

Sermon Text for November 27, 2016

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Exodus 32:14ff, Romans 1:8-15

“Prayer: finding the time and the place”

We continue along in our Romans sermon series, I have called it faith for dummies, even though it has some incredibly meaty and challenging Scripture, it also gives us some of the most fundamental lessons of faith that we need in order to survive. Today is one of those lessons. I received a note from Andrew Meade, you remember him, he was our organist choirmaster quite a few years ago, and he sent me an article that spoke about churches and what it seems that those which are growing where are they focusing.

It speaks about Scripture and that is definitely something that we focus on with our 90 day challenge and I hope our sermons and our Sunday mornings are crafted around what we consider the authority of our lives. The second is prayer..., prayer. How are we doing with that? What opportunities are we giving you for prayer? We have our Bible Studies, we also have our prayer times, but to be honest, they simply are not used nearly as much as one would think.

When do you pray? Before meals. In the midst of a crisis. Over this past weekend as we gave thanks for food and family. The Scripture that we are looking at today is called a Prayer of Thanksgiving. It makes sense, the Sunday after Thanksgiving, even if it is the first Sunday in Advent.

Prayer allows us to focus upon the one to whom we are praying. Prayer is one constant that every single denomination has. Every religion also calls its people to prayer with the Muslims and the Jews much more disciplined and serious than we are about their prayer times and places. For us prayer is primarily an individual thing where if we find the time and the place then we will go to our God. For Jews and Muslims there is no option: the day stops when it is prayer time.

Calvin called prayer the chief exercise of faith. If we stop praying, then we stop believing. Where prayer ceases, faith ceases as well. Now this may sound a bit harsh, but it is true. You cannot have any sort of relationship with God if you do not pray. It is literally impossible. If we are God’s children then prayer is our lifeline to God. Prayer is

that umbilical chord to which we are attached to God: it gives us life, it gives us nourishment. Without it, we die spiritually.

Paul in our reading today states that he constantly and unceasingly is in prayer for this Roman community that we started to look at a few weeks ago. Paul must not have been married, he must not have owned his own business or had a demanding boss, there is no way he could have had kids or else he would never have commanded us in I Thessalonians 5:17 to pray without ceasing. How can someone whose life is as busy as ours even think of time out of our busy, workaholic, hectic schedule? It would be easier if everyone had to stop what they were doing in the middle of the day for 15 minutes, 3 times a day and take time to pray because it was enforced in the society. But that is not part of our society. Our question today is how do we find the time and the place to pray if it is our lifeline, our identifying factor in our relationship with God. Since we have no choice but to pray if we want to have a relationship with God, how do we do it?

Soeren Kierkegaard once said: “A man prayed, and at first he thought that prayer was talking, but he became more and more quiet until in the end he realized that prayer is listening.” But how do we find the time and the place to listen to God and when we hear God’s voice to not get it confused with the cultural cacophony that is around us? This Advent season we find ourselves waiting and expecting the coming of our Savior Jesus Christ.

So, for these next 4 weeks, we are going to follow John Calvin’s 4 rules of prayer. He calls them rules for conducting prayer in a right and proper manner. We heard a sermon about Calvin’s rules of prayer, but we handled them all in one sermon. We are going to look at each one individually and from Paul’s approach in Romans. The four rules are: 1) We are to dismiss all foreign and external cares, by which the wandering mind may be hurried hither and thither, and dragged heaven down to earth. 2) We must pray for no more than God permits. Seriously consider our necessities of all that we ask. 3) When we pray we must relinquish all confidence in ourselves. 4) We need to be animated to pray by the certain hope of obtaining our request.

All four of these rules need to be translated and put into our modern life. We are going to do that over these next four weeks using the same passage in Romans, 1:8-15. Did you hear that, for the next four Sundays we are going to be looking at the same passage. Romans is so rich that we can’t just run through it without spending some time. Today, let’s look at the first rule. How do we pray? How do we dismiss all foreign cares

so that our thoughts and our mind is on God and not on the laundry or the paper that is due or the next deadline? In modern language you need to find the right time and the right place so that you can avoid distractions while you pray. Paul starts in verse 8 stating that he thanks God through Jesus Christ. Paul always uses Christ as his point of reference in prayer and in all things that he does.

We constantly see Jesus before every major event in his life go off by himself to a mountain, a garden, or other isolated areas where he could be with his father. Let me give you some examples: At his baptism in Luke 3:21, when he calls his disciples Luke 6:12, at the transfiguration 9:28-29, In the garden of Gethsemane 22:41, at his crucifixion 23:46. For Jesus he makes it a habit to go off and renew his relationship, to drink at the well of the life giving Spirit in prayer. If Jesus had to do it all through life, who are we to think that we can get by without it. We can't, it is impossible to know God without being involved in prayer. But what we find, just like real-estate, one of the main features of having an effective prayer life is location, location, location.

If you do not spend time in prayer, then you do not know God. You can read all the Scripture you want and it will give you some information, but it is in prayer where the Holy Spirit uses the Scripture to move you and convict you and call you to action. You need time away, in a quiet place. Some families actually have quiet places. An extra bed-room or study can be used as a place where the family knows that there is where you go to be away from the family and with God.

The kids after a while will get it, the spouse will get it, and eventually you will get it. Start with just 5 minutes every day. If you set a goal for hours when you first start off then it will not happen. But after 5 minutes a day every day you will find that you will want more time as the days go on.

Calvin tells us that we need to put ourselves in a place where we cannot be dragged from heaven down to earth. Jesus in Matthew 6:6 tells us to go in the closet and lock the door. I can't stress enough how important it is for us, as Paul states, to pray without ceasing.

Over the next 4 weeks I want you to appoint a time in your day, a place in your house or outside when every single day you spend 5 minutes in prayer, listening to God, praising God, talking to God. Prayer is not one religious act among many, but in prayer we find the totality of our relationship with God. When we pray, we expect change. If

we don't pray maybe it is because we are afraid to change, we know that we are going to be convicted of certain actions or life-styles.

Prayer has changed the course of history. Look at the Exodus Scripture that we read and we find that God actually changes God's mind, because of prayer. The same we see in Jonah. Paul longed to be in relationship with God. Allow your life to gradually be transformed through the power of prayer so that you truly have a meaningful relationship with God. Discipline yourselves to seek out God by making quiet times in your life.

Amen.