

Ungrateful Prayers

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Exodus 16:2-15

“The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.”

Many of us are uncomfortable with prayer. We get nervous, we fidget, and we often just don't know what to do. We are uncomfortable with prayer. We freeze up when we see the pastor point right at us and he says, “Brother Jones, why don't you lead us in prayer.” All of a sudden all eyes, and all ears are focused on you. You begin to sweat, your throat gets dry, and you hope you can think of something to say that will show theological depth, something that will show true piety, something that will show how great of a Christian you are, and at the same time will be humble and unassuming. We are uncomfortable with prayer. Maybe when you are asked to pray, you feel like a child surrounded by adults, towering over you, judging you, and waiting to point out where you went wrong in your prayer. We are uncomfortable with prayer.

We wonder, what if we say the wrong words, what if we go too long, or too short, and often we wonder why it is at all that we are praying. In the movie *Catch Me If You Can*, Leo DiCaprio's character was at the home of the Attorney General and he was asked to pray before eating. It was clear that he had no idea how to pray, so all he could do was tell the inspirational story of two mice in a tub of milk that his father told him. He didn't know how to pray, he didn't have any memorized words of faith, he didn't even really know why he was praying, and it was the most awkward dinner prayer you may have ever heard.

Many of us are uncomfortable with prayer. We open our eyes and peek around us during the congregational prayer, looking around at everyone around us, wondering why the Jones family isn't there, wondering about the new couple in the pew in front of you, thinking about the chores you have to do around the house, and from time to time listening to the pastor, and wondering what it is he or she is babbling about. Maybe we should just voice all of our questions, all of our curiosities, and our wonderings about prayer. After all, it is a big part of our worship service and our Christian life. Maybe we should just shout out what it is about prayer that bothers us, concerns us, or causes anxiety. What is the purpose of prayer? What are the right and the wrong way to pray? How should I go about praying? When should I pray, and what should I pray for?

Maybe these questions have plagued, and maybe I am just scratching the surface. Regardless, we claim prayer to be a significant part of our faith. We claim prayer to heal, solve problems, bring wealth, bring tears, and smite our enemies. But we seem so hesitant to engage prayer ourselves, alone, with our families, with our friends, and in church. We are uncomfortable with prayer.

We worry that we pray in the wrong way. What if we ask God for the wrong thing? What if our prayers are unjustified? We worry that we may be praying in the wrong way. I think we are right to worry. After all, there are so many examples of what I would consider weak and shallow prayers in our society. What about prayer before games? I know, we are praying that everyone plays well, and no one gets hurt, but did God not answer the prayers of the losing team because they didn't play well. Is a game even a religious event? And be honest, aren't you also praying that your team will win, when we know that God doesn't care about teams – even the Red Sox or the Eagles! Maybe we do tend to pray the wrong way.

What about prayers for resources? You know those prayers – the prayers for money, material possessions, and gain. I knew about a pastor who went to a Mercedes car dealership, and demand the \$60,000 car with all the fixings, telling the dealer that God wants him to have this car. He heard it in a prayer. He then went on to encourage the dealer to pray so that he would receive the assurance that God did indeed want that pastor to have that car. True story.

Or prayers for nice clothes, a big house, and money, money, money that we hear and see with many of the Television preachers. Do we really think that God will give us more and more money? The middle class in America is rich compared to most of the world, and I imagine the family in the one room hut with the dirt floor and little food is also praying for money. Do we really think that God favors us more than them? Maybe we should pray that God will take away our resources so that the poorest of the world can have them. This is the trap of our society – money is a sign of success. If this church looks rich, it must be doing well, and praying well. But what if we couldn't make ends meet? What if we lose our building and have to meet in someone's house? Would that mean that God has punished us, and not answered our prayers? Do we really believe that the building is so important that we place it in the place of our relationship with God? The tragic misconception of the prayer of Jabez is that an increase in gain can only be wealth. But it may be more, it may be wisdom, it may be opportunities to serve, or it may be friends. There are so many lures, temptations, and distractions vying for our prayers of all things. We have so many weak examples, that perhaps we should be concerned about our prayers. It is possible, that maybe, maybe we do tend to pray the wrong way.

In the scripture, we have a great example of the ungrateful prayer of murmuring. Listen to the prayer of the Israelites. They were murmuring, they were complaining, and they were praying to return to the very place where all they knew was oppression. Things were better back in Egypt, they claimed, and that is where they wanted to go. Oh how quickly they forgot the sting of the whip. Oh how quickly they forgot the Pharaoh's order to kill their infants and children. How quickly they forgot how God had delivered them out of Egypt, how God had liberated them. Did they really want to go back, to tell God that they didn't appreciate the intervention, the guidance and the salvation? Did they really want to offer that prayer through their own murmuring their own complaining and whining? (As an aside, don't you find it interesting how they remember history with such rose colored glasses?) Maybe they were praying in the wrong way for the wrong thing.

We pray our whining, our murmuring, our complaining as well, don't we? Even when our lips offer praise, when our heart is complaining, when we whisper complaints, then our spoken prayers take a back seat to our own perceived concerns. Can you imagine the Israelites saying, "Let us serve the Lord," but still thinking how much they wanted to return to Egypt? Can you see us saying, "Lord, all that we have is yours," but still looking at the bigger house next door, the nicer car, even the larger church and wishing it were ours. What is the true and real prayer? What is it that we are truly offering in our hearts? This is the danger of complaining and murmuring; it slowly takes over our prayers, our songs, and even our faith. And our prayers can quickly become baseless. When we won't allow ourselves to be thankful, when we won't allow ourselves to trust God, when we allow our worries to sit with our criticism, then our prayers of murmuring take hold. It is very possible for us to fall into the trap and offer shallow and ungrateful prayers, just as the Israelites did in the wilderness.

But there are those honest, authentic and powerful prayers. There are prayers that are prayers of need. The Israelites were in need and they were desperate. They were in the wilderness and had no food, no bread, and no water, and they were going to die if things did not change. Their needs were real and authentic, but their murmuring was not. What if they cried out, "Lord help us, for we are in distress"? What if they cried out, Lord give us drink, and give us life for we fear our own drought? Wouldn't that be a more authentic prayer, instead of this ungrateful prayer that looks back to a flawed and unfounded past? This is the trick, isn't it? To get past our selfish prayers, to get past our ungrateful prayers, to get past our surface and showy prayers, and to move to our real prayers; that is where we need to go. Saint Augustine said, "We may pray most when we say least, and we may pray least when we say most." The band Depeche Mode performs a song titled, *Enjoy the Silence*. In this song we hear about the failing, hurting nature of words. So say little, and that may be the first start, to say little, to sit and experience God's presence. And then let out your prayer with a groan, let out your prayer with a sigh, let out your prayer with a shout, and let the walls resound. There is the beginning of your prayer and it may be the end. Are you grieving? Then share your grief, and no more. Are you worried? Then share your anxieties and no more. We want and we need to share our true, real and honest experiences, emotions, and concerns. In your shout, in your groan you are sharing with God your feelings and your experiences, and you are offering God a deep and authentic prayer.

Imagine in the wilderness, worried about food and drink, and shouting your anxiety – that is the prayer of need that you can offer to God. Imagine the victims of Katrina. Imagine holding your loved one in your hands, and watching that loved one die for lack of food or water – what can you do but shake and groan – that is

your prayer. It is a prayer grounded in your present experience, in the here and now. It is not a prayer that worries about tomorrow, or other people but a prayer that says, right now, God, I'm scared. That is the honest and profound prayer.

And here, what kind of prayer can we offer? We might feel that temptation to explain the actions of God in our prayer, we might feel tempted to thank God that we weren't effected by the hurricane, we might even be tempted to point out to God what great people we are because we have raised so much support and help for those in need. These are all shallow and surface prayers. What prayer can we offer, but to imagine what it is like to be stranded in chaos for days, to be displaced, to be afraid, and then to offer those feelings to God on behalf of your brothers and sisters. That is a prayer of empathy. It is not a sympathy prayer, a prayer that says, "Lord be with those poor, poor people." No this is a prayer that says, "I can almost imagine the pain and suffering – God, there is so much pain and suffering." And that is your prayer. That is the prayer that connects us with our brothers and sisters, and that finds God in that connection. That is a profound and honest and real prayer. For joy or for sorrow, we are on our knees with tears on our cheeks, offering to God our prayer of need, of here and now, of emotion and honesty. It is prayer that does not ask, but just is. That is the honest and authentic prayer.

Then, through that prayer we can be with God. Then, through our prayer, we can experience God's presence in a powerful and profound way. Imagine you have let out your groan, you have opened yourself to God, and then you wait. You let the sound carry, you let the prayer go on in silence, and you will begin to know that God is with you, in your sorrow and in your joy. Like a child climbing up into a parent's lap for comfort, the arms of God, the power of the Holy Spirit moving us and comforting us, will surround us. We don't ask for anything, we don't demand anything; we just sit in our sorrow, our anxiety, and our joy with God. Martin Luther said, "Pray and let God worry," and that is what I am challenging you to do. To just offer the concerns, and don't look for the solutions.

It is so easy to ask, to set the terms for God to succeed or to fail. To say, God this is exactly what I need. It is so easy to say, we're in the wilderness, Lord, send us back to Egypt. We're in the wilderness, Lord, give us the food and the water we need. We're in the wilderness, Lord, come down and deliver us from evil. This is a prayer that leads so quickly to complaining, murmuring, and moaning, when God responds in a different way. But what if we say, "we're in the wilderness, Lord, and we are afraid of dying," and then stay with that fear. And as you open your heart, as you listen for God's presence, you will know that you aren't in the wilderness alone. You will know that you will not have to work through your fear alone. You will know that God is with you.

This is the joyful, the blessed truth of God – that God desires to be in a relationship with us. All through Exodus we see the ways in which God is with and delivers the people. Through a cloud, through flame, through Moses and Aaron, God is with the people all the time. God so much wants to be a in a relationship with us, that God came to us as one of us in Jesus Christ. And then God came again to be with us through the powerful, and everlasting presence of the Holy Spirit. God is with us, and wants to be a part of our lives. So when we name our hurts and fears, then we are inviting God into a deep and profound part of our lives. We offer God our fear, and rest easy knowing that God is with us in our fear, in our pain, in our suffering, and in our anguish. Prayer is a way for us to be with and be aware of God.

And it is a way for God to be intimate with us. I'm not suggesting that God is not always with us, but there is a difference between being in the same room as a person, and actually talking to that person, engaging that other person, and being in a relationship with that other person. This is how it is with God. God is always with us, working in our lives in ways we may never see. But when we offer that honest and authentic prayer to God, then we actually invite God into our own lives, we open ourselves to God, and we become aware of the ways that God is with us. Then the response that God offers is that much more profound because we are aware that it was God.

Look at the Israelites. They complained to God, out of their needs. God answered, God responded, but something was missing. The Israelites did not deepen their relationship, and the quail, the dew; the manna was all received with questions not gratitude. What if the people fell on their knees in prayer, offered God their fears, and then heard the response of manna? What if they were aware of God's ever-guiding presence - then would not their hearts and eyes have been open to God's response?

It is also for us, because God may very well respond to your prayers of need in a way you may never

expect. You may pray that your work is stressful, it is too much to bear, and God may respond with a co-worker, with a vacation, with more work, or with something we may never expect. We have asked God for a mighty savior, and God has responded with a crucified Lord. What can we do but trust that God is with us? What can we do but know that God will continue to walk with us? What can we do but have the faith that the manna God offers will be sufficient for us, will sustain us, and will see us through.

We look at the victims of Katrina, and we offer to God our prayers, and then we have to wait for God to answer in unexpected ways. But when we sit, be silent, and offer our prayers to God, then, through the Holy Spirit, God is with us, acting with us, guiding us.

So what are we to do with our prayers? What are we to offer when we pray? Avoid the whining, the complaining, and the ungrateful prayers. Avoid the superficial, the selfish, and the showy prayers. Offer to God your prayers that say where you truly are. Groan your grief. Shout your joy. Cry out your pain. Dance your jubilation.

And as you wait in the silence, as you hear your shouts and your groans echoing through the hall, say to yourself, "Have thine own way, Lord." Isn't this the response we are to utter. Have thine own way. With my joy, with my sorrow, with my anxieties, with my concerns, with my grief, my pain, with my whole life, have thine own way. Oh can you trust God that much. Oh can you hope in God that much. Oh can you follow God that much that you can say, have thine own way?

AMEN