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## Prayer



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Every endeavor has basic skills that support the success of the effort. For example, tying rope-climbing knots is a basic skill for rock climbing. Study skills are rudimentary for a student. These basic skills are sometimes called disciplines. They are practices from which success springs. The Christian life has disciplines which must be learned. The more we practice these disciplines, the more we grow and mature in them.

As followers of Jesus, we are to become more like Jesus. Spiritual disciplines are meant to help us grow in this godliness. We know this, yet often struggle to engage disciplines that position us to grow in godliness. Even when we engage these disciplines, we often feel frustrated with how difficult they are and how little they seem to change us. Take heart, if this is where you are. The fact you desire for greater fruit in your life is evidence of the Holy Spirit working in you. Sanctification is both a wonderful and challenging journey. We will have seasons of great joy and triumph and seasons of great discouragement and struggle. It is our hope these lessons on Spiritual Disciplines give you greater understanding, hope and most of all, a more fervent pursuit of God. This document gives some brief thoughts on:

1. What is Prayer?
2. Why Pray?
3. How to Pray?

## WHAT IS PRAYER?

In the beginning of creation, God directly interacted with man. *Genesis* paints a picture of God and Man in close communion. The picture then shifts after man rebels against God in disobedience. God in His mercy continues to love and provide for man but sin affects their relationship. Where once there was communion between God and man, now there is separation. God remains faithful to His nature and gives man a way to continue having connection with Him, but now this relationship must be bridged through a mediator such as a priest. Connection through a priest is the model we see throughout the Old Testament. This way of connecting or communicating with God through a mediator is ultimately fulfilled in Christ. Through Christ, we have been reconciled to God. We long for paradise restored when there will not be anything between us and God. Until then one of the ways we can connect with and communicate to God is through the avenue of prayer. Prayer is an amazing gift from a merciful God who desires reconciliation to a rebellious people. We access this direct line to God through audible words, internal thoughts as well as groanings that rise from within us.

There are many recorded prayers throughout the Bible. From David's prayers in the *Psalms* to Paul's sharing of prayers for his reader and so on. Just looking at the different examples and descriptions of prayer in the Bible we quickly realize prayer can take many different forms and emphases. Some are questions while others are statements. Some are focused on personal desires/frustrations while others are focused on God. Each of the following is either a prayer or a description of prayer, but each has a different level of emotional intensity and focuses on different topics:

*"Hear me when I call" Psalm 4:1*

*"Lord, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked triumph?" Psalm 94:15*

*"I praise thee because of thy righteous judgments" Psalm 119:164*

*"I beseech thee, O Lord God of heaven" Nehemiah 1:5*

*"I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" Ephesians 3:14*

*"For we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered" Romans 8:26.*

# Prayer

Three fundamental aspects of prayer are 1) Our perception of God 2) The intentionality of the message and 3) The spiritual condition of the individual/s praying.

## Our Perception of God

Our tendency is to view God through the relationships we have experienced. In some ways this is helpful for us and in other ways, it hinders our view of God. When we recognize the best of a relationship as a small reflection of the glory of God it is helpful. It hinders our view of God when we connect the weakness of an individual or relationship to God. For example, we might view our relationship with God as a friendship. This is partly true yet when we think of talking to a friend, we might wonder why a friend would care about something they might already know. This is exactly what we do in praying to God. (*Matthew 6:8*) Or maybe we view our relationship with God as King of Kings. This is also certainly true yet when we think of God as a King, we may wrongly conclude He is distant and uninterested. Human language and analogies all fall short of fully describing or showing God, but they give us helpful glimpses. God is better than the best parts of a friendship and God is better than the very best of a great king. Prayer is coming before the Creator God and speaking to Him; He who is the One who can soften the hardest heart; the One who can turn the heart of a king easier than you can flip a light switch; or the One who calms the wind with a word. The God who is infinitely powerful yet cares for you and the things you care about. (*1 Peter 5:7*) He invites us into His presence where we find a faithful King and Friend. This God, the God of the Bible, has tethered Himself to the prayers of His people. Prayer is an invitation to come before almighty God in faith that He is able and willing to bring about His purposes through the prayer of His people.

## Intentionality of the Message

The intentional aspect of prayer is a way to distinguish prayer from random thoughts, ponderings, and other mental activity that are not intentionally directed toward God. God knows these thoughts, but they are not prayer. Prayer is an intentional expression directed to God. This intentional expression may not always be coherent words or thoughts. The soul that is in deep pain, confused or overwhelmed may not have words or coherent thoughts to express to God. Yet this soul can intentionally come before the throne of God and trust the Lord understands their groanings. Not only does God understand these groanings, He deeply cares and is present with them in their pain. The soul who intentionally postures themselves before God may be praying audible or silent words, thoughts, or groanings.

## Spiritual Condition of the Individual/s Praying

Prayer is a very common practice for both the converted and unconverted. However, the reasons for praying and what is meant by the practice are vastly different. Typically, the unconverted prays for two main reasons: 1) to connect with the spiritual realm or 2) they desire something. For the converted, prayer is a way to communicate to God. Not just any god but the God of the universe as He is described in the Bible. Our relational standing (child or rebel) before God will affect how we approach God and how He hears us. This is not meant to be a scary thing that leads to a constant re-evaluation of our relationship with Christ; Nor is it meant to convey the idea that God puts everyone on a continuum of righteousness and only hears the most righteous. God loves and delights to hear from the strongest and weakest of His children. He also delights to hear the rebel cry out to Him in repentance. Our relationship with God affects prayer. If we are directly disobeying God's Word and turning from Him, our prayers will be hindered. (*1 John 3:22*) The Child of God, no matter how strong or weak, can rejoice in being invited to open their heart before God. One of the many exciting things about being a part of the New Testament church (i.e. after Christ's death and resurrection) is our direct access to God through faith in Christ. As children of light who have been redeemed, we are to see ourselves as slaves who have been transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of Christ. While we have been given access to boldly approach the throne of grace, we are to be humble and thankful servants.

## Discussion Questions:

1. How would you describe what prayer is to someone who is not familiar with Christianity?
2. Describe how prayer is different from thinking.
3. What thoughts do you have about the three fundamental components of prayer identified above (Perception, Intentionality, Spiritual condition)? What other components of prayer would you add?
4. How is prayer similar to and different from communicating with a friend?
5. How is prayer the same and different since the death and resurrection of Jesus?
6. What does it mean to come both boldly and humbly before God in prayer?
7. List some things that hinders prayer.
8. Scriptures to Consider: *Matthew 6:5-13*

## Further Resources:

- *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* by Donald Whitney
- *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life: Workbook* by Donald Whitney
- Prayers in the Bible: *Colossians 1:9-12, Ephesians 1:15-23, 1 Kings 3:5-15*

# Prayer

## WHY PRAY?

Prayer, like many Spiritual Disciplines, is difficult to engage without it becoming a task to check off the list rather than a discipline which changes us, connects us to the Lord and affects the world. For this reason, it is important to remind ourselves of what we are doing and why we do it. At times quick answers such as the “Bible says to pray”, or “Jesus prayed and I want to be more like Him” help reinvigorate our prayer life. At other times, while we agree with these truths, our prayers continue to be a struggle. Below are three things to consider when wrestling with the purpose of prayer.

### Concept 1: Prayer is Reorienting

The natural state and pull of man is to turn away from God to other things like when Peter shifted his attention and faith from Jesus to the waves. (*Matthew 14:29-31*) From the beginning of creation, Satan has worked to convince man that God is not good and we ought to do what we want rather than what God wants. Prayer is an avenue to audibly or silently remind ourselves of the wonder, mercy, and awesomeness of our Great God. Prayer is an avenue to reorient our hearts toward Him. This is modeled for us over and over in the *Psalms*. The Psalmist is distracted with questions, pain, and circumstances yet then shifts from those difficult struggles to viewing and recalling truths about God. (*Psalms 73*) This same practice of reorienting through prayer is needed in times of rejoicing as well. When things go well we can easily shift from worshipping God to getting overly focused on positive circumstances. (*Philippians 3:4-8, Luke 10:20*) Prayer can continually reorient our hearts toward God’s character rather than our circumstances.

When your car breaks down, who do you reach out to? Maybe you call a trusted mechanic, friend or parent. As we walk through life, the more time we spend in prayer, the quicker our minds turn to God through joys, challenges and the everyday occurrences of life. Prayer is an avenue through which we can spend time with the Lord. Better said, prayer is a time we can become more acutely aware of the reality that God is always with us. Prayer can be a faithful reminder of this reality not because we hear an audible response from God, but because we are consciously reminding ourselves of God’s presence. One way to demonstrate our faith in God is by coming before His throne in prayer. The very act of prayer shows an acknowledgment of His authority. Through prayer we are acknowledging there is someone beyond us we need. Prayer is an avenue where we can grow a right view of God and a deeper relationship with Him.

### Concept 2: Prayer Builds Connection with God

*Psalms 145:18* “The LORD is nigh unto all them that call upon him, to all that call upon him in truth.”

As with any relationship the time spent together is an important factor to consider regarding the health of the relationship. While the amount of time spent with someone is an important factor in growing or maintaining a relationship, it is not as important as how the time is spent. For example: you can spend a 1-hour car ride next to someone but not get close to the individual. Through prayer we build relationship with God as we contemplate who He is and openly express hopes, fears, questions, joys and so on. When we feel stuck, we seek help from those we trust. As we walk with the Lord, we hope to grow as we find hope and comfort in Him. This requires relationship with Him, time with Him, and trusting Him even with things we don’t understand.

### Concept 3: Prayer Changes Things

Two common, faulty beliefs about prayer’s impact are: 1) viewing prayer as a free ticket to change anything we desire or 2) viewing prayer as merely a formality that has no real impact on anything. The first error leads to viewing God as an all-powerful being who always gives what we ask Him. Viewing God through this lens, flips the script and turns the person soliciting God into a god themselves. The second faulty belief comes from the idea that since God is in control of all things and He knows the outcome of all things then I don’t need to pray. Just think if this had been Moses’ thought process in *Exodus 32* when the Lord was angry with the Israelite people for their idolatry. They had made and were worshipping a golden calf. The Lord was ready to destroy them, but Moses interceded on their behalf and the Lord extended His mercy.

# Prayer

Prayer changes things but not always the way we want or in ways visible to observe the change. Consider some of the effects of Moses' prayer in *Exodus 32*. How did Moses' prayer affect Moses, God, and the Israelites? Moses' prayer influenced that moment in time but also countless individuals since. Moses' prayer is still affecting us today as it shapes our view of important topics such as prayer, God, leadership and so on. Prayer is one of the means through which God has invited His people to participate in His grand story of redemption. Through petitioning the Lord we are taking direct action which makes a real impact on our hearts and the world around us. Through prayer God allows His people to take part in His work both in the places they live and far beyond. Prayer is an avenue through which God's people can be a part of what He is doing. Jesus certainly believed prayer has impact. Consider His prayer in *John 17* where He interceded on the behalf of all who are His. Jesus taught and lived the importance and impact of prayer.

## Discussion Questions:

1. What questions do you have about prayer and what might those questions reveal about your view of God or prayer itself?
2. What beliefs or questions do you have that hinder you from praying (i.e. God already knows before I pray. God is going to do what God is going to do no matter if I pray or not. . . .)? Are these beliefs faulty or accurate?
3. How have you found prayer to be reorienting in your life?
4. Describe the difference between being God-oriented and circumstance-oriented.
5. Many of the *Psalms* are prayers. What can the *Psalms* teach us about being open with God in our prayers?
6. Are you able to be open with God in your prayers? Why or why not?
7. How do you view prayer's ability to change things?
8. What does *Matthew 26:36-46* reveal about prayer that is both open about desires while also and yielded to God?
9. Scriptures to Consider: *Isaiah 56:7, Matthew 21:13, Luke 11:5-13, 1 Chronicles 16:7-11, 1 Kings 18:37-38, James 1:5-8, John 17*

## Further Resources:

- Prayer: Placing Your Hope in God (<https://www.counseling.org/prayer-placing-your-hope-in-god/>)
- IVP Bible Study on Prayer
- Sermon on Prayer by Joe Gerber 5/24/17 Champaign <http://accentral.apostolicchristian.org/sermons#page-6>

# Prayer

## HOW TO PRAY

In *Luke 11* the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray. It is comforting to think the disciples needed to learn how to pray too. As we walk with Christ, we are to grow in His likeness. This is the process of sanctification where we are learning and growing as we read the Word, spend time with other believers, and pray. In part, this means our prayer life will grow and mature as we do more of it. This is not to say our prayers are more pleasing to the Lord as our prayer life matures, but it does mean as we spiritually mature, our prayers also ought to mature. Read the verses below and identify instructions from these passages related to “how” we are to pray.

*Matthew 6:9-13*

<sup>9</sup> *After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.*

<sup>10</sup> *Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.*

<sup>11</sup> *Give us this day our daily bread.*

<sup>12</sup> *And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*

<sup>13</sup> *And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.*

As you consider these scriptures remember, maturity in prayer, like all areas of the Christian walk, is a process that takes time, practice and most importantly, the Holy Spirit’s work. Spiritual maturity is not a linear process. Instead, there will be times of growth and times of stagnation and even times of regression. It can be easy for prayers to turn into: “Thank you, thank you, help me, help me, I’m sorry, I’m sorry”. This is not a bad or wrong prayer, but prayer is so much more.

Using *Matthew 6:9-13* as a model for how to pray. The Lord starts with recognizing who God is and lifting His name up. From verse 9 we can see the importance of spending time in prayer where we are honoring the Lord and in so doing reminding ourselves of who God is. Verse 10 focuses on several things including: 1) praying that God’s kingdom would come 2) there would be places on earth where God’s instruction is being sought and followed and 3) that hearts would be under the rule and reign of God and this would lead to living as Christ modeled. This is followed by requests for food, forgiveness and protection. The prayer ends with an acknowledgement of God being God and He is the rightful king.

Other places in scripture teach additional truths about how to pray. For example, many of the *Psalms* teach that prayer can be an open expression of hurt, questions, and rehearsing truths about God.

Practical Ideas:

One of the keys to a vibrant prayer life is engaging our hearts and minds in prayer rather than going on auto pilot. We often pray about the same things day-after-day and have a difficult time coming up with new topics to pray about or new ways to pray for the same things. Sometimes changing up the method we are using can help expand our prayers. Some of the ideas below can help us consider additional topics to pray about while others might help give ideas of how to pray about the same things in different ways.

1. Pray scripture.
2. Pray for a different group of people each day of the week. (Example: Monday: Family, Tuesday: Friends, Wednesday: Church Leadership, Thursday: Missionaries, Friday: The Unconverted)
3. Share specific prayer requests weekly with someone.
4. Write out your prayer.
5. Pray out loud.
6. Find a good time of the day to pray. (Example: Set aside 15 minutes a day to pray.)

## Discussion Questions:

1. What are specific ways you can mirror the Lord's Prayer in *Matthew 6*?
  - a. For example:
    - i. To honor the Lord?
    - ii. Pray His kingdom come?
    - iii. To make requests known?
    - iv. Remind yourself of God's "bigness"?
2. List some things we learn about prayer from the following verses? (*1 Peter 3:7, James 5:16, Luke 18:1-5, 2 Corinthians 12:8*)
3. Many of the "how to" prayer pieces are about overarching attitudes or characteristics of biblical prayer such as faith, boldness, openly expressing joys and sorrows. What are other attitudes or themes of "how to" pray?
4. Share some preconceived notions regarding prayer that does not seem to be explicitly taught in scripture (possible example - eyes must be closed for prayer).
5. Identify some topics/subgroups which you personally would like to incorporate into your prayers more (i.e. The Lost, Church Leaders, Political Leaders, Friends, Professors, Honor to the Lord, God's Kingdom Come).
6. Which of the six "practical ideas" listed above would you like to try this week?
7. Scriptures to Consider: *Matthew 6:5-13, James 5:16, Luke 18:1-5, Hebrews 4:16, Matthew 26:36-46*

## Further Resources:

- Praying the Bible with Donald Whitney:  
<https://www.biblegateway.com/blog/2015/08/praying-the-bible-an-interview-with-donald-whitney/>
- ISU Bible Study on Prayer 1/24/19: <http://acccentral.apostolicchristian.org/sermons>