

Being Honest in Prayer
Psalm 31:9-24, Luke 18:9-14

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I hope when I am gone that you will remember me as an honest man. Once Groucho Marx was talking to Woody Allen about what he would like people to say about him in a hundred years. Woody jumped in. “I know what I’d like people to say about me in a hundred years. I’d like them to say “He looks good for his age.”

I don’t know if anyone will remember me in a hundred years, but I wouldn’t mind if my tombstone read like the epitaph Robert Burns wrote for a friend: “An honest man here lies at rest.” It’s not the easiest trait to have if you’re a pastor. A pastor wrote an op-ed piece in the *Times* last Saturday [Jeffrey MacDonald, “Congregations Gone Wild,” *New York Times*, 8-7-10] that the real cause of clergy burnout is not too much work or no vacations; the real cause, he said, is that congregations want pastors to soothe and entertain them rather than to follow their calling and challenge them to grow spiritually. The voice of Yahweh spoke to a similar situation through the prophet Isaiah. He said that the people “say to the prophets, ‘Do not prophesy to us what is right, speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions’” (30:10). The fellow who wrote in the *Times* said that the advisory committee of his congregation told him to keep his sermons to 10 minutes, tell funny stories, and leave people feeling great about themselves.

This has not been my *modus operandi* over the years—although I’ve had advice like that, too. Better to tell the truth than to be liked. Nothing would be better than to have someone say, “He didn’t claim certainty where none is possible, or water down what Jesus clearly said, or say things just to win friends. He told the truth.”

Being honest starts with being honest about who you are. Haddon Robinson, who taught preaching at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, used to begin almost every sermon with the same prayer: “God, if these people knew about me what you know about me, they wouldn’t listen to a word I say.” The honest person does not pray “God, I thank you that I am not like other people;” the honest person says, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Praying that way doesn’t mean that you have an unhealthy self-image. It means that you are being honest with yourself and with God. We fall short. We screw up. We get distracted. We get lazy. Maybe that’s just me, but based on my observation of church people over the years, I doubt it.

I want to talk about being honest when we pray. On the one hand it seems so obvious that I don’t need to mention it. Why would anyone try to lie to God, from whom no secrets are hidden? And yet that is the old, old story: that when we do something wrong, we try to hide from God in God’s own garden, and when we are caught we justify ourselves by saying that someone else made us do it. Our human capacity for self-deception is endless. We don’t even admit to ourselves that we are lying. That’s why honesty in prayer requires so much effort.

C. S. Lewis said, “The prayer preceding all prayer is ‘May it be the real I who speaks. May it be the real Thou that I speak to.’” May it be the real I—not an I going through the motions, not an I pretending to be religious, not the people-pleasing God-pleasing I saying what I think God wants to hear. That is no easy thing. We are not very old when we learn to say prayers we think our parents want to hear, prayers the Sunday School teacher wants to hear. Jesus knows that public prayer is almost impossible. Oh, it has its place in worship because it’s the only way we can pray *together*, but it’s almost impossible to pray in public and speak to an audience of

one. That's why Jesus calls religious people hypocrites, play-actors. That's why Jesus tells us to go into our bedrooms and close the doors and talk to God in secret.

David McIntyre, a Scottish preacher of a hundred years ago, wrote in a book called *The Hidden Life of Prayer*, "Honesty becomes us when we kneel in [God's] pure presence. In our address to God we like to speak of Him as we think we ought to speak, and there are times when our words far outrun our feelings. But it is best that we should be perfectly frank before Him. He will allow us to say anything we will, so long as it is to himself. 'I will say unto God, my rock,' exclaims the psalmist, 'why has thou forgotten me?' If he had said, 'Lord, thou canst not forget. Thou hast graven my name on the palms of thy hands,' he would have spoken more worthily, but less truly."

Sometimes we are just too darn polite with God. Are we willing to be so honest that anyone listening would think we are being rude to God? Are we worried about hurting God's feelings? God can take anything we can dish out. The American preacher A. W. Tozer wrote about honesty in prayer in the middle of the last century [reprinted in *Pray!* magazine, October 2002, www.navstudy.com/magazines/archives/article.aspx?id=14495]. You may find his words strange in a day when everybody complains about the lack of civility, but I think they still ring true.

The basic artificiality of civilized human beings is hard to shake off. It gets into our very blood and conditions our thoughts, attitudes, and relationships much more seriously than we imagine....The desire to make a good impression has become one of the most powerful of all the factors determining human conduct...With this perverted courtesy determining almost everything men say and do in human society, it is not surprising that it should be hard to be completely honest in our relations with God. It carries over as a kind of mental reflex and is present without our being aware of it. Nevertheless, it is extremely hateful to God. Christ detested it and condemned it without mercy when he found it among the Pharisees. The artless little child is still the divine model for all of us. Prayer will increase in power and reality as we repudiate all pretense and learn to be utterly honest before God.

Can I compare the way we talk to God to the way we talk to our spouses? In marriage, if we say what we think the other person wants to hear, there will be a wall between us. We imagine that we are being courteous for the sake of preserving the relationship, but the truth is that our well-intended dishonesty is preventing a real connection between the heart of the husband and the heart of the wife.

There was a time in our marriage many years ago when Becca was depressed and angry much of the time. I didn't want to have conflict with her, and I didn't want to hurt her, so I would try to be nice and be a dutiful, compliant husband. I didn't always succeed of course. But when I did succeed in masking my true feelings, I only made things worse, because Becca knew that we weren't connecting at a deep level. After a while, there was nothing to talk about, because the reality was gone. It was all play-acting, being the husband I thought I should be.

What I *needed* to do to restore a love relationship was to say, "Stop! You're hurting me!" and also "I miss you! How can I get through to you?" Those are words of love, because they are words of reality. It was when I learned to be honest rather than merely nice that we began to move toward a deeper relationship. Oh, there are times for hearts and flowers, and times for saying thank you, but they mean a lot more now than when it felt like I was going through the motions because the negative stuff wasn't being expressed.

That's the way it is in our relationship with God. If we pray the way we think God wants us to pray, we may feel religious but we won't feel real. Prayer is about developing a relationship

with God as a person through conversation. If our attention is focused on not offending God, or on meeting God's expectations—or worse, of course, on meeting the expectations of other people who hear us pray—then a wall will come down between us and God. After a while there will be nothing to talk about, because there is no reality. Praying becomes playing a part. Sometimes what we need to say to God to restore a love relationship is “Stop! You're hurting me!” and “I miss you! How can I get through to you?” Psalm 62:8 says, “Pour out your heart to God.” In Psalm 51:6 the guilty man says, “You desire honesty from the heart” (NLT). Psalm 15 (NLT) begins with a question: “Who may worship in your sanctuary, Lord?” The answer begins, “Those who lead blameless lives and do what is right, speaking the truth from sincere hearts.” Psalm 145:18 (CEV) says “You are near to everyone whose prayers are sincere.”

How do we learn to be honest in our prayers? There is a very old way of learning to pray through the complete range of our feelings. It is very simple. It is called praying through the psalms. Of course the psalms have been used by Jews to voice their prayers since they were collected. But Christians of all kinds have used the psalms for daily prayers. This is the basis of most prayer in monasteries and convents. Calvin taught praying the psalms. This was the form of prayer urged by Dietrich Bonhoeffer for Christian communities. It doesn't mean just reading the psalms out loud, but *praying* them as if they were your own prayers—offering the words of scripture back to God in prayer.

More than one-third of the psalms are laments—complaints to God about how terrible things are, sometimes complaining that God is far away. Can we say that? The Bible *teaches* us to say that. It teaches us to pray a wide range of things and to express a wide range of emotions. Sometimes we pray “I'm innocent;” sometimes we pray “I'm guilty.” Sometimes we pray “I am thirsty for you;” sometimes we pray “My cup overflows.”

Look at that psalm we read earlier—Psalm 31. If we pray those words we aren't pasting a smiley face over our hurts. “My life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing.” “Those who see me on the street flee from me. I have passed out of mind like one who is dead.” The psalm moves back and forth between expressions of confidence in God and complaints about life. Isn't that the way prayer usually works? The pray-er says, “I had said in my alarm, ‘I am driven far from your sight,’ [being honest with God] but you heard my supplications when I cried out to you for help.”

If you actually sit down and read the psalms you will be shocked at how often the prayers get angry with God and complain that God isn't doing anything. They are the kind of prayers we are afraid to pray in church. We don't want to upset people or be a “downer.” But the truth is that expressing anger is a way of getting intimate. What gets the real me close to the real God is telling the truth about how I feel. Martin Luther once said we are sometimes closest to God when we shake our fist at heaven because to do that we have to trust God and God has no children more dear than those who trust him [cited by Tom Long www.csec.org/csec/sermon/Long_4603.htm].

Nobody complained more against God in the Bible than Job. The whole point of the book is that Job's suffering really wasn't fair in spite of what his religious friends said. Archie Bunker didn't usually get theology right, but he did when it came to Job. He said, “See Edith, Job hollered at God and, if memory serves, he got a promotion from that there and even a nice write-up in the Bible.”

You can holler at God and live to tell it. Moses did. Jeremiah did. Even Jesus did. You can come to God in your brokenness and confusion. I think one of the most honest lines in the psalms is Psalm 77:3, “I think of God, and I moan; I meditate, and my spirit faints.” The psalmist then asks the unthinkable: “Has [God's] steadfast love ceased forever? Are his promises at an

end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious?" In the end, the one praying finds comfort in remembering what God did for his people in the exodus from Egypt, remembering how God has revealed himself in history. I, too, comfort myself in remembering how God has revealed himself in Jesus, in his death and resurrection. But being honest about my questions is a way of moving closer to God.

I discovered this week a prayer by the German poet Rilke, written around 1900, that struck me as a moving example of being honest with God:

I am praying again, Awesome One.

You hear me again, as words
from the depths of me
rush toward you in the wind.

I've been scattered in pieces,
torn by conflict,
mocked by laughter,
washed down in drink.

In alleyways I sweep myself up
out of garbage and broken glass.
With my half-mouth I stammer you,
who are eternal in your symmetry.
I lift to you my half-hands
in wordless beseeching, that I may find again
the eyes with which I once beheld you.

I am a house gutted by fire
where only the guilty sometimes sleep
before the punishment that devours them
hounds them out into the open.

I am a city by the sea
sinking into a toxic tide.
I am strange to myself, as though someone unknown
had poisoned my mother as she carried me.

It's here in all the pieces of my shame
that now I find myself again.
I yearn to belong to something, to be contained
in an all-embracing mind that sees me
as a single thing.
I yearn to be held
in the great hands of your heart--
oh let them take me now.

Into them I place these fragments, my life,
and you, God--spend them however you want.

[The Book of Hours, Vol. II, 2, trans. Anita Barrows, Joanna Macy]