

This is the second of three sermons on prayer (Titles of sermons).

I concluded the sermon last week with the statement that I had some firm convictions about prayer.

One: When I pray, and it doesn't seem as if God is listening - I will not surrender to the silence. God is listening.

And, second, when I pray, it is not with a perfect knowledge of God, but it is with a firm desire to seek God's will and have the faith to walk in it.

That's why my next question is, “Am I listening to God?”

I think it's a fair question for our prayer life – if we expect God to be listening to our prayers, we have to ask of ourselves, “Are we listening to God?”

Even though we so often begin our prayers asking God to hear us, isn't it you and I who need to listen?

For too many people, prayer is complicated because we try so hard to get it just right because we want to make sure God is listening to us.

So if you want something from God, this line of thinking goes, you have to ask with all the right words and in all the right ways and in all the right places.

But in this parable, Jesus is telling us that prayer isn't a magic formula that involves having the right words or the right attitude or the most perfect faith.

It's not about the power of prayer, but it's all about the power of the one to whom you pray.

So the question is, “Am I listening to God?”

I like what Martha Moore-Keish says in her recent book, *Christian Prayer for Today*: “Prayer requires our attention so that we might have our eyes opened to the way things really are.”

Or, for the purposes of this sermon, 'so that we might have our ears open...'

If you think of prayer as a conversation with God, a relationship in which we speak to and listen for God, then you have to realize prayer is not just dropping in for a cup of coffee and some chit-chat with God.

In this conversation, as in any conversation, people both speak and listen to the other. We do not only talk to ourselves. This is a crucial lesson in Jesus' story about what it means to pray

I've said before, it's so important to note the 'why' of the story in order to understand it, to get what Jesus means.

Eugene Peterson, in his translation of the Bible, introduces the story in this way: *Jesus told this next story to some who were complacently pleased with themselves over their moral performance and looked down their noses at the common people.*

Jesus points out that the Pharisee was 'exalting himself,' focusing on his own merits.

This leads to the deeper meaning of this parable – for how can you really listen to God if you are standing on the premises of your own perfection?

The tax collector was able to make full disclosure, “God, be merciful to me a sinner.”

The mystery of prayer in this parable is that because the Tax Collector knew there was a great distance between himself and God, he paid more attention to God's words than his words, he listened more intently to what God had to say.

We want God to listen to us, but are we listening to God?

It could be that part of our problem with listening to God stems from the fact that we live in what's being called an 'echo chamber'.

That is, in contemporary American society most people tend only to listen to people with whom they already agree.

Living in an echo chamber – for example, using popular political terms, people on the "right" tend to listen only to their favorite conservative radio talk show host, and people on the "left" tend to listen only to their favorite progressive authors and spokespersons.

The result is almost complete ignorance of the perspectives of others. The result is a society that is no longer a community; we have no shared values.

Does this describe our prayer life, much like the prayer picture of the Pharisee: listening to God in an echo chamber of ego; do we sit ourselves down in that prayer closet of self-righteousness?

In his classic book, *On Listening to Another*, Douglas Steere lists four qualities of a good listener: *vulnerability, acceptance, expectancy, and constancy*.

These marks of a good listener also mark the prayer of the Tax Collector.

He was vulnerable. Glenn Hinson notes that 'vulnerability' comes from the Latin words meaning 'capable of being wounded, able to be hurt.'

The Tax Collector was vulnerable – he acknowledged his hurt as a sinner – he confessed – he opened himself to God at the place of his hurt.

Prayer is about our willingness to come before God with all of who we are – our strengths and our weaknesses, our warts and our halos.

The second mark is 'acceptance.' And this is the difference between the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

Now, in Steere's book, it's a matter of accepting the other person for who they are - to listen without our biases or prejudices or preconceived notions of the other.

So, in listening to God, it is to let God be God - not a cosmic bellhop, not the salesclerk of some divine-line googling experience.

Gary Habermas, a philosophy professor, is a man of prayer. When his grandmother was ill, he prayed for her, and she was healed.

Then his wife of 28 years was diagnosed with cancer, inoperable and terminal. He tells the story of himself – that he prayed God's will might be done.

What he really wanted, he said, was the same as he had prayed for his grandmother – that his wife be healed, that he would have her back well and healthy, just as it always had been.

But before Debbie, his wife, died, she told him one evening, "God spoke to me today and he said just three words, 'I love you.'"

Gary Habermas was grief-stricken at her death, but he said this, "Debbie had doubted God's love all the days of her life, yet now she was as sure of God's love for her as she was of my love for her."

He went on to say, "I trust God to have a good answer to my prayers. That's not the same as knowing what the answer will be."

Acceptance is truly to pray and let God's will, not my will be done

The third quality of a good listener is 'expectancy': to listen to God in our prayers so that this relationship with God grows and develops.

As we invest more time and more of who we are in prayer, we will begin to develop a relationship with God that makes hearing God – I don't want to say 'easier' – but that we're more aware of God speaking.

We expect to hear God - not like sitting across the table from someone drinking coffee – but when we hear God, it's more likely to be a word that has grown in us, and sometimes comes to us in a flash of insight, "I hear you."

Finally, the mark of a good listener is 'constancy.' Steere describes this constancy as 'infinite patience' - what the psalmist describes as 'a watchman waiting for the morning'.

Really, to listen to another, one has to exercise patience. I appreciate your patience with me!

Patience in listening means we can't be interrupting, "Oh, you mean..." when we don't know what someone means.

It's one of my bad habits to do that – maybe you've done it – when someone is explaining to us, giving us instructions, directions, describing something to us, and we don't let them finish their speaking – we interrupt.

And the interruption is basically a way of our saying, "You tell me what I want to hear now, so I can get on with what I want to do."

To be 'constant' in our listening is "to stay with the other" until the end of what the other is saying – no interrupting!

We need to be constant, attentive for God's voice to lead us, sustain us.

As Clarence Bauman said, "*The purpose of prayer is not to inform God of our needs, but to invite God in to rule our lives.*"

That's the question - are we listening to God - vulnerable, accepting, expecting, constant – inviting God in to rule our lives?

So I come to the close of this sermon with the same thought as last Sunday - prayer, in its most fundamental sense is about our relationship with God.

God is listening to you and me - and we enter into that relationship of faith as we listen to God.

As this relationship grows, we begin to grow into God's will for our lives, not because we learn some magic formula about prayer, but simply because, through prayer, we are able to live more and more in Christ and Christ lives in us.

And that leads us next week into what I call the adventure of living prayer.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.