

From Our Lips to God's Ears: The Purpose of Prayer

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[0 : 00] So welcome here for this Sunday, January 14th, 2024. Do you ever remember hearing this kind of time frame, the 2020s, or in a futuristic sense, thinking that we would have flying cars and transporter technology and who knows what?

But here we are in 2024, pretty much as we expected it wouldn't be. It's not futuristic, but we are continuing into the future.

My name is Kent Dixon, and it is my joy to be the pastor here. It's good to be back with you again. So congratulations to everyone who is here in the flesh this morning.

Your flesh did not freeze. You managed to make it, so give yourselves a round of applause. Very, yeah, please give yourselves a round of applause. So good morning, and as I've said to a few people, happy new year.

And I'm allowed to say it because I haven't seen you yet, so it's still the statute of limitations on a new year greeting still applies for me. So I hope you enjoyed time with family and friends over the holidays, that your transition back to regular life has not been shocking and difficult and challenging, not too painful, I hope.

[1 : 20] I hope the weather makes it a little more challenging than we might want. So it's that time again. It's the time for New Year's resolutions.

Seeking to make positive changes in our habits, maybe to break out of some of the ruts that we've formed in our lives, some of the things that we've got stuck in in our lives.

And over the past several months, I've been feeling strongly that we need to be reminded of one of the most critical aspects of our lives, particularly as followers of Jesus, and that is prayer.

Over the coming weeks, we're going to explore many different aspects of prayer. And we're going to be reminded of why it is so critical that we seek to be people of prayer.

And this new series is called From Our Lips to God's Ears, Living a Life of Prayer. And we're starting our series this morning by considering the purpose of prayer.

[2 : 22] In August 2015, you can probably read this off the slide, Newsweek and BeliefNet asked just over 1,000 people in the U.S. what they believe and how they practice their faith.

And one of the questions was, what do you think is the most important purpose of prayer? And so you can see on the screen, these were the responses they received.

27% of respondents said prayer exists to seek God's guidance. 23% to thank God. 19% to be close to God or to the divine.

13% to help others. 9% to improve a person's life. 4% chose other, which is always interesting to me as a person who likes data and information.

Other could include something like, dear Lord, please make this pharmacy line move faster. That's one kind of other prayer. 5% of respondents said they didn't know, which is also interesting because they recognized the importance of prayer, but did not know why.

[3 : 29] So that's interesting to me. So what is the purpose of prayer? Well, hopefully we have some idea to start. And as the answers above suggest, as these stats suggest, there may be many reasons to pray.

And so one way to remember the purpose of prayer, this probably won't be too surprising to you that I'm going here, is with the acronym ACTS, A-C-T-S, where A stands for, anyone know off the top of your head?

Adoration. Perfect. Wow. A lot of Bible school people. Adoration. Adoration. And I've got two passages there. So what does it mean for us to express our adoration to God?

Well, I think we'd all agree that God is certainly worthy of our praise and adoration. Is that fair? While we can praise God with singing, as we've done this morning, we can also praise God, if you ever thought of this this way before, we can praise him in prayer.

And so the Bible gives us many examples of adoration for God expressed through prayer. And so when Paul in Ephesians, that passage you can see, when Paul prayed for the Ephesians, he took time to praise God.

[4 : 49] And we read this in Ephesians 3, 14 to 21. And you can turn there or have a listen. For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory, he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

I love this benediction at the end of this passage. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

David provides an example of offering adoration and praise as we read in 1 Chronicles 29, 10 to 13. David says, well, sorry, the passage begins, Therefore David blessed the Lord in the presence of the assembly, and David said, Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of Israel, our Father forever and ever.

Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours.

Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all.

[6 : 49] In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. And now we thank you, our God, and praise your glorious name.

Expressing adoration wasn't one of the things in the list we looked at. Maybe you noticed that. But it certainly is an important purpose of prayer.

So continuing in that acronym, ACTS, C stands for? Thank you. It absolutely does. And so that confession, that concept specifically as it relates to our sin.

So we need to recognize there is mercy to be found in confessing our sins. As we read in Proverbs 28, verse 13, it says, whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.

As Christians, our only means of being cleansed from our sin is by the blood of Jesus Christ. And we are reminded of that in 1 John 1, verses 7 to 10.

[8 : 08] Love this passage as well. But if we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another. And the blood of Jesus his son cleanses us from all sin.

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. The Bible gives us many examples of confessing sin through prayer.

And so we're going to look at them a little bit here. Jesus provided an example in the parable of the Pharisee and the publican. And as I was thinking about this sermon, I was thinking back to our parable series, and that's not one we covered.

So I think I said when I did that series, there are many more parables in Scripture. We might come back to this again one day. So noted for next time. So Jesus provides this example in Luke 18, verses 10 to 14.

[9 : 22] Jesus says, Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus, God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get. But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift his eyes up to heaven.

But he beat his breast, saying, God, be merciful to me, a sinner. And Jesus says, I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other.

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted. Praise God for the upside-down kingdom.

Again, David provides an example with his confession of sin as we read in Psalm 51, 1 to 13. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love.

[10:39] According to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me.

Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.

Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean.

Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness. Let the bones that you have broken rejoice. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

This is a very familiar part of this passage. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

[11:50] Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. So receiving forgiveness by confessing our sins is something that we can experience, as I said a moment ago, only through Christ, and Scripture's clear about this.

As we read in John 14, verse 6, Jesus said to him, I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me.

So once we've received Jesus as the Lord of our lives, prayer and confession of sin are critical to our forgiveness. Letter T stands for?

Thank you. Good class. T is the third letter in our acronym, or if you prefer, our acronym, and it stands for Thanksgiving.

[13:03] Being thankful is emphasized repeatedly in exhortations to pray, and it's demonstrated many times in Scripture. So let's look at a few. Ephesians 5, verse 20, reminds us to be giving thanks always, for everything, and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Colossians 4, verse 2 says, continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. 1 Thessalonians 5, verse 17 to 18 tells us to pray without ceasing, to give thanks in all circumstances. For, why? Because this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Friends, do you want to know the antidote to anxiety?

It's praying for everything with thanksgiving, as we read in Philippians 4, verse 6.

Do not be anxious about anything. I've quoted this passage to myself many times in different seasons in my life. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving.

[14:25] Let your requests be made known to God. The Bible has lots of examples of offering thanksgiving. Many, many examples.

Jesus himself set an example of us prioritizing being thankful. Jesus modeled this constantly. In Matthew 11, 25, we read, At that time, Jesus declared, I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children.

In Matthew 26, verse 27, we read, you know this from once a month, And he took the cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, Drink of it, all of you.

In John 6, verse 11, we read, Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated, so also the fish, as much as they wanted.

In John 11, verse 41, just before Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, we read, So they took away the stone, and Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, Father, I thank you that you have heard me.

[15:52] In the Old Testament, we learn in Daniel 6, verse 10, that Daniel had the custom of thanking God three times a day. When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, Daniel 6, 10, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem.

He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God as he had done previously. A habit of being thankful in prayer.

We can't discount the importance of thanksgiving in our prayers, especially if we ask God to answer us as we make requests for future blessings.

Have you ever had someone ask you for a favor, and then one of the first things you remember is, you weren't that grateful for the last one, were you? Nothing like feeling taken advantage of, right? So if we begin with that attitude of thanksgiving always, we're in the right place. And so that leads us to our final letter, which stands for, S stands for supplication.

[17 : 13] Or more specifically, making supplication. That's what it means. It's an active act. So making supplication, it's not something we hear often.

Are you making supplication? No, I'm making a casserole. You don't hear making supplication, right? It's very complicated, but it simply means to plead humbly.

And most often it means to plead humbly to someone who is in power over you and specifically for their help. So you are making application for help from the one person who can help you.

So we're encouraged, as we heard a few moments ago in Philippians 4, verse 6, to let our requests be known to God. And we're commanded to make supplication for all people, to appeal to God on behalf of all people.

And we read this in 1 Timothy 2, verse 1 and 2. First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, it says, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

[18 : 36] So just a couple of examples of making supplication. Now Solomon made supplication at the dedication of the temple.

Maybe that's one that pops into your mind. We read that in 1 Kings 8, 28 and 29. Yet have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, O Lord my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that your servant prays before you this day, that your eyes may be open night and day towards this house, the place of which you have said, My name shall be there, that you may listen to the prayer that your servant offers towards this place.

Jesus, of all times, made supplication as he was crucified. We read in Luke 23, verse 34, And Jesus said, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

And they cast lots to divide his garments. Stephen also, as he was being stoned, as we read in Acts 7, verses 59 and 60, And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

And falling to his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, Lord, do not hold this sin against them. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

[20 : 21] In the worst possible time, they put others before God. They lifted others up in supplication.

Acts. So I hope this has obviously been a reminder, but you all know it very well, quite clearly. So I hope you've been reminded of some of the important things this morning.

Maybe gained a new perspective on some things. And with the aid of this simple acronym, we know it, my challenge is, do we use it? We should never forget, if we use this as a tool, the purpose of prayer.

The way to approach our prayers. Through adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. So it's definitely good to understand the purpose of prayer, which is what we've done this morning. But do we also appreciate the power of prayer? Do we recognize the privilege that we have in prayer? Do we understand the principles of prayer?

[21 : 33] Do we live a life that reflects the persistence of prayer? Do we engage regularly in the practice of prayer?

So as we continue in this series, from our lips to God's ears in the coming weeks, we're going to be exploring those concepts that I listed for you. We're going to be reminded of what it means to be people of prayer.

And maybe you're thinking to yourself, oh, Pastor Kent, so young and so naive. I know how to pray. I've been praying for decades. Doesn't hurt to have reminders, right?

Doesn't hurt to have tools and examples from Scripture for us to reinvigorate our prayer life. So over the coming weeks, we'll be exploring those concepts and more together.

So may we be reminded, may we be blessed and changed as we seek to elevate prayer as a focus in our own lives and in the life of our church.
[22 : 37] Amen.