

**From Magic to Faith:
Overcoming Infirmities that Hinder Prayer**

Presented at the Gospel Fellowship Church
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by Jack Heppner

Text:

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Romans 8:26-27)

Who Knows How to Pray?

Today has been designated Prayer Sunday. We believe that prayer is an important part of the Christian journey every day. But we have set aside this day to focus our minds and incline our hearts toward God in prayer in a special way.

It comes as a surprise to us, perhaps, that the Apostle Paul admits that he really doesn't know how to pray very well. We often put him on a pedestal as though, if there ever was such a person, he is the one who has arrived at the highest possible point of spirituality. But again and again Paul tells his readers that he has not arrived, that he sees "through a glass darkly," that if he must boast he will boast of the things that show his weakness.

Is that perhaps a good place for us to start on this special day – to admit along with Paul that we do not really know how to pray as we ought. Or is that too hard to admit? I have heard many sermons and read many books about prayer but it seems I have only met a few persons who really know how to pray. And these are not the ones who draw attention to themselves because of it. As a matter of fact if you would suggest to them that they are really good at prayer, they would be the first to point out how far short they fall of having arrived.

In his book, *A Spirituality of the Road*, David Bosch tells of doing a survey of missionaries to find out what were the greatest problems they encountered in their ministries. He discovered in this anonymous survey that almost unanimously they indicated that their greatest problem was maintaining a devotional life of prayer and meditation. The second on the list was fatigue. I wonder if those two are related. These supposedly "spiritual giants" sent to foreign lands admitted that their greatest concern was that they did not know how to pray as they ought – in company with the Apostle Paul.

Why is it then that in many circles where I have moved through the years people often have left the impression that they really know how to pray. The truth is that some of them know how to weave words together in a way that almost takes your breath away. Their voices switch to a sappy, pious tone they must have picked up from the angels, I guess. With cadences and crescendos they can move from the soft and quiet to the loud and triumphant as they leave us dazzled by their oratory. A few weeks ago, upon hearing such

a rendition of prayer that would have made Mozart jealous, I opened my eyes to watch the spectacle. For the life of me, I couldn't close them again. I think to do so might have been blasphemy.

Out text suggests that the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness, in this case, our utter inability to pray as we ought. The King James translation says it this way, ***Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities.*** David Seamands suggests in his book, *Healing for Damaged Emotions*, that many of us are subject to various kinds of infirmities that stand in the way of authentic spiritual growth. Some of our infirmities are indeed quite severe. But mostly we deny them and do the best we can with keeping up pretenses. And when we do, our prayers tend to take on a magical character instead of that of authentic faith.

It seems to me that if we want our prayers to be more than some sort of exercise in magic, we must first of all admit openly, along with Paul, that we really don't know how to pray as we ought. And then, with the help of the Spirit, begin moving past those infirmities that keep us from experiencing authentic prayers of faith and moving forward in our spiritual pilgrimages.

Prayer Beyond Magic

I have recently been inspired by a little book called *Intimacy*, written by Henri Nouwen. The first chapter is entitled, *From Magic to Faith*, and I am indebted to him at least for some of what I will now say. I will be identifying six conditions of the human soul which I will refer to as infirmities, that if left unchecked, lead us to view prayer in a magical sort of way. I will also point in the direction that might lead us from magic to an exercise of true faith in our prayers. I am the first to admit that I have wrestled with and often continue to keep wrestling with these infirmities myself. Just so you know that I am not just speaking theoretically here.

Infirmity One: Self-centeredness

One infirmity many of us wrestle with is self-centeredness. Have you ever noticed how easy it is to produce a prayer list that centers on ourselves. It's almost as though we want to flag God down and help him realize that the whole world revolves around us. We list our needs and desires, and those of our friends, and then the projects we are involved in and anything else that might touch our lives in some way or other. Its normal for an infant under 18 months to consider itself the center of the world. Everything revolves around the infant until it gradually begins to realize that "mother is an other" and that there are plenty of "others" to contend with. Most of us grow out of this stage and begin to make room for others in our world. But it is surprising how tempting it is to remain at this stage spiritually. Now of course it is not wrong to pray about our own needs. As a matter of fact we are instructed to do so. But when our prayers are **all** about blessing "me and mine," and are activated most readily when illness, shock or exams overtake us, it is perhaps fair to say that they have more to do with magic than with true faith. Our prayers are then basically, **"Lord, bless me and mine – period!"**

How does the Spirit help us with our infirmity of self-centeredness? If we do not get help, are we, in that case, any better than the pagan who is mostly concerned about him or herself? I believe the Spirit wants to show us that God is not simply our "shaekbangel" – someone ready to jump to make all our wishes come true. We would do well to ask God to forgive us for our self-centeredness – to help us recognize God as being someone bigger than our personal wish-fulfiller, and ourselves as his humble servants among many

others. And that there is a world of need beyond the boundaries of our own little kingdoms. Our prayer then basically becomes, **“Lord, shine your grace through me.”**

Infirmity Two: Control

A second infirmity many of us have is our need to be in control. It may well be related to the infirmity of self-centeredness we have just identified. But it goes much deeper than that. It has to do with power. We feel good when we think that we really have the power to make things happen. But there is a devastating side-effect that comes with this way of thinking, and that is that in such a case we really don't need God. We know how to pull the levers and push the buttons that make God's Kingdom roll – at least so we are tempted to think. When we are beset with the need to control, our prayers take on a magical character. They are designed to manipulate God in our direction. “Look how clever I am, God, and how much I am controlling on your behalf. Surely you are willing to come on board with what I've got rolling here, aren't you?” When our need to control is present even our devotions take on magical characteristics. “I'll spend a few minutes with you every morning and evening, but in exchange I expect you to come on board with what I am doing.” It's as logical as putting a lunny into a snack dispenser and getting a candy bar in return. In such a case our prayer is basically, **“Lord, come on board with my agenda.”**

How does the Spirit help us move past the infirmity of needing to be in control so that we can pray as we ought? Perhaps by reminding us that God is not about to be manipulated. Once we realize this, the first thing we need to do may be to ask God to forgive us for thinking too highly of ourselves – for our need to have everything under control. Instead of asking God to come on board with what we are doing, we need to ask God to show us what He is up to and then to give us the willingness and strength to get on board with his agenda. Last week at the Presidential Prayer Breakfast in Washington D.C., Bono said the following in the presence of President Bush and company: ***A number of years ago, I met a wise man who changed my life. In countless ways, large and small, I was always seeking the Lord's blessing. I was saying, you know, I have a new song, look after it. I have a family, please look after them. I have a crazy idea... And this wise man said: Stop! He said, Stop asking God to bless what you're doing. Get involved in what God is doing – because it's already blessed.*** I believe that it is only when we are willing to give up control of our lives, our ministries, and our futures that we can move forward to experiencing real prayers of faith. Our prayer then basically becomes, **“Lord, what are you up to?”**

Infirmity Three: Invulnerability

A third infirmity many of us carry around with us is our need to be invulnerable. We fear vulnerability – afraid that if the real truth about ourselves were known we might lose our reputations. People would begin to think less of us, perhaps, because now they would know that we are not always as strong as we appear. Again, in such a context our prayers tend to take on magical qualities. Although we might not say it in precisely these words, what we are really praying is that God will help us keep up a good front, to keep our masks firmly in place, to hide the cracks in our armor – so we won't ever have to demonstrate our weaknesses before others. Our need to be invulnerable drives us to use our prayers to deny the hardships of life. I see and hear a lot of this – the notion that if we pray the right prayers in the right way we can escape the harsh realities and hardships that other people have to endure. After all, if they would hit us we would become vulnerable. So like the toddler believes that if a problem ever arises his daddy will take care of it so

that everything turns out well – our prayers become desperate pleas to make everything right so that we can maintain our naive sense of invulnerability. We prayed right, so now we can always appear strong and triumphant. If our prayer basically is, **“Lord, just make everything right,”** it is perhaps more akin to magic than true faith.

How does the Spirit help us move past our infirmity of needing to remain invulnerable? I think the Spirit helps us by coaxing us on to become more honest about how things really are. Telling the truth may make us vulnerable but it also sets us free. Free to be unconcerned about our public image but also free to be real. Free to have our public personas blend naturally with who we really are. Our prayer then becomes one of asking God’s forgiveness for pretending always to be strong. Our magical prayers turn to real prayers of faith when we ask God to help us face the realities of brokenness in our lives and in the world around us. Our prayer then is basically, **“Lord, help me face brokenness in and around me.”**

Infirmity Four: Privacy

A fourth infirmity we often encounter is our tremendous drive to keep our faith private. I like what Jim Wallis says about this. He says that our faith can be very personal but never remain a private affair. However, we are tempted to keep faith private to keep it simple and comfortable. It’s somewhat comparable to a pre-school child becoming comfortable in the home where he knows the ropes and things coast along quite well. But when he enters school he has to learn that there are other children from other homes with other parents. This means that his ideas about his own private world get challenged, modified, enlarged and even disrupted. He learns to include the wider world in his scope of reality.

Unfortunately, however, many of us don’t make this transfer in our spiritual lives. Even while we move out into the bigger world and even become quite successful in that larger environment, we sometimes remain “at home” as it were, with respect to our faith. In such a case prayer is part of the private package of faith. It works in church and in private devotions perhaps. It helps to keep our prayer life simple and comfortable, never having to wrestle in prayer with the harsh realities that life bestows upon us in the public square. We prefer the warm milk designed for pre-school children when we should already have learned to eat meat. When adults cling to an essentially juvenile form of prayer – keeping it simple and private - it tends to take on unreal, somewhat magical characteristics. It allows us to remain forever in a “pre-school state” as it were, with respect to our faith while we continue to grow in other areas of life. Our prayer then is basically, **“Lord, keep my life simple and comfortable.”**

How does the Spirit help us move past our temptation to keep faith and prayer simply a private matter that doesn’t really touch the harsh and broken realities of life around us? I would suggest that we should begin by recognizing that our culture has, especially in the last half century, told us that we should keep our faith to ourselves. Keep it out of the public square. This is part of the modern value of individualism. We must say – in the power of the Spirit: “No. I will keep my faith personal, but I will refuse to keep it private.” My prayers will engage the tough and complex issues that face me in life. They will encompass the hurting people on my street, the challenges I face at my job, the starving children in the world, and the injustices and inequities faced by so many around us. We will ask God to forgive us for our resistance to move from milk to meat in our spiritual lives. Our prayer then becomes basically, **“Lord, throw me a steak.”**

Infirmity Five: Fear

A fifth infirmity some of us encounter in our prayer life is that of fear. We are not talking here about our fear of the harsh realities of life we face in the world, as we have just discussed. We are talking here about the fear of facing the shadows that are present in our lives – those dark places that need airing out and healing for us to mature in our faith journey. It is often in our teen years that these shadows begin to emerge. We are hurt too deeply for words perhaps, and so tuck it under the rug in our hearts. We may feel guilty about how we have handled our emerging sexual urges. We may have found ourselves misunderstood, side-lined or even bullied. We are afraid to go back there, and sometimes we have even been told we shouldn't go back there because in Christ we should just look forward. So to go back to face the pain of the past might even be construed as being unspiritual.

If this is our way of thinking, there will always be a skewed dimension to our prayers. Instead of being an invitation for God to come with us to the pain that lies hidden below the surface, our prayers become a means of talking our way past them. It's like chattering to a friend about the weather and hockey scores to distract him or her from what is really troubling us. I have noticed repeatedly in my short life-time that persons who pray in the most flowery language and with the most dramatic flair in the end are often shown to have been using those prayers as a cover-up for a sickness of the soul that needs healing. And indeed, if that is the case, those prayers are used more like magic than authentic dialogue with God, because we are basically praying, **“Lord, protect me from my shadows.”**

How does the Spirit help us with the infirmity of such fear? I believe it is by affirming the fact that God is, indeed, the Great Physician. That when God embraced us, he embraced us as we were – lock, stock and barrel. That he feels the pain we feel, that he groans in concert with our groans, and that he stands ready to touch the broken places in our past. Sometimes the Spirit uses a brother or sister before whom we can unwrap those hurting places, and who will become “Christ with Skin On” for us so we can actually grasp the healing power of God in our lives. We can confront the fear of facing our shadows by simply dropping our guard before God, asking him to forgive our frantic attempts to hide our broken places, and to allow him to turn our shadows into rays of light. Our prayer basically becomes, **“Lord, help me drop my guard before you.”**

Infirmity Six: Boredom

A sixth infirmity some of us encounter in our prayer life is that of boredom. Life has taken on a hum-drum kind of dynamic. The sun rises, the sun sets, I'm going to bed. “Give me my breakfast, dinner and supper, Lord – and protect me from being too happy or too sad or too excited about anything. Just protect my boring life – please, I don't know if I could handle anything else.” Where does boredom come from? I think it comes from not seeing the larger picture – not being aware of how our present experiences connect with the past and the future. Life is just a series of disconnected experiences that have no central focus. I often see this boredom beginning to settle in for people somewhere in their late twenties. They have had some excitement in their younger years. But now that life has settled down, a career is well on its way and the family is coming along, a kind of “live and let live” mentality sets in. Another day, another dollar. Each year becomes a facsimile of the previous one - more or less.

Of course boredom can set in much earlier in life. As a matter of fact it is a defining characteristic of many of the cool cats of the youth culture of today. “So what do ya wanna do? I donno, whatever? Why don’t we hang out somewhere? Sure, let’s hangout. Where do you want to hang out? I donno, wherever? I’m bored. Let’s hangout somewhere else. Where? I donno. Wherever.” At whatever stage in life, when boredom strikes it is a sign that our lives are disconnected from the larger picture in some way. I suggest that prayers that are basically rooted in boredom are in some way related more to magic than true faith, because we are basically praying, **“Lord, protect my Merry-Go-Round.”**

So how does the Spirit help us with the infirmity of boredom? I think one way is to remind us that when we truly get connected to God’s agenda in the world – when we get to see how our energies can be linked to God’s energy – we can begin to move through our lives with a sense of purpose and focus. And our prayers change from asking God to just keep us safe in the cocoons we have spun around ourselves, to asking him to give us willingness, strength and joy to take some risks – to move past our comfort zones, past our complacency and our timidity. When the Spirit heals our infirmity of boredom we begin to see life in all its vibrant colors and our prayers become wrapped up with what God is doing in the world today. We then begin to pray, **“Lord, fill my life with purpose and focus.”**

Conclusion

Perhaps you say that none of these infirmities affect you in any way. To you I would simply repeat the words of Jesus in Matthew 9:12, ***Those who are well have no need of a physician.*** But to those of you who recognize one or more of the infirmities we have talked about in your life, I repeat the same words of Jesus with a few words added. ***Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.*** And I remind you of the first line of a well-known gospel song, ***The Great Physician now is near, the sympathizing Jesus.***

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