

SHARPENING YOUR PRAYER LIFE 9-19-21

How is your prayer life? Most every believer I know would say, *Not what I would like*. Why is that? Why are we so weak in this area of discipleship? Perhaps one of the reasons is that we have no earthly reason to pray. A carnal desire for knowledge could lead a man to study his Bible. A desire to look good before others pushes us to many of our disciplines, but prayer? Prayer pleases no one but God. Is that enough? All agree that prayer is important. Almost everyone admits needing to pray more and more deeply, but—what's the problem? Fact is that many of us are bored by prayer. We don't like it. One reason we may not like it is because we aren't very good at it. We don't know what we are doing, and in this respect, prayer is a lot like tennis. Tennis is not the easiest game and some beginners have a hard time getting the ball over the net. When that is the case tennis is boring. Folks try it and are bored by it because they aren't skilled at it. That's the way it was for me. I started playing tennis around ninth grade, as sort of a social thing. The game itself really wasn't much fun, but I can remember the day I was playing and something changed. I found myself getting intense over it. I was playing well enough that I could strategize and get into the sport of it. And tennis became really fun. *Fun* may not be the word to use in reference to prayer but I propose that when we are confident in prayer it becomes much more fulfilling. Sadly, some simply will not endure to get to that point. By God's grace, I believe you can learn to love to pray. The message today and next Sunday with Pastor Ben are designed to point you in the right direction, prepare you for the roadblocks ahead and propel you into a more effective pattern of personal prayer which is the P of our PBJ missional focus.

So, we begin with a question. Why pray? With all the other things I could be doing - what about prayer makes it a priority? Three answers. The first reason to pray is because it is your delightful duty. Ephesians 6:18-19 *With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints,* ¹⁹*and pray on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel.* Here, in the context of spiritual warfare, Paul exhorts the believer to pray. And verse 18 is a very strong verse because of the repetition of the word "all." All prayer. All times. All saints. Similarly, our memory verse this month. I Thessalonians 5:17 *Pray without ceasing.* It is obvious that prayer is at the center of the spiritual life. Does that mean you stay in prayer 24/7, sort of like a

monk? No, it means you walk in an attitude of prayer, aware that you live Coram Deo, in the presence of God.

Secondly, prayer is important because it is how we honor God. The most direct way to honor God is with our praise and thanksgivings which are offered to God in prayer. It is to offer praise that you and I have been saved from sin. That's why Jesus died and that's why prayer is so vital. Besides honoring God with our praises we also honor Him with our petitions because when we bring our concerns to God it expresses a humble dependence on Him. One of our church's core values is dependence on God and a resting in His care as we do His work.

A third reason prayer is important is that by it we affect positive change. Jesus said, "Apart from Me you can do nothing, but with me you can do all things thru prayer." Prayer links us with God's power and God's power changes things. And the first thing that is gonna be changed by your prayers is— you. Do you want that? Then seek the Lord for that. God promised that those requests, if they are sincere, will be granted. There are two things specifically mentioned in the Bible that God will give you if you ask. One is wisdom - James 1:5 tells us that. The other gift that God promises to give us if we ask is his Holy Spirit. Luke 11:**13b** *How much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?* The Holy Spirit, His fullness, His leading, His power come to us when we pray. What a difference prayer makes in me! Prayer makes us more spiritually sensitive, more open to the movements of God in your soul.

So, you pray to affect change in yourself which communion with God will always do. Secondly, you pray to affect change in others. We all want others to change, don't we? You want your boss to change, your spouse to change, your kids to change, your parents to change, your pastor to change. How do you foster change? Prayer is the best way I know. So, Ephesians 6:18 tells us to pray for others, to pray for the saints. And in that same letter Paul twice mentions his own prayers. 1:**16-18** *I do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers; ¹⁷that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. ¹⁸I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints.* Paul is just praying down spiritual treasures upon these people. So, you can pray for those you love. You can pray for all the saints. You can pray for the impact of God's word. Prayer makes an enormous difference in what I do up here each week. On one of his visits to continental Europe, Charles Spurgeon, the great English preacher of the

19th century, met a minister who asked him the secret of his great influence. Spurgeon said simply, *My people pray for me*. When we meet together in glory I expect we shall all be amazed at how big a difference prayer has made. I have a good friend who, for many years, was a missionary in Japan. While I was in college we were close friends and every time we were together we prayed. And the people we prayed for most were her parents who were not believers and were on the brink of divorce. From all normal judgments these people had no hope. The church, the gospel, were foreign to them. All they had going for them was a daughter who prayed. I remember learning some time back that her parents had donated 60 acres of their land to a church to start a Christian school. My friend's dad not only came to Christ and kept his marriage together, he became an elder in the church and both of his kids went into full-time Christian service. Every time I think about them I want to shout out loud, *Thank you God that prayer changes people - forever*.

Thirdly, prayer not only changes people it changes circumstances. In Acts 12 Peter's prison chains fell off because of prayer. Thomas Watson said of that, *The angel fetched Peter out of prison, but it was prayer fetched the angel*. In Acts 16 an earthquake hit Philippi because of prayer. Jesus said you could move a mountain with the prayer of faith. Mountains of addiction. Mountains of despair. Mountains of sin and pride. Prayer can affect change in circumstances. So, having seen the whys of prayer let's move on to look at the when, where, and what of the discipline of prayer.

Our next question is *when should I pray?* For that we have three answers. The first answer to the when question is "anytime and every time." I Thessalonians 5:17 *Pray without ceasing*. Prayer, which is communication with your God, should be an element of everything we do. You don't just pray in church and in your quiet times, but you pray as you drive and eat and work and play. This type of prayer comes from a habit or a state of mind that is constantly mindful of the presence of the Lord. My mother did me a great service when she taught me to pray a little prayer for people who offend. My mom taught me to respond to the attacks of others by praying, "God bless him and open his eyes." That is a simple thing but I have prayed it countless of times through the years. And, of course, any interaction with our fellow humans, souls that will live forever, is an occasion to pray. *Lord, please love on that feeble old man. Father, open the heart of that teenager*. When Beth and I go to restaurants, Beth makes it a habit to ask the server what me might

pray for on their behalf. You never know where a simple inquiry like that can lead. So, pray often, pray anytime. That is when.

The next answer to the when question is *daily* in your devotional times. Now, by “devotional time” I refer to a special segment of the day set apart to give attention to God in His word and prayer. Mark1:35 *In the early morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went away to a secluded place, and was praying there.* In Luke 5:16 *Jesus Himself would often slip away to the wilderness and pray.* This is the One that we are to imitate. You wonder - if Jesus needed to get away regularly and be alone with His Father do we not need that too? The flash prayer throughout the day is a great thing, but this devoted time is so enriching. There is a discipline of daily prayer that you would be wise to maintain. There is the time of solitude with God when you bear your soul before the One who knows you perfectly. This kind of prayer serves to check the wanderings of the soul. It is much harder to cherish sin in your heart when you face your God every day. It is much harder to drift away and grow cold when you have a heart check every morning. There I go talking about the morning again. For Jesus and for many of us the best time to get alone with God is in the morning - usually first thing or close to it. There are fewer distractions then. The phone seldom rings at 6am. The kids are asleep. The TV isn't blaring. Once I get into the business of the day I find it hard to slow my mind and body down to meditate on eternity. So morning is best for me. Beth and I generally do this together, at home or on a walk. David prayed in the morning Psalm 5:3 *In the morning, O LORD, You will hear my voice; In the morning I will order my prayer to You and eagerly watch.* That's no rule but it is a solid suggestion. Seek to make it daily, and try the morning or whenever you can be most awake and focused.

The third answer to the when question is: *At special times.* Set aside special times for the purpose of extended prayer. Luke 6:12 says that when Jesus was preparing to name His twelve disciples 12 *It was at this time that He went off to the mountain to pray, and He spent the whole night in prayer to God.* The whole night. What do we in this day and age know of that kind of prayer? Very, very little. And we need it very, very much. But, it is challenging to make the time. Beth and I support a missionary who regularly tells us in his letters about the next day that he plans to spend alone with the Lord. He blocks out a day. Can you make an extended date with your Lord?

So those are three answers to the when question: anytime, daily and special times. Our next major point is the *where* of prayer. Where should I pray? And for

this one we have four answers. Answer #1 is that you should pray wherever God is. So, you should pray anywhere. I can't think of a bad place to pray. I can think of bad places to be, but if you are gonna be in those places it's probably best that you pray there.

The second answer to the where question is *in solitude*. Pray alone. This is what Jesus meant when He said in Matthew 6:6 *when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you*. There is a freedom, a focus, an honesty you can have with God alone that nothing else provides.

The third answer to the where question is in groups. Especially I think of the meetings of the church. Frequently, in the book of Acts we read about the early Christians coming together for prayer. Acts 2:42 says they continually devoted themselves to prayer. Now, I gotta tell ya. Group prayer takes some work. It's easy to drift into never-never land while you pray in groups isn't it? You have to work at praying while others speak. I suggest you repeat in your mind what the leader is saying, add to it, branch out on your own a little bit. The human mind thinks four times faster than most people speak so you can do that. Some people like to affirm what they hear with an "amen" or a "yes, Lord." That can help. It is good to do something to really actively pray in groups and with focus. And, by the way, when you pray in small groups, if you are gonna lead out in prayer, don't feel like you have to pray long stretches at a time. Some folks can do that, but most of us do well to keep our prayers brief and on point. As we launch into our PBJ disciplines, we are going to invite you into some special group contexts for effective prayer.

I have one last answer to the where question: pray anywhere, alone, in groups, and fourthly, in families. Not just at meals. Have regular and special times of prayer with the whole family together. I've got a true story for you. I grew up on a farm. We had lots of cows, a few horses, one dog and a variety of wild animals living on our 80 acres. Among the wild ones were two hawks. At least there used to be two hawks. There came a day when one of the hawks died and for weeks you could hear the other hawk wailing in its tree. Because of that I took interest when about ten years later I was working outside with a couple of guys when two hawks flew over. We all noticed the hawks and one of the men there noted that birds rarely mate for life. He said the only birds that will do that are birds of prey. Aha, I said, "That proves it's true. The family that prays together stays together." Make yours a praying family. Join with your children to talk about and pray for the kids in their school, or on their team. Ask God to help you reach out and bless them. There

is power in a praying family for more than just staying together, but also for having an impact.

Finally, today we look at what to include in prayer. Many of you I'm sure are familiar with the ACTS acrostic and it's a good one. ACTS stands for the elements of prayer. Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. Adoration is the admiring of God. It is praising God for who He is and the perfections of His character. You can do this with your own words or with the words of Scripture or hymns. Dear friends, the book of Psalms was given to us to aid our worship. Use it. Take a Psalm like Psalm 103 or Psalm 111 and pray through it. When I say to pray through it I mean to read a verse or two and then respond to it in prayer. Speak it to God and supplement it with your own words and thoughts. Psalm 111:1-3a *Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to the LORD with all my heart, in the company of the upright and in the assembly.* ²*Great are the works of the LORD; they are studied by all who delight in them.* ³*Splendid and majestic is His work.* Then praise Him for His works. 3b-5a *His righteousness endures forever.* ⁴*He has made His wonders to be remembered; the LORD is gracious and compassionate.* ⁵*He has given food to those who fear Him.* Praise God for that. 5b-6 *He will remember His covenant forever.* ⁶*He has made known to His people the power of His works, in giving them the heritage of the nations.* So far there is mention of God's righteousness, love, compassion, power. Verse 7 mentions His justice, verse 9c *Holy and awesome is His name.* Let the Psalms lead you in worship. And then too, utilize hymns in that way. I pray through hymns like I pray through Scripture. All human words fall short of God's glory, but most of us can come closer to it if we quote King David or Isaac Watts or Chris Tomlin.

Next is the C-word, *confession*. As you reflect upon God's holiness you must also reflect upon your own sin, laying it out honestly before the Father, apologizing for it and determining to turn from it and do right. Psalm 51 is a wonderful example of a prayer of confession. 51:1-4ab *Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions.* ²*Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.* ³*For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.* ⁴*Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight.* Confession is far from a grim task. It is close to the heart of gospel blessings. We don't run from God because of sin. We move toward Him for forgiveness and restoration and cleansing, rejoicing that at God's throne there is a fountain for sin and uncleanness. There is grace and mercy with Him.

The T of our acrostic is for Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is closely linked with praise but it focuses more on what God has done than on who He is. We reflect upon His goodness. His goodness in redemption, His goodness in our lives. His answers to prayer.

Then there is the S which is for supplication or petition or requests. This involves asking for God to do something for ourselves or someone else. Philippians 4:6 *Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.* So these are the elements of Biblical prayer. ACTS. Let's say them together: *Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication.* The order is not critical although the normal pattern seems to be to enter God's gates with thanksgiving, his courts with praise and then later in your prayer to bring your requests.

So, prayer, is the first element of our PBJ initiative and strategy. Especially, we are asking you to awaken to each new day with a prayer that God might give you sensitivity to how you can be a blessing to folks you encounter each day. Can you make that a daily prayer? *Lord, give me your eyes to see what I need to see, give me your heart to care about needy people as you care.* And then, target some of those needy folks with your prayers – that the kingdom of Jesus would invade their souls, heal their brokenness and equip them for a life of purpose, meaning and joy. Let's talk more about that next week. For now remember PBJ starts with prayer – dependence on the Lord to change us, to change others. We will pray with one another and by ourselves. And we will call on the Lord with adoration for who he is, confession of who we are, gratitude for what he is doing and appeals to his mercy for a needy world. When should we start this? How about right now?