

Walking with God in Prayer

There's a story of an elderly couple years ago who lived in a remote valley in Wales. They went to a great deal of trouble and expense to have electrical power installed in their home. However, after a couple of months, the electric company noticed she'd hardly used any electricity at all.

Thinking there might be a problem, the company sent a meter reader out to check on them. A woman answered the door and the man said, "We've just checked your meter and it doesn't seem that you're using much electricity. Is there a problem?"

"Oh no" she said. "We're quite satisfied. We turn on the lights every night to see our way to light our lamps and then we switch them off again."

I have to wonder, can we be the same way in our spiritual lives?

As we continue this morning with our series *Walking with God*, we come to the topic of prayer. We've been talking about spiritual disciplines for ordinary people. Out of all the spiritual habits, none is more simple than prayer. Anybody can talk to God. And yet, nothing is more difficult than prayer. For many followers of Jesus, this is one of the most challenging areas of spiritual discipline. Like the Welsh woman in the story, we turn on the power of prayer just enough to see the way to try and do it ourselves. But really, we're just stumbling around in the dark. I know this is true in my own spiritual life. In my prayer life, I feel as though I am continually looking up to those more advanced than I. Even decades in I feel as a continuing beginner.

We are so dependent on our five senses. We are so in tune with what those senses desire and demand, that it is difficult to pray to a God we cannot see and to wait for answers we cannot control. How do I, a non-expert, give you advice on prayer? Well, we're talking about spiritual habits for ordinary people. I'm just an ordinary guy on the same journey as you, and this morning I want to invite you to join in the journey into the adventure that is prayer.

I. **Pray**

The first and most essential bit of counsel I can give you on prayer is this: Pray. With all apologies to Nike. Just do it. Just talk to God. We think and talk about deeper prayer, higher prayer, better prayer, but any prayer is better than no prayer.

The easiest way for Satan to disconnect us from God is to disconnect our prayer. And so even though we know we can pray anytime, anywhere, we put it off, and end up praying at no time and nowhere.

F.B. Meyer, the great evangelist of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries wrote, "The great tragedy of life is not unanswered prayer, but unoffered prayer."

If we were going to be honest this morning, we have to admit that prayer is, to borrow from Dr. Calvin Wittman, an undisciplined area of our spiritual life. It is sporadic at best, usually erratic and often more prosaic than powerful. It is an untapped resource, an unexplored continent where countless treasure

remains to be unearthed. It is talked about more than anything else, and practiced less than anything else.

And yet the command of Scripture is to pray. Paul writes in Colossians 4:2, “*Devote yourselves to prayer.*” In Luke 18:1 Jesus tells a parable about prayer with this explanation, “*And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray.*” In fact, Jesus’ teaching simply assumes that we will pray. Listen to these snippets on prayer from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount:

- Matthew 6:5, “And when you pray...”
- Matthew 6:6, “But when you pray...”
- Matthew 6:7, “And when you pray...”
- Matthew 6:9, “Pray then like this...”

(2 Slides)

Do you hear the expectation of prayer in our Savior’s words? The fact of the matter is, you cannot be a growing Christian and not pray, just like you cannot have a growing marriage if you don’t talk to your wife or your husband. I suppose you can be a believer and not pray, just like you can be married and not talk. But in both circumstances your relationship will be distant and stagnant; strained and maybe even dying. Without either, you will never know the full joy and intimacy of a close, shared relationship.

BREAK ONE

II. **Pray Persistently**

Once we begin to pray, the second thing I could say about prayer is to pray persistently. I Thes. 5:17 says, “*Pray continually.*” As some translations put it, “*Pray without ceasing.*” We already saw where Paul says, “*Devote yourselves to prayer.*” The word translated as *devote* means to, “persist in, adhere firmly to, or remain devoted to or to give unremitting care to.” It is the idea of being dedicated to something. Of the ten times this word is used in the New Testament four of them have to do with prayer.

Persistence in prayer is not an option for the Christian; in fact, it is an order from the Lord Himself; a direct command.

Jesus tells not one, but two parables about the importance of persisting in prayer. In Luke 11, after teaching the disciples the Lord’s prayer, Jesus goes on to say, “*So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.*” Asking, seeking, and knocking all have to do with prayer. And each one of those verbs is in the present tense which means, “keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking.”

Now there is a difference between a persistent prayer and long-winded prayer. In fact, Jesus says in Matthew 6:7, “*And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.*” Prayer is not about getting God’s attention on us; It’s about keeping our attention on God. You already have God’s attention.

Persistent prayer is frequent prayer. It is a habit of prayer that we regularly practice. Sure, you can spend a long time in prayer as the old hymn suggests, "Sweet hour of prayer." But you can also fill your day with lots of short prayers.

Persistent prayer also means not giving up. It means not quitting, not becoming discouraged when answers don't come as quickly or in the manner we imagined. How many things do we pray about just once or twice, and then we forget about it. We give up too easily on prayer.

III. Pray passionately

Thirdly, we need to pray passionately. Pray fervently. Pray like it matters. Guard against going through the motions, like spinning a Tibetan prayer wheel where the prayers go up without any thought or engagement of our heart. Passionate prayer is a pouring out your heart and mind and your whole being before God.

This is how Jesus prayed. Hebrews 5:7 says, "*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.*" Jesus prayed with passion, because He knew to whom he was talking and He knew access to the Father is a powerful thing not something to take lightly.

Theologian Peter Kreeft reminds us that prayer is, "a matter of life and death, your lifeline to God, to life itself."

If we truly believed in the power of prayer, if we truly understood our utter dependence on God and what prayer means for it, we would pray with much more fervent passion. Donald Whitney suggests in his book *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, "If we felt certain of visible results within 60 seconds of every prayer, there would be holes in the knees of every pair of Christian-owned pants in the world."

IV. Pray Gratefully

The fourth principle that should guide our prayer life is pray gratefully. Pray with thanksgiving. So often our prayer life is reduced to a child's wish list to Santa Clause before Christmas. I want, I want, I want. Give me, give me, give me." Certainly we can make our requests and petitions to God. He already knows even if we don't ask it, so we might as well be honest about it. I believe we can ask God for anything, but before we focus on what we want to get from God, we should remember how He's already blessed us.

I found at least 12 passages in the Bible that mention prayer and thanksgiving together.

Philippians 4:6 tells "*Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*"

First Thessalonians 5:18 tells us to, "*give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*"

Colossians 4:2 says, "*Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.*"

Expressing gratitude as we pray accomplishes several things:

A. First it expresses dependence – It says you know who God is, you know who you are and you are aware, at least to some degree, of how desperate you would be were it not for His providence and presence in your life.

Praying gratefully expresses our understanding that every breath we take is, in fact, a gift from God.

B. It Creates humility – Gratitude expresses dependence which then creates humility. If we are dependent on him, then we can't do it all. Praying gratefully keeps our arrogance anchored to reality. It keeps us from thinking we're all that and more.

Everything in this world and in our sinful nature, all try and reinforce the idea of the self-made man, of the superwoman who can do it all. But everything in God's word speaks to the contrary. James 4:14 throws a bucket of cold water on our natural pride, *"Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes."* Praying gratefully waters sapling of humility in a heart of pride that would otherwise wither and die.

C. Expressing Gratitude demonstrates Relationship – At the root of gratitude is relationship. God is able to bless us in so many ways because he knows us intimately and he loves us deeply. Praying gratefully says we know that He is our Father and that we are His children and He provides for us out of love.

Any mom or dad knows how heartbreaking an entitled, ungrateful child can be. I heard a mom describe her teenage son who was put out when mom refused to buy something he wanted. She explained they didn't have the money. The son then says, "When are you going to get a real job?" Mom stood there flabbergasted. He then twists the knife, "What have you ever done for me?"

"You mean besides cook you thousands of dinners, pack your school lunches, fold your laundry, clean your messes, volunteer at your school, help with homework, read bedtime stories, be your personal chauffeur, play nurse when you're sick, buy your medicine, buy your clothes and work three different in home jobs to pay for it all?"

Praying gratefully guards our hearts against taking God for granted and it opens our eyes to every good and perfect gift which comes from above.

BREAK TWO

IV. Pray selflessly - we must pray for others

Finally, we should pray selflessly. The highest pinnacles of prayer are when we are no longer just praying for ourselves, but praying for others. This is what is called intercessory prayer. It is to go to your knees for someone else. You might simply be praying through the prayer list that Sara puts out. You might be prayer for the leaders of the church. You might be praying for your spouse. You might be praying for your best friend. You might be praying for your worst enemy. You might be praying for your boss or for your employee. You might be praying for your church family, or you might be praying for your lost

neighbor. You can pray for Donald Trump. You can pray for Nancy Pelosi. There's no end to who you can pray for.

Paul wrote to the young minister Timothy, *"I urge then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people (1 Tim. 2:1)."* After telling the Ephesians to put on the full armor of God, he then urges them in Ephesians 6:18, *"pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people."* And then in verses 19 and 20 he makes a request. It was his most frequent request to the churches he wrote to, *"Pray for me."*

Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

One of the most powerful things you can ever do as a Christian is tell another, "I will pray for you," and then do it.

And I'll tell you one more thing about praying selflessly— when pray for others there is a lot less conflict and friction in the church.

Listen to what Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *Life Together*,

A Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses. I can no longer condemn or hate a brother for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble he causes me. His face, that hitherto may have been strange and intolerable to me, is transformed in intercession into the countenance of a brother for whom Christ died, the face of a forgiven sinner.

The goal of prayer or any spiritual discipline is never a purely selfish thing. The goal of the spiritual disciplines is spiritual growth, and the goal of spiritual growth is to be more like Jesus. The reason God wants us to become more like Jesus is so that we can continue the work of Jesus. In John 20:21 Jesus says, *"As the Father has sent Me, I also send you."*

Prayer in the end should never be just a vertical relationship between you and God, but it becomes a safety net that ties all of us together and anchors us to him.

Intercessory prayer allows us to partner with God in His holy work of grace in the lives of others. It is to go to the cross, and then prayer bring someone else with you.