

Teaching Outline

Intro hook:

- In the last session I told you the story of Mother Teresa, where the journalist Dan Rather asked her, “When you pray to God, what do you say?” and she answered, “I don’t say anything, I listen.” But I left the story unfinished.
- If you watch the interview, after her response there’s an awkward moment, where he is a bit thrown off; then he asks her the follow up question, “Okay, when you pray to God, what does he say to you?”
- She’s quiet for a minute, and then answers,, “He doesn’t say anything, he listens....”
- Then there is a very awkward moment and she clarifies, “And if you don’t understand that, I can’t explain it to you.”
- She was referring to a dimension of prayer that goes beyond words to simple, loving presence...
- Over the last three Sessions, we’ve covered three stages of prayer:
 - Talking to God
 - Talking with God
 - And listening to God
- Now we come to the final stage: being with God.
- To reiterate: these are not “stages” in that you never mature beyond one.
- For example, you never mature beyond the need to ask God for help, anymore than an NBA player matures beyond dribbling.
- But there is a progression: in basketball, you start by learning the rules of the game and practicing dribbling, not by trying nothing-but-net from the three point line.
- But the farther we progress in prayer — just meaning, in our life with God — the more we grow to love him and desire to talk with him, yes, and listen to him, even more, but also, to just be with him in love...
- As a general rule, in relationships — with God or otherwise — you can gauge the level of intimacy in that relationship by how comfortable you are being alone together in silence.

- Early on, relationships are full of a lot of words and activity, and that's good; but as you grow closer, you continue all that, but you are also more at ease with one another and desire time to just be together.
- All human analogies fall short here, but in marriage, there is a level of intimacy that is literally the intermingling of persons at the deepest level, that is wordless, yet deeply loving, that the mystics have long said is ultimately a picture of our union with God.

Seam: *When applied to prayer, this level of wordless communion has come to be called “contemplation.”*

- Now, contemplative prayer means different things to different people at different times and places in church history.
- But there are three basic dimensions to contemplative prayer:
 - Looking
 - Yielding
 - Resting
- A short word on each.
- The first is...

1. Looking at God, looking at you, in love.

- Turn in your Bibles to 2 Corinthians 3... [interlude]
- The label “contemplative prayer” is based on language found in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, where he writes in verse 18...
- “We all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory.”
- Did you see the word in there? “We all who with unveiled faces...” And the imagery here is of a bride in intimacy with her husband... “Contemplate.”
- The word is *kato-treezo/κατοπτρίζω* in Greek, and it can be translated “to gaze at.” Or “to direct the inner gaze of your heart at.”
- Another name for contemplative prayer is “beholding prayer,” because in it, we behold, we look at, in Paul’s language, “the Lord’s glory.”

- Glory in the NT doesn't mean God's fame or celebrity status, as it does in the Country Music Awards — "Glory to God." It means God's presence and beauty.
- In the OT, God's glory was the cloud over Mt. Sinai or the Tabernacle.
- To contemplate God's glory is to look at his beauty and goodness and love pouring out toward you.
- This is the essence of our faith.
- As A.W. Tozer once said:
"Faith is not a once-done act, but a continuous gaze of the heart at the Triune God. Believing, then, is directing the heart's attention to Jesus. It is lifting the mind to "behold the Lamb of God," and never ceasing that beholding for the rest of our lives. At first this may be difficult, but it becomes easier as we look steadily at His wondrous Person, quietly and without strain."
- Of course this raises the question, How do we "look" at a God who is invisible? It is written, "No one has seen God."
- Bonaventure — the medieval intellectual monk — said we each have three eyes:
- The eye of the body — by which we see the world around us
- The eye of the mind — by which we see the world within us - ideas and concepts.
- And the eye of the heart — by which we see God.
- As St. Theophan the Recluse put it, "To pray is to descend with the mind into the heart, and there to stand before the face of the Lord, ever-present, all seeing, within you."
- St. John of the Cross said, in this kind of prayer we "remain in loving attention on God."
- This is the most basic aspect of contemplation: loving attention on our Father, and on his love and compassion and goodwill coming toward us in Christ and by the Spirit. Secondly, it's...

2. Yielding to his love

- There is a type of prayer where you are laboring with God to change what is — petition and intercession — and that is good and necessary; but there is another type where you are laboring, not to change, but to accept what is...
- Think of Jesus in Gethsemane. He begins by praying, "Father, let this cup pass from me!" He's trying to change the circumstances of his life! But he ends by praying, "Not my will, but yours be done."
- This yielding, this letting go of outcomes, this surrender of our will to God's will... is at the

heart of contemplative prayer.

- The NT theologian Robert Mulholland said it's...
- *"The deep inner posture of a joyful release of our life and being to God in absolute trust, without demands, without conditions, without reservation... [it is] neither a passive resignation nor a fatalistic acquiescence to whatever comes. It is, rather, a consistent posture of actively turning our whole being to God so that God's presence, purpose, and power can be released through our lives into all situations."*
- It's just, God, here I am, I'm yours.
- Not as an act of "submission"; but of surrender to love.
- Walter Hilton called contemplation "love on fire with devotion."
- Finally, it's...

3. Resting in God's love

- Asking — whether it be petition or intercession — feels like work, because it is. We're co-laboring with God to bring his kingdom to birth in our life and world!
- For that reason, Orthodox Jews forbid all intercessory prayer on the Sabbath.
- But contemplative prayer feels less like work and more like rest — more like a portable Sabbath.
- That's why it feels very different from the previous three stages — it's less something we do, and more something God does in us.
- Ultimately, we just come to rest in his love...
- That's mostly what prayer is, the medium by which we experience the love of Christ.
- It's how we experience the answer to Paul's prayer in Ephesians:
 - *"I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."* (Ephesians 3:16-19)
- This type of prayer is how we are "filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."
- What the saints have long called his "loving light."
- St. Teresa of Ávila just called this type of prayer "silent love."

And St. Augustine said, “True, whole prayer is nothing but love.”

- In the modern world, where so many of us live in a state of chronic fatigue from our performance-oriented culture, this type of prayer, just resting in and receiving the gift of his love for us, receiving our identity as well-loved sons and daughters of our Father, and then offering our love back in worship... is our lifeline.

Hinge:

- It comes as no surprise that contemplative prayer is at the heart of spiritual formation —the process by which we are formed into people of love in Christ.
- Look back at Paul’s letter... again, 2 Corinthians 3, in verse 18...
- He writes that as we “contemplate the Lord’s glory” we are “being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”
- That word “transformed” is metamorphao in Greek, where we get the word metamorphose, the word for how a caterpillar is transformed into a butterfly. It’s the word and word picture for the type of change that is possible in Christ, and the process by which we change, or what is called “spiritual formation.”
- In Paul’s framework, the core of this change is contemplation, or looking at God himself.
- The Singaporean writer Hwee Hwee Tan said, “You are what your mind looks at; you are what you contemplate.”
- Think about it: people who spend hours every day reading or watching angry political news, tend to become angry, political, radicalized by ideology, etc.
- People who spend hours every day scrolling on Instagram or Twitter tend to become angry, or anxious, or emotional...
- People who spend hours every day watching dirty TV tend to become lustful, addictive, etc.
- We become like whatever it is we gaze upon, whether that’s a TV or the Trinity.
- Therefore, the yellow line down the middle of the pathway to become like Jesus is looking at Jesus.
- One way we do this is by reading Scripture, especially the four gospels, and another way is through prayer where we “look” with the eyes of our heart upon Jesus.
- This is how God designed your brain to grow and develop!
- Your brain is full of mirror neurons that cause you to take on the properties of whoever or whatever you look at. When someone smiles, what do you do? You likely smile back.

- If somebody glares at you, it's likely you do this (flinch) or glare back!
- The secular neuroscientist Dr. Andrew Newberg in his book *How God Changes Your Brain* writes:
 - *"If you contemplate God long enough, something surprising happens in the brain. Neural functioning begins to change... [we have] a nervous system that actively participates in its own neural construction, something we do not see in other animal brains."*
- Basically, there's a little part of our brain called the anterior cingulate, that sits between our limbic system and prefrontal cortex. When stimulated, it decreases our impulses of anger and fear, and it increases our feelings of compassion.
- Very simply, as we contemplate the love of God coming toward us, it literally rewires our brain... and makes us into more compassionate and loving people.
- But the opposite is also true; if your view of God is of an angry, authoritarian tyrant in the sky, it also changes your brain... and Newberg argues, has a similar effect to PTSD, and changes your brain to make you more fearful and aggressive.
- The Anglican Bishop William Temple once observed that if people have a wrong view of God, the more religious they become, the worse they will become.
- This is why it's so incredibly essential to think Christianly or "Christ-ianly" about God.
- Because as we contemplate God's love, we become more loving.
- As it is written in Psalm 34: "Those who look to him are radiant." As we look at God's beauty, we become more beautiful.
- This is the gift of contemplative prayer.

Seam: *And contemplative prayer isn't just for monks, nuns and introverts!*

- Anyone can and I would argue should pray contemplatively.
- But that's not to say, it's easy. It's hard!
- You will face three major challenges:
 - Distraction
 - Hurry
 - Fear

- First is...

1. Distraction

- The moment you begin to sit in loving attention to God; without words, your brain will start to jump all over the place... “I need to pick this up from the grocery store, and...” Oh, God... “I can’t believe what she said to me. Or what I said to her...” Oh, God.
- That doesn’t mean you’re bad at prayer; it means you’re human!
- You have a mind.
- The mind is jumpy and distractible.
- That is a normal and natural part of your brain’s inner workings, and while it can be calmed and quieted over time with dedicated practice, distraction will never go away.
- The key to quieting distractions is not to give them a second thought. Literally. When they come — not if, but when — just bring your mind back to God.
- Thomas Keating — whose book *Open Mind, Open Heart* is the seminal work on what he calls Centering Prayer, writes about how, if your mind gets distracted a thousand times in ten minutes of prayer, that’s a thousand chances to come back to God.
- Secondly, you will have to face...

2. Hurry

- To be with God in this way, “You must,” as Dallas Willard once said, “Ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life.”
- But to do so, will force us to confront our impatience and how quickly we get bored.
- Henri Nouwen once called prayer “wasting time on God.”
- He didn’t actually mean it’s a waste of time.
- He meant, in our productivity-obsessed culture, where time is money, and money is God; where entertainment and stimulation fill every crevice of our time... to give God your time and loving attention... for him to do, or not do, with it as he pleases... is “wasteful” — in the eyes of our culture. But like the story in John’s gospel of Mary pouring out expensive perfume on Jesus’ feet, it’s an act of love and worship... and it’s the only fitting response to the beauty of who Jesus is.
- Because, again, the main thing we “get” out of prayer isn’t different life outcomes from God; it’s God himself.

- The third thing we have to face is our...

3. Fear

- Whatever is down in us will come up to the surface in prayer.
 - Desire for God; lack of desire for God.
 - Love; hate, anger; anxiety, insecurity, envy, jealousy, hurt, regret, etc.
 - All the inner turmoil and tension we carry in our body... will come up in the quiet.
- As we begin to pray contemplatively, we become more and more aware of how we've been using distraction, hurry, noise, work, people, entertainment, food, shopping, and a thousand other cultural narcotics to run from our pain.
- Now, all of that pain is in you and me, and it is likely leaking out in all sorts of unhealthy ways.
- In quiet prayer, we create space for it to come up in a healthy way; and for us to offer it to God to heal.
- And that is scary for a lot of people.
- But if you stay with contemplative prayer long enough, you will move through that inner turmoil to a kind of surrender, freedom, and inner peace.
- Pay attention and you will notice that the people who give themselves to God in quiet prayer over a long time tend to be very calm and happy.

Hinge: *All that to say, in light of these challenges, and there are more, you will quickly realize that to pray contemplatively, you have to adopt a contemplative lifestyle. Put another way, to be with Jesus in this way, we have to slow down to a more prayerful pace.*

- As a general rule, how you are outside of prayer is how you will be inside of prayer.
- If you are stressed and hurried, and distracted by your phone, when you sit down to pray, all of that will bleed into your time.
- We must slow down to what the Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama called “the speed of love.”

Seam: *One way of thinking about discipleship to Jesus in the modern era is about slowing your life down to pray; it's about arranging, or for most of us re-arranging, our life around God.*

The Daily Prayer Rhythm:

- Historically, the way followers of Jesus have done this for thousands of years is through cultivating a daily prayer rhythm.
- In the Hebrew tradition, that Jesus himself would have gone by, there has long been a rhythm of stopping three times a day to pray — morning, noon, and night.
- You see this all through the Psalms, and famously with the story of Daniel and the lions in Babylon.
- In Acts 2, on the Day of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit happened during morning prayer.
- As did several other key inflection points in Acts' story of the first Christians.
- St. Benedict and the monastics upped the rhythm from three to six times a day.
- The Book of Common Prayer dialed that back to twice a day — morning and evening — to make it more accessible for non-monks and nuns.
- But the idea is all the same, that to pray all the time, we need to pray much of the time. To practice the presence of God all day long, we need to pause at intervals throughout the day, even for only a few minutes, and come back to our home in God; and his home in us.

Ending:

- In the same way, the end goal of a daily prayer rhythm is what Paul called “praying without ceasing.” What A.W. Tozer called “constant conscious communion.” What Madame Guyon called “a continuous inner abiding.”
- To live, as Jesus did, saturated in the loving light of the trinitarian presence.
- Looking at God, looking at you in love, yielding to his love, and resting in his love...
- Can you imagine a more compelling, beautiful life?
- If you ache for that kind of life, start right where you are..
- Begin slowly, begin humbly, by being with God.