

## **Permission to Speak Freely: In the Secret Chambers of Prayer**

By Ken Wilson © 2007

We're beginning a new series today entitled, "Permission to Speak Freely." The image behind this is from the military. When a soldier needs to speak to an officer with a freedom beyond the customs of rank, he or she seeks "permission to speak freely." Though not officially recognized by the Army, this is "a semi-guarantee that anything an individual says immediately afterwards will not be held against them." (from [www.everthing2.com](http://www.everthing2.com))

We receive permission to speak freely in the secret chambers of prayer and there we learn to grant others the same permission; thus we are to become a community that together learns to "speak the truth in love."

Permission to speak freely has potential to affect every area of life: intimate relationships, family, friends, work, church, as well as our pursuit of justice, goodness, beauty and happiness in the world.

We don't automatically know how to do this. We fear our own thoughts or the responses of others, including God, to our thoughts. As a result our thoughts may languish in darkness, running little circles in our heads like a dog chasing its own tail.

As a pastor you're sometimes regarded as an "authority figure" and you see how crippling it can be when a person hasn't had good experience with authority figures. Sometimes I'm approach tentatively, eyes down-cast, shoulders tucked in as the person says, "I've been afraid to ask you this, but..." (It may be a request as simple as "Can I put this and so in the bulletin?") When it first started happening I took it personally. "Geez, I'm not that intimidating! I'm an inch below average height; my voice more tenor than baritone; my biceps not exactly guns and I'm not prone to bark: what's to fear?"

I know it from the other side too. The Christian world can be a very opinionated world and sometimes one's own opinions don't square with the dominant opinions in a particular segment of the Christian world one may inhabit. Perhaps you've had this experience too. Everyone's head is nodding to something but you see it differently. This requires you to do some risk assessment: "Should I reveal my own view on this or just play along?" It can feel like a lot of social capital is at stake. So you keep it to yourself, then later berate yourself: "You spineless, boneless, jelly-limbed excuse for a fully functioning human being!"

Maybe you're in a family relationship with a spouse, parent, sibling and within the context of this relationship entire categories of reality are off limits; there's no permission to speak freely. My dear mother didn't know what a uterus was when

she got married. My father had to tell her. I'm guessing it wasn't kosher to talk about sex in her family of origin. When I was in Junior High, it was all my mother could do to tell me, "Ken, it's time you learned about the birds and the bees. There's a book over there in the living room that your father and I got for you." When I went to the wicker basket that held the magazines in our family room, there it was: Ann Landers Talks to Teenagers About Sex.

In some families the only feelings you can speak of are anger and hunger. This leaves a great deal of territory in the realm of human emotion off limits. This of course trains us in the art of not speaking freely.

What's the solution? Do we wake up one day and say "I'm not going to take it anymore! I'll speak my mind come hell or high water and I dare anyone to stop me!" This is the "speaking the truth with or without love" approach. On cable television we have talking heads yelling their opinions at each other as a kind of blood sport. Everyone's yelling; no one's listening. Yes, it's a form of free speech, but where's the love?

Maybe there's another approach. What if speaking freely is more than a right we use as a club whenever we please. What if it's permission received, first from God for use with God in the realm of prayer, where we learn to grant this permission to others; thus we become the kind of community where the rule of love prevails as we learn to "speak the truth in love," and we bring that freedom into all we do.

To the core issue, then: Does permission to speak freely exist in our relationship with God? Whoever wrote those Psalms thought so. With the Psalms as our guide, then....

**1. You know there's permission to speak freely when you're free to be less than polite with God.** "Listen, God, to my prayer; do not hide from my pleading; hear me and give answer." Ps 55: 1-2

In polite conversation you don't say: "Listen to me! Don't hide; hear and answer!" That's the tone lovers might use in an argument or parents with a sullen teenager. The ancients approached their rulers with flattery: "O Great King Agrippa, who patiently bears with your subjects and hears our requests with a magnanimous heart!" There's none of that here; instead we have: "'God listen to me! Don't hide! Hear me and answer!'"

**2. You know there's permission to speak freely when you don't have to put a lid on your feelings.** "I rock with grief..." (55:3) How many times have you asked a bereaved person how they were doing and got, "I rock with grief, I'm pacing the floors; I'd crawl out of my skin if I could get away from my

sorrow!" Usually its: "I have good days and bad." The psalmist feels no need to protect God from the depths of his own grief. He takes the lid off.

"I groan at the uproar of the enemy, the clamor of the wicked. They heap trouble upon me, savagely accuse me. My heart pounds within me; death's terrors fall upon me; shuddering sweeps over me." (55: 4-5) We don't know what the psalmist was facing: this sounds like a literal, taunting-murderous mob was at the door of the psalmist's abode. Or something less outwardly dramatic but equally terrifying, perhaps? A few verses later (55: 13-15) it's a personal betrayal bugging him. In our setting it might be a friend at work who envies your success and turns on you and spreads rumors designed to get you fired. Whatever it is, the psalmist is not minimizing his anguish; the lid is off.

In our efforts to be cool, calm and in control we put a lid on our feelings much of the time. There's a time and a place for lids, like when you bring your coffee onto the carpet: put a lid on it, please. But we don't have to put a lid on our hearts in the presence of God. Prayer is the zone of ultimate freedom: freedom to express our anguish and our joy in whatever shade or flavor it may come.

The range of feeling expressed in Psalms is the full human range: Mad, Sad Not too Good, Not too Bad, Glad, Totally Rad! The psalms are not limited to the "polite company range" that some of us try to live our emotional lives in. "I came that you may have life and have it to the full!" said Jesus.

When I first read the Psalms of praise, they made me feel like a zombie by comparison. I had such a lid on my emotional life; I was living in a narrow range of the temperate middle zone on that scale of human emotion. I needed the Holy Spirit, not to zap me into a praise machine, but to thaw my heart so I could feel beyond the polite mid-ranges.

**3. You know there's permission to speak freely when you're free to let the ugly out.** "Let death take them by surprise; let them go down alive to Sheol" (Ps. 55: 16) It's a plain fact: the psalmists say some of the meanest, nastiest, ugliest things.

Take Psalm 137. The first of three stanzas is filled with the bitter-sweet sorrow of exiles missing their beloved homeland (see 137: 1-4.) We hear this and think, "Let's make a "killing me softly" song of this one!"

The second stanza is a pledge of loyalty to Jerusalem to stir soul (see 137:5-6.) We hear this and think, "Let's make a national anthem of this: 'Jerusalem, God shed his grace on thee!'"

But the third stanza lets the ugly out (see 137:7-9.) "May your enemies dash you infants against the rocks!"? Who let this into Bible! "Who let the dog out? Put it back, please!" we think. But there it is, as if the Spirit were saying, "Sorry, but the Psalmist is in the freedom zone of prayer and he's letting the ugly out." To be real before God, we have permission to let the ugly out before God. This is a horribly beautiful thing.

Psalm 139, a few psalms away, ends like this: "Probe me God, know my heart; try me, know my concerns. See if my way is crooked, then lead me in the ancient paths" (Ps. 139: 23-24) God probing our hearts isn't always him poking around in there with sharp objects. Sometimes it's a matter of giving us permission to speak freely and eventually we let the ugly out where it can be aired, understood, cleansed, redeemed, whatever is needed to lead us in the ancient paths of wisdom and beauty and life.

What permission to speak freely to God doesn't mean:

**1. It doesn't mean venting is the ultimate highway to wholeness.** This is just common sense but it needs saying. Back in 1970's the conventional wisdom in the field of mental health viewed venting anger as automatically helpful. There were a lot of angry people punching their pillows on doctors' orders in the 1970's. It turns out, in many cases this just made the anger worse, not better; it was like adding fuel to a fire, rather than letting it burn out. Dryers need venting but not necessarily the people who use them.

What's the difference between venting for venting's sake and being honest about your anger? Venting isn't engagement in a relationship. It's throwing a sucker punch. It's hit and run. It's indiscriminate expression rather than productive communication.

Sometimes when anger has been forced into the basement of your soul for too long and never sees the light of day, once it comes out it comes out with a vengeance, like a bat out of hell. That's not the goal and it's not the ideal; that's just a sign it's been locked up too long, even though God can work through the storm of that kind of experience to bring healing to the soul.

Anger is not like gold: the more the merrier, let's generate as much as we can! Unpacking our anger before God, honest disclosure of our anger before God is modeled in the Psalms. But there's also encouragement to restrain anger in the Psalms.

**2. It doesn't mean we don't take some things back that we've spoken freely.** God's not fragile; we don't need to fear for his life when we speak strong

words. But some words we speak from the vortex of distorted perceptions. When those perceptions abate, we later regret what we've said.

Kids, full of frustration, may blurt out, "I hate you!" to a loving parent. The first time I heard it from one of my kids, I was stunned. But the storm passed, and the storm tossed child came back to say, "I don't hate you. Sorry I said that." We can do likewise with God.

**3. It doesn't mean God isn't free to speak back freely.** God reserves the freedom to respond to our speaking freely. We see this in the book of Job. Job is going through the most severe period of testing. His family, his health, nearly everything of value to Job have been destroyed, To make matters worse, Job is afflicted with three friends who represent the worst of the religious sensibility. They offer Job advice based on the conventional wisdom that God rewards the righteous but punishes the wicked so if Job is going through a touch time, he shouldn't blame God, but look to his own character for flaws to correct. Unfortunately, the conventional wisdom doesn't apply in Job's case as it doesn't in many cases.

Job, to his credit, spoke freely to his lousy comforters; in his distress he held nothing back, objecting vigorously to their unsolicited advice. He refused to curse God as Mrs. Job suggested, but he got in quite a few good licks against God in his complaints which were voiced freely. God held his peace as all the unpacking and anguish proceeded, then it was his turn. It is after all a relationship which means taking turns. God let the self-righteous and narrow-minded comforters have it. Man, did they deserve it! And how it vindicated Job before his friends! Then God spoke to Job out of the whirlwind, and Job hearing God speak was no longer standing in defiant complaint against God; he was standing at attention because he was getting an attitude adjustment. When it was over, he felt the better for it and so, presumably did Mrs. Job. As do we when God gives us an attitude adjustment. I've had quite a few in my life; while I'd never volunteer for one, once I've had one, I've always felt the better for it.

Practical ways to begin to speak freely to God:

**1. Try writing God a letter.** Something may be stuck in our gut and it's hard to get it out. Usually it's stuck because there's some anger or fear or other unpleasant emotion surrounding the issue. Try writing a letter to God about it as a way of putting into words what's in your heart. Any kind of letter will do. Well-crafted, full sentences will do. Chaotic stream of consciousness will do. A sheet of paper with impressions and isolated words, if that's what comes out, is fine too. Just get it out of your inner world and onto a piece of paper as best you can. Then it's out of the darkness, into the light, there on the paper. You can read it, face it and offer it to God.

Sometimes getting something "into the light" like this, seems to open up a whole new world of possibilities: you may catch a hint of his response--if not in words, a sense of his heart toward you as you deal with the issue, which can be just as powerful as words. You may realize that there's someone trustworthy that you could share this issue with. You may just feel better knowing that God knows what's in your heart and is with you in your struggle. Something may dawn on you that never occurred to you before and you have one of those "aha!" moments.

**2. Become familiar with the repertoire.** The Bible is a big, and sometimes an intimidating book. Here's a tip as you let this book into your life: never get too far from the gospels, and never get too far from the psalms. These are the two guides to walk you through the Bible.

The psalms are important because they are the songbook of the bible. They are the repertoire of prayer.

Your task in life is to learn your own song to sing with God in the company of others. All the great songwriters are familiar with the repertoire. You don't write your own song by ignoring the repertoire. The songs of those who've gone before us are the scratch from which your song is made. And your song, once it's sung, will inform theirs, because ultimately the whole deal is a choir in concert, stretched across time as well as a stage.

Not every psalm will express what's in your heart at any given time. But over a lifetime each one will have it's day in your life or perhaps the life of someone near and dear to you.

To become familiar with the Psalms, you might simply put a sticky note in your Bible to mark their location. Then you can find easily. Try praying a psalm or two a day at bedtime as a way of becoming familiar with the repertoire. Load 'em on your IPOD for a bedtime listen if that helps. Use a form of "prayer at intervals through the day" like *The Divine Hours*, compiled by Phyllis Tickle. I love the divine hours because they've been so helpful in making me familiar with the repertoire of the Psalms. Often my life experience and a given snippet from the psalms in the *Divine Hours* fits perfectly. Whatever you do, just get started--become familiar with the repertoire.

**3. Save the choice lines in your memory file for ready retrieval.** Highlight the lines that resonate right now. Pay extra attention to them because they are the ones designed to help you through your current stretch of the adventure, the journey or the shipwreck you're in right now.

As you add files to your memory bank in the form of remembered lines from the psalms you'll see that they organize themselves into "folders." In my hard times folder I've got a few: when going through a time of depression, "In the evening, in the morning and at noonday, I will complain and lament and you will hear my voice!" When graced with blessings in the midst of a really tough time: "Blessed be the Lord, who has shown me the wonders of his love in a besieged city."

Have you ever felt the need of direction from God but you feel too blind to see the way forward and too deaf to hear the directions? "Point my feet in the way they should go!" is what you need. Save the choice lines in your memory file for later retrieval.

I have a dear friend who told me a moving story recently. His name is Nick and he's been praying for his son who is serving in the infantry in Iraq. Nick told me that he had been praying for safety for his son over and over, with a kind of "pious anxiety" surrounding his prayers. One time, he felt a prompting from the Spirit (who helps in us in our weakness, when we don't know how to pray as we ought) to simply, "Stop asking." A strange prompting, but Nick was wise enough to recognize it as the prompting of the Spirit so he stopped asking for a moment. Shortly thereafter, out of his own mouth comes a torrent of Scriptures, like "the angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him and delivers them"; and "you prepare a table for us in the presence of our enemies." As he reported to me, "Scriptures I didn't know I knew came tumbling out!"

I happen to know that Nick is someone who has become deeply familiar with the repertoire of prayer in the psalms over many years. Those verses didn't simply come pouring out of his memory bank by some magical process. He had planted them there in his heart over the course of many years. Now he was reaping the harvest from all that sowing. We'd all be wise to do our own sowing now for a future harvest when it's really needed.