

Trinity UMC House Church – March 22, 2020
When People Pray: Week 5 – Contemplative Prayer
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***Note:** this is not a word-for-word manuscript of the message video, but an outline summarizing the main content of the message.

• **INTRODUCTION**

- Welcome from wherever you're watching or reading! I am so glad you are taking time to do what you are doing right now. What you are doing—taking time to worship God and connect with other Christians—this is the most important thing you could be doing right now! We are in a time when more than ever we need to connect with Jesus and connect with our brothers and sisters in Christ.
- In this message, I want to proclaim the Good News of Jesus, preach the Word of God, and teach about another unique dimension of prayer. But first, as we prepare to explore our theme, I want you to reflect on this challenging time.
- Think about this moment we're in: when did this global crisis of the coronavirus become “personal” and real to you? Was it when activities began to be shut down? Seeing empty shelves at a grocery store? Seeing a family or friend lose work? How have you been dealing with these challenges personally?
- This is a moment of great challenge and opportunity. How are we to respond?
- The most profound and simple Christian response I have heard right now is simply for us to say: ***Jesus, you have my attention.***
 - *Jesus, you have my attention.*
 - Right now, this crisis *has* us—it has our attention. We can't go anywhere without seeing it's effects, it's changing the way we live right now, it's everywhere in the news. Our attention is easily fixed on the chaos, the fear, the panic.
 - What do we need to do to work through grief of the things we have lost and missed out on, to identify the fears grabbing at us, and bring them to God so that we can say, “Jesus, you have my attention”?
 - John Eldredge recently said on the Ransomed Heart Podcast, **“The rescue of the Gospel is to not let something seize your attention more than Jesus has your attention.”**
 - Hebrews 12 says, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus...Let us run the race set before us...”
- We desperately need to give our greatest attention, our focus, to Jesus. Because of this, we are going to continue with our teaching series on prayer. I contemplated changing to another topic specific to our present situation, but our study of prayer continues to be so relevant to this moment! Today we are talking about Contemplative Prayer. This is a perfect topic to consider as we think about giving our attention to Jesus.

• **WHAT IS CONTEMPLATION?**

- Think about an experience you had where you “lost yourself” in the moment—something you were part of that transcended that place and time. Your team scoring at a live sporting event when the crowd goes wild, your favorite artist at a

live concert where the music carries you away, a powerful book or movie where you forget that you're watching a fictional story, an intimate conversation with a friend or a spouse. We as humans long for these moments of transcendence that connect us with an experience that is greater than ourselves. This is part of what it means to be human—being wired for worship, reaching out for what is beyond us. It's our heart cry for eternity, our soul's longing for God.

- If you can imagine moments like that in your life, you can grasp what we're talking about when we consider "contemplative prayer."
- The Psalms say things like "taste and see that the Lord is good," "your love is better than life," "Oh my soul, praise the Lord," "The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing." The Bible talks about *experiencing* God's presence in a way that transcends words, knowing God's presence intimately.
- Imagine if my relationship with my wife *only* consisted of *talking*, non-stop, back and forth—if all we ever did was ask about what we needed, talk about our experiences, discuss our next steps... never just *being together*, enjoying each other's *presence*, and *living* together.
- Contemplative prayer is about putting aside the many words, the needs, the requests, the petitions and intercessions, and just *being with God, beholding God, experiencing God, communing with God*.
- **Contemplation is seeking God for God's sake.**
- Pete Greig says, "If petition is prayer at its simplest, and intercession is prayer at its most powerful, contemplation is prayer at its deepest and most personally transformational."
- In our book, *How To Pray*, Pete Greig shares about having lunch with Brennan Manning, a prominent Christian ministry and author over the past few decades (he wrote the classic *Ragamuffin Gospel*). In this conversation, Brennan shared a wonderful perspective on prayer: "*What if the hour you spend in the prayer room [or in your devotional time, or church service] is when you refocus on Jesus so that you can carry his presence with you into the other twenty-three hours of the day with a heightened awareness that he is with you, he is for you, that he likes you, that he hears your thoughts? You start to pray in real time. You instinctively lift situations to the Lord in the actual moment that you experience them—while you are watching that distressing news report or hearing about your friend's latest crisis. You're no longer deferring all your prayers to some later, holier moment, because your whole life is becoming that holier moment.*" (*How to Pray*, by Pete Greig, copyright 2019, Navpress)
- **...your whole life is becoming that holier moment...**
- **HOW TO DO IT**
 - Ok, so, how do we do it? What does contemplative prayer look like in practice?
 - We might have some understandable hesitancy about this kind of prayer: it's very subjective and experiential, so we must be discerning and biblical in *everything*. We might also think it's just reserved for the super spiritual elites. But the truth is, contemplative prayer is for all Christians, for ordinary believers like you and me.

- You've probably already been experiencing this in your Christian walk in ways you didn't realize: getting lost in song during corporate worship where time seems to stand still and you forget about everything else in that moment except worshipping the Lord. Sitting alone quietly or walking outside, and God's presence gently washes over you in a way that transcends words. If you've ever had an experience with God that you couldn't put into words, that made you forget about everything (including yourself) in that moment, except God, then you understand contemplative prayer already.
- Pete Greig lays out 3 Steps or movements for understanding and engaging in contemplative prayer:
 - ME & God (Meditation) – it starts by simply bringing your attention to God, let distractions wash away, and meditating on God's presence and God's word. You're aware of yourself, but your bringing your attention to God, with no agenda other than to be *with* God and behold God's goodness.
 - GOD & me (Contemplation) – as you begin to meet with God, distractions gradually start to fade away. The worries and distractions you had seem less important, your life is not the all-consuming center of the universe—rather, you see God for who He is. And the most amazing thing is, you start to realize that while you are contemplating God, *He is contemplating you*. While you are starting to give your attention to God, *God has already been paying attention to you*. While you are now beholding God, *God is beholding you*.
 - GOD (Communion) – there are times when we move so deeply into this time of contemplating God that we lose track of everything else, even ourselves, and are caught up in God's glorious presence. These moments feel like heaven on earth, time stands still and we touch eternity, nothing matters but the love of God. The Old Testament speaks of God's people encountering God's "shekinah glory" in a cloud of glory enveloping the tabernacle and the temple. The New Testament authors at times speak of "praying in the Spirit" and being caught up in the heavenly realms. We can move into a place of prayer so deep where our souls commune with God, a prayer that goes beyond words.
- You've experienced this exact kind of progression if you've ever become so engrossed in a movie that you completely forget you're watching a movie. You arrive at the theater and sit down with you popcorn, thoughts and distractions from the day still buzzing through your mind while you watch the opening scenes (ME & movie). As you become more engrossed in the plot, you start to forget your popcorn and forget everything about your day. Distractions cease and your full attention is on this story (MOVIE & me). If it is a truly great film, you will become so engaged that everything else fades away, and it's almost as if you're in the movie—you forget you're watching actors on a projector screen, you forget you're watching a fabricated story. You live the story right along with the characters (MOVIE). This is what it's like to engage contemplative prayer—you're caught up in the presence of God. "Your love, oh Lord, is better than life" (Psalm 63).

- **LIVING IT**

- This might sound like the most unproductive way of living out your faith, but it can actually be the most fruitful way to live. It's part of what it means to abide in Christ and *thrive in Christ*. Your life becomes so rooted and grounded in God's presence that every moment is a walking, living prayer with God. Every moment you are aware of and interacting with God. And, as Corinthians says, with unveiled faces we behold the glory of God and transform from glory to glory to reflect Christ's likeness.
- Paul describes this kind of prayer in Ephesians 3:16-19
- "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."
 - While prayer is so many things involving our whole being—our minds, our hearts, our bodies, our souls—this kind of prayer that the Bible attests to is an experience of God's presence that transcends words and *transforms lives*. A life of prayer in this way transforms *your life* and eventually transforms the lives of those around you and your life becomes that "holier moment".
- Contemplative prayer is an essential part of prayer for everyday, ordinary Christians because, the truth is... **You become what you behold**. What you give your attention to will *define* your life.
 - What are you paying attention to right now?
- Jesus, you have our attention. Amen.