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A Primer on Prayer

Luke 11:1, “And it came to pass, that, as he was praying in a certain place, when he ceased, one of his disciples said unto him, Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples.”

This passage occurred toward the beginning of Christ's third year of ministry. As the disciples, frequently witnessed Christ praying, no doubt they stood in awe as they beheld the intimacy and communion that Jesus had with the Father. And this conversation quickly arose as to how they could pray like Christ.

Now, you may or may not know this but two of Christ's disciples, Andrew and Peter, were actually disciples of John the Baptist before they became followers of the Lord.¹ Accordingly, as John the Baptist had given his disciples a lesson on prayer, (a lesson that Andrew and Peter would have remembered) Andrew and Peter no doubt took the lead here in requesting a lesson on prayer from Christ.

The result was Christ's giving to His disciples, and thus the church, a pattern after which we ought to pray. And that pattern is what we commonly called *The Lord's Prayer*.

Matthew 6:9 - 13, “After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.”

You might think that the appropriate place to start when it came to a sermon on prayer would be *The Lord's Prayer*. However there is a problem with this tactic. *The Lord's Prayer* was given to a group of men who were not strangers to prayer. NOT ONLY were they raised in their Jewish homes praying BUT up to this point they also had the privilege of watching and listening (Jews prayed out loud) to Christ pray for no less than two years! As such they not only had a firm grasp on prayer, but also a strong desire to learn how better to pray.

Well family of God, we have not been privy to what the disciples had gleaned about prayer from Christ up to this point. As such, far from being hungry to learn more about prayer, my guess is that for some this morning the topic itself has been met with yawns and disinterest. It has been said, “If you want to empty the pews, preach on prayer.” In fact, this past week some of you read the quote that Dorothy sent out:

¹ Compare John 1:35-42

“We are never better affected unto God than when we pray; yet when we pray, how are our affections many times distracted!... Are we not as unwilling many times to begin, and as glad to make an end, as if in saying, ‘Call upon Me,’ [Christ] had set us a very burdensome task?”

Accordingly if we had a chance to ask of Christ one question that He would answer directly today, I doubt any of us would request that the Lord, “Teach us to pray.”

So rather than discussing how to pray, I want to give you a primer on prayer. I want to answer some of the more fundamental questions:

- What is prayer?
- What good is prayer?
- Is there anything I can do to cultivate a life of prayer?

Prayer’s Essence

In light of this, let's begin by looking at the essence of prayer.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, “Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.”

This constitutes part of the final exhortation that Paul gave the Thessalonians as he closed out this epistle. Nestled in the midst of a call to godliness in which Paul said such things as these:

- 1 Thessalonians 5:12, “...appreciate those who diligently labor among you...”
- 1 Thessalonians 5:14: “...admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all men.”
- 1 Thessalonians 5:15: “...[do not] repay... evil for evil...”
- 1 Thessalonians 5:19: “Do not quench the Spirit.”

Paul exhorted the people of Thessalonica to be men and women of prayer, “Pray WITHOUT CEASING” (1 Thessalonians 5:17)!

- Why does Paul strongly exhort prayer here?
- What is prayer?

We could supply the answer given by the church so many years ago to these questions:

- WSC #98: “Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies.”

Yet again on account of our church culture which doesn't pray, this still is not basic enough. In its most essential form, “What is prayer?”

To understand prayer, we are going to begin by simply defining the word for prayer in this text — *proseuchomai* *proseuchomai* This term literally means to pray or to offer prayer, to ask. This is the most comprehensive word for prayer and the most frequently used word for prayer in the Bible. For example, in Scripture there are many words used to describe prayer.

- euchomai, eucha: is a prayer which expresses a wish. It comes very close to being a vow.

Romans 9:3, “For I could wish² that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh.”

Acts 18:18, “And Paul after this tarried there yet a good while, and then took his leave of the brethren, and sailed thence into Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila; having shorn his head in Cenchrea: for he had a vow³.”

- erotao, deasis: is a prayer of entreaty of supplication. These are used in contexts of asking or requesting.

1 Peter 3:12, “For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers⁴: but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil.”

1 John 5:16, “If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray⁵ for it.”

- enteuxsis: is a prayer used when petitioning a superior.

1 Timothy 4:5, “For it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer⁶.”

Proseuchomai can refer to all of these or none of these.⁷ Its primary reference is to devotion; it expresses a God-ward look of dependence, devotion, and communion. Proseuchomai is depending upon God to do what He says He is going to do. For example, when a person comes to a Biblical view of God's sovereignty, one of the first questions which arises is this one: If God is sovereign, why pray?

Yet, how much more difficult the question becomes when we think of prayer in relation to Christ: If God is sovereign, and Christ is God, why did Christ pray?

Matthew 26:36-39, “Then cometh Jesus with them unto a place called Gethsemane, and saith unto the disciples, Sit ye here, while I go and pray yonder. And he took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be sorrowful and very heavy. Then saith he unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me. And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.”

It is clear from this text that the reason why Christ prayed, and primarily why we ought to pray, is because prayer is not primarily requesting (that is deomai)⁸ rather, it primarily is an act of dependence upon and communion with God! This is why our Lord was always praying! For Christ, prayer was NOT the means

² ευχομαι euchomai

³ ευχη euche

⁴ δεησις deesis

⁵ ερωταω erotao

⁶ εντευξις enteuxis

⁷ Compare Colossians 1:3; 2 Thessalonians 1:11, Acts 6:4; Ephesians 6:18

⁸ Christ here was not trying to change the path on which He trod- a path which would lead to His death!

to change reality, He could have done this by speaking a word, BUT the avenue of communion with God!⁹

And so, “If God is sovereign why pray?”

In light of what we have seen we really are asking here, “If God is sovereign, why depend upon Him?” When viewed this way, the answer is quite simple: We should pray BECAUSE God is sovereign!

And so “prayer” primarily speaks of a relationship of dependence upon and communion with God which consequently expresses itself in “...an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ...”

And so that is what we primarily are speaking about when we address the issue of prayer, we are addressing, the communion we have in Christ, and our fellowship with Him. The highest call of the redeemed life, specifically, the intimate and life-changing privilege of laying our head upon the breast of Christ (as did John¹⁰) looking into His eyes by faith, and pouring our hearts out before Him.

In light of this, it should be obvious that for you to fulfill the command to, “Pray without ceasing” you must have a relationship with Christ. He must be your Savior. You must be His servant.

In fact, listen to Isaiah 59.

Isaiah 59:1-2, “Behold, the LORD’S hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear: But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear.”

Did you get that?

If you do not have a saving relationship with Christ, it is not that God cannot hear you when you pray, it is that He will NOT hear you. And so this day, before it is too late, bow your knees before God and ask Him to forgive you on account of your sin.

All of us have sin. Accordingly all of us are under the wrath of God, “for the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23).

Though you might be a very “good” person, nevertheless if you die guilty of just one sin you will be sent to hell. And yet that is why Jesus came. As God He did not have any sin. As a man, He could go in our place when it came to God’s punishment for sin. And so though He was without sin, nevertheless Jesus was hung on a cross to die in our place, because of our sin.

Accordingly if you will claim that sacrifice as the payment for your sin, you will not be punished for your sin. Rather, you will see that you are an object of God’s grace, mercy, and love.

⁹ The Bible records that Christ prayed: Early in the morning, Mark. 1:35; All night and often, Luke 5:16; During the Day, Matthew 14:19; From Afternoon till evening, Matthew 14:23; During the Evening, Luke 22:17; When He was physically tired, Mark 1:35; When incurring rejection, Matthew 11:25; When misunderstood, John 6:15; During spiritual conflict, John 12:27; When He was in the Garden, Matthew 26; When He was dying, Luke 23:46. Christ’s utter dependence upon the Father resulted in a life of prayer!

¹⁰ Compare John 13:23

Oh how I exhort you this day. Go to God in prayer. Confess that you deserve death on account of your sin. Claim Christ as your sacrifice. And God will make you His child and you will enter into a saving relationship with God!

Now, if this is true of you- if you have a saving relationship with God, then in and through all things you are invited to fellowship with God. And you are invited to commune with the Lord. Come and lay your head upon His breast through faith and pour your heart out before Him. Pray!

So what is prayer?

It denotes a God-ward look of dependence and devotion. And thus to “pray without ceasing” is to cultivate a life where you at all times are living in reliance upon Christ.

The Effect of Prayer

James 5:16, “Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. **The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.**”

It has been said that prayer does not change a thing; only God does. And that is right. However would you notice that genuine communion with God, and that is what James is talking about here when he references the “effective prayer of a righteous man,” does have an effect!

What is that effect?

If you study Scripture you will discover that the primary effect of prayer is not related so much to the changing of this world, but to the changing of the one praying.

Philippians 4:6-7, “Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”

Oh brothers and sisters, if we would but cultivate a life of dependence upon and devotion to God Our greatest privilege is not getting our way but seeing that God has gotten His. Communion is our primary passion. God's peace will guard our heart and mind in Christ Jesus!

Accordingly, nothing in the world may change the cancer may not go away, but instead become worse, our circumstances may not get better. Our loved one may not do what is best but we will undergo a life-transformation which will be nothing short of incomprehensible! We will know intimacy with God. We will enjoy His peace. Our walks will be vibrant and alive. Our souls will be refreshed by living waters.

We see it in the prophet Habakkuk.

Habakkuk 1:2-4, “O LORD, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear! even cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save! Why dost thou shew me iniquity, and cause me to behold grievance? for spoiling and violence are before me: and there are that raise up strife and contention. Therefore the law is slacked, and judgment doth never go forth: for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth.”

This prophecy begins with Habakkuk complaining bitterly to God about His providence. God's people

have plunged to new depths in their depravity. And evidently Yahweh didn't care. And Habakkuk is angry here; he's mad.

Yet do you know what this righteous prophet did?

He DIDN'T chuck God and go it alone. He didn't accuse God of foul revolt and fall back to coasting. Rather, as these first verses demonstrate he went to the Lord in prayer. He struggled with God on his knees. Now though nothing changed in Habakkuk's surroundings, notice the effect of prayer on this man's life.

Habakkuk 3:17-18, "Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation."

Don't Miss It!

In Habakkuk 1, we read of this prophet kneeling in prayer. In Habakkuk 3, we read of this prophet rising from his knees. Nothing in the world had changed; but Habakkuk was a new man! Because he had just communed with God!

Such is the effect of prayer on the life of the child of God.

If you want to know

- Joy
- Peace
- Satisfaction
- Good days
- A life filled and overflowing

Then cultivate a life of dependence upon and communion with God.

And yet, there is a hindrance here. There is something that will wage war with your desire to fellowship with God. What will transform intimate communion into a time of "dryness?" What will lead us to the place where our prayers seem just to bounce off the ceiling?

Hindrances to Prayer

In the first epistle that Peter penned to the brethren scattered throughout the world, he mentions prayer three times. What is note-worthy about these references is that there is something common to each of them.

1 Peter 3:7, "Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honor unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered."

Now in the very next paragraph he speaks to all believers (in v. 8) about being brotherly and kindhearted and humble and (in v. 9) not returning evil for evil but instead giving a blessing. Then to support these admonitions he quotes Psalm 34 in verses 10-12, which is the second time he appeals for prayer in this

epistle.

1 Peter 3:10-12, “For he that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile: Let him eschew evil, and do good; let him seek peace, and ensue it. For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers: but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil.”

Then a chapter later, Peter exhorts us once again concerning prayer.

1 Peter 4:7, “But the end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer.”
What is the common thread running through these three references to prayer?

Don't miss it! All three teach us, NOT that praying helps us live right. BUT that living right helps us to pray.

Did you get that?

As we just saw, prayer is one of the ways that God has appointed for us to grow in our walks with Christ. And so, to live the way we should.

But Peter's point in this epistle is that it's also true the other way around! God has appointed a way for us to live which will help us to pray. Prayer helps us to have communion with the Lord and fellowship with Him.

So what is the way of living that hinders prayer?

Let's look more closely at these texts. Peter's first exhortation in 3:7 tells us husbands that there is a way to live with our wives that can clog our prayers, and a way to live with our wives that will help our prayers.

1 Peter 3:7, “Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered.”

If you want your prayers to be helped and not hindered, you have to live with your wife in a certain way. There has to be an effort to understand her so as to know her needs. There needs to be a special solicitousness of her weaknesses and what she especially needs from you. There needs to be a recognition that she is a fellow heir of the grace of life and an accompanying bestowal of honor rather than any belittling or demeaning. When husbands live like this (with understanding, tender care, and honor), their prayers will not be hindered.¹¹

Consider the second exhortation of 1 Peter 3:10-12.

¹¹ Wayne Grudem put it this way, “So concerned is God that Christian husbands live in an understanding and loving way with their wives, that he 'interrupts' his relationship with them when they are not doing so. No Christian husband should presume to think that any spiritual good will be accomplished by his life without an effective ministry of prayer. And no husband may expect an effective prayer life unless he lives with his wife 'in an understanding way, bestowing honor' on her. To take the time to develop and maintain a good marriage is God's will; it is serving God; it is a spiritual activity pleasing in his sight. (*1 Peter*, p. 146)

Following his command to husbands, Peter goes on in verses 8 and 9 to call all of us, not just husbands.

1 Peter 3:8-9, “Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous: Not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing; knowing that ye are thereunto called, that ye should inherit a blessing.”

Then he gives a reason for why we should live like this. Again, it is a quote from Psalm 34 and in verse 12 the reason comes to a climax with the same kind of argument as in 3:7. Namely prayers are hindered if you do not pursue a life of godliness and devotion and rather you give yourself to speaking or doing evil (1 Peter 3:10-11).

Do you see it?

From this passage we conclude that God has a special openness to the prayers of those who pursue peace and whose lips are pure and who don't use guile (deceit).

1 Peter 3:12, “For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers: but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil.”

God listens to the prayers of those who keep their tongue from evil. He listens to those who refrain from guile. He listens to those who seek peace and do righteousness.

Lastly, notice Peter's third exhortation to prayer, 1 Peter. 4:8.

In this text the Apostle says that there are special endeavors we can make so that our prayers will be helped and not hindered.

1 Peter 4:7, “But the end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer.”

Peter says two things here as it relates to prayer: we must be of sound judgment for the sake of prayer, sober for the sake of prayer. In other words, there is a way to think and a way to live that will hinder your prayers and there is a way to think and a way to live that will help your prayers.

From 1 Peter we derive an important doctrine for the Christian Life: Christians must endeavor to live in a way that does not hinder their prayer.

Notice this “doctrine” has three parts.

First, it implies that prayer can be hindered. Our prayer life can be clogged, blocked. What blocks prayer is often our lives, the way we live, the way we relate to wives or husbands or kids or parents or colleagues or neighbors. Opening the way of prayer to God involves a conscious endeavor. In each of these texts Peter is telling us to resolve to do something so that our prayers will not be hindered.

I hope you see it. A free, open, and satisfying life of communion with God is not automatic. It doesn't just happen to you while you are passive. If it did, Peter's exhortation in this epistle would be pointless.

Indeed! The intimacy of your walk with God depends in part on how you choose to live at home, at work, and in your private life of solitude. John Piper put it this way:

“Be sober for the sake of your prayers,’ Peter says. But whoever sobered up by coasting? Nobody coasts into sobriety. Not physical sobriety, and not spiritual sobriety. Sobriety happens when we begin to use sound judgment about our lives. Sound judgment about how we spend our time. Sound judgment about the spiritual climate of our homes. Sound judgment about the worldliness of our leisure. Sound judgment about the music we listen to, the movies we attend, the TV we watch. Nobody sobers up without intentional steps to get the bottles of worldliness off the shelves, out of the cabinet and out of the house. When that happens, then the spiritual breath begins to clear up and the kiss of prayer is not hindered.”¹²

Now for an unbeliever who has never known a personal walk with God, what we are addressing this morning no doubt will seem quite irrelevant. However for the believer who has known God and loved Him and tasted the sweetness of peace and fellowship with the Lord nothing could be more terrifying than the growing feeling that God does not seem to be there anymore.

Am I right?

To wake up in the morning or to go to bed at night and to lie there and stare at the ceiling and feel, “It's not real. He's not listening.” To feel God is distant and will never hear and to try to formulate a prayer and feel utterly phony is a terrifying experiences for a Christian who has known unhindered communion with God.

And yet this will be the experience for the child of God who is in love with this world and whose heart beats for another lover. John Piper again put it this way:

“Jesus does not kiss a drunk wife. He may carry her off the street and back to bed. He may be utterly patient with her, and set before her hot coffee and fresh starts. But he will not kiss a drunk wife. What do I mean? I mean that when the bride of Christ, the church, is drunk with the world, she may turn to him for a brief kiss of prayer, but her breath wrecks so bad of worldliness that he turns his face a way.”¹³

Now, this is not to say that God will reward our acts of devotion with a closer walk with Christ. That's pagan. Rather it is to recognize that there is a cause/effect relationship that exists between how we live and the intimacy in our relationship with Christ. If we give ourselves to wanton pleasure, we will be dead even while we live.¹⁴ But if we live so as not to please ourselves but God, we will find ourselves standing beside the Lord, for that is the field where Christ Himself is laboring. We will be able to look up and behold the Savior. We will be yoked in an intimacy of fellowship with the Lord.

You say, how good must a person be for God to commune with them, for truly, as much as I would desire otherwise, I am a sinner through and through?

The gospel would answer this in a two-fold way. First, in Christ you have been made “good” such that God will never close His ears to your prayer- YOU ARE HIS CHILD. However the gospel would also say that if as a believer you spend your life fulfilling the desires of the flesh, while God is willing and desirous of fellowshiping with you nevertheless there will be a separation between you and God such

¹² Quoted from his sermon on 1 Peter 3:7, “That Your Prayers May Not Be Hindered,” January 2, 1994.

¹³ Quoted from his sermon on 1 Peter 3:7, “That Your Prayers May Not Be Hindered.,” January 2, 1994.

¹⁴ Compare 1 Timothy 5:6

that He will lift the sense of His presence and give you leanness of soul so that you might be wooed back to your first love.

Oh, may we not lose the joy of our salvation on account of our sin.¹⁵ Rather, may this coming week, month, and year find us striving for devotion and purity in our walks with God. May it find us growing in our love of fellowshiping with the Lord. May it find us maturing in the faith such that we sincerely would ask of the Lord, “Teach us to pray!”

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on July 30, 2006. Greg is the Preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.

¹⁵ Compare Psalm 51:12