

Faith that Prays: getting honest in prayer
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I want to begin this morning by asking you a question: what would you say are the greatest benefits or results of God's saving love for us? Because of the great love of God, all those who recognize and see that their biggest problem is their sin and that Jesus is the answer to that problem receive the forgiveness of sin through Jesus' death and resurrection get... what? What's the ultimate goal? God acted with saving grace in our life for what? What would you say? What are those goals?

I think one of the mistakes we make in our tradition is stopping too short when it comes to God's saving work for us. I think we're really good at clarifying what God has done for us and how God has done that, but we're not so good at identifying and understanding why. God forgives our sins because of Jesus' death. He was resurrected from the grave guaranteeing his promises. God's Holy Spirit lives inside of us and we get to live with his power. Yes, yes; a thousand times "yes"! But why? For what goal? As glorious and as miraculous as those things are, there's something more or beyond those things. Those things serve the greater goals of God for us.

One of those higher goals, those end-game hopes is this: union with God. We usually use the phrase *being in a relationship with God* as a way to refer to being in union with God. Because Jesus died for me; because he was raised; because the Holy Spirit now lives inside of me, I am united to God. I am now mercifully and intimately connected to God in a relationship - a union. Peter mentions it this way in 2 Peter 1:3-4 (this is kind of a long passage and the big idea comes towards the end so stick with me here), "His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers (participants) of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desires." What's the goal? Becoming partakers of the divine nature; participants of God's divine life. That's union with God; being caught up in the divinity of God where our very life joins God's life. Imagine such a marvelous *relationship*. In speaking of these things, the ancients would say God is closer to us than we are to ourselves. What a glorious union; what a glorious relationship being so intimately connected to God!

I remember someone once saying to me: for as much as we talk about being in a relationship with God, we really don't relate to him all that much. That kind convicted me and has stuck with me. You know, if I treated my friends like I treated God I don't know if I'd have many friends. I don't call; I don't write. I don't spend much time listening. When God calls me and invites me to join him in what he's doing I often say no. That's not much of a relationship. And this relates directly to prayer: we can taste and practice that union, that relationship with God right now. Through prayer I can talk with God, spend time with God, seek God, get to know

God, and enjoy his presence. Prayer is a way we can practice and enjoy the divine life right now. That's what's happening when we pray; we are relating, connecting to God. We're experiencing a foretaste of what's to come - union, relationship with God in Jesus Christ.

Did you know that's what you're doing with God when you pray? You're relating with him. You're speaking with him, sharing your thoughts, your fears, your concerns to him. You're enjoying his presence. You're interacting with God in a very personal way.

Jesus would do this himself. We often see Jesus withdrawing to quiet, desolate places to pray. Do you remember those occurrences? Even though people wanted to see Jesus, even though there was work to do and people to help, Jesus would step away so he could pray. In Luke 6:12 we read, "In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God." Towards the end of Matthew when Jesus is contemplating his remaining hours before his death, the gospel writer records Jesus' last words, many of which were to God in prayer. He says things like, "My father, does this really have to happen? Father, can this cup, this responsibility, pass from me?" When Jesus calls God "Father," I'm always struck by how personal that is. I'm so thankful that I could talk to my father about anything. We had a great relationship. I'm really sorry that some of you don't have that with your earthly fathers; it's not supposed to be that way. But God intends for us to have a relationship with him and a prayer life with him that's simple, humble, and honest. Imagine a normal conversation with someone you're close to and who you greatly respect. You're not trying to impress them; you're not concerned if you stutter or if you misspeak. You know they will be gracious to you and you want to listen to them. That's what your prayers to God should be like. That's the way Jesus prayed to God.

It makes me wonder: why don't I pray more? If prayer is tasting and experiencing a part of this union with God right now, why am I not doing more of it? Part of the reason is because my stubborn will doesn't want to give up control, even in my weaknesses. Last week, we examined how weaknesses are an invitation from God to seek his help and blessing in prayer. But when we despise our weaknesses rather than seeing them as opportunities for Jesus to work his power, we won't go to God in prayer.

Another reason we might not pray to God is because we haven't gotten honest with ourselves. We can't pray to God when we are living in a fantasy world about who we are, where we stand with God and with others. You can't have a relationship with someone who is dishonest all the time including being dishonest with themselves. To relate to people you need to know who they are and where they stand. But if they are dishonest, you're never able to rest securely in knowing who they are. And you and I can't have a relationship of God, we can not pray to God, if we are dishonest with ourselves. Let's see that in our story and then apply to our lives as well (READ Gen. 32:22ff)

The most explicit connection to prayer is Jacob's plea to God for blessing. After God renders Jacob weak and unable to fight, Jacob grabs onto this man and simply holds on for

dear life. It's all he can do; he's injured and weak. So, he grabs on and asks the only thing left and demands, "Bless me! Will you bless me?"

God does something interesting in response; he asks him a simple question: "What is your name?" Names are really significant in the scriptures (and in other cultures around the world). In Near Eastern cultures, names symbolize and embody who we are. Do you know what Jacob's name means? It literally means "heel grabber" or really, "cheater." Sadly, that's who Jacob was. Up until this very moment, Jacob has lied and cheated his entire life. He cheated his brother Esau not once, but twice. He cheated his father-in-law. It's almost like Jacob doesn't know how to live in the world without being dishonest, always manipulating and conniving his way out of trouble.

That's how dishonesty works, friends. Over time, we forget that we're lying and we willfully deceive ourselves that we are lying so that we can maintain some sense of control or so we can avoid whatever we are afraid of.

Chris Herren (PIC) was a basketball prodigy from the New England area back in the 80s. He was a HS legend and got recruited to play at the biggest college programs. But Chris had an addiction problem. His drug use ruined many opportunities to play basketball in the college and the pros. His story in one sense is a typical story of drug addiction. It's filled with lies, deceit, and broken relationships. In a documentary chronicling his life he explains that for years he would always shave and brush his teeth in the shower because he couldn't bear looking at himself in the mirror. He couldn't bear being honest with himself; he couldn't face who he was. Thankfully, for his sake, for the sake of his wife and kids, Chris got sober. And he got sober by getting honest with himself; getting honest with who he was so he could become a new man.

All this deceiving and cheating has caught up to Jacob. He's fleeing from his father-in-law who wants to harm him, but he's going back to his hometown where his brother Esau lives. But the last time Jacob saw his brother Esau, his brother wanted to kill him, too. Now, with nowhere to go, he's terrified. So, what do you think a deceiver, a manipulator, would do? He tries to bribe his brother before he even arrives by sending him gift after gift after gift. Jacob is running out of ideas and options; his lies and deceit have made his life a mess. Without any options and afraid for his life, he finally contends (wrestles) with God; in his weakness as he's holding onto his very last hope he cries out, "Bless me!" And God asks, "What is your name?"

The last time someone asked Jacob his name he lied. His father Isaac was dying. So he had a final request from his favorite son, Esau (don't have a favorite son, people... just because something is in the Bible doesn't mean it's a good thing like having two wives). Isaac promised to bless Esau with his blessing. But Jacob wanted the blessing and he knew the only way he'd get it is if he tricked his dad. So, that's what he did. He disguised himself as his brother taking advantage of his aging father's bad eyesight. When Isaac suspected something was up he

asked him, “Who are you?” Jacob lied and said, “I am your son, Esau. I’ve come for my blessing.”

Now, many years later, Jacob is looking for a blessing again and he’s confronted with the same question. But this time he doesn’t lie; he’s learned that cheating and lying has only gotten him into mess after mess and so he says, “My name is Jacob.”

Do you know what God is asking him? *Who are you, Jacob? Who are you? What do you see when you look into a mirror?* And for the first time in his life Jacob gets honest; for the first time in his life Jacob sees and admits the truth about who he is and says, “my name is Jacob. I’m a cheater, a liar, a heel-grabber.”

Authentic faith in God and real prayer makes us get honest with God and with ourselves. We can not have genuine faith, we can’t practice real prayer when we are dishonest with ourselves and with God. All relationships are founded and based on trust.

I hope it’s not too surprising for you to learn or hear that our adversary, named in the scriptures as the Deceiver and the Father of lies, would tempt you to lie and deceive you about everything including yourself and God! And one of Satan’s greatest allies in his quest to deceive us is our own pride and arrogance. Do you know what that means? We are willfully self-deceived. We don’t want to know the truth. We’ll work hard at staying blind. But we can’t stay that way and have authentic faith and practice genuine prayer.

Let me tell you a few things that I take away from this encounter. The first thing is how great it is that we serve a God who gives us second chances. The first time Jacob was asked, “who are you?” he lied. But when Jacob needs God’s blessing again, God doesn’t turn his back on him, he gives him a second chance.

I need second chances, friends. Don’t you? How wonderful it is that our God forgives us and doesn’t give up on us. And that’s because of his great love for us in Jesus. Because of Jesus dying on the cross for our sins, we can be forgiven and given the chance to live in the light after we chose to walk in darkness.

But you need to understand: the second chances come through repentance. That’s what happens with Jacob, right? God didn’t just *bless* him. He blessed Jacob after Jacob turned away from his deceitful and cheating path. “Jacob, let me give you another chance; let’s try this again: what is your name?”

And that’s the second thing I want to highlight (and get a little more personal). God will forgive you, too; he will give you a second chance. But you have to get honest; you have to turn back to God. What do you need to turn from, what do you need to get honest about so you can enjoy a sweeter union with God in prayer? God is asking you, “What is your name?” Are you

ready to get honest? Can you answer him like Jacob, “My name is _____, I am a _____.” I am a people pleaser. A thief. Lover of pleasure. A cheat. A liar.

You actually doing this will help your faith with God and prayer to God; you have to get honest with yourself and with him. But I have to say two quick things about that. First of all, if you can't, that's not a good sign. If you can't label or identify the darkness that lives inside of you that just means you're blind to it. Because it's there and it is impacting your life and your faith (including your prayer life). So, if you're scratching your head a little thing, “Boy, this just doesn't relate to me,” that's not a good sign; seek help.

Secondly, you have to get specific. You can't say, “My name is Brian, I am a sinner.” Well, yeah, of course you are. So is everyone else. You're not saying anything then. How do you sin? How are you proud? If you're not willing to get specific you're not willing to get honest with yourself.

If this exercise depresses you, just remember what's on the other side of the truth: God's blessing! He's looking to bless you! Repentance leads to life, friends. Let that be the fuel that motivates you. He's a good and gracious God.

Key vs. Gen. 32:27

Questions for the week

- How is your *relationship* with God?
- What did you hear today that would encourage you to get honest with yourself and God?
- Spend time in prayer with God beginning by admitting who you are and then remembering his grace of forgiveness.