

Paradise Lost and Restored: What is Prayer? (Part 1)

Ricardo Campos, Pastor Grace Chapel, Orange, CA February 22, 2015

I. Introduction

Humans go through many experiences in life. Some of these experiences will cause inner unrest. This unrest drives us to find solace in something or someone who can bring us peace. Some people find their inner peace in yoga, sailing, or some other activity, or even in therapy. Why do humans have this drive for inner peace and is there something that can actually give it to us?

II. Prayer is Something **All** Humans Desperately Need (even the nonreligious)

The meaning of the word “prayer,” when it comes to prayer some people say, “Why do I need to pray, doesn’t God already know what I’m going to say?” So in their minds, prayer is us talking to God and since He already knows everything, what’s the use of praying? This seems to be the dominant definition of prayer. In fact, this is how the dictionary defines prayer. Aside from the definitions that describe the word prayer as a “sequence of words,” or “a religious observance,” the rest of the definitions found in Dictionary.com define prayer as one-way communication, i.e., they include words like “devout petition,” “supplication, thanksgiving, adoration, or confession,” and “a petition; entreaty.” All of these basically describe someone who is saying something to God, but they don’t indicate whether God answers back. Is that what prayer is, we talk and God listens?

In one of the places where Jesus teaches us how to pray, we see that God doesn’t just sit there and listen. After teaching His disciples how to pray, Jesus gives two real-life examples of someone asking for something and someone else responding. He does this to stress the fact that God responds when we talk to Him, Luke 11:1-13. Thus, prayer is not always a one-way conversation. There are times when God actually answers back.

Why do all humans **NEED prayer?** There are many people who don’t believe in God or religion and yet they still crave something spiritual. Why? Every individual at one point or another will experience inner unrest and they’re going to need something to make it go away, to bring them peace. This is why people *religiously* pursue meditation, yoga, or some other exercise or activity, or even therapy. And it’s not that there’s something inherently wrong with these things; they can all be very beneficial. But when something becomes the anchor that steadies your soul, that thing we need in order to cope with life, we’re no longer talking about a stress-relieving activity. We’re talking about something that’s taken on god-like status, a god we need to spend time with and brings us peace.

And this is not unique to the nonreligious. Christians do this too...with prayer no less. What?! Have you ever been anxious about something, so you decide to pray and afterwards you feel better? Then moments later you do it again: you get anxious→ pray→ feel relief. Get anxious→ pray→ feel relief, and on, and on? And it’s not that a Christian can’t have moments like this, especially in the beginning of their relationship with God. But if this is what prayer looks like in your life, week after week, year after year, then you’re using prayer the way the non-Christian uses a yoga mat. It’s a one-way conversation that gives you momentary relief.

Is this the reason why everyone NEEDS prayer, i.e., to have someone/something to talk to whether a yoga mat or God when things go crazy? Yes, but there's an even deeper, primal reason why humans need to talk with someone. It has to do with what it means to be human. The Bible tells us that we're made in God's image, Genesis 1:27. But what does that mean? God is one in three Persons and He's lived in that community forever, John 1:1. There's constant contact between the three Persons of the Trinity; they love and desire this. We see this evident in Jesus' life. He was never far away from His Father; His Father meant everything to Him, in fact, He and His Father were one, John 5:19-20, 30; 10:30; 14:5-11. Who was the first person Jesus turned to when He was in trouble? God the Father, Luke 22:39-46. To be made in God's image means that we like Him have a need to commune. The dictionary defines "commune" as "to converse or talk together, usually with profound intensity, intimacy, etc.; ... to be in intimate communication or rapport," Dictionary.com. But it's not just that we have a need for intimate contact with others, we have a deep desire for intimate contact with God. Why?

He made us, everything about us. He knows what we like and don't like, what we're great at and not so great at, Psalm 139:13-14. He also knows exactly what we were meant to do and be in life. He knows if we should've been a singer or a CPA, Psalm 139:16. Thus, there's an inseparable connection between us and God, not only because He made us but because He knows exactly what we'll go through and therefore, He knows exactly what we'll need when things go crazy in our lives. This is why at the end of a book written to tell us the meaning of life, a man who had it all and tried to find the meaning of life in every human endeavor—education, wealth, pleasure, legacy building, etc.— says that man's all in all is to "fear God and keep His commandments," Ecclesiastes 12:13. So the meaning of life is to fear God and obey Him? What?! Why does God say this? Because He's got all the answers. If you want to find peace in your marriage, job, sex life, friendships, anything and everything, you'll have to ask God about it.

To listen to God and follow His advice instead of anyone else's, doesn't mean that you have to be terrified of Him or else He'll punish you. It means that you recognize that He's got all the wisdom and instruction you'll ever need in life, Proverbs 1:7. So to fear and obey Him means that if you want to build your business right, raise your kids right, get sex or anything else in life right, that is, if you truly want to find inner peace, then you'll follow what God says. In fact, God designed all of life to work this way. What do you have to do to be a lawyer, doctor, pro athlete, or even a file clerk, don't you have to respect and obey what it takes to become that? And God is the ultimate answer man; He's got the answers to all of life. But in order to get those answers you have to have intimate contact with Him, which is what prayer is.

Troubles in life are inevitable, pressures in life are unavoidable. But humans were never meant to run away from unrest, neither were they meant to meditate it away. When things go wrong in our lives, we were meant to go to the One who made us and truly has all the answers. And for those who don't believe in God, then that intimate conversation happens between them and a yoga mat, or sailboat, or bike, or bottle of alcohol, or any number of other ways people try to find inner peace.....Jesus always went to the Father for inner peace.

III. Conclusion

And He was withdrawn from them about a stone's throw, and He knelt down and prayed, saying, "Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done." Then an angel appeared to Him from heaven, strengthening Him.