

**Text: Exodus 20:1-11 and Luke 11:1-13**

**Theme: Prayer Series 1: I am the Lord.**

**Sermon delivered by Reverend Dele Agbelusi at Morning Prayer on 02/10/2011 at 10.30am.**

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Some years ago a young man looking for work approached a foreman of a logging crew and asked him for a job. "It depends," replied the foreman. "Let's see you take this one down."

The young man stepped forward and skilfully felled a great tree. The foreman was impressed and exclaimed, "You can start on Monday!" Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday rolled by. On Thursday afternoon the foreman approached the young man and said, "You can pick up your pay cheque on the way out today." Startled, the young man asked, "I thought you paid on Fridays."

"Normally we do," answered the foreman, "but we're letting you go today because you've fallen behind. Our daily charts show that you've dropped from first place on Monday to last place on Wednesday." "But I'm a hard worker," the young man objected. "I arrive first, leave last, and I've even worked through my coffee breaks!"

The foreman, sensing the boy's integrity, thought for a minute and then asked, "Have you been sharpening your axe?" The young man replied, "Well, no, sir. I've been working too hard to take the time."

What about you? Are you too busy to sharpen your axe? Prayer is the hone that gives you the sharp edge. Without prayer, the more work you do, the duller you'll get. We need to take time to stay sharp as we go about the work of Christ's kingdom! And we need to stay sharp and focussed on our prayers too. This is the reason why we are devoting this Sunday and the next to a Series of teachings on Prayer using the Ten Commandments as our basic text at the 10.30am services. At the 6pm evening services, we shall devote 4 evenings to a study on the pattern of prayer taught by our Lord Jesus Christ to His disciples. I hope you will take advantage of these opportunities.

Let us begin with our approach to prayer and consider how best we can prepare ourselves for it. It must be borne in mind that **prayer is more than asking for things. Prayer is life's greatest reminder of the reality of God. It is simply being in the presence of God so that we can absorb a renewed sense of his greatness and our constant need of him.**

This is why, from experience, I pray best with an open Bible in front of me. Good prayer is responsive; it is speaking back to the God who has already addressed us in Scripture. It is for this reason that **meditation is important. It is the spiritual exercise whereby we listen intently to what God is saying to us through a biblical passage and allow it deeply to permeate our hearts and minds, reverently pondering its message, constantly and gratefully repeating its words so that, as it becomes part of our mental framework, we are inspired to pray.**

We may begin our prayers by reciting some part of Scripture quietly to ourselves. As we meditate unhurriedly on its message, it prepares us reverently, gratefully and expectantly for the experience of prayer, so that we guard against rushing into the presence of God, babbling familiar words and reciting our urgent requests. Meditation will impress upon us the thought that God may well be wanting to say something to us, the importance of which transcends anything we may say to him.

Today, we are looking at the Ten Commandments as an aid to prayer. By quietly reciting the commandments at the beginning of ones prayer time, you are reminded of four great truths which they enshrine for us:

- (1) **Who God is,**
- (2) **What He has done,**
- (3) **Who we are, and**
- (4) **What He wants us to be.**

Today, we shall concentrate on the first two aspects, and next week, God willing, we shall look at the third and fourth truths.

The commandments begin by asserting something about God. They are not cold, legalistic instructions, but a sensitive revelation of the nature and character of the God who is speaking to His people. 'I am the Lord' recalls the name by which He revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush. When Moses was told of the forthcoming deliverance, he naturally asked what he was to say when the enslaved Israelites asked for the name of the God who had spoken. God answered: 'This is what you are to say to the Israelites: "I AM has sent me to you"' (Exodus 3:13-14). He is the ever-present, never-failing, all-powerful God.

Therefore, when you begin your prayers reverently by recalling the commandments, you are like the Israelites considering the God you are addressing. Who is He? He is a sovereign God who controls their (Israelites) destiny; and not just the destiny of the fearful Moses and the despondent Israelites, but also that of the arrogant Egyptians and of the vulnerable me, the conscience-stricken Peter and of you and you.

Moreover, the commandments go on to declare that this eternal, sovereign God is omnipotent. He does not simply speak to Moses but will act savingly, on behalf of His people. He is the God who liberated them from Egyptian slavery. He is the only God; there are no others. Idolatry is out of the question. He is a jealous God who will not tolerate any suggestion in the Israelite's religious practice that their God is one among many, leaving them free to compromise with other religions. He is a loving God, demonstrating dependable covenant compassion to thousands who love him and keep his commandments.

He is a saving God, able to take people in the worst of life's situations and bring them out 'with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm'. He is a generous God who longs only for his people's good, 'that it may go well' with them and that they 'may live long' in the land which he is to give them. He is the living God, so they must not rob anybody of a life He has given. He is a loyal God, so they are not to live otherwise in their marital relationships. He is a truthful God, so they must not speak lies against their neighbours. He is an omniscient God, seeing and knowing everything...even the secret thoughts of a covetous heart and a materialistic grasping spirit. The tenth commandment is an eloquent reminder that here is something more than a set of rules. How can anybody detect secret covetousness but the God who sees all things? Here then in the Decalogue is a rich portrait of God, who He is and what he does - revelation and redemption. That is at the heart of the commandments and God's demand is simply this: that his people should be like him. If he values life, so must they. If he is reliable and trustworthy in relationships, how can they possibly be anything else? If he is holy, then they too must be pure in every aspect of their behaviour.

**Our concept of God greatly influences the way we approach Him. If I see God as distant, uncommunicative and judgmental, it will affect the way I approach Him in prayer. I am**

**loved by God not because of my ability; I am loved because He is love. Contrary to what many people think, God is a Father who delights to answer prayer. God is not mean or stingy and gives us everything we need. (Luke 11:5-13).**

The first Commandment really brings us to a state of reality. You have got your shopping list but first you are being called to consider the God you are talking to. You are being reminded outright that life is not about you but about Him. He is the one who calls the shots. So my so-called petitions now take a second place as the revelation of God Almighty calls for my worship and adoration. And when God declares himself that “I am the Lord,” He demands our worship and an absolute and sincere confidence in Him in all things and that it is His earnest purpose to be our God. My heart must neither build upon nor trust in anything else be it goods, honour, wisdom, power or any created thing. My heart should be full of gratitude to such a generous God – that I can even be called by His name. Prayer is not simply learning, thanking, confessing and asking; it is also gratefully affirming in the presence of God all we believe about Him. In the creed, when we reflect on the words “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth,” we are reminded of our total indebtedness to God who has made us (Creator), and loves us (Father). It reminds us that of ourselves we are nothing. In making us, God generously gave us the breath we breathe, and it can be lost within seconds: ‘At any moment he can return you to nothingness.’ This truth deplores our unbelief and unthankfulness in not having taken God’s graciousness to heart.

**If prayer does not begin by giving God a preeminent place in our hearts and minds then it is not prayer in the biblical sense of the word.** When Jesus told us to begin our prayer times by first focusing on God, He did so for a good reason (Luke 11:2). If we focus first on God then everything else falls into perspective. If you follow this advice, and make the opening moments of your regular prayer sessions a time of reverential worship, you will see the difference. And how God has loved us. He not only made us, He redeemed us through the death of His Son. He left His throne and came to seek us, who had been lost and he paid an awful price for that mission.

I recall a story of a young boy who spent many hours building a little sailboat, crafting it down to the finest detail. He then took it to a nearby river to sail it. When he put it in the water, however, it moved away from him very quickly. Though he chased it along the bank, he couldn’t keep up with it. The strong wind and current carried the boat away. The heartbroken boy knew how hard he would have to work to build another sailboat.

Farther down the river, a man found the little boat, took it to town, and sold it to a shopkeeper. Later that day, as the boy was walking through town, he noticed the boat in a store window. Entering the store, he told the owner that the boat belonged to him. It had his own little marks on it, but he couldn’t prove to the shopkeeper that the boat was his. The man told him the only way he could get the boat was to buy it. The boy wanted it back so badly that he did exactly that.

As he took the boat from the hand of the shopkeeper, he looked at it and said, “Little boat, you’re twice mine. I made you and I bought you.”

In the same way, we are twice God’s. Our Father in heaven both created us and paid a great price for us. (See Colossians 1:16 and Romans 5:8.) With the blood of his Son, we have been redeemed and reunited with God. Jesus Christ gave his life to get us back, yet so often we

show such little gratitude for what he has done for us. We must bear this truth in mind as we approach the throne of God in prayer. Never forget that you are entering God's presence, His palace and you must bow in worship. When her Majesty the Queen enters a place, everybody stands in reverence and this God is the King of kings. Worship Him.

The great problem with our prayer lives is that we are more concerned about getting things from God than giving Him the glory that is due to His name. Life, first and foremost is about Him, His glory, His honour, His power, His saving grace. It was C.S. Lewis who said: "If you put first things first then everything comes out right; if you put first things second then nothing comes out right." Nowhere is that truth more important to recognise than at the place of prayer.

As we thank God for his faithfulness even when in tears, we are encouraged to trust Him and trust His revealed Son, The Christ. What does it mean to trust Christ? It is a reliance and a dependence. It is leaning all your weight on Him. It is to tumble down into Christ's arms because you cannot stand upright. That is faith. You just give up depending on anything that you are or do or ever hope to be and depend on the merits, finished work and precious blood of Jesus Christ. You think about those blessed feet pierced by nails which are signs of his love. That bleeding person on the cross is the grand display of the heart of the ever-blessed Lord. Look to the Saviour's pangs, griefs and groans. These are punishment for my sin. This is God's wrath expending itself on Christ instead of the sinner – instead of me.

How do we then worship the great I AM but to begin to appreciate what He has done? When we pray we should intersperse our supplications and prayers with thanksgiving. Nothing reveals the immaturity of our prayer life more than making our requests to God without remembering to give Him thanks and praise for the things He has already given to us or done for us. A preacher made the point that humanity can be divided into two categories: those who take things for granted and those who take things with gratitude. Every Christian should belong to the latter category. It has been observed that the biggest barricade against depression is a thankful and praising heart. So as we learn to give thanks to God in everything, it not only blesses God, it blesses us also. It is a danger to our faith when we are so blinded in our so-called problems that we fail to feel the loving arms of God around us that should move us to give him thanks. Do you still carry those burdens in the light of a worshipful experience in God's presence? The burdens become lighter when we are in the presence of the One who knows about them even before we mention any of them. Thank Him for that also.

Our thanks should not be like that of the little girl who detested milk pudding and was made to eat some for her dessert. When she asked if she might get down from the table she was told that first she must return thanks to God for her meal. 'But I have nothing to be thankful for,' she said sulkily. 'Very well,' said her mother, 'Then remain there until you have.' After a few minutes she said: 'Thank You, God, that I wasn't sick. *Now* may I get down?'

The commentator Matthew Henry, while reflecting on the fact that someone had stolen His wallet, prayed like this: 'First, Lord, let me be thankful that I had never been robbed before. Second, that the thief did not take my life. Third, that because he took all I had possessed it was not much, and fourth, because it was he who robbed and not me.' There is never a time in anyone's life when there is nothing for which to be thankful. So, let me encourage you to think - and give thanks.

Finally, coming back to our text, 'I am the Lord your God...who brought you out of bondage...it is I only you must worship, I only you must fear. If you remember that when you are about to pray things will come together as the centre holds all contending forces in position.' Amen.