

Lecture 17 - Prayer "Conversation with God"

In Luke 11:1 the disciples said to Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray." What followed is what we commonly refer to as The Lord's Prayer. Say it with me:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

It has been said that many of us learned to pray in our highchair. "God is great, God is good. Let us thank Him for our food." Sadly, many Christians fail to get beyond the basics of rote prayers we learned early in life. One of the many blessings of being a part of People of the Word is that you are among praying people in your small groups and hopefully you are learning to expand your own prayer life.

As we learned in our lesson, 1 Chronicles 16:11 gives us the purpose of prayer, "Look to the Lord and His strength; seek His face always."

It's probable that the word "prayer" invokes more guilt among Christians than does the word "sin," because even though Bible-believing Christians feel a responsibility to pray, few have developed a real discipline of prayer. For many, prayer is a desperate cry for help in emergencies, not too unlike a phone call to Triple A after the car runs out of gas on the freeway. For others, prayer becomes an attempt to manipulate God through formula ritualistic prayers, times of fasting, promises, and even praises, through which they seek to enlist God to do their bidding.

With such primitive concepts of prayer, it is little wonder that prayer is praised publicly but is passed over privately. When prayer is reduced to management of God, it is obviously too great a chore for the common person. If, however, prayer could become a channel of communication between man and God, an exchange between friends, a communication of guidance, and the channel for love to flow between the redeemed and the Redeemer, then prayer would be relief from the stress and anxieties of life, rather than a burden of guilt because we feel so woefully inadequate at it.

The last thing I want to do today/tonight is add to guilt . . . to beat you over the head with Scripture that tells you to pray unceasingly. My goal is to be instructive and encouraging.

Does it encourage you at all to know that people we think of as "giants in the faith" all wished their prayer lives were greater . . . regardless of the hours they spent in prayer? Our spiritual education seldom dwells on men considered to be giants of faith, so some of these names may be unfamiliar to you. But Martin Luther spent three hours a day in prayer yet felt consumed by guilt, E. M. Bounds, Hudson Taylor, John Henry Jowett, G. Campbell Morgan, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, F. B. Meyer, A. W. Tozer, Joseph Parker, H. A. Ironside, Peter Marshall, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Billy Graham, J. Sidlow Baxter, John R. W. Stott. Why in the world would those men living fully for God be dissatisfied with their prayer life?

In my humble opinion it's because God has put inside each of us His Holy Spirit that is a powerful magnet . . . drawing us to the Father. We want so much to be with

Him that even if we spent every waking hour on our knees, there would still be the void that will only be fully satisfied when we see Him face to face. Our hearts desire is to be where He is . . . to look full on His wonderful face. Prayer gives us communion with him, but what will ultimately satisfy us will to be in His very presence.

So we're not going to fret about the amount of time spent in prayer . . . but let's focus on the wonderful privilege of prayer and how we can discipline ourselves to make the most of every opportunity we have to pray.

We've been talking about this Last Supper Jesus had with His disciples. He's told them many things and next week, in John 17, Jesus will pray what is called His "High Priestly Prayer" before his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. During this final teaching session with His disciples, He talked of being the True Vine and the necessity of abiding as branches in the vine. In the midst of this illustration, Jesus said, "If you remain in Me, and My words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you."

It's a common interpretation of that verse to see that Christ was establishing the law of harvest . . . wherein the source of life that produces a spiritual harvest must flow from Christ, the Vine, but the fruit will be produced and displayed on the branches – the disciples. But what we must not overlook is that Jesus stated that prayer (Asking) is the means of maintaining that vital abiding relationship and is also the channel through which the life of the vine is transmitted to the lowly branch. Prayer is the "sap" of the vineyard. When it flows, life will manifest itself, but when it ceases to flow, the leaves turn brown and fall off, and the fruit withers on the vine and the plant goes into a dormant stage. Prayer is therefore not elective but a true essential. No prayer – no life flow; no life flow – no fruit.

Christ's formula for a sustained life flow can be divided into in three parts:

- 1) Abiding in Christ – that means relationship – the premise of prayer is that it's based on a relationship, fellowship and partnership;
- 2) My words abide in you – that means the pattern of prayer is communion and communication and petition;
- 3) Ask whatever you wish and it will be given to you – that means partnership – the purpose of prayer is change, change in us, in our circumstances and in our union with God. The praying person will not remain the same; he will either change or cease to truly pray.

So let's talk about prayer itself. Have you heard the term "arrow prayers"? We shoot them up all day long. If we were to put reality into the 1 Thessalonians 5:17 Scripture that says "pray without ceasing," it would mean that we should have an attitude of prayer all day. We pray, "Lord, Chuck's late for work, protect him in traffic. It's time to take the kids to school, Lord, where are my car keys? Help! Jesus, this is an absolutely gorgeous day, thank You. My friend just called, Lord, be her strength right now. Comfort her. Father, my 'to do' list isn't getting done today, help me set right priorities. Thank you, Lord, everyone's home safely today. The children are finally in bed, thank God!"

I'm teasing, of course, but you'll find you go through the day saying "Thank You, Jesus" a hundred times for a hundred different things.

Important as they are, we can't live on arrow prayers any more than we could live healthy on a diet of fast food. What we need is some good "quiet time" with the Lord. Arrow prayers fit God into our schedule, but quality quiet time fits our schedule around Him.

I know this is "old hat" for People of the Word, but we should not be concerned about what we're going to say to God in prayer. He knows us inside/out. Nothing is hidden from him. Nothing shocks God. Francois Fenelon wrote:

"Tell God all that is in your heart, as one unloads one's heart, it's pleasures and its pains, to a dear friend. Tell Him your troubles, that He may comfort you; tell Him your joys, that He may sober them; tell Him your longings, that He may purify them; tell Him your dislikes, that He may help you to conquer them; talk to Him of your temptations, that He may shield you from them; show Him the wounds of your heart, that He may heal them; lay bare your indifference to good, your depraved tastes for evil, your instability. Tell Him how self-love makes you unjust to others, how vanity tempts you to be insincere, how pride disguises you to yourself and others.

"If you thus pour out all your weaknesses, needs, troubles, there will be no lack of what to say. You will never exhaust the subject. It is continually being renewed. People who have no secrets from each other never want for subject of conversation. They do not weigh their words, for there is nothing to be held back; neither do they seek for something to say. They talk out of the abundance of the heart, without consideration they say just what they think. Blessed are they who attain to such familiar, unreserved intercourse with God."

Wise words! E. Stanley Jones writes, "Prayer is surrender – surrender to the will of God and cooperation with that will. If I throw out a boat hook from a boat and catch hold of the shore and pull, do I pull the shore to me, or do I pull myself to the shore? Prayer is not pulling God to my will, but the aligning of my will to the will of God."

As I said, we should not be concerned about what we're going to say in our prayers for we know God hears and answers prayer. For example: A man was being pursued by a roaring, hungry lion. Feeling the lion's hot breath on his neck and knowing his time was short, he prayed as he ran. He cried out in desperation, "O Lord, please make this lion a Christian." Within seconds, the frightened man became aware the lion had stopped the chase. When he looked behind him, he found the lion kneeling . . . lips moving in obvious prayer. Greatly relieved at this turn of events – and desirous of joining the lion in meditation, he approached the king of the jungle. When he was near enough, he heard the lion praying, "And bless, O Lord, this food for which I'm exceedingly grateful!"

For many of us the words "discipline of prayer" make us uncomfortable . . . we don't usually like discipline in any form. But somehow, if we're given some tools . . . some "how to's" it's much easier.

Of course, the Devil's favorite word for any discipline from exercise to diet to prayer is tomorrow. When we were raising our children, bed was never a punishment. We worked or went to school, ate meals, bathed, went to bed. It was a comfortable routine not a time of stress. As our bodies need that comfortable routine of rest and

food, so too our spiritual life needs a comfortable schedule of time to be alone with God and feed upon His word for our spiritual bread. Quiet times should relieve anxiety. So here are some “how to’s” if you will . . .

Find a quiet place. God has given us the privilege of prayer that we might draw close to Him, that we might share our lives with Him, and that we might see the miracle of answered prayer each day in our lives.

Take a moment to breath out all the tension and anxiety of your day and the stress that’s in your life. Breath in love and the peace of Jesus. Picture it flooding every part of your being. Maybe do it several times. Thank God He’s at work in your life and He’s protecting you from the evil one. I’ve always liked the picture that the hymn lyrics bring to mind . . . “I come to the garden alone while the dew is still on the roses; and the voice I hear, falling on my ear, the Son of God discloses. And He walks with me and He talks with me, and He tells me I am His own. And the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known.”

It doesn’t hurt to pray a prayer of protection – if the devil can’t win you with “tomorrow,” he switches to plan B, which is to do all in his power to distract you . . . phone, doorbell, magnifying all the things you have to do – giving you that feeling of urgency that you must get at them at once.

What can be done to overcome the flesh in prayer time? What can we do to stay attentive during communion with the Lord? Here are a few suggestions to consider:

Shut the door – another way to say find a quiet place. It means to close the door on things that would disturb or hinder prayer. Set my attention on the living God. This is an act of the will, a decision to be quiet, listen, and be sensitive to the Spirit and His presence. It’s a commitment to slow down and allow myself to experience His peace and rest.

Read Scripture – reading the Bible provides spiritual nourishment and is the best preparation for communion with the Lord. Don’t just read words, look for God’s message. Often a verse leaps out as you read. When that happens, think, meditate about it in your life.

Pray out loud – the quickest way to eliminate distractions in prayer is to pray out loud. It causes us to slow down, address one issue at a time instead of just thinking prayers and letting the mind run away with all you’d like to talk to God about.

Pray Scripture – Galatians 6:9-10 for example . . . “Carol, do not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time you will reap a harvest if you do not give up. Therefore, as you have opportunity, Carol, do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” or James 1:5 “Lord, you said if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given him. Today, Lord, I need that wisdom.”

Sing spiritual songs – Paul admonished the Ephesian church to “speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.” A hymnal or chorus book can become a rich source of devotional material to enhance prayer time. “I am weak but Thou art

strong/Jesus keep me from all wrong; I'll be satisfied as long, As I walk, let me walk close to Thee."

Write your prayers – Some like to keep a journal of what God is doing in your life. Certainly as we write prayer requests, we see how God answers prayers. Many find it's a great benefit to reread them later. We did that in last week's lesson.

The outline we had in this week's lesson is one many have used that has the acronym of **ACTS**: the praise of prayer – adoration; the penitence of prayer – confession; the pleasure of prayer – thanksgiving; the petition of prayer – supplication. Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication. For some the acronym CATS works best: Confession(first)/Adoration/Thanksgiving/Supplication. The format is only a tool to help you organize those things you want to share with your Lord.

ADORATION – When we see the holiness of God, we can feel like Moses, that we need to take off our shoes for we are on holy ground. Or perhaps as Peter, we feel "depart from me for I am a sinful man, O Lord." The sight of God is enough to show us how holy He is and how unholy we are. But we adore Him. You have no end of attributes to praise Him for . . . no limit of ways to express what a great God He is.

CONFESSION – Implies humility and this, in God's sight, is of great worth. Like a farmer viewing a wheat field . . . there are those stalks who stand tall and look good, but the ones that hang heads low so modestly are full of the most beautiful grain. Certainly Psalm 51 "see if there be any wicked way in me" is effective in prayers of confession. Confession means we don't try to justify ourselves and our actions, when we're convicted by the Holy Spirit of wrongdoing, we need to see it as sin, acknowledge it as sin, and confess it as sin. Jesus forgives, comforts and reassures us through His Word. If necessary we need to show the fruit of repentance with restitution. Are you willing to make it right?

Certainly as God forgives us, we need to forgive others, ourselves and be accepting of God's forgiveness – He forgets and says, "I will remember their sin no more." God's forgiveness is not probation, and neither should ours be for others.

THANKSGIVING – That choosing to give thanks helps keep us from dwelling on the difficulties in life. Begin to recognize ways God is good to you each day, the friend's hug or encouraging word. We can be specific, not just "thank you for everything," but . . . for his great love, his gift of salvation and eternal life, the indwelling Holy Spirit, His Word so alive and active, the privilege of prayer, for church and the fellowship of believers, the work he's given you to do, health and strength, you know the list could go on and on.

SUPPLICATION – Joseph Scriven wrote wonderful words, "Oh what peace we often forfeit, Oh what needless pain we bear, All because we do not carry, everything to God in prayer." Jesus said, "Ask." We pray for ourselves, our family, our friends, our church, our country. Nothing is too hard for God. We need to communicate what is on our heart. Pray with persistence as we're taught in Scripture. And when we pray, expect an answer. See what God will do. Jesus intercedes for us. It's like the bank note without a signature at the bottom is nothing but a worthless piece of paper. The stroke of a pen confers on it all its value. Our prayers may be a feeble thing in itself, but once endorsed by the hand of the Lord Jesus it is valuable. Robert Murray

McCheyne once said, "If I could hear Christ praying for me in the next room, I would not fear a million enemies. Yet distance makes no difference. He is praying for me."

There is one last thing I'd like to say about the subject of a quiet time of prayer with God, and that is we must stay long enough to let Him answer. When you dial a phone and begin a conversation, eventually you have the courtesy to stop talking and let the other party get a word in edgewise. So, too, with God. You begin by doing all the talking . . . you need to be quiet and let Him speak to you. Three things happen when you listen to God: 1) often He brings to mind someone who needs special prayer – ask the Holy spirit to guide that prayer. 2) He gives you guidance on what to pray for and how to pray for it. 3) He will bring to mind some fault or sin or some way you may have failed Him that perhaps you were not acutely aware of. We all know that our prayers are sifted through God's perfect will. Sometimes His answer is yes . . . no . . . wait. God does answer prayer.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. (Phil. 4:6)

Isn't that beautiful? It isn't complicated. It isn't religious talk. It is the most natural outflow of a child/Father relationship. He is able to lift any load, erase our anxieties and stress when we give it over to Him!

And the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 4:7)

That says it all!

Tell God all that's in your heart, as one unloads one's heart, its pleasures and its pains, to a dear friend. Tell Him your troubles so He can comfort you. Tell Him your joys, He'll give you perspective. Tell Him your longings, He may purify them. Tell Him your dislikes, He'll help you conquer them. Tell Him your temptations, He'll shield you from them. That's the power of prayer. You may have heard it before but listen to the prayer of a Confederate Soldier:

I asked God for strength, that I might achieve;
 I was made weak, that I may learn humbly to obey.
 I asked God for health, that I may do greater things;
 I was given infirmity, that I might do better things.
 I asked for riches, that I may be happy;
 I was given poverty, that I might be wise.
 I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men;
 I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.
 I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life;
 I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.
 I got nothing I asked for but everything I hoped for.
 I am, among all men, most richly blessed.

We pray in private, we agree in prayer with others in a group, we as Christians need to be praying people. Like two buckets in a well, as the prayers ascend, God's grace and mercy descend. Let's close in prayer.

Father, what a privilege we have in coming to the Throne of Grace in prayer. We come in love and adoration seeking to grow spiritually, to learn from the Holy Spirit, and to be intercessors for those whose lives we touch. You are our great and gracious God and our prayers are offered in the strong name of Jesus Christ.
Amen.