

Lessons from the school of prayer

by DA Carson

Having delved into what the Scriptures teach us about prayer, it is also useful to get some practical tips from other Christians about how to deal with our struggles in prayer. This appendix by Don Carson does just that. It is abridged (by permission) from his excellent book A Call to Spiritual Reformation. If you are using these studies in a small group, you might like to use the questions at the end as a basis for group discussion.

Throughout my spiritual pilgrimage, two sources have largely shaped, and continue to shape, my own prayer life: the Scriptures and more mature Christians. The less authoritative of these two has been the advice, wisdom and example of senior saints. I confess I am not a very good student in the school of prayer. Still, devoting a few pages to their advice and values may be worthwhile. Among the lessons more mature Christians have taught me, then, are these.

1. We do not pray because we do not plan to pray

We do not drift into spiritual life; we do not drift into disciplined prayer. We will not grow in prayer unless we plan to pray. That means we must self-consciously set aside time to do nothing but pray.

What we actually do reflects our highest priorities. That means we can proclaim our commitment to prayer until the cows come home, but unless we actually pray, our actions disown our words.

This is the fundamental reason why set times for prayer are

important: they ensure that vague desires for prayer are concretized in regular practice. Paul's many references to his "prayers" (e.g. Rom 1:10; Eph 1:16; 1 Thess 1:2) suggest that he set aside specific times for prayer—as apparently Jesus himself did (Luke 5:16). Of course, mere regularity in such matters does not ensure that effective praying takes place: genuine godliness is so easily aped, its place usurped by its barren cousin, formal religion. It is also true that different lifestyles demand different patterns: a shift worker, for instance, will have to keep changing the scheduled prayer times, while a mother of twin two-year-olds will enjoy neither the energy nor the leisure of someone living in less constrained circumstances. But after all the difficulties have been duly recognized, and all the dangers of legalism properly acknowledged, the fact remains that unless we plan to pray we will not pray.

2. Adopt practical ways to impede mental drift

Anyone who has been on the Christian way for a while knows there are times when our private prayers run something like this: "Dear Lord, I thank you for the opportunity of coming into your presence by the merits of Jesus. It is a wonderful blessing to call you Father ... I wonder where I left my car keys? [No, no! Back to business.] Heavenly Father, I began by asking that you will watch over my family—not just in the physical sphere, but in the moral and spiritual dimensions of our lives ... Boy, last Sunday's sermon was sure bad. I wonder if I'll get that report written on time? [No, no!] Father, give real fruitfulness to that missionary couple we support, Whatever their name is ... Oh, my! I had almost forgotten I promised to fix my son's bike today ..." Or am I the only Christian who has ever had problems with mental drift?

But you can do many things to stamp out daydreaming, to stifle reveries. One of the most useful things is to vocalize your prayers. This does not mean they have to be so loud that they become a distraction to others, or worse, a kind of pious showing off. It simply means you articulate your prayers, moving your lips perhaps; the energy devoted to expressing your thoughts in words and sentences will order and discipline your mind, and help deter meandering.

Another thing you can do is pray over the Scriptures. Christians just setting out on the path of prayer sometimes pray for everything they can think of, glance at their watches, and discover they have

been at it for all of three or four minutes. This experience sometimes generates feelings of defeat, discouragement, even despair. A great way to begin to overcome this problem is to pray through various biblical passages.

A slight variation of this plan is to adopt as models several biblical prayers. Read them carefully, think through what they are saying, and pray analogous prayers for yourself, your family, your church, and for many others beyond your immediate circle.

Similarly, praying through the worship sections of the better hymnals can prove immensely edifying and will certainly help you to focus your mind and heart in one direction for a while.

Some pastors pace as they pray. One senior saint I know has long made it his practice to pray through the Lord's Prayer, thinking through the implications of each petition as he goes, and organizing his prayers around those implications.¹ Many others make prayer lists of various sorts, a practice that will be discussed in more detail later.

This may be part of the discipline of what has come to be called 'journalling'. At many periods in the history of the church, spiritually mature and disciplined Christians have kept what might be called spiritual journals. The real value of journalling, I think, is several-fold: (a) It enforces a change of pace, a slowing down. It ensures time for prayer. If you are writing your prayers, you are not daydreaming. (b) It fosters self-examination. It is an old truism that only the examined life is worth living. If you do not take time to examine your own heart, mind and conscience from time to time, in the light of God's Word, and deal with what you find, you will become encrusted with the barnacles of destructive self-righteousness. (c) It ensures quiet articulation both of your spiritual direction and of your prayers, and this in turn fosters self-examination and therefore growth. Thus, journalling impedes mental drift.

But this is only one of many spiritual disciplines. The danger in this one, as in all of them, is that the person who is formally conforming to such a regime may delude himself or herself into thinking that the discipline is an end in itself, or ensures one of an exalted place in the heavenlies.

Such dangers aside, you can greatly improve your prayer life if you combine these first two principles: set apart time for praying, and then use practical ways to impede mental drift.

3. At various periods in your life, develop, if possible, a prayer-partner relationship

Incidentally, if you are not married, make sure your prayer partner is someone of your own sex. If you are married and choose a prayer partner of the opposite sex, make sure that partner is your spouse. The reason is that real praying is an immensely intimate business—and intimacy in one area frequently leads to intimacy in other areas.

While I was still an undergraduate, in one summer vacation a single pastor took me aside and invited me to pray with him. We met once a week, on Monday nights, for the next three months. Sometimes we prayed for an hour or so, sometimes for much longer. But there is no doubt that he taught me more of the rudiments of prayer than anyone else.

At various periods of my life, other such opportunities have come my way. For the last year or so of my doctoral study, another graduate student and I set aside time one evening a week to pray. Eventually (I was rather slow on this front), I got married. Like most couples, we have found that sustained time for prayer together is not easy to maintain. Not only do we live at a hectic pace, but each stage of life has its peculiar pressures. When you have two or three pre-school-age children, for instance, you are up early and exhausted by the evening. Still, we have tried to follow a set pattern. Quite apart from grace at meals, which may extend beyond the expected “thank you” to larger concerns, and quite apart from individual times for prayer and Bible reading, as a family we daily seek God’s face. About half the time my wife or I leads the family in prayer; the rest of the time, the children join us in prayer. We have discovered the importance of injecting freshness and innovation into such times, but that is another subject. Before we retire at night, my wife and I invariably pray together, usually quite briefly. But in addition, at various points in our life together we have tried to set aside some time one evening a week to pray. Usually we achieve this, for a few weeks, and then something breaks it up for a while. But we have tried to return to it, and we use those times to pray for family, church, students, pressing concerns of various sorts, our children, our life’s direction and values, impending ministry, and much more.

If you know how to pray, consider seeking out someone else and teaching him or her how to pray. By teaching I do not mean

set lessons so much as personal example communicated in a prayer-partner relationship. Such modelling and partnership will lead to the sorts of questions that will invite further sharing and discipleship. After all, it was because Jesus' disciples observed his prayer life that they sought his instruction in prayer (Luke 11:1).

4. Choose models—but choose them well

Most of us can improve our praying by carefully, thoughtfully listening to others pray. This does not mean we should copy everything we hear. Some people use an informal and chatty style in prayer that reflects their own personality and perhaps the context in which they were converted; others intone their prayers before God with genuine erudition coupled with solemn formality, deploying vocabulary and forms of English considered idiomatic 350 years ago. Neither extreme is an intrinsically good model; both might be good models, but not because of relatively external habits, and certainly not because of merely cultural or personal idiosyncrasy. When we find good models, we will study their content and urgency, but we will not ape their idiom.

Not every good model provides us with exactly the same prescription for good praying, exactly the same balance. All of them pray with great seriousness; all of them use arguments and seek goals that are already portrayed in Scripture. Some of them seem to carry you with them into the very throne room of the Almighty; others are particularly faithful in intercession, despite the most difficult circumstances in life and ministry; still others are noteworthy because of the breadth of their vision. All are characterized by a wonderful mixture of contrition and boldness in prayer.

Once again, my life has been blessed by some influential models. I must begin by mentioning my own parents. I remember how, even when we children were quite young, each morning my mother would withdraw from the hurly-burly of life to read her Bible and pray. In the years that I was growing up, my father, a Baptist minister, had his study in our home. Every morning we could hear him praying in that study. My father vocalized when he prayed—loudly enough that we knew he was praying, but not loudly enough that we could hear what he was saying. Every day he prayed, usually for about forty-five minutes. Perhaps there were times when he failed to do so, but I cannot think of one.

But with great gratitude to God, I testify that my parents were not hypocrites. That is the worst possible heritage to leave with children: high spiritual pretensions and low performance. My parents were the opposite: few pretensions, and disciplined performance. What they prayed for were the important things, the things that congregate around the prayers of Scripture. And sometimes when I look at my own children, I wonder if, should the Lord give us another thirty years, they will remember their father as a man of prayer, or think of him as someone distant who was away from home rather a lot and who wrote a number of obscure books. That quiet reflection often helps me to order my days.

5. Develop a system for your prayer lists

It is difficult to pray faithfully for a large spread of people and concerns without developing prayer lists that help you remember them. These lists come in a variety of forms. Many denominations and mission agencies and even some large local churches publish their own prayer lists. These can be a considerable help to those with large interest in the particular organization; otherwise, they may seem a trifle remote. Despite its remoteness, there is one prayer list that offers a tremendous compensating advantage. The list to which I am referring is the publication *Operation World*² which over the course of a year takes you around the world to country after country and region after region, and provides you with succinct, intelligent information to assist you in your prayers. Its value lies in its ability to enlarge your horizons, to expand your interest in the world church and the world's needs.

Many Christians who give themselves to prayer, however, find that, in addition to such published information, it is wise and fruitful to prepare their own lists. These come in many forms. Some are really a subset of journalling, briefly described earlier in this chapter. One approach to journalling involves writing down prayer requests on the left-hand side of a notebook, along with a date and relevant Scriptures, and answers on the right-hand side. This approach has the advantage of encouraging thoughtful, specific requests. General intercession, as important as it may be, cannot so easily be linked to specific answers.

Although I have sometimes adopted this and other forms for my prayer lists, the prayer-list pattern I have followed in recent

years I adapted from J. Herbert Kane, a veteran missionary to China (1935-1950) and then a productive teacher of world mission. Apart from any printed guides I may use, I keep a manila folder in my study, where I pray, and usually I take it with me when I am travelling. The first sheet in that folder is a list of people for whom I ought to pray regularly: they are bound up with me, with who I am. My wife heads the list, followed by my children and a number of relatives, followed in turn by a number of close friends in various parts of the world. The two institutional names on that sheet are the local church of which we are a part, and the seminary where I now teach.

The second sheet in my folder lists short-range and intermediate-range concerns that will not remain there indefinitely. They include forthcoming responsibilities in ministry and various crises or opportunities that I have heard about, often among Christians I scarcely know. Either they are the sort of thing that will soon pass into history, or they concern people or situations too remote for me to remember indefinitely.

The next item in my manila folder is the list of my advisees—the students for whom I am particularly responsible. This list includes some notes on their background, academic program, families, personal concerns and the like, and of course this list changes from year to year.

The rest of the folder is filled with letters—prayer letters, personal letters, occasionally independent notes with someone's name at the top. These are filed in alphabetical order. When a new letter comes in, I highlight any matters in it that ought to be the subject of prayer, and then file it in the appropriate place in the folder. The letter it replaces is pulled out at the same time, with the result that the prayer folder is always up to date. I try to set aside time to intercede with God on behalf of the people and situations represented by these letters, taking the one on the top, then the next one, and the next one, and so forth, putting the top ones, as I finish with them, on the bottom of the pile. Thus, although the list is alphabetized, on any day a different letter of the alphabet may confront me. As I write these lines, I see that names beginning with 'F' are next in the folder.

I am not suggesting that this is the best system. It suits me, and I am happy with it. I need to use it more, not enlarge it more. But the system is flexible, always up-to-date, expandable; above all, it

helps me pray. I tell my students that if they want me to pray for them regularly after they graduate, they need to write regular letters to me. Otherwise I shall certainly forget most of them.

Whatever the system, use prayer lists. All of us would be wiser if we would resolve never to put people down, except on our prayer lists.

6. Mingle praise, confession, and intercession; but when you intercede, try to tie as many requests as possible to Scripture

Both theoretical and practical considerations underlie this advice.

The theoretical considerations can best be set out by mentally conjuring up two extremes. The first judges it inappropriate to ask God for things. Surely he is sovereign: he does not need our counsel. If he is the one “who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will” (Eph 1:11), surely it is a bit cheeky to badger him for things. He does not change the course of the universe because some finite, ignorant and sinful human being asks him to. The appropriate response to him, surely, is worship. We should worship him for what he is and does. Because we so frequently skirt his ways, we should be ready to confess our sin. But to bring him our petitions is surely to misrepresent where true piety lies. Godliness rests in submission to the Almighty’s will, not in intercession that seeks to change that will. Petitionary prayer can therefore be dismissed as at best an impertinence, at worst a desperate insult to the sovereign and holy God. Besides, if God is really sovereign, he is going to do whatever he wants to do, whether or not he is asked to do it. Of course, if a Christian adopts this line, he or she is thinking in much the same way as a Muslim: the right approach to God binds you to a kind of theological determinism, not to say fatalism.

The second extreme begins with the slogan, “Prayer changes things”. Petitionary prayer is everything. This means that if people die and go to hell, it is because you or I or someone has neglected to pray. Does not Scripture say, “You do not have, because you do not ask God” (Jas 4:2)? Worship and confession must of course be allotted an appropriate part, but they can reduce to mere self-gratification: it can be fun to worship, a relief to confess your sins. Real work for God, however, demands that we wrestle with God,

and cry, with Jacob, “I will not let you go unless you bless me” (Gen 32:26). Not to intercede is to flee from your responsibilities as a Christian. Far from being an insult to God, petitionary prayer honours him because he is a God who likes to give his blessings in response to the intercession of his people. In fact, if you agonize in your prayers, fast much, plead the name of Jesus, and spend untold hours at this business of intercession, you cannot help but call down from heaven a vast array of blessings. Of course, if a Christian adopts this line, he or she is in danger of treating prayer much like magic: the right incantations produce the desired effect.

On the face of it, neither of these extremes captures the balance of biblical prayers, and both of them are reductionistic in their treatment of God. We must remember that the Bible simultaneously pictures God as utterly sovereign, and as a prayer-hearing and prayer-answering God. Unless we perceive this, and learn how to act on these simultaneous truths, not only will our views of God be distorted, but our praying is likely to wobble back and forth between a resigned fatalism that asks for nothing and a badgering desperation that exhibits little real trust.

Of the various models that usefully capture both of these poles, the model of a personal relationship with a father is as helpful as any. If a boy asks his father for several things, all within the father’s power to give, the father may give him one of them right away, delay giving him another, decline to give him a third, set up a condition for a fourth. The child is not assured of receiving something because he has used the right incantation: that would be magic. The father may decline to give something because he knows it is not in the child’s best interests. He may delay giving something else because he knows that so many requests from his young son are temporary and whimsical. He may also withhold something that he knows the child needs until the child asks for it in an appropriate way. But above all, the wise father is more interested in a relationship with his son than in merely giving him things. Giving him things constitutes part of that relationship but certainly not all of it. The father and son may enjoy simply going out for walks together. Often the son will talk with his father not to obtain something, or even to find out something, but simply because he likes to be with him.

None of these analogies is perfect, of course. But it is exceedingly important to remember that prayer is not magic and that God is

personal as well as sovereign. There is more to praying than asking, but any sustained prayer to the God of the Bible will certainly include asking. And because we slide so easily into sinful self-centredness, we must approach this holy God with contrition and confession of our sins. On other occasions we will focus on his love and forbearance, on the sheer splendour of his being, and approach him with joy and exuberant praise. The rich mixture of approaches to God mirrored in Scripture must be taken over into our own lives. This rich mixture is, finally, nothing more than a reflection of the many different components of the kind of relationship we ought to have with the God of the Bible.

In addition to these ‘theoretical’ considerations (as I have called them), there are some intensely practical questions. If the one to whom we pray is the sort of God I have just portrayed, then when we ask him for things, when we intercede with him, we must not think either in fatalistic terms or in terms of magic. Rather, we must think in personal and relational categories. We ask our heavenly Father for things because he has determined that many blessings will come to us only through prayer. Prayer is his ordained means of conveying his blessings to his people. That means we must pray according to his will, in line with his values, in conformity with his own character and purposes, claiming his own promises. Practically speaking, *how do we do that?*

Where shall we learn the will of God, the values of God, the character and purposes of God, the promises of God? We shall learn such things in the Scriptures he has graciously given us. But that means that when we pray, when we ask God for things, we must try to tie as many requests as possible to Scripture. That is an immensely *practical* step.

7. If you are in any form of spiritual leadership, work at your public prayers

It does not matter whether the form of spiritual leadership you exercise is the teaching of a Sunday school class, pastoral ministry, small group evangelism, or anything else: if at any point you pray in public as a leader, then work at your public prayers.

Some people think this advice distinctly corrupt. It smells too much of public relations, of concern for public image. After all, whether we are praying in private or in public, we are praying to God: Surely he is the one we should be thinking about, no-one else.

This objection misses the point. Certainly if we must choose between trying to please God in prayer, and trying to please our fellow creatures, we must unhesitatingly opt for the former. But that is not the issue. It is not a question of pleasing our human hearers, but of instructing them and edifying them.

The ultimate sanction for this approach is none less than Jesus himself. At the tomb of Lazarus, after the stone has been removed, Jesus looks to heaven and prays, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me” (John 11:41-42). Here, then, is a prayer of Jesus himself that is shaped in part by his awareness of what his human hearers need to hear.

The point is that although public prayer is addressed to God, it is addressed to God while others are overhearing it. Of course, if the one who is praying is more concerned to impress these human hearers than to pray to God, then rank hypocrisy takes over. That is why Jesus so roundly condemns much of the public praying of his day and insists on the primacy of private prayer (Matt 6:5-8). But that does not mean there is no place at all for public prayer. Rather, it means that public prayer ought to be the overflow of one’s private praying. And then, judging by the example of Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus, there is ample reason to reflect on just what my prayer, rightly directed to God, is saying to the people who hear me.

Many facets of Christian discipleship, not least prayer, are rather more effectively passed on by modelling than by formal teaching. Good praying is more easily caught than taught. If it is right to say that we should choose models from whom we can learn, then the obverse truth is that we ourselves become responsible to become models for others. So whether you are leading a service or family prayers, whether you are praying in a small group Bible study or at a convention, work at your public prayers.

8. Pray until you pray

That is Puritan advice. It does not simply mean that persistence should mark much of our praying—though admittedly that is a point the Scriptures repeatedly make. Even though he was praying in line with God’s promises, Elijah prayed for rain seven times before the first cloud appeared in the heavens. The Lord Jesus

could tell parables urging persistence in prayer (Luke 11:5-13). If some generations need to learn that God is not particularly impressed by long-winded prayers, and is not more disposed to help us just because we are garrulous, our generation needs to learn that God is not impressed by the kind of brevity that is nothing other than culpable negligence. He is not more disposed to help us because our insincerity and spiritual flightiness conspire to keep our prayers brief. Our generation certainly needs to learn something more about persistence in prayer. Even so, that is not quite what the Puritans meant when they exhorted one another to “pray until you pray”.

What they meant is that Christians should pray long enough and honestly enough, at a single session, to get past the feeling of formalism and unreality that attends not a little praying. We are especially prone to such feelings when we pray for only a few minutes, rushing to be done with a mere duty. To enter the spirit of prayer, we must stick to it for a while. If we “pray until we pray”, eventually we come to delight in God’s presence, to rest in his love, to cherish his will. Even in dark or agonized praying, we somehow know we are doing business with God.

If God is the one “who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Phil 2:13), then of course he is the God who by his Spirit helps us in our praying. Every Christian who has learned the rudiments of praying knows by experience at least a little of what this means. The Puritans knew a great deal of it. That is why they exhorted one another to “pray until you pray”. Such advice is not to become an excuse for a new legalism: there are startling examples of very short, rapid prayers in the Bible (e.g. Neh 2:4). But in the Western world we urgently need this advice, for many of us in our praying are like nasty little boys who ring front door bells and run away before anyone answers.

Pray until you pray.

These, then, are some of the lessons I have learned from other Christians. But I would not for a moment want to leave the impression that they constitute a rule, a litmus test, still less a ‘how-to’ manual. The words of Packer in this regard are worth pondering:

I start with the truism that each Christian's prayer life, like every good marriage, has in it common factors about which one can generalize and also uniquenesses which no other Christian's prayer life will quite match. You are you, and I am I, and we must each find our own way with God, and there is no recipe for prayer that can work for us like a handyman's do-it-yourself manual or a cookery book, where the claim is that if you follow the instructions you can't go wrong. Praying is not like carpentry or cookery; it is the active exercise of a personal relationship, a kind of friendship, with the living God and his Son Jesus Christ, and the way it goes is more under divine control than under ours. Books on praying, like marriage manuals, are not to be treated with slavish superstition, as if perfection of technique is the answer to all difficulties; their purpose, rather, is to suggest things to try ... The only rules are, stay within biblical guidelines and within those guidelines, as John Chapman puts it, "pray as you can and don't try to pray as you can't".³

Questions for review and reflection

1. List the positive and negative things you have learned about praying by listening to others pray.
2. List practical ways in which you will commit yourself to improve your prayer life during the next six months.
3. What do Christian preachers and teachers mean when they encourage us to "meditate prayerfully on the Word of God"?

Endnotes

1. See David H. Adeney, “Personal Experience of Prayer”, in *Teach Us To Pray: Prayer in the Bible and the World*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker/Exeter: Paternoster, 1990), pp. 309-15.
2. Patrick Johnstone, *Operation World: A day-to-day guide to praying for the world*, 4th ed. (Bromley, Kent: STL, 1986).
3. In *My Path of Prayer*, ed. David Hanes (Worthing, West Sussex: Henry E. Walter, 1981), pp. 57.

From DA Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1992. Abridged with permission of the author.