

Elemental Disciplines

Wayne Waibel – 07/24/2022

I've known folks that love to pray, and are very good at it. It's as though their entire voice takes on a completely different tone when they actively engage in prayer. It is a skill I've never acquired. I'm one of those who like the silent prayers.

I don't really consider it a failing or chink in the ecclesiastical armor – the fact that I'm not a gifted prayer warrior. We all have our strengths and none of us can do it all, so I'm resigned to the possibility that prayer is not where my calling lies.

Then again, if you consider all the time I spend thinking about God and saying thank you to God and asking for a little assistance from Him here and there throughout the course of a day – I do spend a good deal of time in a prayerful state. And then there's all the time I spend listening. Maybe I am a prayer warrior!

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When you consider some of the brutality and violence documented in the Old Testament, it would seem that God had some anger issues with the children of Israel. Who could blame Him when you consider the various ways they found of completely disregarding His Word, His warnings, and His preferences. He is not a demanding God, but He does require obedience – not unlike a parent.

There is a school of theological thought that advances the notion that God Himself evolves, much as the earth and humanity has done since the beginning. Things most certainly are not now as they were then. No question. Hosea documents an excellent example of just how fed-up God has become with His chosen people.

Despite the many ways the children of Israel have disappointed God, and regardless of their outright defiance of Him, God is determined to retain that which belongs to Him. And He will always do what it takes to justify His people. It's a wonder that He still clings to us with the love and affection that he does. Perhaps that's all part of *His* maturing process. Fortunately – he never gives up on us.

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The structure of the universe is within the church, and the foundation of the universe is not something, but someone. Paul does a very good job of outlining that in his letter to the Colossians.

Individual identity is part of a larger shared identity. A shared identity is one of the essential elements that define a community, particularly a community of faith. We come together on so many things, and yet – maintain a very personal relationship with God as well. It's all part of the mystery of faith.

I remember being very confused by the story of Moses and the children of Israel seeming to be at odds once they were finally set free. How could they so easily and so quickly turn on the God that had saved them from a life of oppression and slavery? Then I think of how easily we are duped by the various media competing for our attention.

It's difficult to put ourselves in the same position as the ancient Israelites, especially given their history of persecution even if – some would argue – they really had it coming. Where is the love of God in that scenario? Again – different time and circumstance.

Enter Jesus. Here's a guy with the patience of a saint, the Wisdom of Solomon, and the authority of the Son of God. When He speaks, all around find comfort in His Words.

When His disciples ask Him to teach them to pray, I wonder if they had any idea of the magnitude of that simple request. Now we ALL get the recipe – not just a chosen few.

If you break it down, the way Jesus instructs us to pray is a very deliberate progression. You start with a proclamation of reverence – Hallowed be thy name. Then you extend that reverence into a statement of fact – Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

You follow that up with four requests: Give us - forgive us – lead us – deliver us. Ending with acknowledgement of His sovereignty – for Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory – forever.

While this prayer is probably remembered by even the most distant Christian, the illustrations Christ uses to define and illuminate following the Lord's Prayer is where the rubber meets the road. Not a lot of attention is paid to that portion of the Gospel, because it's in the shadow of the Lord's Prayer, but therein lies our charge to pursue and discern the voice of God amid the racket of distracting noises.

Now we have a number of elemental disciplines to guide us. One of them is persistence. Seek and you will find. And the act of seeking is not simply having a look. It's a considered effort to discover and comprehend. The promise of finding that which you are seeking requires a good bit of attention to detail. You don't always fall into the answer or the response.

In the time of Christ there were no 24-hour convenience stores. Back then, if someone stopped by in the middle of the night, the neighborly thing to do was feed them, and if you had nothing, you sought help from a neighbor. If

that neighbor was unwilling to help you out, you had no choice but to be relentless, knowing they would ultimately come to your aide. That's how a community operates.

It's hard to say if the point is to keep pestering someone until you get what you want or remind folks of what it means to be in community until they relent, and you get what you need. The same is true today, but our circumstances are far different. We have the option of just running to the store if we lack the appropriate supplies.

The same could be said of praying. Sometimes it takes a while for God to hear our voice. So we must continue until we are heard, or at the very least, until we fully understand what it is we are asking.

Just as it is important for us to listen for God as we pray, it is also important for us to listen to ourselves. We don't always start with the right frame of mind when we enter a prayer, but if you stay at it – you'll get there. Knock and it will be opened unto you.

And perhaps the most critical point to be made in all of this is the understanding that we hold the capacity to be very righteous in our efforts to minister unto one another.

The point Jesus drives home at the very end of this tutorial is that we ourselves are not exactly perfect, yet even we know enough to provide good

things for one another. And if we have that skill in our imperfection, how much more will God deliver in His perfection?

We do our best, and we fall short. But we do our best and strive to do better. As we walk through this life and try to pick things up along the way, we get better and better at noticing the right way to do things. It's not always the cheapest or the easiest, or even the most efficient – but we need to continuously make the effort.

God can show us and teach us and help us along the way, but we have to put in the time and elemental discipline, or our prayers are meaningless. It's simply a matter of putting your heart into it.

You can intellectualize all you want, and use flowery language and even impress people with your eloquent attempts at reaching God through prayer, but He knows the desires of your heart before you even verbalize them, so don't kid yourself.

Because Christ shares fully the human condition, we share Christ's destiny. So, approach God with humility and honesty. And keep at it – He'll hear you. And He will answer your prayer. It may not be the answer you were looking for at a time convenient to you, but it will be what you need to hear – when you need to hear it. Amen.