

WHY PRAY? John 17:24-26

Duane Denham, a friend of mine who is very involved with Kairos prison ministry, shared a conversation he had with an inmate. The subject was prayer. The man asked, "Does prayer really work?" It's an honest question, but I wonder what he was really asking: Why didn't God answer my prayer to keep me out of jail? Will God heal everyone I pray for? Will God give me whatever I pray for every time? Maybe it reflects an understanding of prayer where prayer is seen as a magic formula that if you say the right words in the right way, you will get what you ask for. It's like in the "Wizard of OZ" asking the Great and Mighty OZ for a favor. This understanding of prayer makes God look either like Santa Claus, a Coke machine, a genie in a bottle, or a lottery ticket. "Who really cares about who He is, as long as He gives me what I want. Will prayer make God give me what I want, or do I need to try something else?" It's like saying all you want from this relationship is what you can get out of it.

That's when prayer becomes a phone call where we order what we want from the unknown person on the other line, like ordering a pizza. And some would say, "If we don't get what we want, why pray? If prayer doesn't work, what good is it?" That would be like saying, what good was it to have my dad as a father, if he wouldn't give me everything I asked for. Or what good is it to have Rhonda as my wife, if she doesn't do everything I say? It's pretty insulting! I liked Duane's answer to the guy - "Prayer isn't about whether it works or not. Prayer is about a personal relationship with God as your heavenly Father."

We hear again and again about having a "personal relationship" with God through Jesus Christ, but what does that look like? How do we live that out from day to day? I mean, it sounds great, but how do you do that? It starts with this strange notion of talking to ourselves and believing that someone unseen is not only listening, but answering us in unspoken ways. But even knowing that prayer is talking to God, is it more like talking to the person on the intercom at McDonalds or Sonic? You have no idea who it is, nor do we really care, as long as have our stuff ready when we pull the car up.

Prayer is not just for emergencies, it is an ongoing conversation getting to know Who God is. In his book, Too Busy Not to Pray, Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek Community Church that has over 15,000 members, says, "It has been twenty years since I began taking time to pray, and my prayer life has been transformed. The greatest fulfillment has not been the list of miraculous answers to prayers I have received, although that has been wonderful. The greatest thrill has been the qualitative difference in my relationship with God. And when I started to pray, I didn't know that was going to happen.

God and I used to be rather casually related to one another: We didn't get together and talk very much. Now, however, we get together a lot, not talking on the run but carrying on substantial, soul-searching conversations every morning

for a good chunk of time. I feel as if I've gotten to know God a lot better since I started praying."

Richard Foster, author of the book, Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home, said "The major function of prayer is not to get answers – that's just a wonderful, beautiful byproduct – the first thing about prayer is that I am entering a love relationship. And as I come to enjoy the company of God then God and I talk together about the kinds of concerns & issues and things I might be asking about, because I'm learning to ask from the heart of God Himself."

"Prayer is an ongoing process. We don't master it; we don't arrive. We become available to God and we enter a loving, joy filled, sometimes anxious & frustrating, but an ongoing, developing love relationship with God – and that is prayer."

One of my favorite examples that illustrates prayer is from the movie version of "Fiddler On the Roof" whenever Tevya, the main character, prays to God. Tevya's prayers with God are very conversational. In one of the beginning scenes Tevya is leading his horse by the bridle, walking slowly along the road home. He sighs and looks up to heaven, talking to God, "Dear God, was that necessary? Did you have to make him lame just before the summer? That wasn't nice. It's enough you pick on me - you bless me with 5 daughters, a life of poverty – that's alright, but what have you got against my horse? Really, sometimes I think that when things are too quiet up there, you say to yourself, 'Let's see what mischief can I place on my friend, Tevya? (Wife calls to him and he says to God) I'll talk to you later.'" That's prayer that comes out of a friendship with God.

Most explanations of prayer by Jesus were relational – the neighbor at midnight, the judge and the widow, the father giving his child an egg or a fish, our Father which art in heaven, forgiveness between God & people. Prayer is always based on a living, active friendship with a living, active God.

In the gospel of John, John gives us an intimate eavesdropping on Jesus at Gethsemane. Jesus is praying to His Father about His mission, His disciples, and the disciples yet to come. When you read this prayer, it just sounds different. It seems much more personal. Jesus is speaking in the context of a love relationship with His heavenly Father. And when he prays for His disciples, He speaks of a desire for an ongoing love relationship in and through them.

²⁴"Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. ²⁵"Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. ²⁶I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them." John 17:24-26

Jesus is called the Bridegroom and the church is called His bride. The marriage between husband and wife is a symbol of the union between Christ and His

Church. We say that in every wedding ceremony. Any communication that occurs between them comes out of a love relationship. How do you know the will of God in a situation? It comes out of a growing, love relationship.

We see a growing transformation in the way we pray as we experience a growing transformation in our relationship with God. Let me give you an example of how communication changes in a relationship. When Rhonda and I met, she worked at First State Bank in Baton Rouge and opened my bank account. Although I was interested in her, our relationship was business – friendly but business. I started doing more business at Rhonda’s window, and our level of conversation began to change from business to more personal information. I finally asked her out (by that time the staff at the bank was already placing bets on when I would ask her). Then the conversation became primarily personal (– what are your likes and dislikes? tell me about your family; where did you grow up? what were some of the big events of your life?). But still we led separate lives. Then we fell in love and our communication took on new and deeper dimensions of life – sharing deeper, more meaningful stories from the past and beginning to experience life together. We married and our communication changed even further as the relationship deepened – communication became current – what’s going on now? How can we work through the crises of life together?

We’ve been married 28 years now and we have shared a lot of life. In many cases we know what the other will say before they say it. We have affectionate names for each other. We know what the other person likes and dislikes. Even when we know all these things, we still need to talk to each other. And we still have some communication problems – so it’s something we have to always keep working on. Most of the time, if one of us asks the other to do something, we already have a pretty good idea what the other will say. But we still ask. Sometimes we don’t know until we ask. Communication in marriage is much more than words, it’s based on a committed, growing relationship.

Every marriage, every relationship, carries with it every emotion. Rhonda and I have had arguments, because we are two individuals in a relationship. Earlier in our marriage, I would just clam up and get silent. I wouldn’t argue, because I felt like she might get mad and leave me. But my unwillingness to express that emotion was actually causing a separation between us. I can remember when Rhonda finally grabbed me by the collar, looked me in the eye and said, “I am mad at you, but I am not going to leave you. Talk to me!” I have often been angry with God. I have ranted and raved in prayer over how unfair I thought He was in a particular situation. I was mad, but I would not let Him go, and He would not let me go until we worked through it. That’s what you do in a love relationship.

Do you understand the parallels with prayer and your relationship with God? Prayer is not about getting what you want; prayer is about knowing God better. The plus you receive out of a deepening relationship with God is answers to your questions and prayers. Prayer is to have God walk beside you through the dark valleys of life. Prayer is knowing that God loves you, even through the world wants

to crucify you. Prayer is the one sane connection with God who loves you in the middle of a world gone mad. Prayer is conversation with the One you love that moves from impersonal to personal, and that in death moves from long distance conversations to talking with the One you love face to face.

Why pray? To me you might ask, “Why breathe?” It’s not just talking to God. It’s not just a conversation with God. Prayer is a love relationship between you and God. Anything less is a sad shadow of the reality.

“Does prayer really work?” I guess the guy’s question is really a valid one, but there was a whole lot more behind it than he thought, once we understand the meaning of prayer. “Why pray?” “Does prayer really work?” or to reword it, “Can I really know and love God who knows and loves me?” YES!