

## Spiritual Formation in Worship, Part 3: Listening Prayer

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**Introduction:** There is a story that Mother Theresa was being interviewed about her devotional life by newsman Dan Rather. "What do you say to God when you pray?" he asked. "I listen," she answered. "What does God say?" he responded. She replied "He listens."

### Exploration

#### I. Listening with One's Whole Heart.

Scripture is full of pray-ers determined to listen for an answer from God. Note a few people:

- 1 Sam. 1:9-16 \_\_\_\_\_
- Job 13:20-22, and 31:35 \_\_\_\_\_
- Hab. 2:1 \_\_\_\_\_

Note that with each of the biblical characters mentioned above there was a sense of persistence in their prayers accompanied with their whole being set to hear from God. There is an opportunity every week for *us* to pray words that express that straining to hear and see God break in on earth. They are words of scripture. Do you know them? See Matt. 6:10 \_\_\_\_\_

Overfamiliarity with the words can rob us of the impact and power of this prayer, but to pray "your kingdom come, your will be done" is to make ourselves available on a continual basis to God's purposes – in our lives and in his world. Christians in the early Church saw this as a dangerous prayer:

Allegiance to the empire was determined by proclaiming the kingship of the emperors, the holiness of their name, and submission to their will. To declare otherwise, as demanded by praying the Our Father, was to act subversively towards the powers and principalities. – Michael Crosby, *Thy Will Be Done*

Martin Luther pulled no punches in his comments on the Lord's Prayer:

Thus if anything is to be done well, it requires the full attention of all one's senses and members, as the proverb says, "He who thinks of many things, thinks of nothing and does nothing right." How much more does prayer call for concentration and singleness of heart if it is to be a good prayer! . . . To this day I suckle at the Lord's Prayer like a child, and as an old man eat and drink from it and never get my fill. . . What a great pity that the prayer of such a master is prattled and chattered so irreverently all over the world! – Martin Luther, *A Simple Way to Pray*

Practicing praying and listening intently in "mundane" prayer helps us hear God's voice in the everyday circumstances of life, so when dramatic life events occur we are practiced in listening for his word.

#### Listening Prayer Exercise – Listening for God's Will with One's Whole Heart

In Luther's time silence was observed at different points in the service for personal prayer – lasting the time it took to pray (if one could think of no other prayer) the Lord's Prayer. Take a moment now (30 seconds) to reflect on this prayer (Matt. 6:9-13), *breathing with* this scripture (for example, "Thy kingdom come *in me*; thy will be done *in me*..."). The bible study leader will keep time for you.

#### II. Listening to God Speak through the Words of Scripture

Jesus modeled listening prayer. He showed what it means to be constantly "tuned in" to the presence of God the Father, in a continual process of listening to God's voice. Note key phrases:

- Matthew 4:4 \_\_\_\_\_

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- John 4:34 \_\_\_\_\_
- John 5:19 \_\_\_\_\_

Jesus used words of scripture in his prayers and in one instance the Bible records Jesus hearing his Father speak to him through the words of scripture: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22), which is from two passages, Psalm 2:7 and Isa. 42:1.

Listening for God's answer to prayer may involve recalling words that he has planted in us in the recent or distant past through scripture lessons, scripture songs and hymns, Psalm readings. Theologian P.T. Forsyth said eloquently "Faith is what makes you sure your prayer is heard and stored . . . God has old prayers of yours long maturing by Him" (*The Soul of Prayer*). What an encouraging thought!

#### Listening Prayer Exercise – Receiving the Seed of God's Word

(a prayer exercise suggested by Rev. Robert Warren in *The Practice of Prayer*)

Take a moment to choose a verse of Scripture that you want to see planted and bearing fruit in your life (excellent resource: the Psalms). Then spend 1 minute (the study leader keeping time) in prayer:

- Focus first on God's presence with you and his love toward you. We empty ourselves so Christ can fill us with his Spirit and Light.
- Silently repeat the verse slowly several times, letting the words sink in.
- Picture this verse on the lips of Jesus, repeating the words on your behalf.

Don't strain for a certain feeling. Simply remain in a receiving mode, soaking up the presence of the Lord in his Word.

### III. Listening through Silence.

We are a culture filled with restless activity, busyness and striving. Sometimes that restless activity can extend into worship and into our prayers--we become a *driven* people instead of a *called* people. Christ calls us away from the world, away from the striving, and asks us to wait before him.

God does not promise us that we will immediately hear his voice, but we are called into His presence nonetheless, sometimes simply to remain in s i l e n c e, while the Spirit is quietly at work.

- Psalm 46:10 \_\_\_\_\_
- Psalm 130:5-6 \_\_\_\_\_
- Psalm 131 \_\_\_\_\_
- Romans 8:26-27 \_\_\_\_\_

#### Listening Prayer Exercise – Listening for God's Voice through Silence

We will spend two minutes in practicing letting go and receiving from God. You may reflect on a symbol in the room which reminds you of the presence of Christ, such as a cross or a lighted candle, or on the accompanying Rembrandt painting of Christ.

- Begin with thanksgiving for Christ's Spirit at work in the world and in you – his will being done
- Simply hold yourself before God for him to speak truth, life, and light into your soul.
- Focus on an intentional yield to Christ shaping you – the Potter and the clay.

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## Discussion

1. "God is a heart-reader, not a lip-reader." How does that quote relate to praying "thy will be done"?
2. Have words of Scripture ever floated back to you in a time of decision-making or earnest prayer? Please share if you are willing.
3. Is there space – generous space, in *time* and in *focus* – given over to silence in your congregation's corporate worship? How will you foster silence and calming your soul in your worship life?
4. What is the level of urgency – hearts straining to hear God's answers to prayer – in your church? Would a visitor sense that level of urgency? Does urgency matter?
5. At what point does "earnest prayer" become focused on oneself, not God? What difference does it make?

## Summary

- "Prayer" for most people, and probably for most Christians, is about talking *to* God, *telling* him about our needs, and – if we could but see it – *giving* him the benefit of our wisdom and advice. . . . The truth is that the more important part of prayer is what God says to us, how he shapes and directs us." - Robert Warren, *The Practice of Prayer*
- Listening prayer is an attitude of the heart, oriented on Jesus, focused in the Word, available for God's purposes, waiting in expectation.

December 2006. Dr. Borecki is an adjunct professor of worship (NW Leadership Advancement Process), Concordia University, Portland and an LCMS Theological Educators visiting professor of liturgy and worship to Asia. Accompanying Leader's Guide is also available from the Center for U.S. Missions.

