

Sermon: Prayer and Seeking God (Part 1 - pgs. 1-10)

Hebrews 11:6

John W. Ritenbaugh

In last week's sermon, I continued to expound Hebrews 11:6. I want to read that again to us.

Hebrews 11:6 But without faith it is impossible to please Him: for he that comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.

I have been expounding this, especially in regard to that last phrase about seeking Him. All of us, I think, want to be rewarded by God. There is no doubt at all about that. We want very much to be rewarded by God, but my question to all of us is: are we willing to make the effort, that is, to pay the price? That is inherent in that statement that is made here. That last phrase means to seek out or search with the connotation of earnestness, diligence. It means to seek with a sincere desire to obtain favor. The word *diligence* here is a very strong word and in a different context it has the sense of requiring or even demanding. The word shows a great deal of persistence.

In addition to that, we found that there is a direct linkage between faith, seeing our need, desire, fervency in prayer, and seeking God. All of these are linked together. They are linked in a chain one to the other. And if one is there then there is a possibility, maybe even a very strong likelihood, that the next one is going to be there, and then the next one and the next one.

Turn with me back to the book of Revelation because I want to emphasize again here at the beginning why this is of such concern to us. Revelation 3 and beginning in verse 15 in the message to the Laodicean church:

Revelation 3:15-16 I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot: I would that you were cold or hot. So then because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth.

That does not sound like much of a reward, does it? It ought to be pretty obvious that whoever these Laodiceans are they are not pleasing God at all. Is it because they are not seeking Him? I think you are going to be seeing that there is a direct connection between being spewed out and the fact that these people are not seeking God, at least not diligently seeking Him.

Revelation 3:16-17 "So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of My mouth. Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked. . ."

You see, there is no need. These people do not see one. I should say, there is great need but they do not see it!

Revelation 3:18-19 "I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent."

Do you think that zeal has anything to do with diligently seeking God?

Revelation 3:20 "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me."

We are, to a great measure, victims of an age which is certainly not apathetic to seeking its own pleasure but *is* apathetic about having a true relationship with God. I asked this question in last week's sermon: Do you know of anybody who would tell you in all honesty that he would not care to eat or to have fellowship with Jesus Christ? Look at that verse 20. He is

standing at the door and knocking. He says, if they will open up He will come in and dine with them.

I think that many would like to eat with Christ and fellowship with Him just to say that they had a novel experience. But the ironic thing here is that God is seeking His people and the implication is that they are too uncaring to even rouse themselves to answer the door. The problem—the implication from the other verses in the message to this church—is that they are so far from Him that they are not aware of any need. No awareness of need, no desire. No desire, no prayer. No prayer, no relationship. No relationship, no awareness of need. It goes in a vicious cycle, like a chain that has no links broken in it.

God is hoping that He can stir us up enough to repent and to break out of the cycle by rekindling. He says, "Repent. Be zealous." Zealousness indicates heat, passion, and feeling. So He is hoping to break us out of this circle by rekindling an awareness of need.

An awareness of need is in us because we are close enough to Him to enable us to clearly see how holy, gracious, kind, merciful, and good He is that we then will want to be like He is. In other words, just rephrasing it, is that we would admire Him so much and respect His personality and His qualities so much that we would *want* to be near Him—right across the table from Him. Not just to be near Him to have a novel experience but to be near Him so that we can exalt Him and seek to honor Him by being like Him. Is not imitation the sincerest form of praise? Sure it is.

This is what happens when two people are in love. Two people in love almost desperately seek each other. There is an interesting verse in the book of Jeremiah. It is a remark by God about His relationship with Israel. He says

Jeremiah 2:2 "Go and cry in the hearing of Jerusalem, saying, 'Thus says the LORD: "I remember you, the kindness of your youth, the love of your betrothal, when you went after Me in the wilderness, in a land not sown."

Let me give you one of those phrases from the *Revised Standard Version*. This is in the middle of verse two. He says, "I remember your early devotion, the love of your bridal days." This is why God uses the bridegroom and bride analogies. It is because it pictures the kind of fervent relationship He desires with us. Fervency is warmth of spirit. It is an attitude.

Do you really desire a relationship with somebody who shows no interest in you? There is a possibility that something like that might occur because you are attracted to them in some way but they are not paying any attention to you. So, it is very likely that unless you make a move to build a relationship this other person is never going to notice you. So you begin to seek them out.

Now put God into this. He does not need us in any way. And we are not holy like He is. We do not have the mind He has. We do not have the character He has. We do not even know anything about Him at the time He makes the effort to begin to have a relationship with us. He would like to have one with us, because He can see where it can go.

But what kind of reaction is He going to get from us? He wants the kind of reaction of two people in love. Look at this from God's point of view in terms of the end of the relationship. If you were God, would you desire to have a relationship with somebody who is not showing any interest in you? I do not think you would want to marry anybody that did not have as much interest in you as you have in them—because marriage should be made on the basis of equal, **fervent** interest in one another. It should be made on a desire to be together—a desire to do things together, a desire to accomplish things together, a desire to build a family together, even a desire, we might say, to mature and grow old together.

That is the kind of relationship that God wants. He specifically says in several places, "I remember what it was like in our bridal days" because there was heat there. And each was really and truly seeking each other out.

Let us go back to the New Testament once again, this time to the book of John. We begin to see the kind of heat that our Elder Brother, our God, has in Him. What happened here is that Jesus saw the way the Temple was being desecrated and He got upset. This is when He went in and turned over the moneychanger's table and chased the oxen out of there.

John 2:17 Then His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up."

Here is another one of those biblical patterns. It is an example that God wants us to follow. The example of our Elder Brother, Jesus Christ, and the zeal, the heat, the passion that He felt for God and God's way. His relationship with God was not platonic. It was not cold. He **felt** insulted if God was insulted, profaned, or blasphemed, or any of the holy things of God were profaned in any way. Christ felt it as though it was being done to Him, because Their relationship was that close. There was a real fervency and warmth of Spirit.

It is very easy for us to look at the so-called "Christianity's" picture of a sallow complexion and cow-eyed Christ and listen to many of the songs they have written of Him and come up with a characterization of Him that is indulgent and weakly good-natured. It is true that there is in Him an almost unbelievable patience and lack of exasperation with impossible people: the scribes, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees for example. But it would be a serious mistake to characterize Him as being without fire in His temperament as well.

There are quite a number of examples that Christ got hot about things. In Mark 3:5, it says He turned around and looked at these people with anger. There must have been something flashing out of His eyes, and His face must have been twisted in such a way that it affected Mark or Peter, whomever the author of that was, that he remembered that flashing from Christ. He was angry at what was going on. There was nothing gentle when Christ said of Herod, "Tell that fox. . ." How about the rebuke of Peter in Matthew 16, "Get you behind me Satan!" How would you like Him to say that to you? That would be hard to take.

This came right after Christ asked him, "Who do people say that I am?" And He then asked him, "Who do you say that I am?" And Peter said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And then Christ said not long after, "Get you behind me." I tell you, that must have been painful for Peter to take.

I do not think that the Pharisees found Him gentle, meek, and mild when He gave them that stinging series of rebukes. In Matthew 23, He called them fools, hypocrites, blind guides, lawless, whited tombs, snakes, and brood of vipers. And He felt so strongly about this that rather than making peace with them, He chose to go to His death. Jesus Christ had very strong and heated opinions. And those opinions, in His case, were right.

You are probably all familiar with places in the Scriptures where it talks about the wrath of the Lamb. Ordinarily, you do not think of a little lamb having wrath. But this Lamb has the capability of very great wrath. Brethren, there is *heat* in our God in regard to things that are right. Here in John 2 He is righteously indignant at the irreverence and disrespect and lack of fear of God as shown by their misuse of holy things. And in this case, the holy thing was the Temple of God.

Remember that the Temple is a symbol of the church. It is the place of fellowship with God and the place that is central to the fellowship of God's people. In that Temple, that is in that Body, God expects that there is going to be a place of affectionate family warmth and concern.

We are going to take this another step further. We are going to look in the Old Testament as to where this "zeal for Your house has eaten me up" is taken from. That quote comes from Psalm 69. Let's go back there and look at it.

Psalm 69:6 Let not those who wait for You, O Lord GOD of hosts, be ashamed because of me. . .

Listen to what the author is saying here. The author may have been David. It may have been somebody else. It is a prayer attributed to David, and maybe absolutely for sure it was David. He said:

Psalm 69:6-7 . . . let not those who seek You be confounded because of me, O God of Israel. Because for Your sake I have borne reproach; shame has covered my face.

Listen to why he was going through this persecution—shame has covered his face, he has borne reproach because of his attitude toward God.

Psalm 69:8-12 I have become a stranger to my brothers, and an alien to my mother's children; because zeal for Your house has eaten me up, and the reproaches of those who reproach You have fallen on me. When I wept and chastened my soul with fasting, that became my reproach. I also made sackcloth my garment; I became a byword to them. Those who sit in the gate speak against me, and I am the song [or you might say the subject of songs] of the drunkards.

David became the butt of jokes of sarcasm—even bitterness—**because** he was zealous for God. David put his whole heart into obedience for God, into talking about God, into trying to get people to turn to God, setting a right example for God. So instead of winning people over, they told sarcastic and dirty stories about David. Because of his zeal for God, He became a reproach.

I bring this up because, believe it or not, this will happen right *in* the church, right in the fellowship of God's people. I can almost guarantee that if you display more than usual enthusiasm for God, study a lot, talk a lot about God and His Word that *even members* will avoid you and probably you will offend some of them.

Have you ever had somebody say to you, "Come on. Loosen up a little bit, sin." My wife and I have had that said to us by church members. "Come on, sin a little bit, Ritenbaugh." They were offended.

That will happen right in the church and it was happening to David. Israel, at the time, was God's church. It was His congregation. And people were reproaching him because of his zeal for God.

We are going to take this just a little bit further back, in Deuteronomy 4:21. It is an interesting statement here again about our God. We want to look at what He is like because He is what we want to become like. *He* is the one that we want to emulate.

I am trying to help you all to see that God expects us to be fervent about Him. It is part of diligently seeking Him. And He wants the kind of fervency that He describes as being like a bride, preparing herself for marriage.

Deuteronomy 4:21-24 "Furthermore the LORD was angry with me for your sakes [Does God have heat? He was angry with Moses for the sake of God's people.], and swore that I would not cross over the Jordan, and that I would not enter the good land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance. But I must die in this land, I must not cross over the Jordan; but you shall cross over and possess that good land. Take heed to yourselves, lest you forget the covenant of the LORD your God which He made with you, and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of anything which the LORD your God has forbidden you. For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God."

There is heat in God's relationship with His people. Right in the Ten Commandments, in the second commandment, He says, "For the LORD your God is a jealous God." Do you know what jealousy is? Look it up in the dictionary. It is a passionate intolerance, even a hostility, against a rival. It is also defined as being vigilant in guarding a possession.

Here God is having a passionate reaction against a rival. That rival is idolatry. And God will not permit idolatry without reacting because idolatry promotes divided loyalties. We are His, and He does not choose to share us with anybody or anything else.

Exodus 34:12-16 "Take heed to yourself, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land where you are going, lest it be a snare in your midst. But you shall destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars, and cut down their wooden images 'for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God [I tell you, that is going

pretty far. God calls Himself what He is, and He is jealous.], lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and they play the harlot with their gods and make sacrifice to their gods, and one of them invites you and you eat of his sacrifice [Remember in the New Testament about eating things offered to idols?], and you take of his daughters for your sons, and his daughters play the harlot with their gods and make your sons play the harlot with their gods."

Do you see what is happening? Do you see the way God describes idolatry? He described it as being *harlotry*, playing around with somebody else's wife. It is a case of divided loyalties. God gets hot. He gets angry. He is jealous.

In fact, as we saw there in Deuteronomy 4, He gets so hot that He describes Himself as being a consuming fire. Fire symbolizes God's radiant glory as an aspect of His holiness.

Now get this. Jealousy and zeal are opposite sides of the same coin. Both of them are passion-driven. One of them is positive; the other is negative. One is for; one is against. Zeal is passionately for something or somebody. Jealousy is passionately against something or somebody. In like manner, fire is hot and it is both positive and negative. It symbolizes both refining and purifying, on the one hand, and death and destruction on the other.

The pattern is right there in the way God portrays His feelings toward us. He is a consuming fire. He will either purify or He will destroy with His passion. He is either for something with a great deal of heat, or He is against something with a great deal of heat.

You know the difference. He is for those who are with Him, and He is loyal to the *n*th degree to those. But He is against sin. He is against disloyalty. And He is against it with just as much heat as He is for those who love Him and diligently seek Him. His attitude is not cool in any way, shape, or form, but it is hot. And He wants us to respond in like manner.

In what manner, in what way, are you seeking God? Is it diligently? Is it earnestly? Is it sincerely? Is it with warmth and ardor and affection? Is your

seeking the ardent pursuit of one in love—one who wants to be around this personality and really desires to know Him? Because we are, after all, going to marry Him and spend all eternity with Him. Or is it a kind of a take-it-or-leave-it, distant academic coolness because we do not want to make a fool of ourselves or offend others with our zeal? Think about it.

While you are thinking, please turn to Jeremiah 29. The subject here is the seventy weeks prophecy. God is working out a plan, a purpose, and He is telling Jeremiah and the people that they are going to be in the captivity for seventy years.

Jeremiah 29:10-14 For thus says the LORD: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place [back to their homeland]. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you [God has loving thoughts toward them and He is concerned about them.], says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back from your captivity; I will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you to the place from which I cause you to be carried away captive.

"When you search for Me with all your heart!" There is a condition! Does this tie into Hebrews 11:6 that (says) God is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him? That God desires children around Him who really want to be with Him, who are not caught up in the coolness of this age that we live in but have a warmth, a real desire, and an ardor to be with God?

God is indicating here that we should seek as if we are finding or looking for something that is a vital necessity to us. If we lost a valuable piece of jewelry, we would turn the house upside down in an effort to recover it. We would be wholehearted. We would be zealous about it! This principle that we are talking about here does not just apply to religion. It applies to many other areas of life as well.