

The Lord's Prayer

"Our Father who are in heaven"

(On January 17, 1965, Dr. Chester Terpstra began a series of messages on the Lord's Prayer. The following sermon is the first in this series, delivered at Makiki Christian Church, Honolulu, Hawaii).

As a lad I grew up in the outskirts of Grand Rapids, Michigan. The suburban area then had many plots of land that were as yet not fully developed. Like most boys at one time or another, I had a paper route. During the winter months the sun set at an early hour so that meant that I did not finish my route until well after dark. I still recall how I especially disliked delivering papers to a couple of customers who lived in the center of a subdivision, yet largely undeveloped. At least once I recall shoving their papers in a bush and making tracks for home. When I did have the courage to deliver their papers, I remember that I whistled while walking in the dark. To a small boy darkness seems to be the haunt of many unknowns, and, possibly, of many fearful adversaries. The winning of the wind, the snap of a twig, the howling of a dog, the sweeping rays of an eerie airport searchlight!! What is out there in the dark anyway?`

Some people have suggested that prayer is a form of "Whistling in the dark." Around us is a fearful world we don't understand. There is the darkness of war, of grave upon grave, of cancer, of heart disease, of accidents, and of death. And out there, too, are many other shadowy figures darkly discernible, So, in the midst of our fears we laugh, we whistle, we sing, we pray, we talk to ourselves, we busy ourselves in anything that will take our thoughts away from our fears or may in some way help us to clarify and compose our minds.

My friends, I would like to ask you this morning what you think is out there in the dark? What do these sorrows, heart aches and catastrophes of life tell us is there? I think we are agreed that the usual reaction is fear, but tell me, who is there in the dark? Is it a friend or foe? Over the centuries men have been looking with squinted eyes and wrinkled foreheads to see if they can make out who goes in the dark.

During the time of war when there are air-raids, cities reduced to rubble, untimely deaths, orphaned children, weary-eyed young widows, displaced persons, and acre upon acre of shallow graves, we conclude that this is a terror-filled world. It is an unfatherly place. It is a forest, -a valley of dark shadows. But most of the years of our history have been spent in war. And when not in actual conflict there are to be faced the devastating results of war, or there are the anxieties of cold war as nations and alliances jostle for position for world domination. Goethe said in his old age that he could hardly think that he had been really happy for more than a month in his whole life. Who goes there in the dark? Friend, or foe? Many times, it appears to be a foe.

But just a moment! Quiet, please! I hear something there in the dark. It is a voice softly heard amidst the noise, the sorrow, and confusion of the world. The voice says, "I am here. It is your Father. Be not afraid!" To us who sat in darkness and in the shadow of death a great light has appeared. "Arise, shine; for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you."

There is someone there in the dark and Jesus tells us it is our heavenly Father. Have we ever grasped the significance of this fact? We could have searched all our life and have been subject to fear and anxiety all of our days, and, at death, joined other hopeless creatures

in mourning and wailing over our woes, unless Jesus had come and said: "It is the Father our there." We need not fear for the voice is that of a Friend. Jesus said, "I have manifested Thy name unto men." And His name is Father." We can communicate with God because He has made Himself known. There has been a revelation. God has made Himself known. He is a person, and fellowship is possible.

Our Scripture lesson of the day tells us that "your Father knows what you need b before you ask him." "Before you ask him" - "before." God is always there before. "In the beginning, God..." God always takes the initiative. "God so loved the world;" God "sent His only begotten Son." We love Him because He first loved us. Out there in the dark is God. He was there before you and I ever appeared on the scene. Yes, and at the time of your great sorrow, and my great disappointment He was there, beforehand. Our emergencies, our catastrophes do not take God by surprise. He was there, before.

But it may have been that His call took us by surprise. He may have called "Samuel, Samuel"; "Ruth, Ruth" - but we did not know who it was and went running elsewhere and said, "Here I am for you called me." This may have happened repeatedly, until we recognized it to be the Father's voice, and said, "Speak, Lord, for thy servant hears."

But you may say, "This illness I am faced with makes things very dark. I don't understand." May I remind you this morning that Jesus says He is the Father "in Heaven." He is in so many ways - above us, beyond us. He is "in heaven." The Creed says, He is the "Father, Almighty." In His Almightyness His ways are beyond our ways. Who can understand His deeds? -- His ways with the children of men? Yet this His otherness is associated with His Fatherhood. His Almightyness is qualified by the fact that He is Father. Jesus taught us to compare God with our best, - Father, and then to acknowledge a mystery beyond

the best which no words can hint. Though we cannot trace all of His ways with our fingers yet be assured that He acts out of His Fatherly love. Oh, the import of grasping this truth of life. To know that He was there first, that everything that touches us has first touched Him. This is the truth that alters things for men. Man can then bow his knee before His God and accept his cross from the Father's hands. Sufferings then become trials to refine us; times of terror become times of God's visitation; through the valley of shadows, we know the Shepherd is there with His rod and staff. This is why the Scriptures can say:

"For we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."

All things!! Nothing in our lives can be accidental, arbitrary, or meaningless.

Did you notice that the prayer our Lord teaches is not a desperate, sudden, once-for-all cry for help? Most of our prayers are offered during emergencies, - when we are in trouble. The gist of most of them is, "help me Lord, help me." The Lord's Prayer teaches man, as Luke shows, how man ought to pray. Prayer should not be sporadic, spasmodic. Prayer should be a continuous and growing fellowship between children and their Father. A son who only talks with or writes to his father when he is in need shows immaturity, shallowness. So, with us in our relationship with God. Prayer is mainly fellowship. When in sincerity we have cried "Our Father" we have entered the essence of prayer. "Our Father" - this is a prayer of thanksgiving, uttered by helpless children to their Father. Once we have spoken the name "Father," a calmness possesses our souls. Then we need not be bothered with much speaking as the heathen, or with repetitions. Then we can even be silent in the Father's presence

because the Father knows what we have need of before we ask. He who cares for the sparrow, loves us. He knows you by name, not one hair falls from your head without His will. Nothing can separate you from His love in Christ Jesus.

Prayer can not be continuously carried on most effectively in the noise and bustle of life. There must be quietness, seclusion. "Enter into your closet and close the door" is the admonition. Jesus had no closet, so He went off into the quietness of the mountain before the break of day. We must take the time to hear God's voice. Don't allow the fear of the dark to throw you into much activity. T.S. Eliot speaks of this in his writing:

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
Endless invention, endless experiment.
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word-
Where is the life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom, we have lost in knowing?

I returned to Edinburgh, Scotland after an interval of four years. I recognized many people whom I had previously known. A helpful factor was meeting them again in the setting in which I had known them before. It is good to have a regular place for prayer, a familiar setting, your Peniel, where you like Jacob have "seen God face to face."

The Word of God says, "Men ought always to pray;" "Let us with confidence draw near to the throne of grace." God has not only been pleased to reveal Himself out of the darkness, but He has willed that we should respond to Him. He not only loves us and gave Himself for us, but He desires us to love Him and to fellowship with Him.

It sounds almost unbelievable, doesn't it? That finite, puny man should commune with the infinite, Almighty God? How many times have you had an audience with the Mayor of Honolulu, with the Governor of the State, with the President of the United States? But we are encouraged to enter into God's presence in prayer. This is the humility of God. This is the part of the truth which God has revealed when He came to us in Jesus Christ. This is part of the meaning of the Word becoming flesh.

Observing their Lord in prayer, communing with His Father, the disciples asked, "Lord, teach us to pray." The hymn says, O Master "tell me Thy Secret." The secret of the Master is prayer. We are not taught to preach, to sing, to administer, but we are taught to pray.

To desire to respond to the Father in prayer is the most natural thing on earth. There is no place on the globe where prayer, in some form, is not known. Yet, prayer is an art, a discipline that demands much of man.

It is said that ministers spend more time on the telephone than in prayer. Isn't that a sad commentary? Let us make this personal this morning! How much time do I spend in prayer? Do I have a place of prayer? A time for prayer? Faith in prayer? Or have I stopped talking with God, and now am left with only talking about Him?

How much time do you spend in prayer? Is it in the vein, "Oh God if you hear me in this my hour of need, I'll never bother you again?" Do you have a place for prayer? A time for prayer? Do you believe in prayer? Or are you still whistling in the dark? You may say, "Mr. Terpstra, I don't know God. I have never met Him. Life is still shadowy; there is much confusion."

I answer, "Right now He is near." It is not so much that He is out there in the dark, but that we are in the dark. We are lost, wandering, searching for meaning to life, searching for cleansing from our sense of sin, of guilt. God calls you just now. He says, "Come unto me you who are laboring, and are heavy burden." Do you hear His voice in your conscience this morning? He is there! Answer him. "Adam, where are Thou" is his call. "John, where are you?" "Bob, Ruth, where are you?" Arise, for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

Like the prodigal son, if you arise and make the turn to come home, the Father will meet you with open arms. He is waiting for you right now. Why not join others who have prayed, "Our Father who art in heaven." AMEN.