

What Is Prayer?
Matthew 21:12-13
John Breon

I guess I've been praying all my life. I remember being very young and praying the bedtime prayer:

*Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray Thee, Lord, my soul to keep
If I should die before I wake
I pray Thee, Lord, my soul to take*

Bill Cosby talks about learning that prayer, coming to the line "If I should die before I wake" and thinking, "I'm not going to sleep tonight!"

Later, I graduated to saying the Lord's Prayer before I went to sleep. But the meaning was lost on me somewhat as I would see how fast I could say it.

One of the first times I recall seriously praying for someone else was when I was nine or ten. One of my friends got shot in the head with a pellet gun and I thought he might die. So I asked God, "Don't let Jeff die." And he didn't die. He's still o.k.

We're beginning a series on prayer. Prayer is a vital part of our lives and of the church, so I want to explore it together. Several of you submitted questions about prayer. They're good, and challenging, questions that I'll try to tackle. If your question doesn't get answered satisfactorily during this series, let me know. We can take another run at it. I'll also provide some resources for you to keep exploring prayer and growing in it. Each week I also want to give you a printed prayer to reinforce the theme and maybe to jump start your praying.

Gracious God, we thank you for the gift of prayer. What an extraordinary thing that we can pray to you, unburden ourselves before you, place our cares, woes and joys before you. I confess I find praying an awkward business. I keep thinking, *Who am I to pray?* But I

know that to be false humility, hiding my prideful desire to be my own creator. So we pray a prayer of joy in prayer, asking that we become your prayers for one another. Amen.
(Stanley Hauerwas, *Prayers Plainly Spoken* 23)

Today, we start by asking, "What is prayer?" If we're going to be a house of prayer, if we're to be a prayerful people devoted to a prayer-filled life, we need to know what we're getting into. What does God offer us through prayer? What does God expect of us in prayer? What are we doing when we pray?

To get into the meaning of prayer, let's look at the scene in the Gospel that our text comes from.

After entering Jerusalem in triumph, Jesus went into the temple and drove out the merchants and money changers there. He quoted Isaiah as part of his reason for this act: "My house will be called a house of prayer." God's intention for the temple was that it would be a house of prayer for all nations, all people (Isaiah 56:7). The religious leaders in Jesus' day had neglected this purpose of the temple. They had made it a "den of robbers" instead (Matthew 21:13; Jeremiah 7:11).

For the Jews, the temple was God's house. And God's house was to be a house of prayer—a place of prayer for all people. In the New Testament, Jesus begins to take the place of the temple. Then the church, the body of Christ, is seen as God's temple. Listen to this: "As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:4-5).

The church—all of God's people, "all who follow Jesus all around the world"—is God's house. Remember, the building is not the church. The people are the church. The community of faith is the house of God. If the original temple was to be a house of prayer, don't you think the church is to be a house of prayer? Part of God's call to us is to be a church of prayer, a prayerful people.

So what does that mean? What is prayer? John Wesley said that prayer is “the grand means of drawing near to God” (Steve Harper, *Devotional Life in the Wesleyan Tradition: A Workbook* 45). Prayer is the main way we get close to God. If God is like a destination, prayer is like the road or path we take to God (Mary Kate Morse, *A Guidebook to Prayer* 14). It’s like the key to the house of life with God (Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home* 1-2). If God’s presence and power are like lightning, prayer is like the ground or point of contact that completes the circuit so God’s will can be done (Robert Tuttle, *Help Is on the Way!* 11-12). Even better, prayer is friendship with God (George Buttrick, *Prayer* 47).

What breathing is to our physical life, prayer is to our spiritual life. Prayer is more than saying our prayers. It is communion with the Lord who wants to give us His mind, guidance, and power. Most of all, He wants to give us the gift of Himself. He calls us into prayer to impart that awesome gift.

...Prayer starts with God. He is the initiator, instigator, and inspiration of prayer. (Lloyd John Ogilvie, *You Can Pray with Power* 7-8)

If you feel like praying, it’s because God wants to talk with you. God is calling you to be with God and know God.

We can spend a lot of time talking about and defining prayer. But we learn prayer best by praying. “The difference between talking about prayer and praying is the same as the difference between blowing a kiss and kissing” (G. K. Chesterton, in Morris, *Guidebook* 13). Still, seeing and hearing others pray can help us pray. Let’s take a look at the opening chapters of Acts to see the early church in prayer.

Luke tells us that after Jesus’ resurrection he appeared to his disciples over a period of forty days and spoke to them about the kingdom of God. After Jesus ascended into heaven, the disciples went back to Jerusalem to wait for the fulfillment of God’s promise as Jesus had told them to do. There in Jerusalem the apostles “joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers”

(1:14). Jesus has told them to be witnesses to the ends of the earth and their first response is prayer.

A faithful church waits and prays. Our waiting implies that the things that need doing in the world are beyond our ability to accomplish just by our own effort and programs. We need some other empowerment, so we wait and pray. Our waiting and praying also remind us that the gift of God's Spirit is a gift that we keep seeking in prayer. It's a gift that's always new (Will Willimon, *Acts*, Interpretation Commentary).

Once when I was an associate pastor, in a column for the newsletter I wrote about this part of Acts and how we need to wait for God's promise and the power of the Holy Spirit. When the senior pastor read it, he said, "I'm trying to get this church going and doing and you're telling them to wait!" Who was right? Well, we both were. If we don't wait and pray, our going and doing will be empty and ineffective. If we don't go and do, our waiting and praying will become ingrown and self-centered.

When the disciples and the others were all together on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came and filled them. This was the birth of the church. Peter stood up before a large crowd, preached to them about what God was doing and invited them to be part of it. Three thousand people believed and were baptized that day. Then Luke tells us that the believers "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (2:42). A prayerful church, prayerful people are *devoted* to prayer.

One day as Peter and John were going to the temple to pray, they saw a crippled beggar at one of the temple gates. He asked them for some money. Peter and John looked straight at him and Peter said, "Look at us! I don't have silver or gold, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk" (3:4, 6). The man was instantly healed and went into the temple with the disciples—walking and leaping and praising God.

When a crowd gathered to see the man who had been healed, Peter preached to them about Jesus. Then the priests and the captain of the temple guard arrested Peter and John. Still, many who heard Peter's message that day believed and about two thousand more were added to the church. The next day the religious authorities met and questioned Peter

and John. Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, told them about Jesus. The authorities tried to get them to stop speaking or teaching in Jesus' name, but Peter and John replied, "Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (4:19-20).

The authorities threatened the disciples, but they didn't know how to punish them because all the people were praising God for the crippled man's healing.

When Peter and John were released, they went back to their people and reported what the chief priests and elders had said. When they heard this, *they raised their voices together in prayer to God*. And rather than praying for protection from the authorities, they prayed for boldness to continue speaking the very word of God that got them in trouble. Listen to how they prayed and how God answered:

"Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: 'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one.' Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. (4:23-31)

When we are faithful and fruitful in prayer we're informed and guided by Scripture. We're committed to doing God's will. We acknowledge and receive God's power.

If the early church is a model for the church now, we can learn a lot about prayer and ministry from the book of Acts. We see how important prayer is. And not just individual prayer. Of course, each of us wants to be a person of prayer. But corporate prayer is vital too. We want to be a praying church, a community of faith united in prayer.

You can pray and your prayers are important. The Lord God of the universe hears your prayers. Sometimes people talk about praying and feeling as if their prayers get no higher than the ceiling. You know what? Your prayers don't have to go higher than the ceiling! They don't even have to go that high because God is right here. He is closer to us than our own breath and he hears us.

Maybe you think you don't know how to pray. We don't have to know a lot about praying to do it. Of course, we can always grow and learn more about prayer, but God is pleased with our praying, no matter how feeble it is.

A man heard his granddaughter one night repeating the alphabet in an oddly reverent way. He asked her, "What on earth are you up to?" She explained, "I'm saying my prayers, but I can't think of exactly the right words tonight, so I'm just saying all the letters. God will put them together for me, because he knows what I'm thinking" (*Illustrations Unlimited* 424). Just offer to God your thoughts, desires, feelings, questions, and thanks. He knows what you mean.

There are many ways to pray and many kinds of prayer. We'll explore several of those in the coming weeks. Maybe you can pick one type of prayer and really get into it and grow in it, then move to another type and work with it. God is patient and God wants to help us. Let's renew our commitment to being in relationship with God through prayer.

Here's a practical way to start growing in prayer. When we join the United Methodist Church, we promise to participate faithfully in the church's ministries by our prayers. Here's a way to do that: 1) Each day ask God to bless this church and help us be all that God wants us to be. 2) As you get ready to come to worship, ask God to get you ready, to prepare your heart and mind, to raise your expectations of what God will say to you and do for you in the worship service. 3) As you sit in the sanctuary, pray for

the people around you. Ask God to bless them, to meet their needs, to speak to them and touch them in some way.

If we'll all do those three things consistently, I believe we'll be amazed at what God does here. We'll be on our way to being a church of prayer.