

LESSONS IN LIVING

Prayer, Part 5 *Why Wasn't My Prayer Answered?*

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
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Scripture Reading: Matthew 6:24-34 (The Inclusive Bible)

There's a familiar passage in the seventh chapter of Matthew that says something like this, "Ask and it will be given you; seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened..." The way I heard that when I was a kid was when I pray, if I have enough faith, I will get what I'm praying for. That's what the words sound like. That's the way that a lot of the people who taught me religion believed: that if you have faith, things work out for you, if you don't, there are problems. And if you have problems, then at some point, it's your lack of faith.

Now you may have had better luck with that than I have had (*laughter*) because sometimes it's more like a vending machine. You put the money in, and you do everything right, and you push the Snickers button and you get Brussels sprouts or something...(*laughter*)...very disappointing. But I think it's important to realize that the words of Scripture are like trainer wheels, not to be taken at face value. They're helping you get to an experience.

In the East, that experience is called Enlightenment. In the West, we tend to personify the different energies of life and of the universe, and that can be very helpful. Because in the West, by the time we start asking questions, we have a false belief that we are separate from everything else. We are taught a view of the universe in which it's almost like we are standing outside of it, trying to find something, and there's this missing person named God who we're supposed to beg. If we beg the right way and have this thing called faith (that's not really defined), and if we do it enough, all of a sudden, God will step out of hiding and give us the Snickers that we wanted all along.

I believe that part of the purpose of this series is to point out that that kind of immature idea hurts us...it hurts us badly. Unfortunately, most of us were taught that way. What I want to do is to look at the actual words of Jesus and realize that they're coming from a much deeper understanding. They pull us much deeper, because the whole point is to tune our hearts to whatever the sacred source is, not to change it, so that it does our will. Our unhappiness does not come because we're not getting our wishes granted. Unhappiness comes because we're out of tune – with life, with nature. Even within ourselves, we're out of tune. So prayer is a way of going deeper. You may not even want to use that word. However it is that you go deeper to find your roots into life, into humankind, that's what Jesus is talking about. Jesus isn't talking about religion, he's talking about life. It's very important to know that.

When Jesus gives the Sermon on the Mount, it's very interesting that he calls the people away from the synagogues – the churches of the day – out of the city, and talks to them up on a hill, to change how they're looking at things. He wants to put these words in the context of beauty and of nature, and of the circle of life – because that's what he's talking about. He's not just trying to give you words to

memorize from a Bible. What Jesus is wanting to give you, is, as he said in so many ways, “I’m coming to give you life, that’s the gift I’m trying to give you; love...life...not Bible drills”

So when in sacred literature you see somebody taking you up a hill – whether it’s Moses going up that mountain, whether it’s Jesus going up this mountain, or Buddha going up another mountain, the point is, don’t take those words at surface value. What the story is trying to give you is a bigger view of life, and of who you are.

So Jesus is taking the disciples away from the city, from the religion of the day, and is going to give them a deeper understanding. Obviously, this is something that Matthew is writing in this way so that you will go there in your mind. Jesus teaches a view of prayer that is like one person speaking to another person. For some of you, that works. For others, that just does not work. Realize again that Jesus is giving you images, sensual images of a mystical experience. By mystical, I don’t mean weird or supernatural, I mean deeper into life, into reality itself.

So whatever works for you – if thinking of some kind of parental figure gives you the sense of safety, to go deeper inside of yourself, and to trust what’s there, then take that route. If the idea of an invisible person is what’s getting in the way, drop it. The point is the love. The figures that are given in the teaching are personifying love. You’re going after the love, not the invisible people.

Now the phrase that we’re looking at today in the Disciple’s Prayer is “Give us this day our daily bread.” Part of that is about your basic needs - there’s no question about it. But there’s also no question that Jesus is primarily talking about manna, in that story in Jewish scripture where the Jewish people are lost, and they’re given food; nobody knows exactly what it was – some white powdery stuff that they were able to eat one day, and the next day it was spoiled.

I believe it’s talking about awareness. One time, Emerson said, “The stars are the daily bread of the soul.” When you are aware, anything beautiful or profound or deep touches you inside. Jesus is going to use images of birds or flowers to remind you of your own version of having been deeply touched.

My own story is more neurotic than that. It wasn’t hills and flowers and things, it was a little desk. When I was a kid, we were all crowded together in our small house, but when we moved and I finally got a room of my own, I wanted to be alone and get my thoughts clear. I had a small desk in the closet of my room, and it was like a cave. I would sit there and read Emerson and other thinkers, and the point was to find my truth that I had to share with the rest of the world. I was going into the cave, but it was for other people, to make some kind of discovery to share. The *amazing* this is that now I have found a community that will actually pay my salary while I do that. (*laughter*) What I love most in life is that sharing, going inside the cave and then coming back out again.

You have your own version of that. Jesus is trying to drum up that image, so that you trust it and base your life on that – to make your primary choices about life, that thing that feeds your heart, because the culture will not do that for you. If anything, the culture will punish you for listening to that voice. So the image of praying to an invisible person that’s listening to that voice can be very helpful for some people.

There’s a phrase in Sanskrit that if I were ever to get a tattoo, this might be it: “Sat Chit Ananda.” That means “Awareness of Being is Bliss.” When I sat at that desk, I was simply being aware, and also kind of aware of my awareness. When you sit on the back porch, and you just look out at the stars, the grass, or the animals or the children; and you’re just there, aware of being, it’s among the most blissful moments of your life. There are other forms of happiness, joy, excitement, but the most blissful moments of your life come when you’re simply aware of being.

When Jesus says, “Give us this day our daily bread,” – the manna – it’s not asking God to drop Wonder Bread a slice at a time. It’s pretending to talk to God while really talking to that part of ourselves that’s hiding from the sacred, and to trust that those deep needs are there to be met.

Now understand that that’s going to require something that’s not going to fit in the American culture. It would be to tune to nature, to come together in communities and cooperate with one another. It’s not going to happen unless we break the rules that we’ve been given. When you were educated, it was taught in a competitive manner. You were taught information that’s supposed to be neutral, and you were given tests on it – spelling bees, different drills. And so, even information itself became something that pitted you against your brothers and sisters.

We’re no different than the people Jesus is talking to – calling us out of that machine. Jesus is going to say something that no American believes: you can’t love God and money, too. It’s right there. Now realize that Jesus exaggerates sometimes, to shake us up. He’s not wanting us to live in dumpsters. He’s not wanting us to quit our jobs and look for manna in the backyard. The images he uses illustrate this. Birds work, right? They build nests, they hunt, they sing, they take care of their young. So it’s not saying don’t work. It’s saying don’t think that worry is going to extend your life or make you safer.

What Jesus does is lift up a flower. I don’t know if he picked it...hopefully not, just pointed to it, maybe...but he didn’t say just *look* at it, he said *study* it...*study* the flower. *Meditate* on it, would be another translation that would work. It’s not just *glance* at it. See what’s happening? It’s coming from the soil, and you can’t really tell where the soil ends and the flower begins. Or it’s coming from the sun – there’s a circulation that’s taking place, and when the flower is born, when the flower dies, there’s one sense in which nothing’s happening. That flow is what the flower always was – flowing, flowering – when you turn the universe into nouns, you can get lost in those nouns.

So Jesus says, “Look at the flowers, consider the flowers, consider anything natural. Do not consider anything unnatural. Money is unnatural. It’s not real, it’s an abstraction. You can’t eat it. The unfortunate thing is when you give primates - as some of us in this room are - (*laughter*) an artificial system of values, we can’t find the brakes. And the reason that unfettered corporate capitalism is going to kill us if we don’t get outside of it, is because we can’t find the brake; there’s *never enough*. It’s like people addicted to things. We’ve got to take the keys out of drunk people’s hands, and you can be drunk on money just like you’re drunk on alcohol – or fame, or power.

So when Jesus says, “Think first of God’s realm and everything else will be given to you,” what it’s saying is, realize that your happiness is a little bitty infection on the universal happiness, and you should never consider anything in your benefit that hurts the common body of life. When it says, “Our heavenly parent, give us our bread,” what that’s saying is, Jesus doesn’t want to have a personal relationship with you, not a private one, anyway. It can be personal in the sense of emotional, but Jesus loves everybody, so what we’re doing is coming into the universal. This is different from the religion that pits us against one another, tries to figure out who’s closest to Jesus...who *does* God care about, who *does* God want to feed?

Have you ever thought that when we surrender responsibility for feeding somebody else’s children to the market, that we’ve renounced Christ? Because what we’ve said is that our God, the entity we’re trusting to take care of us, to feed us, to heal us, is an artificial machine. Jesus is calling us back to nature – calling us back to life – calling us to the sacred ground of our own being.

Kierkegaard said it this way, “Purity of heart is to will one thing. The one thing is the common happiness.” So start where you are, give me my bread, give me my share, and deepen it and broaden it.

Do you care about the person sitting next to you? Do you care about your family? Then you care about your friends, then you care about strangers. Then the weird day comes when you care about your enemies – and in a strange way, you care about them as much as about anybody else.

Give us this day our daily bread. Now at that point, our emotions are an incredibly helpful guide. If you're feeling sad, what that probably means is that too much of your weight is in the past. You want to get back to something that has been left behind. It's only human, and you're going to feel sadness sometimes, but it's saying that when you feel that way, pay more attention. Get a flower out. Look at it quick. Have a little glass case and break it, pull out the flower. (*laughter*) Get to the present moment. You can look at the past, but look at it from the present moment – reclaim it, heal it.

In the same way, when you're worried and afraid, it's because you're leaning too much into the future. You're worried that something's going to happen to you. And you know what, it will – at some point. Right? You're going to die. So are you going to let that rob you of the joy of this day? Jesus isn't saying don't work, he's not saying don't be concerned, not to be safe. Take care of yourself, but worry adds nothing to your life. It adds nothing; it doesn't make you any safer at all.

If you saw me sad, and said, "Why are you sad?" and I said, "I'm sad because yesterday is hurting me," you would realize that the problem is not yesterday, the problem is my attachment to yesterday. I'm giving yesterday power over today. If you saw me afraid, and you said, "What's happening?" and I said, "Tomorrow's going to hurt me," you'd realize that the problem is not tomorrow, it's my imagination about what's right around the corner.

Flowers die, birds die; they hit the window out here every week. "Consider the birds" does not mean "Come up with this imaginary idea of safety," but that the birds have been alive their whole lives. Wouldn't that be great...to be alive every day of your life? That's what Jesus is offering us. Not necessarily a safer route; in fact, if you choose the way of universal love, it's going to open you to all kinds of stress that you're not going to have if you do what this culture tells you to do. But you will be alive every day of your life, and you will be at a peaceful place that is inseparable from bliss – *from bliss*.

Why trade that for safety? That's what Jesus is saying. What you want is the bliss, and you'd rather have one day of that than a hundred years of being afraid. So choose it – choose it today, and then when you trip and you blow it, choose it again tomorrow.

Somebody once said the religious life is like stringing pearls. We come together here on Sunday, we think about how things should be, then we go out and it lasts until about Tuesday, (*laughter*) then it breaks down. The point is to try to string the pearls throughout the whole week. And it's okay to make mistakes – then come back to it, and to help each other do that.

These teachings do not make sense in isolation. They make sense in community – friendships, people that help you, people that pick you up when you're afraid. Can you imagine what it would mean if a group of people consecrated themselves and dedicated themselves to non-combative living together – as a community and in harmony with nature – dedicated and consecrated to the common good? That's what Jesus was trying to do. That's what Jesus is inviting you to.

When you pray, and it feels like you're listening to an empty phone, *go deeper*. That means the prayer isn't over yet. Because when your soul is in tune – and that's what prayer does – prayer doesn't change the wisdom of the universe to fit our neuroses, it tempers our neuroses so that reality is okay for us. Prayer won't change the planet to meet our standards – because the problem is never the planet,

the problem is never nature, or if you're religious, the problem is never God; the problem is that we've lost our tuning.

So go deeper. Let your unhappiness become your best teacher – leave your imbalance and find the depth where the bliss lives. Jesus said, “Consider the birds of the air, consider the flowers.” Study them. Meditate on them. Because what they will do is tune your soul, and when your soul is in tune, your life will be music, and the world itself will be your teacher.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



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