Daniel 6:10-11, Matthew 6:5-8

“How to pray”

It seems as if we have been having some fairly significant worship services these past weeks. Today, we embark on a weekly journey through three Scriptural disciplines and as I mentioned to you on Wednesday, I’ve never been more excited about a Lenten season than this one. I have spoken on Spiritual disciplines a number of times when I taught classes on them, but never for a Sunday sermon. So, I am genuinely excited to share with you today, as I am every Sunday, but specifically today as we start this series.

On Wednesday I shared with many of you my approach to discipline and my struggles with it. I equated it with the times that I would run in the Ravine Gardens in Florida. It was a beautiful run and one of the paths went along a golf course, the discipline that it took to either not take that path or to not pick up golf balls was tremendous. Because at the time it was worth it, at least in my mind, but then once the run was over, the lack of discipline really made me pay the price.

Spiritual Disciplines are not an end to themselves, but rather a means by which our relationship with our Savior is strengthened well beyond what we could ever imagine. Leo Tolstoy, a Christian Russian author once stated: Everybody thinks of changing humanity and nobody thinks of changing themselves. These Spiritual Disciplines serve the purpose of changing ourselves so that we can, as Brother Lawrence stated, become or remain in the presence of God.

We are going to be working on the assumption that we all know and love Jesus Christ as Savior. Without that foundation these disciplines are useless. Our goal this Lenten season is to strengthen that relationship with our Savior. If you don’t know Jesus then hear the Good News of the Gospel: He loves you, He died on a cross for you because you are a sinner and need redemption. He was raised from the dead and so conquered both sin and death and as a result gave us freedom to live for him with the assurance of eternal life. But he wants to hear from us daily. And that takes us to prayer.

John Calvin called prayer the chief exercise of faith. It is something that we do, we have to consciously take this action or exercise our prayer life. But I’m guessing that some of us need either a refresher course or a first time guide on How to Pray. You know, kind of like prayer for dummies, not really, but kind of. Our Scripture presents for us two very practical and Spirit filled approaches to prayer that we will examine. Let’s read.

**READ**

I’ll never forget the first time that I walked in on my parents. I should have knocked, but something had woken me up and I was scared. It was dark in the room and I couldn’t see things all that clearly. I was young and I didn’t know what was going on. It was an image that I will never forget, and one that left a lasting impression on me. As my eyes got adjusted to the light I could see my mom and my dad, together, on their knees in prayer right on the side of the bed. They invited me in and I prayed with them. What a blessing it was to grow up in a family that prayed together.

The most powerful prayer experience I ever had was in seminary. It was right after the Rodney King incident and LA had been torched and it was still burning. Many of the shops that were set on fire were owned by Korean Americans and a group of us at Princeton, black, white and Korean, gathered together in the chapel and we prayed together. The Korean community asked if we minded if they prayed in their traditional way, of course not. We didn’t know what to expect. We began praying and their traditional way was for everyone to pray at the same time and seemingly at the top of their voice. To hear a room with 35 people praying fervently and as if they were the only ones in the room out loud was incredible. It was not meant for the public consumption, but once it ended the Holy Spirit seemed to linger upon our group for years.

There have been numerous experiences of prayer that have left an impression on me. When Stacy and I went to Turkey for a Pastor’s conference we were wandering around the streets of Istanbul when the time of prayer came. The haunting caller from the minarettes filled the air with the call to prayer. The streets began to fill up with men with their prayer mats and they put them on the street, the sidewalks, so much so that we had to find a number of other streets just to find our way home. It was amazing to see people filling the streets in prayer, not to the God that I worship, but still their intensity and fervor was palpable.

We then headed to the Blue Mosque and watched as lines of men cleaned their arms and their feet in order to prepare themselves to enter into the Mosque in order to pray and be together on their holy day. They washed themselves clean before they went before the presence of their God. There is something about the intensity of the prayer life of traditions other than ours that puts our mainstream Protestant responsive prayers to shame. In Scripture we see both. We see the intensity of prayer that makes our Savior sweat blood as well as the liturgy of prayer as in the Lord’s prayer that he teaches his disciples which we will address later on and his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane where we hear he prayed the same prayer three times in a row.

So how are we supposed to pray? That’s a fair questions since there are so many Christian traditions around us and also part of this church. Paul tells us point blank in Romans 8:26 that: “We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Holy Spirit intercedes for us, helps us out, with sighs too deep for words.” So we need help to understand how to pray. Let’s look at our Scripture.

In Daniel we see a story being told in only 2 verses. It was illegal to pray to anyone but the king, and Daniel, one of the king’s favorites, knew it, but that didn’t prevent him from praying. Three times a day he would go, get on his knees, just as he had done previously. Prayer was a habit for him, that’s what the Scripture states, and he knew of its importance and refused to give it up even at the expense of his freedom or his life.

It is very possible that those three times he prayed they would have been formulaic prayers, or the same prayers every time. For some reason there is an aversion to prayer that may be written down, or repeated, or for some reason not seen as spontaneous. As if only spontaneous prayers were legitimate. But that is not reflected in Scripture. We see both the formula prayers like the Lord’s prayers and the prayers that would have been repeated in the temple, and the spontaneous prayers such as Jesus’ cry upon the cross. There is no one prescribed method.

The important aspect of prayer, is that you actually pray. When you pray if you do not know what to say there is nothing wrong in reading a psalm to get you started, it could have been one of David’s prayers like what we read for Ash Wednesday which is Psalm 51.

When we look at Jesus’ words to us today from the Gospel of Matthew we see a couple very practical ways in which we ought to pray. If you look at vs. 5 and 6 the first issue he helps us with are those prayers by those hypocrites, the religious leaders. You know, every time, and it has been a lot lately, that Jesus speaks out against them it hurts just a little because I am one of those religious leaders so I have to take special note. But he tells us not to be like those hypocrites who like to pray out on the corners of the streets so that people can see them.

Be aware that what Jesus is addressing is private versus public prayer. He has nothing against public prayer in the temple where the priest would have raised up for the sake of Israel the people and their plight before God. Public prayer is what we do together as a body when we pray together, it is what we do when we raise our concerns to one another. Private prayer is when we are by ourselves speaking with the lover of our life, our Savior. I think of Tebowing, or Ray Lewising, where we choose to exhibit our personal piety to display how righteous we really are.

The advice he gives us is to go into the innermost room of you house so that no one can see you and lay your heart out before God. God doesn’t need our prayers, God knows all things. But he wants us to have a relationship with him and prayer is that umbilical cord that keeps the life flowing between us and our parent. We are still in this womb until we go on to glory where we will be born again for eternity. Prayer keeps us alive with our Savior here on this earth. But when we make that public, he could care less. When we turn personal acts of piety into public displays of righteousness then God loses interest.

The second aspect of prayer that Jesus addresses is those babblers who think that by heaping on words they can force God’s hand to do something that otherwise he would not. He was speaking specifically about the heathen gentiles who believed that if they used the right words then somehow things would work out their way, that’s the way it worked with their gods. Those who believe that they can cast spells with abracadabra, or alohomora, or expelliamus, or avada kadavra, sorry Harry Potter fans, but you can’t just command God, or nature, or people with magical words. It just has no precedence in Scripture.

Now this may not seem very applicable to us today, because we know this. But how many times have you said: God, just this once answer me and heal someone, or let me do well on something, or you send up an incantation that you expect God to respond to. Without a prior relationship it is the same as throwing up words before an idol hoping they will respond.

But we are told that we are to pray with few words in Ecclesiastes 5:2. Or I Thessalonians tells us to pray without ceasing. Or my favorite along this theme is Luke 18:1-8 where we find the widow who incessantly knocks on the door of the judge until he answers and responds to her. We used this when we spoke in churches as Presbyterian missionaries describing how we understood that to be our job as missionaries in Moscow. There was so much need that we had to bug God about it, constantly. That continues to be our job.

We have all grown up in different traditions and the Holy Spirit moves in different ways in each tradition. But what we have in common is that we all believe that the Spirit moves in prayer. May God bless us as we address this most important aspect of our faith which is prayer, that he would make it a habit for us as it was for Daniel, that we would seek the time and the place to pray privately to our loving Savior, and that the words that we use be sincere and from our heart, and not an attempt to manipulate God. Amen.