



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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**Trilogy of Prayer:
(2)
Am I Listening to God?
Dr. Bruce Lancaster**

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Trilogy of Prayer: (2) Am I Listening to God?

Psalm 130 & 131

Luke 18:9-14

This is the second of the three sermons on prayer I had planned for a series. The first sermon asked the question, “God, are you listening?”

I concluded that sermon with the statement that I had some firm convictions about prayer.

One: When I pray, and it doesn’t seem as if God is listening, I will not surrender to the silence. God is listening.

And, second, when I pray, it is not with a perfect knowledge of God, but it is with a firm desire to seek God's will and have the faith to walk in it.

That’s why my next question is, “Am I listening to God?”

Even though we so often begin our prayers asking God to hear us, isn’t it you and I who need to listen?

And I think this is where this parable takes us.

When you read one of Jesus’ stories, it’s so important to note the ‘why’ of the story in order to understand it, to get what Jesus means.

Eugene Peterson, in his translation of the Bible, introduces the story in this way: *Jesus told this next story to some who were complacently pleased with themselves over their moral performance and looked down their noses at the common people.*

Jesus points out that the Pharisee was ‘exalting himself,’ focusing on his own merits, which leads to the deeper meaning of this parable: How can you really listen to God if you are standing on the premises of your own perfection?

The tax collector was able to make full disclosure, “God, be merciful to me a sinner.”

The mystery of prayer in this parable is that because the Tax Collector knew there was a great distance between himself and God, he paid more attention to God, he wanted to hear what God had to say.

We want God to listen to us, but are we listening to God?

In his classic book, *On Listening to Another*, Douglas Steere lists four qualities of a good listener: *vulnerability, acceptance, expectancy, and constancy.*

These marks of a good listener also mark the prayer of the Tax Collector.

He was vulnerable. Glenn Hinson notes that ‘vulnerability’ comes from the Latin words meaning ‘capable of being wounded, able to be hurt.’

The Tax Collector was vulnerable. He acknowledged his hurt as a sinner; he confessed; he opened himself to God at the place of his hurt.

Prayer is about our willingness to come before God with all of who we are: our strengths and our weaknesses, our warts and our halos.

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The second mark is 'acceptance.' And this is the difference between the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

Now, in Steere's book, it's a matter of accepting the other person for who they are: To listen without our biases or prejudices or preconceived notions of the other.

So, in listening to God, it is to let God be God; not some cosmic room service, not a customer representative of some divine-line shopping experience and we expect our order to be delivered prime-time tomorrow!

Gary Habermas, a philosophy professor, is a man of prayer. When his grandmother was ill, he prayed for her, and she was healed.

Then his wife of 28 years was diagnosed with cancer, inoperable and terminal. He tells the story of himself that he prayed God's will might be done.

What he really wanted, he said, was the same as he had prayed for his grandmother, that his wife would be healed, that he would have her back well and healthy, just as it always had been.

But before Debbie, his wife, died, she told him one evening, "God spoke to me today and he said just three words, 'I love you.'"

Gary Habermas was grief-stricken at her death, but he said this, "Debbie had doubted God's love all the days of her life, yet now she was as sure of God's love for her as she was of my love for her."

He went on to say, “I trust God to have a good answer to my prayers. That’s not the same as knowing what the answer will be.”

Acceptance is truly to pray and let God be present, to let be God be God in all that is happening.

Especially today in the darkness that is more than a shadow of death, but a darkness that seeps into our very marrow: El Paso; Dayton, Ohio; Gilroy, California; the murder of Pittsburgh Police Officer Calvin Hall; and the list is sadly endless.

How is God present in all that is happening?

Day after day, night after night in our prayers we try to make sense of the violence; we wring our hands and shake our heads.

And we seem to always come to the same conclusion: They are monsters. We somehow forget that they, like us, are children of God and were created in God's image and it is their actions that are monstrous.

As someone pointed out to me, “We ask questions like: How could he do such a thing? Where is God? We need to be asking (she said): How is my complacency in a culture of violence resulting in the death of members of my community?”

And I think the idea of is not that God will “fix” all these needs and concerns, but rather that together we will hear the call for engagement, concern, and action, wherever possible.

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Dr. Diana Hayes is helpful as she says, "This is our calling as Christian faithful:... to reach out a hand of hope, to speak a word of love, to sing a song of happiness, to share a tear of joy or pain, to speak a word of praise, to murmur a prayer, to stand together against those forces that would divide us, isolate us, and block our flow toward home."

Which leads to the third quality of a good listener, 'expectancy': To listen to God in our prayers so that this relationship with God grows and develops.

Noted Christian writer Brian McLaren tells of how the great C. S. Lewis would ask, "What is the most significant conversation you have every day?"

"That's easy," people would say, "Your conversation with God, of course."

"No," Lewis would reply. "It's the conversation you have with yourself before you speak to God, because in that conversation with yourself, you decide whether you are going to be honest and authentic with God, or whether you are going to meet God with a false face, a mask, an act, a pretense."

As we invest more time and more of who we really are in prayer and less of exalting ourselves, we will begin to develop a relationship with God that makes hearing God, I don't want to say 'easier', but that we're more aware of God speaking.

Less of us, more of God.

We expect to hear God, not like sitting across the table from someone drinking coffee but when we hear God, it's more likely to be a word that has grown in us, and sometimes comes to us in a flash of insight, the seed that has grown through the cultivation of prayer, "I hear you."

Finally, the mark of a good listener is 'constancy.'

Steere describes this constancy as 'infinite patience': What the psalmist describes as 'a watchman waiting for the morning'.

To be 'constant' in our listening is "to stay with the other" until the end of what the other is saying...no interrupting!

I like what Martha Moore-Keish says in her recent book, *Christian Prayer for Today*: "Prayer requires our attention so that we might have our eyes opened to the way things really are."

Or, for the purposes of this sermon, 'so that we might have our ears open...'

We need to be constant, attentive for God's voice to lead us, sustain us, nourish us. As Clarence Bauman said, "*The purpose of prayer is not to inform God of our needs, but to invite God in to rule our lives.*"

That's the question. Are we listening to God: vulnerable, accepting, expecting, constant?

So, I come to the close of this sermon with the same thought as the first sermon on prayer. Prayer in its most fundamental sense is about our relationship with God.

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God is listening to you and me, and as this relationship grows, we begin to grow into God's will for our lives, not because we learn some magic formula about prayer, but simply because, through prayer, we are able to live more and more in Christ and for Christ to live in us.

It's what I call, and we'll talk about it next Sunday, the adventure of living prayer.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.



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