

INVOCATION

Blessed Jesus, our Savior and Friend, lead us to the throne of mercy. Bow our spirits in reverence yet lift us up in joy. Send Your Spirit in our hearts crying, “Abba! Father!” and cast out our fear by Your perfect love. Your love, precious Lord, is like the brilliant blue sky. Your gentleness warms us like the sun on a cold day. O Lord, our God, touch us with the great reality of You, for though our thought about You is better than our words, our experience of You is better than our thought.

...Based on a prayer by Samuel McComb

PRIORITIZING PRAYER

Matthew 7:7-12 and James 4:2-8, 10

How many of us while scrolling on Facebook or Instagram have seen a friend post about a recent accident or tragedy and your response was either, “Sending prayers your way” or “thoughts and prayers”. I was about to post “prayers your way” the other day and I stopped and thought... What does that mean?

Those phrases are well-intentioned.

- We know we are not sending prayers in the direction of other people. We know that prayer, like worship, is directed to God.
- Since we know prayer is vertical, if we thought about it for half a second we would perhaps write, “Praying...”, “Praying for you” or “Praying for your healing,” or whatever is appropriate.
- Sometimes, though, even though it is well-intentioned, and even if we think to say it in a more theologically precise way, it’s often something we say as a checkmark on our to-do list - I expressed concern for someone today.
- But did I actually pray for them? Would it do any good?

Speaking of prayer in general, maybe you have some questions. Maybe your first thought is that the only thing you can think of that’s more boring than prayer is a sermon about it. And maybe your first question is WHY PRAY?

WHY PRAY?

Imagine a relationship with no communication. Two people show up in the kitchen first thing in the morning. No words. She brews coffee. He puts bread in the toaster. They bump into each other. They’re not looking at each other, there is no “excuse me” or even “move it.”

They both leave for work. No call, no text, no little note slipped into a pocket. How long do you think that relationship will last? How did that relationship even get started?

1. Prayer is communication with God. As such it is the centerpiece of our relationship with Him.
2. **God does nothing except in response to believing prayer.**

– John Wesley

[Share about praying for Marti's friend (with Ben).] One evening about twelve years ago now, I got a call from Marti. A friend suffered a fall and hit her head, bleeding in her brain. She had emergency brain surgery, and doctors felt she may have simultaneously suffered a stroke. Her arms and legs were paralyzed and one side of her face was paralyzed. Marti asked if I would come and pray for her. I walked into the ICU and there was Ben Canlas, working as a nurse there. Ben and I stood on the side where she had the facial paralysis and we prayed. I prayed, Ben prayed, Marti prayed, and I think Ben and I prayed again. The next day Marti called me. Not only was her friend's speech not slurred, but she had complete movement on the side of her body where we stood the night before.

3. **"All things are possible with God."**

– Matthew 19:26

4. We pray because we need God to do something for us or someone else: heal physically, mentally or emotionally; provide for a need; bring resolution to conflict; and protect us or our loved ones.
5. We could pray because we are thankful. We got up this morning. In one way or another, we are here. We ate recently. We have safe drinking water. We have spouses, family, and/or friends who love us and look after us.
6. We could pray because we want God to guide every step we take, every thought we think, every decision we make, every action we do, and every word we say.
7. We could pray because we know that the only way we will be close enough to Jesus to learn the unforced rhythm of grace is if we are in constant communication with Him.

I was reading this week about a great heroine of the faith. That's a hero who's a woman, in case you thought I was talking about something else. You never know, we are in California

after all... Anyway, this great heroine of the faith was a woman of much prayer... even though her life was often horrible.

She was married to a man who could be very difficult. She gave birth to 19 children, 9 of whom died in infancy. Two of her children had special needs at a time when society wrote off such individuals. Her husband, a pastor, made two congregations so mad that they burned their parsonage down... twice. The family was inside both times. They were overrun by debt. And those were some of the highlights!

Yet Susanna persevered in prayer. There is a fun fact that she taught her children that when Mom was covering herself with her apron, you left her alone because she was talking to Jesus.

Through prayer and faithfulness she kept her life and her family together. Two of her sons, John and Charles Wesley, brought thousands to Christ and ignited a new generation in praise and worship in their lifetimes. They share a legacy of hundreds of thousands of souls around the world becoming followers of Christ. That is the power of one woman, who against the odds, prayed, and prayed, and prayed.

That is why we should pray.

HOW CAN WE PRAY? Matthew 7:7-12 (and Luke 11:9)

In Matthew 7:7-12, which Christie read for us earlier, Jesus gives us a pattern and even three levels of intensity in prayer: ask, seek, and knock.

1. We can ask and admit our need.

- a. Is prayer our first step or our last resort?
- b. Corrie ten Boom, another heroine of the faith who hid Jews from the Nazi's during the German occupation of Holland in World War 2 was also a woman of prayer. In later years, she was fond of asking, **Is prayer your steering wheel, or your spare tire?**

– Corrie ten Boom

c. Is prayer our PRIORITY?

- The word “priority” is of mixed history and origin, from the Latin and Anglo-Norman and Middle French languages.
- It originally meant “comes before.” It soon came to mean the thing that is more important than anything else, or something that needs special attention.
- *An ambulance has **priority** over other traffic.*

- We were taught to pull over for ambulances. Failure to do so could result in complications or even death for the patient inside the ambulance. You may be afraid that somehow you will be caught if you ignore an ambulance and you'll face a fine or something worse. But in order to actually treat the ambulance as priority, you have to pull over. You have to MAKE it priority.
- In order for prayer to be our priority, we have to MAKE PRAYER *the* PRIORITY.

God always answers prayer. It's always YES, NO, or WAIT. Now, if we have *asked* in prayer but haven't received a YES answer, how can we tell the difference between "No" and "Wait"? We need to intensify our praying.

2. We can seek and state our desire.

- a. What do we really want? Why do we really want it? If we are convinced it is good, then the next level from asking is seeking. This takes us deeper in prayer, and it takes us back to the Word of God, asking Him to reveal Himself in a situation, and direct us through His Word.

b. Three reasons for NO and WAIT James 4:2-8

On the negative side, there are three reasons why we may not have our prayers answered "Yes."

- (1) When our desires are not aligned with God's.
- (2) Nurtured impurity within us and relational issues with God and with others (Matthew 7:12) could be a reason for God to say, "No" or "Wait".
- (3) You see, God wants to do something through you, but He also passionately longs to do something *in* you, too. If your flesh isn't checked by God's Spirit, and if your relationships are out of whack, He can't do anything in you.

Healthy relationships take us back to choosing community, and studying the Scriptures. All our keystone habits, like every member of the body of Christ, are interdependent... when one is missing, everything suffers.

So... I asked God, admitting my need. I sought the Lord, stating my desire. I know God is a good good Father (Matthew 7:9-11). Relationships with God and others are healthy (Matthew 7:12). I am still convinced, in my spirit, that I need the thing for which I am praying. But I am not yet getting a YES answer.

What more is there I can do? I can intensify praying again.

3. **We can knock and acknowledge our desperation.**

In Psalm 17 David, at the time anointed to be the future king, was running from the murderous plots of the current king and others who wanted to end or otherwise ruin his life. He cried out in desperation for justice because he knew only God could provide it. There was nowhere else he could turn as he fled from King Saul who was seeking his life.

Personal sharing: I am desperate for God because I know my own weaknesses. I know what my flesh is drawn to. I know what my redeemed spirit longs to see in me. And I am desperate for God to bring that about in my life. So I continue in prayer, and as I continue sometimes I loudly knock, because I know I need God to move and intervene in my life as well as those closest to me and the world around me.

HOW TO MAKE PRAYER A PRIORITY

Prayer must become a keystone habit in our lives. But more than that, it must become a pervasive practice. Lately, I've been going to a lot of physical therapy - at first it was extremely painful and I felt like it was beyond me. Its easy to feel like that about prayer, too. As I've been going to therapy, I noticed I'm getting stronger, little by little. As I got used to the routine, I realized that I could go through the motions of the therapy mindlessly or I could concentrate on my form, my posture, whether I was really tightening my core and pushing myself. I'll have a good effect either way, but I'll have a better effect when I concentrate and am fully engaged.

[As John Wesley said,] **Bear up the hands that hang down, by faith and prayer; support the tottering knees. Have you any days of fasting and prayer? Storm the throne of grace and persevere therein, and mercy will come down.**

– John Wesley

1. Pray like Jesus prayed.
 - a. This week we're going to hear Zach Zehnder say that Jesus prayed early and often. Sounds like voting in Chicago. Jesus rose up early in the morning to pray. Jesus prayed throughout the day. Jesus blessed food. Jesus blessed children. Jesus lifted His eyes to heaven in prayer before He performed miracles, after He taught multitudes, and as He was in agony in the Garden of Gethsemane.
 - b. Jesus appealed to God as His Father. He was honest with God about His own feelings and desires. Jesus prayed about everything.

- c. Sometimes He would simply ask. At other times, He sought. At other times, He knocked, like He did in the Garden when He was struggling with the reality of His crucifixion. “Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me!” But in the end, He said, “Nevertheless, not My will, but Yours be done.”

In the book of Revelation, chapters 5 and 8, it speaks of times of worship in which incense is offered as a sacrifice to our Holy God. That incense is identified as the prayers of the saints... that’s you and me. Did you know that if you’ve trusted in Christ you’re a saint? Right now! Those are our prayers in Revelation. The eloquent prayers and the “God help me” prayers and just the “Oh God” prayers and the groanings. The prayers in the morning and the evening and every time in between. The prayers of praise offered in joyful times and the prayers of urgency cried out in times of crisis and tragedy. God saves your prayers. God values your prayers. Why? Because God loves YOU. Your prayers are kept by Him and poured out upon His altar in eternal worship around His throne.

2. Make prayer your first thing. In your schedule and in your approach to any situation.
 - a. **Don't pray when you feel like it. Have an appointment with the Lord and keep it.**

– Corrie ten Boom

- b. If someone tells you about a situation, pray with them about it right then. If you don’t feel comfortable doing it alone, get someone in your small group to do it with you... that’s what community is all about.
- c. Enter a reminder to yourself to pray, or keep a list in a place that you’ll see often.

[Call the worship team] In a moment we are going to pray together and I want to give you a prayer tool that has always helped me. I’m not saying I’m a good pray-er, especially compared to some in this church family, but ... maybe we can help each other.

I know this about prayer: even though sometimes it seems pointless, prayer unlocks the power of God. It is part of His incredible grace that He hears us when we pray. It is part of His reckless mercy that He answers our prayers in any way, to meet needs, to make a way where there seems to be no way, to display His glory, and to remind us that the BATTLE BELONGS TO THE LORD, and the greatest thing we can do is be people of prayer, fighting, as it were, on our knees, because that is our power position.

“The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results.”
James 5:16 (NLT)

Amen.

AN ACROSTIC FOR PRAYER:

A: Adoration (Attribute - or characteristic you know to be true - of God)

GOD IS...

Infinite
Colossians 1:17

Omnipresent
Psalm 139:7-10, Romans 11:33

Perfectly Just
Deuteronomy 32:4

Unchangeable
Malachi 3:6, Hebrews 13:8

Perfectly Good
Psalm 34:8, Matthew 19:17

Merciful
Romans 9:15-16

Omnipotent
Revelation 1:8

Faithful
Deuteronomy 7:9, 2 Timothy
2:13

Love
1 John 4:7-8

Omniscient
Isaiah 46:9-10

Holy
Revelation 4:8

C: Confession (confessing your sins - vertically and if needed, horizontally) 1 John 1:8-10

T: Thanksgiving (What has He done for you lately?) Psalm 106:1, 9-10

S: Supplication (Needs)

Today I am asking God to...

Increase my love for God and others

Philippians 1:9-10

Provide for every need: physical, emotional, spiritual

Matthew 6:7-11

Allow justice, righteousness, and peace to prevail in our nation and around the world

Jeremiah 9:23-24

Powerfully advance the gospel throughout the world

Mark 16:15-16