



3 Week Series

Week 1: Prayer: An Oprah-Style Sermon

Colossians 1:1-14

What is prayer? We will explore this question in an “Oprah-style” sermon. That means it isn’t just one-sided—Oprah asks the questions, and her guests or the audience respond.

1. Who taught you to pray?

2. Where is your favorite place to pray?

3. So, what is prayer?

Prayer is all of the answers an audience might give to these questions, plus everything we do to communicate with God. Prayer can be with eyes closed and a bowed head. Prayer can be a big shout of “Thank you, God,” when you get the promotion at work, when your spouse comes through surgery, or when your child is born. Prayer can be a walk at dusk spent in awe of the creation. It can be a commute to work with the car radio off— just listening. Prayer is many things.

Because prayer is so many things, I want to share with you what prayers have been helpful in my spiritual life. At different times in my life, different styles of prayer seem to fit. I’m a talker; I don’t refresh myself through solitude and being alone. I get charged up and excited spending time in conversation with other people. Consequently, sitting alone and listening for God and to God is not my strong suit. God speaks to me, but not often in the still, small voice that Elijah heard while he sat on that mountaintop and meditated. I hear God in different ways. By observing the world and interacting with other people, I can discern God’s will for my life. That discernment is often part of my prayer life, talking with others and asking how they see God at work. One way I pray is to listen to God through other people.

But we all need to change our habits sometimes. My first real job was a miserable experience. My boss was extremely threatening, and I was afraid to go to work. It was such a frightening environment that I was advised to keep a tape recorder on my desk. I would cry every morning in the shower. As I opened the front door of my workplace, I would feel my stomach drop to the floor. I would run up the stairs to my office and hope everything would go all right that day. But as frightening as that job was, I wouldn’t take back those six months for anything. Because in the midst of that awful situation, I felt God’s protection and presence in a way I never have before or since.

Each day I ran the gauntlet to my office and spent the next hour in prayer. In order to survive, I vowed to give God that first hour in prayer and meditation. Remember, I said I’m not good at listening to God for an entire hour of silence. Since I had trouble focusing in the silence, I found books and written prayers. I tried several different books on meditation until I found the one that fit me. Every morning I used a prayer a friend had given me. And I read a variety of Christian books. Each of these aids on meditation focused me on God. Being so caught up in what was going on in my life and surviving that job, I needed these Christian resources to help center me back on God. That is another type of prayer, using the works of other Christians to help us find our way to God.

When my father died I came to understand another form of prayer that really saved my life. It was a

difficult time with many unanswered questions. Through the dreadful time of his funeral, I found the Psalms helpful. In the book of Psalms, you can find every human emotion. There are passages in which we can yell at God through our anger, cry with God in our sorrow, rejoice, and give thanks. Whatever our emotion or state of mind, the Psalms can help us reach out to God. So, at my dad's funeral, I found a breath prayer from the Psalms helpful. A breath prayer is a sentence that you say over and over to yourself, sometimes in bad situations and sometimes in good ones, where you refocus yourself on God. My breath prayer is from Psalm 121: "I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the LORD" (v. 1). When I am in difficult situations and anger or fear grips my life, I remember this breath prayer, and I know that God is present in my life and that God is the only help I need.

In your bulletin you will find a space for a breath prayer. Please take a few minutes. What sentence will remind you to refocus on God? *[Give the congregation a few moments to record prayers.]*

Would any of you like to share your breath prayer? Remember, this is an "Oprah-style" sermon. *[Be sure everyone can hear those who choose to share their prayers.]*

When all else fails, and you don't know what to say and have nothing to read, thanksgiving is always a good place to start. Today we are going to give thanks and praise. In the Colossians passage, Paul gives thanks for the little church at Colosse and the people there struggling to grow in their knowledge of God. Paul shows us that giving thanks is another way to pray. In all of our situations, there is always at least one thing for which we can give God praise. When we don't know what to say, or just have not talked to God in a while, giving thanks is a good place to start.

Take another moment to pray by writing down your thanks. This is a time to push everything else aside and focus your life on the blessings that you have received through your Lord.

Okay, "Oprah" is back.

1. What are you thankful for?
2. What is God doing in this world to be thankful for?
3. What is God doing in this church for which you would like to give thanks?

[Listen to and celebrate the congregational sharing.]

Amen.

Week 2: Presence: Why Are You Here?

1 Corinthians 1:18

Why are you here in church this morning? Why are you here? Seriously, ask yourself the question and really ponder it for a moment. Why are you in church this morning?

Your answers may range anywhere from it is just what you do on Sunday morning, or you woke up early and thought you would see what was going on, or because you're supposed to be, or to see what everybody is wearing, or to find out how your friends are doing. These may be some of your initial responses, but we all are here to worship God in community. We come to meet God here in this sanctuary and to learn about our faith and how to serve Jesus Christ. That is our promise at baptism, that we will be present with the people of God.

But what must our coming together and giving ourselves to the church look like to outsiders? Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:18, "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

If you put yourself in the place of our neighbor, who is still at home this morning, sleeping in or enjoying a second cup of coffee as she or he leisurely reads the newspaper, this must seem crazy.

Paul says it must truly look foolish to the outsider. If you were sitting at home right now, and didn't know about Jesus Christ and the wonders that he can do in your heart and the amazing power Christ has to offer salvation, this church stuff might really look foolish. Why in the world would you get up early on a Sunday morning? Yes, this must really look crazy to our neighbors who sit inside their cozy, warm homes on Sunday mornings.

That, or something like it, is what Paul is saying in this verse. He is pointing out the obvious—the rest of the world thinks we believers are crazy, and that isn't a bad thing. "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." If you don't go to church, if you don't know about the salvation Jesus offers, if you don't know about the family that can be formed between common strangers, then the church is foolishness.

But we know why we are here.

We know that it isn't foolishness or craziness. We are being saved, and it is the power of God. We know that when we sit in the pews, when we talk to one of our sisters or brothers in the faith, when we listen to the beauty of the organ or the choir lifts their voices in song, when we hear the words of Christ proclaimed, we know why we are here. We know that Christ has given us a wonderful and powerful gift and that it isn't foolishness. We are here to be present with one another, our families, and to be in the presence of God. We come to worship God and to be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.

The message of Jesus must truly seem like foolishness to outsiders. We follow a Savior who died on a tree and rose again after three days.

That's pretty unbelievable, but it is true. We believe that Jesus rose from the dead. We know that a little old rugged cross couldn't hold Christ down, or a tomb with a gravestone; a cave with a big old rock rolled in front could not hold him down. Christ took on all our pain and suffering, became like us, so he could identify with us and we could relate to him. Jesus became human so we just might get a better idea about God's unconditional, absolute, never-ending, never-changing, forever-stable love. In Jesus Christ, God shows us how deeply God cares for us.

We know our future, and that means we know why we are here. Our faith is not just about remembering some past act.

Our faith is about filling us for the present and preparing us for the future, and that is not foolish. As I said, you come here on Sunday mornings; you leave the paper, the television, and the warmth to come to church. You spend your evenings in committee meetings. You miss the evening news, you leave your families who are just finishing dessert, and you come to the church to talk about doing the stuff of ministry for others, planning activities for other people's children, painting the church when your own house still needs another coat of paint. Then, to top it off, you give your money. You sacrifice a trip to the movies, a pizza from the local pizzeria, or another new outfit on sale at the mall, for the church. You give out of your firstfruits, not to get another tax rebate, but because God invites you to do so.

We do all this because we know there is something greater than our lives in the world. We are present with one another in the church to give just a little back, because God has given us so much in Jesus Christ and because God is a constant presence with us.

Why are you here? Why do you give your time, your money? Why come and be present in the church?

"For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." We really can't answer any of those questions because, unless you know the power of God and the awesomeness of a faith in Jesus Christ, it just seems like foolishness.

Be filled this hour with the very power of God and then go, and show someone why you are here.

Amen.

Week 3: Gifts and Service: Use What You Got!

Luke 16:1-8

The Broadway musical *The Life* follows a group of prostitutes and their pimps in the late 1970s on New York's Forty-second Street. The play begins with JoJo, the local con artist, singing about using what you have "to get whatcha want, / before whatcha got is gone" (Ira Gasman, "Use What You Got," *The Life*, Sony Music Entertainment, 1997).

The parable of the shrewd steward reminds me of this song. But how can a parable of Jesus be compared to a song about using people? The steward seems like the character JoJo, using everyone and everything to get his own way. This steward doesn't sound like a character that should be in the New Testament, let alone be an example of Jesus. Are we supposed to follow a person who squanders and cheats to get ahead?

There is no initial redemption for the steward; verse 1 shows how the steward has been squandering his master's property. In ancient culture being a steward was a coveted job because it elevated a person's social standing and importance in the community. While the steward was trusted by his master and given the power to look after his goods and property, the passage says, "Charges were brought to [the master] that this man was squandering his property" (Luke 16:1). These were awful charges, and commentators suggest that not only was he squandering the master's property, but the steward was also slandering his name in the process. So far, the steward is like JoJo.

The steward, now caught red-handed, must examine his options after leaving his current position. Not only is he facing a job loss; his entire life will change when the master releases him. Imagine how desperate he feels, about to lose everything. At the point of desperation, the steward asks himself, "What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me?" (v. 3). Then, as any logical person would, he begins to examine his prospects for the future. He sits down and weighs his options. The steward says, "I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg" (v. 3). You can almost hear the honesty when he admits to himself that he does not like his options: manual labor or begging.

At this juncture of the story, I imagine Jesus saying that this man will turn from his wicked ways and believe in God. Here he is, desperate, without job or status, facing the prospects of begging or hard labor. I know Jesus will say that the steward will mend his ways just like the prodigal son. The steward will realize that he has done wrong, beg for forgiveness, and apologize for squandering the master's property.

But this is where Jesus gets us. As in many of Jesus' parables, the expected doesn't happen. Instead of turning toward God and admitting his wrongs, the steward decides upon a plan to save his reputation. He decides to lower the debts owed to his master in the hope of making friends when he is out of work. He acts like JoJo again and uses what he's got to get what he wants before he ain't got no more. He is running out of time; the master will soon return to remove the steward from his post. He must act quickly and get what he wants before the master catches up with him.

So here we have the main character of a Jesus parable squandering his master's money and using his power to get an advantage in the future. We expect the steward to face serious consequences, but Jesus gets us again. The steward isn't run out of town on a rail or tarred and feathered or thrown in prison. Instead, the Scripture says the master "commended" the manager for being dishonest and acting shrewdly (v. 8). What is happening when Jesus has a guy getting commended for being a cheat? Jesus ends the parable this way: "For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light" (v. 8).

I don't believe Jesus is instructing us to go out and cheat our masters or squander money that is not

ours. Rather, Jesus is saying something very powerful. Jesus is telling us to use what we got, to get what we want, before we ain't got no more. Unlike JoJo and the steward, however, we as Christians are called to something more than our own selfish desires. We are called to use the gifts God has given us to get what we want. What we want is to serve Jesus and live life every day, not in a self-consumed manner as the steward does, but to live a life rich toward God. Jesus wants us to use what we got, all of our gifts, in service to him.

We *can* learn from the steward. We can examine our lives and use what we've got to get what we want. God has given each of us gifts and calls us to use them. Through our membership in Christ's church, we have pledged to use all we have in service to him.

The possibilities are endless. We must use what we've got to get what we want. But we must remember that what we want is not for ourselves; it is not so that we can keep our jobs or buy new fancy clothes or remain members of the country club. What we want is to use our gifts to serve Jesus Christ.

Remember, "you gotta use what you got" to serve Jesus Christ. Amen.

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