

- We are beginning a new teaching series today.
 - It is called “Spiritual Development Practices”
 - One of the things that came out of the church health assessment was the desire that we all have to intentionally grow in our spiritual development.
 - So just like there are group oriented things like the missions trip or the Pursuit of a Healthy Soul, there are some things that will personally change our lives if we put them into practice regularly.
 - The first practice in our Spiritual Development that we are looking at today is prayer.
 - I have been a Christ-follower my whole life.
 - I have heard more teaching and sermons and done more studies on prayer than I can remember. A lot were helpful. A lot were not.
 - I would hear sayings like “If Satan can defeat you in the matter of prayer he can defeat you anywhere. If you can defeat him in the matter of prayer, you can defeat him anywhere.” Who wouldn’t want to win that battle. So I would try hard to pray.
 - Then there were those things that eventually led to guilt.
 - “The best marriages are those where you and your wife pray together regularly.” Whew, I would try to do that, it wouldn’t last, and I would feel like a failure.
 - There were the stories of great missionaries or saints who prayed and amazing things happened.
 - I went to prayer meetings that were so dull I wanted the Lord to come back right now.
 - I’ve been taught a host of tools on how to pray. (eg. Lord’s prayer, A.C.T.S, praying around the wheel)
 - I would be inspired or guilted to pray more. It might work . . . for a while.
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- There are certain things that trip us up when it comes to prayer.
 - It’s what good Christians do. Everyone says so.
 - It can feel transactional. We perform an obligation so that God does something for us. Why do I feel so often as though I am trying to talk God into something?
 - This is how most religions for all of history look at prayer. It’s all about doing something to get an answer. The problem is that when what we pray for doesn’t happen, we get disappointed and often give up.
 - There’s sometimes a sneaking suspicion that my prayer doesn’t matter – God will do what God is going to do. My prayer doesn’t change anything.
 - Isn’t God sovereign? Doesn’t that mean He accomplishes what He wants, when He wants? In fact, given my behavior, he probably won’t listen to me. If so, why pray?
 - We struggle with unanswered prayer. Why does it often take so long to get a prayer answered? Can my prayers actually change things? Does God need me to pray or just want me to pray?
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- It is no wonder that it can be overwhelming and confusing. It doesn’t help that many of the examples we see seem beyond our reach. We could never get there.
 - The topic of prayer is a huge one. We could spend the whole year on it, but for today I want to focus on something that has been helpful for me that I hope will encourage you to pursue the practice of prayer. I am going to focus on this statement.
 - **WE THRIVE IN PRAYER WHEN WE EXERCISE TRUST AND EXPECTATION.** One, prayer is more about what we believe than discipline. Two, your prayer matters. Three, some practical tips.

- We often hear that praying is talking to God. It's true but it is so much more than that. We are told that it is important so we try and make it a priority. Yet there is no Christ-follower I have ever met who thinks their prayer life is totally good and sufficient.
- So often our first attempt at fixing our prayer life is to try and be "more disciplined" in prayer.
- We look at heroes, mentors, and peers who seem to have vibrant, powerful prayer lives and figure the solution might be doing what they do or did. If we get up earlier and use a more effective list or app or acronym we'll fix our problem.
- Methods are necessary and beneficial as we'll see, but "more discipline" is a false hope if your view of prayer and God is off.
- **WE THRIVE IN PRAYER WHEN WE EXERCISE TRUST AND EXPECTATION.**

I. Prayer without trust becomes dull and lifeless.

- As long as we think of prayer as an activity or religious exercise that might get God to do something, we will always struggle. The disciples were used to seeing the religious leaders pray in beautiful and eloquent ways. Then they watched Jesus and they asked him to teach them to pray because what Jesus did was different.
- Once when they were trying to cast a demon out of a person and couldn't and Jesus did, they asked him why.

Matthew 17:20 He replied, "Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, 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."

- Another time they saw Jesus tell a fig tree to wither and it did. They were amazed.
- *Matthew 21:21 Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done.*
- In fact, we read over and over that faith is what powers prayer. It what powers relationship with God.
- You can be as disciplined and eloquent as anyone in your prayers and it will do nothing for your spiritual development.
- When we talk about faith, it means being utterly convinced or persuaded to rely on him.
- It is coming to grips with the idea that God can be completely trusted.
- Because he wants to hear from you. He desires what is best for you. He wants to know you and be known more than you do.
- When Martin Luther's puppy happened to be at the table, he looked for a morsel from his master, and watched with open mouth and motionless eyes; he (Martin Luther) said, "Oh, if I could only pray the way this dog watches the meat! All his thoughts are concentrated on the piece of meat. Otherwise he has no thought, wish or hope."
- It changed my prayer life when I realized that God will always give me or those I pray for exactly what I pray for unless he has something better, in which case he does that.
- Prayer is not what helps us grow. It's who we pray to.
- Prayer is not me vs. him.
- Giving God the cold shoulder or silent treatment never works.
- Until you trust him, trust that he loves you, wants to hear from you, enjoys you, is listening to you and is speaking with you, prayer will be a duty that is hard to stick to.
- We must feel free to come to him in any state of emotion, pursuing him, thanking him, being humble in confession, asking of him, crying out to him.
- *"Prayer is not asking. Prayer is putting oneself in the hands of God, at His disposition, and listening to His voice in the depth of our hearts." - Mother Teresa*

- This is only half of the puzzle. **WE THRIVE IN PRAYER WHEN WE EXERCISE TRUST AND EXPECTATION.** We must come to the place where we believe that our prayers matter.

II. Prayer without expectation becomes routine and religious.

- We are commanded to pray – this is not really enough to keep us doing it, no more than telling your kids to do something “because I told you to” will work long term.
- Your prayers matter because God has chosen to work in this world through you.
- Humanity was created to rule and have authority over the created world. God decided to exert his authority here on earth through his people. He wants us to pray because he gave us responsibility for this planet. Prayer is part of that.
- God is sovereign and all-powerful, but Scripture clearly tells us that He limited himself, concerning the affairs of earth, to working through human beings.
- He told us to ask for his kingdom to come and his will be done (Matt 6:10) – why he want us to waste our time asking for something that was going to happen anyway?
- He told us to ask for our daily bread (Matt 6:11) but he tells us he knows our needs before we even ask?
- He told us to pray for him to send laborers into the harvest (Matt 9:38) but doesn't the Lord of the harvest want it even more than we do?
- Paul said to pray that the word of the Lord would spread rapidly and be glorified (2 Thess 3:1). Wasn't God already planning to do this?
- Why am I supposed to ask God for something he already wants to do if it's not that somehow my asking releases him to do it?
- There is a fascinating story in 1 Kings about Elijah. Quick background, there had been a famine for 3 years because of the sin of the nation. The king blamed the prophet Elijah. The nation was suffering. Eventually Elijah has this big showdown with the prophets of the false gods where in the end fire comes down from heaven to burn up an offering, wood and stone and the people see that God was God and believed in him. At the of this incredible day we read this:

1 Kings 18:41 And Elijah said to Ahab, “Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain.” 42 So Ahab went off to eat and drink, but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees. 43 “Go and look toward the sea,” he told his servant. And he went up and looked. “There is nothing there,” he said. Seven times Elijah said, “Go back.” 44 The seventh time the servant reported, “A cloud as small as a man’s hand is rising from the sea.” So Elijah said, “Go and tell Ahab, ‘Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.’” 45 Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain started falling and Ahab rode off to Jezreel. 46 The power of the LORD came on Elijah and, tucking his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel.

- That seems pretty straightforward doesn't it? Look back at the first verse of this chapter. *1 Kings 18:1 After a long time, in the third year, the word of the LORD came to Elijah: “Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land.” 2 So Elijah went to present himself to Ahab.*

• God had already decided what to do before Elijah ever prayed for the rain. The drought was going to end. But then we read this in James.

James 5:16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. 17 Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. 18 Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

- Which is it? Did the drought end because God decided to do so or because Elijah prayed?

- Yes!
- God has given us his authority and power as his representatives. When we pray, in some sense we are agents of releasing this power and his plan in the world.
- If you want to see how serious this is, listen to this. God was speaking to the prophet Ezekiel at a time when Israel had been disobedient and rebellious for a long time.
"I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none. So I will pour out my wrath on them and consume them with my fiery anger, bringing down on their own heads all they have done, declares the Sovereign LORD." (Ezekiel 22:30-31)
- God's holiness and integrity prevent him from simply excusing sin, but in his love and mercy he desires to redeem and restore. In this case, he was looking for someone to ask him to show mercy and spare the people, but because there was none, he had to destroy them.
- When you pray, pray having expectation without agenda.
- Expect that your prayer matters. Expect God to show up. Know that he has given you authority. He will move in response to your prayer. He will change the world. But do it without dictating exactly what it looks like. He will respond but it may be different than what you think should happen.
- The more you do this, the more your prayer life will change *you* and conform *you* to him. That's because when we come near to God in expectation, he comes near to us.
- When we pray trusting God without expectation, it becomes a self-focused, empty exercise that is about feeling good. It will lead us to rely on our own power, our own ability, our own smarts.
- When we pray with expectation and no trust, it leads to performance oriented prayer. We become demanding, harsh, impatient and distrustful. Prayer becomes a duty and not a passion.
- **WE THRIVE IN PRAYER WHEN WE EXERCISE TRUST AND EXPECTATION.**

III. Ways to practice trust and expectation in prayer.

- How to practice trust?
- Trust is all about relationship. It's about knowing who God is and how he sees you.
- Praise – recognizing who God is. This puts the focus on him. It reminds us of what he is like and leads us to learn new things. It is easier to trust someone who we are reminded is loving, interested, involved, powerful, etc.) Music, Scripture, Lists.
- Thanksgiving – specifically thanking God for things that he has done. Stay current. Think through each day. Think long term.
- Review God's promises – there are many. Review them. Claim them.
- Worship – use your favorite music. Go for a hike. Take a walk.
- Quiet – listen. Let God speak to your heart and soul. Take extended time one in a while.
- Meditate – think about one Scripture verse or truth. Mull it over from every angle.
- Identify and talk about trust "leaks" – disappointments, anger, unfulfilled expectations, fears, bitterness, sin habits.
- How to practice expectation?
- Expectation is about looking for God. It's watching for him and being willing to engage with him in what he does.
- Confess and repent – this almost always involves action. Expect that God will change your heart over time.
- Focused Review – looking back at your day/week. Where was God? What excited you? Bothered you? What might he be asking you to do?

- Take risks in praying for others – pray out loud in a group. Ask a friend if you can pray for them.
 - Pray specifically – ask God for opportunities, for answers to prayer. Pray big (remember, expectation without agenda).
 - Intercede – pray for others. Once again, be specific.
 - Record your prayers – we lose expectation because we miss when God answered.
 - Fast – commit to go an entire 24 hour period without eating. Every time your stomach rumbles pray for something or someone. Expect that God will help you physically.
- **WE THRIVE IN PRAYER WHEN WE EXERCISE TRUST AND EXPECTATION.**
 - One of our first core values in the Alliance is that “Prayer is the primary work of the people of God.”
 - There is nothing you can do that will do more for your spiritual growth than praying with trust and expectation.
 - There is nothing we can do as a church to advance God’s kingdom more than prayer.
 - When you look at the people in Scripture, people just like us,
 - When they were persecuted, they prayed.
 - When they were in need, they prayed.
 - When great things happened, they prayed.
 - When they were faced with challenges, they prayed.
 - When they were sick, they prayed.
 - When they were lonely and worried, they prayed.
 - When they were discouraged and down, they prayed.
 - When they saw miracles and God’s hand, they prayed.
 - When they needed wisdom, they prayed.
 - They considered prayer their most important work.
- God heard them. God listened.
 - They prayed and God delivered.
 - He provided for their needs.
 - He did amazing miracles that blew their minds.
 - He directed them and gave wisdom in their decisions and choices.
 - He encouraged them, healed them, delivered them.
 - He filled them in their loneliness, enabled them when they were weak.
 - He strengthened the weak and lifted up those who were nothing.
 - **WE THRIVE IN PRAYER WHEN WE EXERCISE TRUST AND EXPECTATION.**
 - Our prayers are precious to God, coming before God like incense, sweet and wonderful to God.
 - When we practice trust in prayer it leads us to more trust and more intimacy which leads us to trust more which leads to more intimacy and on it goes.
 - When we pray with expectation, we take risks and God shows up and it leads us to pray with more expectation which leads us to greater requests and risks and greater miracles.