

“MOUNTAIN VIEWS – PRAYER”  
A SERMON BASED ON MATTHEW 6:5-15  
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,  
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO  
SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 25, 2018  
10:00 a.m.

People can be intimidated at the thought of praying.

One of the easiest ways for me to cause a near stampede out of a room,

is to suggest that we take turns praying,

Out. Loud.

You could ride a surf board on the wave of panic.

But even on our own, with no one watching or overhearing,

prayer can intimidate us.

We find ourselves wondering if we are doing it right,

if there are some sort of instructions that have been missed,

whether we've prayed for too long or too short a time,

whether we used the right words in the right order.

We want prayer to work.

We want to get prayer right.

Philip Yancey is one of my favourite Christian authors.

He published a book on Prayer.

That is its title. Prayer.

Good solid Christian title for a Christian book.

But what I really love,

is the subtitle.

‘Does it make any difference?’

Does prayer make any difference?

You aren’t really allowed to ask that question in church.

It is a question that you are supposed to anxiously wonder to yourself.

So we bolster ourselves along,

convincing ourselves that it does work,

that it does make a difference,

while hoping that we are doing it right.

We love those social science studies on prayer that came out in past years

There were studies conducted

that compared the length of hospital stay,

for those who receive prayed,  
vs. those who receive no prayer.

The studies would seem to suggest that prayer does indeed work.

Those prayed for have shorter hospital stays.

That's what we like to hear.

This is why I love Philip Yancey's subtitle.

He asked the question we want to ask,

for which we would have tongues clucked at us in church

if we asked it outloud.

Does it make a difference?

Am I doing it right?

We want to know,

because while we may have our prayer journals

sitting atop our bedside table

with all the checkmarks next to it,

where God has given us what we asked for,

there is also that piece of paper,

torn from the journal with disappointment,  
folded over in pain and anger,  
and shoved under the socks, hidden from sight.

Those prayers,

where God didn't heal.

where God didn't intervene.

where God seemed absolutely deaf and silent,

make us wonder if we know how to pray.

Pam Vredevelt is a family counselor

who has written a little devotion book for parents.

Her youngest child Nathan had been born with Down Syndrome.

She describes quite honestly and transparently,

how the shock and upset of the first few weeks after his birth,

the immediate heart surgery,

and other serious health concerns,

the severe disruption to family life,

and her expectations of life,

lead to a long-time struggle with powerful anxiety.

She says

“I suffered from spontaneous feelings of impending doom,  
irrational fears that a family member  
would be harmed or killed,  
and an all-round heightened sense of anxiety.

She was a mother-hen on steroids.

She says,

“I used all the therapeutic interventions I knew  
to combat the unwelcome anxiety.  
Healthy self-talk, diversions, debriefing with friends,  
exercise, prayer, Scripture reading, singing praise songs.

You name it, I did it.

And much of the time, I found relief.

But” she says, “there was a day when...  
well, relief didn’t come.”

It was her older son Ben’s ninth birthday.

They had gone to the local roller skating rink for the party.

They were having a great time.

She had just come off the rink

when she had a sense of looming calamity sweep over her,  
she found herself wrestling with dark images  
of one of the kids getting hurt.

She said to herself,

“This is ridiculous. I’m not giving in to this fear.

This is my son’s birthday.”

For good measure, she prayed.

“Lord, I thank you for all the children who came to Ben’s party today.

Please protect every one of them from harm and danger.

Keep them safe and watch over their time together.”

She forced herself to focus on something else.

And she says, ‘The fear dissolved.’

Seeing some fun skating moves on the rink an hour or so later,

she went to grab her camera.

Ben and his friend came around the rink,

they were doing the pull-through.

Ben reached his hands down between his legs,  
grabbed his friend's hands and pulled him through and up.

Pam didn't get the picture the first time,  
yelled to them to do it again.

This time Ben's skate caught his friend's  
and they both went flying through the air.

Ben's friend landed on top of him,  
smacking his head into the cement floor.

The next thing Pam saw was Ben with his hand to his bloody mouth,  
and frantically wailing,  
"My teeth, my teeth, my teeth!"

Sure enough, his front teeth were broken.

They did the parental frantic scramble,  
getting towels for the blood,  
making arrangements with the other parents  
for care of the remaining kids at the birthday party,

making the emergency call to the dentist  
and rushing right there.

Sitting in the chair next to the dentist' chair her son was in.

The question came.

She says,

“On the outside, I maintained composure for Ben’s sake.

But inside, I was a torrent of swirling emotions.

I was sad that Ben’s beautiful,  
permanent front teeth were ruined.

I was angry that this mishap happened  
right after my fervent prayer for protection.

I wondered why I’d even bothered to pray.

It felt like God had ignored my prayers.

Does it make a difference?

Am I doing it right?

She says the next day she went for a walk with her friend Joy.

Told her about the experience,

her bewilderment.



How much she really wanted to hear God's perspective.

Then Pam said,

“I really shouldn't be bellyaching.

This is nothing

compared to what my cousin and his wife have gone through.

Their son Caleb

was suffering from life threatening heart complications,

found by accident when his dad,

a doctor, spontaneously took Caleb's pulse

after his morning run.

Caleb had merely said, take my pulse Dad!

Joy said to Pam,

“Aren't those the same cousins with the little boy

whose teeth God healed?”

Caleb's brother Luke had a congenital condition

of a missing tooth bud.

His mother Suzanne had had it.

His older brother Caleb had it.

Suzanne had been worrying

about how she was going to pay for all these orthodontics,

when a friend of hers told her to pray about it.

She did, not thinking much of it.

Several years later,

Luke was at the dentist and they took x-rays.

The dentist told the technician she had brought the wrong ones.

Luke's charts showed a tooth bud missing.

“You've given me the wrong pictures.

These aren't Luke's.”

Sure enough they were.

Luke had his tooth.

One woman's prays for protection,

her son sits in a dentist chair receiving repairs from the accident.

Another casually prays and her son is given a tooth from nowhere,

yet his brother has a heart defect.

If God was going to work, and answer prayer,

why not work on the heart?

Prayer – why bother when the answers to prayer seem so random.

Why pray when it seems

that God is just going to do what he wants anyway?

John Ortberg compares our life of prayer

to the television show ‘Let’s Make a Deal.’

At the end of the show, contestants had the opportunity,

to give up what they had won thus far,

for what was behind door one, two or three.

It was a desperate time for the contestants.

Behind one door might lie a fantastic prize,

behind another, the show’s announcer dressed like a toddler

in a giant rocking chair.

What the contestants would desperately have loved,

is insider information.

To have knowledge about what was behind the doors

so they could choose.

Ortberg makes the argument that our prayers for guidance,

are often just the desire for insider information.

“Many people give little thought to spiritual guidance

until they face a major decision:

whom to marry,

which house to buy,

where to go to school,

what job to accept?

What these people really want is not guidance,

in any Christian sense of the term.

They want 'inside information;

so they will know which door to choose.

They want to know beforehand which choice will lead  
to money, happiness and success.”

Many books on prayer could be titled,

Prayer – How To Get God Working For You.

Much of our understanding of prayer

is that of a lobbyist trying to obtain government funds.

Get the petition.

The more names in agreement, the better.

Cry the loudest.

Be persistent.

Stick with it. Have faith.

Use your connections.

We treat prayer as a means to get from God what we want.

When we don't get what we want,

we question God.

His power, his love, his effectiveness.

And we find ourselves asking does it make a difference?

And if we are doing it right.

C.S. Lewis is one of the great Christian authors of the 20th century.

Some of his classic works include Mere Christianity,

and the Narnia series.

Shadowlands is the film portrayal of his life.

After spending many of his years as a bachelor,

Lewis finds love late in life, in Joy Greshem.

But tragically, not long after their marriage,

Joy was diagnosed with cancer.

In the movie a scene takes place outside her hospital room.

Two of Lewis' close friends from Oxford are waiting for him,

while he is in Joy's room receiving word

on whether the initial treatments had worked.

One friend is the chaplain.

The other is an atheist professor.

They are talking.

The Chaplain declares

that if Joy (Mrs. Lewis) recovers from cancer,

it will be a "victory for the power of prayer."

He is challenged immediately by the atheist professor,

who goads him with questions

about who qualifies for divine aid

and whether or not God intervenes only when asked

and whether or not there's a need to pray

if God already knows and does what's best for us.

The Chaplain, obviously stumped, dodges the questions.

Just then Lewis approaches and reports the good news

that Joy's cancer has gone into remission.

The Chaplain, smugly smiling,

loudly chalks up this remission to the earnest,

persistent prayers of her deserving husband,

intimating that Lewis's prayers have at last

prompted God to remedial action.

Lewis passionately rejects this notion.

"That's not why I pray, Harry," he says.

"I pray because I can't help myself.

I pray because I'm helpless.

I pray because the need flows out of me all the time,

waking and sleeping.

Prayer doesn't change God.

It changes me."

So today,

when we hear Jesus teach us how to pray,

and correct some practices and habits we have developed in prayer

well, it's a bit of a relief to have his guidance.

Jesus' teaching on prayer is painfully simple.

When you pray, don't pray in order to be seen and heard by others.

When you pray, go to a secret place.

When you pray, don't be babbling on with many words.

This then is how you should pray.

If you are going to pray, pray this.

54 words.

26 seconds.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come. Your will be done.

Which is another way to say.

You are God. I am not. You are in control.

Give us this day our daily bread.

Which is another way to say

May I have what I need for today Lord, not for tomorrow,

not for next week, next month, or next year, today.



Forgive us our debts.

In the way we have forgiven our debtors.

Which is our reminder to be humble.

We've done damage and we owe.

It is a prayer that we be wise enough to release

the debt others owe us,

that bitterness will not own us.

Lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil.

It is a simple request to be guided on the right path.

It is the simplest of prayers.

You are God.

Grant what I need for today.

May I know the grace of forgiveness, received and given.

And be guided toward the good.

This then is how you should pray, Jesus said.

This is the prayer in it's clear simplicity, that can change you.

This is the prayer you can pray if you don't know what to pray.

This is the prayer that can keep your faith vital.

George Hebert is a 16th century poet.

He calls prayer 'the soul's blood.'

Prayer, the soul's blood,

is God moving in you and through you and giving you life.

Prayer is your connection with God,

him flowing in you and through you.

Prayer is your soul's vitality.

Your life.

Prayer is vitality.

Prayer is life.

Prayer is God moving in us and through us and giving us life.

Prayer is our connection with God.

God flowing in us and through us.

This then is how you should pray.

Not for others to hear or see, but on your own.

Not with many babbling words, but with the 56 Jesus gave you.

Not with an agenda for God, but with your need to connect with God.

Connect to God, Our Father in heaven.

and you'll know you are doing it right,

and it will make a difference.

Amen.