Sunday July 29, 2001

PRAYER AND PERSISTENCE
Luke 11:1-13

Whenever you know someone who has obviously excelled in some area, it's a good idea to ask that person what the secret is of his or her success so that you can learn all you can from that individual. That's what Luke reports the disciples did in the Bible story read earlier. They noticed that each time Jesus returned from a time of prayer, he was clearly refreshed and renewed. So one day they said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray." They wanted to be more deeply aware of their connection with God.

Most people I know have the same desire. Here's what Jesus did in response to their request. First, he gave the disciples a model prayer, an outline for prayer which they could begin using then and there. We call it "The Lord's Prayer." We use it regularly in our worship services and I'm sure many of you use it in your personal prayers.

However, Jesus also realized from his own experience with prayer that there is much more to praying than learning the words of a given prayer and committing that prayer to memory. Therefore in teaching the disciples and others to pray, he gave additional suggestions for improving one's prayer life. Some of these are found in the

passage read earlier from Luke's gospel and others are found in the Sermon on the Mount in the gospel of Matthew.

First, let's consider some obstacles that are mentioned in the Bible which can hinder the development of a more meaningful prayer life.

One obstacle that can stand in the way of meaningful prayer is an inadequate or limited image or concept of God. Listen to people's prayers and their conversations about prayer and you can learn a great deal about their concept and image of God.

I heard a fundamentalist minister say, for example, that he had a vision in which God had rolled up his sleeves and was going to punch the federal government in the nose. Here's an image of God as a brawler. There's also the image of God as an avid sports fan. If you watch enough pre-game and post-game interviews and read enough sports personality profiles, you will hear athletes and coaches repeatedly saying things like: "If the Man upstairs wants us to win this big game, we'll win it. If He doesn't , we won't. It's all up to the Big Score-Keeper in the sky now." Then of course, if the team loses, it's not the coach's fault, or the player's mistakes, it's because God didn't want your team to win. I heard a baseball player say,

"When I hit that ball, I knew it was going to carry far enough, but I thought it might go foul. I said a fast prayer and sure enough, it landed in the stands a couple of feet fair. I guess the Big Batting Coach in the sky was really with me on that one."

A football quarterback said, "I'm disappointed that I completed only two passes in 30 attempts and my left eye was gouged and my leg was broken in three places and we lost. But I guess that's the way the Big Coach in the sky wanted it."

After hearing enough of this kind of talk, a picture begins to form of God sitting up there somewhere, flipping from channel to channel to keep up with

every play of every game going on in the world and of personally directing who wins or loses.

In a World Series baseball game a few years ago, television viewers watched a batter bless himself with the Sign of the Cross before entering the batter's box, while up in the grandstand, the pitcher's wife was shown reciting the Rosary. The batter struck out. Did the Rosary cancel out the Sign of the Cross, leaving skill against skill, or was saying the Rosary stronger than making the Sign of the Cross?

There's also the image of God as the warrior, or God as the Commander-in-Chief. This is one of

God's oldest roles, inspiring troops to go into battle, being at their side and being on their side. Throughout history, there have been very few wars in which God was not said to be on one side or the other, usually on both sides if you believe the generals and leaders of the nations.

Mark Twain once wrote a prayer about war to illustrate the silliness of some of our prayers and implied images of God in relation to war. Here's part of that prayer. "O Lord, our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of their guns with the wounded writhing in

pain; help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire; help us wring the hearts out of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with their little children to wander through wastes of their desolated lands in rages and hunger and thirst....."

Another inadequate image of God which many people still have in their minds and which can be an obstacle to their praying is that of a God who is not good, not loving, not forgiving and not merciful. Instead, too many people still think of God as hostile, holding grudges and almost impossible to please. They still ask, "What can I do to please God and get in good with God?" Or they say, "I

know that God cannot think much of me as I am. How can I get God's attention and do something to make God love me?" God is pictured as an angry parent.

Jesus, however, revealed a God of infinite love, of unending forgiveness and unlimited mercy and patience. God is not far off, or up there somewhere, but rather within us and around us all the time. The Bible tells us that each person is created in God's image which is another way of saying that you are an expression of God. Consider how revolutionary that idea is. This implies that you do not pray "to God," but that you pray from the consciousness of God. Prayer is

allowing the Spirit of God which is already in you to become more active.

Meister Eckhart, a Christian mystic, was aware of the very human tendency to be dominated by an objective perspective of God, an anthropomorphic God who rules over our lives with an iron hand. To change his way of thinking he made what could be considered the most startling statement in the history of religion when he confessed that he boldly "prayed God to rid me of God."

What did he mean by this? He meant that if you believe you are dominated by a God who is "out there" you will always be restricted in your prayer's

effectiveness. God is not a person to whom you should pray, but a spirit in which you should live.

A second obstacle which can hinder your prayers is holding on to feelings and attitudes which are not healthy. These tend to fall into one or more of four categories: (1) fear, (2) guilt, (3) inferiority feelings, low self-esteem, (4) hate or misguided love. Any one of these or combination or all of them can be a block to prayer because they tend to fill your mind and grab your attention and focus which can hinder you from being open to God's Spirit.

That's why Jesus said, "If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother

or sister or any one has something against you, leave your gift there at the altar and go; first be reconciled to that person and then come and offer your gift." (Matthew 5:23-24)

You cannot honestly pray or be in a spirit of worship if there is still within you hostility, hate, envy, or any other kind of negative attitude. Then you will dwell on one or more of these attitudes which tend to block God's loving Spirit which wants to work within you.

If you want to deepen your prayer life, it's helpful to search out and bring to light your fears, guilt, hate and inferiority. It's not that these attitudes bother

God's Spirit which wants to be more active in your life, they bother you. God already knows they are there. You may not know they are there, or how powerful they are.

A third obstacle to a deepening of prayer in your life can be the use of too many words.
Notice how brief and how focused on God the Lord's prayer is. That's why Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 6, verse 7, "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases...do not think you will be heard for your many words." Meister Eckhart, the mystic, said there is really only one word necessary for prayer. That word is "thanks."

Most of the words you use in prayer are not really prayer, but a kind of "pre-prayer." The words are used to get you in the mood of prayer or spirit of prayer. They are a prelude, an introduction. Sometimes they can be very helpful. If there are too many words they can get in the way.

In the Hebrew scriptures, in the book of Psalms, it is written, "Be still and know that I am God." "Be still," means to become peaceful, concentrated and quiet. Again, it is significant in the Hebrew scriptures that Elijah the prophet, had his most powerful experience of God when he was quiet.

To summarize, some of the major obstacles to

prayer are: an inadequate concept of God; negative attitudes within you which can block God's Spirit; and the use of too many words.

According to the Bible in Luke, here are several guidelines for helping you in your prayers. Each guideline begins with the letter "P"–persistence, practice and patience.
They are all connected and are actually different aspects of the same thing.

Being persistent in your practice of prayer and being patient in your praying is not as easy as it sounds. Too many people tend to use prayer like a spare tire, only when an emergency arises and are

therefore apt to be disappointed.

In prayer, it is especially important to be patient with yourself. Many times your mind will wander, especially in periods of silence. Frequently it will seem as if nothing is happening and you will think you are wasting your time. It's crucially important in those times to keep up the discipline, to be persistent in a gentle way which is another way of defining patience. Do not be too hard on yourself. Bring your mind and thoughts back very gently.

Jesus encouraged his disciples to be persistent in prayer. He used the parable of a person who goes to his friend's house at midnight, knocks on the

door because he needs food. He tells his friend that an unexpected visitor has come to his house and he has no food for the guest. The person he has awakened to ask for help at first tells him to go away. It is too late. His family is sleeping and he doesn't want to be bothered. However the person who has come to ask for help keeps at it. He will not give up. "Because of his persistence," said Jesus, "the person in the house will get up and give him what he needs."

Persistence, sometimes called endurance, is an important character quality not only in your prayer life, but in every part of your living. Consider, for example, how important it is in maintaining your

physical strength. If you do not persist in your exercise program, not much will happen.

I meet so many people who look back on their lives and shake their heads with regret and say, "Why did I quit? Why did I give up when I had such a good beginning?" One of the big mysteries in life is why bad habits are easier to maintain than good habits.

What Jesus is telling us here is that growing and maturing spiritually is a process that takes time–it therefore takes persistence, patience and practice. For example, take the act of forgiveness. To forgive someone who has deeply hurt you and to

experience God's forgiveness fully, takes time which is an element of patience. A willingness to forgive is a good way to begin, but that does not mean it will happen instantly and you can move on.

A wise person said to me, "If you rush forgiveness, you will most likely miss the lesson you are being asked to learn. And you will not truly forgive either."

There is one more word that begins with the letter "P" which needs to be added to persistence, patience and practice in our prayer life. That word is "positive." Make prayer positive. Too many people in their praying continue to hold on to

unhappy thoughts and symptoms. Over and over again in their prayers, people will declare their unhappiness, their suffering, their sinfulness and pain. That's ok to do, but you have to also move beyond that. Otherwise you are only affirming your misery rather than letting it go.

When you let those negative attitudes go, then expect positive results. Jesus ended his teaching on prayer with his disciples on a very positive note. He said, "Ask and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks the door will be opened." Amen.