DARING TO PRAY WITH HONEST ABANDON

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The Prayer Coin: Daring to Pray with Honest Abandon
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CHAPTER 1

Our Problems with Prayer

We are a praying people. We can hardly help ourselves. In a pinch when we need help. Under our breath in a moment of frustration. For loved ones so in need of hope and help. Over our troubled world. After a stunningly happy surprise. We pray.

And yet, we can find prayer baffling. Our tongues grow heavy. Sometimes prayer is just plain scary—after all, what do we say to the God of the universe? At other times, prayer can be unsatisfying. We wonder, Is God listening? Will he answer? Why is he taking so long? Why do we feel so cut off from him? What if we're praying in the wrong way? We look to the Lord's Prayer for guidance. *Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.*

We examine and interpret each phrase. *Thy kingdom come, thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.*

We mouth our own prayers after its formula. *Give us*

this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

We beg God to intervene according to its model. *And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*

We memorize it. *For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever.*

A clear prayer formula, right? No doubt. And helpful for all who long to connect with God in spiritual conversation. After all, Jesus offered the model in response to the disciples' plea, "Teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). In Matthew 6:9, Jesus says plainly, "This, then, is how you should pray."

That should work, then, right?

But sometimes it doesn't seem to.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus beckons us, saying, "Ask and it will be given to you" (Matthew 7:7). So we do. Sometimes we receive. In other moments, we stand gapingly empty.

In Luke 18:1, Jesus "told his disciples a parable to show them they should always pray and not give up." We ratchet up our efforts with consistency and sincerity. Sometimes we see results. Sometimes we don't.

Ugh.

Author Paul Miller commiserates, "Our inability to pray comes from the Fall. Evil has marred the image. We want to talk to God but can't. The friction of our desire to pray, combined with our badly damaged prayer antennae, leads to constant frustration. It's as if we've had a stroke."[1]

Oh so true. There are moments I experience a kind

of spiritual aphasia before God. I send commands to my being to express my desires to God and my yieldedness to his will but my then mouth won't move. James writes of the trouble such a condition can bring, "You do not have because you do not ask" (James 4:2).

Maybe I'm a doubter, "like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind" (James 1:6). James goes on to say that such a person "should not expect to receive anything from the Lord" (verse 7).

Or maybe I'm too selfish to experience God's response to my prayers as James, again, warns, "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures" (James 4:3).

Oh my . . . what to do? Pray more?

It's not that I don't pray. I pray constantly, in an unending babbling before God. And I've come to understand that this ongoing conversation actually "counts"—it's even considered the real definition of a life of prayer. The psalms are filled with examples of David and other pilgrims crying out to God in everyday emotion. Perhaps prayer doesn't have to begin with an "Our Father" and end with an "Amen" to be prayer. Theologian Richard Foster offers me hope as he writes, "Countless people, you see, pray far more than they know. Often they have such a 'stained-glass' image of prayer that they fail to recognize what they are experiencing as prayer and so condemn themselves for not praying."[2]

Whew. Whether bent-kneed and patterned or simply

stream of conscious rumbling, my prayers are just that: prayers.

But I wouldn't really call myself a prayer warrior—surely not like some people I know. I don't have a prayer closet at home. I do have a prayer journal, but between the filled pages yawn un-entered days . . . weeks . . . sometimes even months.

As a twelve-year-old in my home church, I memorized the Lord's Prayer, but I don't often recite it. I ask, but I don't always receive. I try to pray and never give up. Really, I do. But sometimes I still forget to pray, and then when I do pray, I sometimes forget what I prayed. I experience—personally—*lots* of prayer problems.

I wonder if there isn't a deeper, more core issue at work here. Nestling down to consider my prayer problems more intentionally, I find myself conflicted in prayer. Pulled in the two directions of what I want and what I think God wants. My will versus his will.

On the one hand, I long to be honest—gut-wrenchingly raw—in blurting out my needs and desires before God and begging him to meet them. *Every single one of them.* But do I dare? Will he hear? Does he care? Will he act? What if he doesn't? Hear. Care. Act. Unsure, I hedge *honest* and dress it up as respectful requests. One inch deep.

On the other hand, I yearn for the courage to abandon my desires in surrender to God's best in all things. But, oh my, what all might "God's best" include? What might he allow? In my life or in the lives of those I love? Uncertain, I wince a compromised yielding.

You relate, don't you?

These are some of the questions and concerns that worm their way into our prayer closets. We have certain prayer problems. Prayer can become a tug-of-war between our desires and God's. When caught in such a rivalry, we often dig in our heels and settle for repetitious, superficial praying.

Or we might simply stop praying.

Now *that's* a prayer problem.

How can prayer become more satisfying? What can we expect—really expect—when we pray? How can prayer bring us closer to God? How can we come to trust prayer to deliver results? As pastor and author Max Lucado puts it, "We can't even get the cable company to answer us, yet God will? The doctor is too busy, but God isn't? We have our doubts about prayer."[3]

One Sunday morning several years ago, as I was listening a bit robotically to the sermon, my pastor arrowed into my prayer thoughts. "If you always do what you've always done," he said, "you'll always get what you've always gotten."

Do something different in prayer, Elisa.

Okay . . . but what? I kept my eyes and ears open to what "different" might be, with very little result. Was this message from God?

Then help came to me from an unexpected source.

In the deepest hours of Jesus' life on this planet, a two-sided coin of prayer was forged. In the crucible of the garden of Gethsemane, pressed between what he wanted and what the Father wanted, Jesus prayed "Take this cup," and then, "Not my will." His words are

recorded in three of the four gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. (They are called the "Synoptics," from Greek words meaning "seeing all together," because they give generally parallel accounts of Jesus' ministry but from the differing perspectives of three different followers). In the fourth gospel, John doesn't actually quote Jesus' prayer but rather illustrates the two sides in the Lord's comments and actions. In all four gospels, they are there. Two sides of Jesus. Two sides of us. Two sides of prayer. The Prayer Coin.

The "pop" in my thinking was palpable. What might I discover about Jesus, God the Father, and myself if I pendulum-swing my prayers between the two sides of the coin? What if I teeter-totter my utterances between what I want and what God wants?

I pause to let the concept sink in. What, really, is the state of Take This Cup? Perhaps a state of "honest"? An unapologetic verbalization of what is truly within? And what, really, is the condition of Not My Will? I mull over my personal language. *Surrender. Yieldedness. Relinquishment.* Another word has the stickiness needed to stay. A startling word at first (is it even the proper part of speech?), yet here is a word that sums up the surprise necessary to grab my heart: *abandon*. Not as in being abandoned by another. No, abandon as in giving oneself completely over to something. To Someone.

Take This Cup: honest.

Not My Will: abandon.

Two sides of prayer.

I muse over them, wondering which side I pray most

often—and why. What might I be missing by not—at least once in a while—considering the other side, following where it leads?

I've vacillated in my prayer coin, depending on the season. In my earliest prayer postures, as an apprentice in prayer, I chose abandon. Zealously smitten with my new Love, I open-palmed my life before Jesus. I burned with commitment, sizzled with passion, and bubbled with contagion.

Later, likely experiencing burnout, I leaned honest. I cracked open my heart and poured out its contents in unbridled freedom. That I could actually say such things to God! Right in front of God! In his very presence! Honest caught me up into an intimacy that invited me closer and closer to God with more and more of me.

Until, sliding down the curve of honest, I spun back into abandon, freshly aware of my need for grace and forgiveness. Of my other-than-God-ness. Splayed under his authority, I'd discovered yet another facet to honest—something that comes from being honest. God likes me, *loves* me, here. Even—*maybe especially*—in honest.

Somehow I pivot on the edge of honest, straight into abandon.

I see a progression in the process. First, I get more honest with God about what I want. Then I'm more able to embrace his acceptance of me in wanting what I want. Then I'm more and more willing to abandon what I want, since I can believe—truly believe—that what God wants is best. Then, living in abandon, I'm able to be more honest about more levels of what I want, and as a

result I'm more able to live in abandon to what he wants. And on and on it goes.

What if I flip-pray this prayer coin, spinning myself between the two sides, one being my desire, the "honest" plea, and the other being the "abandon" of surrendering to his will? All while my relationship with God grows clearer and more and more real?

Surely, I'll never drink the cup that Jesus drank. But what if I kneel with Jesus in his garden prayer, and consider how his ricocheted efforts—between what the human Son wanted and what the divine Father wanted—might become a model of what's available to me in prayer? Might such a practice be "doing more than I've always done and so getting more than I've always gotten?" More honest. More abandon. More . . . intimacy with God.

What if this two-sided prayer coin—daring to pray with honest abandon—could solve my problems with prayer? Take me into the kind of oneness Jesus experienced with his Father? The very intimacy God designed me to enjoy?

So I began a new prayer effort—this prayer coin practice. A "prayer dare" of sorts. An intentional focus on praying the two sides of prayer, as Jesus did in the garden. Honest and abandon. For the issues of prayer that flow from my heart. Some for me. Many for others.

Selecting a new journal, I opened it flat to the first pages, penning on the left side, Take This Cup and on the right, Not My Will. Each entry included the date and my current prayer issue. Take This Cup of _____. I waited

and considered. I mulled over Scriptures I'd read just prior. I listed various personal issues, some things I didn't want in my life and hoped God would remove, and some things I yearned for and begged God to provide. Then I moved my hand to the right side of the journal to catalog movement toward Not My Will.

There have been days when my hand hovered, paralyzed, over the blank page. I was unsure how to put honesty on paper. Who would read these words at some point? Would I be unsafely "outed"? Many times, I'd catch myself rotely relinquishing to the right—to Not My Will—and then I'd have to drag my thoughts back to the left-hand, honest side of Take This Cup to reconsider what I really meant. What *were* my feelings and thoughts? What was I truly discovering from God?

From time to time, I've invited others along on this journey. A New Year's Day sermon to my very own church body, laying out the concept and encouraging others to participate. A blog reaching out to readers who might join in. Conversations with family and friends.

And now, you. I'm inviting you now.

You hold the diary of my prayer coin journey. And so much more: A following after Jesus' bowed presence. A searching for peace in God's no-matter-what love and always-present presence. An erupting of genuine hope and perspective in an ever-evolving relationship with God through Jesus. And a possible model for praying that produces all this abundance.

It's not a perfect process. There have been *many* days—even weeks—that I've shoved the coin under piles

on the desk of my spiritual formation and returned to my habitual blah-blah praying. But I kept coming back to the coin, praying first one side and then the other again and again, and I think you'll find a sincere effort here. A rumbling, bumbling attempt to move through and beyond the prayer problems that leave me chicken-scratching on the surface of connection with God. And consequently devoid of much of prayer's plunder.

My prayer today is that you, too, will open your heart to the prayer coin concept. That as you express your honest Take This Cup moments to God, you'll find him pivoting your desires in abandon to Not My Will—and that in the process, you will discover an intimacy that crashes you through to a more satisfying relationship with him. The place Jesus came to lead us into.

The Prayer Coin is structured to take you on this journey with me. The chapters alternate in a rhythm between Jesus' model of prayer and our practicing his example.

We'll begin with his pattern of prayer—the intimate communion Jesus enjoyed with his Father throughout his earthly life—a pattern that led him to the two-sided plea. Then we'll see how we can make the prayer coin practice our own.

Next, we'll look at each side of the prayer coin—Jesus' honest and then our honest, Jesus' abandon and then our abandon. Expect to experience a kind of ricocheting between deepened understanding and practical application as we move from Jesus to ourselves, revealing layer after layer of the two sides of the prayer coin.

(Can I ask you a favor here? Hold on with me. This

process is complex. Even if Jesus laid down some of his divine attributes to walk this earth, he is still God—we're not. There's surely a divide between us and our holy God, but the whole point of the gospel is that Jesus came to bridge that gap. I'll do my best to honor the complex revelations of Scripture and their integration in our lives.)

Next, we'll stand at the ultimate pivot point, the "yet" or "but" that allowed Jesus to spin between honest and abandon. And we'll dare to consider our own pivot as well. Here, we'll gather our courage to join Jesus as he reaches across the expanse between God and us.

Finally, we'll move into the prayer coin practice to discover how praying this way can change us and our communities. Together, we'll face the ultimate challenge of the prayer coin: to spend the expensively forged offering lavishly, that it might return to us the abundance it was designed to offer.

These chapters are cumulative, each building on the one previous, stacking our understanding and experience. In the end, I believe, the prayer coin practice offers the power to revolutionize our relationship with God.

If you'd like to go even deeper, the back of the book includes reflection and discussion questions to accompany the video curriculum that is also available to use individually or with a group. In it, you'll find more of my own prayer coin stories as well as the stories of others, like you, who dare to pray both sides and grow deeper in relationship with God.

Okay . . . here we go. Up it flies—the prayer coin—into

the air of discovery. Down it comes. Time for you to make the call. What's it going to be? Honest or abandon? Or . . . both?

• • •

"Prayer is how God gives us so many of the unimaginable things he has for us. Indeed, prayer makes it safe for God to give us many of the things we most desire."

TIM KELLER[4]