

Watering the Grass  
Matthew 6:5 – 13; Luke 10:38 – 11:4  
Sunday, October 20, 2019

A couple of weeks ago, we had some landscaping done at our house. There was a small tree in the front yard that we had moved to the back yard. We had some bushes removed and grass seed put down. Since then, every day for the past couple of weeks, I have to go out and water the tree that was transplanted, and the places where grass seed was put down. So I go out in the yard and just stand there with a hose for about 10-15 minutes. And it is *boring*. It is probably my least favorite part of the day. I have started enlisting the kids to come out and help me with it, just to break up the monotony. And the thing is, I *love* working in the yard. But this is different. It is *literally* standing there watching grass grow. And the hardest part about it is that you can't really see any progress from day to day. I *hope* that tree is taking root, but I have no idea; I could be doing all of this for nothing. I *hope* that grass is growing where we put down seed, but it's covered by hay and netting, so it's hard to tell. I go out there and do this day after day, with no indication that it's actually *working*. All the growth is taking place *beneath the surface*, where you can't *see* it. But, if we want this tree to take root and grow, and if we want this grass to grow, we *have* to water it. It may feel tedious and monotonous, but it is absolutely *essential* for growth.

And just this past week, as I was watering the spot where we took out the big, ugly bush, I got down and looked real close, and I saw these little green shoots starting to poke up. And I got unreasonably excited about it. Here was *proof* – visible, tangible evidence – that the work and time I was putting in was paying off. I could *see growth*. And once I could see that, it made me *want* to get out there each day and keep watering.

Watering the grass is a lot like prayer. It takes *time* and *effort* and *consistency*. And the *challenge* is that you can't always see proof that it's working. Because all the growth is taking place beneath the surface. But if we want to have a relationship with God, and if we want our faith to take root and grow, then we have to water it. Prayer is *absolutely essential* for spiritual growth.

Five weeks ago, I shared with you the challenges that I had been experiencing in my own relationship with God. How for a year or more, I had just been empty. My prayer life was non-existent; I had not been praying regularly and I hadn't had any real sense of God's presence with me for a long time. It was what the 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross referred to as "the dark night of the soul." This experience where you still *believe* in God, you still *have* faith, but you lose a sense of the *presence* or *imminence* or *love* of God in your life. I had been struggling with that for a while.

In the midst of that, at the beginning of September, I attended a two-day "prayer school" in St. Joseph, Missouri, outside Kansas City. Two days where the pastor of the church – a man named Brian Zahnd – taught about 90 of us the model of prayer that he had been practicing every day for the past 20 years. And at the end of the prayer school, we committed to practicing these same prayers every day for the next 40 days – from September 8 to October 17, every morning, for about 30-40 minutes. So I would get up each day at 6 AM (sometimes 5 if I had an early meeting or I just couldn't sleep), and I prayed:

Eternal God, creator of heaven and earth,  
God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,  
God of Israel,  
God and father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,  
True and living God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,  
Have mercy and hear our prayer.

O Lord, open our lips, and our mouth shall proclaim your praise.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;  
As it was in the beginning is now and will be forever. Amen. Hallelujah.

O God, make speed to save us.  
O Lord, make haste to help us.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;  
As it was in the beginning is now and will be forever. Amen. Hallelujah.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.

Most merciful God,  
We confess that we have sinned against you  
In thought, word, and deed,  
By what we have done,  
And by what we have left undone.  
We have not loved you with our whole heart;  
We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.  
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.  
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,  
Have mercy on us and forgive us;  
That we may delight in your will  
And walk in your ways,  
To the glory of your name. Amen.

Then I read a psalm corresponding with the day of the year (if it's the first day of the year, you read Psalm 1; if it's the 140<sup>th</sup> day of the year, you read Psalm 140). Then I would read the gospel reading from the lectionary, the calendar of prescribed scripture readings for each week. Then I would say the Apostles' Creed:

I believe in God, the Father almighty,  
Creator of heaven and earth.  
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.  
He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit  
And born of the virgin Mary.  
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
Was crucified, died, and was buried.  
He descended to the dead.  
On the third day he rose again.  
He ascended into heaven  
And is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.  
I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
The holy catholic church,  
The communion of saints,

The forgiveness of sins,  
The resurrection of the body,  
And the life everlasting. Amen.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
He leads me beside still waters,  
He restores my soul.  
He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.  
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I fear no evil, for you are with me.  
Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.  
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.  
You anoint my head with oil.  
My cup overflows.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,  
And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

You who live in the shelter of the Most High,  
Who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,  
Will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress;  
My God in whom I trust."

So you'll notice that for those first five minutes or so, I am not praying my own words. I'm praying scripture, psalms, other written prayers and liturgy. But now I reach a point where I pray for my family. And this is where I have the freedom to pray my own words. I pray for Jen, for each of the kids, for my mom, my brother and his wife, my brother- and sister-in-law and nephew, my mother-in-law and father-in-law. Then back to the psalms:

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.  
Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits –  
Who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,  
Who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,  
Who satisfies you with good as long as you live,  
So that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.  
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.

Then I pray the Lord's Prayer *again*, but it's an *expanded* version where I pray each line and then reflect on what it means for me, praying it with my own words:

Our father, who art in heaven,  
Eternal and loving Abba who rules and reigns over all.  
Hallowed be thy name.  
May your name be kept holy on my lips and in my life this day.  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.  
May your rule and reign be made real and manifest in my life,  
On earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
I pray that you would provide me with everything I need –  
Physically, mentally, spiritually, and emotionally –  
To *live* and be *whole* today.  
And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,  
Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,  
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.  
Do not let me follow my own inclinations today Lord,  
But set my feet on your right path that leads to life.  
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.  
Do not let me seek my own will today, Lord, let me seek yours.  
Do not let me trust in my own power today, let me trust in yours.  
Do not let me seek my own glory today, let me seek yours. Amen.

Then I spend a few minutes praying for whoever and whatever I want. I pray for the church; our Elders, Deacons, and Trustees; those who are sick; those who are caring for them; those who struggle with addiction; for my friends; for situations in our country and the world. I have a list and just pray my way through that. After that, I will spend about ten minutes sitting in silence, just *being* with Jesus. There is more after that – prayers from the Book of Common Prayer, I pray the Beatitudes (Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted....), I pray the Prayer of St. Francis (Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love. Where there is injury, pardon....).

The *reason* that I wanted to walk through this with you was so you could see that my prayers each day are *very structured*. I hardly even have to think about *what* I'm going to say, which allows me to reflect on what I *am* saying. And over the past 40 days, praying it over and over, I have started to *internalize* it; I am *memorizing* it, and it's becoming a *part* of me. It's like we talked about last week, when there is a *structure* to our faith, when it is shaped and guided by specific religious practices and traditions, that is what opens us up to the movement of the Spirit and a connection with God.

Now, there are some days when my alarm goes off at 6 AM, and it's dark and cold outside, but it's warm in bed, or I had a late meeting the day before, or maybe it's even my day off, so I don't really *need* to get up that early to pray, and I think, "I could just stay in bed and do it later." There *are* times when it feels like a chore, like watering the grass. Because you can't always see proof that it's working. But the purpose of prayer is not to get God to do what we want. The purpose of prayer is to be *properly formed*. To be formed in the image and likeness of Jesus Christ. And that formation takes place beneath the surface. When you feed your soul with the waters of prayer day after day, roots are growing, even if you can't see it or feel it. And then one day, almost by surprise, you start noticing growth. And when you *see* that, it makes you *want* to get up each day and pray.

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Jesus was at the home of Mary and Martha. He's sitting around in the living room, talking with the disciples, taking a break after going all around teaching and healing people. Martha is running around, getting everything ready. She was preparing the meal, making sure everyone had drinks. I mean, this was *Jesus!* Everything had to be *perfect!* It says she was distracted by her many tasks. But her sister Mary, it says, sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. Martha complains to Jesus, "I'm running around doing all the work, while my sister is

just sitting here! Tell her to help me!” To which Jesus says, “Martha, Martha.” (You know when Jesus says your name *twice*, you’re in trouble. Or he’s just trying to get you to stop and listen.) “Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only *one* thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” Mary’s not *doing* anything; she’s just sitting with Jesus. Listening to him. Spending time with him. And that’s what *prayer* is. Spending time with Jesus, sitting with him, listening to him, maybe asking some questions here and there, having a conversation.

A lot of us are so busy that we feel like we don’t have *time* each morning to pray. “Thirty to forty minutes?! That’s *a lot!* I don’t have time for that!” I didn’t think I did either...until I started *doing* it. Until I chose the better part of sitting with Jesus, listening to him, spending time with him, rather than running around, distracted by my many tasks. You make time for the things that are important to you. And what in your life is more important than *knowing* your Creator? Because when you know the One who created you, you start to understand what you were created *for*.

You know, it’s funny, the very next thing that happens after this story of Mary and Martha is that it says Jesus was praying. Even *Jesus* needed to pray and nurture his relationship with God. And it says that when he had finished, the disciples said to him, “Lord, teach *us* to pray.” We *all* need to be *taught* how to pray, don’t we? It doesn’t just come *naturally* to us. I mean, at some point, *someone* taught you how to pray, right? You parents or a pastor or *someone* taught you a pattern of prayer. And we all need to keep learning *new* patterns of prayer, because eventually we grow out of the one we were taught or it stops working for us. That’s why I traveled half way across the country to a prayer school – to be *taught* how to pray. There’s no shame in saying, “I need *help* with this. Teach me how.”

And when Jesus answers his disciples, he doesn't just say, "When you pray, just say whatever you want! God is listening!" Jesus says, "When you pray, say this," and he teaches them a specific prayer. "Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial." That's a little different than the version we know, right?

When you look over at Matthew's gospel, Jesus is teaching his disciples how to pray. He says, "When you pray, go into your room and shut the door. And don't just heap up empty phrases and say *whatever*. Pray *in this way*: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one." It's a little different than the other version, but Jesus gives his followers a *specific prayer* to pray. He gives them *structure*, a *framework* to follow. And yes, those two prayers are *different*, which I think shows us that within that structure and framework, there is *freedom*.

When I pray each day, I pray specific prayers. And there's some room for *freedom* within that, but I *need* to be structured. I *want* to be formed in that way. And I understand that not everyone likes praying liturgy or saying fixed prayers over and over again. People will say, "Oh, *liturgy*, that's so *rote* and *boring* and *lifeless*. It feels *dead*. I just want to *talk* to God and feel the *Spirit move*." But liturgy is neither dead nor alive. It's *words*. The person *praying* them is either dead or alive. Think of it this way. If you've ever seen roses growing, they climb up a trellis, right? No one looks at a trellis and says, "Ugh, I *hate* that trellis. It's just so *boring* and *dead*." It's not dead or alive. It's just a *structure*. But it provides the *framework* for growth to take place.

We have been given these rich resources for prayer. We have been given a *gift* by the *centuries*, the *thousands of years* of faithful people who have come before us. We don't have to figure this out on our own. When you pray, you can use the words of those who came before us – the psalms, the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, any number of books and other resources for prayer. I'd be *happy* to share the one that I'm using with you. But it's that *structure* that can help *growth* take place; that intentional practice of specific prayer. And eventually, using *their* language can enrich our own language of prayer. Prayer is about being properly formed, and their words can form and *inform* our own words.

We all need to make time in our lives to nurture our relationship with God. And we don't need to be afraid to ask for help doing it.

I want to end the way I end my prayers each morning, so let's pray.

Almighty God, father of all mercies,  
We your unworthy servants give you humble thanks  
For all your goodness and loving kindness  
To us and all whom you have made.  
We bless you for our creation, preservation,  
And all the blessings of this life;  
But above all for your immeasurable love  
In the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ;  
For the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.  
And, we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies,  
That with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise,  
Not only with our lips, but in our lives,  
By giving up our selves to your service,  
And by walking before you  
In holiness and righteousness all our days;  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord,  
To whom, with you and the Holy Spirit,  
Be honor and glory throughout all ages. Amen.

Lord, have mercy.  
Christ, have mercy.  
Lord, have mercy.

Christ has died.  
Christ is risen.  
Christ will come again.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me. Amen.