

BaptistWay: 14 Habits of Highly Successful Disciples: Prayer

July 6, 2014

- *The BaptistWay lesson for July 20 focuses on Luke 11:1-13; 18:1-8.*

I almost hesitate to comment on the discipline of prayer. So much has been written that turns it into something it is not.

Seven years ago, a book called *The Prayer of Jabez* hit Christian book stores and sold millions. It promised if a person prayed an obscure prayer in the Old Testament tied to a specific context and not repeated anywhere else in Scripture, God would have to respond favorably to whomever prayed it.

Derek Webb, then a member of the band Caedmon's Call, tells a story about an appearance he had to make along with the band at a convention that Christian bookstore suppliers attended to preview upcoming products. Bruce Wilkinson, the author of the bestselling book, stood on stage and pitched the book to potential buyers. Following his pitch, he had an altar call where he encouraged everyone to take the "Jabez Challenge" and pray the prayer he outlined for 30 days. He promised at the end of those 30 days their stores already would be on their way to being more profitable than they were in the previous year.

This is a tempting promise, but it is not a biblical one. When Jesus speaks about prayer in this week's Scriptures, the certainty of material gain never is mentioned. And in my opinion, Jesus makes a far superior authority and example for our prayer lives than Jabez.

God before us

Perhaps the most prominent takeaway from Luke's short and simple version of the Lord's Prayer in 11:2-4 is simply that our concern for and about God should come before ourselves. This idea not only defies the formula outlined in *The Prayer of Jabez*, but also the way many of us pray during Bible studies, small groups and prayer meetings.

Most churches have some kind of prayer list. It might be utilized on Wednesday nights, printed on the bulletin or mailed out in the newsletter. Almost always, without fail, the items mentioned on that list will have to do with sick people. While there is nothing wrong with praying for the sick—we are commanded to do so in the book of James—this is only one small aspect of how we are to engage God in prayer. During Bible studies it is common to ask the question, "Are there any prayer requests?" Again, while this is a perfectly acceptable question, when considered in isolation, it communicates that our needs, wants and wishes take precedence over God.

To keep yourself from praying in this lopsided manner, you may want to begin your prayer time with Scripture. Many have found the revised common lectionary (type this phrase into an Internet search engine if you are not familiar with it) to be a helpful tool in guiding devotional times around selected Scriptures. When you begin first by reading and meditating on God's word and then transition into prayer time, chances are greater your prayer will start with God instead of yourself.

Us before stuff

At the same time, God cares immensely about our needs and concerns. I would dare say he also cares about what we want, but not nearly as much as about what we need and what he wants for us. "Give us each day our daily bread" (11:3) from the Lord's Prayer is a familiar reminder of how Jesus modeled this aspect of prayer.

I recently preached about praying in the midst of both sickness and health. As I was preparing, I sent out an email asking for testimonials from the congregation about how health had affected their prayer life.

One man who had just turned 50 admitted: "I remember in my younger years being amused about why older folks would sit around discussing their health. ... Now I do the same thing 25-30 years later. Our health (especially when bad or declining) makes us focus on ourselves more and more. But we are supposed to focus on God's kingdom, living in Christ and ministering to other saints. Maybe God allows aches, pains and serious health problems so we stay dependent on him. I struggle to give God praise and glory when my back hurts or my knee aches and limits my mobility. But I am encouraged by the Spirit 'to be satisfied in all circumstances and situations.' This is our temporary home, and this body will pass away."

His honest words and sentiments poignantly capture the temptation we all have to make prayer so narrowly focused it lacks a sense of divine vision. Daily provision, forgiveness and holy living are given priority over our wants and desires in the Lord's prayer.

Persistence before formality

This does not mean asking with boldness is not appropriate. On the contrary, the imagery Jesus provides in 11:9-13 and 18:1-6 suggests God delights in us continually approaching him and in giving us what we need.

In *Prayer: Does it Make any Difference*, Philip Yancey asserts: "Prayer remains a struggle for me. On the other hand, so does forgiving someone who has wronged me. So does loving my neighbor. So does caring for the needy. I persist because I am fulfilling God's command, and also because I believe I am doing what is best for me whether or not I feel like it at the time. Moreover, I believe that my perseverance, in some unfathomable way, brings pleasure to God. We should always pray and not give up, Jesus

taught.”

Don't be concerned if your prayer life also is a struggle. Be concerned if you have stopped struggling in prayer.