



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

November 5, 2017

“When Words Fail” (How to Pray Series)

Pastor Dan Chun

We are in a series on how to pray. We have covered all sorts of prayer and I have wanted to personally include and preach on the ones that people might have the most questions about the most controversial ones, the ones that could possibly be the most wacky and weird, like healing prayer – a prayer that can actually help people get healed immediately; and prophecy, where God supernaturally gives us a thought, a picture, or words to strengthen, encourage, and comfort another person.

I told you a few weeks ago that part of the reason for this prayer series is so that you could have a big portfolio of prayer in your life, like a quiver full of different arrows, so that, depending on the situation, you would know how to pray.

Today I want to add one more prayer to your quiver, and that is praying in tongues. Some of you might be saying, “What the heck is that?” So hang on.

The gift of praying in tongues is supernatural, and available to all. It is greatly misunderstood, but it is biblical. It can also be greatly misused, but it is for real and can be super helpful in our life, in prayer, and in worshipping God.

If I really want to get academic about it, the Greek word in the Bible for praying in tongues is *glossolalia*. That word alone sounds like speaking in tongues.

Basically tongues is a spiritual gift that allows you to pray in a language that is unknown to you. Rarely is it a known

language that you have learned. Most of the time it is a supernatural language, an angelic language that no one speaks, but it has a great benefit for you.

Already some of you are thinking either “I have no idea what you are talking about” or maybe “Yeah, I have seen some televangelists do it and it is super weird, and in fact, I think it is fake.”

I join you in that thinking. When I would see televangelists speaking in tongues, it made me think it was fake and utterly crazy. It sounded like gibberish. But actually today I have come to the conclusion that tongues is real, but not in the way many on television do or did it, but rather in a gentle, quiet, and honest way. The mark of authentic tongues is not that it is showy but it full of quiet humility.

Now we are not Pentecostals. Classic Pentecostalism says if you are a Christian you must speak in tongues. We don't believe that is a proof of a Christian. Jesus would say as in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25, the proof of whether you are a Christian or a spiritually mature one is how you answer the question “Do you help the poor, widows, the imprisoned, the homeless, the immigrant stranger?” Jesus makes that so clear. He says if you don't help those five kinds of people, you are accursed eternally and get thrown into an eternal lake of fire. Oh, that's comforting.

So let's take tongues off the table as a PROOF of whether you are a Christian or

let alone a spiritually mature one. But I do believe the gift of tongues exists and can be helpful for your life if you accept the gift from God. And yes, it is a gift.

So let's start our study about tongues. Where does it talk about it in the Bible? On the day of Pentecost when the apostles were all in a room and the Holy Spirit fell on them, we read the first narratives about the gift of tongues:

Acts 2:4 All of them [the apostles] were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

This kind of tongues was a sudden supernatural ability to speak in other languages. Uncanny! Unbelievable! But it does happen. I know it does. Most of the time we don't know what we are saying when praying in tongues.

Years ago a group of our church members went to Bangladesh. When they got off plane, the women went off to a woman's prayer meeting. At the meeting, Bangla, the country's language, was spoken. And since NONE of our American members knew Bangla, they kind of quietly prayed, and one of them prayed in tongues.

One of the local mission partners who was working in Bangladesh said, “She is speaking in Bangla! She's giving a word of encouragement!” Our church member was stunned. Later in the day another one of our church members was praying for children for healing and again chose to pray in tongues.

Again a different local mission partner there said, “You were praying in Bangla for healing the child!” Happens rarely but it does happen.

Here’s another Bible verse about tongues. Peter the Apostle is preaching soon after the early church started. He is doing some street evangelism and the Bible records this and it says:

Acts 10:44 While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.

Acts 10:45 The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles,

Acts 10:46 for they heard them *speaking in tongues* and extolling God....

And then in the CHAPTER 19:

Acts 19:4 Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.”

Acts 19:5 On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Acts 19:6 When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they *spoke in tongues* and prophesied—

Acts 19:7 altogether there were about twelve of them.

Fascinating. Okay, one more passage and then I am going to teach about the process of speaking in tongues. This passage is written by the Apostle Paul to a church in a city called Corinth.

1Cor. 14:1 Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy.

1Cor. 14:2 For those who speak in a tongue do not speak to other people but to God; for nobody understands them,

since they are speaking mysteries in the Spirit.

1Cor. 14:3 On the other hand, those who prophesy speak to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.

1Cor. 14:4 Those who speak in a tongue build up themselves, but those who prophesy build up the church.

1Cor. 14:5 *Now I would like all of you to speak in tongues*, but even more to prophesy.

If you want to learn more about prophecy, check out my previous two sermons on it. Jumping on to verse 15:

1Cor. 14:15 What should I do then? I will pray with the spirit, but I will pray with the mind also; I will sing praise with the spirit, but I will sing praise with the mind also.

See, it’s both-and not either-or. Pray or worship in English, but also at times humbly in tongues. Then to verse 18:

1Cor. 14:18 I thank God that I *speak in tongues* more than all of you;

1Cor. 14:19 nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind, in order to instruct others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

So tongues is important, but let’s not blow it out of proportion in terms of priority. Super helpful but not critical. So let me make some points about praying in tongues, which will show why it can be helpful.

1. Tongues do exist.

From the very beginning of the early church when the Christian movement started, we see in the Bible that the Christians prayed in tongues. I have seen it and heard it. Not in the way crazy televangelists do it, but in a gentle, humble way.

More importantly I have experienced it. I speak in tongues. You say, “You never

told us that.” That’s the point. Why should I have to tell people? It’s a private gift that I use to help people, but all gifts don’t need to be flaunted or call attention to itself.

For example, if you have the supernatural gift of hospitality you don’t say in a party or if serving as an usher in church, “Hey look at me, I am so welcoming, aren’t I? Hi, how are you? I have the gift of hospitality. I make people so comfortable with my gift. Don’t I?” Speaking about it destroys the effectiveness of the gift. Just do it, don’t announce it.

The Bible says in the little known book called Jude these words:

Jude 20 But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; *pray in the Holy Spirit*;

The phrase *praying in the Holy Spirit* are the words used in the Bible to often mean, to pray in tongues. Are there times when you want to pray but the words seem inadequate? You have all of this emotion, but the words coming out of your mouth can’t quite articulate what you are feeling.

When I pray in tongues, I know what I am thinking when I pray for but it is like all of this emotion just pours out of me and it is pure 100% grade feeling and thought. In praying in tongues, I, in faith, believe that my words are communicating to God the essence of my soul of what I need or want or what I am grateful for—that my English is not completely adequate to articulate the deep feelings I have. Have you ever prayed earnestly and felt your words were not enough?

The Apostle Paul wrote this to the early church in Rome:

Romans 8:26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”

That's it! I don't always know exactly what to say but my praying in tongues activates the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit speaks for me to God. My sighs, my emotions are too deep for words.

2. When Words Fail

Why is the title of this sermon "When Words Fail"? It's because for me that is the essence of speaking in tongues. Have you not experienced a time when words don't fully express your grief, don't fully express your pain, don't fully express your joy, praise, and worship; words don't fully express your thanksgiving or doubts?

That's where tongues come in. We pray in the Spirit and just pour out our heart and soul in intelligible words. There are times when I pray silently in tongues for people especially at healing services when the pain of the person is so deep. The hurt is so pervasive, that I don't have the vocabulary to express my deep empathy and my plea to God for help, healing and His intervention.

Sometimes my own despair is so great that it is in essence crying out to God, and by praying in tongues it is like my plugging my prayers into a converter into a heavenly outlet and my prayers are now illuminated and powered by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit gets this. He translates from me to God what my earthly words can't speak fully.

My mind is not fast enough or articulate enough to fully empty out my heart as I pray for myself or for another person. To me that is the greatest use of tongues when words fail. I am pleading on behalf of you and like it is full on the highest baud rate or bandwidth possible as my prayers are full-on streaming to God.

The Apostle Paul wrote to another early church in the city of Ephesus in a country we today call Turkey to tell them to *always* pray in the Spirit. He wrote:

Eph 6:18 And *pray in the Spirit* on ALL occasions with ALL kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and

always keep on praying for ALL the Lord's people.

Here's the deal: when we activate this gift of tongues and pray in tongues, we find that we pray with all of our hearts and soul. Wouldn't we want this gift where it's like a high grade of communication to God, or the fuel of our prayers is at such a high octane that your communication with God is the purest, clearest, highest, and most intense in a supernaturally natural way?

If you want to know how to pray in tongues, don't worry I am going to tell you how, and in fact I will pray this morning that you will get the gift soon. But that's later.

3) A prayer using tongues is to build up people – yourself and others.

It's to build up others, not for showing off and not for delighting in the gift, but rather using it only for good. When I pray for people in urgent situations, like when someone is really sick, or dying, grieving, or in pain; when a relationship is so broken, or a depression is great, I often pray in tongues.

If I have prayed for you, you probably didn't know I prayed in tongues because I do it silently under my breath. For me it is like letting my emotions and requests just flow full-on to God. When words fail in my praying for others, I need help—angelic, Holy Spirit help in my language. And yes, in other times I am praying in tongues for me. Tongues is one of the most vulnerable prayers I can pray because it is baring my soul. I'm just letting it flow and it becomes a pure cry for help to God.

Tongues can be used for worship, to praise God, and tell Him how much we love Him. Sometimes people pray out in tongues in public, and then wise elders must decide what the person is really saying and/or determine if it is for real. But that is for another sermon for another day.

4. Tongues is a gift, not a trophy.

Some people think they are not worthy or qualified to speak in tongues. Remember, it's a gift, not an Academy Award Oscar for achievement. They might fear, "What if it is fake?" I think it shows your integrity if you fear it could be fake. I say, Good job!"

In the beginning we might initially be stumbling in our mumbling, but then in the privacy of your home, give it a try to receive what God might give you. For some it means giving up control – yup – that's the name of the game. Let go and let God take over. Many of us can be control freaks, and this is one way we can stop being one.

So how do we receive the gift of tongues? Here is what Jesus says about asking anything from Him. In the gospel of Matthew:

Matt. 7:7 "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.

Matt. 7:8 For everyone who asks receives; those who seek find; and to those who knock, the door will be opened.

Matt. 7:9 "Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone?"

Matt. 7:10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?"

Matt. 7:11 If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

So how do we receive the gift of tongues? What does it say in verse 7.

a) Ask for it.

Pray and ask: "Lord, I would like the gift of tongues." But I would say, don't take it lightly. Ask seriously. Tongues will at first sound like gibberish. Syllables that don't make any sense. It might sound like, Sambala, Jamba.

Might sound like a clicking sound. Might sound European, African, or Asian, or something really different. It often is highly repetitive but it is still a vehicle for me to pour out my emotions to God that words couldn't express.

If it is repetitive, that's okay. You are learning at a kindergarten level a new angelic language. It's like the movie *Arrival* or *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, where humans begin learning an alien language. Tongues is a close encounter of a godly kind. So be easy on yourself. You could ask for the gift today or if not today when you are by yourself praying. But notice the passage says that we should ASK, and then also in verse 7:

b) SEEK.

If you ask and really seek it you will find it. Seeking means being diligent about it. Study more about it. Read about it. Practice it. Ask people who might have the gift how it works for them. How did they get it? Everyone gets it differently. There is no cookie-cutter to it.

c) KNOCK ON THE DOOR

What does this mean? You only knock on doors that are CLOSED. To me it means sometimes when you first try the door it seems closed, unknown what is on the other side. But when there is a closed door, knock on it that the Lord might open it.

d) RECEIVE

Matt. 7:8 For everyone who asks *receives*; those who seek find; and to those who knock, the door *will* be opened.

You won't receive the gift unless you ask for it. Then the door will always be closed. But you say, "If it is a real gift, why should I ask? I don't ask my friends to give me a birthday gift. That would be rude."

But think of it this way. I know my wife, Pam, would appreciate a gift on her birthday or for Christmas. She doesn't demand it or stamp her feet for one. But she would appreciate it. But in my marriage, the best gift I can give her is

when I ask her what does she want. Some people like surprises, but not Pam. I know it is better to ask her what she wants.

So when I give her the gift, I know 100% guaranteed she'll like it because she TOLD me what she wants. It also makes me look brilliant if she wears what I gave her, and our friends see that she loves her gift. It makes me look super wise. "Dan, how did you know to give her that?" I just humbly reply, "What can I say, man? I'm prophetic."

Yes, tongues is a gift. But it is okay to ask for it from our heavenly Father because He delights in delighting you. If you ask Him for a specific gift that you want, He would love to give it to you. I know at times we will think God will give a gift to EVERYONE IN THE ROOM except for me, but have faith that God delights in giving you what you want. Remember Jesus said, "If you ask for bread, God the Father will not give you a stone."

I remember Mike Pilavachi telling how he received tongues. He prayed for it on his own and he thought if he confessed his sins, take a warm bath, and play Christian music that the gift would come. But it didn't. So he went to a couple that was in his small group. They said to Mike, "We are going to confess our sins and then praise God in English. We will pray and then we will pray in tongues and then one of us will touch your lips." Mike said he panicked.

The couple began to pray in tongues. Their language in prayer sounded beautiful. Have you ever heard a language that was not familiar to you like a Gregorian chant or maybe Celtic or Hawaiian music and it sounds beautiful even though you can't speak it? That is how it is to hear people sing in tongues.

And then they touched his lips. And they told Mike to pray in tongues. Mike said shalabalabala. He was afraid he would be called a fake. So he went shalabalalBILAbala. Then he went shalabalabilabalaboolababa. The

husband of the couple said, "Keep doing that for the rest of your life." Mike thought, "What the heck?" He left and then later thought, "Lord, if I have only gobbledygook I will do it for you."

Then he did every combination of shalabilaboola. Finally he started to think of God and NOT WHAT HE (Mike) was SAYING and then Mike sensed Jesus' presence, and the tongues later flowed. The point is not the tongues. The point is the prayer. Any way of praying is good. So over the years since, Mike has found praying in tongues helpful in his personal walk with the Lord.

Someone once said to Mike, "Do you want to speak in tongues or only have Jesus?" Mike thought, "There's something wrong with that question." He realized that because we are in Jesus, all of the gifts are ours; it's just that we haven't unwrapped them.

Mike says asking God for the gift of tongues is like standing on a diving board and you then you realize there's no water in the pool just when you're about to dive. God says, "Dive, and by the time you get to the pool, I will have filled it with water." It's adventurous and risky, and one has to be bold.

So tongues is one more type of prayer we need to learn about, and hopefully you might be willing to ask for it. There are two basic ways for people to receive tongues. Pray on your own, or ask someone to pray for you to receive it. Today, we will do both.

Let's take a moment of silence, and if you want, go ahead and talk to our Jesus. Knock on the door, seek, and ask to receive the gift of tongues. And then I will pray for those who want the gift to please stand, and I will pray for you to receive the gift for it seems some in the Bible had people praying for them to receive it. And if you don't receive it at this time, don't worry. It's a gift from the Lord. He knows best when and to whom to give it.