

## Learning To Pray

On Sunday we began a new sermon series based on a current *New York Times* best-selling book called *Learning to Pray: A Guide for Everyone*, by Father James Martin.

1. Warm-up Question: Which of the following prayers comes closest to describing how you're feeling this week? Explain your choice.

*Thank you for blessings bestowed.*                      *Help me not to kill anybody!*

*Have mercy on my soul.*                                      *Show me the way.*

*How long, Lord, how long?*                              *Help me to let go.*

2. Although there is a vast power disparity between us and God, God longs for our companionship. Similarly, we long for connection to God. St. Augustine said, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord. And our hearts are restless until they rest in you." So how do we build a relationship with God? The key is communication, i.e., prayer. If you were to pick one word to describe your prayer life at this point in time, what word would you choose? Explain your choice.

3. Father James identifies several obstacles to building a vibrant prayer life. No. 1 on his list is **Busyness/Time**. We face so many demands and distractions.

- a. How fast is your life moving right now? Too fast, too slow, or just about right? What are some of your greatest time stressors right now?
- b. Most people feel terribly busy even if they're not. Why is that?
- c. Psychologist Dan Ariely asked Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "If I started keeping just one commandment [out of 613 commands in the Torah], which one should I start with?" Rabbi Sacks said, "Keep the Sabbath." Why do you suppose he recommended Dan start there? What's so important about Sabbath observance? How is prayer and Sabbath observance similar?
- d. Left to our own devices, we will never finding time for prayer. To break out of that cycle, Father James suggests we take a cue from Amos 3:3, which says, "How can two walk together unless they have made an appointment?" What do you hear that verse saying?
- e. Rather than praying for 15 minutes straight, which many people find daunting, Jeff suggested we experiment this week with three 5-minute prayer times per day – once in the morning, once at lunch, and once in the evening. In each 5-minute session, suggested we be guided by three questions:
  - ✓ What's one thing you're thankful for in this moment?
  - ✓ What's one thing you want to ask for help with in this moment?
  - ✓ What do you think God wants to say to you right now?

Have you tried this experiment? If so, how's it been for you? What's working? What's not? Do you like the rhythm of morning/noon/evening prayers? What's something God has said to you in these prayers that has surprised you?

4. Another obstacle to a vibrant prayer life, Father James says, is **Honesty**. Read a brief excerpt from Father James' book printed on p. 3.
  - a. If God already knows exactly what we're thinking, why is it so important that we verbalize those thoughts to God in prayer? What's the point? What's the benefit?
  - b. What are examples of the kinds of things we think we "should" say in prayer?
  - c. For prayer to be genuine, Father James says, we must dare to say things that we think are not appropriate to say in prayer. What are examples of the kinds of things you would be reluctant or uncomfortable discussing with God in prayer?
  - d. Read Psalm 137, printed on p. 3. In this prayer, the author refuses to sing praises to God and express profound anger at enemies, so much so the author says it would be a delight to kill the babies of their enemies. Why is that in the Bible? Wouldn't it be better to leave that prayer unsaid? Why or why not?
  - e. Father James especially encourages us to talk to God about our sex life. Do you ever? What's the point in talking to God about something so fraught as sex?
  
5. A third obstacle to vibrant prayer is **Fear of God** – and not the good kind. If we're afraid of God, naturally we'll want to keep a safe distance, rather than having deep, honest communication with God.
  - a. C.S. Lewis said, "My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. God has to shatter it for us." What do you think he meant?
  - b. Oftentimes people fear God because they have been taught a primitive understanding of God. Father James says, "Your childhood image of God may need to evolve." Has your understanding of what God is like evolved? In what ways might it still need to evolve?
  - c. Another reason people often fear God is because they're afraid of what God might ask them to do or to change. But if God wants the best for us, Father James says, we should welcome the challenges God lays before us as the path to fuller life. What is something hard God has said to you in your past that helped you a lot?
  - d. Father James says we have a tendency to pray about everything except "the one burning issue in our life – the one thing about us we don't want to look at." Yet the refusal to look at that very thing keeps us stunted in life. What's something hard God is trying to say to you now that you are tempted to run from? What might happen if you started to consciously discuss it with God?

## **Excerpt from *Learning to Pray* by James Martin**

“Letting God come to know you is essential in your relationship with God. Letting yourself be known in this relationship means more or less the same as it does in any relationship: you must speak about your life, share your feelings, and reveal yourself openly. . . . If you are saying what you think you should say to God rather than what you want to say, then your relationship will grow cold, distant, and formal. . . . Let’s say your father has died. Good friends already know how sad you are [and so does God]. But you tell them anyway, right? And they listen. Honesty means sharing everything with God, not simply gratitude and praise and not just things you think are appropriate for conversation with God.”

## **Psalm 137**

- <sup>1</sup> By the rivers of Babylon—  
there we sat down and there we wept  
when we remembered Zion.
- <sup>2</sup> On the willows there  
we hung up our harps.
- <sup>3</sup> For there our captors  
asked us for songs,  
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’
- <sup>4</sup> How could we sing the LORD’S song  
in a foreign land?
- <sup>5</sup> If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
let my right hand wither!
- <sup>6</sup> Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,  
if I do not remember you,  
if I do not set Jerusalem  
above my highest joy.
- <sup>7</sup> Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites  
the day of Jerusalem’s fall,  
how they said, ‘Tear it down! Tear it down!  
Down to its foundations!’
- <sup>8</sup> O daughter Babylon, you devastator!  
Happy shall they be who pay you back  
what you have done to us!
- <sup>9</sup> Happy shall they be who take your little ones  
and dash them against the rock!