

Basics

¹ *Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand,² and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you —unless you believed in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:1–2 ESV)*

¹⁶ *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16 ESV)*

Now I want to remind you, although you once fully knew it, that Jesus, who saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe. (Jude 1:5 ESV)

What Is Prayer?

September 20th, 2015

Genesis 32:9-12

Matthew 6:8-13

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Introduction:

Good morning! This morning we are going to continue with our Basics series in which we have been asking and answering some of the foundational questions about the Christian faith. This morning we are asking “What Is Prayer?” Prayer is a pretty big deal for Christians. In fact, I think you could say that prayer is definitional to the Christians meaning that prayer is quite simply what Christians do. Martin Luther said:

“He who does not do this (i.e. pray) should know that he is no Christian and does not belong in the Kingdom of God.”¹

John Knox said that prayer:

“is the very branch which springs forth of true faith.”²

Prayer is what real Christians do so obviously this is a big topic; it deserves more than a single sermon and in fact, as you’ve heard now, it will receive more than a single sermon. This whole

¹ Martin Luther as cited by Joel Beeke in Taking Hold of God (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011), 9.

² John Knox as cited by Joel Beeke in Taking Hold of God (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011), 45.

week at our church is about prayer. This morning's sermon is just the appetizer. It is intended to introduce the topic and to answer some of the most common questions about prayer. By God's grace and if time allows I hope to ask and answer 4 common questions about prayer. We'll begin with the most basic question of all.

Question 1: What Is Prayer?

Let's begin by taking a look at the first extended prayer in all of Scripture. Open your Bibles to Genesis 32:9-12. Many of you will know this story. Jacob is coming home after many years away from his family. He ran away in fear and in disgrace. He had lied to his father and he had stolen from his brother and he had literally left home running for his life. He wasn't sure how he would be received. He had stolen something very precious from his brother and his brother was a powerful and sometimes violent man. So Jacob did two very smart things. He planned and he prayed. He organized a variety of gifts that were intended to appease his brother, he organized his family to maximize the possibility of escape should that become necessary and then with his plan made he got down on his knees and he prayed. And this is what he said:

⁹ "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, **O LORD who said** to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, that I may do you good,' ¹⁰ I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps. ¹¹ Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me, the mothers with the children. ¹² **But you said**, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.'" (Genesis 32:9–12 ESV)

Jacob prayed to God on the basis of what God had said to him. That's what prayer is, prayer is going to God on the basis of who God is and how God has spoken in his Word. Tim Keller offers a very similar definition in his very helpful book on prayer. He says that prayer is:

"a personal, communicative response to the knowledge of God".³

He goes on to say that:

"What Christians know about God comes with verbal specificity through the words of the Scripture and its main message – the Gospel."⁴

So prayer is our response to God as he reveals himself in the Gospel. Prayer is us responding to

³ Tim Keller, Prayer (New York: Penguin Group, 2014), 45.

⁴ Tim Keller, Prayer (New York: Penguin Group, 2014), 45.

what God says about who he is, who we are, how he has saved us through the person and work of Jesus Christ, how that grace is changing us now in this life and how it will one day bring us all the way home to be with him in glory and to enjoy him forever. That's what prayer is.

Obviously then, the best way to pray is with your Bible open in front of you. Read the Bible – see what it says about who God is, who you are and how he has saved you, is saving you and will save you through the person and work of Jesus Christ. See that and then respond to it. That's what prayer is.

Secondly I want to ask:

Question 2: How Should We Pray?

As I prayed to God about what I should say to you about how to pray, three words seem to come to mind:

- ✓ **Faithful**
- ✓ **Fervent**
- ✓ **Focused**

1. Faithful

When I say faithful I am thinking in terms of the regularity and priority that needs to characterize our personal prayer lives. The simple fact is that if you don't plan to do something then you won't do it. You have to have a plan and you have to execute that plan. Daniel prayed 3 times a day the Bible says; David seems to have followed the same pattern. He says:

¹⁷ Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and he hears my voice. (Psalms 55:17. ESV)

John and Peter appear to have kept the standard Old Testament hours of prayer according to the Book of Acts. In chapter 3 it says:

Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour. (Acts 3:1 ESV)

The Apostle Paul says:

pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17 ESV)

So without prescribing a particular set of hours, let's just agree that the New Testament assumes that you are praying a lot and that you are being faithful at it. My experience as a pastor has been that people who don't have set appointments to pray, generally speaking, don't pray. You need to be faithful.

2. Fervent

But of course you also want to be fervent. The two can go hand in hand. David mentions that he kept the hours of prayer but he also said:

As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. (Psalms 42:1 ESV)

David was faithful, but he was also fervent. He PANTED AFTER GOD. He needed his time with the Lord. Fervency matters. If I can make a marriage analogy I think most of the wives in here would agree that when it comes to romance faithfulness and FERVENCY both matter. You got have a regular date night. Doesn't have to be expensive or fancy – it just has to happen. You have to have regular, scheduled times to be together. But then every so often you have to have a little fire too. You've got to have some PASSION. So it is in prayer. You want to be regular, but God responds to PASSION. The Bible says that; do you remember how the old KJV renders James 5:16?

The effectual **fervent** prayer of a righteous man availeth much. (James 5:16 KJV)

I love that! The Apostle Paul tells his people to be FERVENT IN SPIRIT in Romans 12:11 – God responds to PASSION, God responds to FERVENCY.

My most fervent times of prayer are generally unscheduled. They are the times when I just fall on my face before God because I am feeling tired, or distant, or helpless or confused and I NEED TO SPEAK TO GOD. Those are powerful times. But they can't be the only time. I have found fervency impossible to summon when I am not also being faithful. I don't think you have to

choose, in fact I think you have to do both.

Thirdly of course, we want to be focused:

3. Focused

This is where the Lord's Prayer is really helpful. If we don't have a bit of a plan for our prayer times we will often run out of things to say after 2 or 3 minutes and we will likely find ourselves narrowing our prayers to very personal and particular concerns. The Lord's Prayer is the answer to that problem. John Calvin commented on the Lord's Prayer saying:

It was not the intention of the Son of God, (as we have already said), to prescribe the words which we must use, so as not to leave us at liberty to depart from the form which he has dictated. His intention rather was, **to guide and restrain our wishes**, that they might not go beyond those limits and hence we infer, that the rule which he has given us for praying aright relates not to the words, but to the things themselves.⁵

So Jesus didn't give us this prayer to use a magic totem to quote back to God – he didn't intend the structure of it to eliminate spontaneity and passion and liberty, but he did intend it to guide and restrain our wishes. He gave it to help us focus. The Lord's Prayer is Jesus saying, when you pray, focus on these things. You don't have to use these exact words every time, but focus on these things. Most of you will know that there are 6 petitions – 6 requests – in the Lord's Prayer. These are the things Jesus is telling us to focus on.

Now, we won't go in depth on any of them this morning because first of all this is BASICS not verse by verse exegesis, and secondly we have been going phrase by phrase through the Lord's Prayer at our Prayer Week special services. You can come tonight and we will be dealing in depth with the second petition of the Lord's Prayer. But for now, let me just introduce what Jesus is telling us to focus on in our times of prayer. He's telling us first of all to focus on:

i. The beauty of who God is (Hallowed be thy Name)

Leon Morris has a wonderful comment on this line of the Lord's Prayer. He says:

⁵John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries (Complete)*, trans. John King, Accordance electronic ed. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847), n.p.

This prayer is not so much a petition that God will do some great act that will show everyone who and what he is, as **a prayer that he will bring people to a proper attitude toward him**. It expresses an aspiration that **he who is holy will be seen to be holy** and treated throughout his creation as holy.⁶

When we focus on hallowing God's Name in our prayer times we are asking God to help us see his beauty and his goodness and we are praying that other people would see that too. This is when praise happens, this is when singing might happen, this is when prayers for illumination and expressions of delight over insights given into God's Word might happen. That's all part of what we do when we are focused on hallowing God's Name in our prayer times.

Secondly, Jesus tells us to focus on:

ii. The coming of God's kingdom (Thy kingdom come)

I'm not going to say anything about this because we're going to be talking about this tonight. That's not fair I guess to those who can't make it tonight, so I'll just say that this would be a great time to pray for own full submission to and delight in the Lordship of Jesus Christ and to pray for the cause of world mission – think of that as an appetizer, for the rest you'll have to come tonight.

Thirdly, Jesus tells us to focus on:

iii. The doing of God's will (Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven)

When we pray that petition we tell the kids in the catechism class that we are praying:

“That people on earth may serve God as the angels do in heaven”.

We are praying for obedience to God's will; for all people generally but for God's people in particular. This is a good time to pray for the ministry of your church. This is a good time to pray for the elders and pastors of your church. Pray for our collective service. Pray that we may serve God on earth as the angels do in heaven.

⁶Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 145.

Fourthly, Jesus tells us to focus on:

iv. Our physical and spiritual needs

Bible scholars often notice that the first three petitions are focused on God and the last three petitions are focused on us. The balance matters and the order matters. We need to be more concerned with the goodness of God and more concerned with the kingdom of God and more concerned with the will of God – those things have to come first! But that doesn't mean that God doesn't care about our personal needs. He does. God is not so concerned with the cosmic and transcendent that he can't also spare some attention for the personal and the mundane. He can do both. That's the benefit of being infinite. God is never too busy. God's ability to handle the massively significant things is not in any way diminished when he listens to your prayer about your sick cat. I love that about God. God has big things to attend to. There are refugees in Syria and ISIS is going crazy and there are 130 000 abortions every year in Canada – those are HUGE THINGS. But because God is a huge God you can pray to him about that mole on your back or the trouble that your kid is having in 3rd grade and God can handle it all! You can and you should go to him about your personal needs.

Fifthly, Jesus tells us to focus on:

vi. Our need to receive and extend mercy (Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us)

Go to God with your guilt and ask him for grace. Ask him for forgiveness and ask him for help to forgive others. Spend some time on that when you pray.

Sixthly and lastly, when we pray Jesus tells us to focus on:

vii. Our need for protection and deliverance (Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil)

That's how we learned to say it in school but actually the NKJV offers a more accurate translation. It says:

And do not lead us into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one. (Matthew 6:13 NKJV)

The Greek word there is *poneros* and it refers specifically to Satan. The Bible says that:

Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. (1 Peter 5:8 ESV)

You have an enemy, the Bible says, and your enemy wants to eat you. He wants to destroy you and crush you and ruin your life and steal you away from God. He wants to get you addicted to things and distracted by things and the problem is that he is stronger than you; but here's the good news, he is not stronger than God. Ask God to limit your temptations. Ask him to provide a way of escape. Ask him to never abandon you to the power of your enemy. Pray, "lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."

That was a pretty long answer to the question: How Should We Pray? I want to move a little bit faster now and try and answer 2 more questions related to prayer in order to set you up for this coming week. We've asked "What Is Prayer?"; we've asked "How Should We Pray?" and now I want to ask:

Question 3: What Does It Mean To Pray In Jesus' Name?

One of the interesting things of course about the Lord's Prayer is that it does not end with the words: "In Jesus' Name". In fact there are no prayers in the Bible that end "In Jesus' Name" and yet Jesus told us:

¹³ Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. (John 14:13 ESV)

So clearly Jesus wants his disciples to be praying in his name so that the Father may be glorified in the Son when those prayers are answered. And yet, as I said, there is not a single prayer in the Bible that ends with the words "in Jesus' Name". Clearly this means something and it is bigger than just the words we use at the end of our prayers. Martin Luther is helpful here, he says:

"Asking in the name of Christ, really means relying on Him in such a way that we are accepted and heard for His

sake, not for our own sake.”⁷

It means to approach God – BECAUSE OF CHRIST. It means to pray to God knowing that the only reason you can pray to God is because Jesus did for you what you could never do for yourself and he paid for what you did do in his body on the cross. To pray in Jesus’ Name is to approach God boldly as a blood bought son or daughter. That’s what the Bible says; Paul wrote to the Ephesians saying:

¹¹This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹²in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. (Ephesians 3:11–12 ESV)

We can be BOLD and we can enjoy ACCESS to God because we are IN CHRIST through faith in him. When we enter the presence of God wearing the robe of righteousness provided by Jesus Christ we enter his presence with the boldness of sons and daughters. We are children of the king and we can be assured of welcome and reception. That’s what it means to pray in Jesus’ Name. It means to pray as a Christian. It means to pray as a blood bought child of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Lastly, I want to ask the question:

Question 4: Does Prayer Really Change Anything?

We’ve talked about what prayer is. We’ve talked about how to do it. We’ve talked about praying in Jesus’ Name but some of you are wondering whether this really matters at the end of the day. I mean, if God is Sovereign, and he knows everything and he’s going to do what he’s going to do then how could it possibly matter whether we pray or whether we don’t? Does prayer change things? That’s not a bad question. Jesus anticipated that question. Before teaching the Lord’s Prayer he said:

⁸your Father knows what you need before you ask him. (Matthew 6:8 ESV)

God knows what you are going to say before you begin to pray – well why then should we pray at all? If God knows what we’re going to say and God is going to do what he wants to do then

⁷ Martin Luther as cited by Joel Beeke in Taking Hold of God (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011), 22.

what is the point in actually praying? John Calvin addressed this question at length in his commentary on the Lord's Prayer. He said:

Believers do not pray, with the view of informing God about things unknown to him, or of exciting him to do his duty, or of urging him as though he were reluctant. On the contrary, they pray, in order that they may arouse themselves to seek him, that they may exercise their faith in meditating on his promises, that they may relieve themselves from their anxieties by pouring them into his bosom; in a word, that they may declare that from Him alone they hope and expect, both for themselves and for others, all good things. God himself, on the other hand, has purposed freely, and without being asked, to bestow blessings upon us; but he promises that he will grant them to our prayers. **We must, therefore, maintain both of these truths, that He freely anticipates our wishes, and yet that we obtain by prayer what we ask.**⁸

Let me bring that down to street level. Calvin says that we pray for two reasons.

i. We pray because it changes us

We don't pray to change God. We don't try and manipulate God or rouse God to his duty as if God wasn't going to do what he said he would do. God will do all that he said he would do but God wants to do that through you and so when you pray you actually experience an internal adjustment towards the will of God. You pray for the conversion of the nations and that prayer bounces back on your heart and it causes you to feel a burden for the nations. Your prayer becomes your calling. It changes you.

And it also changes the world. Calvin says that too:

ii. We pray because prayer changes the world

God is going to accomplish his purposes on the earth Calvin says, but he promises to do that **THROUGH THE PRAYERS OF HIS PEOPLE!** God has ordained the ends but he has also ordained the means. The Apostle Paul told us to expect this sort of thing from God. He said:

²⁷ God chose what is **foolish** in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is **weak** in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is **low and despised** in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (1 Corinthians 1:27–29 ESV)

God has a plan to destroy all human boasting and to set all the world to rights before himself. To

⁸John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries (Complete)*, trans. John King, Accordance electronic ed. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847), n.p.

effect that plan he will use foolish things, weak things, low and despised things – things that are NOT – according to the wisdom of the world – to overturn and bring to nothing things that are. God is going to change the world and he is going to do that through the prayers of God’s people. We catch a picture of that in Revelation 8. The Bible says:

¹ When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. ² Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. ³ And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, ⁴ and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. ⁵ Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake. (Revelation 8:1–5 ESV)

Are you hearing that? The seventh seal represents the completion of God’s purpose upon the earth. God’s Sovereign will falls upon the earth in cataclysm and power in response to the prayers of the saints. Revelation 5 tells us that those prayers are stored in a bowl. Every time you pray your prayers are added like drops, they are mingled with incense and they rise before God and they summon God to action. Not because he is slow to act but because he has willed to act through the prayers of His people.

Listen to me my friends, this week we are going to pray. We are going to pray because prayer changes the world. We are going to pray because prayer changes us. We’re going to pray because the:

God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Corinthians 4:6 ESV)

This is what we do. This is who we are and this is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.