

Formed in Christ: A Study of the Practices of Following Jesus

Week 3: *Prayer*¹

REVIEW

“Grace is opposed to earning, not to effort” (Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission*).

“We must seek out ways to live and act in union with the flow of God’s Kingdom life that should come through our relationship with Jesus” (Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission*).

INTRODUCTION

I. The DIFFICULTY of Prayer²

Prayer is hard, because...

1) We are self-occupied and cynical.

“Praying exposes how self-preoccupied we are and uncovers our doubts. It [is] easier on our faith not to pray. After only a few minutes, our prayer is in shambles. Barely out of the starting gate, we collapse on the sidelines--cynical, guilty, and hopeless” (15).

2) We live in a non-stop culture.

“American culture is probably the hardest place in the world to learn how to pray. We are so busy that when we do slow down to pray, we find it uncomfortable. We prize accomplishments, production. But prayer is nothing but talking to God. It feels useless, as if we are wasting time. Every bone in our bodies screams, ‘Get to work!’” (15).

3) We don’t combine prayer with other practices.

“But prayer will not be established in our lives as it must be for us to flourish, unless we are practicing other disciplines such as solitude and fasting. In many Protestant churches prayer and Bible study are held up as *the* activities that will make us spiritually rich. But very few people actually succeed in attaining spiritual richness through them and indeed often find them to be intolerably burdensome. The ‘open secret’ of many ‘Bible believing’ churches is that a vanishingly small percentage of those talking about prayer and Bible reading are actually doing what they are talking about. They have not been shown how to change their life as a whole, permeating it with appropriate disciplines, so that prayer and Bible reading will be spiritually successful” (Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 186).

4) We’d rather be self-sufficient.

¹ Works consulted: Willard, *The Great Omission*; Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*; Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*; Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*; Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*; Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*; Old, *Leading in Prayer*; Old, *Praying with the Bible*; Miller, *A Praying Life*.

² Based on Paul Miller, *A Praying Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2009).

“In the broader culture and in our churches, we prize intellect, competency, and wealth. Because we can do life without God, praying seems nice but unnecessary. Money can do what prayer does, and it is quicker and less time-consuming. Our trust in ourselves and in our talents makes us structurally independent of God” (16).

5) Prayer seems odd.

ULTIMATE PROBLEM: Prayer is hard, because we have a dysfunctional relationship with our Heavenly Father.

“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 4:12).

“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God” (Gal. 4:4-7).

“5 And he said to them, “Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves, 6 for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him’; 7 and he will answer from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything’? 8 I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs. 9 And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 10 For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. 11 What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; 12 or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? 13 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:5-13)

“Deep down, we just don’t believe God is as generous as he keeps saying he is” (135).

“The crisis of our prayer life is that our mind may be filled with ideas of God while our heart remains far from him. Real prayer comes from the heart” (Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 58).

II. WHY PRAY?

a. Prayer is Christ-like.

John 17 – The High Priestly Prayer

“35 And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.” (Mark 1:35)

“16 But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.” (Luke 5:16)

“12 In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God.” (Luke 6:12)

“22 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. 23 And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone” (Matthew 14:22-23)

“38 Then he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.” 39 And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” 40 And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, “So, could you not watch with me one hour? 41 Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” 42 Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” (Matt 26:38-42)

b. Prayer is expected.

“5 And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 6 But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 7 And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words.” (Matt 6:5-7)

“And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.” (Luke 18:1)

“2 Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.” (Col 4:2)

c. Prayer is heard by God.

“14 And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.” (1 John 5:14)

“16 Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Heb 4:16)

“12 in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.” (Eph 3:12)

“Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion, and to you shall vows be performed. 2 O you who hear prayer, to you shall all flesh come.” (Ps 65:1-2)

d. Prayer is ministry.

“It is in prayers of intercession that we continue the ministry of intercession that Christ gave to the Church to perform in his name” (Old, *Leading in Prayer*, 175).

“To pray in the name of Jesus is to pray with Jesus as he intercedes for his disciples in every age and every condition. Jesus has left us to carry on in his name the work of intercession that he began” (Old, *Praying with the Bible*, 20).

“13 Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. 14 Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. 16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another

and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.” (James 5:13-16)

e. Prayer is helped by the Holy Spirit.

“26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.” (Rom 8:26)

III. WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL PITFALLS OF PRAYER?

a. Hypocrisy

“5 “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.” (Matt 6:5)

i. What it looks like

“6 But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 7 “And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” (Matt 6:6-8).

ii. What’s the solution

b. Not asking

7 “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. 9 Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? 11 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matt 7:7-11)

“3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions” (James 4:2b-3a).

c. Asking selfishly

IV. WHAT ARE THE PRACTICES OF PRAYER?

a. Learning to pray from Jesus & His Word.

i. Pray regularly

Morning: Shema (Deut 6:4)

Afternoon: Series of blessings called the “tephilla” (Hebrew for prayer - 2 Chron 6:19).

Evening: Identical to morning but included private petitions.

“Like David, who prayed seven times a day (119:164), and Daniel, who prayed three times a day (Dan 6:10), Jesus and the Jews of his day prayed at set hours of the day. It was a devout Jew’s habit to go to the temple at the sixth and ninth hour (noon and three o’clock). After Jesus’ death, his disciples continued to pray at fixed hours of the day (Acts 3:1; 10:3, 9, 30). This

custom of praying at set daily intervals quickly became a part of the early church's rhythm of prayer" (Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 224).

ii. Pray Scripture

1. Pray the Psalms

2. Pray the Lord's Prayer

- a. Use the Lord's Prayer as a "Thought-by-Thought" model for prayer.
- b. Use the Lord's Prayer as a "Word-for-Word" model for prayer.
- c. Pray it once through and then go back and elaborate on each line. Remember to allow your opening address ("Our Father") to shape your communion with God.

3. Pray the promises of God.

4. Pray meditating on Scripture.

"Meditation is the missing link between Bible intake and prayer...There should be a smooth, almost unnoticeable transition between Scripture input and prayer output so that we move even closer to God in those moments. This happens when there is the link of meditation in between" (Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 71).

"The process works like this: After the input of a passage of Scripture, meditation allows us to take what God has said to us and think deeply on it, digest it, and then speak to God about it in meaningful prayer" (Whitney 72).

iii. Pray without ceasing

"17 pray without ceasing" (1 Thess 5:17)

"18 praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication." (Eph 6:18).

"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner."

iv. Pray out loud

"Jesus follows the custom of praying out loud...Praying out loud can be helpful because it keeps you from getting lost in your head. It makes your thoughts concrete. But it is more than technique. It is also a statement of faith. You are audibly declaring your belief in a God who is alive. Praying aloud is not a New Testament rule; it is just another way of being real in prayer. Everyone is different" (Miller, *A Praying Life*, 48).

v. Pray accounting for your body

1. Stand

"25 And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses." (Mark 11:25)

2. Outstretched arms/lifted hands

"Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!" (Ps 141:2)

“So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands.” (Ps 63:4)

“8 I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling;” (1 Tim 2:8)

3. Uplifted eyes

“To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens! 2 Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maidservant to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, till he has mercy upon us.” (Ps 123:1-2)

“34 And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.”” (Mark 7:34)

“When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you,” (John 17:1)

4. Kneeling

“40 But Peter put them all outside, and knelt down and prayed;” (Acts 9:40)

“40 And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, “If you will, you can make me clean.”” (Mark 1:40)

“Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!” (Ps 95:6)

5. Prostrate

“31 And the people believed; and when they heard that the Lord had visited the people of Israel and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshiped.” (Exodus 4:31)

“6 And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.” (Nehemiah 8:6)

“12 While he was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy. And when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged him, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.”” (Luke 5:12)

b. Learning to pray from Jesus’ people.

i. Adoration Confession Thanksgiving Supplication (ACTS)

ii. Fixed-hour prayer or The Daily Office (Book of Common Prayer)

1. How it began:

Set prayer times of monasteries based on Ps 119:64 (“Seven times a day I praise you”) and the regular practices of prayer by Jesus and the early church:

- Night prayer – *Vigils*
- Waking-up prayers – *Lauds*
- Prayers for beginning work – *Prime*
- Giving-thanks prayers in mid-morning – *Terce*
- Noon-day prayer of commitment – *Sext*
- Mid-afternoon prayer – *None*
- Evening prayer of stillness – *Vespers*
- Going-to-sleep prayer of trust – *Compline*

Reduced by Anglicans to four basic times with emphasis on Morning & Evening Prayer:
-Morning, Noon, Evening, Compline

2. Why this is helpful:

“When it comes to spiritual formation, we are what we pray” (Brian Zahnd, *Water to Wine*, 75).

“Unless I’m badly mistaken, one of the main reasons so many of God’s children don’t have a significant prayer life is not so much that we don’t want to, but that we don’t plan to. If you want to take a four-week vacation, you don’t just get up one summer morning and say, ‘Hey, let’s go today!’ You won’t have anything ready. You won’t know where to go. Nothing has been planned. But that is how many of us treat prayer. We get up day after day and realize that significant times of prayer should be a part of our life, but nothing’s ever ready. We don’t know where to go. Nothing has been planned. No time. No place. No procedure. And we all know that the opposite of planning is not a wonderful flow of deep, spontaneous experiences in prayer. The opposite of planning is the rut. If you don’t plan a vacation you will probably stay home and watch TV. The natural, unplanned flow of spiritual life sinks to the lowest ebb of vitality” (Piper, *Desiring God*, 150-151).

“How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour and that one is what we are doing. A schedule defends us from chaos and whim. It is a net for catching days. It is a scaffolding on which a worker can stand and labor with both hands at sections of time” (Annie Dillard).

3. What it can look like:

- a. *The Book of Common Prayer*: <http://www.bcponline.org>
- b. ESV Daily Office Readings:
<http://www.esvbible.org/devotions/bcp/>
- c. Mission St. Clare: <http://www.missionstclare.com>
- d. *The Valley of Vision*

iii. Notecards

1. Prayer “snap shot” using short phrases
2. A few seconds per card
3. Write Scripture verse to pray specifically for person/issue
4. Possible cards: Family Members, People in Suffering, Non-Christians, Friends, Church leadership, Small Group, Missionaries/Ministries, work, co-workers, world/cultural issues, personal, etc.

CONCLUSION

“9 I am praying for them.” (John 17:9)

“My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” (1 John 2:1)

“5 For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,” (1 Tim 2:5)

“25 Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.” (Heb 7:25).

Questions for Reflection

- How would you describe the rich prayer life with God that you desire? What would it look like?
- What is the greatest struggle in your prayer life?
- How might your prayers change if you frame it in terms of seeking a relationship with God the Father instead of an experience?
- Which methods of prayer have worked best for you in the past? Which of the above is most appealing to you?
- How do you feel about written prayers?
- What is the benefit or disadvantage of having said something so often that you know it by heart?

RECOMMENDED READING & RESOURCES

A Praying Life, Paul Miller

The Valley of Vision

The Book of Common Prayer

Westminster Larger Catechism #178-#196