

A Life of Prayer:
The Purpose of Prayer
Luke 24:32

This month we are talking about conversational prayer. Conversational prayer is prayer in which we talk with God, rather than just talking to God.

This morning we will be talking about the purpose of conversational prayers. Why do we talk with God? And I think the best way to answer this is to ask, why do we talk with one another? Have you ever thought about why people talk to one another? Why do we have conversations? This is something I've given a lot of thought to over the years, because of my childhood.

Growing up in a family with three brothers, as you can well imagine, the noise level sometimes got pretty high. Silence really was golden, since it was so rare. My parents had high praise for us when we were quiet. My father was always quoting from the Book of Proverbs, "It is better to be thought a fool than to open your mouth and prove it." Then there were Jesus' words in Matthew 12:36-37, "I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

I grew up being trained to be very careful what I said. I said only what I felt needed to be said. I understood conversations to be for the sole purpose of sharing vital information. If you asked me for information, I would share it with you. Or, if I needed to know something from you, I would ask. Otherwise, I didn't say anything. I didn't participate in small talk. I considered small talk to be both dangerous and sinful. I didn't want to have to give an account of my careless words on judgment day.

Then I got married. A few weeks after Becky and I were married, we were sitting on the couch. I was reading a book. All of a sudden, out of the blue, she said, "Talk to me." I sat there, trying to think of something to tell her. I went through all my lists of information. Finally, I said, "I think I've given you all the pertinent information I'm aware of." She took one of the pillows off the couch, and she hit me.

That's when it dawned on me that there might be other reasons we talk to one another, such as being connected with one another. Becky was feeling lonely. She wanted me to talk to her because that's an important way to be with one another.

That was really brought home when our children came. I'll never forget the first time I communicated with my son. He was about three or four months old, I guess. I was holding him in my lap, where we were looking at each other. I don't know why, but I went, "pppppt" at him. He looked at me. I could see the little wheels in his head turning. And suddenly he went "pppppt" right back at me.

I don't think "pppppt" conveys any meaningful information. I certainly didn't intend to tell him anything. Well, maybe I did. I was telling him that I was aware of his presence and that his being there was important to me. And when he went "pppppt" back at me, he was saying, "I am glad that my being here is important to you." We connected. We bonded. And we have shared a close bond since that moment.

My son called me last night. He was driving from New York to South Carolina for a meeting. I asked him if there was anything new to report. He said, no. He asked me what we were doing, and I said, "We're just hanging around the house this evening. Nothing new to report." Basically, we were just going "pppppt" at each other. We had no information to share, but we were just enjoying being connected.

I do a little better with small talk these days, because I know understand that small talk does say something important. When you are in line at a checkout stand and say something to the person behind you about the weather, you are saying, "I recognize that you are a human being, not just a lump standing there, something to ignore. I am offering to connect with you for a few moments while we are waiting here, if you like."

My experience with conversational prayer is that it mostly about connecting with God. It seldom involves sharing information. God almost never gives me new information when we talk. God does give me new insights, as God helps me take the information I have and put it together in new ways. Conversational prayer helps me to be of a like mind with God. God has, on many occasions changed my mind about things, even the things I pray for.

You've heard the expression, "Be careful what you pray for. You might get it." There's actually a story of that in the Bible. The Israelites in the desert got tired of manna and wanted meat. Psalm 106:15 KJV says, God gave them what they asked, "To the leanness of their souls." Many of the things we think we want, we wouldn't want if we just knew better. Well, in conversational prayer, God helps us to know better.

Once upon a time a man prayed, "Lord, please give me a successful life." The Lord answered by asking, "What do you mean by a successful life?" The man said, "Well, I would like for my business to be successful, so that I could have enough money to do the things I want to do, and I would have a position of respect in my community."

The Lord said, "So you think that having money and respect will make you successful in life?" The man said, "Well, yes, what else is there?" The Lord said, "A successful person is one who is filled with joy and peace. A successful person is one who has touched many lives with kindness and generosity. A successful person is one who never tires of admiring the beauty of creation. He wakes up every morning excited about life. Why do you worry about money when I will provide everything you need? Why do you worry about being respected by people? Can they know your heart as I do? I'm the only way who is qualified to pass judgment over you. I will grant your request. I will make you successful in life. My question to you is, which success do you want: What the world calls success or true success?"

The man thought about what the Lord had said. He said, "Lord, please make me successful in your eyes."

Without conversational prayer this man would have asked for the wrong thing. And he may have gotten it "to the leanness of his soul." When you want something from God, talk with God about it. You may discover that wants you to ask for something even better than what you have in mind.

So, God shares insights with us, but not information.

Do we need to share information with God? It's not a bad idea to tell God what's going on in your life. But it's not as if God doesn't already know. I know of one preacher who often started his pastoral prayers on Sunday morning with the words, "Lord, as you read in the paper this morning..." and then he would go on to pray about some contemporary issue. That always got a chuckle out of his members, because it is silly to think of God reading the paper to find out what is going on.

God knows what is going on. God doesn't have to read about it in the paper. And we don't have to tell God what is going on in our lives. God knows. But God enjoys hearing us talk about it. It does a couple of things: First, it helps us be straight about what's been going on in our lives. Our lives can get pretty complicated. And it helps to talk things out. Some of my most successful sessions of pastoral counseling have been when I have shared absolutely no insights or information whatsoever. I simply sat and listened, maybe asking a question here and there. But I've seen people go from being thoroughly discouraged to gaining a renewed resolution to face their problems, simply because, as they talked to me, they became clearer about what their problems were and how they deal with them.

Charles Allen was the pastor of First United Methodist Church in Houston for many, many years. He used to talk about what a wonderful counselor he was. He said that when people came to him, he would ask what the problem was. After the person had explained what their problem was clearly enough that it made sense to him, he would ask, "What do you think you ought to do about it?" Then he would listen, as they talked about the various possible solutions and zeroed in on the best ones. Then he would say, "Go do that."

Oftentimes, when we have a conversation with God, that is exactly what happens. God says nothing more than to ask a few questions about what the problem is. Then God asks, "What do you think you ought to do about this? My response is, "What should I do about this? I'm asking *you* to do something about it." And God says, "I will. But most likely it will be through you." So, we talk about what could be done, until a solution appears. Then God says, "Go do it, and I will be with you."

We may ask, "What good does prayer do if God isn't going to tell us anything we don't already know and isn't going to do anything but tell us to take care of our own problems?"

Well, of course, God doesn't always tell us to take care of our own problems. Sometimes the problem is too big for us to take care of. Sometimes. But most of the time there is something we can do.

But it makes a big difference to know that God is with us when we do it.

Do you remember in the movie, "Sixth Sense" when the little boy got dressed up and took a train ride with his counselor all the way across town to a strange house where a wake was being held and walked up to the father of the girl who died and gave him information to help him understand why his daughter died. Do you think that little boy could have done that if his counselor hadn't been with him? Then we find out at the end of the show that the counselor was a ghost. The counselor hadn't done a thing to help the little boy except be there with him.

Knowing that God is with us gives us the strength to do things we couldn't do alone.

After walking with Christ on the road to Emmaus, the disciples said, "Were not our hearts on fire, as he talked to us?" That's what we long for. We long for Christ to set our hearts on fire. When we are connected with him, our hearts are set on fire.

The purpose of conversational prayer isn't so much about sharing information. It's more about getting connected with God. When we are connected to God, God sets our hearts on fire and gives us the courage and strength to face and overcome life's challenges.

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