

Confessions of a Pastor: I Struggle with Prayer  
Mark Statler – September 13, 2009

Today we are continuing the series called “confessions of a pastor”. In some ways I’m glad I only get to deliver one of the messages in this series, because I’m not sure I want to share several of my confessions with you! So today we’re going to talk about prayer. Maybe the most correct way for me to tell you about my prayer life is that I struggle with prayer. The blunt version is that sometimes I just don’t want to pray.

The real confession for me is that I went through years of ministry without praying regularly, especially early in my ministry. I am more consistent in prayer right now than I have ever been, but occasionally I will still go days without taking time to pray. And I really don’t know how to explain this. Clearly, Jesus modeled that regular communication with God is critically important. Clearly the expectation for someone in leadership of ministry is that prayer would be critically important. Clearly I understand the significance of prayer, and have even had many amazing experiences of God’s presence through prayer. So why don’t I crave spending time in prayer? Why is it something I have to discipline myself to do. Why is it not more natural and effortless for me? I don’t know that I have an answer to those questions. I have always struggled with prayer.

I do believe that prayer comes more easily and naturally for some people. There may be many of you today who communicate with God almost effortlessly through prayer. You look forward to your quiet times with God and feel less connected to God if you miss one. If that’s who you are, that’s great! I wish I was more like you. But I’m not.

My guess is that there are many of you who struggle with prayer just like I do. You’d like to experience a closer relationship with God through prayer, but you struggle with how to pray or what to say. Maybe you have a hard time believing that God wants to communicate with you through prayer. Or maybe you’re not sure that God will answer your prayers. Maybe you are just so easily distracted (one of my prayer issues) that you think trying to pray is useless. Here’s what I mean...*Lord, help me with my patience. I don’t want to be short-tempered, especially with my kids...oh yeah, Andrew has guitar lesson after school and Caroline has a ball game. Guess we’ll eat at the ball park. I like the hot dogs there, but I’m not in a hot dog mood. Too bad I don’t have time to swing by Hackett’s for some wings. The truck will need some gas before we do all this running around. And it’s time for an oil change, when will I have time for that? I wonder if we have any bug spray. Hope the game doesn’t run late. There’s a new episode of Psych on TV tonight. That’s cool. Did I take out the garbage this morning? Man, I’m hungry.* I have prayer times like that! Still. And some of you may be like me and have the prayer version of “attention deficit disorder”.

Maybe you don’t pray because you figure that God has much bigger things to worry about than your issues. I mean, innocents caught in middle of civil war, or thousands of orphaned children in Africa, or lots of other things are going on out there. Why would God be interested in listening to me? Do my concerns, which are trivial in comparison, really matter to God?

Over the years I have battled guilt about my prayer life. Aren’t pastors supposed to have all this together? Can I be useful for God’s purposes when I don’t want to take

more time to pray? I genuinely love God, but I struggle with prayer. I am, at this point in my journey of faith, at the most fruitful and consistent prayer-life ever. And what I want to share with you comes out of my struggle to find meaningful times of being with God in prayer.

**KEEP IT SIMPLE.** I tend to over-complicate things...and prayer may be one of those things. Prayer is simply communicating with God. That's it. And communication is simply the transferring of thoughts, feelings, and ideas by whatever means works! Start by sharing what is happening in your life right now; start with surface things and use simple language. Sometimes I have prayed about something that is frustrating me on a particular day and that's all there was to it. Other times, I have shared a similar thing, a frustration, and in communication with God it has led to something deep in me...an insecurity I needed to address, or a deep assurance that God is in control.

And remember, words are not the only way to communicate. Words are not our only tools in communicating with God. In fact, the most powerful communication I have ever experienced or witnessed happened in times when words were not adequate. Communication with God in prayer is not limited to our ability to articulate our thoughts and feelings. Paul tells us that one of the gifts of God's spirit (God's presence in us, with us) is that it helps us communicate with God even when we don't know what to pray...

***In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. (Romans 8:26 NIV)***

I have experienced this type of wordless prayer in times of crisis and deep grief, sometimes when I have been confused about something, and also in times of joy and extreme gratitude. So keep it simple...it's just communicating with God by whatever means works.

Next tip...**PRAY HONESTLY.** I used to think that I had to be careful about what I said and how I said it when I was praying. It's like I had this theological correctness filter...carefully measuring my words like I was seeking God's approval....like God wasn't going to listen unless I said the right things in the right words with the right attitudes. They were like Eddie Haskell prayers. Do you remember Eddie Haskell from Leave it to Beaver? He was Wally's brownnosing friend. Every time Eddie would visit the Beaver household, he'd kiss up to Beav's parents. "Hello, Mrs. Cleaver. You sure look lovely today." Eddie's words were the right words, but they just weren't very genuine.

So now I just let it fly...my anger, my confusion, my frustration; whether any of that is directed toward God or toward someone else, and I think my communication with God is better because I am finally being much more honest. I figure it like this, God better be bigger than my anger, disappointment, pain...even my pettiness or selfishness or self-righteousness. I can handle my kid's anger toward me; I can handle it when my kid is being selfish; so I figure God can handle it too.

Our biblical model for honest communication with God is the Old Testament Prophet Jeremiah. Now, God did not give Jeremiah very many messages of hope. It was pretty much gloom and doom. And Jeremiah got in a lot of trouble with his contemporaries over all the judgment he was handing out, so Jeremiah didn't mind

telling God exactly what was on his mind. Check out this passage from **Jeremiah 20:7 (TNIV)**

***You deceived me, LORD, and I was deceived;  
you overpowered me and prevailed.  
I am ridiculed all day long;  
everyone mocks me.***

Now that's not a very politically correct, but Jeremiah didn't give a rip. He didn't play games with God. Neither should we. Now God didn't really deceive Jeremiah, but Jeremiah wasn't afraid to tell God what it felt like to him - his subjective experience. So worry way less about "correctness" in your prayers and be more concerned about being honest and up front about your feelings.

Next, **PRAY ABOUT ANYTHING**. I used to think that it was selfish for me to take little concerns to God when there were obviously much bigger things happening in the world that require God's attention. Why would God give a rip about my head cold when there are millions living with cancer? So I didn't take the little concerns to God in prayer...we didn't talk about them, not because God doesn't want to talk to me about those things, I just never gave God the opportunity to talk about them...I never put them on the table. Now, I'm not talking about really trivial prayers for great parking spaces, or for the perfect latte.

That was a mistake...and it's a mistake I learned from my kids. Our son, Andrew, likes to collect rocks for whatever reason. We were hiking at 9000 feet in the Utah mountains this summer and he came down the mountains with pockets full of rocks. And then he wants to show me his rocks. Now I don't care for rocks. After two or three rocks, I'm ready for the show to be over. They all look the same to me. But then I notice that he has reasons why he chose each rock. There is some small detail he spotted that makes the rock unique or special. As I see how much he does care about his collection, then I realize that I care too. I care because he cares. For my birthday a few weeks ago, Andrew gave me a special gift. Some of his favorite rocks.

God is like that. Because God cares for you, he cares about what you care about. Paul seemed to know that God was into the details of our lives. He reminded the believers in Philippi, ***Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. (Philippians 4:6 TNIV)***. Paul didn't say to pray only about the big, hairy, important sounding things, but about everything. Paul said to pray about everything because God cares about everything. If it matters enough to you to want to talk to God about it, then share it.

Something I have really used to improve my connection to God is to follow another bit of advice from Paul about prayer found in I Thessalonians 5:17...it is to **PRAY CONSTANTLY**. I have mentioned that I have struggled with spending dedicated time in prayer each day. But one thing I have done well for a long time now is to pray constantly. That doesn't mean we are in a constant state of meditation. It means that we are constantly communicating throughout the day.

I have to admit that I am pretty late into the texting thing. I think it's because I struggled with it's usefulness. I thought, "if you need to talk to me, then call me." Well because others in my family were texting, I decided it was time to pay for the unlimited

family texting package. Now I'm sending texts all the time! It's a great way for me to be in touch with what's going on with my wife or daughter or friends without taking lots of time. They are short, quick, communications that help us stay up with each other.

That's the way I see Paul's advice to pray constantly. It's not about taking lots of time to sit and pray and not do other things...it's about taking a little time to pray while life is happening. You hear a concern about someone - take a minute to lift it in prayer. I remember one Saturday evening I went out snow sledding with my kids. It was turning dark and then it started to snow again...big, beautiful flakes floating down by the light of street lamps. We were having so much fun, and it was so beautiful out. I just stopped for a minute and said "thank you" to God.

To pray constantly is to be in ongoing communication with God over anything that's happening or whatever's on your mind at anytime.

The final thing on my list today of things that have helped me develop a much more open communication with God through prayer is to **PRAY CREATIVELY**. You don't have to be in a certain posture or a certain place to pray. Pray during routine tasks; When I drive, I pray for all kinds of things, especially the other drivers. When I jog I pray for the people who live in the houses I am running by; When I'm mowing, I pray for my neighbors, then I pray that my grass is going to die soon because I really don't like to mow. If you get bored in a meeting, start praying for the people in the meeting...better yet, pray for a change in the agenda! Write out your prayers for a change. A friend of mine recently encouraged me to journal my prayers, then set them aside for awhile before rereading them. It's a great way to see how God has been at work in your life.

Routines for prayer are good. Setting aside a certain time and place each day for prayer is an excellent habit. I am living into that habit every day. But variety is also good, just as it is with anyone else you communicate with. So experiment with different ways to communicate with God.

I didn't always have healthy communication with God through prayer. The lessons and practices I've shared today have helped me enjoy a much more consistent and fruitful connection to God than I once had. I don't have a "wow, look what amazing thing happened when I prayed," story to tell you. I believe prayer has been involved in every amazing thing that has happened in my life.

I have a deep, deep, confidence that God walks through life with me daily. I trust that whatever I face, I don't face by myself. I've had that confidence since I first met Jesus. But it's much deeper now that I have learned how to pray in ways that work for me...ways that keep me in constant touch with God. God desires to have that kind of relationship with you. And God will do most of the work - he'll never miss an opportunity to share life with you. That's some very good news! And the best way for you to share your life with him is through the practice of prayer. I hope there have been some hints or reminders today that will help you with your daily communication with God.