

Nokesville UMC Sunday Worship [Third Sunday after the Epiphany]

January 24, 2021

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Prayer is Not a Vending Machine

Psalms 62:5-8

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Today, I want to talk about “PRAYER.” In church or at home, in a quiet time, we close our eyes, put our hands together, bow our heads, and begin to pray. There are various types of prayers depending on how we define them. When we sin before God or people, we repent of our sins and ask God for forgiveness. We call this a prayer of confession. When we are in trouble or in need, we ask God for something that we need. We call this a prayer of supplication. When there are people in need around us, we pray for them, and we become an intercessor between God and the people. So, we call this a prayer of intercession. Other than that, we praise God’s greatness and sovereignty. We call this a prayer of adoration. And we give thanks to God for what He has done for us. We call this a prayer of thanksgiving. Our prayers should be balanced with these five types of prayers.

By the way, let’s take some time to look at some biblical verses. Matthew 6:8 says, “...for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” Matthew 7:11 says, “...how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him.” And Matthew 10:30 says, “Even the hairs of your head are all counted.” These are the teachings of Jesus. How about King David? He professed his faith in this way, “O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely” (Psalm 139:1-4). Jesus and David said, God knows everything about us—our thoughts, our behaviors, our situation, our troubles and predicaments—and eventually gives us goodness. If so, you may ask, “Well, if God knows everything about us and will give us good things, is there any reason that we have to pray?” My answer is “Yes!” Period! Why?

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According to the Lectionary schedule, we read Psalms 62:5-8. This is a prayer of King David, the second king of Israel whom God loved the most among Israel’s kings. Through his prayer, we will examine what prayer is and what we should expect from our prayer.

In order to understand David’s prayer in chapter 62, we need to understand his situation when he lifted up this prayer to God. The situation is described in 2 Samuel chapters 15 through 20. King David had many sons from many wives—Amnon the eldest son through Solomon the youngest son. And here is Absalom, the third son of David, a half-brother of Amnon and a half-brother of Solomon. Well, because we have children with us this time, I will not explain the eldest son Amnon’s wrongdoings before God, Absalom, and his sister. Anyhow, Absalom killed his eldest half-brother and was in exile in Geshur, his mother’s home country, for three years, and then he was brought back to Jerusalem. But he needed to wait two more years until he stood before his father David for pardoning. However, the relationship between David and Absalom—a father and a son—was already broken and it would be hard to restore.

Resentful of his father, Absalom moved to Hebron, the southern capital of Israel. There, he stirred up a considerable revolution against his father David. First, he declared himself as the king of Hebron and marched in Jerusalem to depose his father. This was a sudden military coup by his son; so, caught by surprise, David fled from Jerusalem. David, who once was a national hero who defeated Goliath of Philistine, an anointed one, and a king who defeated neighboring countries and brought Israel into a strong and prosperous time, now was defeated by his son and became a poor fugitive begging for his life. That night when he fled from Jerusalem and Absalom, David must have had mixed feelings: shock, anger, fear, regret, and many others.

Let's take a breath! I want to invite you to David's situation and his feelings. If you were David, what would you pray to God? If I were him, I would pray to God to eliminate Absalom, an ungrateful son, and bring me back to the throne again. Why not? If somebody hurts us and our family, and we are in deep trouble, but our enemy derides us and continues on the up and up, what would we pray to God? "Remove my enemy from my sight and bring me and my family back to the place where we were."

But here is David's prayer in his situation: "Yes, my soul finds rest in God; my hope comes from him. Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress; I will not be shaken. My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge. Trust in him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge" (vv. 5-8). There is no curse upon his enemy; there is no anger; there is no revenge; and there is no supplication for himself in his prayer. Instead, there is only one thing: complete trust in God. He did not ask for his own desires because he knew that God knows everything about him—his thoughts, his behaviors, his situation, his troubles and predicaments—but finally gives him goodness and leads him in the righteous path. Based on his faith, he didn't need to ask for what he wanted and needed; he just professed his complete confidence in and reliance on God.

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Let us think about our prayers. I assume that rather than our adoration of our God's greatness and goodness and our thanksgiving to God, we mostly pray to God, asking for what we need in difficult situations. Please forgive me if I misguide you. We can pray to God, asking for what we need—a prayer of supplication—or asking for God's help for our loved ones, the nation, and the world—a prayer of intercession. Why not? We can ask these things of God who is our Abba Father.

But we need to be sure that prayer is not a means to satisfy our own desires. We ask God for our own success and prosperity. And we ask God for many blessings on our children and their children. Sometimes, we pray to God for a very specific purpose like college, a promotion, job, buying a house, and many others. Or we pray for our family members, friends, and others for their healing, strength, guidance, and more. That's why we share our prayer requests in the beginning of our worship, and we set aside a time to pray for them in our lives. It is good to ask God to intervene in our lives and for His guidance.

By the way, what do we expect from our sincere prayers? We expect that God responds to our prayers JUST AS WE PRAYED. We just say our prayers have been answered when we get these things from God. Is this a true prayer that we gain what we want and need from God? What if we have God's silence or have different results from our prayers? Then what do we say? Do we misunderstand prayer and give thanks to God when we receive what we prayed for, and complain against God and waver in our faith when we receive nothing or different results?

Prayer is not a vending machine that we push a button and gain what we want immediately. Prayer is to put down what we want and discern God's will and humbly ask God for His will to be done through us. And through prayer, we enter into the presence of God. In His fullness of presence, we come to realize His existence and abide with Him. Then, we come to know God's greatness and goodness. Before the Absolute Being, asking about college, wealth, a house, car, health, recovery... what is it worth? The matter of prayer is not asking but abiding in His presence first. I believe David in chapter 62 might have experienced God's greatness and goodness in His presence, so he could say that God is my rock, salvation, and refuge in the face of death threats.

If we are in God's presence, we will come to stand firm in God whether we receive what we ask for or not, whether our loved ones recover from illness or return to the eternal home. This is possible because we know that God knows everything about us and will give us good things according to His will. Thus, please do not fill your prayers with asking for your wishes and desires. Please ask to abide in His presence and His will to be done through us. Amen.