

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, August 24, 2014**

**WHEN YOU COME INTO THE PRESENCE OF JESUS:
THE GIFT OF PRAYER**

Matthew 6:5-8; 7-7-11

THE ONLY PRAYER YOU WILL EVER NEED?

Recently I was leafing through the 2014 *Farmer's Almanac* and came across a full-page ad promoting a book entitled *The Only Prayer You Will Ever Need*. The ad describes it (the prayer) as "A Prayer Like No Other – A Prayer *Without Words*." Curious as to what this might be all about, I stopped to read the ad, which contains the following testimonial given by the author of the book, Elvira Powel:

I received this prayer from my uncle who was on his deathbed. I will never forget his words: "This is the only prayer you will ever need."

It changed my life. I was out of a job. I had lost my home. My health was failing. Yet this prayer changed everything.

It is worth more to me than anything money can buy, for I know that whatever I need it can supply. It brought me hope. It even made my children better behaved!

I have always believed in prayer. But my prayers were not always answered. None of this matters now, for I now have the only prayer I will ever need.

My long night of darkness was over. Into the light I emerged and not only were my problems solved but my life was at last going forward.

I found a job I love, one that is secure. And I met a wonderful man: a successful businessman who loves not only me but my children, too.

I put all this down to this one prayer.

When my uncle explained it to me I was amazed. "How can a prayer be without words?" I asked.

"Don't question it," he replied, "just do it. Even if one doesn't believe in the God of the Church it will work for you. *Just do it!*"

I had never known anything like it. And it has inspired me to write this book [which, by the way, you can order online for only \$22.99]. The publisher tried this prayer and tells me that he now uses it every day. "I will not argue with what your uncle said.... I am amazed by it and the immediate help it has given me for many situations."

Whatever your problem, whatever your need, use this prayer. If you need more money, use this prayer. If you need to solve an intractable problem, use this prayer. If you need love, use this prayer. If you want someone to love you again, this is the only prayer you need. If you are ill, trust in this prayer, for your health is about to change. Anyone can use it, anyone can get results.

My sister's life was a misery on account of so many allergies. This prayer changed everything. Now she enjoys life to the full. I explained it to a young colleague who was anxious about her next driving test. She passed [the test] after using the prayer (she had failed the previous 7 times).

I could go on...

(This prayer) is the best thing to ever happen to me. I now live in faith, for I have this prayer which unfailingly helps and guides me. I use it daily to ensure that my day goes well. And so it does....

This prayer brings immediate comfort. You feel good the moment you use it, and you feel even better when you see the results you've been hoping for... No matter what your circumstances, no matter how low you've been, I want you to know that right now *there is real hope*.

(This) is the prayer that "moves mountains," lifts the spirit, and dissolves obstacles.

I know now that I shall never have to worry about money again.

I know now that my health will always be perfect.

I know now that I will never lack for anything again.

I live in a state of complete reassurance....

I don't have to worry about my children or anyone close to me. I use this prayer for them and I just *know* it is answered.

Whatever your need it will answer. If you need a better memory, better concentration, more confidence, more money, a better job, a promotion, gambling wins – whatever – this prayer will answer your need. You will be surprised at how simple it is. You need to read it only once and immediately you can use it. (*The 2014 Farmer's Almanac*, 195)

But did I mention you have to buy the book for \$22.99 to find out what it is?

I hope I don't need to tell you that this is a classic illustration of what prayer is *not*. In fact, this "prayer" is really a form of idolatry, since the object of the author's faith is not God but the prayer itself. Whether she knows it or not, this prayer is her god. Her hope is not in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Her hope is in the prayer, with its supposed power to fix everything that is wrong in life. "This prayer is my shepherd, I shall not want."

THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF PRAYER

When Jesus spoke about prayer, or when He taught His disciples to pray, you can be sure that this is not what He had in mind. It is not what any of the biblical writers in the Old or New Testament had in mind when they encouraged or called God's people to pray. It is certainly not what Paul had in mind when he told the Colossians to "devote (them)selves to prayer" (Colossians 4:2). Or when he urged the Thessalonians to "pray continually" – without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Or when he charged the believers in Rome to "be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer" (Romans 12:12). Or when he wrote to the Philippians: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God ... will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7). God does not always give us what *we* think is best. Nor does He operate according to our timetable. Still, as it says in *The*

Message, “it is wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life.” Instead of worrying, “let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns.” And let God be God.

Nor is the “prayer” in the *Farmer’s Almanac* ad what the author of Hebrews had in mind when he said we could “approach the throne of grace” – which means, to enter into the very presence of God, or to come to Jesus, just as we are – “with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” And, let’s face it, “our time of need” is all the time. There is never a time, never a moment, not even a nanosecond in this life, that is not “our time of need.” There is never a moment when we are not in need of God’s rich mercy and abounding grace.

But prayer is not a form of magic, as this book seems to suggest. God is not a genie we can compel to grant our every wish, so long as we say the right words, think the right thoughts, follow the correct formula, or pray the proper prayer, as in “the only prayer you will ever need.” This is not the true meaning or purpose of prayer. It is not the reason God invites us, encourages us, exhorts us, commands us, almost pleads with us to pray.

Prayer is essential to the health and vitality of your relationship with God. It is that relationship – your relationship with God as your loving Heavenly Father, with Jesus the Son of God as Savior and Lord of your life, and with God the Holy Spirit, who is at work in you to shape you into the likeness of the Savior – that lies at the heart of Christian prayer. Prayer is not about using a magic formula guaranteed to produce the result you desire every time. Prayer is not a means of manipulating God in order to get what you want. Nor, as John Ortberg writes in *The Life You’ve Always Wanted*, is it a way to earn favor with God or to gain extra credit (Ortberg, 73).

The essence of prayer is communication, or communion, with God. It is the primary means by which we communicate the deepest desires of our souls to God, even if or when we are not able to put those desires into words. When we don’t know how or what to pray, Romans 8:26 says that the Holy Spirit “does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans” (*The Message*).

“In prayer,” wrote John Bunyan, “it is better to have a heart without words than words without heart.” You will see in just a moment, I think, how this relates not only to those times when our words are inadequate but also to those times when all we have is words, and think our words will automatically cause God to do our will.

DON’T BE A HYPOCRITE

Since prayer is about communication with God, since it is relational in nature and central to our relationship with God, it is no wonder that Jesus says in Matthew 6 that there is no place for hypocrisy or meaningless babbling in prayer. Prayer is not meant to be a public performance done for the applause of others. Understand that Jesus is not prohibiting public prayer. He is not saying you should never pray in public. If, however, the purpose of your praying in public is to show how spiritual, how passionate, or how eloquent you are, don’t

expect God to be impressed. You may be able to fool people into thinking you're a spiritual giant, but you can't fool God. This goes double for pastors who are often asked to pray in public.

There is no place for hypocrisy or "showing off" in prayer. Andrew Murray wrote that "the chief mark of counterfeit holiness is its lack of humility." That lack of humility, that counterfeit holiness earned the Pharisees the severest criticism from Jesus. Their use of prayer to call attention to themselves and the pride they took in being more pious (they thought) than everybody else made Jesus mad. It should have been intuitively obvious to them, and it should be intuitively obvious to us, that prayer is not about trying to impress others, or even God, with your religious devotion.

It won't surprise you that I believe it is a good thing to come to church. I am generally in favor of it. But you can come to church for the wrong reason. If the main reason you come to church is not to worship God but to be seen by others or to make a good impression, you might as well stay home. The same thing applies to prayer or any other spiritual discipline, such as reading the Bible, fasting, or acts of charity. If you do it for the wrong reason, if you do it to impress others with how spiritual you are, you have already gotten the only reward you will ever get.

DON'T BE A BABBLER

Jesus also says that we are not to turn prayer into a kind of mindless, meaningless babbling, hoping that by the length of our prayers or by repeating certain words or phrases, we will induce God to give us what we want. Not knowing any better, this is what many "pagans," many adherents of other religions do. In doing so, they are guided by superstition, not by faith in the God we know as our loving Heavenly Father. Jesus couldn't say it any more plainly: "Do not be like them" (Matthew 6:8a). Do not be like those who think that by simply praying the right prayer, or saying some "magic words," they will get whatever they want, as the ad for *The Only Prayer You Will Ever Need* promises: perfect health, a perfect marriage, perfect children, a better memory, more confidence, more money, a better job, a promotion, even gambling wins – whatever you want or need. "Do not be like them," Jesus says. Do not get sucked into their way of thinking. Why? Because "your Father (in heaven) knows what you need before you ask Him" (6:8b).

WHY BOTHER TO PRAY?

This prompts the inevitable question: If God loves us as His children and already knows what we need, what is the point of praying? If God already knows what we are going to ask Him, why bother to pray? I don't know if we will have a perfectly satisfactory answer to this question on this side of heaven, but John Calvin's answer may be about as close as we will get. Here it is: "Believers do not pray with the view of informing God about things unknown to Him, or of exciting (God) to do His duty, or of urging Him as though He were reluctant. On the contrary, (we) pray in order that (we) may arouse (our)selves to seek Him, that (we) may exercise (our) faith in meditating on His promises, that (we) may relieve (our)selves from (our) anxieties by pouring them into His bosom; in a word, that (we) may declare that from

Him alone (we) hope and expect, both for (our)selves and for others, all good things.” Then, of course, there is the simple reason that in the Bible God tells us again and again to pray.

Prayer is not about getting God to align His will with ours. It is about aligning our will with God’s, to the end that we will desire what God desires and pray accordingly. We will pray, then, not with a spirit of resignation or defeat but with gladness and “serenity now,” trusting that God really does know best, and that He will do what is best for us, even if it doesn’t seem like it or feel like it at the moment. In Matthew 7:11, Jesus reassures us of God’s goodness and trustworthiness, telling us that if parents in this or any generation know how to give good gifts to their children, how much more can we count on God, our Father in heaven, who loves us more and better than any of us could ever love our children, to give good gifts to those who ask Him. God *has given* us incomparably good gifts. He *does give* us good gifts, expressions of His grace, day by day and moment by moment. He *will give* us everything we need to live for Him in this world until He calls us home to heaven.

So, do not hesitate to ask Him for good things. Do not hesitate to present your requests to God. Go ahead! But in your praying, ask Him to align your heart with His heart, and your will with His will.

HAVE TO, OUGHT TO, OR GET TO?

Most of us, I would guess, tend to think of prayer as an *ought to* or a *have to*. At least sometimes. We view prayer as something we know we *ought* to do, or even something we *have* to do. And we feel guilty when we don’t take time to pray. Or we feel guilty that we don’t spend more time praying. If you struggle with this in your life, I promise you that you are not alone. I think John Ortberg is right when he says that, of all the spiritual disciplines, “my hunch is that prayer is the one that people feel most guilty about” (*The Life You’ve Always Wanted*, 160-161).

Is this true of you? Should you spend more time praying? Probably. Should I? Definitely. The thing is, it is not about proving your spiritual fitness or degree of devotion to God by the amount of time you actually spend praying. It is really about your relationship with God. It is about communing with your heavenly Father and growing in your relationship with Him. It is about growing to become more like Jesus. In what ways? In your character. In the way you think and the way you live. And, not least, in the desires of your heart. Which will impact the way you pray.

Instead of viewing prayer as an *ought to* or *have to*, let me urge you to see it and value it and embrace it as a *get to*. Not something I *have* to do, but something I *get* to do. I *get* to have a personal audience with the God of the Universe! I *get* to bring my cares, my concerns, my worries, my problems, my pain, my hurts, my fears, my failures, my hopes, my desires, my needs, my joys, my sorrows to my wise and loving and powerful heavenly Father. And He is never too busy to hear my prayers.

I’m preaching to myself today. But I’m preaching to you, too. Prayer is not a *have to*. It is a *get to*. If you will embrace it as the gift it is and accept God’s invitation to commune with

Him in prayer, it will make a difference in your life. And you – *we* – may just see God do some amazing things as a result.

Lord, let it be so. Yes, Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.