

Pray Daily

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Sermon Series: Seven Habits of a Disciple

Acts 1:6-14

I ask God for ice cream; sometimes God gives me broccoli.

I believe in prayer. I practice it. I depend upon it. Yet prayer remains mysterious to me. I will be unable to explain prayer in the next 20 minutes so it makes perfect sense to you.

It shouldn't come as a surprise that I engage in prayer, although I don't understand it thoroughly. The intricacies of anti-lock braking systems are mysterious to me, as well. Yet, I still want my car to come equipped with them!

I've had the exhilarating experience of God answering prayer in my life. There are times when the circumstances in life fit together in such a way that I know they cannot be merely coincidental. Sometimes God's providential presence is palpable and compelling.

Yet, I also acknowledge times when God seems strangely silent. I pray for something, yet no answer seems forthcoming. All I get is silence!

I'm confident God answers prayer; not always in ways I can comprehend. God's answer is not always an unequivocal "Yes." Sometimes God's reply to my prayer is "No" or "Wait."

The same is true in the world of parenting. Chris and I didn't always give our kids everything they asked for. They wanted Cocoa Puffs for breakfast, we served them Cream of Wheat ,

instead. When it came right down to it, we knew better than they did what they needed.

God knows better what we need than we do. I ask God for ice cream; sometimes God gives me broccoli.

I had planned, today, to preach from Acts 2, but I became so intrigued with Acts 1 that I changed my mind, with apologies to those who planned adult class lessons on Acts 2. In reality, both passages point to the same theme.

The first chapter of Acts records three principle events in the life of Jesus' disciples. First, the disciples receive Jesus' commission: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witness in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth" (1:8). Essentially, this is a one-verse summary of the book of Acts; their mission begins in Jerusalem (chapters 1-7), extends into neighboring Judea and Samaria (chapters 8-12) and culminates with their arrival in Rome itself (chapters 8-12).

Second, the disciples watch Jesus go into heaven. In theological circles, we call it the "Ascension." To borrow language from the Apostles Creed, "He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty."

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Third, they return to Jerusalem, to the same upper room they shared with Jesus at the Last Supper, to await the promised Holy Spirit. They were not altogether certain what they were asking when they prayed for the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, Luke tells us, they devoted themselves to prayer.

Our secular culture treats prayer as ceremonial. People ask me in public settings to offer “a little prayer.” What, precisely, is a little prayer? Prayer has also become ceremonial in the church. We think if we pray at the beginning and end of a meeting, somehow God is bound to bless whatever falls in-between.

For Jesus’ disciples, prayer was not merely ceremonial; they were devoted to prayer.

We have a cat named Eve who is the epitome of devotion. At every meal, she assumes a begging posture, acting more like a dog than a typical cat. Every meal, she positions herself at my feet, petitioning for table scraps. She will eat most anything, although she prefers chicken and tomato sauce. Go figure! She sometimes resorts to playing on my emotions by placing her paws on my chair and staring at me with the most plaintive expression imaginable. In that moment, she is focused on one thing and one thing only—food! If only I was as devoted to prayer as Eve is about table food.

Notice in the text the adverb preceding the word “devoted.” They were constantly devoted to prayer. They persevered in prayer

a full ten days before they were filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Why is it necessary to persevere in prayer? If God knows what we need, why don’t we ask once and be done with it?

Persistent prayer changes us. More than prayer changing other people or our circumstances, God changes us through prayer. I pray, “Lord, change that person,” yet I find in praying that the person God changes is me.

Whenever we harbor an unforgiving attitude toward someone, prayer brings us back to God’s gracious pardon. If God forgives us of an enormous debt, we can forgive someone of a trivial debt.

Richard Foster writes, “To pray is to change. Prayer is the central avenue God uses to change us.”

In her book, *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris writes about a Benedictine friend, a gentle, thoughtful man, who has been in constant physical pain for years and is now confined to a wheelchair. Her friend says of prayer, “Often, all I can do is to ask God, ‘Lord, what is it you want of me?’” Kathleen writes, “From him I have learned that prayer is not asking for what you think you want but asking to be changed in ways you can’t imagine.” Prayer moves me off “Give me what I want” to “Give me what you want me to have.”

Persistent prayer moves us beyond ourselves. We all possess a stubborn, innate capacity to be fixated on ourselves. We come to think about life in “It’s all about me” terms. Prayer moves us out of

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the puny world of the self into the larger world of God's kingdom.

We sometimes pray to derive some benefit from God, such as a higher standard of living or personal acclaim. Persistent prayer helps us sort out deep-seated desires from fleeting whims. Persistent prayer has a way of maturing our choices. It prepares us for a full appreciation and right use of the answer when it comes to us.

Persistent prayer puts us in the place of greatest spiritual potential. While Peter prays from the rooftop of his house, God gives him a vision that completely scrambles Jewish-Gentile relations (Acts 10:9). While Paul prays from his prison cell, an earthquake rattles open the jailhouse doors (16:25). Paul's first mission journey is the direct result of the prayer meeting (13:2). Every spiritual revival in history is attributable to persistent, kingdom-centered prayer.

When I was in middle school, I had a crush on a girl. I wanted desperately to be noticed by this girl, so I learned her class schedule and made a point of walking in the same halls she was likely to frequent. I got to know her friends, in hopes of getting to know her. If I was going to meet her, I had to place myself in a place of greatest potential. If I am going to cultivate a relationship with God, I must likewise put myself in the place of greatest potential.

We are a church committed to discipleship. Too many churches in America today regard Christian discipleship as optional. We lump

discipleship in the same category as extra stereo equipment or plush leather seats for our car. It might be nice to have, but one can do without it.

The American church is anemic today, because professing Christians do not differ in character but only in ritual from our non-professing neighbors. Our goal in this church is to learn what it means to follow Jesus. We have identified seven covenants or practices of a disciple, the first of which is pray daily.

I'm struck with how many times in the gospels Jesus sought a quiet place for prayer (Luke 4:22; 5:16). Jesus advised his disciples when they pray to go into the closet, shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret (Matthew 5:16). Maybe you find prayer difficult. You might want to utilize other people's prayers. Our bookstore has a suggested list of books on the subject of prayer, as well as a compendium of other people's written prayers.

Another source of prayer can be found within the pages of Scripture itself—in the book of Psalms. I urge you to become acquainted with this portion of Scripture. There are all kinds of prayers in the Psalms. There are prayers of praise as well as lament. The Psalmist has the audacity to argue with God. If we cannot argue with God, we cannot be brought to deeper understanding. In the words of one author, "God wants honesty rather than pretense in prayer."

There is benefit in proscribed times for prayer, as well as praying

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through the day. I am reminded of something the Puritan Cotton Mather said: “It is best to pray briefly but often.” I know of one woman who makes it a point to pray at every red light. Instead of waiting impatiently for the light to change, she turns her heart and mind to God. Another man regards police and fire sirens as a summons to pray for people in special need.

So far, I have talked in terms of praying alone, but let’s spend our remaining time talking about corporate prayer. Jesus said, “Whenever two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them” (Matthew 18:20). Two to three people constitute a Biblical quorum. Do you have a spiritual friend who can pray with you and for you?

If we are going to pray together, somehow we must get over the paranoia we have about praying aloud. According to the Book of Lists, the number one fear Americans have is the fear of public speaking. Forty-one percent of people have more anxiety about speaking in front of people than any other fear. One fear people in the church have is being called upon to pray out loud. We need to break free of the obsessive pre-occupation that prayer is meant to be private—personal, yes; but private, no. Don’t worry about using the stained glass words; pray for whatever is on your heart. We need to make prayer more conversational.

I want to become a church constantly devoted to prayer. Now that we have finished our construction, we cannot simply assume God wants us to run last year’s programs the same way all over again. God has a greater mission for this church than we have yet conceived. God wants to engage Northern Virginia with the good news of Jesus Christ through the ministry of this church.

Our mission, like the first disciples, begins with prayer—persistent, prevailing, kingdom-centered prayer. Lord, what do you want through us in the life of this church?

