

Part Four: “Practical Praying”

The spiritual discipline of prayer should be a given to anyone with even a cursory understanding of the Bible. After all, the heroes of the Bible constantly demonstrate lives of prayer. From the patriarchs to the prophets, from the kings to the military champions, from Jesus Himself and His apostles, prayer is presented as an absolutely indispensable practice for the faithful. We are also specifically (and frequently) commanded to pray. We are even given specific prayer targets: the Lord’s will, one another, our daily needs, thanksgiving, our enemies (even those who persecute us), the peace of Israel, laborers for the kingdom’s harvest fields, and so many more. Prayer, we are carefully taught, is the antidote to anxiety, to losing heart, to selfishness, to worldliness. It is a key path by which the believer finds God’s guidance, protection, and intimacy.

“Among our specific prayer disciplines are nightly prayers together in which we take turns, each one speaking aloud a request or praise or thanksgiving, so that we can share in the conversation with God. Those prayers include the people on our prayer list for that particular day, but also the variety of friends, issues, and needs that are on our hearts that night.”

Yet even with this matter established in our minds, Christians regularly confess that prayer is too often a matter of weakness, frustration, and guilt. Why? One reason is that we don’t really understand prayer very well. We haven’t been “schooled” in the basics and so when we’ve tried to put our ideas into practice, they fall flat. We end up either accepting an inconsistent mediocrity or we even forgo prayer altogether -- except perhaps in emergencies or the obligation to “say grace” at the dinner table when company is present!

There are yet other reasons for an ineffective life of prayer. We live divorced from an awareness of the supernatural. Yes, even Christians get used to thinking that life is a matter of self-sufficiency. Heartfelt prayers for daily needs, guidance, and strength are therefore foreign to us. Some also deal with a lack faith, or of ongoing sin in their lives which keep them embarrassed from coming to the Lord for a conversation. Others may feel a definite unwillingness to hear what God may have to say or a fear that God will not answer their prayers the way they want.

Don’t know what to pray about?
Many use “The Lord’s Prayer” from Matthew 6:9-13 (more aptly named, I believe, “The Disciple’s Prayer”) as a springboard for prayers. It’s an excellent model into which you can express your own concerns and needs.
Also, we sometimes use the C.A.T.S. categories: confession, adoration, thanksgiving, and supplication.

Actually, the answers to these obstacles are not all that difficult to overcome. For Jesus has promised us help, understanding, strength, forgiveness, and fresh starts. And He has comforted us with the news that His burdens are light as we lean into the power of the Spirit. But to overcome the barriers to prayer, we must 1) seriously desire things to change, 2) become properly informed about prayer, and 3) start praying! That’s

right; get started. Even when it seems awkward or irregular, you must realize that you will never become confident and comfortable in prayer unless you start exercising what you are learning.

One of the most elementary lessons in the “school of prayer” is that you become better acquainted with the God you’re praying to. Focus in on the wonderful truths the Bible teaches about our heavenly Father. Be moved by His testimony of overwhelming power and enduring mercy. Rest on the promise that He is always eager to listen to those who have by faith received Jesus as their Savior. Praise God that, through the sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf, our sins are completely and forever forgiven. Thus, we are guaranteed complete and immediate access to the Father -- always! No penance is required before we pray. No workup of emotions. No religious bribery to persuade Him to give us a few minutes. No mediator is needed nor is any special sentiment or atmosphere required. Our omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient Father is always there and He is eager to spend time with us.

Psalms 145:17-19 -- “The Lord is righteous in all His ways, gracious in all His works. The Lord is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth. He will fulfill the desire of those who fear Him; He also will hear their cry and save them.”

“True prayer is neither a mere mental exercise nor a vocal performance. It is far deeper than that. It is spiritual transaction with the Creator of Heaven and Earth.”
(Charles Spurgeon)

1 John 5:13-15 -- “These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God. Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.”

Job 22:25-28 -- “Yes, the Almighty will be your gold and your precious silver. For then you will have your delight in the Almighty and lift up your face to God. You will make your prayer to Him; He will hear you and you will pay your vows. You will also declare a thing and it will be established for you; so light will shine on your ways.”

“Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tire?”
(Corrie ten Boom)

Another critical element is to realize that our purposes of prayer are often quite different than those of God. We tend to focus on “presents;” that is, what God can give us or do for us while

His priority is all about “presence.” The Lord wants us to find comfort and strength simply by being in His company, experiencing a fellowship with the One Who saved us from the penalty of our sins. For never forget that “His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue.” (2 Peter 1:3)

So spend time with God. Honestly lay your concerns and needs and ideas before Him even as you put your humble, confident trust in Him to achieve His glorious will in your behalf. That is the most significant and far-reaching of all the blessings coming from prayer; namely,

being occupied with God rather than being occupied by your questions, complaints, and requests. This is how to be successful in folding prayer into day-to-day life.

As you diligently pursue your pilgrimage, your prayers will become more characterized by a love of truth, a willingness to obey His Word, heavy doses of thanksgiving and praise, intercession for others, deeper humility and trust, and an ever-growing intimacy with the Lord Jesus that sees you placing all areas of your life into His hands. Your prayers will be conversational – not ritualistic repetitions or stilted religious rhetoric. You will become comfortable with short prayers as well as longer conversations. You will find yourself looking for prayer opportunities – in the car, on the patio, in groups of Christian friends, in planned “devotional” exercises, but also in spontaneous appeals for help or praise. Like in any relationship, your conversation becomes easier and more fruitful as you become familiar with the other person. And as the comfortability and significance of your prayer experience grows, so will your desire to live godly in all areas of your life.

“We are to pray in times of adversity, lest we become faithless and unbelieving. We are to pray in times of prosperity, lest we become boastful and proud. We are to pray in times of danger, lest we become fearful and doubting. We are to pray in times of security, lest we become self-sufficient.” (Billy Graham)

Now there are many, many more things to be explored about prayer – confession, vows to God, public prayers with one’s spouse and children (extremely important), and so on. But of highest value are those two things I underscored earlier – becoming better informed about prayer and starting in to build a stronger, more natural prayer experience. In both, cherish the fact that God is on your side and that He wants you to succeed in becoming more “conversant” with Him. Furthermore, He is a God of great grace Who offers forgiveness and fresh starts over and again.

“Dear Lord, please help me to become better in my prayer life. Motivate me to ‘go to school’ on the subject through Bible study, help from Christian friends, and a renewed devotion to the adventure. And help me to embrace the grace that you give for my weak prayers of previous days and for the new, fresh power You offer me to start again and become better in this key area of the sanctified life. In Jesus’ Name, amen.”