

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

Embrace the Awkward: Deuteronomy and the Foundations of Prayer

Scott Powell

Well, hello everybody. My name is Scott Powell, and I'm excited to talk to you today a little bit about prayer – namely, why it's so hard – and to try to answer that question I want to go back to the roots, and kind of look at where prayer comes from, and dig back as far as we can in the biblical tradition. So, before we do all that, let's begin in a prayer.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Lord Jesus, we thank You for the gift of this retreat. We thank You for the gift of all of the people who are watching and listening online. I pray for all of the other presenters, and all of the people who are involved in this. We pray that You would help us understand what it means to be a people of prayer, and to find out where prayer comes from, and what it means to give You all of our heart, and all of our soul, and all of our strength. I pray that You would be in my words. Let me not say anything that's outside of Your will, and we pray for all of the people that are close to us. We pray all this through Christ, our Lord. Amen. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

So I was at my 20-year high school reunion not too long ago, which dates me a little bit. But I was there, and I had a very weird experience. So I'm at my 20-year reunion, we were hanging out at this restaurant, and I was seeing all of these people, many of whom I literally haven't talked to or seen in 20 years, since we were in high school. And I've had this happen in other contexts, but for some reason I was really struck this time, and I realized how much we all knew about each other. And I was having these conversations, and hearing other people. And, you know, we would be talking to each other. Again, we haven't seen each other in 20 years in a lot of cases. And we'd be saying "Oh, yeah. You know, so you live in Louisville now?" And "Oh, you have this many kids," and "Hey, I saw you took that trip to the Bahamas," and "Your kitchen remodel looks awesome."

And, you probably all had this experience before: we all knew kind of everything about each other because of social media and Facebook and everything. And so we've seen the pictures, and the updates, and all of this stuff, but we hadn't actually seen each other. And what it made me realize is that we have this weird situation in our society right now, and I'm sure it happened before, but now it's kind of acute: We know a lot about people, but I don't know that we know people. Now, I'm sure you have people in your life, I hope, that you know, that you're

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

close to, that are friends, that are family members. But, unfortunately, our society and social media and stuff, it's kind of changing our definition of what a relationship is. Because, again, we know a lot about a lot of people, but how many people are actually friends? How many people do you really know?

And because we've kind of confused in our society this idea of knowing and relationship and what friendship actually is, I think it's actually made prayer a lot harder for us. Because, at the end of the day, prayer is a relationship. Prayer is a conversation with God. And there's no good relationship that's really going to go anywhere if you don't know the person. And so, you know, if you're at this retreat, that means you're probably interested or maybe serious in the spiritual life. And if you're like me, you're one of those people who has a whole stack of books, you know, by their bedside table about prayer, about the spiritual life, about Jesus.

You know, I'm a theologian, and I remember at one point during my doctoral dissertation, which was on the bible. I mean, I've got all of these books and, you know, five times more than this about the bible. But I realized at one point I wasn't reading the bible, I was reading about it. And so I think we can get confused sometimes, and frustrated in prayer, because we've been trained to know about things, but we haven't been trained to know things, or to know people, or God in particular. So how do you know God? Where does this come from?

Well, I don't have a strict answer for that, but I want to give you a couple of thoughts and reflections, and things to just kind of mull over. And to do that, like I said, I kind of want to go back to the beginning, or at least kind of the beginning. I want to go to the book of Deuteronomy, which is in the very beginning of the bible. It's one of the books of what's called the Pentateuch, the Torah, the first five books, which are the foundation of all of the Jewish scriptures, the foundation of all of the Jewish life, the foundation of what would have been Jesus' religious life. And I want to go back to a prayer that is the foundation of everything for the Jewish people, the foundation of their prayer life. It would have been a prayer that I guarantee Jesus would have prayed probably every day. It's what the Blessed Mother Mary would have whispered in Jesus' ear when He was a baby. It is the prayer that sort of shaped all of the rest of the Jewish prayer life. And you've probably heard it before.

It comes from the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 6. And I'm going to read this. And, again, I bet you've heard it before, but I want to challenge you to look at it with new eyes, and to hear it with new ears, and to try to put yourselves into the footsteps and the shoes of the people who originally gave us this. You might recognize this partially because Jesus uses this in the gospel of Matthew, it's

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

Matthew 22, when He's asked "What's the greatest commandment?" He actually quotes this. So we already know that, for Jesus, this is a pretty big deal.

So I'm going to read this to you. It's in Deuteronomy chapter 6, and I'm going to start in verse 4. It's called the Shema prayer. Shema is the Hebrew word for "To hear. To hear. To Shema." And one thing to note before we read this: In Hebrew, the word for "hear," "listen," and "obey" are all the same thing. Because, for the Hebrews, to hear and to not obey is to not really hear. You know, I've got 3 kids, and if I ask one of my kids to go take out the trash or something like that, how do I know that they've actually heard me? Well, I know that they've actually heard me if they take out the trash. Otherwise, have they really heard? They can kind of hear with their ears but not do anything about it.

So ***Hear, O Israel*** is how this prayer begins, which means not only just listen, but obey. "Turn yourself, O Israel." ***Hear, O Israel, "Shema Yisrael" The Lord, your God, is one Lord. And you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all of your soul, and with all of your might. These words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart, and you shall teach them diligently to your children. You shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, they shall be as frontals between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorpost of your houses and on your gates.*** In other words, this is a big deal. Pay attention to this prayer. ***You shall say them every day. Hear, O Israel.***

Well, what are they supposed to hear? Well, the Lord is one. This is the original statement of monotheism, that there is one God, which is a counter-cultural thing to say in the time of Deuteronomy. But if we know that God is one, and if we believe that and acknowledge that, well, what do we do about it? Well, we are to love the Lord, your God, with all of our heart, it says, with all of our soul, and with all of our strength. "Love the Lord, your God, with all of your heart, your soul, and your strength," or "your might," some translations say. I want to take those apart kind of one by one, just take a couple of minutes here, because I think we have a pretty profound misunderstanding of what a lot of those words mean, especially that first one. What does it mean to love the Lord, your God, with all of your heart?

We have a misunderstanding of what the word "heart" means in our culture. I blame it on a whole lot of things. I partially blame sappy English poetry and the Hallmark channel, because... I have nothing really against those things but, for whatever reason, we've become a people, when we hear the word "heart," we think of emotions, right, feelings. "That person is heartless." In other words, they have no feelings, they have no emotions, right. But for the Hebrews, the Jewish people, for Jesus' time, the heart was not the seat of our feelings, it wasn't the seat of our

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

emotions, it was something far different from that, far more important than that. And I actually want... I shouldn't say important, they're all important, but it's a little bit different. And I'm going to read to you a quote, if I can find it in my notes, I'm going to read you a quote from the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

Which says this. By the way, this paragraph, I'm going to quote 2 paragraphs. And where they come from, they come from the fourth pillar of the Catechism. If you know anything about the Catechism of the Catholic Church, it's divided into 4 sections, which are called pillars, which delve into different aspects of the spiritual life, prayer, what we believe, and why we believe it. The last pillar though is the pillar on prayer, the section on prayer, and it's profound. It's a spiritual masterpiece, and it's tucked into this huge book that's kind of considered like a reference manual. If you get a chance, read the fourth pillar on the Catechism on prayer. It's amazing. But what it is this. This is paragraph 2562. And it says: "Where does prayer come from?" Which is our question today, right. "Whether prayer is expressed in words or in gestures, it is the whole man, the whole person who prays. But in naming the source of prayer, scripture speaks sometimes about the soul, sometimes about the spirit, but most often of the heart. Over a thousand times." That's a lot of heart.

"According to the scripture, it is the heart that prays. But if our heart is far from God, then the words of prayer are in vain." Okay, so the next paragraph. So what is the heart? It leads us to those next question. "Okay, if the heart is the source of all of this, what is the heart? 2563: "The heart is the dwelling place, where I am, where I live. According to the Semitic or the biblical expression, the heart is the place to which I withdraw. The heart is our hidden center, beyond the grasp or the reason of others. Only the spirit of God can fathom the human heart and know it fully. The heart is the place of decision, deeper than our psychic drives. It is the place of truth, where we choose life or death. It is the place of encounter because, as the image of God, we live in relation. It is the place in the covenant."

That's a big deal, which is very different than the way that I always thought heart... what I thought "heart" meant. It's the Hebrew word "Levav," which, if you listen to what the Catechism says, this is very different than what many of us think of the heart. This is not the seat of our emotions, this is not the seat of our feelings, this is the seat of our will, our decision-making, where we choose, as Deuteronomy says later on, life or death. Who are you going to be? Your will. That is what the heart is. It's the place where we meet with God, the dwelling place. For the Hebrews, that was the temple. That means we each have little temples, tabernacles within us, where we choose. "Who are you going to be?" That is what Deuteronomy says we are to love the Lord with all of. Not just our feelings, not just our emotions, but all of our will, our decisions. "Who am I?" That's a very big deal.

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

The next word that Deuteronomy uses, “Love the Lord with all of your heart,” your will, your decision-making, “With all of your soul.” The word for “soul” there in Hebrew, it’s the Hebrew word “Nephes.” And Nephes, you know, this is the problem with languages. We don’t always have an exact one-to-one translation of certain words. If you know a foreign language, you know that certain things, it’s hard to translate. What is Nephes? Well, Nephes is actually, ironically enough, it’s closer to what we might think of as when we define a heart. It’s a little bit different. It’s not really emotions, it’s more about our personality. What makes you, you. The things that are uniquely designed to make you an individual. Your personality, your quirks, your idiosyncrasies, your gifts, your wounds, the things that you carry with you, your baggage. Those are the things that we are also to give over to God.

You know, when we pray, sometimes we want to whitewash it and make ourselves look as good as possible. This is the thing with social media. You know, I mentioned my high school reunion, there were a lot of people who knew a lot of things about me, but they knew the carefully curated version of myself that I put online. That’s not really knowing me. God doesn’t want the carefully curated version of us that we put on Facebook, He wants us. So, give Him your personality, your quirks, your woundedness, because if He is the divine physician, then only He can actually fix those things. So, give Him all of your heart, give Him all of your soul. And then it says, “With all of your strength,” or “might” it’s sometimes translated.

And the word for “might” or “strength,” this is a weird one, because it doesn’t really have a translation into English. It’s the Hebrew word “Meod.” And Meod, it’s not fully translatable. The closest I can think of it is if you have like 3 exclamation points behind the rest of what it says. So, “Love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, exceedingly, to the limit!!!” That’s what it means. And so, it raises the question, right. “What does it mean? What would it look like to love our Lord with all of our will, with all of our decision, with all of our drives that we choose life and death. Who am I going to be? How can I give God that?” To love the Lord with all of what makes us me, me. My giftedness, my woundedness, my weird quirks that might, you know, get on our spouse’s nerves or whatever it is. Give Him all of that, and do it exceedingly, in totality.

You know, I’m reminded of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, when He was saying “Lord, I don’t want to go and do what I’m called to do.” He doesn’t say that. He says “Lord, if it’s possible for this cup to be taken away from Me, let it be. But not My will, but Yours be done.” That is Jesus loving the Lord with all of His heart, His Levav. “I don’t know if I want to do this, but I’m conforming My will to Yours.” What does it look like to give the Lord our will? To turn ourselves to Him,

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

to decide for Him. With all of our personalities, our quirks, our wounds, our weirdness, and to do it in totality. Well, it looks a lot like a crucifix. Because, ultimately, God doesn't ask us to do anything that He hasn't already done Himself, and so He give us the model.

You know, up until Jesus and His passion, this prayer in Deuteronomy chapter 6 is a bit abstract, because I don't know if anyone's ever been able to do that, to give the Lord their whole will, their whole personality, exceedingly and in totality. And then Jesus does it, He shows us the way. That's what we're meant to be. That's what we're meant to do. That's what prayer is meant to look like. To give Him all of those things. And if you really do that, if you go through each of those 3 components, it's going to get messy, it's going to get awkward, and it's going to get a little clumsy. You know, that's the thing about relationships. Any good relationship requires pushing through some awkwardness, some clumsiness.

When I fell in love with my wife, I had to get over, you know, those awkward dates where I had the cold sweats and like "Oh, is she going to like me? What am I going to say? I'm going to do the wrong thing." There's awkwardness in relationships. There's clumsiness in relationships. That's what relationships are. But if you can push through the awkwardness, and push through the clumsiness, then you get to the good stuff. And so, I guess, as we reflect on these words from Deuteronomy, and what we're asked by God to give back to Him, my challenge to you is when you pray, let it be awkward. Let it be clumsy. Deal with those things. Sit with that. Give in. Embrace the awkwardness. Embrace the awkwardness of prayer, because every good relationship that's worth it is worth pushing through those with our will, with our personality, with our quirks all the way.

That's what God wants. He wants nothing less than all of us. And if we give those things to Him, or if we even begin to give those things to Him, He's going to come and do the rest. He's going to come and pick us up. He's going to get us out of the clumsiness and the awkwardness, and He's going to carry us the rest of the way. Because that's the kind of relationship He wants to have. He's a Father who wants to pick us up in our brokenness, comfort us, hug us, wrap His arms around us, and get to know us. Or, rather, get us to get to know Him. Because He knows us. He knows everything there is to know. But He wants us to know Him. Let's close in prayer.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, it is now and ever shall be. World without end. Amen. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Thank you all so much. We'll see you next time.

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript