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What Does it Mean to Pray?

Before we get into today's scripture, I want to try something together. I'm going to offer you a few statements about prayer, and I want you to raise your hand for the ones you agree with. I'll read through all of them first so you can decide in advance.

Here are the statements:

1. Prayer is meant to change my behavior.
2. Prayer changes God's behavior.
3. Prayer is meant to deepen my relationship with God.
4. I don't know what prayer does. It's a mystery.
5. I'm not sure I think prayer does anything.
6. Something else — something not on this list.

Now I want to make it a little harder. This time, I'd like you to choose just one — the one that feels most true to you about prayer.

Whatever you raised your hand for, I'll ask you to hold it loosely as we dig into prayer a bit deeper together.

Prayer is both a mysterious practice and one to which people have turned in almost every religion across all human history. We are innately drawn to the idea of conversation with the Divine. But why? What is it for? As we saw in our exercise just now, there are nearly as many answers to that question as there are kinds of prayer.

But here is something we know for certain: Jesus prayed. A lot. Regularly. Alone and with others. In moments of crisis and in ordinary moments. About big things and small things. And perhaps that alone is a sufficient reason for us to pray. We consider baptism and communion sacraments because Jesus told us to, but he modeled prayer all the time. If our hope is to follow Jesus — to pattern our lives after his — then prayer must belong near the top of that list, not as obligation, but as formation.

Today's text from John is known as Jesus' High Priestly Prayer. It takes place in the upper room on Maundy Thursday, after the meal, after the foot-washing, after the farewell discourse. Jesus has done everything he came to do with his disciples that evening. He

has said everything he has to say. And so, finally, there is only one thing left. He turns to God in prayer.

The theologian Debie Thomas writes that although the disciples are meant to overhear these words, Jesus' tone carries an urgency and passion that feels achingly private: Jesus is not merely teaching in this moment — he is rending his heart.¹

The last thing Jesus does before Gethsemane is pray. Not plan. Not instruct. He prays and opens himself, completely, to God.

We may take it for granted that Jesus prays. But if we really think about it, it is genuinely strange. Jesus — who is God, who is one with the Father, who knows all things — turns to God in prayer. Why? What does Jesus need to say to himself?

Former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams puts his finger on the paradox:

“Yes, Jesus is a human being in whom God's action is at work without interruption or impediment. But wait a moment: the Jesus we meet in the Gospels is someone who prays, who speaks of putting his will and his decisions at the service of his Father. He is someone who is in a relationship of dependence on the one he prays to as Father. In him there is divine purpose, power, and action; but there is also humility, responsiveness, and receptivity.”²

Humility. Responsiveness. Receptivity. These are not words we typically pair with omnipotence. And yet here is Jesus, the Son of God, on his knees — or perhaps more accurately, with his heart broken open — before God.

What this tells us is that prayer is not, for Jesus, primarily about getting God's attention or changing God's mind. If that were what prayer was for, Jesus would have no need of it. He already has God's attention. He already knows God's mind — because he is God.

So, what is prayer for, for Jesus? The posture of Jesus in this moment suggests something different: prayer is the practice of becoming fully present to God. It is the act of opening ourselves — vulnerably, completely, to the one who already knows us fully. Prayer is relationship - the willingness to be seen.

And perhaps that is why it is so hard.

Even with God, genuine openness is scary. Scary enough that most of us avoid it most of the time. We come to prayer with our polished requests, our careful language, our liturgically appropriate words. We may become more honest when desperation sets in

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2646-that-they-may-be-one>

² <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2646-that-they-may-be-one>

— when someone we love is ill, when something falls apart, when we run out of other options. Then, perhaps, we let the real thing show.

But day to day? I imagine most of us are not quite as vulnerable as Jesus is in this prayer. And why would we be? Vulnerability costs something. It requires us to set down the image we are maintaining — even before God, even in the privacy of our own hearts — and just be.

Jesus, in this prayer, shows us what that looks like. He does not perform perfect prayer. He does not speak in measured theological paragraphs. He is urgent, he is passionate, he is — as Thomas said — rending his heart. The disciples who overheard this prayer were not watching a teacher demonstrate prayer technique. They were watching someone they loved lay themselves bare before God.

And we are invited to do the same. Not because vulnerability earns us anything with God, but because the practice of it — the regular, disciplined practice of being fully honest before God — changes us and perhaps it changes God too. It shapes our interior life. It makes us more honest, more aware, more open to what God might be saying rather than what we want God to say. It allows for a relationship which always means a give and take on both parts.

It is worth asking, given all of this, what Jesus prays for in these last moments with his disciples. Jesus prays that they may be one.

Not just in this passage — throughout this entire prayer in John 17, the refrain is unity. Jesus prays for his disciples, and then for all who will believe through them, that they would be unified as he and God are unified. And earlier that same evening, he had already made clear what was at stake: “the loving unity of his disciples is the litmus test of Christian witness. Our ability to love one another across differences, our willingness to preserve and cherish our God-ordained oneness, is precisely how the world will know who we are and whose we are.”³

That is a hard thing to hear. Look around and it is easy to see how far we have fallen from that prayer. Christianity is a fragmented collection of denominations, traditions, and factions that at best maintain a polite distance from one another and at worst bring violence and destruction in the name of Christ.

Debie Thomas does not soften this:

“What Jesus seems to be saying is that if we fail to reconcile and unify, if we normalize divisiveness, separation, bitterness, and discord, the world won't know what it needs to know about God, and in the terrible absence of that knowing, it will believe falsehoods

³ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2646-that-they-may-be-one>

that break God's heart. It will believe that the whole Jesus thing is a sham. It will assume that there really is no transformative power in the death and resurrection of Christ. It will decide that God is a mean, angry, vindictive parent, determined only to shame and punish his children. It will believe that the universe is a cold, meaningless place, ungoverned by love.”⁴

We might be tempted to protest that Jesus was speaking into a simpler time, that he couldn't possibly have understood the depth and complexity of our divisions. But that simply isn't true. Jesus was living and ministering in a culture deeply divided by religious, ethnic, and political fractures. He was about to be killed, in part, because of his differences with the religious establishment. He understood division intimately. And still — still — what he prays for is oneness.

This is where I want to return to something we were talking about earlier — the nature of Jesus' prayer, not just its content.

Jesus does not pray for unity abstractly, from a safe distance. He prays for it from the most vulnerable place he has ever occupied. He prays on the night he is betrayed, with his heart broken open, having washed the feet of the one who would hand him over. He asks for unity in complete openness to God.

I wonder if that is a lesson and not only a prayer. Because consider what it would mean if we prayed like this — if we regularly made a practice of being genuinely, honestly, vulnerably open before God. What if we let down our defenses in that space? What would happen to us?

I think what would happen is that we would slowly become different people. People less defended. People more honest about our fears, our biases, our failures. People who have practiced, in the presence of God, the terrifying and freeing experience of being fully known and still loved. And people who have practiced that in one place tend to become capable of practicing it in others.

Because here is the truth about Christian unity: it will never be achieved through ecumenical groups or conferences. The only way we ever truly become one is if we become the kinds of people capable of genuine vulnerability with one another. And that kind of vulnerability — the kind that can hold difference without destroying it, the kind that can stay in relationship when staying is costly — is formed in prayer.

If we keep up our defenses with God, we will keep up our defenses with each other. But if we learn, slowly and imperfectly, to be more nakedly honest in the presence of God — to bring our real selves instead of just the image we like to present — then perhaps that

⁴ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2646-that-they-may-be-one>

practice will seep out into who we are in the world. Perhaps we will become people who are slightly less afraid of being known. And slightly less threatened by the difference of others.

This is not a prayer for uniformity. Jesus is not asking that his followers all look the same, think the same, or come from the same background. He is praying for something far harder and far more beautiful: that we would be unified — bound by a sacred commitment to love one another across every barrier, to reconcile rather than entrench, to stay rather than withdraw.

So, I want to come back to the exercise we did at the beginning.

Whatever you believe about prayer — whatever you raised your hand for — that is a fine answer. We are not Jesus and so our prayers might do it differently. We don't know the mind of God. But whatever your answer, remember this: Jesus prayed. Not because he had to. Not because he needed to convince God of anything. But because prayer was the practice by which he stayed open, honest, and deeply connected to God. And in his last moments with the people he loved, he modeled that practice for them — bare and urgent and real.

We are the people he was praying for. We are the disciples and the believers who come after. And his prayer for us has not changed: that we may be one.

So, may we learn, little by little, to pray the way Jesus prayed — vulnerably, urgently, and with our whole hearts - that one day, we might be one.