

Ordination

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Preacher: Bishop Steve Breedlove

[0 : 00] Kevin and Susan, it's a great joy to be with you and your family and friends and fellow ministers. I hope you'll look around and just see. It's really wonderful and joyful to be here. And I haven't met your family. Susan, is this your parents? Hi.

Greg and I don't know your name, but Mary Ellen? Mary Kay. Okay, good, good. Thanks. Welcome. Glad you're here. This is a joyous and celebratory service. We prayed in the litany before that the Lord would increase the number of ministers in his church, that the gospel might be spread. And tonight, this is an answer to that prayer. And I want to direct my thoughts towards you, Kevin, but I encourage all the rest of you to listen and pick up what you can. I believe that there will be application for all of us here.

But I want to start by just sharing with you a spiritual practice that the Lord has given me something in the last few years. And I hope it's useful to you. It's something that's deeply shaped my life in ministry.

And that is simply a particular psalm that comes as a regular prayer to start pretty much every day. The Lord has called me to that, and it has done more to change and shape my life and my imagination than I ever dreamed possible.

[1 : 11] And I've been for about four or five years now praying the same psalm, just the same few verses of a psalm, not every day, but virtually every day. And for me, it's Psalm 90, 12 through 17.

And it sets the basic course of my soul day after day. It's really shaped my thinking about life in general. I don't mind sharing that same psalm with you. I do not own the copyright to it. But I'm going to suggest that you consider a different psalm because we just read it, okay? And it's alert in our minds. When I read this psalm in preparation for tonight, it jumped off the page for me. And I thought it was an incredibly appropriate psalm to come in to you to do the same thing that I do for me. And so I just encourage you to at least consider it. If I wasn't so grounded in Psalm 90, I might consider this text from Psalm 119.

I know that you guys are all robed up and all that kind of stuff. But if you have a Bible, turn to Psalm 119. Or if you have your phone, take it out. Just make sure your little ringy thing is off because I will be walking our way through the psalm.

[2 : 18] And so I think it would be helpful for you. And as we follow along, Psalm 119, it starts in verse 33. The first comment I want to make is self-evident.

It's so much so that it's easy to miss. It's sort of a forest for the trees kind of a statement. And that is simply that this psalm is what? It is a prayer.

So when you consider a life of ministry, what is it if it is not an act, a process, and a walk of constant prayer? And even before we jump into any specifics, I want to just stop and think that this psalmist is praying for a life of constant communion and conversation and transformation with God.

Communion, conversation, transformation from God. Teach me. Give me understanding. Lead me. Incline my heart. Confirm your promise. And he's praying a prayer built around an image of seeking the Lord at every turn and listening to him literally at every step of the way.

Literally doing life as devotion and prayer. So I was reading that and it led me to wonder about the possibility of ministry as prayer. Full stop.

[3 : 35] Praying in the context of ministry, as I think about that, it makes me imagine many things that I would call aspects of ministry, sort of tools or practices of ministry.

Intercession, supplication, healing. These are the work of ministry. And I can imagine praying around those. But I think underneath it, I want to pause and consider the attitudes of a heart or a life of prayer.

And the ones that jumped to my mind as I was reflecting on this, four words. Dependence, humility, receptivity, and gratitude.

So those are the ground of a soul underneath prayer. Dependence, humility, receptivity, and gratitude. And that's the four words that I think will generate a life of prayer.

Now, I struggle because those four words are a sermon in themselves and I'd never actually get to the psalm. Okay? So I'm going to resist preaching that sermon. But I urge you, and I literally, Kevin, plead with you to write those four words into your mind.

[4 : 41] Your notes, your phone. Ask Susan to be your scribe. Whatever you need to do. Okay? But come back to those words. And I mean literally dwell with those words. A life of dependence.

A life of humility. A life of receptivity. And a life of gratitude. I do not think you can escape them. You may try.

It won't work. If you want to be a minister of the gospel. If you want to be about the work that God has called you to do, you won't be able to escape them.

So I'm just going to leave those four words with you for right now. We can talk about them later if you want to. We can have a one-on-one. Whatever you want to do. Okay? Because there's a lot to those four words.

But I do want to just have time to make sure that we walk through the specific petitions of the prayer. Because this psalm to me, and I say this to all of us, is a marvelous psalm to me that weaves us deeper and deeper before the Lord.

[5 : 37] It starts with something. And I'll tell you what it is. And it just then goes from that something and it travels to the next and to the next and to the next. And it's digging deeper into your soul as a man or into our souls as people, as men or women before God.

And causing us to really reflect on what it means to have a life of prayer. I'm going to walk through this psalm in couplets. Two petitions at a time. First, verse 33 and 34.

Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes, and I will keep it to the end. Give me understanding that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart. So together, the psalmist is praying for the reformation of his mind so that the understanding will be changed and that begins to sink into his heart.

So mind, understanding, into heart. And it begins with simply a request for God to teach us. Lord, I need you to be my teacher. Which is reflective of the passage from Isaiah that we read earlier before.

But below the words, below the actions, what do I need God to do as my teacher? And he says, not teach me your statutes, but teach me the way of your statutes.

[6 : 55] Open to me my mind so that I can see beneath the words of direct instruction the way or the path. Not only the what, but the why and the how of what you're telling me to do.

Give me understanding then. So open the eyes of my heart to the truth underneath the instructions of God. So that my obedience, my walking with God, is not the walking of a mule led by a bitten bridle.

But the walking of a man alongside God as a friend and partner. Because I understand or I'm beginning to understand the beauty of what you're telling me to do. So this is a prayer really for understanding the beauty of the truths of God.

Let me just give you one example that pops to my mind. You can pick any particular instruction, but I'll pick a virtue. God encourages and teaches and instructs us around the virtue of generosity. Share your bread with the needy, right? There's the what. Share your bread. Share your gifts. Share your offerings. We on your tithes. Give alms to the poor. All those kinds of things. But what is the way underneath that?

[8 : 03] What is the understanding underneath that? And that opens us up to all sorts of principles in the word of God. Underneath the call to generosity. We have nothing but what we have received, right?

That's the truth from the word of God. All things come from thee, O Lord. And of thy own have we given back to you. Every good and perfect gift comes from the Father above. Ridiculously generous.

What father among you? If his son asks for a snake and fish, will he give him a snake? Or if he asks for bread, will he give him a stone? If you, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to you?

So all of those principles of the radical generosity of God standing behind our call to participate in the life of generosity. So it's an understanding of who God is, right?

And then there's also seeing the needy person as a person. So we begin to attend to the person behind the need. So this is a person not just who has a need for bread or for money or for whatever we may want to give them.

[9 : 05] But this is a person who has a deeper need. Jesus sort of got onto that, right? Give me a drink of water. If I give you, you know, and then the water kind of what is underneath the soul. If you knew the one who asked you, you would ask for something more, right?

So we begin to see people differently if we see according to the way of God. And then there's the whole principle of 2 Corinthians chapter 9 and 8, but particularly chapter 9, where we have the opportunity to participate in the bounty of God to the world.

And God will give us the seed that we need for sowing into the lives of others so that a ridiculously huge harvest will be produced. And so God is giving the seed. He's bringing out the life, but we get to be the sower of the process.

So we get to join in and participate in the work of God. So, so far under generosity, we've seen the character of God. We've seen the value of the other person.

We've seen the participation that we have to be able to be in the work of God. And then also underneath the principle of generosity, we have to get eventually down to a perspective on material possessions, right? We live in a culture that says, hold back on nothing.

[10 : 17] If you can, do it. The distance between the rich and the poor get further and further, gets further and further as the rich do everything within their grasp, including levels of debt that are beyond all expectation.

But the deeper problem underneath a lack of generosity in our world, I think, is a definition, is a problem with the definition of life itself. Because we believe that this life is all there is.

And therefore, if we don't grab the pleasures for now, we've missed our opportunity. But that's the way of death, right? Because that's not only failure of generosity, it's failure of understanding who we are as human beings and what life is meant to be for us in an eternal perspective.

So all I'm doing by way of instruction and by way of example, Kevin, and for all of us, is just take one concept of generosity, which is an instruction from God, and seeing underneath it the layers of principles that you can begin to dig apart.

So as I speak to you, Kevin, directly, your whole ministry of teaching and preaching, of counsel and discipleship, should lead people to dig deeper into the ways of God underneath the instructions of God.

[11 : 32] The understanding that goes underneath it that broadens out and helps them form a view of the entire person of God and the life that he's created us to live.

That's your opportunity, my brother. So pray accordingly. Pray accordingly that God will open up the hearts of people to understand his ways.

And then at the end of this, he goes on to say that my heart will observe your law. So we've moved from mind to understanding in his own prayer to prayer for his heart, which introduces us to the next couplet.

Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it. Incline my heart to your testimony as not to selfish gain. So the psalmist has prayed, first for a change of mind, a growth of understanding, and now a change of heart.

The first couplet combines obedience with understanding. This couplet connects obedience with heart, with desire. I need help with both.

[12 : 43] I need my mind changed, but I need my desires changed. Even more, I think, in some ways. And the psalmist says, as I walk with you, increase and expand my heart.

Change my desires, my joys towards you, toward God. Kevin, I know you. I know you deeply. But I believe, based on what I already know, that you want to walk with God.

You love the Lord. He's captured your heart. You want to serve him. Don't give that up, obviously.

But as you walk into ministry, any day of ministry, take time with prayer, particularly maybe a prayer like this, at the beginning of each day and often through the day, so that you remind yourself through prayer of the necessity of being alert, so that your ears are open to the voice of the shepherd, but even more so, and I would even say even more so, that you remind yourself through prayer of the necessity of your affections being constantly reshaped.

You cannot, I don't think you have the power to transform your heart. Only God can. And the desires of the heart run deep within our soul.

God promises in the Old Testament, throughout the Bible, to give us a new heart. But I think the prayer for a changed heart is a constant prayer throughout the rest of our lives.

[14 : 18] And with that, the psalmist says, And change me so that I no longer am inclined towards selfish gain. And that's the massive alternative desires of our heart, right?

A desire toward God, alternatively, is a desire toward selfish gain. And I want to just pause here again and say doing the ministry can and often is, can be and often is selfish gain.

We find our identity in ministry. I think it's proverbial that people in ministry often thrive on affirmation, from a sense of purpose, from the sense of being so important to other people.

Selfish gain can be the gain of accomplishment and perfection and a reputation for excellence and dependability. Selfish gain can be the same. That happens to be a bit of an idol for me.

I really want to be known as a person who does my job and does it well. And you can depend upon me and I'll fulfill my responsibilities. And I can be so determined to finish my to-do list that I forget to do ministry because I'm doing my list, not my ministry.

[15 : 27] I had a knee replacement in January and there was this incredibly wonderful woman who came to our home for a couple of weeks, maybe three weeks, named Marilyn who did physical therapy.

And, I mean, we just, she was just an awesome lady. We had so much fun with her and talking with her. And she just did a great job. She was such a caring person. And, but, you know, we never really got, I mean, she works for the University of North Carolina.

And the University of North Carolina does not allow you to say the word prayer or God or you'll get fired, you know, that kind of stuff. But anyway, and I'm not joking. I mean, I've been with doctors who tried to say, they almost said, well, if you were, I mean, if you're thinking about this, you know, because they know if they said prayer, I could probably sue them on the spot kind of a thing.

So anyway, Marilyn was just a great person, but she was very neutral in all her affect and so on.

And, but we had a lot of fun, joked around, laughed a lot. It was her last day. And that was the day that I was finally getting back to the place where I was really, you know, kind of ginning back in with ministry.

And my to-do list was going. And I think I'd awakened that day with, you know, just a thousand things I wanted to do. And I needed to get this physical therapy done. And it was like, okay, Marilyn, come on, let's get it done. I'm doing well.

[16 : 34] Let's get it over with. And then see you later. And I got to get back to my work. Okay. Well, so I'm not working with Marilyn and right in the middle of this conversation with Marilyn and this work with Marilyn, the Lord says, pray with her.

Ask her to pray with you. And I really resisted because I had too much to do. And I'm being it. I'm dead serious. I had so much on my mind. I'm going, I don't have time for that.

But the Lord stopped me, pushed me a little bit harder. And I stopped. Okay, I will. So I said, Marilyn, I don't know if you're comfortable with us or not, but I'd really like to pray with you. This is our last time together.

Would you like to pray with me? She said, oh, I would love to pray with you. Would you please pray with me? So I started praying with her and I prayed with her in reflection on things that she had told me a little bit about herself along the way.

And by the time we finished praying, which was a good 10 or 15 minutes later, tears were streaming down her face. And she said, this has been the most important moment I've had in so long. I can't tell you.

[17 : 32] Well, it's a simple illustration. And I bet you probably many, many of the people in this room could give a similar illustration. But I'm saying to you that that question for me was a question of selfish gain, i.e. accomplishing a lot, versus allowing myself to incline my heart toward the Lord.

And I think that that line can be particularly subtle in a man like you, or a man like Tommy, or a man like Jim, or any of us who are doing ministry.

Selfish gain, what does it bring us? What does it profit a man to gain the whole world but to lose his soul? So we pray for instruction that's rooted in understanding, our changed mind, obedience that's rooted really in love, emotions.

And I think you can anticipate where the next couple goes. Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things and give me life in your ways. Confirm to your servant your promise that you may be feared. We're still touching on the mind. These prayers are interlaced between mind and emotion and understanding and now will.

[18 : 50] But this one, I think, begins to really focus on the will. And maybe I'm putting too much on it, but it says, the psalmist says, Lord, turn my eyes. You turn my eyes.

Now, I think the point is, is that I can't expect for God to turn my eyes if I don't start to glance in the right direction. But what it's acknowledging is that as we turn, the psalmist is saying, Lord, as I begin to turn, then you really turn me.

I mean, give me muscles I never dreamed I had in my neck. Because I want to turn, and all of a sudden, okay, I need you to really give me strength. Give me the ability in my will to do what you call me to do.

From mind to heart to will. And after the growth of understanding and the development of desire, we need the literal help and hand of God to give muscle to our weak will.

Now, I may be more recalcitrant than you. I've been in active pastoral ministry, some clear level of leadership in ministry since 1970.

[19 : 58] But I still, true confessions, have to make decisions on a daily basis to do the will of God. Am I the only person? I still have to make a decision pretty much many times a day to believe that his will is life itself.

Most often, that battle of belief is not played out in cosmic philosophical terms. The big ones. Or the big moral sins.

Most often, it's a lot more simple. Will I do what he just told me to do? Like, pray with Marilyn, right? Will I turn away from worthless things? Will I pray at his promptings rather than power through in my energy?

Will I accept his interruptions of my agenda? Now, that's a really hard one. Will I turn off the TV at the end of my day? And I don't watch a lot of TV. But when I am watching TV, will I turn it off and end my day with examine and prayer?

Will I pray with my wife? Let me get more practical. I go through seasons when I play Words with Friends. Now, about 100 years ago, I was born and raised in Texas.

[21 : 07] And I can be as competitive as any Texan in the room. And I get into Words with Friends. And I can be playing about 12 people at a time. And, man, I can play a lot of people.

But, man, my desire to beat my middle son, Stephen, my desire to beat my brother, Jim, who has a double PhD, I mean, we're talking.

It's fierce. Okay? I get to the place where I can wake up in the middle of the night and start dreaming and thinking about the next play where I'm going to beat them. I start imagining how I'm going to make the letters work.

And I wake up in the morning when I'm in this place, and is it Bible or phone? Bible or phone? Bible or phone? And I have to decide in that moment my will. Simple obedience.

Because I have made a decision that I need the Bible before I need a screen. And I believe it's important for me. I'm not going to evaluate that for you. But it's those little habits of the heart where I think the shaping and the will.

[22 : 11] And I think for us, even in ministry, and maybe especially in ministry, the little decisions can be so subtle that we think they're no big deal. And actually they are. Give us the strength of will to obey you.

Finally, verses 39 and 40. Turn away the reproach that I dread, for your rules are good. Behold, I long for your precepts, and your righteousness give me life. And again, I don't want to over-organize this prayer into mind, will, emotions, you know, in some strict category.

Because as I mentioned a moment before, these things are lacing in and amongst themselves. They sort of draw from one to the other. But here we do touch on what I consider to be a new category for prayer. And that is the fears within our soul.

And at that point, we're sort of deep. We're kind of in some very, very mysterious territory. Not the fears of what others may do to us, but the fears of what we will do to ourselves and our ministries. The fear of our defaulting. The fear of our turning away. One of my very favorite songs that we sing is, In thy mercy, Lord, good Lord, deliver me. The secret fears of reproach are buried deep within each of us sitting on this front row.

[23 : 28] And each of us in this room. We know that we don't want to admit, We know what we don't want to admit aloud to anybody else. We know our struggles with doubt or unbelief. We know our besetting sins.

We know our temptations. We know our weaknesses, our failures of courage. And we work and we hope and we seek to follow God faithfully. But do we pray?

I'm sure we do. But do we center our hopes of finishing well in prayer? Or do we center our hopes in finishing well in our energies and ourselves?

Do we not need the Lord in the end to infuse in us a life we do not have in ourselves to the end? Let me say that again. Do we not need the Lord to infuse in us a life that we do not have within ourselves to the end?

And the answer is yes. I love the way Paul begins to wind his ways toward the end of life. It's full of joy and gratitude.

[24 : 36] But he's constantly very to the end saying, I need some help. Would you bring me a blanket? I'm cold. You know, a coat. Would you go do this and go do that? Because I need your help.

And he's calling upon the body of Christ to say, I need your help. I need you. He's constantly at the end of his letters. Pray for me that I'll stay firm. Pray for me that I'll stay firm.

And then toward the end, I think as he can see the finish line, there is a little bit of a triumph and a satisfaction. And I think a little bit of a, you know, I don't know. Paul's kind of getting up with it. I fought the fight.

I finished the race. I've kept the faith. But I don't sense pride in that. I sense just sheer joy. I sense, I am so grateful because I see the finish line. Because God has kept me.

Kevin, I just encourage you to realize that you can go to the Lord with your deepest fears. Your deepest fears of your own self-reproach. And hide nothing from him.

[25 : 35] Hide nothing from him, but give it all to him. And release it to him. So that he may heal it, take it, and restore you.

So my message to you is prayer. Prayer regarding your mind, your heart, your will, the deepest elements of your soul as the starting point and the continuing core of your ministry.

So I'm going to swing back and return to the four words that underlie this life. Now you didn't think you'd get away with me not talking about these again, right? Dependence, humility, receptivity, and gratitude.

Dependence, how will you accomplish your ministry? Simple as that. What will it mean to do ministry? You have gifts. You're a gifted man. You are an intelligent man.

You're a well-trained man. You're an energetic man. But is that going to change people's lives? No.

[26 : 42] God does. Humility. Humility is not a technique. It's the truth. It's a word that shares a root with the word humus, dirt, soil.

It also shares with our language the word human. We are human, made from dirt. Let me quote something from a man named Anthony Bloom.

Basically, humility is the attitude of one who stands constantly under the judgment of God. It is the attitude of one who is like the soil. Humility comes from the Latin word humus, fertile ground.

The fertile ground is there, unnoticed, taken for granted, always there to be trodden upon. It is silent, inconspicuous, dark, and yet it is always ready to receive any seed, ready to give it substance and life.

The more lowly, the more fruitful because it becomes really fertile when it accepts all the refuse of the earth. It is so low that nothing can soil it.

[27 : 54] Nothing can abase it. Nothing can humiliate it. It is accepted the last place and it cannot go any lower. In that position, nothing can shatter the soul's serenity, its peace, its joy, or deny its fruitfulness.

Humility. Receptivity. Core to our humanity is receiving life rather than taking life. we do it every Sunday.

Every Sunday we receive, we do not take. Let that be a lesson to you. Gratitude. I urge you to consider the practice of Ignatian examen as a way of grooving gratitude into your soul.

End your day with your journal and a list of things for which you are grateful for. Do ministry as prayer. Walking, independence, humility, receptivity, and gratitude.

Brother, may God bless you. May he do far abundantly beyond all that you can ask or think. Amen.
Amen. Amen.