

Prayer: Pray Without Ceasing

Focus: Our focus in this class is on *personal/private* prayer rather than *corporate/public* prayer. Talking to your dad via phone is far less formal than honoring him at a public banquet.

Review

- Definitions of Prayer:
 - “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.” (WSC 98)
 - “Continuing a conversation that God has started through his Word.” (Keller)
 - “Like our family mealtimes... prayer is all about relationship.” (Miller)
 - For our faith, prayer is the “sign of life... the act of breathing.” (J.C. Ryle, *Practical Religion*)
- Importance of Prayer:
 - Not only a sign of spiritual life, but the means of *sustaining* our spiritual life.
 - Not only pouring out our hearts, but the means of *conforming* our hearts to God’s will.
 - Not only asking God, but the means by which God *activates* his eternal plan.
- Obstacles to Prayer:
 - Shame – Prayer exposes our selfishness and spiritual powerlessness.
 - Legalism – We think we need to clean ourselves up *before* we can begin to pray.
 - Perfectionism – We get too focused on “doing it right” with our prayers.
 - Impatience – We want an experience of God (“Amazon.God”) vs. getting to know Him.
- The Gospel for Prayer:
 - The Holy Spirit helps us to pray (Rom. 8.26-27).
 - Jesus doesn’t want *perfect* prayers, but *honest* prayers (Mt. 11.28).
 - Honest prayer *includes honesty about our struggles to pray*:
“When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul.” (Ps. 94.19)

When Should We Pray?

- Regular Times of Prayer
 - “And Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening.” (Gen. 24.63)
 - “[Job] would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings...” (Job 1.5)
 - “O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice...” (Ps. 5.3)
 - “Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and he hears my voice.” (Ps. 55.17)
 - “when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night.” (Ps. 63.6)
 - “It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night...” (Ps. 92.1-2)
 - “[Daniel] got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously.” (Dan. 6.10)
 - “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.” (Mk. 1.35)

→ *What are the greatest obstacles in our lives to making regular, focused time for prayer? What are some strategies we could employ to overcome these obstacles?*
- Continual Prayer
 - “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” (1 Thess. 5.16-18)
 - “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.” (Col. 4.2)
 - “...praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.” (Eph. 6.18)
 - “Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.” (Rom. 12.12)
 - “I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day.” (2 Tim. 1.3)

→ Analogy: ~ ongoing, throughout-the-day text messages sent to your family, friend, or spouse...

Practicing Continual Prayer

- How can we “pray without ceasing” when we have to be at school, at work, and/or with people?

In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. And the king said to me, “Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart.” Then I was very much afraid. I said to the king, “Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?” Then the king said to me, “What are you requesting?” So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said to the king...” (Neh. 2.1-5)

→ How much time did Nehemiah have to premeditate or prepare his words to God?
What does this suggest to us regarding the command to “pray without ceasing”?

- Continual prayer is not diverting our attention, but rather a habit of ongoing conversation:
 - The Christian life is a life lived by faith (Gal. 2.20, 2 Cor. 5.7),
 - Christian faith breathes through prayer (Ps. 62.8), therefore
 - The Christian life is best lived as an ongoing conversation with God as we go about our day:
 - Praising him for the good things we see... “Look at that! Praise God!”
 - Apologizing to him for the bad things we say or think or do... “I’m sorry, Lord...”
 - Thanking him for the good (and the bad) things we experience... “Thank you, Father.”
 - Asking him for help in the moment – for ourselves and others! – “Lord, give light...”

Note: As you begin to cultivate this habit, it will feel awkward. Persevere!

“A praying spirit transforms how we look at people. As we walk through the mall, our hearts can tempt us to judge, despise, or lust. We see overweight people, skinny people, teenagers with piercings and tattoos, well-dressed women, security guards, and older people shuffling along. If we are tempted to judge an overweight person, we might pray [for their health]. When we see a teenage girl with a nose ring, we can pray that she would find her community in Christ. When we see a security guard, we might pray for his career. When we pass an older couple shuffling along, we can pray for grace as they age.” (Miller)

- Continual prayer does not require prolonged words, but can utilize short, “bullet prayers”:

“Into your hand I commit my spirit...” (Ps. 31.5)

“May those who love your salvation say continually, ‘Great is the LORD!’” (Ps. 40.16)

“I am yours; save me, for I have sought your precepts.” (Ps. 119.94)

“Lord, have mercy...” (Ps. 123.3; Mat. 15.22, 17.15, 20.30-31)

“I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mk. 9.24)

“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God... and it will be given him.” (Jas. 1.5)

- Although such short prayers can be abused, abuse does not invalidate right use:

“Praying simple one-word prayers or a verse of Scripture takes the pressure off because we don’t have to sort out exactly what we need... This is the exact opposite of Eastern mysticism, which is a psychospiritual technique that disengages from relationship and escapes pain by dulling self. Eastern mystics are trying to empty their minds and become one with the nonpersonal “all.” But as Christians we realize we can’t cure ourselves, so we cry out to our Father, our primary relationship.” (Miller)

Activation Tips #2-3

- Trying going for morning or evening walks to pray; pray out loud while you walk!
- Find a verse to use as a “bullet prayer” – or write your own!

Request for this Week: Ask the Lord to help you develop a habit of continual prayer!