

“Prayers of Desperation; Worship Touching the Soul”

Theme: Values and Yearnings - The Keys to Life

Sermon Scripture: Philippians 4:6-7; Acts 2:42, 47

Family Activity for the Week: Create a “prayer pillow” for each family member. Ask each family member to bring his or her pillow, covered in a pillowcase, to a gathering spot. Provide crayons or markers and paper. Invite each person to draw a picture of, or write down a prayer for, every other family member. When everyone has finished their prayers, have them place the right prayer in each person’s pillowcase. Read and share your prayers with each other. Close your time together by thanking God for your family. Ask each person to sleep with his or her prayer pillow. Let everyone know they can continue to place prayers inside each other’s pillows. Also encourage everyone to add their own prayers to their own pillow if they wish.

Monday, September 30 – Read Mark 1:32-39, 6:45-46. Early in his public ministry, people who needed his help constantly surrounded Jesus. Like all of us, Jesus had times when he needed to step away and refocus. Mark wrote that Jesus purposely rose “very early in the morning” and sought out quiet places to be alone with God, knowing that soon “everyone” would be looking for Him. Prayer seemed to be the best kind of renewing “break” Jesus could take.

- If Jesus (God’s son) needed to be alone with God, that must be even more vital for us, with our cell phones always going off! Consider how your conversation with friends changes when you are one-on one, rather than in a crowd. What benefits do you see in solitary time with God compared to community worship? Do you ever pray alone? If not, try it this week. If so, how do your prayers change in that setting?
- The mountain in Mark 6 likely wasn’t where Jesus usually prayed, but when his inner and outer needs called for prayer, he found a place. When can you find a solitary place? Where are you most likely to remain undisturbed? At what time of day are you most alert and focused? These factors can help make your time with God more fruitful. As you plan your alone time with God this week, reflect on what you can do to choose the most helpful setting(s).

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, if you needed to pray, I certainly do! Guide me, teaching me the best ways in which I can nurture a consistent prayer connection with you. Amen.*

Tuesday, October 1 – Read Luke 18:9-14. Luke said Jesus told this story “to certain people who had convinced themselves that they were righteous and who looked on everyone else with disgust.” Jesus’ focus was on the Pharisee. As he learned to trust God’s mercy, the tax collector could have prayed more confidently (see Hebrews 4:16: “let’s draw near to the throne of favor with confidence”). The Pharisee couldn’t trust in God’s mercy—it never crossed his mind that he needed any!

- Which of the two stances in this parable are you more often drawn to: looking down on everyone else (at least those who are not as good as you are), or coming to God with a deep personal sense of needing grace? How can God’s love and grace help you maintain a healthy sense of spiritual need without sinking into a sense of contempt, either for others or for yourself?
- We have a choice when it comes to words we said we wish we hadn’t, or things we have done we wish we hadn’t. We can continue to carry the burden of our brokenness, or we can give them to God, and be set free to live as God dreams. The process begins with honesty and repentance, acknowledging the wrong. Do you find it hard to acknowledge to yourself, others or God that certain things you did were wrong? How can you open your heart to allow God to give you the courage to be honest with God, and if necessary, with others?

Prayer: *Holy God, Hebrews 4:16 invited me to come before you “with confidence,” not because I’m good, but because you are. Help me live trusting your grace, but never arrogant about my goodness. Amen.*

Wednesday, October 2 – Read Luke 7:1-10. Centurions commanded 100 soldiers, part of the Roman force occupying Palestine. This centurion was decent and wise (not all of them were) and had dealt generously with the citizens of Capernaum. They told Jesus the centurion “deserved” help. The Centurion disclaimed any “deserving” (verse 6), expressing full trust in Jesus’ power. Jesus put more value on the centurion’s faith than on his “deserving” actions.

- We see other ethical traits in the Centurion. Roman law said slaves were living tools. A slaveholder had the legal right to treat his property however he chose, beating the slave, even to death if he chose. This Roman also had an extremely unusual attitude toward the Jews. Antisemitism is not a new thing. The Romans called the Jews a filthy race. They spoke of Judaism as a barbarous superstition. Might this centurion show the fruits of what John Wesley called “prevenient grace”—God at work in a person who’s not formally one of “God’s people”?

- We tend to relate to Jesus first in terms of what we know best. How did the Roman centurion draw on his military experience to express his trust in Jesus' power? How did Jesus' response to that foreign military officer point ahead to a church that welcomed Gentiles and Jews as equals before God (e.g. Galatians 3:28-29)? Which of your life experiences help you better grasp and trust God's power?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, there were all kinds of reasons for you and your disciples to fear, snub and hate Roman soldiers. Yet you cared about this Roman's prayer. Help me to trust you as much as that Roman commander did. Amen.*

Thursday, October 3 – Read Philippians 4:4-12. Do we really understand “peace”? Quiet surroundings, comfortable sleep, a beautiful view out the window? The apostle Paul's statement that God's peace “exceeds all understanding” makes more sense when we realize that he sent this letter from a dank, dreary Roman prison cell (cf. Philippians 1:12-14). Even there, he had God's peace. And Paul shared a key he'd found for living in God's peace: to talk to God in prayer about anything and everything that might worry him.

- Scholar William Barclay wrote, “The peace which the world offers us is the peace of escape, the peace which comes from the avoidance of trouble and from refusing to face things. The peace which Jesus offers us is the peace of conquest. No experience of life can ever take it from us and no sorrow, no danger, no suffering can ever make it less. It is independent of outward circumstances.” What things most often trigger anxiety in you? How can you incorporate Paul's wisdom about taking those things to God in prayer more fully into your daily life?
- Paul, at peace even in prison, did not say, “Lucky I was born with a peaceful temperament.” Instead, in Philippians 4:11 he said, “I have learned how to be content in any circumstance.” In what conditions, good or bad, do you find it a struggle to remain in God's peace? What examples or experiences have helped you learn to make choices and take actions that lead you toward accepting God's gift of peace?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, I want to turn my worries into prayers. I lay before you all the things that worry me today, and I open my heart to your gifts of peace and contentment. Amen.*

Friday, October 4 – Read Luke 11:1-13. Clearly the disciples believed that something they admired in Jesus came from his praying. They wanted to learn from him—they wanted to be more like him. In verses 9 and 10, Jesus did not mean that if we ask God for a solid gold Tesla full of thousand-dollar bills, God must give it to us. But he did mean that God will give “good gifts” (by God's definition, not ours!) when we ask. Verse 13 offered the ultimate good gift: God will always give the Holy Spirit to anyone who asks.

- Some earthly parents either neglect their children's needs, or actively give them things that are bad for them. Jesus used the common “How much more...” rhetorical device in verse 13 to distinguish God's infinite love and generosity from our human frailty. In what ways did (or does) your earthly family reveal God's qualities? In what ways, if any, do you need God to be “more” for you than they were able to be?
- Consider taking with you today a simple breath prayer that Jesus promised God will always answer. As you draw in breath, silently start the invitation: “Come to me...” As you exhale, finish the prayer: “Holy Spirit.” Repeat at any point in the day where you need to. At day's end, review in what way(s), if any, the prayer deepened your connection with God.

Prayer: *Dear God, thank you for inviting me into the ongoing conversation with you that we call “prayer.” Help me never be too busy, or too shy, to bring you big or little concerns that are on my mind. Amen.*

Saturday, October 5 – Read Mark 14:32-43. Rome meant for crucifixion to strike terror in the stoutest human heart. Even Jesus shrank from the ordeal. This is Mark's account of Jesus' prayer struggle in Gethsemane as he faced “despair,” “anguish,” and being “anxious”—parts of our human experience he shared (cf. Hebrews 4:14-16). He asked God, in effect, “Isn't there some other way?” But even before he said, “Not what I will, but what you will,” his prayer carried a note of trust. Abba was an intimate Aramaic family word, one that conveyed the same trusting sense as our English words “daddy” or “papa.”

- Jesus shrank, not just from the physical pain of the cross, but from the spiritual ordeal he faced. The apostle Paul wrote that Jesus carried the spiritual burden of sin (alienation from God) in our place (2 Corinthians 5:21). How can you trust your heavenly Abba even in the face of darkness, as Jesus did? What challenges in your life have left you “deeply distressed and troubled”? Did others tell you (or did you tell yourself) that you should be “stronger,” that you shouldn't feel what you felt? How does Jesus' experience in the Garden show that it takes greater inner strength to honestly face and express your feelings in times of anguish than to deny them? When you face the unbearable, are you learning to trust and say, as Jesus did, “Not my will but yours be done”?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, thank you for promising to be with me always, even during the hard times. Thank you for modeling honesty about life's struggles for me, as well as hope and courage. Amen.*