may well be an answer may seem at times to us like silence. And there is a great deal of pain and mystery around what seems like unanswered prayer; the line is going dead, or losing reception.

When my wife and I switched over our cell phones to a new system a couple of years ago, we were told that we would have coverage in all the shaded areas of the map. Looked good; everywhere we would be we had coverage. Later I found that there were certain areas where I would lose connection. Some places along highway 52 around Canon Falls and Zumbrota. Sometimes even from one place in our house to another. Something gets in the way of the phone conversation and I lose contact.

There are certain points along the journey of faith where it may seem as if we lose contact also. We can't communicate even though God is still there. Something gets in the way and the mystery of life and death, the mystery of evil and sin in the world takes us captive and we don't understand the outcome of things.

Remember the two individuals, Cleopas and an unknown companion, who didn't understand the outcome of things either as they walked along the Emmaus road? These two have just seen Jesus crucified. They're devastated. You can read about them in Luke:

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him. He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" They stood still, their faces downcast. (Luke 24:13-17 NIV)

They are dismayed. Jesus has just been crucified and this was not the way it was supposed to have turned out. Not at all. Then a stranger comes alongside.

What are you talking about as you walk?

asks the stranger, wanting to be included in their conversation. The stranger is Jesus but Cleopas and his companion don't know that. Now have you ever experienced something devastating in your life? Something that's really hard to understand and then when you go to pray, God feels like a stranger? If bad stuff happens to you, sometimes God seems like a stranger when you pray, doesn't He? Circumstances don't line up with who you know God to be - loving, kind, generous etc. Sometimes God seems like a stranger even with resurrection staring you in the face.

We had hoped,

Said one of them

that Jesus was the Messiah.

We had hoped,

said so many saints,

That God was God. Now look...even though we prayed so hard...this awful thing has happened to us.

The victory of the resurrection was staring Cleopas and his companion in the face, but they couldn't see it. Jesus was Lord of life and death, walking with them, explaining to them using the scriptures, that this had to happen, giving them hope, but they don't recognize Him. All they see is death, until the end of the story when suddenly they recognize the presence of Jesus and then everything makes sense.

Sometimes we have to **wait a while**, before we see God's grace staring us in the face. Sometimes we have to journey a bit further along the road to get that spiritual cell phone reception again. Sometimes when we feel cut off, Jesus seems like a stranger and prayer becomes an obligatory duty, rather than a delight. It becomes rote and we don't even think about what we're saying. Have you ever listened to yourself while saying the Lord's Prayer - or thought about what the words really mean?

It is never, ever, that God hasn't answered us when it seems as if the line has gone dead. It is simply that we may not understand the answer because of our poor reception, and poor perspective; our wanting our way in this life because we don't see things the way God does. What would have happened, I wonder, if God had answered all the stupid things I've prayed for. I don't want to know.

Reason #4 not to answer the cell phone:

It's just my friend, and he already knows me, and knows what I'm going to say. Why bother? OR - *Why pray when God already knows the outcome and is going to do what God is going to do anyway?*

This is a difficult question, because obviously God does know the outcome of all things. However given that reality, the Lord has allowed us the freedom to alter the course of events. All through scripture it is clear that God wants our participation with Him in being difference makers for the world.

Here's a simple example. If you are sitting at the dinner table, would you give up having gravy on your mashed potatoes because God has not seen fit to put the pitcher of gravy next to your plate? Hardly. You are not going to sit by passively.

Please pass the gravy!

You say. Now this is not a huge theological dilemma for you to request beef gravy. But by asking, you have influenced the course of events - the state of your mashed potatoes. And perhaps if it looks like rain, you might just grab an umbrella. You wouldn't say,

God knows best if I am to be wet or dry.

The odd thing is that God should allow us to influence the course of events at all...in this way. But if you don't pray, then you shouldn't try to influence the course of events in any other way either. Eat your mashed potatoes dry, and get drenched in the rain.

But if, as you have seen with gravy and umbrellas, God has arranged it so that our actions **do make a difference** - why wouldn't this be the case through prayer as well?

God has chosen to work through the prayers of His people, and prayer has changed and continues to change the world. For those who question the power of prayer, the following may be of interest:

- People who pray live longer, healthier lives (states Duke University's *Journal of Gerontology*, Nov. 8, 2003)
- People who pray at least once daily recover more quickly from common illnesses and have a lower rate of cancer and heart disease than those who do not include daily prayer time (says the *International Journal of Psychiatric Medicine*, Oct., 1997).
- 73% of Americans believe in the power or value of prayer (says the Center for Mind-Body Medicine in Washington DC)
- The MANTRA project, a study at Duke University, showed that heart patients who receive prayer have 50% to 100% fewer side effects than those patients not prayed for.
- In blind studies done in a variety of contexts, patients who being secretly prayed for by a group of people, fared much better than those in a control group not being prayed for.
- The majority of those who had a sudden remission from cancer, when expected to die, credited their religious convictions and prayers from others as playing a critical role in helping them. (*Spirituality and Health*, August 2004, p.13)

There was a woman I met once from Colorado who came to our church. She showed up at one of our Alpha sessions. The session that night concerned Healing Prayer. She told us she was going to the Mayo Clinic because of a spinal condition. Her spine was being eaten away by a condition she had and she was in continuous pain. Wes and I prayed for her to be healed and I was watching her face as we prayed. Her face went calm and I could feel her

whole body relax. WOW, what an experience! Afterward she mentioned that she felt some relief.

About four months later we got this note from her:

“It was my privilege to worship at your church. You personally prayed over me! WOW!

You prayed to God for healing in my Body. I need to let you know that I have felt so wonderful, that I have quit taking my pain medications. The excruciating pain is gone. I know that the Holy Spirit is working through you, and I wanted to thank you, and thanks be to God for your faithfulness!”

Prayer changes things because prayer puts us in touch with an actual concrete person; puts us in touch with the Lover of our lives; puts us in touch with the One who created us, created the infinite universe. Puts us in touch with the One who has the resurrection power that raised Jesus from the dead.

If you have any inkling to pray today, you can know that your spiritual cell phone is ringing. It's vibrating. It's doing a dance in your pocket. It's beeping.

If you missed the call, you can always call Him back. The number is 1-800-GOD-TALK. Go ahead dial it. You'll never get a busy tone, you'll never be put on hold, you'll never listen to an answering machine, you'll never get “Dial 1 if..., dial 2 if...” You'll always get an answer.

And you know it's the best plan around, because the minutes are free. Jesus wants to communicate with you so badly that He paid for it all already.

Go ahead. Answer the phone.