



Meditation and Prayer

2 Timothy 1:1-3, 2:1-9

March 24, 2013

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Palm Sunday

Text

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, according to the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus, 2 To Timothy, my dear son: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. 3 I thank God, whom I serve, as my forefathers did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers....

2:1 You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. 2 And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others. 3 Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. 4 No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs-- he wants to please his commanding officer. 5 Similarly, if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules. 6 The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops. 7 Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this. 8 Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, 9 for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained.

Introduction

What I'm going to try to do today is not natural to me – that is to preach a topical sermon of a mostly practical nature. I'm more comfortable preaching the next passage in a book of the Bible, unpacking the truths and the picture of Christ it gives us, and leaving the outworking of these truths and the implementation largely up to the work of the Spirit in individuals' lives as they live in community. So I feel something like a fish out of water today.

The subject matter at hand also makes me feel extremely inadequate. My experience of these aspects of the Christian life that I'm going to talk about today leaves much to be desired. And of what I do know, it's hard to speak of. It's largely intuitive and, I don't know why, but it feels private. I'm not a model practitioner or a guru. I too want to grow in these areas, but that's what church is, right? A safe place to learn and grow together.

Every year we take time out of our *lectio continua* preaching (that's what preaching straight through books of the Bible is called) to focus in on the death and resurrection of Jesus during what's called Holy Week – the time between Palm Sunday (today) and Easter (next Sunday). To kick off this special week this year we wanted to cover the twin topics of meditation and prayer. We want this to be a week where we as a church grow in the biblical practices of meditating and praying. It's good to take time together to give ourselves to these disciplines. And today is supposed to give some guidance for that.

We've been announcing for a few weeks now that from Palm Sunday to Easter we would be having a church-wide fast. This year it won't involve fasting from food, which is traditionally what is meant by fasting. Instead we're suggesting you fast from media, specifically electronic media, so... television shows, movies, March Madness, video or computer games, web surfing, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, in as much as possible text messaging and emailing. It's not meant to be legalistic, but an exercise of self-control for a spiritual purpose. That's what fasting is.

Also, fasting is not giving up something bad. Work is good, but we fast from it one day a week. The most obvious example is food. Food is not bad. It is a good gift of God, to be enjoyed with thanksgiving. But there can be a period with a specific purpose where foregoing a good thing can achieve something even better (cf. 1Cor. 7:5). We're not saying that watching TV is inherently bad and you should be reading your Bible all the time. No, healthy exposure to screen time can be a legitimate use of leisure or even have a constructive purpose, a means of worshipping God, even. Technology is good and can be harnessed for kingdom purposes.

But there is also a danger in too much of a good thing. Food can become an idol, something we look to for comfort instead of God. So can electronic media be in many ways. And in addition there is the alarm sounded by media ecologists like Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman in his famous book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* that says it's very hard, if not impossible, to use such media with it also using us. Perhaps unique to these mediums is the potential for them to rob us of our ability to think and relate in a way crucial to our Christian faith. There have always been distractions, but those distractions are amplified with 24/7 access to *information* that doesn't always translate into *wisdom*, *entertainment* that doesn't always lead to *edification*. We must be careful in our use of Xboxes and the internet and that kind of stuff.

Meditation and prayer are two ancient practices that require unhurried quiet, the very commodity our modern world is short on. Jim Elliott once said that "Satan is quite aware of the power of silence." TVs and iPhones make it next to impossible to ever find time to be still and alone with God.

But the Bible calls Christians to be people whose "delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law [they] meditate... day and night" (Ps. 1:2). And we're told to "pray continually" (1Thess. 5:17). Meditation and prayer, that's what we're looking at today.

Let's go to the Lord for help...

Gospel Motivation to Meditate and Pray

First off, let me be clear about something. I need to talk about the motivation for meditation and prayer, because when we hear these words what immediately pops into our minds? A holy man or holy woman. I think of a monk with a scratchy robe; candles; Gregorian chants. I think of some hermit in the Himalayas that the Beatles went off to live with. Mother Superior in *The Sound of Music*. And what is associated with these images in my mind (probably yours too) is an impossible standard that only the really spiritual have attained to and is maybe something I should do to, but I'm just not holy enough. We think of meritorious meditation and prayer; in other words, works that we do to get ourselves into and stay in God's good favor.

We often think of meditation and prayer as means for us to climb some mystical ladder to get into heaven. But the whole Christian message is supposed to be about how God the Son left heaven and came down to us to do everything for us and bring us up to him by sheer grace alone.

Grace. You don't meditate and pray to attain some level of spirituality that God finds acceptable. That is the problem with much monkish spirituality out there. You are only and always acceptable to God through the perfect life and death of Christ. That's what we're celebrating this week with Good Friday and Easter. The Holy Spirit brings people into that acceptance with the Father through the life and death of the Son without any prerequisite spirituality. In fact, technically speaking, even if you're a very spiritual person, apart from faith in Christ you are spiritually dead. The Spirit has to come and bring you to life through faith in Christ. And faith is not a work but empty hands receiving the work of Christ on your behalf.

Now what we're talking about today is that once you've been made alive by the work of God's grace through Jesus Christ, *then* you have the desires to grow in knowing and relating with this gracious God, and that happens through meditation and prayer. Meditation and prayer comes out of a supernatural work of God in your life to make you alive to him. They can't be self-driven disciplines to somehow get God to notice you or make you feel good enough. So the stuff I'm talking about today is for people who have been born again, who have seen a little of the glory and grace of the cross and know something of what it means to have God delight in them despite their sin because of Jesus. If that's you, then you will want more. That's where meditation and prayer come in.

Meditation

So first – meditation. Meditation is mentioned over a dozen times in the Psalms. That's where we see this word primarily in the Bible, especially in Psalm 119. “Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long” (Ps. 119:97). “My eyes stay open through the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promises” (Ps. 119:148). But the concept is seen several other places throughout the Bible.

What is meditation? It's all the rage today in many circles. Very often when you hear of meditation in popular culture it involves emptying your mind. And maybe that's all. Or maybe it is to turn off your mind and open your heart to ecstatic experiences where *something* will come in. But biblical meditation is not emptying your mind or turning off your mind, but filling your mind with truth. It's taking a truth of God's Word and mulling it over and thinking on it and letting that truth impact your will and affect your emotions. It's using the mind which God gave you and which he liberated from its futility to reflect on God's revealed truth.

God has revealed himself in two books – General Revelation and Special Revelation (cf. Ps. 19). He has revealed himself in Nature and in Scripture. Psalm 143:5 says, “I meditate on all your works and consider what your hands have done.” So you can meditate on God's glory revealed in a sunset, the Grand Canyon, or a spring day. But we do that through the lens of Scripture. We can only ultimately see truths illustrated in nature that are revealed in Scripture. Scripture is the supreme authority.

And, therefore, Scripture (God's inerrant, sufficient, revealed Word) is to be the primary subject matter of our meditation. Meditating on Scripture then requires us to

familiarize ourselves with the Bible. We need to be reading it regularly, through and through, over and over, letting it renew our minds and shape our worldview. It's not ridiculous to make it your goal to read through the whole Bible once every year for the rest of your life, just familiarizing yourself with its verses and overarching story. If that's not a habit, I have several plans that can pace you and help you do just that. Just let me know.

It starts there, but it doesn't stop there. Another important part of meditating involves memorizing Scripture. This is a way to begin internalizing Scripture. I'm not really great at this, but one thing I do is I put flash cards of Scripture passages in my stack of prayer cards.

Here's what begins to happen: God speaks to you directly and he does it through his Word. It may be in the activity of reading it in the morning – and by the way, I seriously recommend making Scripture intake a daily morning habit, even if it's only for a short time; don't wake up and go right for your phone to check ESPN.com or the news or your Twitter feed; first things first. C.S. Lewis talked described the morning ritual this way – “It comes the very moment you wake up each morning. All your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists simply in shoving them all back; in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in.” I wonder what C.S. Lewis would say about Facebook??

So you start each day with Scripture reading and it might be that something strikes your heart while you're doing your regular morning reading. But more often than not meditation will happen when you're walking to the bus and either something you read that morning or a verse you memorized and hid in your heart years ago comes into your mind and you begin engaging with it.

“It says somewhere – *be completely humble*. How does that apply to this situation I'm wrestling with right now?” At night you may come home and look up that verse in your concordance at the back of a Study Bible or with a computer program like [Bible Gateway](#). And then you find that the whole context says, “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love” (Eph. 4:2). And you really know what God is saying to you about a certain relationship. You need to apologize for being impatient. Or maybe ‘love’ sends you mentally to 1Corinthians 13 – “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.” There's a lot there for slow meditation. You notice that another translation has “is not irritable” and you realize that you've been easily offended in this certain situation. You see how this works?

There's a book out now that is very popular called *Jesus Calling*. It's supposed to be a devotional where a woman shares things she's heard Jesus tell her. “I knew that God communicated with me through the Bible,” she says, “but I yearned for more.” “Increasingly, I wanted to hear what God had to say to me personally on a given day.” I want to say, “Be very careful.” You don't have to yearn for something more than the Bible. Just meditate on the Bible itself!

Sermons are in part models of meditation. It's the preacher taking a passage and picking it up in front of everyone else and turn it around and over and looking at it and making observations. There are wonderful things there. There's always more there to

see. I was reminded this week of how one of my mentors taught me to read the Bible. He heard it from his mentor. It's the story of a scientist who forced a student to stare at a fish. After 30 minutes the student got bored and thought he had exhausted everything there was to notice about this fish. The teacher made him to continue to stare at it for hours and days. And eventually he began to recognize astounding facts about this fish. Meditation is like staring at the fish. Just keep looking, poking, thinking, cross referencing, and God will open your eyes to see wonderful things in his Word.

Studying Scripture is part of Christian meditation. Reading books, especially good theology books is never a replacement for reading the Bible, but it can be a helpful part of meditating on the Bible. Do you read good Christian books, not self-help books or books like *Jesus Calling*, but meaty books that are ruminating on biblical truths? That is a major way that I meditate on Scripture. There's a danger here of merely intellectualizing or pursuing this knowledge to puff yourself up. But it can be an indispensable tool for engaging deeply with the truth of the Bible, and thus the Person behind the Bible. I hope that this week with all that extra time on your hands with all electronic devices off in the morning and evenings you will read through a good book for your soul. I've selected just a few from my shelf and am making them available to borrow if you don't have anything. I picked simple, short books for the most part that focus on the heart of the gospel, the events we celebrate this week.

Some other really practical tips for meditation – mark and highlight the Bible. It took me a long time to do this. Here's my first Bible I ever studied. It has two places in it that are highlighted with a neon yellow highlighter – Acts 17:25 and Romans 9:16. A few years ago I read about Jonathan Edwards taking a part his Bible and sewing in extra pages between each page for taking notes and so I bought this ESV Journaling Bible with columns for writing next to the text. I've been underlining and marking and jotting down thoughts and questions and prayers in the side now for a few years.

That brings up another part of meditation. Journaling. Journaling can be an aid to prayer (we'll talk about prayer in a moment), but how can it be part of meditation? What if you took a verse or a truth in a verse and you tried to write about it? I heard a talk recently on the great Christian poet George Herbert. The point was made that Herbert wrote poetry as not as a way to record an experience, but to have an experience. "It is that which, while I use, I am with Thee." For me it generally works this way. I get Leviticus 9 for the next sermon passage. I read it, study it, marinate in it, but then often I don't feel much of it. But then I start to write about it, to put into my words God's words and my soul every week finds things to marvel at and I'm instructed and I worship God and sense his reality.

The speaker used this analogy. Suppose it's the night before your child's birthday. You're busy; you're not feeling much. But you give it an hour after the kids are in bed and you start writing a card. And in the process you find yourself feeling appreciation and affection for your kid that wasn't immediately felt before. That's a great analogy for meditation. I write sermons. I suggest you maybe journal and put work into saying Scriptural truth freshly as a means of seeing it freshly. "The effort to say beautifully is a way of seeing beauty."¹ That's a part of meditation. You're not seeking a new revelation from God; you're chewing on and savoring the revelation he's already given in Scripture.

There's so much more that can be said about this! There are so many more practical tips, I'm sure (i.e. music can facilitate meditation). I'd love to hear what you do. There are so many verses we could look at on this. Let me just quickly draw your attention to the one that was read earlier. In 2 Timothy 2 Paul is giving Timothy charges and he uses three pictures to describe how he should be: like a soldier, like an athlete, and like a farmer. Then he says, "Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this" (2Tim. 2:7). The Bible is calling us to reflect on, to think about, to ponder, to muse, to contemplate it. What does it mean to be like a single-minded soldier, enduring hardship in our Christian life? How is pursuing Christ like a runner pursuing a prize? What does that look like in my life? It takes some thought. You can't rush right through those verses.

But like a gardener who works hard, but then gets to eat a juicy summer strawberry freshly picked, so someone who puts the effort into meditating on God's Word will eventually be richly rewarded with deeper insight and appreciation and intimacy. It requires our work. We must reflect on what he has said, but (did you see this?) it's ultimately a grace, a gift from God. He comes and meets us there and showers us with treasures. "Reflect on what I am saying, *for the Lord will give you insight into all this.*" There are more mercies to be had and relished through meditating on God's Word. He is gracious to beckon us to this task and to reward us with more of himself in it.

That's what we're going to do this week. And ultimately, what is God's Word preeminently about? Not things to do, but something that's been done. The gospel – the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ and all that accomplishes for us. And here is unsearchable riches, meaning not something we can know nothing of, but something we will never exhaust, a well we will never suck dry, an infinite treasure that will never tarnish, a pleasure that will never end or grow boring. Paul says to Timothy – "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained" (2Tim. 2:8-9). What great material for meditation: Jesus... Christ... raised from the dead... descended from David... gospel. God's Word is not chained. It can make a dead heart beat again and once it gets in a heart and starts prowling around it can't be stopped.

Prayer

Now what do we say about prayer? Again, this is a huge topic. And I'm not claiming to be an expert. But the main thing I want to help you see is that prayer is generally the response of a heart that has heard God speak in his Word. A relationship is a two-way street. There is mutual communication. It's true. One lane is called meditation, where we hear in the deep parts of our soul God's Word. The other lane is called prayer, where we respond with our praise, complaints, requests, questions, confessions, declarations of weakness. To which God responds to us by opening up more of his Word to us. And sometimes he responds in the realm of the world as he gives direct answers to our prayers. And we praise him and press in more and the relationship grows.

So, generally, meditation is where we hear from God. Prayer is where we speak to God. When you hear the Lord personally address you through meditation on his works

and Word, you will want to talk back, not in the negative sense, like sassing, but you'll want to dialogue, engage.

In 2 Timothy 1:3 Paul says, "I thank God, whom I serve, as my forefathers did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers." Just from this verse we can get several things. It seems Paul was a person of prayer. He had times of prayer – "night and day." Do you have a schedule, set-aside times for prayer? He also seems to be in a constant posture of prayer – "I constantly remember you in my prayers." Do you watch your minutes with God? Do you dial and hang up and dial again? Or do recognize you have unlimited, walkie-talkie privileges? We also see from this one verse that prayer involved thanksgiving – "I thank God." Prayer was verbalizing his position downstream from God's grace.

We see from this one verse that prayer has an intercessory aspect to it. Intercessory prayer is praying for other people. Paul was praying about and for Timothy. Do you just pray for your needs or do you also have a system for praying for other people? I have a document that I pray through on Sundays and I keep 3 x 5 cards that I pray through other times during the week with people's names on them. There's probably an app for that.

We can benefit from a system, but what are we to pray for others? Often I find myself praying – "God bless _____. God bless _____." Often our prayer requests are for aches and pains, finances, and stuff like that, which is totally fine to pray for, but I benefited several years ago doing a study on Paul's prayers in the NT.² What did Paul pray for for other people? He was thankful for signs of faith, grace, love, perseverance (i.e. 2 Thess. 1:1-12). He's praying for people's salvation – "My heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved" (Rom. 12:12). He's praying for Christians that they would grow – "And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ Jesus, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God" (Ph. 1:9-11). Does your intercessory prayer life sound anything like that?

Or how about – "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe" (Eph. 1:17-19a).

Here's one more: "I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:16-19).

Meditate on the prayers in the Bible to inspire and inform your prayer life!

In the Bible, especially in the book of Acts, we see that prayer is not just an individual discipline, but a communal thing. So not just private prayer, but group prayer. And in this regard "[Jack] Miller makes a helpful and perceptive distinction between 'maintenance' and 'frontline' prayer meetings. Maintenance prayer meetings are short, mechanical, and focused on physical needs inside the church. In contrast, the three basic

traits of frontline prayer are these: 1. A request for grace to confess sins and to humble ourselves 2. A compassion and zeal for the flourishing of the church and the reaching of the lost 3. A yearning to know God, to see his face, to glimpse his glory.... Notice in Acts 4, for example, that after the disciples were threatened by the religious authorities, they asked not for protection for themselves and their families but only for boldness to keep preaching!"³ Oh how I want this to characterize our prayer meetings every Sunday before the service and every first Wednesday of the month.

There's obviously so much more to say about prayer. We see in the Bible that prayer is not just supposed to be intercessory, but also personal. Again Jesus taught us to pray for our daily bread (Mt. 6:11). Our prayers involve petitions (i.e. Ph. 4:6), but so much more. The kinds of prayers Paul prayed for others we should be praying for ourselves. We are to have flash prayers based on things we see throughout the day (i.e. Mk. 7:34). We're also to have extended times of private prayers just enjoying God's presence (i.e. Mt. 6:6; Lk. 6:12). We are to pray for illumination (Ps. 119:18). We are to pray in adoration (i.e. Ps. 84:1-2). We are to pray in lament (i.e. Ps. 13:1). One verse that stuck out to me recently is Psalm 62:8 – "Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge." The Psalms are great models of raw, honest, praying to God, fleeing to him as our Rock, Portion, Deliverer, Strong Tower. We are to pray prayers of confession, admitting that we are sinful, weak, needy, and require help (i.e. Ps. 51).

More than likely if you're not praying, you're not hearing from God. And if you're not hearing from God, you've let his voice be crowded out by other voices. This week is a time to re-focus, to still and quiet your soul (cf. Ps. 131). Abby will share more in a bit, but we're having a sign-up sheet with hour slots to take from after the Good Friday Service to our Easter Service to have continuous unbroken prayer.

Conclusion

Again, let me remind you: if you're a born-again believer your righteousness before God always and only comes from Christ, never from your performance at prayer and fasting and meditation. Don't you want to realize this more and live in light of it? Yes, you do. And God has graciously given us rendezvous points. This week especially, ask the Lord to give you deeper insight into the meaning of the cross and empty tomb.

The Lord's Table

Let's spend some time meditating on 1 Corinthians 11:23-29 and then praying, talking back to God – confessing sin, praising him for his provision of Christ, asking for more insight into the mystery... And then eating together.

Benediction

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard

from me, or seen in me – put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you” (Ph. 4:4-9).

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Immanuel Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, by Pastor Nathan Carter on Sunday morning, March 24, 2013. It is not meant to be a polished essay, but was written to be delivered orally. The mission of Immanuel is to be a multiplying community that enjoys and proclaims the Good News of Christ in the great city of Chicago.

End notes:

¹ <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/biographies/saying-beautifully-as-a-way-of-seeing-beauty-the-life-of-george-herbert-and-his-poetic-effort>

² See D.A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).

³ From Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 73.

1 Timothy 1 is the first chapter of the First Epistle to Timothy in the New Testament of the Christian Bible. The author has been traditionally identified as Paul the Apostle since as early as AD 180, although most modern scholars consider the letter pseudepigraphical, perhaps written as late as the first half of the second century AD. This chapter contains the personal greeting (salutation), the exposition about the gospel and its counterfeit, Paul's personal experience of Christ and a charge as well Palm Sunday commemorates the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:1-9), when palm branches were placed in his path, before his arrest on Holy Thursday and his crucifixion on Good Friday. It thus marks the beginning of Holy Week, the final week of Lent. In the Church of Pakistan (a member of the Anglican Communion), the faithful on Palm Sunday carry palm branches into the church as they sing Psalm 24. In many Protestant churches, children are given palms, and then walk in procession around the inside of the church. [citation needed] In traditional usage of the Methodist Church, The Book of Worship for Church and Home (1965) provides the following Collect for Palm Sunday:[14]. Ending your day with prayer is a wonderful way to let go of stress and find peace before falling asleep. No matter what you faced today, talking to God through a night prayer will renew your faith and help you experience true rest. Evening prayers also help you reflect on all the events throughout your day and the ways that God has been present with you. Share these night prayers for evening bedtime with your children, spouse and friends so they too can fall asleep feeling blessed and thankful!