

Morning Worship Services

Sunday, August 12, 2007

“Jesus’ Teaching on Prayer - 2”

Matthew 6:1-18

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Today we will spend the second of two weeks working our way through this extremely important teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Last week, I suggested that you respond to the first portion of Jesus’ teaching by doing the following: “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.”

In a sentence, I attempted to share with you that “Jesus teaches us that the Holy Spirit uses our prayers to illuminate the pathway of obedience.”

You see, it’s all about “obedience.” The one and only “thing” God asks of us: obedience.

Jesus continues his teaching in this passage by instructing us to take the opportunity—while we wait quietly in God’s Presence and talk with Him—to ask Him to give us whatever we need for each day. “Give us this day our daily bread.”

Part of our acknowledgment of who God is—that He is our Father, that He has chosen us before the foundation of the earth to be His children—requires us to recognize that all that we are and all that we have comes from His mercy and grace. Nothing that we are—our accomplishments, our achievements, our successes, our reputations, our health—and nothing that we possess, comes as a result of our efforts. Everything we are and everything we have has come to us as a gift from God.

Every breath that we take, every beat of our hearts is a precious gift from God. Every bit of intelligence that we possess, every bit of cleverness that we exhibit, every bit of success that we enjoy, every sliver of recognition that we receive, everything we are and everything we have has come to us as a gift from God.

Last week I suggested to you that “the very God of the Universe waits to welcome us into His Presence.” I suggested that “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.

Along with His desire to have us call Him “Father,” He also wants us to act as if He is the “Giver of every good and perfect gift.” Time and time again, throughout the New Testament, Scripture tells us to sit in God’s Presence and present our needs to Him. Tell God what we need.

Just a few verses later in this very “Sermon on the Mount” we are looking at, Jesus tells us in Matthew Chapter 7 verses 7 through 11:

⁷ Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. ⁹ Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? ¹¹ If you, then, though you are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

So, as you sit quietly in God's Presence, whatever you need for this day, ask your Father. He waits to grant you everything you *need*. Just remember, He gets to choose whether or not you really "need" it. And, also remember, you are asking for *today*. Not for yesterday, and certainly not for tomorrow, but for today. God expects His children to live very much in the present. We could talk about that at greater length, but that will have to wait for another warm August Sunday, because I need to press on to the hardest teaching of all.

In verses 12 and 13, Jesus instructs us to ask God to forgive our sins and to lead us away from temptation by delivering us from the clutches of satan, the evil one.

Peter tells us in Chapter 5 of his first epistle:

⁸ Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

¹⁰ And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

¹¹ To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

Just as I shared with you last week, "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."

And yet, until we pass from this life and enter God's eternal kingdom—the process that Paul describes in Romans Chapter 8 as "glorification"—we remain "sinners." Yes, our sins are covered by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. But, the sin nature that we inherited from Adam through our parents, grandparents and so forth, remains active in us, ever striving to drag us into the old patterns of sinful behavior. Our redemption comes through our relationship with God in and through the Lord Jesus Christ.

As an indication of our obedience to God, He asks us to mirror the relationship we have with Him by the way we relate to each other. Frankly, I think this is the hardest part of obedience. I am expected to relate to each one of you in the same way that God has chosen to relate to me.

My offenses against God condemn me to eternal death. At the moment of my birth, because I inherited the sin nature passed down from Adam through my parents, I started this life condemned to eternal death, separated from God. And, my conscious and active behavior from that day forward has only served to exhibit the sin nature within me. Charge upon charge has been laid to my account. Sin upon sin.

Praise God, that before the foundation of the earth, He chose me to belong to Him. He sent His Holy Spirit to convince me—or, “convict” me, if you will—of my sinfulness and give me the opportunity to receive His mercy and grace by acknowledging His gift of redemption through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. It’s a great mystery. Yes, it is! A very, very great mystery. But, its true, nonetheless.

So, God wants me to mirror His forgiveness by forgiving everyone who sins against me; every single, solitary person who offends me, who sins against me. He wants me to extend to them the same unconditional forgiveness that He has extended to me.

And, if that’s not enough of a challenge, He instructs me through the words of Jesus to comprehend the seriousness of this sign of obedience by reminding me that He has forgiven me *first*. Even though I did nothing to deserve His mercy, He has chosen to forgive me.

Not only did He choose to forgive me, He made the first move. He sent His Holy Spirit to speak to me through my conscience and draw me irresistibly into His mercy and grace.

Dear friends, this “forgive our debtors” requirement is serious business. God gets our attention by asking us, “How would you like it if I made my forgiveness conditional on whether or not you forgave those who sinned against you?”

“Wait a minute,” I hear you respond, “Isn’t that what Jesus did say? Didn’t He say that if I don’t forgive the one that sins against me, my sins won’t be forgiven?”

Well, if that is how you read this passage, let me ask you a question: “Why do you persist in bearing a grudge against those fellow members of the household of faith who have offended you?”

In Matthew Chapter 18, verses 15 through 17, Jesus tells His followers:

¹⁵ “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. ¹⁶ But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”

Did you notice that Jesus expects the one sinned against to make the first move? Astounding! Jesus expects the one sinned against to go to the one who sinned and attempt to make it right. That’s a far cry from our normal pattern of waiting until the one who sinned comes to us to apologize before we extend forgiveness. You see, God expects us to forgive just like He forgives. Paul tells us in Romans Chapter 5:

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Examine your own hearts right now. Do you bear a grudge against a brother or sister in Christ who you believe has sinned against you in the past. Oh, you may not call it “sin.” You may say that “so and so” *offended* you, or did something wrong, or spoke ill of you, or questioned your authority, or challenged your judgment, or (you insert your favorite euphemism for “sin.”). Do you still hold that fault against the person who perpetrated the fault? Well, then, Jesus calls you to obedience and instructs you to forgive.

“But I can’t forgive!” you may respond in exasperation. “The hurt is too deep. The offense is too enormous. Why what ‘so and so’ did tore me apart. He or she ruined my family, defamed my reputation, stole my inheritance. You don’t know the awful things he or she did to me. How can I possibly forgive?”

The truth is, *you* can’t.

Remember how we talked about God placing the Holy Spirit inside your heart? Part of the reason God did that was to give you the power to be obedient.

No. **You** can't forgive. You don't have the power by yourself. You are too weak, too frail, too mired in your sin nature. But, God can enable you to forgive by the power of the Holy Spirit within you. With the same mercy and grace that God extends His forgiveness to you for your sins—which, by the way, are ever so much more horrible than any sin that any person here on earth could commit against you—God will enable you to forgive. All you have to do is let Him.

In a sentence, what I have been trying to share with you from the second portion of this passage is "Jesus teaches us to show our love for God by trusting Him to meet our daily needs, including our need to forgive others." Let me say that again. "Jesus teaches us to show our love for God by trusting Him to meet our daily needs, including our need to forgive others."

Are you wondering what to do? Here's my suggestion for the week ahead. As you sit in quietness with God—if you took my suggestion for last week, surely you will want to continue to meet with God each day—ask Him to bring to your mind the name of one of your brothers or sisters in Christ who you believe has sinned against you. Then ask Him to give you the power to forgive. Just say to Him: "Father, please give me the power to forgive 'so and so.'" And, speak that person's name aloud.

It may even help you to name the sin that you believe the person has committed against you. "Father, please give me the power to forgive 'so and so' for doing (and just name the sin that you believe the person has committed against you.)"

Be careful to understand that I am asking you to start with one of your brothers or sisters in Christ, rather than someone who may not be a believer. I'm doing this because I am asking you to follow the pattern in Matthew Chapter 18.

Next, whenever you think of that brother or sister during the week, see that one in your mind's eye as someone God is helping you to forgive.

Then, in obedience to Scripture, go to that person and talk with him or her about what you believe he or she did to you. Go humbly, go quietly, go patiently, and share the offense that resides in your heart: "You know, I have been holding a grudge against you for a long time because you did (and name the sin). I am asking God to help me forgive you. And, I just want to let you know that as far as I am concerned, you are forgiven."

This may be the hardest thing you have ever done in your life. And, be prepared to learn that the one who you believe has sinned against you feels that **you** actually provoked his or her behavior toward you. During your conversation with this brother or sister in Christ, you may even find that the Holy Spirit is convicting **you** of sin in the matter. In that case, you will both have to ask forgiveness from each other. So, when you approach the one who you believe has sinned against you, make sure you do so in a spirit of humility seasoned with great grace.

Now, just a word of caution: If the person that God brings to mind is a brother or sister in Christ who is **continuing** to sin against you, when you approach that one to tell him or her that you are extending forgiveness, you should also tell him or her that you are asking him or her to please stop sinning against you. "You know, I have been holding a grudge against you for a long time because you did (and name the sin). I am asking God to help me forgive you. And, I just want to let you know that as far as I am concerned, you are forgiven. But, I also want to ask you to please stop doing what you're doing to me. Please, stop sinning against me."

If the brother or sister in Christ that you speak to in this way is also seeking to be obedient to God, the sinning will stop. If it doesn't, then follow Matthew 18 and the next time you go to the one sinning against

you, take along a reliable witness. Follow the pattern of Matthew 18 all the way through to the end, if need be. But, if my experience over a life time in the church is reliable, you will almost never have to move beyond step one.

God asks you to forgive. In fact, He asks you to forgive everyone, whether a particular person is a believer or not. But, He has a special interest in maintaining harmony among the members of His household.

At the same time, don't expect the instruction in Matthew 18 to work for a non-believer. Someone who does not belong to God through the power of Christ's blood, someone who does not have the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, cannot be expected to behave according to the patterns of those who belong to God. You still have to forgive. But, you have no reasonable expectation of repentance on the part of the non-believer who sins against you.

God asks one thing of us. And, its the hardest thing. He asks us to be obedient.

As I shared with you last week, "Jesus teaches us that the Holy Spirit uses our prayers to illuminate the pathway of obedience."

Now, there is so much more to glean from this passage. I haven't even spoken to you about "fasting." Let me simply say that fasting energizes prayer by illustrating true self-denial. Perhaps we will have the opportunity to talk about *that* some other time.

In your moments of quiet alone with God this week, ask Him to bring to mind the name of one of your brothers or sisters in Christ who you believe has sinned against you. And then, ask Him to give you the power to forgive.

"Jesus teaches us to show our love for God by trusting Him to meet our daily needs, including our need to forgive others."

Let us pray.