

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
“Overheard”
By Doyle Young
June 29, 2008

It was several weeks ago that I was asked to preach today, so I looked in the lectionary to see what Scripture readings were assigned for today and started preparing my sermon. About ten days ago, I got an email from Wes Craig. Many of you know Wes and Susan Craig, former members of DaySpring who are in their mid-20s and serve as missionaries with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in Bucharest, Romania. In April we sent a group of DaySpringers over to spend a week with the Craigs, ministering with them and to them. I replied that I had gotten his email and that I would reply more fully in a few days. By last Saturday I had just about finished the sermon. On last Sunday I polished it up a little bit. Then on Monday I sat down and replied to Wes. I sent the reply, re-read it, and then, about thirty minutes later, realized that our exchange of emails was a lot better sermon than the one I had prepared. So, with Wes' permission, I want you to overhear this conversation:

“Hi, Doyle.

“I hope you are doing well. It was so good having Regina and the rest of the group here a couple of months ago. I only wish you and Harrison could have come with them!

“The reason I'm writing is to ask for your help. For some time now, praying has been difficult. Just recently, I've begun to make it a priority to begin my day with 10-15 minutes of prayer. I first listen to a prayer (a morning prayer from a Northumbria Community album). I then begin praying to God by asking for help and confessing my weaknesses, feeling of spiritual failure, and desire to pray. I then try to sit in silence for a short period of time. After this, I use Phyllis Tickle's book, *The Divine Hours*. I also try to have one or more fixed times of prayer during the day (usually at night before bed). I finish by reading a chapter from Scripture and a Psalm.

“All this is rather new. Up until now, I have not prayed like I used to. I use to pray at various times throughout the day (e.g. as I drove down the road). I'm trying to get back to this living in the presence of God.

“I'm telling you all this because I would like for you to walk with and teach me to pray. I wish we could talk face to face and I hope you don't mind helping through email.

“I've begun something. I'm only afraid it will not last.

“Thanks, Doyle, for considering this.

“Wes.”

“Wes,

“It sounds like you’re on a good track. I think it is common, even necessary, to get to a point where older methods and older understandings of the spiritual journey no longer suffice. I think that’s a good thing but it is almost always uncomfortable. It feels like I’ve done something wrong, I’ve lost my spiritual footing. But I think that it is God calling us deeper. We have to take seriously that there are stages or levels in the spiritual journey and that what helped at one stage will not be adequate at another. For example, in the youth group stage, a person needs a lot of fun and excitement and feeling that this is a cool place to be. But as a young adult one doesn’t need that, one needs something deeper. You’re on a journey and you will have to adjust to the methods that are appropriate for the different stages you enter.

“It sounds like you are needing a more structured and less feeling-based spiritual practice and that you have found a structure to lead you there. I need a structured practice, i.e. every morning I try to get up early so I have 30-60 minutes to read the lectionary readings for the day and do a type of lectio divina with it. If I’m telling folks about a pattern for spiritual practice, what is often called a “rule of life,” I recommend:

1. Keeping the commandments – we’ll fail some, but we’re making a serious effort.
2. Some daily Scripture – this is not an analytical, academic reading but a meditative, lectio-type reading. You’re getting this with the Phyllis Tickle book.
3. Some daily meditative prayer – which you’re doing. This can be as short as 5-10 minutes. In this, I try to open my heart to God, ask for spiritual healing, and then sit in silence. If I’m having trouble with distracting thoughts, which I often do, I say the Jesus Prayer (‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner’) or a shorter variation like ‘Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.’ Sometimes I just use ‘Jesus, help me.’ I think it’s OK to experiment and find a prayer that fits and feels right – and it’s OK to change periodically. What matters is not the verbal formula but the attitude of asking God to help you.
4. Weekly, some type of fasting. Usually people start with trying to fast on the same day each week so that it is a discipline and not just done when it feels convenient. A 24-hour fast is pretty hard so you can start much more modestly. The fasting doesn’t have to be heroic and shouldn’t be so harsh that it discourages you. Maybe you just leave a couple of bites of a meal. Sometimes if I’m with Harrison and we get donut holes, I’ll just leave a couple in the bag. The point is that we’re making an overt effort to gain control over one bodily drive (i.e. hunger) and in some way this bleeds over to other bodily drives, i.e. it increases our control over the sexual energy, anger, etc. This does work!

“About the meditative prayer, you likely will eventually have some unpleasant memories and emotions surface. This is good so don’t run from it. Let it bubble up. This is a clearing or cleansing of the heart. It often will be accompanied by tears and this

may last for months or even years. The spiritual Fathers call this the “gift of tears” and it is a sign of progress. In my experience, it moved from feelings of stark fear about life to anger at my father to deep mourning about my neediness and sinfulness – all this over a course of several years. You may need to talk to someone about these emotions and thoughts – I saw several counselors over the years and was seeing them before I understood the spiritual dynamic of what was happening. Put another way, at one level I think counselors and spiritual directors are dealing with the same issues in people’s lives – then there are levels where counselors don’t or can’t go. I think it would strengthen your marriage if you could talk to Susan about these emotions but you may well need someone beyond her. Don’t be embarrassed or afraid of seeking help.

“You’re a good guy. Your heart is right. Try to be gentle with yourself but keep on with a structure. And remember that we don’t earn God’s love by becoming a better person – God’s love is a given, it is the foundation. But we are transformed by making efforts that combine with God’s help. The Fathers call it a “synergy” in which my effort mixes with God’s power.

“I’ll send you some essays that Burt and I wrote. It helps to have some conceptual knowledge of the journey and what is happening.

“Doyle”