

Simple Prayer to God Starts with Simple Hard to do Acts

September 7, 2008 - Psalm 131

A man arrived in a city one cold morning. As he got off the train, the station was like any other station with the crowds except that everybody was barefoot. They wore no shoes. He noticed the cab driver was barefooted. "Pardon me," he asked the driver, "I was just wondering why you don't wear shoes. Don't you believe in shoes?"

"Sure we do," said the driver.

"Why don't you wear them?"

"Ah, that's the question," came the reply. "Why don't we wear shoes? Why don't we?"

At the hotel it was the same. The clerk, bell boys, everybody was barefoot. In the coffee shop he noticed a nice-looking fellow at a table opposite him who was also barefoot. He said, "I notice you aren't wearing any shoes. I wonder why? Don't you know about shoes?"

The man replied, "Of course I know about shoes!"

"Then why don't you wear them?"

"Ah, that's the question. Why don't I? Why don't I?"

After breakfast he walked out on the street in the snow but every person he saw was barefoot. He asked another man about it, and

pointed out how shoes protect the feet from cold. The man said, "We know about shoes. See that building yonder? That is a shoe factory. We are proud of that plant and every week we gather there to hear the man in charge tell about shoes and how wonderful they are."

"Then why don't you wear shoes?"

"Ah, that's the question."

Don't we believe in prayer? Don't we know what it could mean in our lives? Then why don't we pray? Ah, that's the question ... Why don't we?^{*1}

Most Christians I talk to value prayer. Yet most pray very little or think they should be praying more. Why don't we pray? I think there are several reasons.

We think we can't pray until we attain a certain standard of spiritual maturity. We think that we can only pray when we've been good. We may think God reserves prayer for the super holy. Or we know what's really inside of us. We know our unholiness and God's

* Charles Allen, *All Things are Possible Through Prayer* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1963), 52-53.

¹Morgan, R. J. (2000). *Nelson's complete book of stories, illustrations, and quotes* (electronic ed.) (632). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

holiness. So we stay away from prayer because why would we want to be around someone who makes us uncomfortable?

But as C.S. Lewis writes, in prayer we come to “lay before the Lord what is in us, not what ought to be in us.” If we wait until everything is perfect in our lives and hearts, we won’t ever pray.

Another reason we may fail to pray is we see it as an obligation with no real “results.” We could pray this morning for those who have someone difficult at work to deal with. But after the prayer we still have to go to work and face that person tomorrow. If we focus on results in prayer it reveals we see prayer only as getting things from God. Yet prayer is much more about a relationship with God.

Another author writes “Prayer is nothing more than an ongoing and growing love relationship with God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” Seeing prayer as a love relationship instead of a bartering session can dramatically change our attitude towards it.

Or we may not pray because we’re getting along quite fine without it. We may think prayer is only for the weak or those in crisis situations. Oswald Chambers writes, “*Prayer is not a normal part of the life of the natural man. We hear it said that a person’s life will*

*suffer if he doesn’t pray, but I question that. What will suffer is the life of the Son of God in him, which is nourished not by food, but by prayer. When a person is born again from above, the life of the Son of God is born in him, and he can either starve or nourish that life. Prayer is the way that the life of God in us is nourished. Our common ideas regarding prayer are not found in the New Testament. We look upon prayer simply as a means of getting things for ourselves, but the biblical purpose of prayer is that we may get to know God Himself.”*²

So this is where we will start with the study on prayer we now enter into. The primary purpose of prayer is to get to know God; to enter into love relationship with Him. When we look at prayer like that, it has the potential to transform our attitude towards prayer. I hope you discover this a lot sooner than I did. Though I’ve been a Christian for 37 years, I think its only in the last 10 to 12 years that I have gone deeper in prayer.

I now celebrate discoveries like prayer is the glorious means to communicate with the Almighty God of the Universe. It is one of the Christian’s greatest resource and source of deep comfort. Through

² Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, August 28th reading.

prayer, God settles my spirit during turbulent times. Through prayer I know I am never alone day or night, I carry with me the gift of knowing that the Lord goes with me into every situation. So I invite you to enter into this series on prayer. My desire is not to motivate us to pray by guilt; “we should be praying more.” I believe God invites us to deeper with Him through one of the greatest resources He has given.

Today, we’re going to look at how to start praying. The central truth I want you to hear today is this: **Prayer to God starts with simple hard to do acts.** How can an act be both simple and hard? Well we will soon see that what’s required is simple to understand. But hard to do because of what it asks of us.

This truth comes from a very simple Psalm. It’s found within a collection of 15 Psalms from 120-134. Commentators view these Psalms as the “approaching the temple Psalms.” They believe these Psalms were sung or recited as God’s people physically approached the temple in Jerusalem. This is similar to us drawing near to the Lord through prayer.

So we’re going to look at a couple of simple hard to do acts necessary for prayer. Then we’re going to respond to God in prayer.

Psalm 131 is our text.

Psalm 131 (ESV)

A Song of Ascents. Of David.

131:1 O LORD, my heart is not lifted up;
my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvelous for me.

2 But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
like a weaned child is my soul within me.

3 O Israel, hope in the LORD
from this time forth and forevermore.

Psalm 131 NIV

A song of ascents. Of David.

¹ My heart is not proud, O LORD,
my eyes are not haughty;
I do not concern myself with great matters
or things too wonderful for me.

² But I have stilled and quieted my soul;
like a weaned child with its mother,
like a weaned child is my soul within me.

³ O Israel, put your hope in the LORD
both now and forevermore.

Prayer to God starts with simple hard to do acts.

Simple Hard to do act #1 – Humble yourself (Psalm 131:1) In coming to the Lord God Almighty in prayer, we must humble ourselves. In verse 1, King David - the author of this psalm, provides a triple description of humbling oneself. “My heart is not lifted up. My eyes are not raised too high. I don’t occupy or concern myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.” David does not think too highly of himself which means he understands a proper relationship with God. He recognizes this is not a relationship between equals. It is one of subordination with God the greater and he the lesser. And this is no problem for David in this Psalm anyway. He accepts that entering into prayer and relationship with God involves submission, trust and humbling ourselves.

But it’s not easy in our world to do that. We live in a prosperous culture that swims in arrogance towards God. Its tough when you hear Olympic medalist after Olympic medalist say “I just believed in myself and had confidence I could do it.” It can be tough when you’re young and strong and full of energy, ideas and possibilities. It can be tough to humble ourselves when we head a successful business or live

successful lives or have a very smart brain and we get puffed up with our great accomplishments or great intellect or great achievements.

We humans can start to believe we know everything. Yet how quickly we fall. I had to chuckle this past week when I was on the phone with a customer service representative for our home internet service provider. Our internet was down at home so I called them. After explaining the problem, the agent replied “we know exactly what to do.” After about 20 minutes on the phone, they didn’t know exactly what to do. They admitted this problem was beyond them. They admitted that they would have to send out a technician to look at it. When the technician came later in the week, he was at first baffled too. The attitude changed from one of “we can handle it” to “we haven’t seen this before and don’t know what’s going on.” We’re not God. We don’t understand everything.

David provides a three-fold humbling filter to remind us of this upon entering prayer. “My heart is not lifted up.” That means he doesn’t raise up his heart with an unhealthy pride thinking he’s independent of God. Next week, we’re going to look at another time in

David's life when he forgot this and thought it was all about him. But here, he recognizes God is God and he is not.

“My eyes are not raised too high.” It's okay to raise the eyes high. It's okay to dream dreams and go after lofty things if God calls us to that. But if we aim our eyes too high above God or independent of God, we've gone too far. When we lift our eyes too high, there is no longer need for prayer. I think the scientific, medical and technological community faces a real challenge in this way. Compared to say 30 years ago, it is amazing what scientists have discovered and medical research has uncovered and technology has advanced. But these discoveries are sometimes accompanied by prideful conclusions that totally exclude God.

So now we have mapped DNA. We have cracked the code. But who wrote the code? Or we have discovered the possibility of a cure for Parkinson through stem cells. But who designed stem cells? Or now with technology we have access to information all over the world. But who gave the brains to those who go deeper in technology? It strikes me that David does not condemn the raising of eyes or the

aiming for loftier things. But he limits his eyes to not look beyond and apart from God.

He also says “I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.” Now I don't think here he means we should turn off our brains and give up thinking. Jesus does include “loving God with our mind” in the greatest commandment. I think David discovered that there were certain things that were too great or too marvelous for him to understand. He decided to entrust those things to God instead of suspiciously questioning God as if He's withholding information we need.

Are we willing to entrust the secret things of God to God? Are we willing to affirm Biblical doctrines that trouble us like Hell, Election, Suffering and Judgment even though we don't fully understand them or how they fit into the big picture? Can we admit that we don't know everything?

I remember graduating from seminary. It was an exciting time. But sometimes, seminary grads like myself get an illness that takes time to cure. It's called “the Messiah complex.” Sometimes we come out seminary convinced we know almost everything. Our congregations

need to be blessed with all our knowledge. But after nearly 20 years in the ministry, I think I'm learning how little I know. I must humble myself and recognize there are many issues I don't have the answer to. There are so many things which I have little or no control. Instead of pretending to understand everything or pretending to know exactly what's required, I have to humble myself from any claims to God-like status. When we do this, there is a tremendous relief. We can entrust those things to God and seek Him for our small part in what He's doing.

Humbling ourselves by recognizing that God is God and we're not, is the first simple hard to do act required to come to God in prayer.

Simple Hard to do act #2 – Embrace the dependent role
(Psalm 131:2) we must embrace the reality that we are God's dependents. If God had to fill out tax forms, He would have thousands of pages of dependants! The Psalmist provides an image of a child with its mother. But it's not just a child, it's a weaned child. Weaned children don't need their mother's milk anymore. Yet this weaned child is with its mother.

There are a couple of possible meanings for this image. It could mean that David could go off and be independent from God; he desires to be close to God. That is where David can find stillness and quiet for his soul. Or it could point to the fact that unweaned children often get easily disturbed by hunger. Weaned children can be calmer because they can get other sources of food. So just as weaned children might be more content and at peace, David finds peace and contentment in closeness to God.

In both interpretations, the child is content in its mother's presence. David finds peace and quiet in closeness to God not independence from God. In a sense, this is an invitation to embrace our identity as God's children; we're dependent on Him just like a young child is so dependent on their parents.

Remember when you were a kid how you depended on your parents or whoever cared for you? You trusted they would have food on the table regularly though you never may have thought much about where it came from. You trusted they would provide clothes for you and hugs when you skinned your knee. You believed what they said was true. You heard their explanations about how things work and

why things happen. You had to listen when they said “look both ways before you cross the street,” even though you may have thought that was a waste of your play time.

The years went by. You got into the world; you gain more and more independence. You go to school without them. You have conversations apart from them. You begin to evaluate their messages and the way they did things. Some things you think are good. Others you think you’d do differently. Eventually you leave home, if you’re capable to pursue your life. Some can’t wait to get out from their parent’s thumb. But as we mature, we hopefully realize that not everything our parents said was crazy. We might actually admit that they were right about some things. We might actually want to consult them about decisions. We’re still independent but we still depend on them – we want to be with or gain their wisdom.

This seems to be what David talks about here. He has entered into a second childhood. It’s not that he’s naïve about the world. He’s discovered much about the world that he doesn’t understand. So instead of struggling against that, He decides to come to God and trust God for His provision. We might think “well David maybe needed to

do that, (he played harps after all) but I’m not going to embrace a dependent role. That’s for wimps!” But consider Jesus’ words in Matthew 18:3-4 “Truly I say to you unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus makes this comparison to call us to recognize our dependence on God and willingly accept from Him what we cannot provide for ourselves.

When we embrace this role, we can experience this calmed and quieted soul. One commentator writes, “the poem understands that such glad, submissive reliance in God leaves one free of anxiety, for anxiety comes from either trying to be self-sufficient (which one cannot be) or in trying to be equal to God, rather than feel dependent.” Our world tells us that the real maturity is to be free from every relationship of dependence. David discovered that spiritual maturity involves embracing our dependence on God.

How might we embrace our role as dependent children of God? Well, we must set aside time to be with the one we depend on; to sit in His presence; to receive His embrace; to rest in His character; to

reflect on His faithfulness; to read His Word, to rediscover life according to His pace. The more we do that, the more prepared we will be to walk with Him when life brings along those difficult times: a loved one is diagnosed with a serious illness or dies; our business goes through hard times; a friend is killed in an accident; there's trouble at home; the kids have problems.

Life contains these difficult patches. If we haven't cultivated a dependent attitude on the Lord, we go through a double shock of difficulty with life and ignorance of tapping into His resources. But if we cultivate that dependency upon the Lord in the ordinary times of life, we will be better equipped to navigate the hard times.

I remember the last 10 days when my father was dying. I didn't have time or really the energy to pray and read Scripture. We took shifts at the hospital. Then I would spend time settling down emotionally and physically after the shift was over. We received support and gave it. We had to process information about tests, procedures, updates and decisions and grabbing sleep when we could, if we could.

During those days about all I could offer in prayer was "Lord help us through this next day; Lord grant us strength for this next hour; Lord please help the nurse to come quickly to help with his pain; Lord please take him soon so his suffering will end."

The Lord carried us during those days. But what also sustained me was the years spent in cultivating a relationship with the Lord as a family. So when the news came that it was unlikely that my Dad would recover, my Mom could say "we've entrusted him to the Lord." We had been taught and reflected on and believed the truths of Scripture about the reality of heaven and everlasting care of the Lord for His loved ones.

We were also sustained by our hope in the Lord that He really was there to take my Dad when his time to enter glory came. My hope was not grounded on some whim or positive thinking but years of experience with God who proved His trustworthiness again and again. I knew the God who had answered my prayers in ways that needed answering. I knew the God who came through even in dark valleys. That knowledge and learned dependence served well in those difficult days.

So even if you are not going through something difficult today, it is crucial and vital to cultivate a dependent relationship with the Lord. It is crucial to accept His invitation to come and walk with Him and enter His rest. It is crucial to have Christ as your Savior so that when you face death that moment of ultimate dependence, you can face it without fear because you know the One you entrust yourself to. And with Christ as your savior, you protect those who love you from that difficult wondering upon your death of what has in fact happened to you.

The Psalm ends with a corporate call to hope in the Lord. “Hope in the Lord from this time forth and forevermore. We are going to close by practicing that verse.

I would invite you to think about something that troubles you today or something that looms over you. It could be a difficult task you face; an illness that has struck you or your family; problems at work; a relationship that needs repair or some situation where you just don't know what to do.

We have spent time acknowledging that there are things beyond us. Some things are too marvelous for us or too wonderful for us to

comprehend. We have been reminded Christian maturity involves embracing the role of dependent when it comes to God.

Now taking into account these realities consider that situation that troubles you or weighs heavily on you and hear verse 3. “Hope in the Lord, from this time forth and forevermore.” Not hope that everything will turn out like we'd want. Not hope that the Lord answers according to our directives. Not hope that the problem will just go away or resolve itself. Hope in the Lord both now and forevermore. Bring that situation before the Lord right now. Admit that it is beyond you. Acknowledge your dependency. Put your hope in the Lord now, through this week and forevermore. After a time of silence and prayer, I will close in prayer.