

Does the following sound familiar? "Hi, how are you today?" "Fine, thanks for asking. How are you?" "Fine. Have a nice day." So goes a typical conversation in daily life. It's called "small talk." When asked, we tell people we're fine--it doesn't matter that our house just burned down, our spouse just left us, and the doctor told us we have six months to live! That's the way it is with "small talk"--we say things we really don't mean.

It's unfortunate that we engage in so much frivolous conversation with people, but there's a far more serious situation which calls for our attention this morning. Far too often, we practice small talk with God. When it comes to prayer, we say things we really don't mean. Too often, prayer becomes little more than cute cliches and pious platitudes.

Do you ever ask yourself why the American Church with all its wealth and resources continues to flounder, and why conversion growth rates continue to decline year after year? You say, "Well, the answer to the problem is a complex one," and you may be right. But I want to suggest that the basic reason is not hard to figure out. R. A. Torrey put his finger on it decades ago in his classic book, How To Pray. He wrote (95):

"Doubtless one of the great secrets of the unsatisfactoriness and superficiality and unreality of many of our modern so-called revivals, is that more dependence is put upon man's machinery than upon God's power, sought and obtained by earnest, persistent, believing prayer. We live in a day characterized by the multiplication of man's machinery and the diminution of God's power. The great cry of our day is work, work, work, new organizations, new methods, new machinery; the great need of our day is prayer."

The Church today is in great need. The reputation of the Lord Jesus Christ is on the line. We cannot afford to play games with God any longer. Getting busy for God isn't the answer. Humbling ourselves before God in prayer is the answer. But small talk won't do.

How can we get beyond small talk in our prayer lives? God has shown us how by providing us with a model, Daniel. God can use Daniel to teach us how to pray.

Proposition: From Daniel's prayer in chapter 9, we discover five perspectives which are necessary for genuine, God-honoring prayer. We pondered the first three last week, and will focus on the final two this morning.

- I. Perspective #1: He looks up (4).
- II. Perspective #2: He looks back (5-6).
- III. Perspective #3: He looks down (7-10).
- IV. Perspective #4: He looks to Scripture (11-14).
 - A. We have transgressed the commands of God's law (11a).
 - B. We have experienced the curse of God's law (11b-14).
 1. God is the law-giver.
 2. God deals with law-breakers.
- V. Perspective #5: He looks up again (15-19).
 - A. Praise God for His help in the past (15).
 1. He redeemed Israel from Egypt.
 2. He made a name for Himself.
 - B. Ask God for His help in the present (16-19).

***Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

1. Recover Your reputation (16).
2. Restore Your worship (17).
3. Regard Your Name (18).
4. Revive Your people (19).

Implications: What must we do to get beyond small-talk?

1. Admit the truth to God.
2. Accept the forgiveness of God.

Review: Allow me to remind you what had happened to Daniel. Daniel had been in exile in Babylon for some 67 years when two things occurred. First, the Medo-Persians conquered the empire that had ruled the world for the previous 6 decades, the Babylonians. Second, during the first year of the reign of the new king, Darius, Daniel was reading the Book written by Jeremiah the prophet, and discovered a promise of God. God had foretold through Jeremiah that after 70 years, He would judge the Babylonians and restore Jerusalem.

Daniel was gripped by the Book. True to His Word, God had just destroyed the Babylonians, and Daniel sensed that the fulfillment of the second half of the promise was just ahead. So what did Daniel do? He prayed!

What kind of prayer did Daniel bring to God? A prayer marked by five perspectives.

I. Perspective #1: He looks up (4).

Daniel took his eyes off of himself, and lifted them upward to God. He began his prayer (4), "O Lord, the great and awesome God." That's where we must start, too, by looking up. God is great and good, and we must not minimize either.

II. Perspective #2: He looks back (5-6).

In verses 5-6, Daniel proceeded to look back, and what he saw were the sins of his people. "We have sinned!" he cried. Daniel confessed both the wrong they had done, and the right they didn't do. The Israelites had rebelled against God time after time, and to top that, when God sent His prophets to call them back, they refused to listen.

III. Perspective #3: He looks down (7-10).

When you look back and see sin, the natural reaction is to look down in shame. A holy God cannot look upon sin, nor can sinners look into the face of a holy God. Daniel cries out twice (7, 8), "O Lord, to us belongs confusion of face!" We're full of shame, shame which is the consequence of sin!

But Daniel doesn't leave the throne of grace in shame. Nor must we because of what Jesus Christ has done. After Daniel looked up, looked back, and looked down, he exhibited a fourth perspective in his prayer.

IV. Perspective #4: He looks to Scripture (11-14).

Notice how Daniel grounded his prayer in Scripture in verses 11-14, "Yea, all Israel has transgressed *Thy law*, even by departing, that they might not obey *Thy voice*; therefore Thy curse is poured upon us, and the *oath* that is written in the *law of Moses*, the servant of God, because we have sinned against Him. And He hath confirmed *His words*, which He spoke against us...As it is written in the *law of Moses*..."

Please don't miss the obvious. For Daniel, prayer wasn't small-talk. It wasn't a therapeutic session where he "got things off his chest and told God how he felt." No, his prayer was grounded in Scripture. His prayer was based on truth. His prayer demonstrated good theology. His prayer flowed out of his Bible study.

What does Daniel focus on as he prays? The Torah, the Law of God. Notice how he affirms two truths related to God's law as he prays.

A. We have transgressed the commands of God's law (11a). V 11 again (NIV), "All Israel has transgressed your law and turned away, refusing to obey You." Notice an important connection. When we disobey God's law, what are we really doing? We are rejecting God. To ignore God's Word is to ignore God's Person. God's Law is God's standard. What happens, according to Daniel's confession, when we disobey God's Law?

B. We have experienced the curse of God's law (11b-14). "Therefore the curses and sworn judgments written in the Law of Moses, the servant of God, have been poured out on us, because we have sinned against you (11b, NIV)."

The language of Daniel's prayer is shaped by his knowledge of the Mosaic covenant, the background of which may be foreign to us. The Mosaic Law follows the format which was common in ancient Near Eastern treaties. When a king conquered a people, that sovereign would draft a legal document known as a "Suzerain-Vassal treaty." That covenant was a legally binding agreement between the parties.

The typical format began with a preamble, in which the king introduces himself to his subjects, followed by a historical prologue (where the king reviewed the historical account of his relationship with his subjects). Then came the stipulations, where the king wrote down exactly what he expected of the people under his rule. The stipulations were followed up by a section of blessings and curses, in which the king specified what would happen if his subjects chose to obey or disobey him.

That's exactly what the Lord God did with Israel in the 15th century B.C.. He redeemed the Israelites from bondage in Egypt, brought them to Mt. Sinai, and entered into a covenant with them (known as the Mosaic covenant). As the Sovereign, He wrote down on two stone tablets the stipulations of what He required of His subjects (the Ten Commandments). Then He warned them, and had Moses record the warning in writing, with a list of blessings and curses.

We read the blessings in Deut 28:1-2 (NIV), "If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God." Moses listed the blessings in vv 3-14.

But then God detailed the curses beginning in Deut 28:15, "However, if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you."

One of the specific curses of which God warned was this (Dt 28:36-37), "The LORD will drive you and the king you set over you to a nation unknown to you or your fathers...You will become a thing of horror and an object of scorn and ridicule to all the nations where the LORD will drive you."

All this was in Daniel's mind as he knelt before God that day. He had seen firsthand God's warning come true. God judged His people just like He said He would. Now, listen carefully to Daniel's prayer again in light of what we just learned (10-14, LB):

"Oh Lord our God we have disobeyed You; we have flouted all the laws You gave us...we have turned away from You and haven't listened to Your voice. And so the awesome curse of God has crushed us--the curse written in the law of Moses Your servant (11). And You have done exactly as You warned us You would do; for never in all history has there been a disaster like what happened at Jerusalem to us and our rulers

(12). Every curse against us written in the law of Moses has come true; all the evils he predicted--all have come. But even so we still refuse to satisfy the Lord our God by turning from our sins and doing right (13). And so the Lord deliberately crushed us with the calamity He prepared; He is fair in everything He does, but we would not obey (14)."

You may be wondering, "So what does all this have to do with us?" Good question. In light of Daniel's prayer, we can draw a couple of conclusions about God.

1. *God is the law-giver.* What's the reason that we shouldn't use the company credit card for personal purchases? Because we might get caught and lose our job? No. Why is it that we should not have an affair with another person? Because it would cause embarrassment for the kids? No, that's not the primary reason. Why is it that abortion is a blight on our country? Is it because of the economic problems incurred by eliminating 33 million potential tax-payers? No. What's the basic problem with each of these scenarios? The problem is that each is a violation of the stipulations of the law-giver, God.

God said, "Thou shalt not steal." God said, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." God said, "Thou shalt not murder." Where did He say that? In the written, moral Law which is the reflection of His holy character. What happens to law-breakers?

2. *God deals with law-breakers.* There are lots of ways to sin. In fact, Daniel specifies several right here as he itemizes the evil of his people: "transgressed," "departed," "sinned," "iniquities" (13), "obeyed not his voice" (14).

What's the result of evil living? Three times in this section, Daniel repeats a word which underscores the consequence of law-breaking: "bringing upon us great disaster (12, NIV);" "all this disaster has come upon us (13);" "The Lord did not hesitate to bring disaster upon us (14)." Disobedience brings "disaster" (the KJV translates as "evil;" here it doesn't have moral connotations, but refers to calamity). God deals with law-breakers.

Listen, friends. A holy God isn't interested in hearing irreligious, small-talk. What can we do to pray more God-honoring prayers? Do what Daniel did. Look to Scripture.

In fact, I would offer a very practical suggestion. Pray Scripture. With your Bible open before you, pray through passages. Read a text such as Matthew 6:9-13 or Ephesians 1:15ff., and talk to God about what you've read, one phrase at a time.

A pioneer missionary to Mongolia, James Gilmour, wrote the following a short time before he died: "When I feel I cannot make headway in devotion, I open the Psalms and push out my canoe and let myself be carried along on the stream of devotion that flows through the whole book. The current always sets toward God and in most places is strong and deep." (in Wallace, 155)

If you want to get beyond small talk in your prayer life, develop the five perspectives we see in Daniel's prayer. Look up, look back, look down, look to Scripture, and then...

V. Perspective #5: He looks up again (15-19).

Daniel closes his prayer as he began it, with his eyes fixed upon the greatness of God. He teaches us that as we look upward, we should engage in two God-centered activities.

A. Praise God for His help in the past (15). Listen to Daniel again as he reflects on what God did in the past (15), "And now, O Lord, our God, who hast brought thy people forth out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand, and hast gotten thee renown, as at this day; we have sinned, we have done wickedly."

Remember, Daniel lived in the 6th century B.C., a time in which the Jewish people desperately needed help. So what does Daniel do? He looks back 900 years to the 15th century to another time when God's people needed help. Daniel meditates on what God did for his ancestors. God accomplished two things.

1. *He redeemed Israel from Egypt.* Throughout the Old Testament, the Israelites constantly looked back to what God did when He miraculously rescued His people from Egypt. We look back, too, but not to Egypt. We look back to the Cross, for it was there that our Redeemer, Jesus Christ, rescued us.

In v 15, Daniel says that in addition to redeeming His people, God did something else in Egypt. What was it?

2. *He made a name for Himself.* We live in a society in which people are enamored with themselves. Doug Marlette probes this indictment by adjusting the following hymn lyrics to fit our theology, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a stunted self-concept like me; I once was stressed out, but now am empowered, was visually challenged, but now I see."

In contrast to our self-focused culture stands Daniel. Daniel was captivated with God. He praised God for His help in the past.

The hymnwriter understood the value of looking back when he wrote, "O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home!" Like Daniel, we should praise God for His help in the past. Only then are we prepared to proceed with a second God-centered aspect of prayer.

B. Ask God for His help in the present (16-19). Daniel asked God to do four things in verses 16-19. What's ironic is that he didn't ask for one thing for himself. All four requests have to do with something for God.

1. *Recover Your reputation (16).* V 16 "O Lord, according to all thy righteousness, I beseech thee, let thine anger and thy fury be turned away from thy city, Jerusalem, thy holy mountain; because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and thy people are become a reproach to all that are about us."

Daniel asks God to turn away His anger from Jerusalem. Why? It's not a selfish request at all. Daniel says, "Lord, we deserved the judgment You sent our way. Jerusalem is in shambles today because we sinned. Yet Lord, because You've judged us, the pagans are mocking us. And You. Please act, Lord, for Your reputation is being unjustly blasphemed. Help us, Lord, for the sake of Your reputation."

One thing's for sure about Daniel's prayer. It's a God-centered prayer. Just notice what we learn about God from the prophet's prayer. He is great, awesome, and faithful (4). He's righteous (7, 14), merciful and forgiving (9). He's a revealing God (10), a judging God (11), a trustworthy God who keeps His Word (12). We learn a lot about God from Daniel's prayer.

What would a listener learn about God from hearing one of *your* prayers? Would he learn much about God, or would he get the idea that God is some kind of Genie-in-a-bottle?

Parents, do you allow your children to hear you pray? I'm talking about more than the pre-meal ritual, "Thanks God for this food, Amen." Do your children ever hear you pray, "Lord God, You are holy, righteous, and faithful."? You say, "But my 4-year old doesn't understand those words." Maybe not, but you're not talking to your child when you pray, are you? By letting your child hear you pray, you are stretching your child's view of God.

You're showing him or her that the God we pray to is greater than daddy and mommy. You're teaching your child that we come to God or *His* terms, not ours.

Years ago, a woman came with her son to see her pastor, R. A. Torrey. She was in desperation because her son was out of control and hardened, and said to Torrey, "What shall I do with him?" In relaying the story, Torrey writes (21), "I asked, 'Have you ever tried prayer?' "She said that she had prayed for him, she thought. I asked if she had made his conversion and his character a matter of definite, expectant prayer. She replied she had not been definite in the matter. She began that day, and at once there was a marked change in the child, and he grew up into Christian manhood."

Daniel's first request, "Lord, recover your reputation."

2. *Restore Your worship (17)*. Here's how the LB paraphrases Daniel's supplication in v 17, "Oh our God, hear Your servant's prayer! Listen as I plead! Let Your face shine again with peace and joy upon Your desolate sanctuary--for Your own glory, Lord." What did Daniel ask God to notice? The desolate sanctuary. The temple.

Daniel had a problem. He knew God had said, "Without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins (Lev 17:11)." For hundreds of years, the blood of lambs had been shed to make atonement for the sins of God's people. Where did that happen? First in the tabernacle, and later in the temple. Here was the problem. The temple was in shambles.

Daniel knew that a holy God required sacrifice in order to forgive sins. No wonder he asked God to do something about the condition of the temple. What Daniel did not fully realize was that the day would come when God Himself would make a final sacrifice for sin, on a hill outside of Jerusalem called Golgotha.

Daniel was concerned for God's worship. Are you?

3. *Regard Your Name (18)*. "O my God, incline thine ear, and hear; open thine eyes, and behold our desolations, and the city which is called *by thy name*; for we do not present our supplications before thee for our righteousness, but for thy great mercies." Daniel was gripped by God's Name. "Lord, look what's happening to the city that bears *Your* name. Please help us for *Your* name's sake. We don't deserve it, but *You* do."

4. *Revive Your people (19)*. Notice the fast pace, repetition of verbs for Daniel in this verse. This is no rote prayer, but a heartfelt cry, "O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, hearken and do; defer not, for Thine own sake, O my god; for Thy city and Thy people are called by Thy name." Daniel prays with the perspective the Lord later taught His disciples to have, "Our Father, hallowed be *Thy* name, *Thy* kingdom come, *Thy* will be done." The requests that consumed Daniel were for God's reputation, God's worship, God's name, and God's people. What drives you?

Implications: What must we do to get beyond small-talk?

1. *Admit the truth to God*. John Steinbeck commented (in Wells, 53), "We can shoot rockets into space but we can't cure anger or discontent." Walker Percy asked an important question (ibid), "Why does man feel so sad in the twentieth century? Why does man feel so bad in the very age when, more than in any other age, he has succeeded in satisfying his needs and making the world over for his own use?" Why is that?

Back in v 13, Daniel pinpointed the gut-level problem that led to his people's predicament. Daniel says (paraphrase of the end of v 13), "We've failed to give attention to God's truth." Sadly, if we'll be honest with ourselves, so have we.

In 1993, David Wells wrote a book entitled, No Place for Truth. In it, Wells reveals the sad fact that the American Church today is more concerned about feeling good than it is about truth. So what do we need to do to break the trend? Admit the truth to God.

Do you do that when you pray? You say, "What if the truth hurts? Then what?"

2. *Accept the forgiveness of God.* Daniel's prayer ends, "O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive."

Response:

At the beginning of the message, we considered a statement about the importance of prayer by R. A. Torrey. Listen to another of his observations (95):

"It was a master stroke of the devil when he got the church so generally to lay aside this mighty weapon of prayer. The devil is perfectly willing that the church should multiply its organizations, and deftly contrive machinery for the conquest of the world for Christ if it will only give up praying. He laughs as he looks at the church today and says to himself:

'You can have your Sunday-schools and your Young People's Societies, your Young Men's Christian Associations and your Women's Christian Temperance Unions [Torrey wrote this in 1900], your Institutional Churches..., your grand choirs, and your fine organs, your brilliant preachers and your revival efforts too, if you don't bring the power of Almighty God into them by earnest, persistent, believing, mighty prayer.'"

My friends, we need to stop and pray. Really prayer.