

Prayer

I. An Introduction to A Teaching on Prayer

A. Scripture Introduction

1. **Psalm 5:1-3** . . . Give ear to my words, O LORD, consider my groaning. [2] Heed the sound of my cry for help, my King and my God, for to You I pray. [3] In the morning, O LORD, You will hear my voice; in the morning I will order my prayer to You and eagerly watch.
2. **Psalm 34:17-18** . . . The righteous cry, and the LORD hears and delivers them out of all their troubles. [18] The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.
3. **Psalm 116:1-2** . . . I love the LORD, because He hears My voice and my supplications. [2] Because He has inclined His ear to me, therefore I shall call upon Him as long as I live.

B. Prayer

C. As we see from these three Psalms, and from our own experiences in life, and from the experiences of other Christians, prayer is most often driven by one of two things: (1) some need – be it a felt need or a genuine need, (2) or by some strong desire that we long to have fulfilled. In other words, we need or want something from God.

1. Now in pointing this out, I am not implying in any way that such prayer is somehow wrong or deficient or displeasing to God. In fact, such praying is both commended by God and taught by Christ.
2. And yet, not all our prayers are need based, for surely all of us take time to praise and thank our loving, merciful Father for gifts and grace received from Him. And we should praise and thank God for His gracious giving – because as the scripture says: “Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow” (**James 1:17**).
3. However, if we take the time to give serious consideration to the content of our prayers, we will most likely find that the majority of our praying centers around some sense of need – be it a personal need or the need of someone else.

D. Without discouraging or denigrating need based prayers in any way, I want to place before you a rarer form of prayer, and yet this form produces a

precious treasure that is available to all who will persist in heading toward this kind of prayer. My purpose of placing it before you – at the beginning of this series on prayer – is to expose you to this reality and encourage any of you who might long for the spiritual treasure that is part of this kind of praying to pursue this form of prayer.

1. The form of prayer I am referring to is the kind that seeks, first and foremost, personal and intimate fellowship with God. Such praying is far less focused on asking for temporal things and far more focused on communion and companionship with God.
 - a. If a sense of need arises, it is most often driven by a recognition that we need God's assistance, strength, and grace to put away some remaining traces of sin so we can enter into His presence with a purer heart and enjoy the fellowship we share that much more.
 - b. What I am talking about here is prayer that has as its focus simply being with God and enjoying whatever time we have together – just as two people in love with each other look forward to being together because it brings such joy to each of them.
2. This kind of prayer does not come naturally and it is easy to lose once you begin to experience it. Therefore, I want to share some of the things this kind of prayer requires of us.
 - a. Time – lots of quiet time by comparison to how long most of us pray at any given time now.
 - b. Sincerity of heart in putting away sin and walking before God in righteousness – as much as we know to do.
 - c. Confident faith in God's love and in His commitment to seek our good so that our mind and heart is much freer from the kind of concerns that normally press us to talk to Him about seeking our good in some way or another.
 - d. Quickly and thoroughly dealing with sin as we become aware of having sinned – so as to confess it, make things right with God and anyone we have sinned against, and returning to a sincere pursuit of holiness.
 - e. Fighting off distractions that enter into our mind and draw us away from focusing on and enjoying fellowship with God.
 - f. And a constant vigilance and guarding against whatever would weaken our resistance to temptation and draw us back into sin – for such things serve only to turn us against God, and in so doing turn us away from walking and talking with God.

- E. Let me give you an example of this kind of prayer – though I want to make it clear this example only helps us understand the point being made because there is no earthly example that perfectly explains our relationship with God in regard to prayer and intimate fellowship.
1. Think of a loving, caring parent and the relationship he has with his child at three distinct stages of that child's life.
 - a. The first stage I want to use as an example is the stage when the child first learns to talk. Though the child wants for nothing because the parent knows and anticipates the child's needs, still the parent rejoices at these first words and, sometimes even phrases that come tumbling out of the child's mouth.
 - (1) Is it the joy of relationship that comes from these first words of communication that excites the parent? No! Does the parent need this communication from the child to discern the needs of the child, or to give proper care to the child? No.
 - (2) Then why does the parent take such joy at his child's beginning words? Because this is the beginning of meaningful relationship between the child and the parent and the parent knows that this is the path of getting from here to there.
 - (3) You see, the parent longs for meaningful relationship – adult relationship – with his child. But because of his love for the child and knowing the path the child must take to get to meaningful relationship, the parent enjoys and rejoices over each step taken by the child along the way.
 - b. The second stage in this example is the teenage stage of communication. In this stage, there is far less relationship building of a meaningful nature and far more communication that deals with the teenager's behavior, his needs and his wants.
 - (1) In fact, we can say that it is common at this stage for the teenager to be more outwardly self-focused and proud than was noticeable before.
 - (2) Though this can be a challenging stage for the parent, the good parent is not discouraged or put off by this stage, but rather sees it as a step of growth that all children pass through on their way to maturity – a maturity which will make a mutually meaningful relationship possible between the parent and the child.
 - c. The third stage of this child's life that I want to give as an example of our relationship to God in relation to prayer is the mature, sensible, loving adult stage. It is in this stage that the parent and child enjoy being together because they love each other and treasure

meaningful fellowship and companionship with each other. This stage does not remove the child's asking for advice or for specific help from his father, but such asking is not the dominate reason for maintaining fellowship. Rather, meaningful, mutually satisfying fellowship is their motivation for being together.

2. The point of all this talk about the relationship between a parent and a child is to help us see two things:
 - a. First, like a loving earthly father, our Heavenly Father is looking forward to the day when He can enjoy adult, meaningful and mutually satisfying relationship with us.
 - b. Second, we can learn from the human experience and follow a similar path of growth to maturity and meaningful relationship with God.
3. I am not saying that we are bad or even deficient if we do not have this kind of relationship with God right now any more than I would suggest that a child or a teenager is bad or deficient for not having an adult relationship with his father. But I am laying this level of relationship with God in prayer before you so that, if you will, you can give yourself to traveling this path to this place of spiritual maturity and fellowship with God.
4. Therefore, as we work our way through this series on prayer, please keep in mind that we all start as young children in our relationship with God – and this is by God's design. We all grow through stages of relationship with God, and this too is by God's design. In fact, growth in all of God's creation is a matter of time – and this is right and good in that God made it this way.
5. Now it seems obvious to me that just as human growth takes time and is intended to take a child to full adulthood, so spiritual growth takes time and has as its intention the taking of a new believer to full Christian adulthood.
 - a. And it is in this state of full Christian adulthood that we are equipped to enter into the kind of communion and companionship with God, primarily through prayer, that is mutually meaningful and mutually satisfying.
 - b. And so, though our early prayers and many of our prayers for the rest of our lives are need based, God is looking for those days when our prayers are fellowship based – where we are seeking communion and companionship with Him because just being with Him is a greater treasure and of greater importance than whatever needs we may have.

F. With this grand goal of intimate communion with God in mind, I want to return to prayer as we know it and most often participate in it.

II. Understanding Ourselves In Relation To Prayer

A. At this point I want us to look at prayer in general, with an emphasis on need based praying, to help us see several things about prayer. First, we pray in a variety of ways – and that is as it should be. Second, we pray for those things we desire, or those things we care about, or those things that frighten us, or those things we believe we need. Third, whether we think of it this way or not, when we pray, we are engaging in fellowship with God and coming into personal, and sometimes even intimate contact with Him through a means that is at the very least mystical, and in many ways beyond our ability to explain. With these three things about prayer in mind, lets look at a number of reasons we pray and a number of ways in which we pray.

1. We pray one way when we are happy with life or with God's dealings with us. We pray another way when we are burdened with a weight of sadness, or when we are going through a time of great perplexity as to what God is doing, or when wondering what we should be doing in response to our circumstances.
2. We pray one way when we are experiencing measurable and successful spiritual growth, and another way when we are under serious attack by the enemy who seeks to turn us away from loving and obeying God.
3. We pray one way when confessing our sin and seeking God's merciful forgiveness. We pray another way when we are pouring out our heart for help from God in overcoming some sin that seems stubbornly resistant to removal, or when resisting what appears to us as being an overwhelming temptation.
4. We pray one way when we are rejoicing in our salvation, and another way when we feel spiritually dry, or distant from God, or as though we had lost the joy of our salvation.
5. We pray one way when reflecting on the immeasurable joy that awaits us when we see our Savior face-to-face and enter into His eternal kingdom. We pray another way when humbled and even embarrassed by the remembrance of our past sins and the reality of our present weaknesses in our walk with God.
6. We pray one way when enthralled by praise and thanksgiving and worship of our God and King – and especially so when encouraged to such awe by the praises and worship of other brothers and sister in the Lord or good music or encouraging stories of God's goodness to

others. We pray another way when reflecting on the fact that we must face Christ on that final judgement day and give an account of all we have or haven't done.

7. We pray one way it seems all our needs are met and most of our wants are satisfied, and another way when it is evident our situation is on the verge of desperation and there is no imminent prospect of improvement.
8. We pray one way when all is well and we feel safe and secure, and another way when we are in danger of some sort or our sense of well-being is being severely threatened.
9. We pray one way when our heart is at peace, and another way when we are so anxious that our heart is in turmoil.
10. We pray one way when we are crying out to God on our own behalf and another way when we are interceding for others.
11. We pray one way when God is satisfying our hunger for His speaking or for understanding some difficult portion of scripture or for gaining some previously unseen insight into His ways with us. We pray another way when it feels like God has gone silent and His word says nothing new to us and we feel a dryness of heart and mind.
12. In general, we pray one way when desperate, and another way when generally satisfied or unexcited or seemingly unconcerned.
13. The lesson here is that we interact with God in prayer for a variety of reason and our interaction takes a variety of forms.

B. In addition to why we pray or how we pray, there are characteristics of prayer that are very important, and I want to look at three of them today: humility, honesty, and fervency.

1. Humility in prayer is knowing our position in comparison to God's position when we are speaking to Him. It is knowing our true condition in comparison to God's holiness, justice, and love. It is being bowed in heart and mind before Him and respectful to the uttermost.
 - a. If we lack humility in our praying, we will find it easy to accuse God of wrong doing or of failure to do what we believe is His duty to do.
 - b. If we lack humility, we will pray as if we are better than others – which means God will respond to our prayers like He responded to the Pharisee who thanked God he wasn't like the sinner across the room (Luke 18:10-14).
 - c. If we lack humility in our praying, we will pray wrong prayers and God will set himself against us rather than give us His grace.

2. Honesty in prayer is seeing ourselves as we really are – and this is proven by our attitude toward God and others, how we speak to God and what we say to Him, the tears we shed when with Him, and the joy we experience deep within from being with Him.
 - a. If we lack honesty in our praying, we will pray like the Laodicean’s who believed they were spiritually rich, and had become spiritually wealthy, and had need of nothing more – spiritually speaking, when in fact they were spiritually bankrupt – being wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked.
 - b. In other words, we will pray as if we are better than we are; or we will pray according to what we wish to be rather than what we really are. This means we will not ask for what we really need. We will not confess and seek forgiveness for what we have really done. And we will feed spiritual pride rather than Christ-like humility.
3. Fervency in prayer is feeling deeply what we are speaking to God, be it a request, praise, or communion and fellowship.
 - a. If we lack fervency in our praying, we should not be surprised that God does not take us seriously.
 - b. Think about this: how many of your child’s requests or concerns do you take seriously when they are expressed dispassionately? And if it commonly happens that today’s dispassionately expressed requests or concerns make it seem as if yesterday’s are no longer important, how seriously do you take today’s?
 - c. Or to put it another way: how sincere are we if we are casual in our praying? Fervency validates sincerity and importance. Therefore, God’s word says the fervent prayer of a righteous man accomplishes much.

III. Conclusion

- A. When we pray, we are engaging in fellowship with God and coming into personal, and sometimes even intimate contact with Him through a means that is at the very least mystical and in many ways beyond our ability to explain.
- B. Yet we are encouraged to pray – and most of do pray on a daily basis.
- C. Helpful Scriptures for encouraging and directing prayer – Psalm 24-26