

A salad, a salad, a salad. Health professionals would tell us that we should learn to eat salads more often. But it's so hard! For starters, I don't really care for a salad as a meal. With a meal yes, as a meal no. Could the same thing be said of prayer. We're told we should pray often. But that too can be hard! When should we pray, how long should we pray. What do we even say? We're going to see if scripture can help a bit with these questions.

During our Lenten series, we talked about the importance of individual prayer. Remember what our hand represents? As we move past Easter, I want to spend more time talking about prayer and how to pray. What better example of how to pray than using prayers straight from the bible. I'm calling this sermon series Lettuce Pray: A Spiritual Salad. It's based on a book written by one of my seminary professors called "God Heard That: 31 Prayers that God Heard, and I Overheard".

Don't worry, we're not going to look at all 31 prayers. But we are going to look at one prayer from each of the 8 different categories of prayers in this book. We will tie a salad vegetable to each of these categories.

Our first category is Daily Prayer. Romaine in Daily Prayer. After all, lettuce is the bedrock of any salad. In this section there were three prayers to choose from. The Lord's Prayer, The Prayer of St. Francis Assisi, and the one I chose. The Full Serenity Prayer. Today's prayer is not in the bible, but it is certainly inspired by the Bible. Most of us have heard, if not even said the first portion of this prayer. I remember as a toddler seeing this prayer hanging in my grandparents' bathroom. It has been an anchor for many who participate in 12-step programs like AA and NA. God Grant Me the serenity....(say the whole beginning)

The Serenity prayer is attributed to a man by the name of Reinhold Niebuhr. Reinhold was a pastor in Detroit in the early 1900s. He later went on to be a professor of theology at Union Theological Seminary in NYC.

As a pastor, Reinhold weathered some very tough times not just in American but in world history. There was the first world war which saw many US soldiers in the trenches in Europe. Far too many never returned home. He saw the Great Depression, where no one could find jobs, many people lost their homes, and food was scarce. His flock in Detroit was severely challenged by economic collapse. There was the rise of the Nazis in Germany and their hate-filled ideologies. Japan was committing atrocities against China and Korea. Everywhere you looked in every part of the world there were echoes of economic doom and impending war.

What did Reinhold do? He prayed the full Serenity prayer. We said it just a minute ago. God grant me...(say whole prayer) Reinhold preached...and prayed this prayer. He taught theology at seminary...and prayed this prayer. When World War II and the Holocaust ripped at the fiber of humanity. He prayed this prayer. During the Cold War and the race to build “better” bombs...He prayed this prayer. When the wars in Korea and Vietnam slashed at his hopes for lasting peace and a just world. Still, he prayed this prayer.

One of the pivotal points of this prayer is. “The wisdom to know the difference”. Solomon is proof of what James says in our scripture today. “If any of you is lacking wisdom, ask God who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.” When God told Solomon he’d give him anything he asked for, Solomon realized something. Wisdom is the one gift with the ability to save us from the undesired by-products of our other gifts.

Without wisdom, other gifts can become a curse. A commitment to justice can be misshapen into the arrogance of self-righteousness. Our greatest visions can shatter into resentful shards of disillusion. An honest acceptance of our limitations can be warped into complicity with small mindedness. Recognizing that we can’t do all things can lead to doing nothing.

Wisdom is the gift that can help us know the difference. Wisdom is what keeps us in line with living one day at a time and enjoying one moment at a time. Wisdom gives us the strength to take this sinful world as it is and not as we would have it. Wisdom reminds us that God will make all things right in time if we surrender to God’s will and God’s will alone. Wisdom

enables us to be reasonably happy with God in this life. Wisdom holds the promise that we will be supremely happy with God forever in the next.

Reinhold is credited with developing the concept of Christian Realism. This is the idea that as Christians we remain rooted in the hope of the supreme happiness that God has in store for us. Which comes when we find the moral courage to surrender to the goodness that comes from God. We accept the reality that not all things can be changed at the moment of our choosing or just because it's what we want. Christian realism asks that we humbly accept the world as it is but also have the courage to imagine the world as it could be. Remember....world as it is...world as it should be. We are here to close the gap.

Turning back to James for a moment longer. After James encourages us to ask God for wisdom, he goes on to say that we should ask in faith. In chapter three, James compares the wisdom of this earth to pure wisdom. Vs. 13 – 17 Who is wise and knowledgeable among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be arrogant and lie about the truth. This is not wisdom that comes down from above but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

Asking for wisdom is only the beginning. We must commit to understanding what God-like wisdom is. How do we know someone is practicing God-like wisdom? James just told us. It will be a wisdom that is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield. No partiality, no hypocrisy. When you see envy and strife in a situation, you should highly suspect that earthly wisdom is the driver.

A warrior went searching for a master who could help him get a better understanding of himself. By understanding himself and how his mind worked, the warrior would be a better fighter and know how to live honorably.

Finally, he found a master who could teach him. He asked the master. “Please teach me the ways of heaven and hell”! The master took one look at him and burst out laughing. “Look at you” the master gasped. You call yourself a warrior? Look at your belly...you can’t even control your appetite. What makes you think you could ever understand the ways of heaven and hell. That’s a good joke!”

The warrior blushed with embarrassment then he became hot with anger. As his anger grew to full blown rage, he grabbed his sword. Master or not, he was going to pay for his insult. “I’m going to cut you down”, said the warrior, raising his sword above his head.

The master looked at him and said calmly...”that is hell”. Immediately, the warrior recognized his lack of judgement and the wisdom in the master’s instruction. His heart changed immediately. He fell to his knees in gratitude and appreciation. “And that is heaven”. Said the master.

Taking this world as it is, not as I would have it. That is the gift of wisdom. Wisdom from God enables us to recognize when our steely courage is becoming foolhardiness. When our serene acceptance falls into complacency.

Serenity to accept. Courage to act. Wisdom to distinguish. I pray that you will join me and remain in these daily.

Let us pray.

Lord, remove whatever of me stands between me and the gift of your wisdom.