

Hunger Prayer

by Stewart Ruch

Bishop Stewart Ruch's sermon emphasizes the relational nature of prayer, comparing it to the communal experience of sharing a meal at the kitchen table rather than a transactional process like shopping online.

Duration: 27:48

Scripture: Psalm 145:14-16, Matthew 6:17-18, James 4:2-3

Topics: "Prayer"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of hungering for God's word and righteousness. He shares a personal example of purchasing items online and how it satisfies his needs, but also highlights the significance of gathering around the kitchen table, which was built by a carpenter in their church. The speaker mentions his mentor, Archbishop Benjamin Kowashi, who experienced the trauma of Boko Haram's attacks in Nigeria. Despite the suffering, Archbishop Kowashi was led to disciple the next generation and plant churches. The sermon also references James 4, emphasizing the need to ask God for what we need and to align our desires with His will.

Transcript

This is Church of the Resurrection in Wheaton, Illinois. This week's sermon is by Bishop Stuart Ruch and is part two of Teach Us to Care and Not to Care, a three-part series on prayer. So one of the sort of key questions to living life, period, regardless of your spiritual background or religious concern, is how do you get what you need? How do you go about making sure you get what you need? And then if you believe in God and you're a follower of Jesus, that question gets even a little more specific.

How is it that you're supposed to ask for what you need? How do you engage God on those things? That, by the way, can cover a really significant spectrum. It may be things that you need that would be a help or a comfort or a consolation. It may be on the spectrum that these are things that you need that are literally life and death for you or for others.

It can have different levels of urgency. So there are a few arenas, if we explored it, where we get what we need. Let me just grab two.

I'm going to highlight two venues. I'm going to have one venue on this side. I'll talk about it.

Okay, I'm going to put one venue on this side. So the first venue would be a venue like Amazon. So, for example, yesterday I needed something.

So I went on my laptop. I opened it up. I bookmarked Amazon Prime.

I clicked to get into Amazon Prime. I searched for what I needed. I clicked through, click, click, click.

Oh, 20% off. Read the reviews again. Good reviews.

I purchased. I have every expectation because I have Amazon Prime that in two days, and they now deliver on Sunday as well, that I will get exactly what I bought. If I don't get exactly what I bought, then I know that I will return it immediately and I will then be refunded or I will get exactly what I bought.

If I actually even buy what I bought and I don't like it, even if I got what I asked for, I can still return it and get something else that I think I need. This is a commerce mentality that we as Americans, for example, are profoundly formed and shaped by. I click.

I purchase. I, within two days, get what I bought. I have the opportunity to return it or refund it if I don't like what I got or it isn't what I thought I wanted.

Boom. Another way that I get what I need, let me take you over here, let me take you actually to our kitchen table at our house. Okay, at our kitchen table, I also get what I need.

Now, our kitchen table was actually built by one of you, a carpenter in the church who took old barn wood and put it together and built this amazing, very large, very solid table. Our table has eight chairs, nine chairs, 12 chairs, 14 chairs. It's always changing how many chairs are on the table.

They're all mismatched. It's very likely there's three or four cups of half-drunken tea that are somewhere on the table and probably somebody's literature book and somebody else's assignment that's over here and that little list that somebody wrote that they can't find anywhere, and it's all there at the table. At least three times a day, often four or five because it involves snacks and late-night conversation, there's food happening at the table.

When you come to the table, you actually will get what you need. You know that you will be fed, and you'll do it actually not by yourself on a laptop. You can't get food that way, but you'll actually do it with a whole bunch of people, and you'll wait for what you want.

You'll say things like, could you please pass the salt and pepper, and at least in my family with a lot of people, there's often guests that are there, I'll say, please pass the salt and pepper, and I'll ask for something that I need, and I won't actually get it, and I'll have to ask again and again. I do a lot of waiting. I'm at the end of the table.

It's mostly a place of honor, but I can't ever get salt and pepper. I'll say, hey, I'm hungry, please pass the rice and beans, and then I'll wait for the rice and beans. But I'm in community with others.

Sometimes it's really fun, and we have great laughs. Sometimes we're all a little testy and tired. Sometimes we engage in arguments.

Sometimes we lose our temper. Sometimes we're really gracious to each other and servant-hearted. It's this whole kind of life around the kitchen table.

But every time I go to our kitchen table, I never walk away hungry. A gift, actually, in a country of prosperity like ours. I'm always fed at our kitchen table.

I always get what I needed, but I don't always get what I think I want. Okay, the life of prayer and the life of fasting in prayer is not like Amazon, and it's a lot like the kitchen table. In prayer, you don't click through always by yourself.

We do prayer on our own. But you don't click through to what you think for sure you need and be guaranteed you're going to get what you think you need, i.e., an answer to prayer. And if you don't like it, you return it.

But we're so formed and shaped by commerce, by quick capitalism, that we can actually import what we do here to get stuff that we do actually need. We can import this whole world and think this is your life of prayer. And if you live a life of prayer that's Amazon-based, you will become so discouraged you've probably already stopped praying because it doesn't work.

Or maybe you've gotten bitter or exhausted or so disappointed. This will not help you in your life of prayer. But this, on the other hand, the kitchen table, the family table, interacting with others in relationship, you're not clicking.

You're connecting. You're not purchasing. You're petitioning.

You're asking for that food, that salt and pepper that you need. You're not guaranteed exactly what you want, but you're guaranteed that you'll be fed. This is the life of prayer.

Now, often when I teach, we go deep into one passage and explore that passage together, several verses. And so this morning, I want to look at three different passages to form a composite and a picture of what is it to hunger in prayer. First, I want to talk about hungering for God.

We hunger for God, Matthew 6, verses 16 to 18, our lesson that was read by Dick and Valerie. Two, we hunger for rightness, which would include a biblical word righteousness, but we hunger for things to be right, James 4, verses 2 to 3 especially. And then we hunger for God's food, Psalm 145, verses 14 to 16.

Matthew 6, our Lord is teaching on fasting. Okay, most important word in that teaching right there is father. Second most important word is fasting.

Third, and I do mean third, most important word is secret, and I'll say a little bit about each of those right now. Most important word, fasting. Excuse me, father.

Fasting gets the red ribbon. This seems so obvious, but I actually forget it myself, so I'm just going to make the assumption that you also forget it, and that is this, that when I get into prayer and I'm in an Amazon mode, I'm in a cause and effect kind of model where I'm like, if I do this, this should happen. If I engage this way, then I should get this result.

And I forget, particularly when there's a pressure and an urgency of asking in prayer, like I really need something to happen, I really need something to change in my own life, my own heart, or somebody else's life, I forget that actually the first and foremost thing that I'm doing is I'm hungering for God. Jesus is teaching that you fast to fasten your heart to the Father. You fast that the Father's heart, which is already reaching out to you, might be properly fastened to you.

We fast to be fastened to the Father. We go into a closet, which is to say a close place, a place of connection, so that we can know just how much the Father is loving us and reaching out to us, and we can experience His character and know His character in fasting. We hunger for the Father.

That's where prayer always starts. That's where fasting always starts. We hunger for God, which is the second most important word, fasting.

Jesus, from a Hebrew culture and background, formed philosophically, mentally, emotionally by His Hebrew upbringing. He was a full person, raised by Hebrew parents, had a Hebrew mom. So He thinks like a Hebrew.

Well, Hebrews think about spirit and body integrated deeply, and one practice of the Hebrew people is to fast. It has always been to fast. So He's assuming when you fast.

He's actually not even going into a lot of why you should fast. There's an assumption that you will fast, that your body will engage in prayer and hunger. There's an assumption that's the case.

So He's saying when you fast, you fasten your heart to the Father. That's the main focus of your fasting is time with your Father in heaven. By the way, I'm not going to go into details about how to fast.

There are mechanics to fasting, particularly fasting from food, which many but not all of you are able to do. That will be on the website to prepare for Wednesday's Res Fast. So now we get to the third word that actually, if you have a Bible background at all, is often the word that I feel like Christians remember the most.

So if you're not a believer and you're here and exploring Christianity, let me tell you a little bit about our culture. We have this quirk in our culture. It's around fasting and secrecy.

Because Jesus taught, like, do it in secret. Again, people don't hear Father or fasting, they hear secret. They're like, this has got to be secret.

This has got to be absolutely top secret. If it's not secret or I lose the secrecy, I lose my reward. So Christians, like, tie themselves in all kinds of pretzel knots trying to keep it secret.

So here's what happens. I've watched this so many times. You're in a community, like a staff team where we are, and you don't have lunch.

And someone says, oh, you're not having lunch. Are you fasting? I'm just not having lunch. Well, that's unusual.

You always have lunch. You must be fasting. And all of a sudden you're like, do I lie? Is it worse to lie? Like, what do I lose if I lie? Or what do I lose if I keep it a secret? What do I do? I'm exposed.

I don't know what to say. Man, well, are you on a diet? No, I'm not on a diet. I'm like, stop, please.

Okay, don't think that way. That's cause and effect. That's legalism.

The point is not you've got to keep it absolutely secret or you lose the reward. That's not what Jesus is teaching. If you're fasting, if someone says you're not having a meal, you're fasting, you say, yeah, I'm fasting.

It's okay. But it's kind of that Amazon mentality, right? Got to do things just right, click through just right, purchase just right, have money in your account when you buy it. No, no, no, no, no.

The secrecy piece is important because Jesus understands that the human condition is such that we love to make awesome first impressions, and that the real impression that eventually will come if you get to know somebody really well will not be anything like the first impression. I mean, that's where real friendship happens, right? You get beyond the first impression, you realize, wow, they're not as impressive as they appear to be, but they actually still really love them and like them. And Jesus is saying, you're so inclined toward first impression, what I'm trying to do is not get you to make a first impression that you are unbelievably spiritual and denying yourself something.

Although, I do expect you to be unbelievably spiritual, and I expect you to deny yourself stuff. I just don't want you to get caught up in the impression of it. That's the secrecy piece.

But if we get so worked up about that, they forget that actually you fast because you're hungry for God, and you are fastening your heart to the Father. Why else is it in secret? Because secrecy, particularly healthy secrecy, creates closeness. Do you or do you not lean in if you're at coffee with somebody and they say, hey, don't tell anyone else this, but you're like, wow, I really want to know what they're getting ready to say.

And when they tell me this, and it's a secret, it could be a healthy secret, I'll feel closer to them, they'll feel closer to me. Husband and wife, wife's pregnant, but they're not ready to tell anybody, they're carrying a secret. There's a sweetness in that, a closeness.

That's why secrecy matters, is that your Father wants to have that closeness with you, a communion with you, conversations with you, some conversations which may never be repeated. They're just between the two of you. Fasting embodies, it makes concrete, our spiritual hunger for God.

Even if you can't get there emotionally or intellectually, in Christianity, you don't have to always get there emotionally and intellectually. It's important to be an emotional and intellectual person in Christianity, but you can also get there with your body. It's a grace and a gift.

Your body can be hungry even if your mind and your heart aren't fully hungry, and you can still be hungry for God with your body. This is why we fast as a whole church. Primarily, we have Res Fast a couple times a year, because we want, as the people of God, to come to God's kitchen table and be hungry together, hungry for God together, and say, feed us whatever you've prepared, Father.

Second, we hunger for rightness. Okay, now James chapter 4, it's an absolutely intriguing passage, all those verses, very tempting to go all into them, but let me just highlight a couple of them, particularly in regard to hungering for rightness. Second part of verse 2, chapter 4, you do not have because you do not ask, you ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly to spend it on your, and I'm going to comment here, on your wrongly formed desires, your wrongly formed passions.

Passion and desire is very good and holy, but when they're wrongly formed, it then means that, as the writer James says, that we have a friendship with the world, it's actually an enmity with God. A friendship, not that we don't love the world, we do love the world, but we recognize that the world is also an enemy against the things of God, which is why we love the world and care for the world and love our enemy, if you will, because we so want to bring the reality of God to the world, we have to learn to care and not

care. I talked about that last week.

We have to learn to care deeply about the kingdom to come and the reality of the kingdom and not care about wrongly formed passions, wrongly formed desires, those things that the world says is most important. And when we hunger for rightness, we read that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble, verse 6. Humble yourself, verse 10, before the Lord and he will exalt you. How humbling it is to ask.

You have not because you ask not. One of the key marks of a mature Christian man or woman is that they've learned how to ask. When I look up to other believers who are farther along the road of maturity in Jesus than I am, one of the things I always see in them is they've learned how to ask God.

I'll mention in just a moment one of my mentors and how I watched him ask things of God. They've learned what to ask God for and how to ask God. They've learned to care and not to care.

They've learned that there's a reality of enmity with the world and friendship with God that they ask into, learning how to ask things of God. So just like make a mental note, that's one of my goals in life. If you're serious about following Jesus and serious about being a Christian and serious about the kingdom of God, then one of the things you need to learn and develop in your life is how to ask God of things, how to hunger for God and hunger for rightness.

We hunger for God's kingdom come. Part of what James is teaching and what we see in different parts of the Scriptures is the reality that we are awaiting the fullness of God's kingdom to come, that we are in a place where God's kingdom has come but has not fully been consummated, hasn't fully been fulfilled, that we're in between. And in between that place, if you will be real about your world and real about your own heart, you will realize there is great peril in your heart and great peril in the world and that there is a huge rightness gap.

There's a huge rightness gap between what is now and what should be. Just one of the things that just embodies or captures this rightness gap is the reality of disease. I hate disease.

I hate it. You're supposed to hate it. God didn't make disease.

It wasn't God's plan for the human person. It wasn't God's plan for male and female. He made male and female in His image.

He made them to live in union and the call of marriage, male and female. He made them to live in collegiality and consolation and love together. He made them to feast off the things of this earth.

He made them to live in full and complete health. He made them to not die. And disease interrupts itself and forces itself on the human person as part of the sinful reality of this world that we are at war with in Jesus' name.

And when we see disease, we say, that's not right. And we hunger for it to be changed. We hunger for healing.

We hunger for the reverse of diagnoses. We step into that. One of the places for greatest denial among us as Christians who have been given in this culture so many consolations and even comforts.

None of us can escape the reality of disease, though. It touches all of us. It touches those that we love.

So we look into that. We face into that. And we fast into that.

Do you see what I'm saying? You say, I'm fasting for rightness. I'm fasting for God's kingdom come. If you don't do that, you'll either deny the peril that's there and not be a healthy human being or a healthy Christian.

Or you'll face the peril that will so overwhelm you, you'll shut down. You'll stop praying. You'll despair.

You'll live in fear and terror. So there's got to be some way to respond to the lack of rightness. Just for one example, in the human body, we fast.

We're hungry for righteousness. Jesus said, for they will be filled. We're hungry for the rightness in the body.

I visited a friend who's just suffered physically. I mean, one challenging diagnosis after another, like a march. Boom, boom, boom.

It's incredible. So what do I do as a pastor or a Christian friend in the face of that? What can I do? How can I respond? I think the Bible teaches me that I can fast. That I can, with Him, hunger for rightness.

I can call out to God for His healing. But I can also enter into the reality there's this gap that we pray into. We hunger to be fed God's food.

Psalms 145. I talked about this last week. If you didn't hear last week's sermon, I want to encourage you to because they integrate and link up together.

But I talked about the psalms as poems. So every day it's really great to read a psalm, important to read a psalm. And every day then you get to read a poem.

They're prayers and poems. And they're full of passion. So we have here in Psalm 145 a passion.

And the passion is that we hunger to be fed God's food. We hunger to be invited to God's kitchen table where God is serving the food He has chosen for us in that moment. And the part of prayer is coming to the table, submitting ourselves, humbling ourselves, asking for His food, and then receiving whatever He has chosen to give us.

Verse 15 of Psalm 145. The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand.

You satisfy the desire of every living thing. The Lord is righteous in all His ways and kind in all His works. The Lord is near to all who call on Him, to all who call on Him in truth.

Right? So, I mean, this goes right to the heart of suffering, doesn't it? The reality of suffering that's so poignant. There's a beautiful work of theology. It's called Theodicy on suffering and why God allows suffering.

It's very important, by the way, to read on that and to understand biblically why God has allowed suffering. And it will always take you to the heart of the Son of God who Himself suffered on the cross. But it's also a practical or embodied way to enter into the reality of suffering.

And that is that as others suffer, so we hunger. As others hunger, so we hunger. And as others wait on God, so we wait on God to be fed with what God will give us.

And we humble ourselves to realize that we're not, first and foremost, going for an answer. I think it's fine to talk about answered prayer. I think it's beautiful to talk about answered prayer.

But I think it can get confusing if you think that the answer is a precise, pinpointed answer of exactly what you asked for. I think that will get confusing. I think you're not so much looking for an answer, so to speak.

You're looking for a response from God. You're looking for a move from God. You're looking for your Father at the kitchen table, passing you the food that He has prepared for you.

That's what you're looking for. If you get too obsessed with a particular answer, I think you'll miss what God wants to give you, which is His presence. Which is a response to where you are in your asking.

To where you are in needing God. To where you are in hungering for Him. You won't always get exactly what you want.

But you will always get, ultimately, in God's understanding, what you need. Okay, I have two daughters. And I won't say which daughter, but one of my daughters had a very significant issue in her early years with cooked zucchini.

And it was intense. Now, zucchini would come to the table, and immediately there would be the most vociferous and profound of reactions. I mean, passion, and anger, and repulsion at this cooked zucchini.

You know, now she goes to Wheaton College. She's a junior. She's an RA.

You know, she's got kind of a place of responsibility, so I wouldn't want to expose her. But, I mean, it was unbelievable. She did not want to eat that zucchini.

I mean, she was convinced it was poison. She thought that we were poisoning her. It's almost like she was asking, you know, for bread, and we were giving her a serpent.

Or, you know, she was asking, you know, we're giving her a snake. But we actually knew that no zucchini is good for you. It's not poison.

Maybe a little slimy. Kind of coagulates, you know. But you're going to be just fine.

As a matter of fact, that's what we made for dinner, and that's what you're eating because you're at our family table. She now eats her zucchini. She's actually grown to like it.

How? She learned to humble herself and eat what was given her. That's part of the kitchen table. You don't always get exactly what you want.

But God promises you will never go away hungry from His table ever. You will never go away hungry from His table. So don't confuse the fact that you didn't get the answer you were hoping for for hunger.

Don't get confused there. Don't miss, actually, the food that He's providing. Catherine and I went through an experience here at Rez many, many years ago.

We talked about this some in our history. There was about a five-year period where we had four different church splits from 1997 up through 2001. And I was asked to be the leader or the rector of resurrection in the middle of that.

And Catherine and I would daily cry out to God and say, Please make this stop. We can't handle one more split. This was like after two.

We didn't even know two more were coming. We can't handle any more division. Please, God, make this stop.

And we would cry out. We would knock. We would ask.

We would seek. And it wasn't stopping. It wasn't getting any better.

And finally, we sensed the Lord say to us, through Scripture reading and through counselors around us, that the Lord was saying, This actually isn't stopping yet. I'm doing something else. So again, I was like, He's not going to give me what I'd hoped, but actually what God will often give us is perspective from the kingdom of God.

Sometimes you have to change your ask. You have not because you ask not. We have to learn how to ask well.

I had to change the ask. So, Lord, what is it then that you would teach me now? What is it that you want me to understand? Well, he wanted me to understand at least two things. One is that resurrection would become a church to learn to fight for unity because she knew the poison of unity.

Of division so well. And two, that he was basically strengthening Catherine and me for a lifetime of service. It was hard.

It was arduous. But he wanted to build our servant muscles, our prayer muscles, for the duration that he would let us serve the church. So sometimes you change your ask.

You say, No, I need perspective from the kingdom of God. I need to be reminded I'm at a table and I've got a father who will never give me poison or a serpent or a stone. So what are you giving me, Father? What are you providing for me right now? Sometimes it gives us something to do.

I mentioned my mentor. His name is Benjamin Kwashi. He preached here in July.

He's the Archbishop of Jos, Nigeria, working in northern Nigeria where Boko Haram has been an Islamic jihadist movement in which thousands have been killed, including his own people and his own sheep. He was so traumatized. What was happening to his people? He went into fasting and prayer.

He was seeking the Lord's face and crying out, Lord, stop this, I pray. His sense in prayer, and this proved to be true, that that was not going to stop for a season, that this was going to continue. God is not the author of evil.

He's not the author of discord. But in the mystery of God, this was being allowed. So he said to Ben, While this is still happening, disciple the next generation of men and women and plant as many churches as you can.

So in fasting and prayer, he was fed with something he was called to do. For Catherine and me, in fasting and prayer, we were fed by being given a kingdom perspective of what God was doing. So when you hunger, hunger for God's food, hunger in prayer, hunger for rightness, for righteousness, for the food of God, draw near to God.

He will draw near to you. Fasten your heart on the Father. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

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