

What is prayer?

Romans 8:12-17

Pastor Tom

September 25, 2016

If someone asked you “what is prayer” how would you answer? If you were writing a test maybe in university course on Christianity and the test paper said, “Define Christian Prayer,” what might you write down? A simple answer might be “prayer is talking to God.” After all, that’s what we do in prayer isn’t it? We bow our heads and in our minds or out loud or with a bare whisper we utter phrases and requests to the invisible God. If we’re praying with others, people take turns talking out loud to God.

But this definition is very limiting. It includes the communication piece. But notice it describes one way communication. We talk TO God as if prayer only works by us talking and God listening and then deciding on whether or not to act on our requests. If we think of prayer this way, it can result in a pretty distorted relationship with God. It makes us the commander and Him the servant. We talk and He’s supposed to act or obey. But the very name of God reveals this cannot be. God, by definition is greater than any human. To call someone “god” assumes they are much greater than the average human. So the simple definition that prayer is talking to God will not do.

So what is prayer? Today, we will discover a much broader definition of prayer. But I don’t want you to leave here today thinking that “now I have a fuller definition of prayer. So should anyone ask me, I can now answer them – because I get asked ‘what is prayer’ by so many people every day. Except we seldom get asked about prayer’s definition. Sometimes we don’t think much about broadening our understanding of prayer. Nor do we talk a lot about it with others. In my journaling about prayer I wrote this November 18, 2015. *I find if I continue to read about prayer, it stimulates me to keep at it. Perhaps I need to do this because prayer is so seldom a point of conversation or discussion. I don’t often find others discussing their joys and struggles in it.* If we don’t talk about prayer or think much about it, we might have a very limited definition of prayer which can limit our relationship with God. I pray that God will use this message to deepen and broaden your own relationship with God. I hope a whole new realm of walking with God might be opened up to you.

Because God wants to be close to us in relationship. God has made a way for us to be close to Him. Because of this way, we can draw near to God through prayer. So our study today will begin with some deep digging in a glorious passage about God’s desire for closeness with us. Then we will unpack a broader definition of prayer.

Romans 8:12-17 (ESV)

¹² So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. ¹³ For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

The letter to the Romans is all about the Gospel. The author, the apostle Paul, talks about the Gospel at the very beginning of the letter. He says in chapter 1, verses 16 and 17, “For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written “The righteous shall live by faith.”

Then Paul walks his readers through all God did in providing the Gospel so that we might receive the power of God unto salvation. But what did we need salvation from? Paul explains this in chapters 2 and 3. He reveals that everyone is a sinner. Everyone has violated and rebelled against God’s holy law and God Himself. We could not repair the damage done by this rebellion. We could not do enough good deeds to cover over this offense. We could not earn enough gold stars to gain God’s favor. By God’s very nature of holiness and justice, rebellion against Him had to be dealt with. Paul brings us to the center of the Gospel in Romans 3 with one of the most famous verses in the Bible. It is found in what some claim to be the most important paragraph in the New Testament - Romans 3:21-26.

But I’ll just quote Romans 3:23-25 – *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, but all who believe are justified by his grace, as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation or sacrifice of atonement by his blood to be received by faith.*” That’s the core of the Gospel. We deserved God’s justice. But instead God put his own Son forward as our substitute. When we trust in Christ and His work on the cross, we receive God’s salvation.

Then Paul goes on to explain this more deeply and talk about the reality of the ongoing struggle with sin of the Christian. Christians then and Christians today wonder why they continue to struggle with sin even though they have received Christ. Paul builds towards chapter 8 - one of the most glorious, encouraging, uplifting and Gospel-energizing chapters in the Bible.

So in Romans 8:1, Paul states “there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” So right now, today Christian, you already know the verdict that will be pronounced over you on Judgement Day. Not guilty

– There is now no condemnation. Not only are you not guilty but you have also received a new nature. The Holy Spirit lives in you. The moment you became a Christian, the Spirit came in. Now we have a choice about which nature we will follow each day. Will it be our old sinful nature called the flesh or our new nature in Christ led by the Spirit?

In the early verses of chapter 8, Paul urges us to live by the Spirit, set our minds on the things of the Spirit and to live in the power of the Spirit to reject the old ways. So then, verse 12, *we are debtors not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh*. We now have an obligation to Christ and God for all they have done for us. We now owe a debt to live a life of gratitude and honor to our Savior. But it's not a debt to live according to what our sinful nature wants.

After all, living according to that nature brings death – it leads to spiritual death. It leads to separation from God, grieving God and harming our relationship with Him. But we can overcome the sinful nature or flesh by putting to death its deeds by the Spirit. Then you will live and experience the life of God with God. (If you want to explore Romans more deeply, I preached through it in 2009 to 2011. We have all those messages on every passage in Romans. We can get you those now if you contact the office or in future days when we get caught up with uploading the messages onto the new website).

So we get all this encouragement and command to live the Christian life by following the Holy Spirit and not the sinful nature. But does God really want to be close to us through all that? Does He want to hear from us in prayer? Is God really aware of us and our lives and struggles? Has He done anything to show His interest in this close relationship?

Verse 14 – “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons or daughters of God.” That means, if you're a Christian here today, you are a child of God. Well how did that happen?

Verse 15 – “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry out, “Abba! Father!” So we were adopted as children into God's family. Therefore, we can call him Abba, Father. A couple of contemporary realities in Paul's world give much greater punch to this verse. Adoption was not widely practiced in the Jewish world though Israel had this sense that she was collectively the adopted nation of God in Romans 9:4. But they had such strong family units that giving up children for adoption would be shameful and a condemnation of the entire community. God's people were supposed to care for one another and ensure that there would be no need for adoption.

But adoption was practiced among the Romans somewhat differently than how think of adoption today. Usually, wealthy Roman citizens who didn't have children would adopt a young man or maybe a young woman so that they would inherit the estate. If you know the story of Ben-Hur, you know he was adopted by a Roman and inherited that estate upon the Roman's death. So he became wealthy. But they would adopt people with potential and character in the hopes that they would treat the estate well and carry on the name of the adopter. So those adopted were not rivals to natural born members of the family. The adopted child was usually the only child and received the inheritance. It is with this understanding that we are adopted by God into His family. We are not second class children but heirs of God, co-heirs with Christ. Does that act of adoption sound like God doesn't want to be close to us?

But perhaps even more incredible in verse 15 are the names we are permitted to call God. "Abba, Father." We are familiar with Father. Jesus taught his disciples to pray "Our Father in heaven." But far more controversial and striking is the name "Abba." Jesus and the common Jews of the day spoke Aramaic. "Abba" is the Aramaic name for a dad that's used by a child. It's a term of affection and intimacy. Abba is like our "daddy or papa or walking ATM – I'm so glad to see you – give me money." Now why would calling God "Abba" or Daddy be so controversial? Well the Jews treated the name of God with such reverence that they didn't dare pronounce it. They didn't dare spell it out in its entirety for fear of offending and misusing God's holy name. We too must reverence and God's name. That's good and important.

Yet Jesus called God "Abba." In Mark 14:36, Jesus calls out "Abba! Father! All things are possible for you; remove this cup from Me; yet not what I will, but what You will." The rabbis and strictly orthodox Jews of Jesus' day would be outraged that Jesus used such a familiar name for God. Only someone incredibly close to God could use a name like that – like God's Son – like God's adopted kids. Now Paul describes Christians calling out to the Holy God with the name Abba.

But not only are we invited to address God with this intimate, close term for a Dad. He empowers us to do so through the Spirit. Notice the end of verse 15, "you have received the Spirit of adoption (the Holy Spirit) BY WHOM we cry "Abba! Father!" So God the Spirit enables us to address God the Father as ABBA. God, the Holy Spirit, empowers God's adopted children to address God the Father as Abba. Does that sound like a God who does n not want to be close to us?

God, the Holy Spirit not only empowers us to use this name. He speaks to our spirit confirming that we are God's children. Look at verse 16. "The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God." You know those times when the devil whispers "God has abandoned you; God doesn't care; God has disowned you." The Holy Spirit comes to our spirit to remind us we are God's children.

Is this a distant God who just watches over his universe expecting his subjects to pour more wealth into the eternal treasury? He saw our alienation from Him. He paid dearly and personally to repair our relationship with Him. He adopts us into His family as co-heirs with His eternal Son. He puts His Spirit in us by whom we call Him Dad, Father. And the Spirit keeps testifying to our spirit that we are God's child. This is not a God who just wants to be talked to. This a God who actively and constantly desires to communicate with His children.

This brings us back to prayer. What is prayer? It is much more than "Talking TO God." **Prayer is conversing with and encountering God.** To converse means to engage in a conversation where both parties communicate. It is an interaction where one speaks and the other responds – one gestures and the other gestures back – one presents their idea and the other hears that idea and comments on it.

1) Prayer is *conversing with not just talking to God.*

Yet we face that initial struggle that we talked about in kid's time last week. We can pray and talk with God but He doesn't answer out loud. So how do we actually converse with God? Well, we must change our perspective on communicating with God. I think most of us think (and I know I did), we have to initiate or start the conversation with God. We come to God and have to get His attention to notice our lives and what's going on. Then God has to think about it and see how He'll respond if at all. But Tim Keller points out "God is the initiator. God has already communicated through creation – through sending Jesus onto the earth. through providing His Word –All this communication from God happened before we were even born.

So one of the key ways we converse with God is to read and meditate on His Word. This Bible is a massive communication from God. Our prayers should arise out of immersion in the Scripture. Keller writes "if the goal of prayer is a real, personal connection with God, then it is only by immersion in the language of the Bible that we will learn to pray, perhaps just as slowly as a child learns to speak."

How do kids learn to speak? Do they come out the birth canal saying “ohh that was tight. Mom, what were you doing eating the spicy chicken the other night. Do you know how much that upset my stomach?” No. It takes babies years to learn to talk and form sentences and learn to communicate with others. They learn it from responding to communication by others. If we’re going to learn to pray we need to learn the language of prayer – God’s Word – found in the Scriptures. We’ll talk more in the weeks to come about prayer and meditating on the Scriptures. But we converse by reading and hearing the Scriptures and then responding to them in prayer or worship. Prayer is conversing with God.

2) Prayer is encountering or experiencing God. For this one, we need to be careful. And we have to guard against two extremes. One is that we let our emotions and our personal preferences for a good experience govern whether or not we encountered God. It’s all heart and emotion with no head and thought. So we can conclude that unless we are moved emotionally, we did not experience God. Yet the other extreme is suspicion of any talk about encountering or experiencing God. We are uncomfortable with other people expressing emotion towards God. We emphasize head knowledge about God and ensuring right doctrine. But we get so concerned about it that our hearts are never moved by encountering God. So those are two extremes we need to avoid – all heart and no head – all head and no heart. Head and heart, Truth and spirit need to be part of our encounter with God. So how do we encounter God in prayer which keeps these tensions in balance? I think Keller has an excellent approach. He focuses us on whom we encounter and how we encounter God.

So whom do we encounter in prayer: We encounter the Triune God or a tri-personal God. Our prayers can be heard only through the distinct work of every person of the Godhead. The Father, Son and Spirit all share one divine nature – they are one being. There is only one God – not three. Yet the Father, Son and Spirit are equally God. They know and love one another and have from all eternity together worked for salvation.

Now think about the implications for prayer of conversing with the Triune God? Sometimes people think that God created humanity because He was lonely. But God enjoys perfect friendship between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So God is not lonely. God is infinitely joyful in the relationships between the persons of the Trinity. So why create humans? Jonathan Edwards, an American theologian from the 1700’s writes “The only reason God would have for creating us was not to get cosmic love and joy of relationship (because he already had it) but to share it.” Keller writes -

This is completely consistent with a Triune God who is other oriented to his very core. He seeks glory only to communicate happiness and delight in his own divine perfections and beauty. So he wants to share His joy. Prayer is one way of entering into the happiness of God Himself.

Whom do we encounter in prayer? Our Heavenly Father. When we are born again in Christ, we receive the right to be his children (John 1:12). We are adopted into His family (Romans 8:15). The Spirit puts the actual life of God in us. We have the most intimate and unbreakable relationship possible with the God of the universe. To be God's child means access to God. Prayer is a way to sense and access this fatherly love of God. Then we experience calmness and strength in life because of the assurance that He cares so well for us.

Then Keller adds another dimension to encountering God. **How do we encounter God: The Spirit of Adoption – the Holy Spirit.** This is what Romans 8:12-17 was all about. The Spirit himself bears witness that we are children of God. We respond in prayer. We pray "Thank you Holy Spirit for reminding me that I am a child of God." But the Spirit not only bears witness to our spirits. He prays and intercedes on our behalf. Romans 8:26 – Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words." The Holy Spirit does not waste prayer or ask things outside of God's will because He is God. Graeme Goldsworthy's book – *Prayer and the Knowledge of God*. "The intercession of the Spirit is answered as God works all things for our good." Keller writes "Prayer is the way to experience a powerful confidence that God is handling our lives well, that our bad things will turn out for good, our good things cannot be taken from us, and the best things are yet to come."

Keller concludes this structure or outline of encountering God through prayer with one more piece. **How do we encounter God: Through the Mediator, Jesus Christ.** Romans 8:34 we read "Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died – more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us". Somehow Jesus supernaturally intercedes for each of us before God the Father. This paints a picture of Jesus' preoccupation with our security. It assures us of his unchanging love. Jesus is the ultimate mediator and priest to end all priests. He eliminates the gap so that we can know God as friend. The only way to God is through Jesus.

Prayer can be a deep encounter with the Triune God. Remember what we talked about last week? The greatest prayer request we can offer on one another's behalf is to pray that we will know God better. Today, we have seen just

one glimpse of God's greatness through one short passage in the Bible. It reveals God's sacrificial love on our behalf so we can be close to Him and share in His happiness and joy. This knowledge helps us move beyond treating God like some divine Santa Claus who just exists to give us gifts.

Keller writes –“When we grasp God's astonishing, costly sacrifice for us, and transfer our trust and hopes from other things to Christ, and we ask for God's acceptance and grace for Christ's sake, we begin to realize with the Spirit's help the magnitude of our benefits and blessings in Christ. Then we want to know and love God desperately for Himself. This new relationship with God is what you need if you have a bad family background; if you feel like a failure, if you feel lonely, or if you are sinking further into despair. Because of the infinite price paid by your brother, Jesus, God your father will hold you up.”

Prayer is conversing with and encountering God. But I don't want you to just leave with a broader definition for prayer. I pray that you will know God better and want to know more of Him. So will you come to the Triune God, Abba, Father, through Christ the mediator and intercessor, by the ministry of the Spirit of Adoption and Intercessor now in prayer?