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Lesson 8

How Do I Pray?

Introduction

Big Question:
How can we develop strong prayer lives?

Conversation Starter

Archibald Brown, the preacher who succeeded Charles Spurgeon at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, once said, "You will overcome all difficulties if you but give yourself to prayer." Why do you think prayer is important? What are some reasons people don't pray?

Prayer is the path to experiencing God's presence, power, and peace. Along with Bible reading, it is one of the two most important spiritual disciplines in the Christian life. Perhaps it is foremost in all spiritual exercises.

Jesus commanded us to pray, saying, "But when you pray, go into your private room, shut your door, and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Matthew 6:6).

Key Scripture:

"But when you pray, go into your private room, shut your door, and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."
(Matthew 6:6)

Transition

When we examine Scripture, we discover several realities that help us understand how to make prayer a meaningful part of our lives.

1. Know What Prayer Is. (Mark 9:29, Luke 19:46, Acts 1:14, Romans 12:12, Ephesians 6:18, Philippians 4:6, and 1 Peter 4:7)

Defining a thing is often the first step to understanding it. Such is especially true with prayer. Many don't pray because they don't know what prayer is. They assume it is a religiously complex endeavor, so they avoid it. They assume it is something for pastors and super devout older people. Fear and confusion keeps them from close interaction with God.

When the New Testament speaks of prayer, it used numerous terms. However, there is one it uses most frequently. In the original language of the New Testament, it is the word *proseuché*. See Mark 9:29; Luke 19:46; Acts 1:14; Romans 12:12; Ephesians 6:18; Philippians 4:6; and 1 Peter 4:7 to see how it is used. The term literally referred to the act of going to or approaching another person. It conveyed the idea of one associating with or drawing close to another. In the ancient world, the word was used in religious contexts to speak of one approaching a deity.

Key Scriptures:

Mark 9:29

Luke 19:46

Acts 1:14

Romans 12:12

Ephesians 6:18

Philippians 4:6

1 Peter 4:7

Illustrate

I'm thankful I was taught a simple definition for prayer at a young age. Though I did not become serious about my relationship with Christ until my college years, a youth pastor's teaching during high school left a major impression on me. I recall an evening Bible study at youth camp one summer. It took place in our cabin shortly before bedtime. A youth pastor taught the guys in the room on the subject of prayer. His aim that evening was to help us see how simple prayer is. I still remember him asking us to repeat a definition he had created to help teenagers understand the act of praying. He said, "Prayer is talking to God."

To this day, I often quote the words I heard at summer camp. I know most struggle with prayer because they make it too complex. The simple definition – "prayer is talking to God" – is liberating. One doesn't need an in-depth Bible study, a seminary degree, or any other qualification to pray. One simply needs to approach God and talk!

Jesus highlighted this reality when He taught His followers to pray. In His most famous sermon, He spoke on the subject, saying, "Therefore, you should pray like this: Our Father in heaven, your name be honored as holy" (Matthew 6:9). The word "Father" is an important one. It denotes a close, personal relationship. Thus, it reminds us of an important key to strong praying.

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Key Scripture:

“Therefore, you should pray like this: Our Father in heaven, your name be honored as holy.” (Matthew 6:9)

Apply

If we want to learn to pray, we must learn to regard it as a relational activity. We must know what prayer is. It is simply the act of talking to God. When we come to grips with such truth, the pressure and confusion that often keeps us from praying will vanish and we will be more prone to pray.

Discussion

How does viewing prayer as a relational activity change one's perspective on prayer? How might such a perspective encourage one to pray more regularly?

2. Make Place for Prayer in Your Life. (Matthew 6:33, 1 Timothy 4:7)

Many don't pray because they don't understand what prayer is. Others struggle because of busyness. In fact, our fast-paced society may be the number one cause of prayerlessness in the church. The onslaught of life's demands keeps many from spending time on their knees. They rush through life with little thought of God. They fail to pray because they don't properly plan for prayer.

If you are too busy to pray, you are simply too busy. You need to make room for prayer in your life. In some cases, you may need to eliminate superfluous stuff. In other cases you may need to be more disciplined and regimented. Know that the call to prayer involves a call to prioritize. Remember Jesus said, "But seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you" (Matthew 6:33).

For some, an emphasis on prioritizing is unappealing. They feel that any thing that hints at discipline is unspiritual. Opting for a more emotional form of Christianity, they believe they should wait for a feeling to prompt them to prayer. They fear legalism, so they are averse to anything that seems mechanical or dry.

While we do want to be on guard against lifeless, duty-oriented religion, we must also realize there is a place for discipline in the Christian life. Paul instructed Timothy, saying, "But have nothing to do with pointless and silly myths. Rather, train yourself in godliness" (1 Timothy 4:7). Paul used the word "exercise" to speak of the intensity required for true spiritual growth. Underlying English translations is a word from which we get our word "gymnasium." The picture behind the term involved intensity, grit, dedication, and laborious effort.

Key Scriptures:

"But seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you." (Matthew 6:33)

"But have nothing to do with pointless and silly myths. Rather, train yourself in godliness." (1 Timothy 4:7)

Illustrate

Daniel 6:10 tells of the way in which the prophet diligently prayed, even when a royal edict made it illegal to do so. Out of jealousy, his political colleagues had conspired to eliminate him from the halls of government. They duped the king into ratifying a law that made it unlawful to pray to any "god" but him.

The new law didn't detour Daniel from personal worship. The Bible says, "When Daniel learned that the document had been signed, he went into his house. The windows in its upstairs room opened toward Jerusalem, and three times a day he got down on his knees, prayed, and gave thanks to his God, just as he had done before" (Daniel 6:10). The phrase "as he had done before" indicates Daniel had a disciplined approach to prayer. He made personal worship a customary and routine part of his life. Believers can learn an important lesson from Daniel's example.

Apply

To experience the power and peace of God through prayer, we must make prayer a priority. We have to trim the excess things that distract us. Limiting hobbies, social media, and Netflix consumption is sometimes necessary. In addition, rearranging schedules and calendars can be helpful. On occasion, a complete overhaul of priorities is sometimes in order. Know this – if you don't make place for prayer in your life, you probably won't pray. Make it a priority and discipline space in your calendar for talking to God!

Discussion

What priorities sometimes prevent you from praying? Is there anything you could remove from your life to make room for conversation with God?

3. Know What to Say. (1 Timothy 2:1, Matthew 6:9-13)

Illustrate

I didn't do a lot of dating in my adolescent and college years. My wife is the only serious girlfriend I ever had. However, I still remember a date I had with one other girl before I met my wife. I don't remember much from our time together, but I remember what I discovered afterward. Apparently she was nervous about engaging in conversation. Fearing I might be a dud of a personality, she made special efforts to get ready for our date. She prepared an index card upon which she wrote talking points. If the conversation lulled, or if things got boring, she would be well-equipped with a guide to help.

I've often thought about that experience when thinking about prayer. To effectively engage in conversation with the Lord, I have found that a similar approach is helpful. My personal prayer life was revolutionized when I learned this secret. I used to enter my time of intercession with nothing more than a blank mind. Most of the time, I uttered a few cliches and recited a few rote-memorized prayers. After a few moments, I would typically fade and falter. I had no agenda for praying, so my prayers were weak.

I remember learning about the "A.C.T.S." model for praying. The letters of the acronym stand for adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. The model is thoroughly rooted in Scripture. It provides a mechanism for including four of the biblical types of prayers believers are encouraged to offer.

Key Scripture:

"First of all, then, I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone." (1 Timothy 2:1)

You see, Scripture reveals there are multiple modes of prayer. Consider what Paul said in one of his letters to Timothy – "First of all, then, I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone" (1 Timothy 2:1). When writing to the Philippians, he said, "Don't worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Philippians 4:6). Notice that the apostle mentioned five different types of prayers – petitions,

prayers, intercessions, thanksgiving, and requests. To that list, we could add praise (Hebrews 13:15). Mature believers are aware that prayer can take many forms, and they use those forms as an outline for praying.

Illustrate

There was a time when I was a prayerless Christian. I prayed a minute or two each day, at best. Most of my praying took place at meal time. Every now and then, I would engage in a lengthier prayer – three to five minutes tops. Usually such prayers were a response to a crisis or an emergency. I knew I needed prayer, but I simply didn't do it. Prayer was an aspired value, but it wasn't an actualized one.

Things changed when I began to focus on praying the different types of biblical prayers. I started with the "A.C.T.S." outline. Committing myself to pray for two minutes on each subject (adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication), I used a stopwatch as I talked to God. Eight minutes seemed to fly by. What's more, I felt encouraged and energized by my time with the Lord.

In time, I began to develop a prayer list. Writing the letters "A.C.T.S." in the back of my Bible, I made a table in which I wrote requests and prayer topics for each subject. I even added Scriptures I could use to guide my prayer time. Names of individuals, along with different needs I had, were listed in the column for supplication. It wasn't long before my time of personal devotion increased. I was soon praying for fifteen minutes each day. I felt closer to the Lord than I had ever been and I seemed to experience more of His working in my life.

Some may still balk at the idea of such a routine. Perhaps it will help to consider the teaching of Jesus. Have you ever given serious consideration to the Lord's Prayer? You know it, don't you? Our Lord taught us to pray as follows:

Our Father in heaven,
your name be honored as holy.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not bring us into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one (Matthew 6:9-13).

What was the Lord's intent in giving us that prayer? Did He intend for us to recite it from rote memory on a daily basis? I don't think so. While there is benefit in praying the precise words of the prayer, it seems our Lord gave us the prayer for another reason. He meant to teach us the types of things we should focus on in prayer.

Key Scripture:
Matthew 6:9-13

If you look closely at the Lord's prayer, you will notice that the topics of adoration ("Our Father in heaven"), confession ("Forgive us our debts"), thanksgiving ("Give us today our daily bread"), and supplication ("And do not bring us into temptation") are present within the prayer. To experience meaningful prayer, we must be thoughtful to pray about the things that matter most. Jesus has helped us in this regard. He has given heaven-sent instructions to show us what to do. By following His instructions, and by praying in alignment with the outline He provided, we can experience freedom and focus in our prayer life.

Apply

Take the Lord's teaching to heart. Put things into practice. Do what that girl did on a date with me several years ago. Make a list or outline with some talking points. You have to know what to say if you want to engage in meaningful prayer. Create a list of topics, requests, and Scripture. Let your list guide you and spend time with the Lord!

Discussion

What type of outline or list have you used in the past to guide your times of prayer? What are some potential outlines or lists you could use?

Follow Me Challenges

PERSONAL: Identify a time and place for your prayer time this week. Ask folks on your "My 5" list for prayer requests.

PUBLIC: Host and invite folks to a Backyard BBQ. More information can be found at tabernaclebaptist.org/events.

PRAYER: Using what you'll learn about prayer in this lesson, pray for:

- The people on your "My 5" list
- your church
- your church staff
- your family
- our mission families
- your witness