

Prayer: Our Spiritual Lifeline, #1

The Privilege of Prayer

--CEFC 4/8/18

I remember it well—
it was what made all the difference to a teenager
who had no time for religion./

I had become an agnostic, looking for answers in anthropology
and pop-psychology.
I was caught up with the fads of the 1970s—
like psycho-cybernetics
and "I'm OK; You're OK" transactional analysis.

But then I met some guys from a Christian organization
who got involved in our high school.
And their view of Christianity was very different from what I had known before.

Christianity, they said, was not about religion—
with its creeds and strict codes of conduct.
No, Christianity was essentially about a relationship—
a relationship with the God who made us
as that God has made himself known to us
through his Son Jesus Christ.

In putting our faith in Jesus, they said,
we could come to know God as our loving Father in heaven.
We could live in a personal relationship with him.

I was intrigued by that message,
and over time I did come to put my faith in Jesus,
as I came to recognize that he died for me
and rose from the grave and is alive today,
and by his Spirit he comes to change us from the inside.

And they were right—
the message of the Bible is that we were created to know God
and to love him
and to live in a relationship with him.

I don't throw out creeds—
our relationship with God depends on certain things being true—
true about who God is,
and about who Jesus is and what he has done for us,
and about who we are as those created in his image.
These things are important.

And how we live matters, too—
As human beings, we are made to live in a certain way—

supremely in relationships of love with God and with one another.
And loving relationships require certain moral and social qualities
if they are to exist and be sustained.
We are to recognize that God is God
and it is right that we should obey him.

But the center of this thing we call Christianity,
what it is really all about,
is not intellectual or moral—it is relational.
Do we know God personally as he has revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ? /

But this raises the question—
What does it mean to have a relationship with God?
A relationship with my wife I understand—
I can see her, I can hear her, and I can talk with her.
But what about a God I cannot see?
How does that work?

He is the eternal Creator of all things;
and we are but finite creatures.
He is over us and outside of us—existing in an entirely different realm.
As the theologians say, God is transcendent.
How can we relate to him?
Compared to God, we are kind of like the characters in a novel—
How could we possibly have a relationship with the author of the book?

The truth is, we can know the author
only if the author reveals himself within the novel itself,
and that is just what has happened.
The God of the Bible is a personal God who has spoken into his creation—
He has done it in various times and in various ways,
but finally and supremely he has spoken to us in person—
coming among us in the person of his own Son Jesus Christ.

And our **Bible** gives God's words to us.
From the prophets of the Old Testament
who point us forward to Jesus, Israel's Messiah,
and from the apostles of the New Testament
who point us back to Jesus the Christ,
God speaks his word into our world.

So our relationship with God through Christ
is grounded in God's word to us in the Bible—
Here God speaks to us.

And one of the amazing things that happens to people
is that God in his grace opens their ears to hear his voice in the words of this book.
With that gift of faith through the Spirit,
this book comes alive to us in a new way—

these are more just words on a page
but the voice of the living God.

God reaches out to us through this message of love and grace
in the gospel of Jesus Christ found in the Bible,
and he invites us to respond to him in faith.

He speaks,
we hear,
and we are called to respond—
God communicates with us,
and he wants us to communicate back to him—
and that communication back to God is what we call prayer.

Isn't this how relationships work?—
we communicate with one another—
we talk about what's on our minds.
we share what's in our hearts.

That's what happens in our relationship with God—
God speaks to us through his word in the Bible
as his Spirit works in our hearts to hear him;
then we respond in prayer.

So **prayer could be defined as our communicative response to the revelation of God.**

Let me repeat that—
prayer is our communicative response to the revelation of God.

Now, I had at first wanted to say that prayer is our "verbal" response
to the revelation of God.

And prayer is primarily verbal—it involves words that we speak—
either out loud or in our heads,
for we primarily communicate with another person with words.

But there are some times when we communicate in silence—
I think of two lovers gazing at each other,
silently enjoying each other's presence.

And there can be a place for that kind of wordless praying—
it's not the norm,
but there can be a kind of communication that goes beyond words,
or even involves words of a different kind—
words of the Spirit praying through and for us.

That's why I say,
prayer is our communicative response to the revelation of God.

This is the fundamental way our relationship with God works—
God speaks to us through his words in the Bible,
words which point us supremely to Jesus,
as those words are given life by the Spirit.

And we speak to God through prayer.

Now God's words to us in the Bible can come to us in a variety of ways—

We can pick it up and read it on our own,
 or we can come and read it together as we worship as a church;
 God's word in the Bible can be turned into song,
 it can be given to us in our prayers in worship,
 and certainly it can come to us through biblical preaching,
 and God's word can come to us from other Christians in private conversations.

And so it is with prayer—
 You can pray alone in your home,
 or you can with others in our various church gatherings
 or as we pray together during worship
 as someone leads us in prayer;
 Or our songs can be a form of prayer as our words are directed to God,
 and you can be praying even as you listen to a sermon,
 responding to God in your heart
 as you hear him speak to you.
 And you can pray any time during your day, wherever you are—
 as your thoughts are directed to God in brief moments.

Don't think of prayer in just one way—
 it is simply the way we speak to God
 whenever and wherever we respond to him
 in whatever circumstance we may find ourselves.

In this sense prayer is easy—
 Anybody can pray—
 there's no set form that our prayers must take;
 there are no special words you must say;
 prayer is simply the sharing of your heart with God.

Anybody can pray,
 and, in fact, almost everybody does pray—at least in some sense.
 Talking to God is an almost universal practice.

In one sociological study of prayer in United States,
 it was reported that 78 percent of all Americans
 pray at least once a week;
 and that, even among the 13 percent of Americans
 who are atheists or agnostics,
 nearly one in five still prays daily.¹

Spontaneous prayer is easy.
 There are no atheists in a fox hole—
 and when people find themselves in a fox hole—
 whether literally or figuratively—
 they will pray.

And there is a sense that the prayer that the Lord wants from us
 is simply the kind of communication that a parent wants from their child—

¹Cf. Dallas Willard, *In Search of Guidance*, p. 5, citing a cover study in *Newsweek*, January 6, 1992.

he invites us to simply say what we are thinking.
 God readily accepts that kind of prayer,
 and anyone can do it
 that's easy./

But in another sense, prayer can be hard.

Here I'm not talking about the "O God, help me get out of this mess!" prayer.

Nor am I thinking of the rote prayer—
 the Muslim's prayer ritual five times a day toward Mecca,
 or even the perfunctory "Hail Mary, Full of grace"
 prescribed as penance for some misdeed.

That's not what I'm talking about,
 though I'm not denying the value of formal practices or even written prayers.

I'm simply talking about real prayer—

the real prayer where the real me is addressing the real God—
 informed prayer,
 real heart-to-heart prayer,
 soul-to-Spirit—what Paul calls prayer "**in the Spirit**."

I'm think of the prayer that really engages with God,
 prayer that listens first and then responds.
 That's a little harder.

It's kind of like the difference between the way we talk to a stranger
 and to a close friend—

With one, you may confine yourself to small talk—
 talk about sports and the weather;
 But to the other, you may engage in intimate communication—
 sharing your hopes and fears.
 That takes more thought.

Deep friendships require time and effort;
 they demand trust and self-disclosure;
 they often put some demands upon you.

So it is with our relationship with God—
 a relationship in which we converse with him,
 and we commune with him,
 through prayer.

And the very fact that the Bible has to command us to pray
 and to encourage us to pray
 and to admonish us to pray
 gives us biblical warrant for assuming that prayer can be hard.

We don't need to be commanded to do what comes naturally and easily.

I confess, I find prayer hard—

I have no excuses for my failure to pray more than I do,

but we do face some considerable obstacles in developing our life of prayer—
obstacles that come from the world, the flesh and the devil.

First, think about the effect of the world around us—

We live in a world that bombards us with its constant demands and distractions—
you can't get away from it

We live in a world of incessant noise and chatter—
wherever you go—

from the radio in the car to the TV at home to the Muzak at the mall—
it's all round us.

Our smart phones—and Facebook and Twitter---
have only made it worse.

Where can you find that precious moment of silence and solitude
where you can gather your thoughts and focus on the Lord?

In such a fast-paced, whirlwind of a world, who has time to pray?

I like C. S. Lewis's observation--

"The moment you wake up each morning,
all your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals.
And the first job each morning consists in shoving it all back;
in listening to that other voice,
taking that other point of view,
letting that other larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in."

That's not easy.

The world we live in distracts us.

And the world we live in seduces us--

The world we live in seeks to insulate us
from anything beyond the secular.

The focus is on the here and now—the tangible, the material.

Who thinks of the eternal anymore?

Who cares about sin and righteousness, heaven and hell?

We are bombarded with messages that brainwash us into thinking
that prayer is a waste of time.

Let's be practical--get busy,
don't get on your knees.

We become consumed by a restless ambition to achieve
that makes us addicted to activity—

we dare not stop for a moment to spend time in God's presence,
to rest in his love.

Somebody else might get ahead of us in the race.

There's no time to pray—
what we're doing is just too important.

We don't really believe what John Bunyan said,
 that "you can do more than prayer, after you have prayed,
 but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed."

And there's one more thing that happens to us in this world—
 This is a fallen world, a sinful world,
 and as a result, this world not only distracts us and seduces us,
 it also wounds us.

Abused children have a difficult time trusting anyone;
 jilted lovers are reticent to open their hearts again;
 Bad things happen, and God doesn't seem to care,
 so we are hesitant to trust him enough to pray.

That's what the world does to us—
 it distracts us,
 it seduces us,
 and it wounds us—
 no wonder prayer is hard.

If the world distracts us—
 And then I'd say, **the flesh *deludes* us.**

And by the flesh, the Bible doesn't simply refer to the bodily appetites.
 Though there is something to that—
 We face the battle of simple laziness--
 prayer takes self-discipline,
 it takes diligence.

The spirit is willing at times,
 but the flesh is weak--
 and we too often indulge the flesh at the expense of the spirit.
 So we continue to splash around
 in the shallowness of the spiritual baby pool,
 instead of swimming in the spiritual depths—
 which is made possible only by the disciplined practice of prayer./

But "**the flesh**" as Paul uses the term refers to our whole fallen humanity—
 a life-orientation that is cut off from God,
 and that, in fact, opposes him.

"The flesh" is our self-centered, self-exalting, self-pride
 that deludes us into thinking that we are self-created and self-sufficient.

Who needs God?
 As Oprah preaches, "You can do it."

And with that attitude,
 regardless of what we say we believe, we live as practical atheists.

Prayer—Why, that's a last resort, maybe—
 an emergency measure when all else fails.
 We think, prayer is for weaklings,
 it's for failures,
 it's for those not strong enough to stand on their own feet
 and face the challenges of life courageously.

We don't say that exactly—
 not if we are church-goers in good standing—
 but that is how we live—
 living "**in the flesh**"—
 trusting in our own strength and our own power:
 bolstered by our own self-sufficient pride.

But we are deluded.
 For we are not self-created,
 and we are not self-sufficient.

The very act of praying recognizes that--
 it says, I can't do it—
 In that sense prayer is an act of personal humiliation--
 when we pray we acknowledge our weakness, our lowliness--
 we acknowledge that we have needs that we cannot meet ourselves.

We pray when we truly take to heart Jesus' own words
 that apart from him we can do nothing—
 nothing of real significance, real value, in God's sight.

That's what it takes—
 a humility that recognizes our need.
 And our flesh rebels against such a confession.

The world distracts;
the flesh deludes;
 and the **devil—he deceives.**

I like the quote from Samuel Chadwick
 "The one concern of the devil is to keep the saints from praying.
 He fears nothing from prayerless studies or work or Christian activities.
 He laughs at our toil,
 mocks our wisdom,
 but **trembles** when we pray."²

So we should not be surprised, then, that one of the devil's chief aims

² *The New Encyclopedia of Christian Quotations* (Hampshire, UK: John Hunt Publ, 2000), p. 783.
 cited by Tom in his Aug., 2004 letter.

is to hinder our prayers.

He does this, I'm sure, in all sorts of ways, all related to his primary weapon of deception.

First, he deceives us by accusing us—

He whispers in our ears,

"Who do you think you are praying to God? Ha!

You hypocrite!

Why should God listen to you—the way you've lived?

Why you haven't opened your Bible in weeks—

the last time you prayed was when you thought you got cheating on an exam.

And you call yourself a Christian.

Your mind is full of filth and greed and gossip—it's disgusting!

You better get all this cleaned up first

before you waste your time trying to get God's attention."

The devil might even quote Scripture—

a passage like Prov. 15:29—

"The Lord hears the prayer of the righteous. . .

but he is far from the wicked"

Have you ever heard that voice ringing in your ears?

The problem, of course, is that much of what the devil says is true.

And you know it's true.

That's where it gets its power.

You know that you have done what you ought not to have done,

and that you have not done what you ought to have done—

and there is no health in you.

You've failed as a follower of Jesus Christ.

You have denied him by your life, if not by your lips--

You don't deserve the name Christian./

But though some of what the devil says is true,

it's not all true,

and it's not the whole truth.

You see, he deceives us when he accuses us

because in the process he confuses us.

Yes, we are sinners;

yes, we have failed to be and do what God has called us to—

yes, we don't deserve to be heard

when we come before the righteous and holy King of heaven and earth.

But the devil knows nothing of God's grace.

For in the end,

it's not our sin that keeps us from God—it's our pride.

You see, the gospel tells us that we've all sinned before God—every one of us.
We're all guilty before him—far more guilty than we realize.
God knows our sin—even more than the devil does—
but in his grace he has overcome our sin
by taking that sin upon himself through the death of his Son Jesus Christ.

It is as we simply acknowledge our sin before God
and call upon him to rescue us in his grace
as we put our faith in Jesus as our Savior—
when we say, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."
that's when the gates of heaven are opened,
and we are given free access into the heavenly throne room.

That's what the devil doesn't want you to know.

That's why he wants to fill your mind with false perceptions of God—
that he is not really all that powerful—
and that he's not really all that good.

Or maybe he wants you to think that God is not all that personal--
The devil wants you to think of God
as some great life force that somehow governs the cosmos—
a benign energy field that keeps things running according to some mysterious plan.

Maybe we don't pray because we don't really believe that
in Christ this great and good God
is in truth our loving heavenly Father.

You see, prayer is not a transaction—
it is not a form of magical manipulation by which
we say certain words in a certain way as a kind of incantation,
and—bingo!—
we get what we want.

Prayer, in the Bible, as we have said,
is essentially about a relationship—
a relationship with the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ—
as holy and gracious and also very personal.

And that relationship is just what the gospel message is all about.
The invitation to prayer is, in a sense, the invitation of the gospel—
the opportunity to know God in a personal way—
to converse with him—through his Word by this Spirit
to which we respond in prayer.

Just think of Jesus for a moment—
As the incarnate Son of God
he lived, as no man had lived before,
in an unbroken relationship with his heavenly Father.

And that relationship was one characterized by prayer—

Luke in his Gospel tells us that
Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed (5:16);
and at least one time he spent the whole night in prayer (6:12).
It was while Jesus was praying at his baptism
that heaven opened up, and the Holy Spirit came upon like a dove,
and he heard the voice of his Father say,
**"You are my Son, whom I love;
with you I am well pleased"** (3:21).
It was while Jesus was praying that his appearance changed,
and he appeared in glorious form to Peter, James, and John
on the mount of transfiguration.
And it was in the garden on the night he was betrayed
that Jesus prayed most earnestly three times,
"Father, not my will but may yours be done" (22:41f).
John's Gospel records a whole chapter of a prayer of Jesus.

In the Book of Hebrews we read,
**"During the days of Jesus' life on earth,
he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears
to the one who could save him from death,
and he was heard because of his reverent submission"** (Heb. 5:7).

It wasn't just that Jesus felt the need to pray;
it was that Jesus enjoyed the privilege of prayer.
It was his lifeline;
it was a means of communing with his Father.

And you see,
the message of the gospel is that we can enter into that same relationship of prayer.
In our union with Christ by faith,
we come to share in who he is—
he is the Son of God by nature;
we become sons and daughters of God by grace.
Through our union with Christ,
we are adopted into God's family.
And God now invites us to pray just as Jesus prayed—
communuing with him as our Father in heaven,
and, in a mysterious way, even joining with him in his rule of this earth.
By our prayer, we can affect the course of history.

What a privilege!

Prayer is a way in which we experience what the gospel promises—
a relationship with God as our Father in heaven.

He is a Father who invites his children to come to him with their every need.
As Jesus put it, **"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 things,**

and supremely the gift of himself in the form of] **the Holy Spirit—
to those who ask him!**"" (Lk. 11:13).

We'll talk more next week about the actual practice of prayer;
this morning I just want to emphasize the privilege that it is.

Prayer is one of the means by which taste the sweetness of the love of God.

It's the invitation of God—the God who created the universe,
the God who entered into our world
and through his Son died for my sin—
it is the invitation of God to commune with him.

That's what so frustrating to me about my own prayerlessness.
It just doesn't make sense.

I like Tim Keller's observation:

"The only person who dares wake up a king at 3:00 am for a glass of water
is his son or daughter.

We have that kind of access with the King of the universe."

My heart resonates with the words of Richard Foster,
who is far more familiar with this territory than I—
by which he introduces his helpful book on prayer—

He writes:

"God has graciously allowed me to catch a glimpse into his heart,
and I want to share with you what I have seen.

Today the heart of God is an open wound of love.

He aches over our distance and preoccupation.

He mourns that we do not draw near to him.

He grieves that we have forgotten him.

He weeps over our obsession with much-ness and many-ness.

He longs for our presence.

And he is inviting you—and me—to come home,

to come home to where we belong,

to come home to that for which we were created.

His arms are stretched out wide to receive us.

His heart is enlarged to take us in.

For too long we have been in a far country:

a country of noise and hurry and crowds,

a country of climb and push and shove,

a country of frustration and fear and intimidation.

And he welcomes us home:

home to serenity and peace and joy,

home to friendship and fellowship and openness,

home to intimacy and acceptance and affirmation.

We do not need to be shy.

He invites us into the living room of his heart,

where we can put on old slippers and share freely.
He invites us into the kitchen of his friendship,
where chatter and batter mix in good fun.
He invites us into the dining room of his strength,
where we can feast to our hearts delight.
He invites us into the study of his wisdom,
where we can learn and grow and stretch . . . and ask all the questions we want.
He invites us into the workshop of his creativity,
where we can be co-laborers with him,
working together to determine the outcomes of events.
He invites us into the bedroom of his rest,
where new peace is found
and where we can be naked and vulnerable and free.
It is also the place of deepest intimacy,
where we know and are known to the fullest.

The key to this home, this heart of God, is prayer.

Perhaps you have never prayed before except in anguish or terror.
It may be that the only time the Divine Name has been on your lips
has been in angry expletives.

Never mind.
I am here to tell you that the Father's heart is open wide—
you are welcome to come in.

Perhaps you do not believe in prayer.
You may have tried to pray and were profoundly disappointed . . . and disillusioned.
You seem to have little faith, or none.
It does not matter.
The Father's heart is open wide—you are welcome to come in.

Perhaps you are bruised and broken by the pressures of life.
Others have wronged you, and you feel scarred for life.
You have old, painful memories that have never been healed.
You avoid prayer because you feel too distant, too unworthy, too defiled.
Do not despair.
The Father's heart is open wide—you are welcome to come in.

Perhaps you have prayed for many years, but the words have grown brittle and cold.
Little ever happens anymore.
God seems remote and inaccessible.

Listen to me.
The Father's heart is open wide—you are welcome to come in.

Perhaps prayer is the delight of your life.
You have lived in the divine milieu for a long time and can attest to its goodness.
But you long for more:
more power, more love, more of God in your life.

Believe me.

The Father's heart is open wide—
you too are welcome to come higher up and deeper in.

If the key is prayer, the door is Jesus Christ.

How good of God to provide us a way into his heart.

He knows that we are stiff-necked and hard-hearted,

so he has provided a means of entrance.

Jesus, the Christ, lived a perfect life, died in our place,

and rose victorious over all the dark powers so that we might live through him.

This is wonderfully good news.

No longer do we have to stand outside,

barred from nearness to God by our rebellion.

We may now enter through the door of God's grace and mercy in Jesus Christ."³ /

That's why,

as we begin our journey into prayer,

we come to this table—

for here we see the door that Richard Foster talks about—

the door of the gospel in Jesus Christ.

Here in the bread and the cup Jesus gives us himself once again,

and in giving himself he invites us to participate

in his relationship with the Father—

as they show forth his death for our sins,

and his risen life that now lives in us by the Spirit—

and this table points us ultimately to that great messianic banquet

when he comes again in glory.

As we prepare our hearts to come to this table,

I invite our servers to come forward as we pray.

Prayer:

"What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them

the way the LORD our God is near us

whenever we pray to him?" –Deut 4:7

Communion:

Prayer is one of the means

by which we experience the gospel in our lives.

Jesus has given us two other means—visible and tangible means—

³ Foster, *Prayer*, pp. 1-3.

baptism and the Lord's Supper—
Baptism is that entry point
into the visible community of the followers of Jesus,
as your faith is affirmed by the church.

The Lord's Supper is the ongoing means
by which believers in Jesus experience the gospel.

So if you have become a part of this new community of God's people
having believed the gospel,
and you've confessed Jesus as your Lord and your Savior—
which is what baptism points to,
then you are invited to share in this visible expression of the gospel.

Take, eat and drink—and may you know that you are united with Christ
and that his heavenly Father is now your heavenly Father.

Benediction: The Grace

Prayer: Our Spiritual Lifeline, #1
April 8, 2018

The Privilege of Prayer

This morning we begin a two-month focus on the subject of prayer. Our goal is that we grow in our actual practice of prayer—both personally and corporately, and so deepen our relationship with God, experience the goodness of the gospel, and more fully engage with God in his rule of his world. We begin by exploring the great privilege of prayer.

I. Prayer Is Easy—

The Essence of Prayer—

Our Communicative Response

to God's Revelation of Himself

II. Prayer Is Hard—

Hindrances to Prayer

III. Prayer Is a Great Privilege

A. The Prayer Life of Jesus

B. Prayer as a Way of Experiencing the Gospel

C. Prayer as a Way of Sharing God's Rule

IV. Prayer Is Worth Practicing

*"What other nation is so great
as to have their gods near them
the way the LORD our God is near us
whenever we pray to him?" –Deut 4:7*

Discussion Questions:

The Privilege of Prayer

- As you think of your Christian life right now, how would you describe it? Are you **sailing** (living the Christian life with the wind at your back, rejoicing in his love)?, **rowing** (finding prayer and Bible reading to be more a duty than a delight)?, **drifting** (experiencing spiritual dryness and not doing anything about it)?, or **sinking** (is your heart becoming hard)?
- What has been one of the best experiences of prayer for you? What made it meaningful?
- What are the primary hindrances to prayer in your life?
- What would you hope to gain if you grew in the area of prayer?
- What would be a reasonable "prayer goal" for you in your practice of prayer for in the next two months? Be specific. Divide up into groups of three and share this with each other—meet regularly to ask how things are going.