

“Lessons in Prayer—Learning Prayer from the Master”

Today we wrap up this series on prayer. Prayer is to our souls what breathing is to our bodies. Without prayer we can't experience the fullness of the Christian life. In fact, without prayer, we will experience virtually nothing of the Christian life. Some of us, our souls are suffocating. Today let's look at the Master, Jesus, and what he taught about prayer and how he prayed. Study Guide reminder...

Let's look at some of Jesus' teaching on prayer starting with Matthew chapter 6. **“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But 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. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matthew 6:5-8).**

So some of the religious leaders at that time, loved to pray in public settings where people could see and hear them. They would pray loudly, visibly. Jesus knew that they were praying to impress other people. “I hope I look spiritual here praying. I hope people notice me. Do you notice me? Aren't I a great pray-er?”

Jesus saw this and one of the first things he teaches about prayer is to **pray authentically**. “You don't have to pray like those hypocrites.” By the way the word hypocrite is Greek. It means a play actor on a stage. Jesus is saying, “Please don't be a pretender. Prayer isn't meant to be an act. Instead engage your heart; engage your mind. This is not about impressing other people; it's about communing with God, so please don't forget that.”

Jesus goes on to teach us that we should **pray with persistence**. In Luke chapters 11 and 18 he tells two parables and starts by saying, “The point of these stories is to always pray and not give up.”

Because sometimes we pray for something once and then we get disappointed because nothing happens. God says, “Keep praying, keep praying...” and somehow in the act of persistence we find hope. Sometimes in the act of persistence we encounter God. A woman told me last week that for two years she had been praying for a particular person in her life to overcome an addiction and find his way back to God, back to faith. For two years she'd been praying for herself to have patience and endurance, and finally after two years there was a breakthrough. Her prayers were answered. Those things that are really important to us we keep praying for them.

Now, I can't say that I fully understand intercessory prayer (that's when we're praying for God to do something specific for someone or ourselves). Because I know that God doesn't miraculously intervene very often. And when it comes to something like healing someone, most of the time God works through biology and physics and doctors and nurses and our body's healing processes. But I know that we play a role in that healing when we pray for other people.

Physicists talk about linked particles. It's where you can do something over here in physics and it have an impact over here even when there is no physical connection. I can't say I understand that, but that's the way physicists say it works. I think in the spiritual realm there is something similar. When we pray here, that releases something powerful over there in someone else's life and body.

I've told the story of Jessica Bainbridge lots of times. Before she was born doctors told her mom and dad that she had a cyst on her brain and that she may not survive until birth and that if she did she would very likely have brain damage. We prayed and prayed for her. Miraculously the cyst just disappeared and she was born perfect. She's in the gifted program and skipped a grade this year because she's so bright. Every time I see her, I feel like we played a part in that.

Jesus also says that we're to **pray with faith**. He said, **[SLIDE: add to previous...]** **“I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.” “If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer” (Matthew 17:20, 21:22).** These passages can be confusing because everything we pray for, even when we believe, it doesn't always happen. And if all we had to do was believe and pray and we all got everything we asked for, it would be a disaster. It's not logically possible for everyone to get what they pray for even if they believe. I mean, I never advocate praying for sports teams. I'm sorry but I don't think

God cares who wins an NFL football game or an NCAA basketball game. I think we should spend our time praying for other things. I say that, and yet I sit at my daughter's basketball games, and guess what I'm doing? Praying for her team to win! And you know there are parents on the other team praying for their kid's team to win. It's not logical for us both to believe and pray and both teams to win that game.

When we look at these scriptures we have to interpret them in light of other scriptures like we looked at last week. But we can get at the heart of what Jesus is saying. His point is to pray with faith and trust that God is, that God hears you, that God knows what's best. And trust that God loves you, trust that God sees a bigger picture than you and I do. Have faith that even though you may not be able to see it, somehow when you pray the world is changed because you prayed!

One of the key things Jesus said about prayer begins in Matthew 6:9. The disciples had asked Jesus, "Please, teach us how to pray." And he teaches them what we call the Lord's Prayer. Now, Jesus' intention in giving us this prayer was to provide an outline to pray, not just something to pray word-for-word all the time. But an outline to guide you, a pattern for your own prayers. We've taught the Lord's Prayer to our daughters as an important part of their prayer lives.

She doesn't quite have all the words down in a traditional sense. But it's an infrastructure that later on she can build on. It will be an outline for her to structure her own prayers around.

Let's take some time to look more closely at the Lord's prayer. It begins, **Our Father, who art in heaven...** Jesus is saying, "When you start praying, begin by making a statement about who God is to you." Sometimes you might want to think of God as a loving, caring Father. Maybe sometimes you think of God as the good Shepherd, or the potter and you are the clay. The point is to connect to God personally.

The word used here for heaven is not some distant place. It's the word for the atmosphere, the very air around us. You're saying, "My loving Father who is as close to me as the air I'm breathing right now..." This is a very simple affirmation of faith and that's great way to start a prayer and open a sense of closeness with God.

The next part of the prayer is, **Hallowed be thy name...** To hallow God's name means to declare that God's whole character is holy. It's to recognize that God is worthy of praise. This is also a good reminder to be careful with God's name. We don't use his name carelessly; we don't use his name in vain. Followers of Jesus don't go around saying, "Oh my God!" Unless they mean it—unless you're praying! We don't use Jesus' name carelessly as just an exclamation. We don't damn anybody in God's name either. That's misusing God's name, forgetting that God is holy and how we use God's name, Jesus' name, matters.

The prayer goes on, **Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.** This is reminder to ourselves that while we have hopes, and dreams, and desires, and there's nothing wrong with that, more than anything, we want **God's** will to be done. We want God's will to be done even more that we want what **we** want.

The idea here is also to remind us that we are joining God in establishing his kingdom. That's what we're about as a church. Doing what Jesus was doing in loving people, teaching people, setting people free, helping them to see God for who he really is, helping them to live life that really is life, not some cheap, fake, imitation life.

If we look at this as an outline, you might say, "Lord, put me to work for you. Here are my hands, here's my life, here are my abilities, my time, my money. Put all these into action for your will to be done in this world. As I go about my day, I give myself to you."

Then, **Give us this day our daily bread...** After all that now we're ready to ask God for the things we want to see happen in our lives! But notice what we ask for. It's not, "God make me rich!" It's not, "Provide for me so that I never need anything again." Jesus is teaching us to say, "I would ask for just enough, Lord. Not more than I need. Just enough for one more day, because I trust you for the other days ahead. I know that there will be just enough tomorrow and just enough the next day." When we come to God we're asking for our "Just enough."

“Lord, I’m sick, and I give this to you. I ask that you get me through this day.” “Lord, you know the decisions I have to make, please guide me by your Spirit so that today I do what you would have me do. I don’t need to know about next week; just enough for today.”

Then, **Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us...** When we have sins in our lives that we haven’t gotten honest with God about, it’s like carrying around a load of rocks. It slows us down in life and separates us from God. We don’t have to walk through life burdened because God offers us forgiveness. Now, God knows our sins already. It’s just that when you name them, you’re being honest about them. God says, “I love you. You’re forgiven.” And you feel lighter, freer, in unity with God.

God wants to forgive us and set us free, but the one contingency is for us to be willing to forgive others in the same way we have been forgiven. So you pray, “God, here’s where I’ve blown it...please forgive me. And you’ve forgiven me, help me to go about the business of forgiving others. Please help me to let go of the need to get even with those who have hurt me.” This is an opportunity for liberation.

Then, **Lead us, not into temptation, but deliver us from evil...** Why would we pray that? Would God actually lead us into temptation? No. The Bible says: **“God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone...” (James 1:13-14)**. What we’re praying here is, “Lord, here are the things that I struggle with, the temptations that lure me away. You know what goes on in my head. I don’t want to go there so, Lord, take my hand and lead me where you want me to go.”

And that’s the end of the Lord’s Prayer as Jesus taught it. Now the early church, added a final phrase from a prayer that King David spoke in 1 Chronicles 29. That final part, that benediction is, **For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.** The end of this prayer is a reminder to ourselves is, “God, it’s really all about you. It’s not about me.”

These are some key things that Jesus taught us about prayer. We can use this prayer, the outline that we already know, to guide us in having rich prayer lives.

But now I want us to look at how Jesus actually prayed. And his prayer life was shaped by his understanding of who God is and God’s relationship to him. Who is God to you? At a time in my life I saw God as an angry old man out to get me if I misbehaved. But that’s not the full character of who God is. Jesus understood God at his baptism. He was baptized by John in the Jordan River. And when he came up out of the water a voice from heaven spoke and said, **“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22)**. Check it out: before Jesus ever did a miracle or ever preached a sermon God said to him, “I am pleased with you. I am proud of who you are.” And Jesus conveys to us that this is the same relationship that you can have. Listen, God already loves you, before you’ve accomplished anything, he loves you. Even when you’ve messed up, he loves you. He is pleased with who you are and wants to be in relationship.

And I think I can understand this because, as a father, I know what it means for a father to want to have a relationship with his children. I love my daughters more than I love my own life. And I just want to be with them. In fact last Friday I took Zoe and Abby on a date—just the three of us. We had a fancy dinner at Mythos—appetizers, flaming cheese, entrées, dessert—we were stuffed. I love those unhurried moments when we just get to talk. Zoe is a great conversationalist and I love hearing what’s on her mind and going on in her life. And Abby joins right in. After we ate, we went shopping at a new store down town that some church members have opened. My girls love going down town. Then we came home and hung out for a while. I savor those times. Just like God savors the times when you stop to talk to him, when you have communion with him. God longs for those times with you.

At its heart, that’s what prayer is. It’s sitting down with God and sharing our hearts and listening for his. It’s learning and laughing. Sometimes it’s crying, and questioning, maybe even doubting. It’s sharing our dreams, the things we wonder about, our hopes and desires. It’s planning adventures and ways to serve.

Prayer is so important because how else are you going to hear God tell you, “I love you so much and I’m proud to call you my child”? When else are we going to be able to say back, “I love you and I don’t deserve everything you’ve given to me, but I’m thankful. And I’m glad to claim you as my father”? That’s what prayer looks like, especially when we follow in Jesus’ footsteps in how he prayed.

The number one excuse you give for why you don't pray more is that you're too busy. You're busy, I'm busy. Jesus was busy, but he made time to pray. He had three years to do his ministry and time was of the essence and there were so many people who needed to hear good news, so many who were sick that needed to be healed...there were times we see in scripture that Jesus was on the go from before dawn until late into the evening. "I've got to heal one more person, help one more hear the good news and then we've got to go over to this other place and do the same..." But we read in the Gospels over and over and over again words like these in Mark: **"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" (Mark 1:35).** Or in Luke where it says, **"One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God" (Luke 6:12).** Over and over Jesus stops everything he's doing to pray. He knows that those hours he's praying he could be doing stuff. He could be healing people, and teaching people, getting more work done. It's just that what he realizes is that for him to be effective, he's got to spend time with his Father in prayer. Because when he spends time with his Father in prayer he finds peace. When he spends time with his Father in prayer he finds strength. He finds wisdom. He finds guidance. He finds hope. He finds joy. He remembers his mission.

Late last Fall I took a Sunday off. I was just exhausted after everything that happened last year. I love this church and you, but sometimes, I just need to get away from you and from here. I had a longing to be outside to worship so I decided to hike up to the bluffs overlooking Shoal Creek--up there near Mother Nature's Crack. I took my Bible, and my journal, and some bread and grape juice. And I spent a couple of hours on the bluff. I had the Lord's Supper. I spent time thinking, praying, writing, singing—which kind of freaked out a few people that came hiking up that trail. But I came down from that time, from the bluff, so rejuvenated, refreshed, remembering who I am, ready for the weeks ahead. Please make the time to pray. Occasionally get outside. The busier you are, the more you need to make time to pray.

Now, some of Jesus' most powerful prayers happen during his last 24 hours of his life. At the last supper, he's about to be betrayed, arrested, crucified, but what does he do? He gives thanks to God. Then in John 17, he takes a huge chunk of time and prays for other people, not himself, but his disciples then and now. Then Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane and he prays, "Father take this cup from me, yet not my will, but yours be done." That's exactly what he taught his disciples to pray in the Lord's Prayer.

Then as he is hanging on the cross he looks at the people who had just crucified him and he prays, "Father forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." Just like he taught his disciples to pray. Then he prays Psalm 22. In his agony he prays, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But that's not the end of his prayer. He prays part of one more Psalm, "Into your hands I commit my spirit."

This is what we learn from Jesus. He trusted his Father with his life. His relationship with the Father transformed him. It sustained him, it kept him going. I really want to have, and I really want you to have, the kind of relationship with God that sustains you, that empowers you, that you might have regular, daily, intimate conversations with God.

The challenge remains. Spend more time in prayer than you already do. Find two times every day that you dedicate to prayer. They don't have to be long times, but intentional times where you disconnect from everything else so that you can spend time with your heavenly Father. One time in the morning, one time before you go to sleep at night. Expand your prayer vocabulary. Use the Psalms in the Old Testament. Use the Lord's prayer as an outline and make it your own. Take special times to get outside, walk, meditate, pray, commune with God. It will change your life. God loves you and he is pleased with you. Spend time with him. Spend time with him so you can hear him say it. Let's pray like Jesus. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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