

Prayer: Our Spiritual Lifeline, #2

The Practice of Prayer

--CEFC 4/15/18

So I am going to assume that you think prayer is important—
that praying to God is a good thing.

Most people think that—
I don't think I've ever had anyone say "No"
when I asked if I could pray for them.

And most everybody prays in some sense,
in some way.

Prayer is good—
it is good for the Christian believer
because it is one of the primary ways that we experience
the relationship with God
that the gospel of Jesus Christ promises us.

A personal relationship involves a sharing of heart and mind,
and prayer is the means by which we share our heart and mind
with our God.

In that sense, prayer is a great privilege—
we can come to the great King of the universe,
the Creator and Sustainer of heaven and earth
as our Father in heaven—

We can come to him openly and honestly
in full assurance
because of his atoning work in Jesus his Son
and by the power of the Holy Spirit who now lives in us.

Prayer is the means by which we enter into God's own triune life of love,
and there discover a peace that can be found no where else.

A personal relationship with God—
that's what we were created for—
to know him, to love him, to trust him, to obey him, and to enjoy him.
And as we engage him in prayer that we grow in this relationship.

It is one of the primary ways that the life of God flows into our lives.

This is the testimony of saints through the ages—

William Cary, the missionary pioneer, said,
"Prayer—secret, fervent, believing prayer—
lies at the root of all personal godliness."

Warren Wiersbe put it this way--

"No Christian rises any higher than his praying. ...
The hidden life of prayer is the secret of an open life of victory."

19th century pastor E. M. Bounds, who wrote extensively on the subject, said—

"God's acquaintance is not made hurriedly.
He does not bestow His gifts on the casual or hasty com-er and go-er.
No man can do a great and enduring work for God who is not a man of prayer,
and no man can be a man of prayer who does not give much time to praying."

Yes, prayer is important, it is essential.¹

Prayer is good thing.

No, prayer is a **great** thing!

And I trust that you all have some desire to dive deeper and reach higher
into this relationship with God that prayer fosters in our lives.

But you may be saying,

"I know that's true—prayer is a great thing,
but how do I do it?"

I've tried to pray, but nothing seems to happen.

I feel like I'm just talking to myself.

My prayers just seem to bounce off the ceiling
and I don't experience any of these wonderful things you talk about."

This morning we move from talking about the privilege of prayer,
to talking about the practice of prayer.

I use the term "practice" not only because prayer is an actual activity,
but also because prayer does take practice.

It is an acquired skill;

it takes time and discipline;

it is something we grow into—

and the more we practice prayer,

the more we can enjoy its benefits.

Deep relationships take time to develop.

Now don't get me wrong—

As I said last week, in one sense, prayer is easy—it's the easiest thing in the world—
it is as simple as saying, "Lord, help me!"

And that may be the very essence of prayer.

It is simply the cry of our hearts to God.

There are no secret codes,

so special formulas,

so magic words that must be said to make it work.

¹ This is esp. true of church leaders—cf. 1 Sam. 12:23; Acts 6:4.

The youngest child can pray—
perhaps better than any of us.
We are to talk to God as if to our closest friend.

But as we talked about last week,
prayer is also hard—
it is hard because we are so distracted by the world
that we often forget to pray
and we get too busy to pray,
it is hard because of our sense of guilt
that we feel unworthy to pray,
and it is hard because of our own pride and self-sufficiency
that we feel no need to pray.
And prayer is hard because the person we pray to
must be approached not by sight but in faith.

Prayer is hard, but pray we must.

For if we want to become more like Jesus, we must pray—

Again, as we said last week,
Jesus was a man of prayer.

Each of the Gospel writers emphasizes this point--
Mark tells us of the press of people coming to Jesus to be healed,
and on the next day **"Very early in the morning, while it was still dark,
Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place,
where he prayed."** (1:35)

Matthew writes that on one occasion that Jesus, after preaching to great crowds,
"went up into the hills by himself to pray." (14:23)

Luke draws attention to Jesus' prayer life most of all—
eleven times in his Gospel he refers to Jesus praying.
John records a whole chapter of Jesus' prayer.

Jesus prayed—
for him prayer was a priority;
prayer was a passion;
prayer was a part of his life blood.
We can say that Jesus lived a life of prayer.

We might be tempted to wonder why that was.
I mean, he was the Son of God, right—why did he need to pray?
But, of course, that's got it all wrong—
Jesus lived a life of prayer precisely because he was the Son of God.

For that's what prayer is about—
engaging in a living relationship with God—

communing with him in love as a son to a father.

That's the one thing his disciples couldn't miss
when they heard Jesus pray.

He addressed God as his "**Father**" –
the Aramaic word they heard was *Abba*—
it was so distinctive that Mark,
in recounting Jesus' prayer in the Garden,
left it untranslated—
just bringing it over into Greek—

Mark 14:36-- "**Abba, Father,**" Jesus said, "**everything is possible for you.
Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.**"

Jesus prayed as one who really knew the One he was praying to—
he knew him as his Father.

That's how Jesus prayed—
like no one they had ever heard before.

It is no wonder that his disciples asked him,
"**Lord, teach us to pray like that.
We want to know God as you do.**"

And that's a request we share—
at least I do./

So how do we pray like that?

I've got a whole list of ways that can help us pray like that—
you see them in the outline printed in your bulletin.
I want to run through these briefly,
and they will be considered in greater depth in the weeks ahead
when we expound Jesus' model prayer—
what we call "the Lord's Prayer."

So how shall we pray?

First, I would say, we should pray **reverently**.

I say that because the first thing we need to consider in praying
is whom we are praying to—
We are praying to the Creator of the universe;
we are praying to the Holy One of Israel;
we are praying to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

As I said, Jesus prayed to God as his Father, using the Aramaic term *Abba*,
and he invites us into the same relationship.

And for the Jews of Jesus' day,

Abba was very unusual as a way of addressing God, almost unheard of.
 It was a more familiar form of address for one's earthly father,
 often used in more informal family settings--
 almost like Papa or Daddy—but not quite.
 On Jesus' lips it always had a respectful tone—
 Jesus joined it to terms like "**Holy Father**" (Jn. 17:11)
 or "**Righteous Father**" (Jn. 17:25)
 or "**Father, Lord of heaven and earth**" (Luke 10:21)
 Abba was intimate and very personal,
 but in Jesus' lips it was also respectful,
 for Jesus was a Son whose greatest desire was to bring honor to his Father

Tim, will talk more about this next week when we look at the Lord's prayer,
 but I want to make the point that though we are invited to speak of God as our Father,
 we are still to do it reverently,
 for praying reverently is simply a way of recognizing that our audience
 the is Almighty God himself.

We can forget that.
 And we can get the focus of our prayer all wrong.

That's why Jesus taught us--
 Matt. 6:5--"**But when you pray,**" Jesus says,
 "**do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray**
standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men.
I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.
When you pray go into your room, close the door
and pray to your Father, who is unseen.
Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Here's the issue-- who is at the center of our praying?

For the hypocrite the focus is on self,
 rather than on God.
 They would rather be seen by men than heard by God.
 They desire the reward of human accolades,
 and that, Jesus says, is all the reward they will get.

According to Jesus, performing a prayer is no meritorious act--
 Who do you think is impressed?
 No, authentic prayer must come from a humble heart--
 not one interested in exalting itself.
 Authentic prayer must come from an honest heart--
 recognizing that God sees what is done in secret--
 in the secret recesses of your own heart.

It must flow from the real you--
 not some pious mask you wear when you are doing something religious.
 Jesus speaks here of prayer as essentially a private matter between you and God--
 It's a personal conversation, not a talk show.

Jesus is not ruling out public prayer--
 he engaged in public prayer himself.
 He regularly participated in the worship of the synagogue,
 which included the public praying of written prayers.

But even in public prayer, the focus must not be on the public but on God.

When your pray--whether you literally enter into a closet
 or you are praying in fellowship with others--
 it is to God alone that you pray.

We must pray to the right person--
 And since God as our audience, we must pray reverently.

The key here is becoming so conscious of God
 that we cease being self-conscious.

That's why great teachers on prayer though the centuries have agreed
 that the first step in prayer ought to be what is called "**recollection**"
 You start to pray by recalling who it is that you are addressing.
 You see this frequently in the Bible--
 the prayers of God's people begin with a recollection of who God is.

And who is the God to whom we pray?

He is our Father in heaven,
 but he is also the Holy One of Israel,
 the Creator of heaven and earth.
 He's not our pal, our buddy, "the man upstairs," "the Big Guy"—
 he is our holy Father.

And like Jesus, we are to come to God as a Father
 who deserves our love, our honor, our respect.

I grew up in home where my earthly father was greatly respected.
 One of my fundamental motivations in life was to bring him honor,
 to make him proud of me.

I wanted to please him.
 And I grew up with a sense of security in the love of my father.
 I knew he would take care of me,
 he would be there in my time of need,
 he would come to my rescue.

This is what sonship means—
 a sense of dependence and trust resulting in a ready obedience
 with a desire to bring honor to one's father.

My father was not perfect—no earthly father is.

**Do not be like them,
for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."**

Not only must we pray to the right person,
we must also pray with the right understanding.

If the sin of the hypocrite is selfishness,
the error of the heathen is mindlessness.

The pagan approach to prayer is one of empty words--
They "**babble on**" in the translation of the NIV--
or "**heap up empty phrases**" in the RSV.

Prayer must be thoughtful, Jesus says, engaging the mind.
Avoid Eastern mystical meditation
which seeks to disengage and empty the mind--
that's not Christian prayer at all.

Or I think of an experience I had as a football coach at Annandale High School—
In the locker room, I was asked to pray by some of the players,
so I did,
and then one of the Muslim players prayed—
OK, fair enough. I had no problem with that.
But he prayed in Arabic.
So the next week at practice I asked him what he had said.
He had no idea. He didn't speak Arabic—it was a prayer he had memorized.
That's certainly not Christian praying.

Empty words mean nothing to your heavenly Father--
Nor do a multitude of words.
Prayer is not magic--
we do not manipulate God by some incantation.
We can't twist his arm by overwhelming him with our verbosity.
"The pagans imagine that the more they say,
the more likely they are to heard"--
It isn't so, Jesus says.

That is a misunderstanding of what Christian prayer is all about.

Don't you know--
"Your Father knows what you need before you ask him."

Again—"your Father"--
He is neither ignorant, that we should instruct him,
nor hesitant that we should persuade him.

He invites us to come;
he welcomes our prayer—
He knows what is in our hearts even before we speak.

Our Western logic might conclude that, therefore, we should say nothing.
 Jesus thinks of it differently--
 in his mind, it means we can say anything.²

He already knows our needs—
 prayer is not about conveying information.
 His primary interest is in the relationship that prayer offers.
 He delights when we acknowledge our needs to him
 and show our dependence on his provision as our Father.

John Calvin writes--
 "Believers do not pray with the view of informing God
 about things unknown to him,
 or of exciting him to do his duty,
 or of urging him as though he were reluctant.
 On the contrary, they pray in order that
 they may arouse themselves to seek him,
 that they may exercise their faith in meditating on his promises,
 that they may relieve themselves from their anxieties
 by pouring them into his bosom;
 in a word, that they may declare that from him alone they hope and expect,
 both for themselves and for others,
 all good things."³

The hypocrite comes to prayer and thinks only of himself;
 The pagan comes to prayer and doesn't think at all.

Other gods may enjoy mindless and mechanical incantations.
 But our God--the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ—
 the sovereign Creator and Ruler of heaven and earth
 who is also our heavenly Father--
 Our God wants to enter into a relationship with us
 as we communicate with him and he with us in thoughtful prayer.

What a magnificent thought!

And what better to give thought to our words to God
 than to begin first with his words to us—
 Reading and reflecting on the Scripture before we pray
 is always a helpful thing to do.
 Remember, prayer is our response to God's revelation of himself.

We are to pray reverently,
 we are to pray thoughtfully.

² cf. Hunter

³Quoted in Stott, Counter-culture, p. 145

Third, and following from what we've just said,
We are to pray **humbly**.

How can we not, if we reflect at all on the God to whom we pray—
he knows us through and through—
nothing is hidden from his sight—
all the thoughts and intentions of our hearts are laid bare before him.
If that doesn't humble you, nothing will.

That's why prayer has an incredible power to reveal to us who we really are—
for it's been said, that who you are in the sight of God,
is who you are and nothing else.

One of the prayers of our hearts ought to be, from Psalm 139—
**"Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting"** (Psa. 139:23-24).

This humble stance before God ought to issue in facing the truth about ourselves,
and the accompanying recognition of that truth in confession of our sins.
Confession is nothing but humble honesty before God—
It says, "Here I am, Lord. This is the real me.
Have mercy upon me.
For apart from your grace, I have no right to come to you at all."

In confession we say, "Lord, I want to turn from my own twisted ways,
and embrace the goodness and beauty of all that you have for me."
That takes humility.

But paradoxically,
we are not only to pray humbly,
we are also to pray **boldly**.

Precisely because we don't come to God on the basis of our own righteousness,
but on the basis of the righteousness of Christ,
The Bible says "**we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place
by the blood of Jesus,"**
and we are encouraged, in the words of the Letter to the Hebrews,
to "**draw near to God with a sincere heart
in full assurance of faith"** (Heb. 10:19,22).

In fact, Jesus seems to give us a blank check when it comes to prayer—
**"If you remain in me and my words remain in you,
ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you"** (Jn 15:7).

"You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it" (Jn. 14:14).

"Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer,
believe that you have received it, and it will be yours" (Mk.11:24).

It's the same thing the Lord said to Solomon when he became the king of Israel—
"Ask for whatever you want me to give you" (2Chr. 1:7).

Your father in heaven longs to give good gifts to his children—
so ask, seek, knock—
we are to come boldly before God in prayer.

But with that boldness,
must also come submission.
After all, the God we pray to is our Father, and he is our King.

And so Jesus himself prayed in submission—
"Father, not my will, but may yours be done."

We must always submit our wills to his.

And doesn't that make perfect sense
when we recognize that he is far wiser than we are.

Would we really want to receive all that you ask for?
Would you really want all your prayers answered
just the way you prescribed?
I know the frailty and depravity of my own heart too well to want that.
God is not a genie in a lamp.

But how can we pray with boldness,
confident that the Lord will hear us and answer our prayer,
and at the same time pray submissively,
knowing that God knows better than I do what is best
and his will is always good and right?

John Calvin wrestles with this question,
and he argues that these two approaches to God
actually complement one another.⁴

On the one hand, we are to bring our requests to God, whatever they may be—
there are many things the Lord wants to give us,
but he wants to give them to us in answer to our prayer.
It is in prayer that we honor him rightly,
and it is in prayer
that our hearts are prepared to receive his gifts appropriately.

⁴ On this, see Keller, *Prayer*, p.102f.

And when we receive his gifts in answer to prayer,
we are more likely to thank him for his goodness,
rather than simply assuming that these gifts come because of our own.
Good things that come to us apart from prayer
are too easily interpreted by our hearts
as the result of our own diligence and wisdom,
and this can feed a deadly sense of self-sufficiency and pride.
So in pray ask for whatever seems right to you to ask for.

But who would dare to pray if they assumed that they would automatically get
everything they asked for.
Anyone who is a parent would know how dangerous that could be.

But when we pray submissively,
we don't need to worry about asking for the wrong thing.
We can pray confidently precisely because he won't give us everything we want—
Calvin writes:
“[God] so tempers the outcome of events
according to his incomprehensible plan
that the prayers of the saints, which are a mixture of faith and error,
are not nullified.”

Ask whatever you will,
confident that God in his great wisdom will "temper the outcome of events"
with his all-surpassing wisdom.
You can then rest in God's goodness,
as you submit to his good will.

You can be confident that he is a good and wise father who knows best.

Pray Reverently;
Pray Thoughtfully;
Pray Humbly;
Pray Boldly;
Pray Submissively;
And finally, I would say, **Pray Persistently—**

Jesus often encourages persistent prayer—
He even used the story of the mistreated widow
who kept pestering an unjust judge
to challenge us to not give up in prayer.

Keep coming to God—
That's what Job did,
and eventually that persistence was honored,
and the Lord addressed poor Job directly.

Keep at it—
and recognize that it can be hard to remain faithful in prayer.

That's why Paul speaks of "**struggling in prayer**" (Rom. 15:30)
and "**wrestling in prayer**" (Col.4:12).⁵

You can get tired;
you can get discouraged;
you can get distracted.
But don't give up—
persevere in prayer—faithful to God.

So, six aspects of prayer—
six ways that we are to pray.

That may be a lot to remember,
but let me simplify it with a simply acronym that many people have found helpful—
It's the letters A-C-T-S—ACTS
Begin your praying in **Adoration**—
stop to remember who you are praying to
and begin simply by praising him.

This leads naturally to **confession**—
as you see yourself through his eyes--his holy eyes,
and you humble yourself before him
and confess your need of his mercy and grace.

Then stop to offer **thanksgiving**—
as you recognize his goodness in your life—

and this will spur you on to then **ask** him to work
in the world,
in the your life
and in the lives of others that he lays upon your heart
in words of supplication.
Praying that his kingdom would come earth as it is in heaven,
and that he would give you your daily bread.

Adoration
Confession
Thanksgiving
Supplication

ACTS—it's easy to remember,
and I commend this to you as a simple pattern to guide your prayer.

Now in closing, can I offer some **quick tips**

⁵ In both passages using a variant of ἀγωνιζόμεαι.

Which leads to a third tip—

3) **pray creatively**—

that is, experiment with different ways of praying.

Sometimes I will take a prayer walk.

sometimes I pray in the car instead of turning on the radio.

Sometimes I pray kneeling.

sometimes I take a Psalm or another prayer from the Bible

and let it prompt me to pray.

Sometimes I will use a hymn or a Christian song as a prayer aid,

or even written prayers,

like the collection of Puritan prayers in this book,

The Valley of Vision.

Experiment in the ways that you pray

to find ways that foster your own life of prayer.

And a final tip—

4) **Pray Corporately,**

that is, pray with others.

That means praying in our worship—

actually pray with the person who leads in prayer—

Don't allow your mind to drift off.

Say "Amen," or "yes, Lord,"

when something is prayer that particularly resonates with you—

say it either under your breath or, better yet, out loud.

When I was in England, and people were praying in a group,

each person would end his prayer with an amen,

and then everyone would say amen—

it helps to keep your mind engaged.

So pray with others in your SS class or your community group—

I find that some of my richest times of prayer are with other Christians—

when I am praying with others, I am forced to verbalize my prayer,

which disciplines my mind.

And I am encouraged by the prayer of others.

The faith expressed in their pray builds my faith.

Don't be afraid to pray out loud with others—

Don't be intimidated by the prayers of those

who have been doing it a lot longer than you have.

Just join in—

voicing what the Lord prompts you to pray.

Start with just one sentence—that's all—

The Lord is not impressed by long, flowery prayers—

it's the heart that counts.

I encourage you to take advantage of the opportunities we have as a church

to pray with others—that's one of the very best ways to learn to pray.

We are praying before SS these next six weeks at 9:15 in the youth building.

Come join us.

We all need encouragement to pray.

Prayer can be hard--

The battle to pray is the battle with the world, the flesh and the devil--

it's the battle to make our will God's will;

it's the battle to turn from our rule of our world,

to God's rule in his kingdom.

It's a battle that we must win.

So don't give up--

begin again—that's what I do.

Confess your sin of prayerlessness and begin again.

The good news is that we aren't in this battle alone.

If you have put your trust in Christ, if you are a Christian united to Christ,

you are a child of God—sharing in Jesus' own sonship—

and as Paul tells us,

**"Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts,
the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father" (Gal. 4:6).**

That Spirit within you is crying out to God your Father—

You have a deep longing to know him and to love him.

The Lord is calling you to himself.

He desires your fellowship--

you are his beloved son or daughter.

He offers you an inexpressible and glorious joy.

Don't ignore him, don't push him away.

As John Wesley said--

"O Begin! Fix some part of every day for private exercise. . . .

Whether you like it or not, read and pray daily.

It is your life;

there is no other way:

else you will be a trifler all your days."

Do you want to be a trifler?

So don't live like a spiritual orphan.

Come to your heavenly Father in prayer.

We have a great treasure right at our very fingertips,

but too often it goes untouched.

So I say,

"Lord, teach us to pray." //

Prayer:

John Newton--

1 Behold the Throne of grace!
The promise calls me near:
There Jesus shows a smiling face
And waits to answer prayer.

2 My soul, ask what thou wilt;
Thou canst not be too bold;
Since His own blood for thee He spilt,
What else can He withhold?

3 Thine image, Lord, bestow,
Thy presence and Thy love;
I ask to serve Thee here below,
And reign with Thee above.

4 Teach me to live by faith;
Conform my will to Thine;
Let me victorious be in death,
And then in glory shine.

Benediction:

Rom. 15:13 May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him,
so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer: Our Spiritual Lifeline, #2
April 15, 2018

The Practice of Prayer

Given that prayer is important, how shall we pray? This morning we consider the practical side of this critical Christian practice.

How shall we pray?

I. Pray Reverently

II. Pray Thoughtfully

III. Pray Humbly

IV. Pray Boldly

V. Pray Submissively

VI. Pray Persistently

VII. A Praying Pattern: ACTS—

Adoration

Confession

Thanksgiving

Supplication

VIII. Some Praying Tips—

Pray Verbally

Pray Physically

Pray Creatively

Pray Corporately

Discussion Questions:

The Practice of Prayer

- As you think of these, which would you most like to grow in as you pray?

How can you do it?

I. Pray Reverently

II. Pray Thoughtfully

III. Pray Humbly

IV. Pray Boldly

V. Pray Submissively

VI. Pray Persistently

- Consider these praying tips—what would you like to try implementing more?

Pray Verbally

Pray Physically

Pray Creatively

Pray Corporately

If, in your group, you have not addressed these two questions, do so this week.

If you have already, take time talking about how it is going.

- 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.

*Take some time to pray together in your group—

Use the ACTS pattern, guiding by your group leaders, spending a few minutes in each category.