

Morning Worship Services

Sunday, August 5, 2007

“Jesus’ Teaching on Prayer - 1”

Matthew 6:1-18

Dean K. Wilson

Back in June, when Rev. Townsend first asked me to speak on the passage we just read, he seemed a bit perplexed that I was not surprised at his invitation. I told him I knew that one of these summers I would be asked to speak again. You see after I spoke the last time in February of 2003, I heard a couple of the long time members remark to each other, “It will be a hot day in August before we let that lad back in the pulpit.”

So you see, I knew that eventually I would be invited to speak some summer. And, here I am.

In order to understand the very familiar passage of Scripture that will form the basis of our time together both this week and next, we must first of all examine a bit about the writer who captured these important words of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Purely on the basis of human expectation, Levi Matthew represented a most unlikely disciple. If a popularity contest had been held in Matthew’s day, he would not have even registered on the scale.

When Matthew walked down the street, people would cross over to the other side to avoid passing him. Those that were bold enough to approach him would likely mutter a curse under their breath or even spit at his feet. You see Matthew had a most loathsome job. He was a publican or tax collector.

His fellow Jews considered Matthew a traitor. He had reached into his pocket and paid a significant sum of money to the Roman government to purchase the right to collect taxes from a segment of his fellow Jewish citizens. The whole purpose of the Roman occupation was to develop an ever-growing base of people from whom Rome could extract taxes to support the spendthrift policies of the ruler in Rome. Talk about diverting funds from one geographic area to support another. The Romans had elevated that political maneuver to an art form.

And here was Matthew: part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Scripture does not record any specific accusations against Matthew. But, we do know that most publicans made it a practice to double or even triple the amount of money for which Rome was actually asking. This gave them a 100% to 200% markup that they could pocket for their own. As long as Rome got its required per capita tax, it really didn’t care how the publicans wrangled the money out of the occupied citizens.

When Jesus called Levi Matthew to become a disciple, this act must have truly shocked the people following Jesus. Matthew, himself, chooses not to even mention his calling. Fortunately we have a record of this event in Mark Chapter 2 and Luke Chapter 5. Luke gives the fuller account in Luke 5:27-29:

Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth.
“Follow me,” Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.
Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house,

Did you notice the phrase "Levi got up, left everything and followed him?" Imagine that. So taken by Jesus simple invitation, Levi responded. And, it changed his life. Forever.

Based on the feelings of his fellow Jews, we could easily imagine that Levi Matthew might have become the first and most zealous missionary to the gentiles. After all, he had spent most of his life being despised by his fellow Jews.

Instead, Matthew becomes the disciple who specifically and intentionally reaches out to his Jewish brothers and sisters.

Some of you have heard me explain before that when God, in His mercy and grace, moved four writers to write the good news of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, He did so in order to create four very special points of view. Of the three "story" gospels, what Bible students call the synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—Matthew writes specifically to the Jews. He portrays the Lord Jesus as "King of the Jews" and creates a word picture very much like an oil painting. Filled with subtle brush strokes and showing the effect of light and shadow, Matthew's gospel has a rich texture that captivates his audience.

Mark writes to the Roman mind, portrays Jesus as a servant, and gives us a series of candid photographs. Some old timers, remembering the *Dragnet* television series from the 1950s and 1960s, refer to Mark's gospel as the "Jack Webb gospel"—just the facts, only the facts.

Luke writes to the Greek mind, portrays Jesus as a man, and provides a motion picture or movie of Jesus' life.

John writes to all mankind, portrays Jesus as the Son of God, or God the Son, and gives us an X-ray of the life and teachings of Jesus.

So, Matthew, despised by his Jewish brethren, aims his gospel squarely at the Jews. And, particularly, he wants to make certain that he provides a contrast with the haughty teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees of that day.

In Matthew Chapters 5, 6, and 7, we have a lengthy discourse of the Lord Jesus that Bible students often refer to as "The Sermon on the Mount." In the 111 verses of these three chapters, Matthew lays out the fundamental teachings of Jesus on a wide variety of subjects. The common theme that threads its way throughout this discourse is "The building blocks of obedience."

Matthew records Jesus' teachings concerning some very difficult and touchy subjects. He deals with how to fulfill the Law of Moses, murder, adultery, oaths, retribution, love for enemies, giving to the needy, accumulating treasures, worry, judging others, asking-seeking-knocking, pathways, fruit inspection, and building wisely.

Smack dab in the middle of this very precise and very scary list of teachings that lead to obedience, Matthew records Jesus' teaching on prayer.

Jesus tells us, first of all, to get alone with God. Go into a place where we can be quiet before Him. Set ourselves apart from the hectic traffic of the day. Sit quietly in His Presence. And, simply, talk to Him. Talk to God. Talk to the Father.

Begin by acknowledging that God is *our Father*. He has chosen to adopt us into His Eternal Kingdom. We are not mere creatures that He has created, but He has chosen us to be His children. As children, chosen before the foundation of the earth, we have the rights and privileges of children. We come into God's presence as His children and we rightly may call Him "Father." Not only do we call Him "Father," but we acknowledge that He *is*. He is not someone who once was. Rather, He currently exists in all His power and glory. And, He waits to welcome us.

You know we really don't understand this. We don't get it. The God of the Universe, the One who spoke a word and all creation came into being, has chosen us as His children. And, He waits to welcome us to come and sit with Him and talk with Him.

Prayer is a fundamental, cohesive, and powerful component of our relationship with God. He is not only willing to have us talk with Him, He welcomes it. He expects it. He longs for it. He waits for it. He waits for us. He wants us to come and sit with Him a while and talk with Him. We have the authority of no one less than the Son of God, Himself, telling us to come into the Father's Presence and sit a while with Him.

Next, in verse 9, Jesus continues His instruction by telling us to speak to God about His holiness: "hallowed be your name." "May your Name be Holy." As we sit quietly in His Presence, Jesus implores us to wrap a cloak of God's holiness around us. By speaking to God of His holiness, we allow the Holy Spirit within us to latch on to that holiness and begin to weave God's holiness into the very fabric of our beings.

Now I know that some of you are getting more than a little uncomfortable at this point. "Wait a minute," you say. "I'm not holy. And, I'm not really sure that I want to be holy. That sounds way too much like one of those scary kind of Christians. I surely don't want to be one of them!"

Well, in that case, I have bad news for you. When you first acknowledged that God had chosen you from the foundation of the world to belong to Him, when you responded to that gentle wooing (or not so gentle wooing) of the Holy Spirit and yielded your heart to God, He imbued you with His holiness.

When Jesus died on Calvary's cruel cross and shed His precious blood to cover your sins, God took that blood and dipped you into it. He plunged you into that saving flood. And, when you emerged you were clean clear through. He sent His Holy Spirit to live inside your heart. And, you became a walking, talking vessel of God's holiness.

Paul tells us in Titus Chapter 3:

At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

So, Jesus teaches us to acknowledge the holiness of God, that we might acknowledge His holiness within us.

Then Jesus instructs us to ask God to bring His will to pass in both heaven and on earth. In this simple statement hangs the chief problem that you and I face each day in our lives. "Not my will, but Thine be done." The trouble is, I want Mine, not Thine.

As I look out over you magnificent people, I know that every one of you represents the very embodiment of kindness, generosity, and good will. Right? Of course not!

Every one of you—and me, too—all of us are filthy, dirty, horrible, corrupt sinners. And, the worst part of it is that we cannot even take credit for this awful state we are in, for we inherited it from our parents. And, they inherited it from their parents. And, so forth, all the way back to Adam.

But, praise God, through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ we have been cleansed. Our sins are covered. The penalty paid. We have been redeemed. We have been adopted into God's family as His precious children.

And, once again, we had no part in this salvation other than being the recipients of God's grace. He redeemed us through the power of Christ's death on the cross. He guaranteed our place with Him for all eternity through the power of Christ's resurrection.

So, what's left for *us* to do? Just one thing. And that "thing" is the hardest "thing" of all. God wants us to be **obedient**. He wants us to surrender our will to His. He wants us to do His bidding in this world. He wants us to reach out to those around us—not because we are really nice, kind people—but solely because of His love that He places in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

"Not my will but Thine be done." That's the watchword. And, Jesus asks us to say those words to God in prayer. He wants us to experience the power of sitting quietly in God's Presence, surrounded by the solitude of our secret hideaway, and say those words of total submission. Jesus wants us to do that because He knows that out of obedience comes great joy.

In a sentence, what I've been trying to say to you concerning the first few verses of this passage is "Jesus teaches us that the Holy Spirit uses our prayers to illuminate the pathway of obedience." Let me say that again. "Jesus teaches us that the Holy Spirit uses our prayers to illuminate the pathway of obedience."

"Okay," you might say. "I don't like the fact that you called me a horrible, corrupt sinner, but I'm going to try to overlook that and ask you, 'So, what?' Exactly what do you want me to do about all this?"

Here's my suggestion for the week ahead. First of all, start today, and find a time to get alone in absolute quietness with God. I know your lives are teeming with noise and busyness. In spite of all that, find a time when you can slip away to a place where you can get alone in total quiet to spend even a few minutes with God.

Then, talk with Him. Call Him "Father." Just speak that word: "Father." And then, wait a bit and just rest in His Presence. God has told us that He is everywhere present. So when you sit in quiet and speak His Name, you can be assured that He is there.

Next, acknowledge that He is holy. Tell Him that you realize that He is absolutely holy. "Hallowed be Thy Name."

And, lastly, ask Him to make His will come to pass on earth, in your world, in your life, in your family, in your friends, in those you love and care about. Submit your will to God. Consciously. Quietly. Earnestly. Just submit your will to God.

That's all I ask of you this week. Just those few things: Get alone with God. Call Him "Father." Sit quietly in His Presence. Acknowledge that He is Holy. And, submit your will to His. Ask Him to complete His will in your life here on earth.

Once you do that, I will likely not have to convince you of the wisdom of doing it again. So, do it tomorrow, too. And, the next day. And, the next. All through the week. If you do, when we meet back here next week, you will be a different person. And, so will I.

"Jesus teaches us that the Holy Spirit uses our prayers to illuminate the pathway of obedience." That's Lesson One from this passage. Lesson Two comes next week.

Let us pray.