

Meditations of the Heart - Reflections on the Scriptures

Psalm 19:14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

Pastor Matt Cadora

April 8, 2010

The Priority of Worship and Prayer - in Community as well as in Solitude

Psalm 1:1-3 (ESV)

1 Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; 2 but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. 3 He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.

Philippians 4:4-7 (ESV)

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5 Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; 6 do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

As we come to the end of our look at the seven Penitential Psalms, it would be good for us to keep in mind that many of these Psalms were written in order to be prayed and sung (many of them were, in fact, set to music) within a worshipping community of believers.

- 1) Psalm 6 begins with the introduction *"To the choirmaster with stringed instruments..."*
- 2) Psalm 32 has the introduction *"A Maskil of David"*; again, an ancient Hebrew cue to use in a liturgical setting with musical instrumentation.
- 3) Psalm 38 begins as *"A Psalm of David. For the Memorial Offering."*, an offering that would take place in a worship service.
- 4) Psalm 51, that most famous of David's confessions, introduces itself as *"To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone into Bathsheba."* What was originally written as a deeply personal prayer becomes something for the worshipping community to use in prayer and worship.
- 5) As a Song of Ascents, Psalm 130 is one song within a series of songs used in worship by the ancient Hebrews.
- 6) Psalms 102 and 143 may be the only Penitential Psalms that were not expressly sung in public worship by the ancient Hebrews, but I only say that because we have no specific indication (within the Psalm itself) of such use. They may well have been sung or prayed amongst the ancient Israelites in public worship and we certainly don't find any prohibition against using this Psalm in our worship services today.

I list these specific examples out so that you might see how important the use of the Penitential Psalms (and all the Psalms) were to the ancient Hebrews as a community of faith.

In the American church, we do place a high priority on personal prayer and reading of the Scriptures - and the Scriptures place a priority on the same! However, we also live in an independent culture. If you ask the average Christian in America what is the most important aspect of spiritual growth, the most prominent answer you will likely receive is that one must be consistent in personal devotions

It is fundamentally important in the life of a Christian to grow in his or her faith by regularly spending time in prayer and Scripture reading and study on their own. The Scriptures teach us this very thing. And yet, this is where Christians in our culture struggle greatly 1) because of the demands on their time; 2) because they often read something in Scripture that they don't understand or know how to appropriate in their lives; and 3) because they separate themselves from the body of Christ and from the priority of approaching God and worshipping Him together as a community of faith.

You've heard me, in these recent weeks, often quote pastor and theologian Eugene Peterson. Permit me to do so once more, for I have found that there are few modern day saints who write as clearly and simply as Peterson on these matters:

"If somebody comes to me and says, 'Teach me how to pray,' I say, 'Be at this church at nine o'clock on Sunday morning [when his church's worship service began].' That's where you learn how to pray. Of course, prayer is continued and has alternate forms when you're by yourself. But the American experience has the order reversed. In the long history of Christian spirituality, community prayer is most important, then individual prayer."

"Prayer has to be a response to what God has said. The worshipping congregation - hearing the Word read and preached, and celebrating it in the sacraments, is the place where I learn how to pray and where I practice prayer. It is a center from which I pray. From it, I go to my closet or to the mountains and continue to pray."

"A second thing about praying in community is that, when I pray in a congregation, my feelings are not taken into account. Nobody asks me when I enter the congregation, 'How do you feel today? What do you feel like praying about?'" So the congregation is a place where I'm gradually learning that prayer is not conditioned or authenticated by my feelings."

"Nothing is more devastating to prayer than when I begin to evaluate prayer by my feelings, and think that, in order to pray, I have to have a certain sense, a certain spiritual attentiveness or peace or, on the other side, anguish. That's virtually impossible to learn by yourself. But if I'm in a congregation, I learn over and over again that prayer will go on whether I feel like it or not, or even if I sleep through the whole thing."¹

¹ Peterson, Eugene, The Contemplative Pastor, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1989, pp. 8-9.