

Worship and Prayer as a Means of Spiritual Growth / COB / 11.02.14

Introduction

- † How many of you practice fasting now and then? How many of you have ever fasted? Today, I want to talk about prayer and worship as a means by which God brings us sanctifying grace. What? That's a fancy churchy way of saying that prayer and worship are activities that will help us grow spiritually. Fasting sometimes is associated with prayer in the Bible, so I thought I would mention it. Someday, we will have a full sermon on fasting, but for now, let me convince you of its value.
- When the Israelites repented under the guidance of Samuel, the Bible says, **“They fasted on that day, and they confessed there, ‘We have sinned against the LORD.’ So Samuel led the people of Israel at Mizpah” [1 Samuel 7.6 NET].**
 - Regarding his time of seeking God's favor and direction about the condition of Jerusalem, Nehemiah wrote, **“When I heard these things I sat down abruptly, crying and mourning for several days. I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven” [Nehemiah 1.4 NET]**
 - When the prophet Joel wanted to call the nation to repentance and desperate begging for deliverance, he said, **“Announce a holy fast; proclaim a sacred assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the temple of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD” [Joel 1.14 NET].**
 - We see in Acts [13.2-3; 14.23] that fasting was an important part of the lives of the spiritual leaders in the early church, particularly when prayerfully selecting and anointing new spiritual leaders to be missionaries and elders.
- † How many of you have tried fasting for more than one day? What's the longest you have fasted?
- I have done what is called a juice fast: no food, but I could drink juice... or sweet iced tea. The longest I have fasted like that was five days. I had a friend who would fast for forty days leading up to Easter. On her juice fast, she could consume anything as long as it was in liquid form. I used to tease her that she was drinking fish smoothies.
- † Have any of you noticed spiritual effects from your fast? What happened?
- I had a friend who used to fast for one day, on Monday, every week, which he said was helpful for connecting to God. The problem with fasting for one day, to me, is that you are so hungry it distracts you from praying, instead of helping you focus on praying. Subsequent days are easier, because your stomach gives up sending constant pleas for food. I used to help my friend out by filling my house with the smells of the crock pot before he came over for our meetings.
 - Before I found this church, I fasted to seek God's direction in my ministry. I fasted for five days. I did not hear from God where he wanted me to go or what he wanted me to do. But I did hear something loud and clear, that I needed to fix something about myself before I would be ready to go and do. I acted on that revelation, and not long later began the hiring process with y'all.
 - So I think fasting has some spiritual value when it is combined with prayerfulness. In Matthew 4, we often think of Jesus' forty day fast as what physically weakened him enough to be tempted, but maybe the fast is what spiritually strengthened him enough to resist temptation.

Prayer

- † Ok... time to get to our main topic. My contention today is that prayer and worship are spiritual exercises that will help make us spiritually healthy and keep us spiritually growing. In fact, I would say, that if you do not pursue these activities regularly, you will not be spiritually healthy or spiritually growing for very long.
- In case there is any doubt about the seriousness of this topic for your life, let me read to you what Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 5.16-18 NET: Always rejoice, constantly pray, in everything give thanks. For this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.**
- † So let's talk about prayer. Have you ever wondered at how formal some very spiritual people are when praying? "Dear Heavenly Lord, we beseech you today to provide for your servants..." Or how our older folks – with all due respect – sometimes slip into King James English when they pray? "Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name." Or how elegantly some people express their prayers? When I first went to a small group, I had never prayed in front of people before, but LeeAnn had grown up that way and she really prayed well, so I was intimidated about trying it at all.
- Well, please don't let any of that frighten you away from praying! Prayer is just talking with God. And it is ok if people pray with formality, elegance, and even seventeenth century English, it really is, but it also is ok if you pray just the way you would talk to someone you loved and respected here on Earth.
 - Prayer is just talking with God. And you can talk with God about anything and everything. He already knows anyway, so you might as well talk it over with him! He is your source of wisdom, courage, strength, and deliverance, so go ahead and talk with God about what is going on in your life and in your mind.
 - Let's take one minute right now for you to just talk with God about whatever is on your mind.
- † In **Matthew 6.9-13 NET, Jesus said, "So pray this way: Our Father in heaven, may your name be honored, may your kingdom come, may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread, and forgive us our debts [or "sins" as in Luke], as we ourselves have forgiven our debtors [those who have sinned against us]. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."**
- We see here expressions of praise, adoration, and devotion; submission to God's will; and requests for the physical and spiritual realms of life, which reflect our dependence on God.
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- † Let's consider praise. **Psalm 117.1-2 NET: Praise the LORD, all you nations! Applaud him, all you foreigners! For his loyal love towers over us, and the LORD's faithfulness endures. Praise the LORD!**
- **Psalm 99.5 NET: Praise the LORD our God! Worship before his footstool! He is holy!**
 - **Psalm 103.1-2 NET: Praise the LORD, O my soul! With all that is within me, praise his holy name! Praise the LORD, O my soul! Do not forget all his kind deeds!**
- † I would like to read to you something from a resource by Ron Hutchcraft:
- *"Praise" - that's focusing on the size of your God instead of the size of your problems, reminding yourself of the great things God is to you and the great things He has done for you, and*

celebrating Who is really in charge of these circumstances. Praise actually has the power to “silence the foe and the avenger.” If that refers to Satan, you need to know that Satan can't stand to be around you when you're praising your Lord. And praise takes away the negative attitudes and the discouragement that he loves to work with.

- *Discouragement and depression, they themselves are “foes” and “avengers” in our lives. And the darkness of the valley often causes us to succumb to our dark side, to emotional paralysis, or to giving up, until we make the choice to climb up on the mountain that takes us above all that - Praise Mountain. You might not feel like praising God, you probably don't - that's when you need to praise God the most. It's a conscious choice to begin saying and singing God's praises instead of your complaints.*
- *Start celebrating the many ways God has worked over the months and the years. Look at the progress you've made - at how far you've come, not just how far you still have to go. Thank God for the things that didn't happen that could have happened. Praise Him for places you can see Him working in just the last 24 hours in spite of your difficulties. Start talking up the qualities you love about your Lord, the qualities that you're counting on to get you through right now.*
- *When you're in the valley, and you're looking only at what's right in front of you, you're going to just get overwhelmed and discouraged. But as you start to look at your valley from the mountain of praising God, everything is going to look different. And you can have that awesome view anytime you choose to go there.*

- † Praising God is to proclaim something wonderful about who God is or what he has done. This can help us by reminding us of how wonderful God is, how he has come through in the past, and how we can count on him to fulfill his promises in the future, including those about helping us persevere.
- How many of you have ever read Habakkuk in the Old Testament? This is what he does at the end of his prophecy. He says, ok, so the Babylonians are coming to destroy my people and my nation... but I know and can praise God for who he is and I know and can praise God for what he has done for Israel in the past, so when all seems at its most bleak, **“I will rejoice because of the LORD; I will be happy because of the God who delivers me!” [Habakkuk 3.18 NET]**. This reassurance about God will help us build our faith, persevere in hard times, trust in God, and be willing to do his will even when it hurts.
 - Let's take another minute right now, and each offer God some praise. You can praise him for one of his amazing attributes or just tell him how much you love him and are devoted to him...

† In the Bible, thanksgiving is associated with praise, for we are thankful for what God has done.

- **Psalm 95.1-2 NET: Come! Let's sing for joy to the LORD! Let's shout out praises to our protector who delivers us! Let's enter his presence with thanksgiving! Let's shout out to him in celebration!**
- **Psalm 100.4-5 NET: Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give him thanks! Praise his name! For the LORD is good. His loyal love endures, and he is faithful through all generations.**
- We can be thankful for who God has been and what he has done, who he is and what he is doing, and who we know he will be – because he does not change – and how he will be faithful to his promises in the future.

† **Colossians 4.2 NET: Be devoted to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving.**

- This is a command! Paul wanted the Colossians to be dependent on God, to be making requests of God for themselves and for his ministry, yet at the same time always to be thankful.
- **Colossians 2.6-7 NET: Therefore, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and firm in your faith just as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.**
- Even when life is going all wrong, we can be so thankful, because we have Christ's salvation, we have God's love, we have the Holy Spirit empowering us to endure, and we have a promise of ultimate deliverance in the future, first to Heaven and then to resurrection on the new Earth.

† **Philippians 4.6-7 NET: Do not be anxious about anything. Instead, in every situation, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, tell your requests to God. And the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.**

- Look at this. Paul is teaching them how to give up their anxiety. They were anxious about their standing before God, but this was because of worldly persecution and other pressures, so I think we can see this as an antidote to much of our anxiety. What does Paul say? In every situation, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, tell your requests to God. We are to be thankful even while we are begging for help and showing our dependence on God for deliverance.
- Cultivating thankfulness in the midst of adversity will bring us an inner peace that will guard our hearts and minds. As we remind ourselves of how thankful we are – as we count our worldly blessings and remind ourselves of the superlative salvation we have no matter what – our existing problems seem more manageable, we trust in God more, and so we can rest easy in his care and continue to persevere in faith and obedience.
- **Colossians 3.15-17 NET: Let the peace of Christ be in control in your heart (for you were in fact called as one body to this peace), and be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and exhorting one another with all wisdom, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, all with grace in your hearts to God. And whatever you do in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.**
- Peace will reign in us if we are thankful; that peace and that thankfulness will grow if we stay focused on the truth of God's revelation, if we encourage one another with teachings and songs comprised of that truth. We will realize the fruit of the Spirit and reflect the character of God better when we are thankful. This is not immediate, like throwing a switch, but if we cultivate thankfulness, we will see a vast difference in ourselves over time.
- Let's take another minute right now, to tell God how thankful we are, for both spiritual blessings and worldly blessings...

† As we saw in Philippians a moment ago, we are told to make our requests known to God. In doing this, we admit our dependence on God to help us, and this acknowledgment of dependence itself is helpful in keeping us humble and walking with God.

- **1 Timothy 2.1-2 NET: First of all, then, I urge that requests, prayers, intercessions, and thanks be offered on behalf of all people, even for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life in all godliness and dignity.**

- There is nothing about which you could not approach your loving God. He is waiting to hear from you, and he wants you to make your requests. Don't think you are being selfish! He wants you to acknowledge that you are dependent on him and to talk with him about your needs and even your desires!
- We are to pray for ourselves, but also we are to pray intercessions, that is we ask God to intercede for others, we pray for their needs. In many of his letters, Paul says both that he is praying for his readers and that he requests they would pray for him.
- **Ephesians 6.18 NET: With every prayer and petition, pray at all times in the Spirit, and to this end be alert, with all perseverance and requests for all the saints. Pray for me also, that I may be given the message when I begin to speak– that I may confidently make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may be able to speak boldly as I ought to speak.**
- You see Paul wanted prayer for ministry effectiveness and to represent God well. We should always be praying for that for ourselves and for others. I personally covet your prayers and appreciate that many of you are lifting up LeeAnn and me before the Lord regularly.
- Let's take a minute to lift our requests to God and then another to lift requests on behalf of someone else. I will tell you when to shift from yourself to others...

- † In that same Ephesians passage, we see another element, praying in the Spirit. All that means is that you are willingly submitted to Christ in that moment, you willingly are yielding to the Spirit in that moment, you consciously desire to be God's person, to have his will be done as Jesus prayed.
 - If you are open to the Spirit's guidance, he will guide your thoughts in prayer. You might even be surprised to hear what is coming out of your mouth sometimes! At a spiritual retreat, gazing out over the river and beautiful grasslands, I was shocked[!] to hear myself tell God I was willing to work in full-time ministry if that was his will; yet fifteen years later, here we are...
 - And I will tell you this, the secret to praying well out loud in front of others is to let the Spirit lead you and pray from the heart. You don't have to worry about being elegant or fancy, just authentic.
- † **1 Peter 5.6-7 NET: And God will exalt you in due time, if you humble yourselves under his mighty hand by casting all your cares on him because he cares for you.**
 - Peter says we humble ourselves by depending on God, instead of trying to be self-reliant. This is a step of growth in itself. It also brings up the question of praying for our own submission.
 - David prayed, **Psalm 25.4-5 NET: Make me understand your ways, O LORD! Teach me your paths! Guide me into your truth and teach me. For you are the God who delivers me; on you I rely all day long.**
 - Again, he prayed, **Psalm 86.11 NET: O LORD, teach me how you want me to live! Then I will obey your commands. Make me wholeheartedly committed to you!**
 - We can only grow to be like Christ, grow in faith and obedience, if God extends his grace to us. But praying for submission can bring us humility and conviction of our need to change, which both are means God uses to grow us, and it also petitions God to do the work in us.

† Another form of submission is to confess our sins and our repentance of them. **1 John 1.8-9 NET: If we say we do not bear the guilt of sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous, forgiving us our sins and cleansing us from all unrighteousness.**

- As I told the young and older men of the Christian Service Brigade, I think this confession includes repentance. Let me explain. Suppose you are walking down the wrong path, in sin, away from God; you could gaily admit that you are sinning – even a demon could admit that – but that by itself does no good, if you stay on the wrong path. Repentance is simply turning around – that’s all it means – so you turn off the path of sin and back onto the path of walking with God. Now you confess: “God I know I was wrong, I was sinning, and I am sorry; thank you for your forgiveness; please help me to be obedient to you, to walk with you, going forward.”
- This act of confession with repentance not only humbles us, it brings about God’s spiritual cleansing, so we can better be his image, reflecting the character of Christ.
- Let’s take two minutes here, to confess our recent sins and ask him for help to be submitted and obedient going forward.

† What we commonly call worship is another form of prayer, but usually it is musical in nature.

- When God delivered the Jews from Egypt’s chariots in the exodus, they sang a song to God [Exodus 15.1].
- David wrote many of the psalms as songs and he sang these songs to God [2 Samuel 22.1].
- David also formed a band – did you know that? King David formed a band out of the Levites – with stringed instruments, trumpets, and cymbals, and told them to sing loudly and joyfully to God as they brought home the Ark of the Covenant [1 Chronicles 15.16, 28-29].
- While they played, David was somewhat wildly dancing! So let’s take a minute and all get up... ha! I seriously considered it, but I wasn’t sure I had enough influence to pull it off! In Florida or Texas, I would not have hesitated, but I wasn’t sure how you would react! One time, when I was leading a small group of high school boys, I put on Passion’s “Dance in the River” and I made those boys dance! I even made them hold hands, because in the middle of the song, Chris Tomlin says to hold hands across the aisle, because the idea is the whole church is dancing!
- Maybe we will dance together in the future. Hey, King David danced wildly in worship; his sinful wife מִיכָל criticized him; keep that in mind.
- There are many commands to sing to God in scripture. **James 5.13 says, “Is anyone among you suffering? He should pray. Is anyone in good spirits? He should sing praises” [NET].**

† Like all prayer, we worship because we recognize God is worthy of our dependence, devotion, and submission, and we worship in response to what God is doing for us, in us, and through us.

- Jesus said, **“true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such people to be his worshipers” [John 4.23 NET].** That means we must genuinely worship God from a heart and mind that is aware of who he really is and what he has done, through our knowledge of Christ and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.
- Like we saw in Colossians 3, **Ephesians 5.18-21 NET** says when you are filled by the Holy Spirit, you will be **“speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making**

music in your hearts to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for each other in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, and submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

- This reminds us that the psalms were written to be sung, and that the Holy Spirit will guide us to times of intentional musical worship.
 - The Spirit also will guide us to worship through observing the ordinances of the church: water baptism and communion. We celebrate and worship together at these events.
- † Each of these intentional worship experiences is not transformational if we simply go through the motions. But what is happening inside us when we genuinely give all of ourselves to God can be transformational.
- For example, taking communion [as we will in a few minutes] is not transformational in the action itself, but it can be transformational if we approach it in humble remembrance of what Christ has done for us. Then we remind ourselves of God’s generosity and sovereignty, we humble ourselves and admit our need for grace, and we experience deeper commitment and faith in Christ.

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- † The action of praying is not transformational in itself, so rote repetition or simply going through the motions is meaningless [Matthew 6.7-8]. However, heart-felt, passionate prayer can result in transformation, through our declaration of faith, that we trust, praise, thank, depend on, and submit to our God, and by God’s response to our prayer of changing our hearts or revealing his will.
- We should note that though we go in prayer to speak with God, to request of God, often he uses times of prayer to speak to us and shape us to his will. This is part of praying in the Spirit too: as we submit, yield, and humble ourselves, we become sensitive to his voice, to the prompting of the Spirit, and thus we know and accept his will for us.
 - In the psalms of lament, the author began with complaints and desperate requests, but ended with praise and thanksgiving, because he had allowed God to shape his thoughts. For example, **Psalm 10 begins, “Why, LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you pay no attention during times of trouble?” [10.1 NET];** but by the end the author says, **“LORD, you have heard the request of the oppressed; you make them feel secure because you listen to their prayer” [10.17 NET].**
 - So even prayers of complaint, if done in the right spirit, that is being yielded to the Spirit, can be transformational, as God works in your heart and mind, and transforms your character.
- † All of these prayerful disciplines are means God has revealed through which he chooses to work to make us more like Christ, more like the image of God we were created to be.

Conclusion

- † Prayer and worship are not sufficient by themselves to guarantee you spiritual health and growth, but they are necessary. If you do not invest time in them, you will not remain spiritually healthy and growing for very long. I would bet that the more you invest in them, the better off you likely will be!
- Let’s make a commitment to ourselves and our God: that we will take a little time – quiet, alone, and still time – to be with God every day, to pray our requests for ourselves and others, to praise him, worship him, and thank him, and to submit to him and confess our sins to him. In fact, let’s take a minute to make that commitment right now...