

Listen Up – Learning to Listen to God in Prayer



Introduction – Prayer

Begin with the Clip from the Wizard of Oz



That is a classic scene from a classic film. For some of us – that scene captures what we believe it is like to have an audience with God.

Mysterious / Shadowy/Unpredictable / Scary /

Some of us have other images.

What's your image of what it is like to enter into the very presence of God

A God who is indifferent to you
One who is harsh – Looking to accuse?
Perhaps the access is blocked

The image we have of being in God's presence is critical to our understanding of prayer – because all prayer is intended to take us into his presence. Prayer is not intended to be like a telephone call – a hot-line to heaven – but more like a candle-lit dinner.

We are in a sermon series on Freedom. This week the topic is the Freedom that comes from developing a two way conversational relationship with God. We are going to look at how two-way prayer should be a foundational part of our lives.

When I first became a Christian – I was part of community of believers where it was expected that God spoke to his people – that God was real. I didn't spend much time in prayer – but occasionally God would speak to me in prayer.

Over the years –God spoke to me less and less through prayer. By 1980 – my relationship with God was being built around figuring out the principles that God wanted me to live by. I studied the scriptures – taught the scriptures – was learning a lot about God. But my prayers were a monologue - unidirectional. Giving praise to God / Giving thanks to God / Offering Confession to God / Petitioning God. It is an odd thing for prayer to become a monologue. We have the privilege of an audience with the King of Kings/ with the Chief Architect of the Universe / and we spend all of our time telling him what he already knows. If we can step back for a minute – independent of our experience– isn't it logical that most of the communication should be flowing the other direction. God is the one we want to get to know – not the other way around. Yet our prayer life would seem to indicate the exact opposite. I am not saying that Praise / Confession / Adoration/ Petition are wrong – but in terms of sheer volume, shouldn't the flow be more in the other direction? Shouldn't there be more coming from God and less coming from me?

Somewhere around 1980, something happened that altered the trajectory of my prayer life with God. A good friend – one who had mentored me and continues to mentor me gave me a book that he highly recommended. The basic premise of the book was that God rarely speaks to his people – He generally only speaks through the Bible – through the principles He has revealed – our job is to figure out the principles. I knew that this is where my trajectory was going – yet I also knew somehow this wasn't right. I needed to know

So in my typical fashion I did what Dave Simpson later coined – A full Japenga. I went through the entire bible looking for anything related to this. And that study – changed everything for me. I concluded that at the very core of God's revelation – was God's desire to have a conversational – two way dialog with his people in prayer.

Listen to just a few of the scriptures that I found compelling.

Scripture

In the Old Testament – God spoke to prophets who were in turn to speak God's word to the people. When the prophet Isaiah was called to be a prophet, listen how God described it.

Isaiah 1:18 "Come now, let us reason together,"
says the LORD.
"Though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;

Picture what should go on in your relationship with a God who invites you to “Come, let us reason together.” A give and take. But notice that it is not as a peer – but as the

Holy God who knows how broken and polluted we are – inviting us in to dialogue. That is an awesome invitation!

In the New Testament – with the coming of the Holy Spirit – as Peter said on the day of Pentecost, everyone is to be like the prophets and hear God speak. Jesus paints a vivid image in our minds of what this looks like:

John 14:23 Jesus replied, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – making their home in us. Jesus is saying that coming into His presence is like going home. But why kind of home do we go to? Does it look like a home where we come in with a constant barrage of

I want, I need, He needs, she needs, I did this .. By the way - you are doing great.

And the Father responds – “Have you read my book?” That’s not the kind of home Jesus was describing.

Jesus gives another beautiful image to the church of Laodicea in the book of Revelation:

3: 20 Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.

Again – what is the picture of the kind of dialog that Jesus is inviting us to – the intimacy of a meal – Notice the two way nature of the image: “I will eat with him ... and he [will eat] with me.”

What I found in this process was a God who longed to be in communion – longed to be in intimate relationship. I became absolutely convinced that I was off track. That for the most part, we, the church were off track. We had missed the mark. Two things I became absolutely convinced of:

Prayer was supposed to be two way Prayer was supposed to involve having a conversation with God. Dallas Willard says: “Prayer is talking with God about what we are doing together.”

But I also learned it was intermittent. The prophets of the Old Testaments had special times where “the word of the Lord” came. In the New Testament we find the disciples having regular but intermittent encounters with God. It isn’t a constant chatter back and forth. It is much more like a real relationship. It’s a lot like my relationship with my wife. When we are in public with other people – we are not constantly talking to each other – just occasionally – a whisper – a glance – but when we are alone a much more intimate

dialog takes place – and even then it only comes during special moments. Moments alone.

How did we get to this place?

So before we launch into some practical application – we need to understand how we got here – how did we get to the place where prayer became a monologue– because knowing how we got here – will help keep us on track going forward.

Listening to God on a consistent basis is hard work – As many of you know Barbara and I had the privilege of leading retreats here for 14 years with Kit and Tricia that were specifically designed to help people learn how to listen to God. In the retreats we found that it was easy to introduce people to listening to God in prayer. God graciously spoke to people in every retreat. The people came - they laid down the burdens they were carrying – they took the time to be in the quiet – in the solitude – they wrote their dialogues in a prayer journal and they connected with God. It was an awesome experience to see this happen. But we found over the years, that most individuals did not continue the practice once they got back into their day to day lives.

Why is this? In my own life I have found the classic big three

World Flesh Devil

Are always at work to distract, to discourage, to sow seeds of doubt. If this really is a foundational truth – just like forgiveness and grace – The World, Our Flesh and Satan will be working overtime to keep us from practicing this.

Two weeks ago we experienced a major crisis a work with one of our customers. As was our habit, Joseph and I took some time out to pray about it and included in that time to listen to God – and I did not hear anything. It was frustrating. We had this great need for direction or at least comfort. I was so worked up. I had been pummeled by the customer and I was shaken. Why could I have not at least heard God's assurance that it was going to be all right. That He was going to go with us. My flesh was just in such a state – I couldn't hear. I believe He was speaking. Experiences like this can discourage us. When we really need to hear from God and we can't.

God says that we are to seek Him with our whole heart – that implies that learning to listen to God is hard work – and it is going to be easy to get discouraged.

But it's more than that -

Listening to God challenges you There are times in my life when I really don't want God's input. Oh I say I do – but when push comes to shove – I say to myself – I know what's best. When I step back from that – that attitude scares me. But it is present in

me – and I suspect its present in you. You and I are afraid of what God is going to say. He’s going to ask me to do something I don’t want to do. This is why Jesus so often had to assure the disciples: If you ask God for good things will He give you things that will hurt you? Don’t you know that it is the Fathers good pleasure to give you the kingdom?

Not too long ago I was fixing one of my cars and I sensed that God was telling me to stop working on it. It was late on a Saturday – the car parts stores were closed – but I went ahead and did it anyway. And I broke the part I was putting on - with no way to replace it. Now I was stuck with a car that I couldn’t drive. But I pushed through and through great effort working late into Saturday night I succeeded in getting the car back on the road. In the end what welled up inside me was – “See God I can do it without You.”

Whoa! That is a dangerous attitude. How can that be within me? But it is. And I suspect I am not alone in this. There are times that we think we know best. And that is going to keep us from going to God to listen.

How should we then live?

If this is new to you – perhaps you’re a guest or a young person – and the whole God and Jesus thing is new. Perhaps the fact that God might have a word for you sounds spooky – well - God has a word for you – “Taste and see that the Lord is good.” Jesus’ disciples spoke to skeptics and said – “Come and see.” I want to encourage you to give it a try. Come and see. Barbara and I are going to offer a one day “Introduction to Listening Prayer” for those who are new to this. 9-3 here at the church on February 21. Your world and my world are so full of distractions – we cannot hear the still small voice of God in the midst of the din. This will be a safe place for that to happen.

There is a sign up sheet in Guest Central/On the hutch down stairs. If you cannot make the 21st but are interested – sign up anyway – indicating that you would like us to schedule another time. We’ll work out a time.

For most of us – this is not new. But I suspect for most of us it is not a regular part of your life. You don’t regularly spend time seeking God’s face – Seeking Him with your whole heart. I would leave you one word – taken from the Wizard of Oz – but hopefully in a better tone – SILENCE. Incorporate silence on a regular basis silence into your prayer life. Stop the monologue and at least turn it into a monologue with pauses. And expect God to reply. He has invited us – Come – let us have a dialogue together.

I believe that God has taken us a long way here at the Barn on this topic. But I also believe that we have just started. The world has never seen a church that with

singleness of purpose as individuals, families and ministries teams developed the disciplines of hearing God. I believe that it is within our grasp.

We are going to have two opportunities to practice listening here at the end of the service. I am going to provide some silence during the Prayers of the People. And then during communion during the times as you kneel – during the times that you are waiting for communion – just lift up this simple prayer:

Here I am Lord
Speak Lord, Your servant is listening.

Let's pray.