

The Discipline of Prayer
Sermon Series: Teach Us to Pray
Acts 10:1–22
Sunday, September 8, 2024

Let us pray: Teach us to pray, Lord, that we might be connected and bound in love to you and to each other, in Christ. Amen.

For the past few weeks, we have been talking about prayer – what it *is*, how to *do* it if you don't know how, and how to *grow* in it if you *do* know how. We started by saying that prayer is not just *talking* to God, it is *communion* with God; a relationship with God, a conversation with God that involves both talking *and* listening. So, we talked about how we practice being silent and still, listening to God. We talked about how we can start talking to God by praying the prayers of others, like prayers that we have been taught by our parents or someone else, the Lord's Prayer, the Psalms, different models of prayer, or the prayers that have been written by Christians who came before us. And last week we talked about what we can *ask for* in prayer; how prayer is both about asking God for what we need *and* God changing us, opening us up to a bigger picture of exactly what it is we need. In all of this, we have said that there are no magic words when it comes to prayer. Just talk to God like you talk to a friend, and if it comes from your heart, *that* is what God wants.

As we finish this look at prayer today, there were two things that I wanted to talk about, and I couldn't decide which one to go with. I wanted to think about how we pray for our *enemies*, people we *don't* like or get along with (because Jesus *does* call us to do that). But I also wanted to think about how we *stick with* prayer. It's easy to *start* a practice of prayer, but it can be hard to sustain it over the long run. We get busy or distracted or whatever, and we kind of fall off. So what are some ways that we can develop a discipline of prayer, so that it becomes a regular part

of our lives? I couldn't decide which one of those to focus on today, but as I was looking at the scripture reading, I realized that they *both* work together. So it's almost like we're going to have two sermons today that (I hope) come together and make one – how we pray for our enemies, and how we develop a discipline of prayer.

Let's start with how we pray for our enemies. Because we talked last week about how we pray for the people we *love* and *care about*; how we ask for God's blessing on *them*. But Jesus says, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven."

Years ago, I drove by a liquor store that had a sign out front with the moveable letters, and the sign said, "Pray for our President – Psalm 109:8." And I thought, "Wow, it's not every day that you see a liquor store encouraging people to pray, and to pray for the president in such divisive times!" Admittedly, at the time, I did not know Psalm 109:8 off the top of my head, but I carry a Bible in my car, so I pulled it out, looked it up, and saw that it says, "May his days be few; may another seize his position."

Is *that* how we are supposed to pray for our enemies? I mean, Jesus just said, "Pray for those who persecute you." He didn't say *how* we have to pray for them! Except that he does. Right after Jesus calls us to pray for our enemies, he says, "For God makes the sun rise on the evil *and* on the good. God sends rain on the righteous *and* the unrighteous." God shows no partiality, so neither should *we*. If we *do*, if we only love those who love *us*, Jesus says, what reward do we have? *Anyone* can love the people who love *them* and pray for God's blessing on *them*. But we are called to love our *enemies* and *pray* for them; to be *merciful* toward them, just as *God* is. One way that I have heard people pray for the enemies is to say something like, "God, please

transform them. Soften their heart. Help them see the error of their ways and to get back on the right path.” But that kind of prayer assumes that I am right. Which *might* be the case, but not *always*.

A good rule of thumb when it comes to praying for our enemies is to pray for *them* the way that you would want someone to pray for *you*. Would you want someone asking God to *change* you and soften *your* heart and help *you* see the error of your ways? Maybe, but I’m guessing that most of the time that wouldn’t feel too good. So often our prayers are focused on what *we* want for *ourselves* or what *we* want for *others*. Not necessarily what *God* wants or what that other person *needs*. I can’t always pray for other people to change, because I don’t always know how they *need* to change. I don’t even always know how *I* need to change. Only God knows that. It is not *our* job to change people, it’s *God’s*. *Our* job is to *love* them.

Pastor and author Magrey deVega says that prayer should push our perspectives beyond ourselves to include others, even those with whom we are in conflict...such prayer must be directed toward *the needs of others* rather than solely for our own.¹ And so I think that a truly loving prayer for our enemies or anyone we’re at odds with might look like this: “Lord, *bless* them. Give them everything that they need to live the fullness of life. Help them to *know you*, truly and deeply; to know your presence with them and your love for them.”

Or we can pray for God to grow the fruit of the Spirit in them. “Lord, may they know your love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and generosity and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control. Grow that fruit in them and help them to live from that place.” Isn’t what we want for *ourselves*? Shouldn’t it be what we want for *everyone*?

¹ *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship (Year C, Volume 3)*, pg. 330

That kind of prayer isn't asking for God to *change* them, but to *bless* them and give them what they need to be the people God created them to be. Because the blessing of God brings about transformation. You cannot receive the blessing of God and be the same as you were before it. *That* kind of prayer makes *you* a more loving, humble person, too. And if God does indeed bless them with that, wouldn't *your* life be better for it? If your enemy, this person you're at odds with, becomes an amazing person who knows and loves God deeply, wouldn't that change *everything*? Wouldn't it change your relationship with them? And if it *didn't* change your attitude toward them, or if their blessing just makes you dislike them *more*, then chances are the problem wasn't with *them* in the first place....

Our reading from Acts tells the story of Peter, a faithful Jewish disciple of Jesus, and Cornelius, a Roman soldier. Two people who would have been at odds. The Romans were ruling and oppressing the people of Israel; they *crucified* Peter's teacher and friend Jesus. But one day Cornelius is praying (because even though he is a Roman, it says he is a believer in the God of Israel), and *as* he is praying, an angel appears to him and tells him to go see Peter. Then, as *Peter* is praying, he has a vision in which God shows him all these unclean animals and tells him to kill them and eat them. Peter says, "No way, God. Those animals are all unclean. That's against your law." And God says, "Do not call unclean what I have made clean." This happens two more times to Peter.

Peter is thinking about these visions when Cornelius' men show up at his house. And Peter puts together, "Oh, Cornelius is a Gentile, someone I would consider unclean. But God has just told me not to call unclean what God has made clean. So God must have made Cornelius and the Gentiles clean." He meets with Cornelius, talks with him, tells him about Jesus, and Cornelius

comes to faith in Jesus as the Messiah. It's not so much that he *prays for* Cornelius, but that they are connected through prayer. While they are in prayer, Cornelius is with Peter, and Peter is with Cornelius. Prayer brings them into communion.

There have been times when I was praying, trying to focus on God, and this person popped into my mind who I was having a hard time with. Not an *enemy*, but someone with whom I was not *whole*. And at first it's like, "Ugh, what are *they* doing here?!" And I would try to get them out of my mind, so that I could focus on God. But they would keep coming back. And eventually I would think, "What's going on here? Are you trying to tell me something, God?" And so I would hold that person in my mind, asking God, "What are you doing with this?" And eventually, I would pray for them, "God, bless them and give them everything they need to live the fullness of life." And it has always changed my attitude toward them.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his book *Life Together*, "I can no longer condemn or hate a [person] for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble [they] cause me. [Their] face, that hitherto may have been strange and intolerable to me, is transformed in intercession into the countenance of a brother [or sister] for whom Christ died, the face of a forgiven sinner." Bonhoeffer couldn't hate the people he prayed for, because *as* he prayed for them, he came to see them as brothers and sisters in Christ, forgiven children of God, just like him. That's what happened with Peter and Cornelius. These two people who would have been at odds came to see each other as brothers in Christ, and as a result, they were *both* transformed.

Can you *be with* this person you do not like in prayer? Can you ask God, not to *change* them but to *bless* them? Because in the process, God might bless and change *both* of you. Just pray for *them* like you would want *them* to pray for *you*.

Now, that is *very hard*. And it doesn't come naturally to us. So how can we *get there*? How can we get to a place where we can pray for our enemies with sincerity and love?

There is a little detail in the story of Peter and Cornelius that we so often miss. After we are introduced to Cornelius, it says, "One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision...." Then when it flashes to Peter a little later, it says, "About noon the next day...Peter went up on the roof to pray." Why do we need to know what *times* they were praying? That seems like such a random detail.

Well, in Peter's time, the Jewish people had a practice called "fixed hour prayer." (That's what *we* call it. They just called it *prayer*.) At set times throughout the day, they would stop what they were doing to pray – 6:00 a.m., 9:00 a.m., Noon, 3:00 p.m., 6:00 p.m., 9:00 p.m., and midnight. When was Cornelius praying? 3:00 p.m. When was Peter praying? Noon. These aren't just random details. They were following a *pattern* of time. And it's not just *here*. We see this at work other places in scripture, too. Psalm 119 says, "Seven times a day, I will praise you for your righteous laws." Seven times a day: 6 A.M., 9 A.M., Noon, 3 P.M., 6 P.M., 9 P.M., midnight. The Jewish people and the early Christians had a *pattern* of time to pray.

A lot of Christians today still follow this pattern, stopping at set times throughout the day to turn their thoughts to God. Maybe you set an alarm on your watch or phone, and when it goes off, you just spend a few moments being still and silent with God. Maybe you pray the Lord's Prayer. Maybe you pray something else. And you don't have to do all seven of them at those exact times. You can pray when you wake up, when you have lunch, and when you go to bed. You can even just do it *one* time a day; when you wake up or go to sleep, but try to keep it at the

same time each day to build consistency. It's about finding a regular consistent pattern that helps you stick with it.

You can do a daily devotion, so that there is something that you are reading each day. We have copies of "Daily Bread" devotionals in the back. They even have apps for your phone that will give you a notification, "Hey, don't forget to do your devotion today!" There are podcasts you can listen to or videos you can watch online where people lead you through guided prayer. And it's good to mix all of these up, so that it doesn't become too routine and stale, and you don't get bored with it. We want to make this something that we *want* to do regularly, not something we *have* to do.

Having a prayer *partner* is a great way to stay consistent. Someone you trust and can pray *with*, and you can hold each other accountable. We had a prayer group here of three women – Nancy Davis, Lois Francis, and Marilyn Benton – who met here to pray together every Wednesday morning at 9:00 a.m. for around 30 years! It's like exercising. It's always easier to exercise *with someone else* than it is on your own.

I have found that keeping a prayer list is a good way to keep me consistent. I have this little notebook where I write people's names down, and each day, I just go through my list. But I keep the list *with me*, somewhere that I will always see it and remember it, and I can write people's names down if I need to. And you want to pray for your enemies? Think of someone you don't like. Someone you struggle to get along with. Someone who, when you think of them, it just *bothers* you. Maybe it's someone you *know*. Maybe it's a coworker. Maybe it's a family member you're having a hard time with. Maybe it's someone like Joe Biden or Donald Trump

that you really just do not like. Just think of someone you have a hard time with. You got them? Picturing them in your mind? That's your prayer list.

There are all these different practices that can help us make prayer a regular part of our lives. It takes time, and it takes patience, and it takes practice. And the only way to *grow* in it is by *doing* it. But the more we *do* it, the "better" we get at it; the more open we are to God's presence and to hearing God's voice. Peter and Cornelius were able to be with one another in prayer and hear God's voice because they had made this a regular, consistent part of their lives. They *practiced* it. And the more that *we* practice it, the better *we* will get at hearing God's voice *and* praying for our enemies, because we come to recognize that God might be present and speaking to us through this person that we are at odds with.