

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Matthew 6:5-13

SERMON TEXT: Opening to God: Prayer

Where in your life are you the most disciplined? Is it a work, at school, at home? Isn't it true that if a goal is important to us we usually manage to discipline ourselves to get it done? Well, it seems to me that a similar dynamic applies to the spiritual life. If our aim is to open ourselves to God so that God can shape us and mold us, then a disciplined approach to spiritual growth can be very helpful. In fact, over the Sundays of Lent as we prepare ourselves spiritually for the new life in Christ that we proclaim at Easter, we'll be looking at several basic spiritual disciplines that open us to God. This morning, our focus is on the spiritual discipline of prayer.

Our scripture lesson comes from a collection of teachings in Matthew's gospel that we call the Sermon on the Mount. The text is Matthew 6:5-13. **SCRIPTURE TELLING.**

Listen again to the words: Verse 5: *And whenever you pray.* Verse 6: *But whenever you pray.* Verse 7: *When you are praying.* Verse 9: *Pray then in this way.* Apparently, the followers of Jesus are expected to pray!

Jesus taught his disciples to pray: *Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.* He taught his disciples how to pray authentically without show and with simplicity of speech.

Jesus himself prayed. The scriptures tell us that Jesus would go away to lonely places to pray. As a faithful Jew, Jesus would have learned to be disciplined in prayer. Jews in Jesus' day recited a prayer twice a day called the Shema which begins: *Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.* Three times a day the Jews prayed a complex series of blessings upon God's people called the *Tephillah*. So Jesus prayed and Jesus expected his followers to pray.

The question is: Why? Well, isn't it true that marriages suffer when couples don't spend time together and when they fail to communicate? It's the same in our relationship with God. In prayer we open ourselves to the divine other. We spend time together. We communicate

through speaking and listening. We place God at the center of our attention.

Evelyn Underhill described a person of prayer as one *who deliberately wills and steadily desires that his or her interactions with God and other people be controlled by God.* (Underhill, Evelyn and Slattery, Charles Lewis. *Concerning the Inner Life.*) Isn't this our desire—to have our actions controlled by God? If it is, then prayer is an indispensable discipline for opening to God. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said that *To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.* My brothers and sisters, as followers of Jesus Christ, we're expected to prayer. Therefore, as one writer put it: *Pray when you feel like it, pray when you don't feel like, pray until you do feel like it.* (Dr. Stephen Olford, quoted in *Life Action Revival Ministries: Victory in the Spiritual Life* by Bobby Moore, at www.lifeaction.org.)

I think it's even fair to say that the future of our church will, in no small measure, depend upon our opening to God in times of prayer. For example, the Brooklyn Tabernacle was once broken-down church in one of America's meanest neighborhoods. The streets outside the church were controlled by pimps, prostitutes, drug pushers, addicts and homeless people. The church could barely draw twenty people to a Sunday service....The pianist could only play one hymn: "Oh, How I Love Jesus." They sang it every week, sometimes more than once.

When Pastor Jim Cymbala and his wife Carol showed up for their first Sunday at Brooklyn Tabernacle, they collected an offering totaling \$85.

During the first months of his ministry at Brooklyn Tabernacle, Pastor Cymbala had to make difficult confession. He writes: *The embarrassing truth is that sometimes even I didn't want to show up for a service—that's how bad it was.*

But then one day, while he was out on a party fishing boat in the Gulf of Mexico with twenty or thirty tourists, something happened that transformed Jim Cymbala and Brooklyn

Tabernacle.

Pastor Cymbala writes: “As we launched out toward the deep water, the others laughed and talked about the fish they hoped to catch that afternoon. I held a pole in my hands, too . . . But my mind wasn’t on fishing. I moved down toward the end of the boat, away from the crowd, and stared at the far horizon....

Lord, I have no idea how to be a successful pastor, I prayed softly out there on the water. I haven’t been trained. All I know is that Carol and I are working in the middle of New York City, with people dying on every side, overdosing from heroin, consumed by materialism, and all the rest. If the gospel is so powerful . . .

I couldn’t finish the sentence. Tears choked me....

Then quietly but forcefully, in words heard not with my ear but deep within my spirit, I sensed God speaking: *If you and your wife will lead my people to pray and call upon my name, you will never lack for something fresh to preach. I will supply all the money that’s needed, both for the church and for your family, and you will never have a building large enough to contain the crowds I will send in response.*

As the boat docked later that afternoon, I felt wonderfully calm. A few days later I flew back to New York, still the same young pastor I had always been. But....God had promised to provide, to respond to our cries for divine help. We were not alone, attempting the impossible in a heartless world. God was present, and he would act on our behalf.

The next Sunday morning when Pastor Cymbala was back with his congregation, this is what he said to them: *If we call upon the name of the Lord, he has promised in his Word to answer....If we don’t call upon the Lord, he has promised nothing—nothing at all. It’s as simple as that. No matter what I preach or what we claim to believe in our heads, the future will*

depend upon our times of prayer.” (Cymbala, Jim. *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997.)

Prayer was a means used by God to transform Brooklyn Tabernacle. Today, Brooklyn Tabernacle worships six thousand strong. The congregation consists of people off the neighborhood streets, professional men and women, blacks, whites, Hispanics. They have a world-renowned choir.

Isn't it amazing what can happen when we open ourselves to God through prayer? As followers of Jesus Christ we're expected to pray. Prayer is an indispensable discipline for spiritual growth. The future of our church depends upon our times in prayer. So, my brothers and sisters, PRAY! *Pray when you feel like it, pray when you don't feel like, pray until you do feel like it.* (Dr. Stephen Olford, quoted in *Life Action Revival Ministries: Victory in the Spiritual Life* by Bobby Moore, at www.lifeaction.org.) PRAY!