

Prayer: The Life Breath of Faith

Resources

- Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Recovering Awe and Intimacy with God* (Dutton, 2014).
- Paul Miller, *A Praying Life: Connecting with God in a Distracting World*, rev. ed. (NavPress, 2017).

Why Study Prayer?

- Of the 3 core rhythms of the Christian life (reading, soliloquy, and prayer), prayer is the hardest.
- There are many obstacles to prayer – especially in our modern culture of comfort & distraction.
- Yet Scripture, church history, and the personal experience of many show us that prayer is:
 - *Essential* to the life of faith:
Do we want faith to feel like a real and vital part of life... not just a hat we wear on Sunday?
 - *Instrumental* in awakening and revival:
Do we want to see lives, communities, and nations come alive in and for Christ?
 - *Powerful* in the story of God's work in the world:
Do we want to see evil vanquished before the spreading goodness of God in the world?
- The single most important solution to all three of these questions is the same: learn to pray.

What is Prayer?

- WSC #98: "Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies."
 - "Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us. (Ps. 62.8)
 - "This is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us." (1 Jn. 5.14)
 - "Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you." (Jn. 16.23)
 - "I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,' and you forgave the iniquity of my sin." (Ps. 32.5)
 - "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." (Phil. 4.6)
- Keller: "Prayer is continuing a conversation that God has started through his Word and his grace, which eventually becomes a full encounter with him."
- Miller: "Like our family mealtimes... prayer is all about relationship. It's intimate and hints at eternity. We don't think about *communication* or *words* but about whom we are talking with. Prayer is simply the medium through which we experience and connect to God."
- J.C. Ryle (*Practical Religion*): "Just as the first sign of life in an infant when born into the world, is the act of breathing, so the first act of men and women when they are born again, is *praying*."

Why is Prayer Important?

- If prayer is faith breathing, then we immediately see two reasons why it is so essential:
 - It is a clear sign that we are spiritually alive... *what better way to prove you live but breathe?*
 - It is a critical means for sustaining spiritual life... *what happens to us if we stop breathing?*
- If prayer is *pouring* out our hearts before God, it is also the means by which we *conform* our hearts to God's. Read: Luk. 22.41-44. If Jesus needed to pray... how much more do we?
- If prayer is *asking* God for "things agreeable to his will," it is also the means through which he *activates* his eternal plan. How many critical junctures in the story of the Bible involve prayer?
Ex: Gen. 4.25-26, 15.2-3; Ex. 32.31-32; 2 Sam. 7.18-29, 2 Ch. 7.1-3; 1 Ki. 18.36-39; Luk. 23.46!

Why is Prayer So Hard? (Paul Miller, *A Praying Life*)

- Shame: “Jesus wants us to come to him like little children, just as we are. The difficulty of coming just as we are is that we are messy. And prayer makes it worse. When we slow down to pray, we are immediately confronted with how unspiritual we are, with how difficult it is to concentrate on God. We don’t know how bad we are until we try to be good. **Nothing exposes our selfishness and spiritual powerlessness like prayer.**”
- Legalism: “Jesus wants us to be without pretense when we come to him in prayer. Instead, we often try to be something we aren’t. We begin by concentrating on God, but almost immediately our minds wander off in a dozen different directions. The problems of the day push out our well-intentioned resolve to be spiritual. We give ourselves a spiritual kick in the pants and try again, but life crowds out prayer. We know that prayer isn’t supposed to be like this, so we give up in despair. We might as well get something done. What’s the problem? We’re trying to be spiritual, to get it right. We know we don’t need to clean up our act in order to become a Christian, but when it comes to praying, we forget that. We, like adults, try to fix ourselves up.... **Private, personal prayer is one of the last great bastions of legalism.** In order to pray like a child, you might need to unlearn the non-personal, nonreal praying that you’ve been taught.”
- Perfectionism: “Many people struggle to learn how to pray because they are focusing on praying, not on God. Making prayer the center is like making *conversation* the center of a family mealtime. **In prayer, focusing on the conversation is like trying to drive while looking at the windshield instead of through it.** It freezes us, making us unsure of where to go.”
- Impatience: “Since a praying life is interconnected with every part of our lives, learning to pray is almost identical to maturing over a lifetime. What does it feel like to grow up? It is a thousand feelings on a thousand different days. That is what learning to pray feels like. **So don’t hunt for a feeling in prayer.** Deep in our psyches we want an experience with God or an experience in prayer. **Once we make that our quest, we lose God. You don’t experience God; you get to know him.** You submit to him. You enjoy him. He is, after all, a person.”

Remembering the Gospel As We Pray

- The Holy Spirit helps us to pray: “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. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” (Rom. 8.26-27)
- Jesus does not want perfect prayers, but honest prayers (Miler):
 - “Jesus does not say, ‘Come to me, all you who have learned how to concentrate in prayer, whose minds no longer wander, and I will give you rest.’ No, Jesus opens his arms to his needy children and says, ‘Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.’ The criteria for coming to Jesus is weariness. Come overwhelmed with life. Come with your wandering mind. Come messy.”
 - **“Don’t try to get the prayer right; just tell God where you are and what’s on your mind.** That’s what little children do. They come as they are, runny noses and all. Like the disciples, they just say what is on their minds.”
- Honest prayer includes honesty about our struggles to pray: “Sometimes, no matter what we do, we simply cannot concentrate, or we find our thoughts do not become big and affecting, but rather we feel bored, hard, and distracted. Then... simply turn to God and make brief, intense appeals for help. Sometimes that is all you will do... and sometimes the very cries for help serve to concentrate the mind and soften the heart.” (Keller)

Activation Tip #1: Instead of trying to be elaborate with your prayers this week, try using a simpler, childlike pattern for prayer: 1) Wow! 2) Sorry! 3) Thanks! 4) Please!