

Developing Your Prayer Life, Part 2 7-9-17

In Luke 11 it says that one day after Jesus finished praying the disciples came to Him and said, “Lord, teach us to pray.” After watching Jesus live for two and a half years, what was it they were curious to know? They never asked, “Lord teach us to preach” or “Lord, teach us to do miracles.” But, *Lord teach us to pray*. It was the prayer life of Jesus that impressed them. They saw in His praying the secret to His person. Last time together we looked at the why, when, where and what of prayer. Toward the end last time we looked at what to include in your prayer. You remember the acrostic ACTS? Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication. Those are four elements of prayer. I encourage you to use them all. You may find it difficult at first to spend much time in adoration, or even thanksgiving but do practice in hope that God will meet you as you do. I have seen that most people go through five stages in the development of their prayer life. First they don’t pray at all. Then they pray only in crises, asking for the help of an unknown God. The third stage is regular intercession or supplication for personal and family concerns. Then the praying Christian goes beyond that to pray for others with consistency. And the last addition to one’s prayer life is usually worship. Maturity in prayer means you will have a good balance and mixture of these basic elements in your praying. I read somewhere that if you took everyone who sleeps in church on Sunday and stretch them out end to end... they would be a lot more comfortable. And if you took all the people in church who have healthy, God-honoring patterns of personal prayer, and stretched them out, it probably wouldn’t be a very long line. Most of us have plenty of growing to do in our prayer lives. Let’s see if better understanding might lead to better praying. That’s my prayer.

Now some people hear that list of the elements of prayer and will think that something important is missing. Where, they ask, is hearing from God? Isn’t prayer supposed to be a two-way street? Aren’t we to listen to God too? Well, the answer to that is, “Yes, we are to listen for God. We are to learn from Him.” That primarily happens when your Bible is open, but it should also happen to some extent as you pray. When you come to God in prayer you have opened up your life to the Almighty and I would expect that He would, in those times, speak to you in the stillness of your soul about what He is looking for you to do and be. That can certainly happen as you worship and pray - but that is not, in itself, prayer. Prayer is speaking to God, not sitting quietly waiting for

Him to speak. Jesus said, “when you pray, say.” He never said, “when you pray, hear.” The inner voice of the Spirit is a blessed by-product of prayer, but not of the essence of it.

Alright, today we are going to look at what you pray for, who you pray to, and then we will wrap up with some miscellaneous notes on prayer.

First of all, what shall we pray for? There are two Biblical answers to that question. First of all, you should pray for whatever is on your heart. Philippians 4:6 *Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.* There is a beautiful and gracious invitation from God. Let Me hear your requests, He asks. What requests? God doesn't narrow it down. Certainly, it would be wrong to ask for something that is opposed to God's revealed will. It would be wrong to ask for help in robbing a bank or hurting your neighbor but apart from such as these anything that concerns you is a legitimate matter of prayer. I remember a prayer meeting when we asked healing for a little girl's sick mouse. Now, the elders didn't run over and lay hands on the mouse but we did pray and that's fine, that's good. If that is where your heart is - then pray about it. And I think now is a good time to put in a plug for honesty in prayer. The human heart is prone to be phony about our religious exercises. And we really have to work to avoid that. Remember that God knows you anyway. Don't try to pretend when you pray. Bring it all to Him. David certainly did. Read the Psalms. When He was scared, he said so. When he was mad, he said that too. He even accused God of forsaking him. We may never think of doing that - even though we feel that way sometimes. God knows you think it and it helps to say it. David M'Intyre in his book, *The Hidden Life of Prayer*, writes: *Honest dealing becomes us when we kneel in His pure presence. In our address to God we like to speak to Him as we think we ought to speak, and there are times when our words far outrun our feelings. But it is best that we should be perfectly frank before Him. He will allow us to say anything we will, so long as we say it to Him.* (Tozer God Tells, pg. 62) Practically speaking, if you come to God in prayer and you don't feel like praying, admit it. Say that to God. Ask Him to stir up your soul, but be honest to God. At those times when things have seemed bleakest in my life, I haven't bothered to work through all the elements of prayer. I wouldn't even try to enter His gates with thanksgiving, I would come barging in to God's presence and say, “Lord, what are you doing to me!?” Tozer writes: *God loves the guileless soul even when in his ignorance he is actually guilty of rashness in prayer. The Lord can soon cure his ignorance, but for insincerity no cure is known.* God invites you to be real. He invites you to cast all your anxieties on Him and let your requests be made known.

The second thing the Bible would instruct is to pray for is spiritual welfare for yourself and for others. We see this in the Lord's prayer. Jesus taught us to pray, "Thy Kingdom come; They will be done." That is a prayer for obedience. "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." Again, it is a prayer for purity of life. Jesus said on several occasions to pray against temptation. It is great to pray for physical well-being and riches and all kinds of things but the main emphasis of Scriptural prayer is on spiritual well-being. David in Psalm 51: **10-15** *Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. 11 Do not cast me away from Your presence and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. 12 Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and sustain me with a willing spirit. 13 Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners will be converted to You. 14 Deliver me from blood-guiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation; then my tongue will joyfully sing of Your righteousness. 15 O Lord, open my lips, that my mouth may declare Your praise.* What does David ask for Himself? Purity of soul. That's his chief concern. Now look with me at some of the prayers of the apostle Paul. We will read quickly a few of his prayers and you will pick up, I think, on how this man of God prayed for others. Philippians 1:**9-11** *And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, 10 so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; 11 having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.* He asks for knowledge, love and the fruit of righteousness. Colossians 1:**9-11** *We have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, 10 so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; 11 strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience.* Sounds similar, doesn't it? Prayer for knowledge, fruitfulness, righteousness, and spiritual power. So, in a nutshell what is Paul asking God to do for these people? He is praying for their spiritual welfare, that they be more holy, more mature, more like Jesus. That is the chief concern of New Testament praying. I think of what Jesus prayed for His disciples. In John 17:**15** *I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one.* John 17:**17** *Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth.* Again, our Lord prays for spiritual welfare. This is not all we are to pray for, certainly not. But, it is the chief thing. Some time back I requested that you make a point of praying for me on Saturdays as I get ready for Sunday. Thank you for doing so. Keep it up or renew your efforts. And, if you pray for

me and Beth I hope you pray for our health and for our safety but most of all petition God to make us holy, to give us all hearts full of the Spirit of life.

So, now we have covered the why, when, where, and what's of prayer. All that is left is the who. Let's look now at who to pray to, or to whom you pray. This sounds like a simple idea but I believe it is the most critical thing of all to understand. I don't remember much from when I was seven years old, but one memory I do have is of the day Steve Davenport called Mrs. Gadd, "*Betty Jean*." Kids today do that all the time it seems, but when I was seven you wouldn't have thought of calling an adult by the first name. In my group of buddies, it was understood that we called the adults *Mrs. Gadd, Mrs. Williams, Mr. Johnston, and Mr. Hendley*. But, Steve Davenport was new around our parts. He had moved from California, and he blew our minds one day by calling Mrs. Gadd, "*Betty Jean*." I remember that because it struck me as such a profound breach of social etiquette. Now I mention that story to remind you of this: how you speak to people depends on who they are, and who you are in relationship to them. You don't speak to your parents the way you speak to your kids. You don't speak to your wife the way you speak to your boss. What you say and how you say it depends very much on how you view the one you are addressing. And I believe nothing so affects our praying as our view of God. In fact, I believe you can learn a great deal about how someone thinks of God by listening to them pray. Now, there are two attributes of God that I think are most important to remember as we pray. And they are truths which we must hold in tension. The first is that we pray to a holy God. We pray to a holy God and we relate to His holiness as sinners. This is the God of whom the angels cry, *Holy, Holy, Holy*. This is the God who went to great trouble in the Old Testament to ensure that His people knew He was holy. So many of the ceremonial laws were designed to remind the people that sinful man cannot know peace with a holy God, that sinners cannot stand before Him. Leviticus 10:**1-3** *Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took their respective firepans, and after putting fire in them, placed incense on it and offered strange fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them. 2 And fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. 3 Then Moses said to Aaron, "It is what the LORD spoke, saying, 'By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, and before all the people I will be honored.'" So Aaron, therefore, kept silent.* That is a message God insisted be heard, and if Nadab and Abihu had to give their lives as object lessons, so be it. The people were going to learn to reverence the Lord, to come before Him with humility and wonder. Habakkuk learned a similar lesson. In his book, he got quite peeved with God for what He

was going to do. He complained against Him until the Lord revealed anew His glory to the prophet and Habakkuk said, *“The Lord is in His holy temple, let all the earth be silent before Him.”* What this means practically is that you must remember who you are speaking to when you pray. And you must remember who you are --that you are a sinner in the hands of a holy God. A sinner comes to God humbly and with repentance. Luke 18 gives us an important lesson about prayer. **10-14** *Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 “The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 ‘I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’ 13 “But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’ 14 “I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.* This describes the attitude we are to have before the Holy One. We come humbly, praying for God’s mercy; we don’t come arrogantly claiming it. I have trouble with the presumption I see in some to demand things from the Almighty. In true prayer, there is an element of subjection to God’s will. Remember who you are. Remember who God is. He is holy, holy, holy.

The second thing to remember about God is that He is a loving Father to whom you relate as a precious child. Do you realize that you pray to your Father? Jesus said, “When you pray say, *Father.*” He didn’t say, “When you pray say, *Jesus.*” A few years ago, I was praying with a certain group of Christians and I noticed as we prayed that every person in the group began their prayers with, “Dear Jesus.” I’ve also noticed that normally we teach our kids to address not the Father but the Son when they pray. And this is a concern not because it is wrong to address God the Son when we pray. There is a place for that, but clearly from the New Testament we see that our prayers go to the Father. Listen again to how Paul prayed Ephesians 1:17 says he prays **17** *That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom.* Ephesians 3:**14** *I bow my knees before the Father.* That is the norm of New Testament prayer. We pray to the Father, thru the Son, by the Holy Spirit. I don’t intend to make a big issue over this, but I do want you to think about what you are doing when you address God. Prayer is presented to us in the New Testament as the address of a child to a father. Romans 8:**15** *You have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, “Abba! Father!”* Galatians 4:**6** *Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”* The Spirit of prayer is the Spirit of

sonship and adoption. When I speak to my God I am able to approach Him as a son would His Daddy. That, dear people, is infinitely precious. That right I would not trade for anything in this world. He is a holy God, yes, but amazingly, in Jesus, He is also my Father. And how does a child approach a perfect Father? Hebrews 10:19 says we have *confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus*. Confidence is the word. When you have a Father who is perfect there is never a time when it makes sense to run away from Him. Never! We are to always run to Him.

In this idea of praying to God who is your father we have hit upon a key notion about prayer that we must understand. Prayer is relational not mechanical. Prayer is relational not mechanical. What that means is that before you pray you must have a relationship with God. Without it, prayer never even starts no matter what forms and rituals and words you may use. In Jerusalem recently, a reporter heard of a man who had been going to the wailing wall to pray twice a day for 50 years. She approached him and asked him what he had prayed about for so long. He said, "For peace, between the Jews and Arabs. For our children to grow up in safety and friendship." The reporter asked him, "How do you feel after praying that for 50 years?" The old man said, "I feel like I'm talking to a wall." I expect he was.

There is a difference, you see, between praying and saying a prayer. Anybody can say a prayer: a Jew, a Muslim, an atheist can say a prayer, but only one who knows God through Jesus can really pray. Do you understand what I'm saying to you? Jesus said the Gentiles suppose they will be heard for their repetition. Others think they will be heard by God if they follow the right pattern, or say the right words. No way. Prayer is a matter of the spirit and the heart, not of form and ritual. Form prayers are fine. I think they are good. Hymns are basically form prayers, but be careful not to repeat anything too much lest it become meaningless repetition. For many people the Lord's prayer is like that. Many can say it in their sleep but haven't a clue what they are doing. Supper blessings can become rote also. If we are to pray and not just say prayers we must make sure that our hearts are engaged when we speak to God.

Furthermore, since prayer is relational, it means that everything in life affects it. God points this out repeatedly in His word where we learn that you cannot expect to be heard by God if you are living in contempt of Him or someone made in His image. Jesus says that if you come to worship and remember that you have offended a brother you must go and make it right before you pray. In I Peter 3 it says that husbands who don't treat their wives respectfully have their prayers hindered. The God of Islam isn't like that. Many Muslims think you can stab your neighbor and then pray to

Allah but the God of the Bible says, “No.” In Psalm 24 the question is asked **24:3** *Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? And who may stand in His holy place?* In essence, who may have fellowship with God, who may pray and worship? The answer **4** *He who has clean hands and a pure heart.* If you expect to be heard by God; if you expect to have any sense of communion with your Lord as you pray, you must have clean hands and a pure heart. That doesn’t mean that you must be perfect, but it does mean you must be repentant and sincere. Psalm 66:**18** *If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear.* **18a** *If I regard wickedness in my heart.* That means, if I refuse to turn from it, then the lines are jammed. God will not hear me. You see, we pray to a person. We don’t pray to a vending machine. We pray to a God who is holy and to a God who is our Father.

So then, we have covered the why, when, where, what’s, and who of prayer. Before we’re done let’s look at a few miscellaneous points. What about praying in Jesus’ name? You hear that all the time. What is it about? Well, we do it because Jesus so instructed. Do you really know the point of it? Some treat it as a magic formula, as if saying the words makes a big difference. It is not a magic. For some it becomes vain repetition. It is nothing more than a way to end prayer. Some will even mumble “in Jesus’ name Amen.” But we should never use the Lord’s name in such a meaningless way. We pray in Jesus’ name in order to indicate our unworthiness and to point to Jesus as the basis for our relationship to God and any favor we might have with Him. Hebrews 7:**25** *He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.* Jesus is our intercessor. That is, it is thru Him that we come to God. It is thru His blood and righteousness that we are made presentable to God, and when we pray in Jesus’ name or thru Jesus we acknowledge that. The words could be omitted. They are not the essential part; the attitude very much is.

What about fasting? How should that fit into your prayer life? Fasting, which is simply going without food for a period of time, whether a half a day or 40 days, is, I believe, an appeal to God to hear your prayers. It indicates your seriousness over a matter and is used in times of special concern and in times of repentance. If prayer were an email, then fasting would be your all caps key. Fasting is sometimes abused, but is more often neglected. Matthew 6:**16-18** *Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. 17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face 18 so that your fasting will not be noticed by*

men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. You will notice here that Jesus doesn't command you to fast but He does mention rewards for those who do and He really assumes that His disciples will fast. He doesn't say, "If you fast" but "When you fast." Try it. When a matter of intense concern arises, don't just pray, but pray with fasting. Take a 24-hour break from food and spend some extra time in prayer before the Father.

What about praying the phrase "If it be Thy will?" That phrase does not need to be said by the one praying but it should certainly be his or her sentiment. It is a recognition that God knows better than I, that His will, His desire is preeminent. We should thank God that He promises to us that when we pray He gives us good things and not precisely what we ask because we often don't really know what to ask.

What about the problem of daydreaming and dozing off? Did you know that problem is mentioned in Scripture? Jesus rebuked His disciples because they couldn't pray one hour without falling to sleep. I bet some of you have trouble with that, especially early in the morning. Others of you just suffer from a wondering mind. Let me offer four suggestions: (1) Change positions when you pray. Try to pray kneeling or standing or even walking. Prayer walks can be wonderful things. Even better try a combination of these postures. (2) Pray with your eyes open. This may not help the daydreaming but it should help the sleeping problem. The eyes closed approach is good in public prayer to block out distractions but in private it may lead to more harm than good. (3) Pray out loud. I think this is an enormous help. When I was young I just thought my prayers to God. That is okay but speaking the words helps me concentrate and focus and stay on track. (4) This one especially addresses the daydreaming problem. Use lists. Have a list of things you are thankful for, and especially have a list of things you are praying for. Over the years, I have heard a lot of negative remarks about laundry list praying, suggesting that if you use a list you don't use your heart, but I think it is great to have a list since it helps you remember what to pray about and even more importantly it helps you concentrate. Without a list, I'm often caught up in wondering what I should pray for next. With a list, I don't have to worry. I can go from person to person, item to item without losing track and wondering off into never-never land. As a result, my heart is more involved, not less.

Finally, what about the *amen*? Where did that come from? Well, the term means "So be it." Or "Yes". It is a confirmation of what is said and is especially handy for public prayer to signal the

conclusion to what has been said. In private prayer, you can take it or leave it. God knows when you are done.

And He knows that I am done. I am keenly aware that the devil hates for Christians to pray. He will throw all he has into keeping you doing everything else but this. If growth is to come, there must be a commitment to making your prayer life more and greater. As a start, some of you may want to get up early in the morning and spend 20 minutes, 10 minutes before the Lord in prayer. Maybe you want to ask a friend or a spouse to pray with you and the two of you can lift each other up. Whatever you do in response to this call to prayer, don't do nothing. How blessed we would all be if a year from now we can look back and testify of growth in the grace of prayer. Let's ask our Father for that right now.