

The Prayer of Giving Up Control

September 28, 2008 - Matthew 26:36-46

It was the end of a long day of travel. We entered the beautiful city of Kelowna looking forward to some fun time at the beach. It was 37 Celsius. The kids had had enough of traveling. We looked forward to getting into an air conditioned hotel room before we swam in the pool. We happily discovered our hotel.

We entered the lobby and remarked at the beautiful big buffet and lovely sparkling pool. Oh, it would feel so good to take a dip in a few minutes. There was a little line up at the counter so we had to wait. We chatted playfully with the relief that comes with completing a trip. Finally, it was our turn to check in. “Last name?” “Anderst.” The clerk smiled as she began to search through her files. The smile straightened as she couldn’t seem to find our name. “Anderson?” “No, Anderst.” “Hmm; confirmation number please. . . .,” I gave her our confirmation number. She punched it into the computer.

“Oh,” the clerk said. Not “here we are.” Not “that’s got it.” “Oh.”

“I’m sorry. That number required a confirmation in 24 hours after booking. You didn’t confirm so your registration was cancelled.”

What? It was one of those moments when I totally understood what

the person just said but I didn’t want to understand it. We talked further. We were sure we confirmed it. We would not have forgotten to do that. But they were sure. No reservation. “Well do you have any rooms available then?” They looked into the same black hole of the computer that delivered the bad news of no registration.

“No rooms. Sorry.”

There would be no refreshing dip; no air conditioned room; no enjoyment at that buffet line. Our kids began to think up evil plans to destroy that dastardly hotel chain. On top of that we were all hungry, hot and now had no place to stay. Our under-control-vacation suddenly switched into a somewhat frantic mode. We searched to find somewhere to stay in Kelowna on a summer weekend. We eventually found a place that was in the very back corner of a motel. Our room looked out at parked semi trailers in a construction site. It was a pet friendly, smoking allowed suite. But it didn’t smell too bad so we took it regaining some control over our vacation and ended up having a great time in Kelowna.

Now this little incident was not very large in the great scheme of things. We endure an hour or two of dealing with something

beyond our little “under control” world. But sometimes much tougher things come into our lives that we have little or no control over. We’re suddenly unemployed or transferred. We receive a difficult diagnosis. A relationship goes sour. We experience some loss. We’re in an accident. Someone sins against us. We’re moved to a different class or given a different teacher. A good friend tells us they’re moving. Some decision made higher up at the office has a profound negative effect on our job. Or there are times we are called to make tough decisions. We know these decisions will affect others. We do our level best to be fair and considerate but we cannot control people’s response. Life’s tough when its out of control especially for control freaks.

How might we constructively respond when something undesirable comes into our life? How can we not only survive but move forward when disturbing events beyond our control directly impact our lives? I’m here to tell you today that **By learning Jesus’ giving up control prayer, we can confidently entrust all that is beyond us to God’s care.**

We are continuing our series on prayer today. We started by looking at simple prayer. It involved recognizing God as God and we’re His creatures. We also learned we needed to embrace our dependent role as God’s children. Then we looked at confessional prayer because closeness to God, yields clarity in sin. As we grow in prayer, we realize prayer is not all about getting things *from* God. It’s about getting *to know* God. It’s about a love relationship with God. As we get to know our loving God, we discover we must come to Him when life overwhelms us. Jesus spoke His giving up control prayer in a desperate situation. It was hours before His arrest. . . the Last Supper is over; Judas has left to betray him; the full weight of what is about to happen hits Jesus. Sorrow and anguish overwhelm Him. Jesus faced a day where much suffering would be inflicted upon Him by sinners. But more fearsome was the wrath of God that would be poured out upon Him on the cross. Jesus knew it was coming. Yet His humanity recoiled in horror at it all. How would He gain the strength to stay and face His betrayer? How would He go to the cross knowing what awaited Him there? He shows us how He gave over control to His Father through his agonized prayer in Gethsemane. Today, we are

going to learn the basics of the “giving up control prayer” Then we’re actually going to do it at the end of our time. (Quick aside) shaped to the likeness of His Son (Rom. 8:29).

Matthew 26:36-46 NIV

Gethsemane

³⁶Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." ³⁷He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. ³⁸Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."

³⁹Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

⁴⁰Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. ⁴¹"Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."

⁴²He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."

⁴³When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. ⁴⁴So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

⁴⁵Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

This is the last time Jesus is together with His disciples before His death. He takes the eleven remaining disciples to Gethsemane. The name means “oil press.” It was likely a garden or an enclosed

olive orchard on the slopes of the Mount of Olives. Jesus and His disciples regularly went there. Perhaps they stayed there overnight when in Jerusalem for festivals. Judas would know where to find them. Jesus’ choice of this location indicates His willingness to suffer betrayal.

He instructs eight of His disciples to sit down while He goes further on to pray. He brings Peter, James and John with Him. Why these three? It seems they were part of the inner circle and Jesus’ closest friends. He invited them to witness the Transfiguration and His raising of a little girl from the dead. But these three also claimed that they would be there for Jesus. They could handle positions of prominence. In fact, Peter vowed he would go with Jesus to death. James and John asked, via their mother, for positions at Jesus’ right and left hand. We will soon see how unprepared they were to fulfill their lofty aims.

When they arrived at a spot further removed from the eight, Jesus spills out His sorrow. “He began to be sorrowful and troubled” verse 37 tells us. The translation “sorrowful and troubled” hardly does justice to the Greek verbs. Jesus suffers an anguish of wretchedness.

He is very sorrowful, deeply grieved. If they didn't see it, He makes it plain to them in verse 38 by telling them "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." Overwhelmed with sorrow or deeply grieved comes from the word "perilupos" from which we get our word "periphery." Periphery is that which surrounds. So it is like Jesus is surrounded by His grief and sorrow.

I'm not sure how intense emotions can kill you but Jesus felt this threat. Apparently it is possible for the emotions of fright and anger to trigger a chain reaction leading to death. In Luke's account of this moment, we are told Jesus sweat drops of blood. His capillaries or thin blood vessels bulged up and burst by the pressure of His deep distress. The blood escaped through the pores of His skin mingling with His sweat as it dropped to the ground.

Jesus will need support for this time. So he asks these three to stay with him and keep watch. I don't think Jesus was calling the disciples to watch out for Judas. He was calling them to remain spiritually alert; to pray with Him; to share in this time of agony. This is one of the great gifts we can offer those around us who suffer. Instead of avoiding them or telling them "get better" so we can feel

comfortable around them, watch with them. Pray with them. Walk with them. Jesus sought that from His friends in this hour of great need. Then He goes to pray. Here we find the basics of a giving up control prayer. Verse 39 – "Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father."

The basics of a giving up control prayer

The giving up control prayer begins by **going to "Our Father."** We must recognize we pray to one who is our Father, not one who is out to get us; not one who has abandoned us; not one who ignores us; but our loving heavenly Father.

It is tempting during out of control times to doubt God's Fatherly Love for us. We wonder how a loving God could allow something like this into our lives. Satan loves to pounce on us during trying times by introducing doubts about God's goodness. That's what Satan did with Eve in the Garden of Eden. "Did God really say, 'you must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" What kind of a God would limit you like that? What doesn't He want you to know? Eve corrects Satan noting the restriction was only for the tree in the middle of the garden and if they ate it, God said they would die. But then Satan

strikes introducing more doubt about God's goodness. "You will not surely die; For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God knowing good and evil." Satan plants doubt in Eve's mind about the character of God. She believes Satan. She eats the fruit along with her husband and suddenly discovers the consequences of believing Satan's lie.

When we face situations beyond our control or beyond our understanding, we must first refocus on the reality that we pray to Our Father; God the Father who created the world and created us. God the Father who sent His Son to die for us so that we could be reconciled with Him; God the Father, who demonstrated His own love for us in this; while we were still sinners, Christ died for us; Our Father in Heaven. Notice Jesus starts His prayer in the same way He instructed us to pray the Lord's Prayer. "Our Father."

Next, – **"Make your request to God the Father."** Verse 39 again; "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me;" or "let this cup pass from me." The cup refers to the destined suffering of Jesus. It is not wrong to pray for relief from that which looms over our lives. "Lord, please help those tests to come back negative. Lord,

please spare my loved one's life. Father, please heal them. Father, bring relief in that stressful situation at work. Father, please help my child to settle down." "Father, if it is possible, take this cup from me." Our God is not some mechanistic dictator who carries out His will with no compassion for His children. He certainly is the Holy God. He is the Creator and we are the creature. But He opened the way for us to talk to Him through prayer. He demonstrates in Scripture again and again His response to His people's intercession.

In Genesis 18, When God declared He would destroy Sodom, Abraham pled that God consider not destroying it if there were righteous people found there. Abraham started by requesting mercy if 50 righteous people were found. He continued to ask God for mercy all the way down to 10. God continually responded to Abraham's prayer "for the sake of ten, I will not destroy it." God responded to Hannah's prayer for relief from barrenness in First Samuel 1 by giving her a son. Then He followed by blessing her with many more children. In 2 Chronicles 20, King Jehoshaphat is told that a great army of Moabites and Ammonites was coming against him. Alarmed, the king resolved to inquire of the Lord. He admits that they have no

power to face the army coming to attack. He pleads for the Lord's help. The Lord struck down the army so that Israel did not have to fight. Jesus responded to the centurion's request by healing the man's daughter. Jesus responded to four friends who lowered their paralyzed friend through the roof with a mat by healing him. God does respond to His people's intercession. Many times He does allow the cup to pass.

Perhaps in heaven we will see evidence of the many times our simple prayers were answered by great works of God. When we asked for safety on a trip, we might see how angels protected us from a reckless driver. When we asked for strength to minister, we might discover who God directed to minister to us. When we asked for wisdom to parent, God may reveal who He appointed to provide us with wisdom. When we sought relief from disease, God may reveal how He supernaturally shrunk a tumor or removed a sickness from us. So when those troubling, out of control times come, ask for their removal. Ask "is there another way?"

But we must not demand. We must not dictate. We must not threaten God as if we were master and He was our slave. God is

sovereign and Lord over all. So after we have prayed "Our Father," and made our request to the Father, we must *submit our request to the Father's will*—Jesus demonstrates the appropriate way to frame our requests in the next part of verse 39. "Yet, not as I will but as you will." Jesus submits His request to the perfect will of His Father. Because sometimes friends, God says No to our requests. Next week, we are going to see an example of this in Moses' life. But we have to deal with the reality that God sometime says no.

When we realize this, we enter into the struggle of giving over control of the situation to God accepting what is happening and learning how to live with this new reality. One writer puts it this way; "In the beginning of our prayer our will is in struggle with God's will. We beg. We pout. We demand. We expect God to perform like a magician or shower us with blessings like Father Christmas. We major in instant solutions and manipulative prayers. In time however, we begin to enter into a grace-filled releasing of our will and a flowing into the will of the Father." Jesus demonstrates this for us in the phrase, "Yet not my will but yours be done." Did you notice that is also from the Lord's Prayer? "Our Father in heaven; hallowed be your

name; your kingdom come; your will be done.” Jesus again follows the pattern of prayer He has laid out for us. Then He includes another segment of the Lord’s Prayer when He returns to check on His friends.

The giving up control prayer requires that we watch and pray so we don’t fall into temptation. (40-41) When Jesus came back to the disciples after an hour of prayer, he finds them sleeping. Besides the personal disappointment this must have been for Jesus, He sees their vulnerability. So after rebuking them Jesus says, “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing but the body is weak.” When difficult times come, temptation is great. Think about the temptation Jesus had to resist in those hours. Satan must have come along and whispered things like “It’s not worth it. It won’t work. You can be free of all this.” Through watching, praying and His Father’s help, Jesus was able to resist that temptation and face the cross. But His disciples failed.

Though they had willing spirits and wanted to be with Jesus in this time of trouble, their flesh overcame them. So Jesus says “watch and pray so you don’t fall into temptation.” The weakness of our flesh or natural nature is a constant struggle facing all of us. To combat its

weakness, Jesus calls us to watch; to remain spiritually alert. And to pray that we will not enter temptation. Again, this reminds us of the Lord’s Prayer. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. Have you ever thought about that phrase? “This phrase asks to be spared times of great pressure, times which would prove very trying. It reflects a sense of our own frailty and limitation, our vulnerability to situations in which we find ourselves. The disciples fail to heed Jesus call. So when the betrayer comes, they panic and quickly scatter. The same can happen to us without watching and praying. Trying times bring plenty of invitations to sin. Watching and praying provide plenty of opportunities to be strengthened by God.

So the giving up control prayer involves coming to our father, making our requests while still submitting our will to the Father. Through these we watch and pray asking for the Lord’s help to resist temptation.

But one declaration of “not my will but yours be done” usually does not end our struggle. You don’t receive a cancer diagnosis, then pray not my will but yours be done and then everything’s fine. It’s a journey in giving up control. So as difficult situations unfold, the

giving up control prayer requires us to *continue to struggle in prayer for clarification*. (42, 44). Verse 42 – “He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.” Jesus’ thinking progresses from “If it is possible take this cup from me” to “If it is not possible, may your will be done.” Jesus is accepting that He must drink the cup. But in verse 44, we’re told He went back again a third time and prayed the same thing until He was ready to face His betrayer. Struggling until control is given over. Struggling is the essential feature of this prayer of relinquishment or giving up control. Jesus prayer struggle complete with his bloody sweat lasted for a long time. It was no easy task. Others have done the same throughout Biblical history. Think what must have gone on in Abraham’s mind those three days it took him to take his son Isaac to the place of sacrifice. Moses had to relinquish his understanding of how a deliverer of Israel should function. David struggled as he gave over control of son given him by Bath-Sheba through adultery. Mary struggled as she gave over control of her future after being visited by an angel. I am the Lord’s servant. She got ready and hurried to the

Hill country of Judea, composed the magnificat in accepting she must drink this cup. Paul struggled to give over his desire to be free of that thorn in the flesh he asked to be removed three times. The prayer of giving up control involves struggle.

But why would God call us to go through such a struggle? Why does He at times require us to go through this prayer before bringing something into being? There are several possible reasons.

(1) Sometimes, we hold on so tightly to the good we know that we cannot receive the greater good we do not know. God has to help us let go of our tiny vision in order to release the greater good he has in store for us. So yes, He may bring a break up in a relationship because He has a better match prepared down the road. Or He may call us to make a move because He has something better planned for us at a new location – C.S Lewis.

(2) God might also call us to the prayer of relinquishment to purge us from the hyphenated self sins like self-sufficiency from God or self-absorption or self-promotion or self indulgence. So suppose we have constructed a self-sufficient life apart from God. Then we come down with an incapacitating illness. We pray “Father heal me from

this illness.” Maybe God will wait for awhile to teach us the reality that we are not really independent from Him and master of our own universe. Realizing that can be a great blessing. Remember we learned that in simple prayer we have to embrace our role as dependents. Sometimes the Lord literally has to make us “Lie down” to get us to see this reality.

Or we might struggle with the sin of **self-absorption**. So we pray “God please get me that job so I can get more money for myself and my family. God replies, “Actually, its not all about you; so I’m not going to give you that job so you can discover the joy of depending on others and giving to others.” Or maybe we are into **self-promotion** more than God promotion. So we pray “God please give me that promotion.” Maybe God will say “No, because you think life is all about climbing a ladder; true life is found in washing feet. Or maybe we’ve bought into the **self-indulgence** life. So we pray “God please can I win the lottery.” God may respond “well, actually that wouldn’t be good for you. You would learn to depend more on money than me; your greatest treasure would become money when in fact that treasure cannot ultimately satisfy forever.” God may use the struggle in prayer

to cleanse us from these sins which will often bring our will into conflict with his.

(3) Then there are those times when something difficult happens and it has nothing to do with our sin. It might have nothing to do with some lesson God wants to teach us. We just don’t understand the mystery of how it all works together. These are times of intense struggle. But we must not give in to fatalism or resignation. It is not “Okay Lord. I guess you just want me to suffer and punish me.” Author Catherine Marshall, whose husband died in mid-life of a heart attack and who was confined to bed for months with a crippling illness writes this: “Resignation is barren of faith in the love of God. Resignation lies down quietly in the dust of the universe from which God seems to have fled, and the door of Hope swings shut.”

But that is not what Jesus does here. He does not finish His prayer without hope in despair. Strengthened by angels He gets up to meet His betrayer. He gets up confident in God. In fact, some see in Jesus’ anguished cry of verse 39, a link back to Psalm 42 and 43. There the Psalmist cried: “Why are you downcast O my soul. Why are you so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet

praise Him, my Savior and my God.” So the prayer of giving up control in fact is a fight to regain a clear picture of the One we give over control to. When some situation clouds our vision of God, we must fight to recapture a clear one of Him. I need to add a number 6. The basis of giving up control prayer, ask for strength to drink the cup Luke 22:43 Jesus is strengthened by an angel.

Sometimes there is no answer to the question why. But there is an answer to who is with us. We can discover a God *who* throughout history has been bringing good out of bad and tough situations. We can trust a God *who* sent His Son to suffer on the cross because of our sins. We trust a God who suffers with His people. We serve Jesus a man of sorrows, familiar with suffering.

So this letting go of control prayer calls us to trust God and His deeper purposes. Or it requires us to focus on God’s provision and care leaving the why to Him. It can mean trusting in a God who constantly brings good out of bad situations. It may mean we have to accept our will is not God’s will and we have to adjust. When we recapture a clear picture of God’s goodness, wisdom, care, compassion

and sovereignty, we can with God centered confidence and strength from Him pray the prayer “not my will but yours be done.”

Jesus invites us to learn this prayer of release. One author puts it this way, “He invites us to lift up into God’s arms our spouse, children, parents, friends and the reactions of other people to decisions we make. Place in his loving care your future, hopes and dreams. Hold up to him your enemies, angers and desire for retaliation. Then turn and walk away.”

What can happen when we engage in the giving up control prayer? Instead of putting our hope in circumstantial resolution, we hope and trust in God. Instead of staking everything on everything being okay, we depend on God’s perfect will; His empathetic presence; His comfort; His promises. Strengthened by God, we get up and get on with life doing our part and leaving the rest to Him. If you are not a Christian here today, you have yet to deal with the biggest giving up control issue of your life. Jesus went through this agony to give you the opportunity for salvation and an intimate walk with God. He went through this anguish of soul and suffering because it was His Father’s will; His Father’s ordained plan to deal with man’s

sinfulness; which ultimately was a desire to take control of our own lives. We have made a royal mess of that. Our first parents passed on to us that sinful nature which lives in rebellion to God. But in trusting Christ and throwing ourselves fully upon Him, through that faith, God justifies you and clothes you with Christ's righteousness. He declares you not guilty forever. He opens the door to ongoing relationship with Him through prayer. Will you trust Jesus today by putting your faith in Him?

Christians: out of control situations, go to Gethsemane school. Learn this prayer or invite a friend to watch and pray with you. Go to the prayer room.

In the Garden of Eden, man tried to take control with devastating consequences. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus gave over control for eternal blessing.

Let us ask for His help now to do the same with our lives.