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Inside Out – Matthew 11:25-30

**Video plays.**

**In theory prayer is essential to the Christian life**, as we have talked about, it is one of the first things that we would tell a new believer that they ought to do, but for most of us it is not very satisfying. It is probably a chore, or a routine, or a ritual, or something you have to do before a meal because it looks good to your guests or will magically transform your kids into good kids or makes you feel more Christian.

**But in practice, it is empty.** We use the same phrases over and over again and it seems more rote than relationship.

**Many times when we pray, especially around others, we get anxious and nervous.** It is like public speaking, which means we are probably thinking more about how other people are receiving our prayers than about how God is receiving them. We don't know what to say. It really just feels like we are talking to an imaginary friend.

Why not just talk with a human friend, at least they talk back? Philip Yancey reminds us how much our world has changed too, **“Advances in science and technology no doubt contribute to our confusion about prayer. In former days farmers lifted their heads and appealed to brazen heavens for an end to drought. Now we study low-pressure fronts, dig irrigation canals, and seed clouds with metallic particles. In former days when a child fell ill the parents cried out to God; now they call for an ambulance or phone the doctor.”**

**We prefer to explain things and presume then that God has no role in them.** We are those guys that show up at work after you have designed and organized a project and explain the whole thing to the boss, completely leaving out that you designed it and did all the work. We presume that understanding how something works eliminates God from it. **Thus talking with God is not all that important.**

**And then if you add to all of our confusion the news stories we hear about prayer, things get even more difficult for us.** In March, Jeffrey and Marcia Beagley were sentenced to prison for the death of their son

who died of complications due to a urinary tract infection. It was easily treatable by doctors, but the Beagleys believed they did not need the help of doctors because they only needed the help of God through prayer. They prayed and prayed and rejected medical treatment and their child died.

**There are countless other examples from handling poisonous snakes to praying whether God wants someone to do something that is clearly sinful . . .** prayer is talked about all the time, but it is often greatly misunderstood.

**Prayer is confusing. And sometimes scary and a weird.**

**This morning we are going to begin a sermon series on prayer by looking primarily at the nature of God.**

Unless we understand the true nature of God, we will not be able to pray in any effective way. Many of our problems with prayer begin with fundamental misunderstandings about the nature of God.

**Read Matthew 11:25-30.**

One of the most interesting things about having kids is to watch them transition from complete dependence to independence.

**When our girls were babies, they could do nothing without us. Sometimes that was annoying, but others times that was great . . .** but they could do nothing without us. If they wanted into bed our girls would look up to us for help. If they wanted to eat, they needed us to get them food and feed them. We had to help them go to the bathroom and communicate and do virtually everything that was involved in living.

**But then as they have gotten older, that changes.** They can get their own water out of the refrigerator. They go to the bathroom on their own. They climb into bed by themselves and can communicate when they want to. They can walk and run . . . and though they still need us . . . they really need us less. And as they get older and older they will need Dana and I less and less.

**Moving towards independence is a natural part of human life.** The Bible makes this clear to us. Children are to eventually leave their parents and begin a new life on their own.

**I have said before and believe this firmly . . . that all sin is the distortion or misuse of something that is good.** I think we talked about this when we discussed sex. We are given a healthy and natural sexuality, but it can be misused and distorted into sin. We have been given a healthy and natural desire for our lives to have significance, but this can develop into career obsession and selfish ambition quickly.

**Our natural desire for independence can also be distorted and perverted into sin though.** In our world today our commitment to individualism and self-sufficiency and human reason have made communication with our Dad, God feel increasingly unnatural.

**It is often uncomfortable and embarrassing for us to pray, especially out loud.** As we said before, it feels more like we are speaking to an imaginary friend than it does that we are speaking to a living being or a friend. **And to speak to God as our Father feels as if we are going against the tide of the independence that separated us from our earthly parents.**

**But what is also bizarre is that when something tragic happens in our lives or when we are under deep stress or we recognize that we are wholly without any answers of solutions, we fall to our knees and pray.** In the worst of times, we are drawn to pray. You have probably heard it said, **“there are no atheists in foxholes.”**

As I have shared, prayer has not always been a very strong area of my personal spiritual life. It always felt awkward. It always felt as if I were simply spinning my wheels. **I couldn't resist asking myself why praying about something was better than trying to do something.** In a sense prayer was a last resort. If there was nothing I could do, if there was nothing I could say, and if there was no hope that I could figure out something to do or something to say, then I guess I had to pray about it. Prayer was my plan D.

**It was something I did when I was desperate. What is funny is that we are usually somewhat desperate and thus statistics show that 9 out of 10 of us pray regularly.** When Riverside did our congregational survey this year, most people responded that they prayed regularly or every day.

**The problem with prayer is not that we don't try it.** It is not like reading our Bibles. With reading our Bibles, we talk a lot about wanting to do it, but we often don't. But when we do we often find it really rewarding.

**With prayer the problem is usually not that we don't pray, the problem is that when we pray, we don't find much satisfaction in it.** It doesn't seem to make any difference or it seems fake or uncomfortable . . . we keep doing it because it feels holy, but we don't get the results we are hoping for.

**I think any path towards a healthy and vibrant prayer life has to begin with a right understanding of the nature of God.**

**I think our passage this morning calls to understand God and thus how we pray radically differently.**  
Look at our passage.

**This passage occurs at a point in Jesus' ministry when he has been making the rounds and performing lots and lots miracles,** yet he is really frustrated because many simply refuse to repent and believe in him. Jesus has just condemned several cities of people that are unrepentant and unresponsive to his message.

Our passage then says.

At that time Jesus said, "**I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. 26Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure.**

**Jesus praises his father that his work, his message of salvation,** his purpose for existence and coming is not for the wise and learned . . . it is not for those that already believe they have the world at their disposal. Jesus says that God has revealed these things fully only to "little children."

Now we know he is not just talking about little kids here. Jesus uses children many times to refer to those that are humble, open and their hearts are in a position to truly receive him.

Matthew 18 says, **“ 1At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"**

**2He called a little child and had him stand among them. 3And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”**

Again in Matthew 19 says, **“Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them.**

**14Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”**

To understand prayer rightly, we have to understand ourselves as God's children. The Lord's Prayer begins with **“Our Father.”**

Nancy Mairs once wrote, **“who one believes God to be is most accurately revealed not in any credo but in the way one speaks to God when no one else is listening.”**

**One pattern that I can get into is that I pray with some of the same rote language all of the time.** I speak to God as if my speaking is just a formality. As if I simply have to speak the right word code in order for my relationship with God to be right.

**I treat God like he is one of those machines that you get when you call a big company.** I called Clarian Arnett billing this week and you get this whole long recording, say 1 if you want to hear your balance, say 2, to change your insurance, press 3 and so on, then you get please say your account number, and your birthdate with a 2 digit month, 2 digit day, and 4 digit year . . .

**And you just unconsciously spit all of that information out . . .** and sometimes my prayers feel that way. It's dinner time . . . **“Lord, thank you for this food, bless it and our time together . . . Miriam, get the pees out of your ear!”**

**I just saw on Facebook that a friend is sick,** “Lord please help Mark, help him to feel better.” And bam I am done. I just pray because I am supposed to.

Here is the problem though. **God is not a machine.** God is a relational being. God is more like our spouse or our best friend. He desires to be intimately connected with us.

**I have this problem that every single day when I come home, I say unconsciously to Dana, “how was your day?”** It drives her crazy because it is just routine . . . and she feels that I am not really wanting to know about her day . . . I am just saying it to say it . . . and she has figured this out because even though she will give me an answer, I will ask the same question again 10 minutes later.

**Imagine if every night I had the exact same conversation with my kids. I told them the exact same things over and over again. Kind of like, Groundhog Day.** “Hey kids, I really enjoyed the weather today. My favorite color is yellow, actually it's pink, but I don't tell people that because they will think I am weird.”

**And every single night, night after night, I just say the same basic things.** It would be like I was talking to a stranger and not someone I was intimately connected with. There is no relationship . . . just code . . . words spoken.

**The truth is that when we pray, we often pray more like we are talking to our Great Great Aunt Louise and not like we are talking to our creator and Father who deeply desires to know us and be known by us.**

**In Hebrew the term for “father” is “ab.”** The language that Jesus and many around him spoke in his day was Aramaic and they often referred to God as “Abba.” It was akin to the way that my kids use “daddy” today. There is a deep intimacy. This is not a random contact but a loving presence that wants us to speak to him as if he were our closest friend. In fact, we should be able to share things with God that we don't even share with our closest friends.

**(you know how you think about things . . . you process things in your mind and have conversations with yourself – good and authentic, right understanding of God prayer happens when God is included regularly in those conversations.)**

**We are God's little children and like a little child's reliance on her parents, we are deeply reliant upon our God.** All that we know and think, we share with our Daddy. (Adelaide will share anything . . . often even things that are inappropriate and even wrong because she is just learning . . . but she does not know one way or another . . . she just shares what is in her. It is learned that to conceal things.)

The second part of our passage this morning says,

**27"All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.**

**28"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."**

**Jesus explains the strength of the relationship between the Father and the Son and makes it clear that one can only truly know God through the Son, through Jesus. Jesus is the bridge between humans and God.**

**But here also is another aspect of God that we too quickly forget. Not only should we relate to God as if he were our perfect image of what a loving father should be, but God wants to meet our needs. God is the extreme caretaker.**

**"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest . . . you will find rest for your souls . . ."**

**One of the most powerful images of Jesus is that of a shepherd . . .**

**God desires to provide for us.** Now, in the coming weeks we are going to speak more specifically about the ways in which prayer actually lessens our weariness and burdens, but it is essential that we understand that God desires to do this for us.

**We are not talking with an inactive and uninvolved divine wall, but a God that desires what is truly best for us.**

**To understand the nature of prayer and its significance in our lives we have to understand the nature of God.** One of the problems with our lackluster and lame prayer lives is that we do not know who we are talking to.

**We worry that we have to say the right things and that we have to speak in prayer code for what we really want to say so that God can and will hear it.** God already wants to help us.

I think there are several misunderstandings of the character of God that lead our prayer lives to stink. **1) God is Santa Claus or a Wishmaker.**

The second is that **2) God is a mean, old, and uptight guy;**

The final misunderstanding of God that we have is that **3) God is too busy, uninterested, and uninvolved (he won't do anything anyway – we go through the motions).**

Sources Consulted:

Hybels, Bill. Too Busy Not to Pray. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1988.

Yancey, Philip. Prayer. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2006.