

# *Rule of Life: The Habit of Prayer*

## *Part 2 – Speaking After Being Spoken To*

### Genesis 1:1-8

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ August 24, 2025 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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<sup>1</sup>In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, <sup>2</sup>the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. <sup>3</sup>Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. <sup>4</sup>And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. <sup>5</sup>God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

<sup>6</sup>And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” <sup>7</sup>So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. <sup>8</sup>God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day. (Genesis 1:1-8, NRSV)

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I’m going to give you the main point of today’s sermon right up front. Mind you, this does not give you an excuse to check out for the rest of the message! Instead, I hope it will whet your appetite to hear how this plays out. In talking about prayer, here is the main thing I want to say today. This might even serve as a good definition of prayer. *Prayer is speaking to God in response to what God has already spoken to us.*

This idea of God as the initiator and us as the responder is actually a basic principle of our relationship with God. God loves first; we love in response. 1<sup>st</sup> John 4:19 declares, **“We love because [God] first loved us.”**<sup>1</sup> God forgives first; we forgive in response. Ephesians 4:32 is clear: **“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”** God serves first; we serve in response. After he washed his disciples’ feet at the last supper, Jesus told them, **“For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.”**<sup>2</sup>

This has been the rhythm of our relationship with God ever since the beginning. We just read the first part of the creation account in Genesis 1. According to scripture, what is the very first thing that happens in the history of creation? The earth is a formless void, darkness and chaos. Nothing is happening. Then the Spirit of God hovers over the void. As we learned from the kids a few weeks ago at the Academy of the Arts performance, that word for Spirit in the original Hebrew is the word *ruach*. That word can just as easily be translated ‘wind’ or ‘breath.’ How does it change your perception of what is happening here at creation when you imagine that at the very beginning the *breath* of God was hovering over creation.

It’s no wonder that the very first thing that happens in creation is that God speaks! And immediately creation responds. God speaks to command light; in response light appears. God speaks to command waters to separate; without hesitation waters separate. On and on it goes throughout the whole creation account. John echoes this fundamental truth at the beginning of his Gospel when he writes, **“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”**<sup>3</sup> The first word is God’s, not ours. It is always the Word of God which originates, initiates, shapes, provides, orders, commands, and blesses.<sup>4</sup> There would be no speech if God had not first spoken. We would have nothing to say.

It naturally follows, therefore, that when we speak to God in prayer it should also be in response to what God has already said to us. But I’m not sure we always think about prayer in this way. In his marvelous book, *Working the Angles*, Eugene Peterson points out how we often think about prayers as starting pistols. He writes, “Most of the people we meet, inside and outside the church, think prayers are harmless but necessary starting pistols that shoot blanks and get things going. They suppose that the ‘real action’ as they call it, is in the ‘things going’ – projects and conversations, plans and performances.”<sup>5</sup> He goes on to point out that prayer is actually never the first word, and definitely never a first word that shoots blanks. Instead, prayer

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, this and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

<sup>2</sup> John 13:15

<sup>3</sup> John 1:1

<sup>4</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles* (Eerdmans Publishing, 1987), 48.

<sup>5</sup> Peterson, 46.

is, as he calls it, “answering speech.” It is not primarily ‘address,’ but ‘response.’

Is it a coincidence that this is also the case with human speech? It’s been fascinating for me to watch our nearly one-year-old grandson, Solomon, learning to talk. His newest word is the word “duck,” because one of his favorite toys is a little rubber duckie. I gave him a baseball when he was born hoping that one of his first words would be “baseball,” or better yet “curveball” or “double play.” “Duck” will have to do for now. Little children like Solomon are surrounded by a flood of language, “duck” and a thousand other words. Eventually, they begin to realize that some of those words are addressed to them, or about them. No child just makes up words, at least what we would call words. Solomon says “duck” because “duck” was first said to him. Countless studies show that a child’s ability to speak is profoundly affected by the number and frequency of words to which that child is exposed. We speak only to the degree to which we are first spoken. This is not instinct. We have to be taught.

What’s hard for us, however, is to continue to use our words as a response to the words of another, whether that’s in a conversation with God or another person. The reason for this is that we are so naturally self-oriented. So almost automatically we begin conversations with *our* circumstances and *our* agendas in mind. Sometimes, even in long conversations, we never really stray from our own agenda. We have all witnessed or participated in conversations between two people where, if you stood back and analyzed what was happening, you’d see that it’s much more like two simultaneous monologues than one back-and-forth dialogue. You’re talking to me about your challenging job and I’m talking to you about what’s going on in my marriage. When you’re talking about your job I’m quiet, but only so that I can think about what I want to say next about my marriage. And you’re doing the same thing with me. Nobody is really listening. And because nobody is listening, nobody is responding.

I’m afraid we do the same thing with God. Think about it, where do we most clearly and most often hear the Lord speak to us? In his Word, right? And since Jesus isn’t here anymore in the flesh speaking audibly to us, his Word is most accessible to us in the scriptures. The way Paul puts it 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy is that scripture is “God-breathed.”<sup>6</sup> In some mysterious way, the words of this book are inspired by the Holy Spirit of God. The breath of God permeates the Bible. With this in mind, I always find it perplexing that sometimes people, even in the church, complain that it is so hard to hear God

speak to us these days. It’s not hard at all. Just open up the Bible and you will hear God speak to you! The same Spirit who spoke creation into being is still speaking through the scriptures and still calling for a response.

But when we hear God speak we often do the same thing we do with one another, which is that we talk right past God. How common it is for us to spend time listening to God’s Word in scripture, either in group study or private devotions, and then when we finish listening and it’s our turn to talk in prayer, the things we pray about have almost nothing to do with what we have just heard the Lord saying to us. And we can almost hear the Lord say to us, “Have you not been listening to me?” If you’ve just been reflecting on a passage of scripture where the Lord is teaching you about forgiving your enemies, then when you turn to pray, don’t you think your prayers should have at least something to do with forgiving your enemies? When they do, then prayer really does become “answering” speech.

Let me quote pastor and author Tim Keller at length on this point. He writes,

Our prayers should arise out of immersion in the Scripture. We should “plunge ourselves into the sea” of God’s language, the Bible. We should listen, study, think, reflect, and ponder the Scriptures until there is an answering response in our hearts and minds. It may be one of shame or of joy or of confusion or of appeal—but that response to God’s speech is then truly prayer and should be given to God. If the goal of prayer is a real, personal connection with God, then it is only by immersion in the language of the Bible that we will learn to pray, perhaps just as slowly as a child learns to speak.<sup>7</sup>

The English poet, George Herbert, once called prayer, “God’s breath in man returning to its birth.” In this way, prayer is like breathing. We breathe in God’s Word through scripture, and then we exhale through prayer. It’s a give and take, like any good conversation, but the initiator is always the Lord.

Let’s just admit that this is not easy for most of us. As I said before, making prayer a response, listening first and then speaking in response, is not easy because we so naturally want to start, and even end, with ourselves. That’s why prayer is a practice. It’s been said that prayer is a bit like learning to play the violin with the virtuosos. No instrument sounds worse when you start learning to play it than the violin. Maybe the bagpipes.

<sup>6</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 3:16 reads, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.” New International Version (NIV).

<sup>7</sup> Cited <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/4321061-eugene-peterson-reminds-us-that-because-we-learned-language-so>

(But at least the violin eventually sounds better!) But even when it's hard at first, you keep at it, just like learning language. Eventually, music emerges. When a baby starts to speak its mostly gibberish with a "duck" thrown in from time to time. But the child keeps at it. And when it comes to prayer there are things we can do to facilitate our practice, specifically our practice as a response to God's initiating Word.

This morning, I want to offer you three practical tools that can help us with this, followed by three words of encouragement.

To begin with, one practice which many of us have found extremely helpful is called "The Three R's". Ben Patterson taught this to us when he was our fall retreat speaker years ago.<sup>8</sup> Some of us have been using it ever since, partly because it's so simple.

It goes like this. After you spend time in God's Word and move to prayer, you simply structure your prayer around these three areas: *rejoicing, repenting, requesting*. Considering what you have just heard the Lord say to you through scripture, your prayer becomes an answer to three questions:

1. *What have I just heard that causes me to rejoice in the Lord?* We begin our prayer with praise and gratitude.
2. *What have I just heard that causes me to repent before the Lord?* How is my own sin highlighted here?
3. *What have I just heard that leads me to make requests of the Lord?* How have the scriptures highlighted what I need from God?

Let me show you how this works. Let's say you've just spent time trying to listen to the Lord through his Word in the parable of the Good Samaritan, this story Jesus tells about what it looks like to love your neighbor.<sup>9</sup> As you reflect on this Samaritan man who crossed all sorts of religious and racial barriers to help a dying man when the man's own religious leaders wouldn't help him, you're listening for the Lord to use this parable to speak into your own life. Instead of then finishing your time of listening to scripture and shutting your Bible and moving on to praying about your own agenda, stop first to respond to whatever the Lord has just said to you using the Three R's. Your prayer might sound something like this:

*Father God, I rejoice in you. I rejoice that you are a God who crosses all sorts of boundaries to come and save the lives of those who others don't think worth saving, including me. Father God, I repent before you. I confess that is not always my way. Too often I walk by those in need in this world because I am too concerned with myself. Father God, I request that you help me with this. Help me live with compassion. Help us, your church, care for those others pass by.*

Of course, your prayer could be longer and cover more ground in each of these areas, though it wouldn't necessarily need to. But can you see how by doing this scripture and prayer can become a conversation where our response in prayer is firmly rooted in God's initial Word spoken to us in scripture? You can use this tool with every scripture in the Bible. Sometimes in our Prayers of the People, the prayer one of us leads each Sunday after the sermon, I will use this framework. Listen for it. We've just heard the Lord speak to us through his scripture read and preached. It's good then to respond to what we have just heard - rejoicing, repenting and requesting.

A second practice which I have found especially helpful in connecting prayer to scripture is the simple practice of journaling. If you came across me in the morning at my devotions, you would see my Bible open and, right next to it, a journal. Here's what I do. I read a bit of scripture, reflecting on what I have just heard, and then I write in response to what I have just heard. Then I read a little more and respond again, doing this over and over again until I reach the end of the passage. Most of the time my journal entries are in the form of prayers. I'm speaking back to the Lord in response to what he has just spoken to me. It's not as linear as the Three R's, and if you read what was written it might not make complete sense to you because it wasn't written to you, but this practice has really helped me learn to speak to the Lord in response to what the Lord has first spoken to me. It might be something you'd want to try as well.

A final practice which many of us here have already embraced is the practice of praying through the Psalms. For years, part of our Congregational Rule of Life has been to read and pray through one of the Psalms each day. Today it's Psalm 17. The Psalms, smack-dab in the middle of the Old Testament were not only Israel's prayer book, they were Jesus' prayer book as well. It's no coincidence that two of the prayers Jesus offers from the cross are directly from the Psalms.<sup>10</sup> The great English preacher, Charles Spurgeon, once reminded us,

<sup>8</sup> He also cites this in his excellent resource called *God's Prayer Book* (Salt River Publishing, 2008), 20. This book gives examples of how to pray through the Psalms, and is very practical tool in helping us learn to allow God's Word to teach us how to pray. I highly recommend it.

<sup>9</sup> See Luke 10:25-37

<sup>10</sup> He prays from both Psalm 22 and Psalm 35.

"I think it well worthy of your constant remembrance that, even in death, our blessed Master showed the ruling passion of his spirit, so that his last words were a quotation from Scripture."<sup>11</sup> Even with his dying breath, Jesus' prayer was a response to scripture.

Others have called the Psalms the school of prayer. They teach us the language of prayer. Admittedly, when you first immerse yourself in the Psalms, the ocean of words and images can be overwhelming, and leave you feeling like a little child listening to fluent adults in conversation around him. But eventually you begin to learn the language, and it slowly become more and more natural. One of the beautiful things about the Psalms is that they represent the full anatomy of the human soul. All the joys, pleasures, hopes, fears, despairs, doubts, heartaches, terrors, and longings of the human experience are found in the Psalms, meaning that all the ways we might pray (rejoicing, repenting, requesting!) are reflected in the Psalms. No matter the place you find yourself in life, the Psalms have language to help you pray.<sup>12</sup>

Take today's Psalm, Psalm 17. It begins,

**Hear me, Lord, my plea is just;  
listen to my cry.  
Hear my prayer—  
it does not rise from deceitful lips.  
Let my vindication come from you;  
may your eyes see what is right.**<sup>13</sup>

If you just prayed with no prompts this morning, is that how you would pray? Not me. But if I use this Psalm as a guide, making my prayer "answering" speech, suddenly I'm letting the Lord teach me the language of prayer. These aren't just words to be read. These are words to be *prayed*. So prompted by the Psalm, I pray for the Lord to hear me, even plead for that to happen. I ask for help in making my prayers honest. I ask for God to see the truth about me. And that's just verses 1 and 2 of a 15-verse prayer.

If this is a practice you want to learn more about, Ben Patterson has a short but very helpful and practical article on this which you can access online. I left some copies in the Welcome Center, and will send out the article on email this afternoon.

As I did last week when I encouraged us all to find a time each day to pray in private and use the Lord's Prayer as a guide, I want to invite you to also make today's teaching practical. Remember that a

Congregation Rule of Life is a set of practices, habits and rhythms we adopt and establish in our lives which, by the power of the Holy Spirit at work within us, help us become more like Christ. Practices must be, by definition, practical. They also take practice. So whether it's praying the Three R's, using a journal alongside your Bible to record your part of the conversation, or praying through the Psalms, would you try this week to take one step towards speaking to God in response to what he has first spoken. As you do, here are three encouragements, three things I believe will eventually happen in your practice of prayer.

First, you will find that prayer will slowly become less and less you-centered, and increasingly God-centered. We often approach prayer as a conversation we hope will change God. I do believe that can happen, that our prayers may at times influence the way God moves in our lives and in this world. But most of the time I think that prayer changes us. That makes sense, that as we practice praying God's agenda rather than ours, trusting that God's agenda even where we are concerned is supremely better than our agenda, we begin to have our minds, hearts, and souls shaped accordingly, ourselves increasingly conformed to him.<sup>14</sup>

Second, as you pray in response to God's Word you will find your language and your prayers expanding and deepening in ways that otherwise you would not find possible. The German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, once wrote, "The richness of the Word of God ought to determine our prayer, not the poverty of our hearts." I don't know about you, but when my prayers start the conversation, they are often shallow, narrow, task-oriented, self-centered, and tend to cover the same tired ground over and over again. But things change immediately when I let scripture guide my prayers. Don't believe me? Try it yourself and see if you don't find yourself covering all sorts of new ground in your conversations with the Lord when you make prayer a response.

Finally, when we allow scripture to guide and inform our prayers, in a sense praying God's Word back to him, we can be confident that we are confident we are praying according to God's will. Jesus says it most succinctly in John 15:7 when he says, **"If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."** What a difference this makes when we pray, the knowledge that not only does our Father in heaven hear us, but that he grants us what we pray for. Take Psalm 17 as an example. When we allow God's Word to prompt us to pray, "Hear me,

communion with God more deeply and come to know the One with whom we are speaking more intimately, that growing knowledge of God reveals to us all the more brilliantly who we are and our need to change in conformity to Him. Prayer changes us profoundly."

<sup>11</sup> Cited by Patterson, 3.

<sup>12</sup> I'm borrowing this language from Patterson, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Psalm 17:1-2

<sup>14</sup> R.C. Sproul once wrote, "Prayer does change things, all kinds of things. But the most important thing it changes is us. As we engage in this

Lord, my plea is just; listen to my cry.”, we can pray with confidence that he will hear us as we cry out to him.

As I said last week, prayer is as essential to being human as eating. It’s especially essential for us if we are seeking to live our lives as Jesus would live our lives if he were in our shoes. I hope we can keep encouraging one another to develop this practice, and to do so by learning to speak to God in response to what he has already spoken to us. This is what the Lord is teaching us to do in his Word. Let’s respond appropriately, even now in this moment.

Amen.

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### **The Next Step**

#### ***A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application***

1. Read Genesis 1:1-8 again. If you’re up for it, read the whole chapter of Genesis 1.
2. The Lord speaks and creation springs into existence. Why do you think that it is with words that God creates? What does this teach us?
3. What do you think about the idea that prayer is “answering” language, that God speaks first to us in scripture and then we speak back in prayer as a response to what we have heard God first say? Is this the way you have prayed in the past?
4. How is talking to God in prayer different from, or similar to, talking to another person?
5. Writer Eugene Peterson argued, “If we insist on being self-taught in prayer, our prayers, however eloquent, will be meager.”<sup>15</sup> Do you agree? Is prayer something that we have to learn? If so, is it God that needs to teach us?
6. What do you think about the practice of “The 3 R’s?” Does it make sense? See if you can imagine how this might work. Read together the simple story of the widow’s offering in Luke 21:1-4. Considering what the Lord may be saying to us in this story, imagining how you might respond by rejoicing, then repenting, then requesting.
7. Consider the three practices Jeff suggested to help us learn how to make our prayers a response to God’s initiating Word to us in scripture. Which one seems like it might be most helpful to you? How do you imagine implementing this in your life this week? Be as specific as possible in the details of your plan.
8. Pray together as a group, trying to let your prayers be informed by what the Lord has been saying to you in this message.

#### **Table to Table: For kids and adults to consider together.**



*As a family take a passage of scripture (Luke 21:1-4 would be a good choice) and, after reading and talking about what God is teaching here, talk together about how you might pray to God based on what you have just learned. Use the 3 R’s if that helps. Then take a few minutes to pray together.*

<sup>15</sup> Peterson, 57.