

Teach Me, Lord, to Pray

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This sermon begins with a video clip from the movie “Bruce Almighty”, produced by Universal Studios in 2003, and starring Jim Carrey and Morgan Freeman.

The clip is of Bruce (Carrey) driving down the street, upset over having lost his job after going on a tirade on live television. Bruce decides to make an attempt at prayer. All the while, he’s not noticing his prayers for a sign are literally being answered immediately, warning of danger ahead. He continues down the road, grabbing a set of prayer beads, given to him in a previous scene by his girlfriend, Grace (Jennifer Aniston), and prays for God (Freeman) to reach into his life and perform a miracle... until he hits a pot hole. Bruce drops the prayer beads, takes his eyes off the road while he’s searching under his seat, and ends up crashing his car into a light post.

Bruce gets out of the car, now even more upset because he has no job and no car, and turns on God for all the misfortune in his life. That’s when Bruce begins to shout and rant at God. He throws the beads into the nearby bay and yells, “Fine! The gloves are off, pal! Come on, let me see a little wrath. Smite me, O mighty smiter! You’re the one who should be fired! The only one around here not doing his job is you! Answer me!!!”

At this point, Bruce receives a page from a mystery number. He takes one look at it, shuts it off, and says this line: “Sorry, don’t know ya. Wouldn’t call ya if I did.”

Praying to God takes all different forms. Praying to God also requires a certain spirit. It’s a spirit of listening, as well as sharing. Sometimes we forget one or the other. Sometimes we’re trying to listen for God’s answer, but we haven’t asked the right questions. We haven’t prayed for what it is openly that we need. Sometimes we’re praying for what we need, telling God what we’re looking for, but we’re not opening ourselves to how God will answer. Prayer is two-way communication.

Now granted, God doesn’t always answer with God’s voice or in obvious ways. I’m not saying he doesn’t ever answer this way. We have examples in the Bible of how God answered with God’s own voice. The Bible also says there came a time when God started speaking less frequently. My point is, we have a part in listening. We have to open ourselves up to hear what God is saying.

Elijah gives us a little bit of an example... scratch that. It’s a really big example of how we first approach God. Or how we should approach God. In the story Elijah has just come from this confrontation with the prophets of Baal. He’s running and he’s scared. He cries out to God, “Just let me die! Let it be good enough and let me die!”

Now hopefully no one here has ever spoken or thought that prayer. If you have and you’re still with us, bless your soul. You have stuck it through and stuck with God. But this is the point Elijah has come to. God hears Elijah and tells him to go on a journey to God’s mountain, Mt Horeb (or

Mount Sinai). There Elijah was to meet God. God even gives him food and drink to nourish him for the journey of forty days and forty nights.

Forty days and forty nights is a long way to go. Think of what that's like without a car. There's not rest stops. There's no drive thru at the McDonalds for a quick meal. Of course, theologically speaking, this is a key phrase in the Bible. Forty days and forty nights means he walked for a really long time to get to Mt Horeb.

You'd think after sending Elijah such a long way to have this meeting with the divine, God would be there waiting, ready to listen, ready to answer Elijah's prayers. That's not exactly what happened when Elijah came up to the mountain. The first thing God says to Elijah is, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Not exactly the warmest of greetings. Also, a confusing greeting given God told Elijah to come.

"Well, Jezreel is after me. I killed all her prophets and they killed all your prophets. I alone am left. Now she's after me to kill me. I'm terrified. I'm scared. Just let me die."

What is God's response? God tells Elijah, "Go stand over there. Step away from me. Go stand over there." That's a paraphrase of course. God told Elijah to go stand on the mountain while God passed by. Elijah obeyed and moved to the side on the mountain and waited for the Lord to pass by.

What happened next? A wind came against the mountain. It was a wind so powerful, when it struck the mountain rocks broke. I don't know about you, but I don't ever want to experience a wind like that. Especially not from as close as Elijah was to it. I came close once. An F4 tornado passed within a quarter mile of our house when I lived in Rochelle, Illinois. It tore through the northwestern corner and just north of town leaving devastation in its wake. At the peak of its strength, it hit a restaurant, causing it to explode. Thankfully, everyone managed to get into the below ground shelter. That's as close as I ever want to get to a force like that, and even that was too close.

...but God was not in the wind.

What came next? An earthquake came next. Now I've experienced what I consider mini-earthquakes. I've had it where I've woken up in the middle of the night because of a vibration or a rumbling. I thought some heavy vehicle was driving by, causing the house to shake. Then I remembered I live on a side street (at least I did at that time) and a vehicle wouldn't cause the house to shake like that. Another time I was laying in bed, just resting, when all of a sudden, I felt the ground drop. Those two incidents weren't really scary, but then I've never been in an area where a big earthquake has hit. I've never experienced buildings falling down around me, or streets breaking apart as I rushed to find shelter with enough structural integrity to keep me safe and alive. I've never had to evacuate to higher ground out of the very real possibility a tsunami could be heading for the coast line. That is terrify and powerful. Literally life shaking... pun intended.

...but God was not in the earthquake.

Then what comes after the earthquake? A great fire; an all-consuming fire. Fire burns. Fire consumes. Fire eats. Fire leaves nothing in its path but ash. Fire can get so hot it can reshape the land, super heating rocks to the point they crack like eggs.

We had an experience with that last summer, where one tiny little firecracker set the Columbia River Gorge on fire just east up the highway. It burned for days. I was living on 97th Avenue and Foster Road at the time. That's ten miles or more west-southwest of here. Multnomah Falls, one of the areas hit hard by the gorge fire, is still 16 miles to the east of us. I remember my car would be covered in ash when I'd come out to go to work in the morning. The air quality was so bad most people were wearing masks to go outside and school sports events and practices had to be cancelled. People had to evacuate their homes and others lost their jobs in Hood River. All the beauty in the gorge was destroyed. Thankfully it's coming back now, but the damage was done.

...but God was not in the fire.

Where was God?

God was in the silence. God was in a gentle silence. Some translations say a gentle whisper. And that's when Elijah went before the Lord.

Some look at this scripture and they see it as a teaching to recognize the might of God. Understand the power you are dealing with before you approach God. I understand it a little differently. All of those storms, all of the raging on the mountain before Elijah could go before God; I don't understand that as being reflective of God's power. The scripture even tells us God was not in any of those events. God was not in the wind. God was not in the earthquake. God was not in the fire.

All of those events and storms, all of the raging that came and hit the mountain was a reflection on the state of Elijah's heart. Think about it. Elijah just came from this massive confrontation with 450 prophets of Baal. He won the confrontation. He brought Israel back to God. He proved through his God-given prophetic abilities that God is God, not Baal. But now Elijah has people coming after his life. He's running and he's scared and he's terrified.

How many of us, when we're running and we're scared and we're terrified are calm inside? I've had a few moments in my life when I have been absolutely terrified. They have been moments when I have been driving and something has zoomed passed me. They have been moments when I have been in school and made a mistake dealing with a peer. It was the kind of mistake that gets you not just beat up, but pummeled. I mean black and blue, bleeding, swollen, on the ground, not getting back up. Do you think my spirit was calm? That's a fight or flight moment. And I was not a fighter. When you're frantically looking for which direction you can run, that is not a calm state.

Elijah does not have a calm state. Not having a calm state can be a huge distraction when it comes to going before God. We need to find that space when we pray. We need to find that space where we ourselves are calm and can go before God.

Bruce, in the movie clip, was clearly not in that space. And it showed. Even as Bruce was praying, God was trying to answer him. He wasn't seeing, or hearing, or understanding that, yes,

God is trying to reach into Bruce's life. God is trying to do exactly what Bruce wanted God to do. The problem was, Bruce wasn't letting God answer. Bruce was so caught up in his own struggles, ambitions, and blaming everyone else, he didn't let God into his life.

Even when we have the purest intentions in praying to God, we are often distracted. We're distracted by ourselves, distracted by what's going on around us, distracted by the pressure we are placed under on a daily basis.

The thing about praying to God is it's a real simple thing. I could give you formulas. I could give you scriptures. Paul tells us to pray ceaselessly. Keep on praying and never stop praying. There's the ACTS formula for prayer; Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. Praise God, confess your sins. (I know this one is hard. It's not supposed to be easy. Do it anyway.) Give thanks to God for what God has given you or done in your life. Ask God for what you need or for what you want God to do for others.

Some people have different practices. When they pray there's a certain ritual they need to follow. They may feel they need to speak in a specific way or say a specific phrase or incantation. I do that with my sermons. Before I start preaching, I pray, "Lord, may the words that flow from my mouth be wholly and truly acceptable to you this day. Amen." That's a ritual of mine. People light candles. We have candles lit here in worship to invite the Holy Spirit in and recognize the dual nature of Christ as being fully human and at the same time fully divine.

But formulas can bog things down and get in the way. Prayer is simpler than that. Prayer in its simplest form does not take formulas or candles or rituals. This is for one very important reason that has to do with what we talked about last week. Last week we talked about coming and being at the feet of Jesus, putting worldly and busy distractions aside. Prayer is very simple. Come and be at the feet of Jesus.

The thing with prayer? It comes right back to that two-way communication piece. Because prayer is a conversation. If you're not in a calm enough state for the conversation, that's ok. God can calm you. Take it to God in a meditative spirit. 'Lord, I need your help. Quiet my soul from what is troubling me, and let's talk.' If you are in that place where you are calm, then it's just a conversation.

Another thing about prayer; what's the very first line of the Lord's Prayer? It's, "Our Father who art in heaven..." Our Father. If Father makes you uncomfortable, our Parent who art in heaven. These are relationship words. They're not worship words. Father God, Parent God, Mother God. These are relationship words.

Prayer is conversation to be had in relationship with God. Jesus even gives examples of relationship when he's teaching about prayer. "Who of you, when your child asks for a loaf of bread, gives them a snake?" Are you going to give your child a snake if they ask for food? I'm not going to give my children a snake if they ask for food. Not even Cole, my twelve-year-old, who's got a wit that makes us proud. At the same time it makes us wanna ground him just because we can. Jesus also asked, "Who among you, when your child asks for an egg, will give them a

scorpion?” Are you going to give your child, or any child, a scorpion? Maybe a toy scorpion because some kids like bugs and they can show their friends. But not a live scorpion.

We know how to answer the requests of our children. It’s a relational, two-way thing. Jesus even says, “Ask and you shall receive. Knock and the door shall be open.” Jesus even gives us permission to be annoying with prayer. It’s right there in the scripture. Jesus gives the example of going to your friend’s house in the middle of the night because you found yourself in urgent need of bread. You knock on your friend’s door and he says, “Go away. My family is all turned in for the night and I’m sleeping.” You keep knocking and being persistent. Eventually, your friend comes down, opens up the door, and gives you what you need. It’s not because he likes you very much at that moment. It’s because of your persistence.

Prayer, like Paul taught, is to be ceaseless. Constantly be in prayer. Always and ceaselessly be telling God what is going on in your life. Always let God know how you are.

One of the beautiful things about prayer is we don’t need to inform God about our lives. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologian, pastor, and Christian martyr during World War II, in his book The Cost of Discipleship, tells us God already knows what’s going on in our lives. God already knows what we need. So what’s the point in asking?

There’s a big point. Yes, God already knows what we want and what we need. What’s the point in asking? The point is that relationship piece. It all comes back to relationship. God wants to hear from us. God wants to give us what we need. God wants to help us out. God wants to be with us and nourish us for the journey. God wants to be active in our lives. God wants us to let God be active in our lives.

Sitting at the feet of Jesus, being there with God in the flesh? That’s relational to the core. A two-way conversation that never ceases always keeping each other in your thoughts? That’s relational at an intimate level. Our first hymn this morning where we sang about walking in the garden with Jesus? That’s something you do with a friend. It’s something you do with family.

God is family. Jesus Christ is family. So when we come to God, know we come to family.

Sometimes that’s gonna be a tirade, because we need to vent sometimes. If your job is going rough, if you’re having a bad day, if your friends, your family, your husband, your wife, or your kids are the cause of your frustration, and you need some real heaven-sent patience, bring it to God. Let God bring you peace. Be in relationship with God. Bring everything to God. If there is a blessing that has happened in your life, bring it to God. If there is a worry that is in your heart, bring it to God. Because God wants to hear it all. God is that good friend who never leaves you. God is that wonderful powerful friend who never leaves you and always loves you.

When you bring things to God, bring them as you bring them to family. Not only surface level things, but come to God with what really concerns you, drives your passion, and is on your heart. God knows we want world peace. God knows you want good things for all creation. Bring to God what’s really on your heart.

Let’s see an example of what a real heartfelt prayer can look like.

A second clip from the movie “Bruce Almighty” is shown. In this clip, we meet Bruce as he is walking the streets in the rain, having had a taste of what it is to be God, and feeling the compassion God feels for the hurting souls of the world. Bruce drops to his knees, offers up himself, surrendering to God’s will for his life. Unfortunately, Bruce dropped to his knees in the middle of the street and was struck by a semi-truck. He dies and goes to heaven where he has a face to face conversation with God.

Now, open to what God has to say, Bruce learns that God created him with a spark; the ability to make people laugh and to be a miracle in others’ lives if only he would trust in God’s plan. Which brings them back to the topic of prayer. God returns Bruce’s prayer beads, the ones he threw into the bay, and tells Bruce to use them. Bruce gives prayer an attempt asking for God to feed the hungry and bring peace to all humankind. In response, God tells Bruce he can do better. God asks Bruce what he really cares about. Bruce deeply cares about his now ex-girlfriend, Grace. Bruce realizes he doesn’t want her back. He wants her happy. His revelation then turns into a real and heartfelt prayer fueled by love. “...I want her to be happy...no matter what that means. I want her to find someone who will treat her with all the love she deserved from me... I want her to meet someone who will see her always as I do now... Through your eyes.” God tells Bruce his prayer for Grace was a good prayer, says he’ll get on it right away, and sends him back to earth.

When Bruce finally opened himself up fully, two-way conversation could happen. When we open ourselves up fully, when we have allowed our spirits to come to that calm place where we can be with God, two-way conversation opens up completely. Let us, as people of God, know that peace, know that joy, know that relationship with God.

In Jesus name, Amen.