

From Our Lips to God's Ears: Dangerous Prayers

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[0 : 00] Welcome here for this Sunday, March the 17th, and happy St. Patrick's Day. My name is Kent Dixon. Yes, I'm part Irish, also part Scottish, part English. That whole island is reflected in my genetics.

So it's my joy to be the pastor here. It's good to see you all here this morning. So being that Irish, Scottish, and English are the genetic roots and cultural origins that I come from, I have made a traditional shepherd's pie for you this morning that we will partake of after the service.

And for anyone who is wondering, yes, it is made from actual shepherds. All right. So this morning we are concluding in our series, From Our Lips to God's Ears, Living a Life of Prayer.

And as Paul mentioned to me this morning, he said, he's reflecting on the fact that we're ending this series, And he said, so after Sunday we don't have a prayer. And I said, that's good. So I stole that. So this morning we are concluding this sermon series. And remember for next week, I'm already leading you ahead a little bit, Next Sunday is Palm Sunday. And so we're going to start our sermon series for Easter, Come Alive.

[1 : 15] So that begins next Sunday. Over the past several weeks, we've explored many different aspects of prayer. We've been reminded of why it's so critical that we seek to be people of prayer.

That's what we're called to be and to do. And over the course of this series, we've looked at the purpose of prayer, the power of prayer, the privilege of prayer, the principles of prayer, the persistence of prayer.

Lots of Ps, right? I like alliteration. The practice of prayer. And then last week, we considered how God answers prayer. And all these sermons are on the website, so you can check them out if you want to catch up.

Mountain climbing. Skydiving. Scuba diving. Certified scuba diver. I know I don't look like it. Juggling chainsaws.

We can probably agree that these are all potentially risky or dangerous activities, right? Is that fair? Juggling cats, maybe, is also dangerous.

[2 : 20] But these things all require preparation and planning, training, and maybe updating your will, even. At least letting your loved ones know what you're up to, what you're doing.

So I believe we have a pretty clear sense of when something is dangerous, right? Do we, I think we understand that. And also, so another thought, you've heard me talk about oxymorons in the past, and you know that I love language and the playfulness of language sometimes.

And an oxymoron, just so you know, is not someone who's bad at using acne medication. An oxymoron is a figure of speech. And it's a figure of speech in which seemingly contradictory words are put together in an unexpected way.

And the word oxymoron, did a little research, comes from the Greek words oxus, which means keen, and the word moros, which means stupid.

So even the word oxymoron is an oxymoron. Do you see that? My father was always amused by word play. He was amused by mental gymnastics that seemed to be needed in word puzzles and things like that.

[3 : 36] He was an excellent communicator. And so when we consider word combinations that seem to include inherently contradictory ideas, here are some of his and my favorites.

Deafening silence. Small crowd. Crash landing. Awfully good. Jumbo shrimp.

That's one of my favorites. Here's another one. Postal service. No offense to my friends who are serving. Military intelligence. Some of them make us chuckle, right?

But likely all of them should make us think. So having considered the concepts of both danger and oxymorons, let's consider this idea of dangerous prayers together this morning.

And our focus passage is Psalm 139. So we're going to look at the entire psalm together. Go ahead and if you have your Bible with you, open it up to Psalm 139.

[4 : 38] There's a Bible in the pew in front of you. Turn on your Bible. Whatever you do. However you do that. And we're going to look at the entire psalm. I'll read it for you.

So if you don't have a Bible, don't panic. And we're going to look at, then we'll zero in on parts of this psalm as dangerous prayers. So turn with me to Psalm 139.

And just so you know, this is one of my very favorite psalms. You search me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit down and when I rise. You perceive my thoughts from afar.

You discern my going out and my lying down. You are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue, you, Lord, know it completely.

You hem me in behind and before. And you lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me. Too lofty for me to attain.

[5 : 36] Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there. If I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

If I rise on the wings of the dawn. If I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me. Your right hand will hold me fast.

If I say, surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me, even the darkness will not be dark to you. The night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.

For you created my inmost being. You knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Your works are wonderful. I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.

[6 : 37] Your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. How precious to me are your thoughts, God.

How vast is the sum of them. Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand. When I am awake, I am still with you. If only you, God, would slay the wicked.

Here's an odd transition in this psalm. Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty. They speak of you with evil intent. Your adversaries misuse your name.

Do I not hate those who hate you, Lord, and abhor those who are in rebellion against you? I have nothing but hatred for them. I count them my enemies.

David is saying there that he hates the enemies of God. He hates the people who defame God and his name. Search me, God, and know my heart.

[7 : 42] Test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. Dangerous prayers.

Feels a bit like an oxymoron, doesn't it? Maybe a bit like the concept of respectable sins. We explored that theme in a sermon series. I looked back.

Late 2021. Doesn't feel like that long ago, but there you go. Hard to believe it was that long ago. So when you consider your own prayers, are they what you would consider to be dangerous?

Is that how you would describe them? Or are they pretty tame? Are we talking about good parking spot kinds of prayers? Are we talking about bless this cheeseburger kinds of prayers?

Don't let me fall asleep right now in the service kinds of prayers? Considering that prayer is speaking directly to God, who loves and cares for us and wants what's best for us, how can prayer be dangerous in any way?

[8 : 48] Isn't it the safest thing we can imagine? Doesn't this suggestion that prayer could be risky or dangerous contradict our very understanding of prayer? Actually, it doesn't.

It really doesn't. In fact, praying these kinds of prayers that we're going to look at this morning have the potential to draw us into closer relationship with God and with other people in ways that we can't even begin to imagine.

Psalm 139 is our guide in recognizing the kind of dangerous prayers we can and should be willing to pray as followers of Jesus. But I have a confession to make.

I read the entire psalm this morning because I love it that much. It's a beautiful prayer that David uses to display his love and devotion to God.

His passion for the things that matter to God's own heart. And we see that on display. And there's even, as I touched on, a bit of a flavor of, I hate your enemies as much as you do, Lord, in there that we saw.

[9 : 56] So I read the whole psalm, but it's actually in the last two verses, verse 23 and 24, where I want to focus. And we're going to focus on them a bit at a time.

So the first half of verse 23 says, search me, God, and know my heart. So that's our first dangerous prayer this morning. Search me.

These days, our understanding, I believe our understanding of a search, is often limited to what kind? An online search. An online search, right? Just looking for general information.

That's the kind of search that we tend to think of. But the kind of search that David is talking about here is one that's actually used to describe the way miners search for gold, the way they dig deeply to find gold.

And this search concept at the end of the psalm is the same as the beginning of the psalm. It's an intimate and thorough examination by the only one who truly knows the one who's praying, God himself.

[11 : 05] In asking God to search him, David is asking the very one who created him, who knows more about him than he could ever know himself, to examine him, to identify and expose anything in his heart.

David was keenly aware that sin might be lurking in his heart and mind. He knew that. And so he asked the Lord to search his heart and know his thoughts.

The Hebrew word translated as heart is levav. And it includes what might be known as what we might call the mind. So he's not just saying, look at my heart and see if I'm happy or sad.

He's saying, look into me. Examine me. It's used to refer to our thoughts and intentions. The same kind of wording is used in Genesis, in Leviticus.

It's also, sorry, it also includes resolve or courage or fear, including discouragement.

[12 : 11] So here David is inviting God into his innermost thoughts. He's asking God to change his perspective to see things as God truly sees them, to help David walk in ways that will prosper his soul.

Have you ever prayed this kind of prayer? If not, are you willing to pray this kind of prayer? Are you willing to ask God to examine your heart, to reveal your deepest desires?

I think when we think of our deepest desires and innermost thoughts being on display, we get a little nervous sometimes, don't we? Are we willing to have God search us and reveal the ways in which our motives, the ways our attitudes, the ways our loyalties even, may be focused on things that are not aligned with him?

There's an inherent vulnerability there, without question. Do you have things in your heart, in your mind, in your past, that you'd rather weren't exposed?

Show of hands, no. I can tell you, I do. Are we willing, though, to lay all those things aside, to lay it on the line and truly ask God, search me?

[13 : 40] The second half of verse 23 and the first half of verse 24 say, test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me.

So it's here that we find our second dangerous prayer, test me. David asked God to test him, to know his anxious thoughts and to see if there's any offensive way in him.

The thoughts David is considering to be anxious likely stem from a lack of trust in God or an improper perspective. Because in either case, David clearly understands that only by aligning with God's perspective will he be headed in the right direction.

David recognizes he can't accomplish gaining God's perspective on his own. He asks God for help. And this is the kind of assistance that God is always happy to provide.

And there's many verses in Scripture that indicate that. So I don't know about you, but as someone who tends to overthink things at times, tests and the concept of needing to measure up somehow to achieve a certain standard can be pretty stressful for me, can make my palms sweat.

[15 : 04] And there have been many times throughout my life where I've had to pass literal tests. My education, in my career path, I've had to study and prepare as best as I can to somehow make the grade, literally or figuratively.

And so, as I say, when it comes to the idea of tests or testing, my palms tend to sweat and my heart rate goes up. And maybe you can relate to that.

And those are just human tests that we're talking about that tend to elicit those kinds of responses. So do you hear something else at work in what I've said there?

It is anxiety. Being anxious, worrying, overthinking, they can stem from lots of things. But ultimately, it all connects back to something that's really not great.

Worry and anxiety are the product of not trusting. And I say that to myself as much as to any of you. Feeling as though we need to have everything figured out.

[16:13] And I've talked about that in this series before, that we, in prayer, will often bring our plans, our well-crafted ideas, to God and say, okay, I've done all the work, now just stamp it.

Right? We tend to do that. But that's backwards. Come to the Lord and say, here's what I'm thinking. What do you think, Father? Point me in the direction you want me to go.

Worrying about things, trying to have all the answers ourselves, trying to do it all on our own, is not what God tells us to do. He tells us over and over, and Jesus confirms it himself, that we need to trust him.

We need to have faith that God is in control. Not just over the universe and all creation, these big esoteric concepts, but over our lives as well, the very day-to-day details of our lives.

So I also want to give you a bit of some grace, and for me as well, anxious thoughts themselves are not the problem. David doesn't seem to suggest in his prayer that he should not experience them.

[17:27] He's not beating himself up about them in themselves. Anxious thoughts, friends, are part of being human. Surprise! Congratulations! Being limited in our capabilities, our knowledge, our understanding, the number of days that we have left, these are all things that can cause anxiety for us.

But David does recognize that he is in control of what he does with his anxious thoughts. Does that make sense? Have you ever asked God to test you in this way?

Have you ever said, all right, Father, I know I'm worrying about this. I know that's not what you want me to do. Please give me peace.

Remind me to trust you with my situation and my circumstances. I think it can be very easy for us to seek to justify our tendency to worry or be anxious about things.

Do you do that in your own life, in your own mind? It's important for us to remember that worry and anxiety don't stem from, well, I'm just being responsible. Well, I'm detail-oriented, so that's why I tend to think about things a lot.

[18:48] Or from somehow, well, I need to be, I'm the provider here, so I need to worry. I need to provide for people's needs. I need to be thinking about this stuff. Ultimately, it all comes down to a lack of trust.

And again, I'm saying that to myself as much as any of you. Worry and anxiety come from when we have begun to take on concerns or problems ourselves.

Can you see that? We've taken things onto ourselves that God has made clear are not ours to deal with. I say this as much to myself again as any of you.

Ask God to test you. Ask Him to reveal the areas in your life that you're holding onto and seeking to somehow look after on your own.

Ask Him to test your motives and your priorities. Help you to realign your will and your plans with His. So having asked God to test him, David was making it clear that he knew his thoughts and actions are his own responsibility.

[20:03] We touched on that a moment ago. So although God knows everything and has power over everything, David understood that doesn't mean that God causes his actions.

See the difference there? David was claiming responsibility for how he handles his thoughts, how he acts. But he was asking for God's help in that.

David asked God to examine him as if on trial. That's the way we're looking at it. Be cross-examined as a person who chose their own actions.

David's asking God to do a thorough examination like a dermatologist looking for skin cancer. And that brings us to the second half of verse 24 which says, lead me in the way everlasting.

And it's here that we find our third dangerous prayer. Lead me. David makes his ultimate motive clear in the final line of this psalm.

[21:11] That God would lead him in the way everlasting. So what does that mean? Well, the purpose of God knowing David or God knowing us is so that he can redeem us from making poor choices.

God can lead us to see our circumstances more clearly. To adopt a more objective perspective on things. God can and will lead us to make choices that are for our benefit rather than making our own

choices.

Sometimes our own choices and maybe you can recognize this yourself tend to be selfish. Tend to at times even be harmful or hurtful to other people.

That's when our own motives are at work. Have you ever sincerely asked God to lead you? Have you ever consciously yielded your desire to control things in your life and sincerely meant it?

When you said that you can trust that he will take care of you, and you can really and truly trust that he will. That you can put your faith in that.

[22 : 29] I've told you this story before. I would not be standing here in this path of my life if I had not said to God I'm done figuring out the way I'm going to do things.

God's response was all in. And the image that I got in my head most of you know this story was of me sitting at a poker table pushing all my chips into the center.

God said I've let you have your way for most of your life so far. You done? Can I have my way for a change? And so here I am.

As human beings we have edges and limits. Right? We're all sitting here this morning thinking oh my back is sore oh I wish I'd slept better. I'm not even Irish.

What difference does St. Patrick's Day make to me? We have real and finite boundaries right? We see them all the time we come up against our boundaries all the time.

[23 : 31] And there's so many ways we simply can't know things let alone control them so do you see how crazy that is? How trying to know the unknowable or control the uncontrollable is ultimately crazy making anxiety inducing do you wonder why you're worried all the time?

Do you wonder why you have trouble sleeping? It's because you're holding it all inside you're trying to control things that you were never meant to do. So I hope that we can recognize the limits of our mortal existence.

Those limits are not helpful in leading us into the internal eternal existence that lies ahead for us. We need God to lead us into that.

There's no time like the present to ask him to help us. So only God who as David recognized in this psalm is omniscient all-knowing and omnipresent everywhere at once only God can best lead us not only in our lives right now he knows what we can't know.

the only one who can lead us into everlasting life you can say Jesus good answer is God who knows all things who knows what's best for us who knows what his plan is for us search me test me lead me so what does this look like in practice don't panic we're in the home stretch each of us could and should ask God to reveal the sins that we're committing in our lives the things that we have normalized or minimized to the point that we don't even recognize them anymore I guarantee you we all have them we can ask God to also redeem our perspective so that we can begin to see those sins as what they are self-destructive and that's the true reality of any sinful behavior it pulls us away from God it destroys relationship if we want the greatest benefit available from life then we need

[25 : 54] God to lead us we need God's help to recognize what perspectives are true what perspectives are pure and we need to be obedient in following his ways friends the reality is that God already knows everything we have done everything we haven't even thought we were going to do yet and we need to be obedient in following his ways so when we simply recognize this that God knows all when we ask for his help in reorienting our perspectives and actions into ways that are beneficial for ourselves and others rather than hurtful we're embracing reality as it is search me test me lead me these can be dangerous prayers especially if we mean them but only in the way that they truly offer our hearts our motives our plans and ultimately our destiny and surrender them to God my friends my brothers and sisters

God is calling us to live dangerously to lay everything at his feet let's trust him as we respond to that call amen God bless you