

“Learning to Breathe”

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, **“Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples”** (Luke 11:1).¹

Our African-American spiritual for this third Sunday of Black History Month is “Standing in the Need of Prayer,” which is another very familiar song:

Not my mother, not my father, but it’s me, O Lord,
Standing in the need of prayer.

Not my brother, not my sister, but it’s me, O Lord,
Standing in the need of prayer.

Not the preacher, not the deacon, but it’s me, O Lord,
Standing in the need of prayer.

Not my neighbor, not the stranger, but it’s me, O Lord,
Standing in the need of prayer.

“It’s me, it’s me, it’s me, O Lord,
Standing in the need of prayer.

“It’s me, it’s me, it’s me, O Lord,
Standing in the need of prayer.



The note in the book about the art illustrating this song is by the artist, Timothy Botts: “One of the richest examples of African art is the mask. I remember singing this spiritual often as a teenager, caught up with its rhythm rather than its meaning. So it was surprising to me years later to revisit these lyrics and make the connection between proverbial masks and our tendency to hide behind them. One of the beautiful traits of the slave musicians was their humility, an essential ingredient to entering God’s kingdom.”²

This idea about not wearing masks when we come before God caught my attention, and we’ll return to it in a bit; but you can see from the title of this message that the metaphor of “breathing” is also going to be prominent this morning. Now breathing is kind of a big deal. I’ll bet you know that. When I made the comment to someone recently that “You miss it if you can’t breathe,” their response was, “Only for the first couple of minutes.”

And it might strike you as unusual that I’ve called this sermon “Learning to Breathe,” since on the whole, the process is automatic. But here’s the deal. Babies do know how to breathe, and if you watch them, they breathe diaphragmatically. That is, their bellies expand and contract with each breath, while their shoulders don’t move much, if at all.

Somewhere along the way, though, we seem to unlearn diaphragmatic breathing, and our bellies begin to stay put while our shoulders start moving up and down. Happily, it’s possible to re-learn diaphragmatic breathing—I had to learn it when I was a vocal student long ago—and once it’s re-learned, it stays with us.

The kind of “breathing” to which I refer this morning is a lot like that. We know it instinctively as children, we tend to unlearn it along the way . . . and we can re-learn it if we

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on February 19, 2017. The inspiration for this sermon is an African American Spiritual taken from Timothy R. Botts, *Bound for Glory: Celebrating the Gift of African American Spirituals through Expressive Calligraphy*, with reflections by Patricia Raybon (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House, 2011).

² Botts, p. 60.

commit ourselves to that project. The “breathing” we’re looking at this morning has to do with our spiritual-for-the-day: we all are “standing in the need of prayer.”

I think it was Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, from whom I first heard about “spiritual breathing.” The idea isn’t difficult. Bill talked about our listening to God as “inhaling,” and our speaking to God as “exhaling.” Others have spoken of breathing out our sin and shame and breathing in God’s grace and glory. The metaphors are many, but the general idea is pretty similar.

And so, as best I can in this short time, I’d like to think with you this morning about the **PURPOSE** of prayer, the **PROCESS** of prayer, the **PROBLEMS** of prayer, and the **PRACTICE** of prayer, with the idea of “spiritual breathing” as a backdrop to the whole thing. There is much more to be said about each than we’ll be able to do here, but we’ll make a start, at least.

It seems to me that the primary **PURPOSE** of prayer is to take us into the very heart of God. We frequently miss this, because we tend to come at the whole idea of prayer backward. We tend to begin prayer with ourselves rather than with God.

Richard Foster put it very nicely when he noted that “God is inviting you and me to come home, to come home to where we belong, to come home to that for which we were created. His arms are stretched out wide to receive us. His heart is enlarged to take us in

“We do not need to be shy. He invites us into the living room of his heart, where we can put on old slippers and share freely. He invites us into the kitchen of his friendship, where chatter and batter mix in good fun. He invites us into the dining room of his strength, where we can feast to our heart’s delight. He invites us into the study of his wisdom, where we can learn and grow and stretch . . . and ask all the questions that we want.

“He invites us into the workshop of his creativity, where we can be co-laborers with him, working together to determine the outcome of events. He invites us into the bedroom of his rest, where new peace is found and where we can be naked and vulnerable and free. It is also the place of deepest intimacy, where we know and are known to the fullest.

“The key to this home, this heart of God, is prayer. Perhaps you have never prayed before except in anguish or terror. It may be that the only time the Divine Name has been on your lips has been in angry expletives. Never mind. I am here to tell you that the Father’s heart is open wide, and you are welcome to come in.”³

Now if that sounds good to you, I hope you’ll read Richard’s book *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home*. I hope you’ll read Dallas Willard’s *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God*.⁴ And I hope you’ll read William Young’s *The Shack: Where Tragedy Confronts Eternity*.⁵ Those books are quite likely to change your life. But there’s more.

Just as without physical breathing, physical life quickly ebbs away, so it is that without spiritual breathing, our spiritual life withers and dies. For those who walk with God, prayer is no

³ Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home*, in *Richard Foster’s Prayer Treasury* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992, 1994), pp. 1-2.

⁴ Dallas Willard, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God*, updated and expanded (InterVarsity, 2012).

⁵ William Paul Young, *The Shack: Where Tragedy Confronts Eternity* (Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2007).

little habit tacked on to the edges of our lives. **Prayer IS our lives**, as breathing is. Prayer is our response to the “perpetual outpouring of love by which God lays siege to every soul.”

God’s perpetual invitation to us is “Come closer! Come in farther! Come up higher!” And when we do these things, we change. As we grow closer to God’s heart, little by little our character becomes more like God’s character, and our lives become more and more filled with *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control* (Galatians 5:22-23). And as these qualities become more and more natural for us, our lives become increasing forces for good in those lives connected to our own—especially our families. That’s the *purpose* of prayer.

With respect to the **PROCESS** of prayer, we do well to begin by remembering that just as a small child cannot offer a “bad picture” to its mother, so a child of God cannot offer a “bad prayer.” None of us will ever be more than beginners at prayer, so relax. You can do this.

“Abba” and “Imma” (“Daddy” and “Mommy”) are the first words Hebrew children learn to speak; and *Abba* is so personal, so intimate a term that no one ever dared to use it to address the Great God of the Universe . . . until Jesus did so and invited us to do so, too.

Using the acronym “A.C.T.S.” is as good a place as any to begin with prayer. As you may know, the letters stand for *Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication*. Those aren’t words we use every day, but the acronym helps us to remember them.

Remembering that the goal is to be natural and normal as we talk to God, taking off the various “masks” we typically present to one another, *Adoration* is simply praising God for God’s great Goodness and Love. Many of the psalms begin in this way, and that’s what Jesus was doing when He began the Model Prayer with “*Father, hallowed be your Name.*”

Confession has to do with agreeing with God about the specific sins in our lives, expressing sorrow and regret for those choices and actions, and asking for God’s forgiveness—forgiveness that has already been purchased on Calvary’s Cross (1 John 1:9). One way to think about confession is that it’s similar to washing a dirty dish so that it becomes useful once again.

Thanksgiving is just what you think it is, and we learn to give thanks by beginning with simple things: “Thank you for the sunshine. Thank you that I’m breathing. Thank you for my family. Thank you for a warm house”; and so on. It’s interesting to notice how our attitudes change as we make our way through *Adoration, Confession, and Thanksgiving*, even in a short prayer.

And it is only after all this that we come to *Supplication*, which is making requests to God. While it is true that God knows what we need far more than we ourselves know what we need, it pleases our Heavenly Father for us to ask, and the reason for this isn’t hard to understand. Just as we like for our own children to ask us for things that we already know that they need, because the asking deepens our relationship, so it is with God. *The purpose is not so much the request as the relationship.*

The third aspect of prayer I want to address this morning is some of the frequent PROBLEMS we encounter in prayer. One of the first things you’ll notice as you begin to develop your prayer life—your conversation—with God is that distractions of many kinds will begin to crop up from every direction, and there is good reason for this.

If prayer really is the central expression of the life of faith, the very breath and heartbeat of our life with God, it should be obvious that for this very reason, our prayer life is the target against which Satan directs his best and most numerous efforts. If Satan can weaken, distract,

or destroy our prayer life, the prospects of taking us completely off of the field of battle become quite good . . . and we may not even notice that departure. I'll come back to distractions in a moment.

Sometimes we become discouraged in prayer because we don't seem to receive answers from God. Dallas Willard's *Hearing God* will be of enormous help at this point; but often our problem is that we tend to treat God, not as a friend, but like a vending machine. When God refuses to be treated as a vending machine (and I'll bet your family and friends don't like it, either), we stop paying attention when answers don't seem to be instantaneous.

And, as I noted in another sermon not long ago, many of the largest problems in our lives come from the fact that we did in fact receive what we wanted and asked for. Even at our best, we see only the smallest part of the picture, and we have only the foggiest notion of what we really need. But as we come to know and trust God more completely, we learn to let God determine our circumstances, because we are completely confident that God knows what is best, is able to provide what is best, and loves us beyond all measure.

Finally, let's look for a moment at the **PRACTICE** of prayer. While the Bible does tell us to "pray without ceasing," and while it is possible to learn to do this, "we only learn to pray all of the time, everywhere, after we have resolutely set about praying some of the time, somewhere."⁶

Prayer is mostly about relationship, and relationships grow through practice—that is, through time spent together, sometimes in recreation, sometimes in chit chat, sometimes in laughter, sometimes around the table, sometimes in serious conversation; and it is so with God even as it is with your best friends.

While it's not essential to have a dedicated place for prayer, many find it very helpful to have such a place, especially as we begin. Find a room—it was a closet in the movie *War Room*⁷—or even a designated chair that will begin to signal to your spirit that this is the "doorway to Heaven's throne room."

Nor is there a prescribed posture for prayer. The most frequent posture described in the Bible is to be completely prostrate on the floor or on the ground, with hands stretched out. The second most common posture is with the hands lifted up. The familiar "folded hands and eyes closed" approach, while perfectly acceptable, isn't in the Bible at all. Do what feels right to you.

Remember that "prayer involves ordinary people bringing ordinary concerns to a loving and compassionate Father. There is no pretense in prayer. We do not pretend to be more holy, more pure, or more saintly than we actually are. We do not try to conceal our conflicting and contradictory motives from God or from ourselves. We lift even our disobedience and our shame into the arms of our Father; He is strong enough to carry the weight. Sin, to be sure, separates us from God, but trying to hide our sin separates us even more."⁸

If thoughts interrupt, and they will, both on their own and by Satan's suggestion, simply notice them and return to God. If you have to do this fifty times in one prayer, then you have offered fifty "loving returns" to God, and that is a beautiful gift in itself.

⁶ John Dalrymple, *Simple Prayer* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1984), p. 47.

⁷ *War Room*, Alex & Stephen Kendrick, Provident Films, 2015.

⁸ Foster, p. 14.

Even falling asleep during a prayer is not a problem. As we release our anxieties and troubles and concerns to God's love, we may well find that to be next to the heart of God is a good place and a safe place for sleeping.⁹

And as we begin to grow in prayer, we could hardly do better than to become intimately familiar with the prayer Jesus gave His disciples when they asked to learn how to pray. We read it before in Luke, but here it is in the King James Version of the prayer that most of us know at least a little bit:

*Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name.
Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done,
on Earth, as it is in Heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil;
for Thine is the Kingdom,
and the Power, and the Glory, for ever.
Amen.*¹⁰

Another good prayer with which to begin is that ancient prayer known as "The Jesus Prayer": "*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have Mercy on Me, a Sinner.*"¹¹ Many find it helpful to read one of the psalms as a prayer, which is, in fact, what most of them are. Some find benefit in praying the words to hymns. And just sitting in silence before the Lord is good, too.

This Journey of Prayer, which is the Journey into the Heart of God, is the Journey for which you were created. When all is said and done, nothing else really matters . . . at all.

It's not my mother, not my father, but it's me, O Lord,
Standing in the need of prayer.
It's not my brother, not my sister, but it's me, O Lord,
Standing in the need of prayer.

"It's me, it's me, it's me, O Lord,
Standing in the need of prayer.
"It's me, it's me, it's me, O Lord,
Standing in the need of prayer.



⁹ Foster, p. 141.

¹⁰ Matthew 6:9-13.

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus_Prayer