

From Our Lips to God's Ears: The Practice of Prayer, Part 1

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[0 : 00] Welcome here for this Sunday, February 25th, 2024. My name is Kent Dixon, and it is my joy to be the pastor here. Many thanks to Mr. Paul Hay, Esquire, for bringing the sermon last Sunday.

You noticed, just by chance, I think, we sang about the sacrifice of Jesus and his blood. And so the theme of Paul's sermon last week was that strange word, that strange focus that we have in Christianity on the blood of Christ, and yet how critical, how important it is for us.

So we're continuing in our sermon series this week, From Our Lips to God's Ears, Living a Life of Prayer. And so over the coming weeks, we're going to continue to explore many of the different aspects of prayer and be reminded why it's so critical that we seek to be people of prayer.

So if you're thinking, that was two weeks ago, I've forgotten the whole thing. Aha, I have an answer for you. So we've considered over time, let's do a quick recap.

We've considered the purpose of prayer, what prayer is, why it needs to be a priority in our lives.

We've looked at the power of prayer for us to receive forgiveness, peace, tranquility, strength, opportunities that God will bring us, boldness and confidence that we can have, wisdom and healing that we can receive from God when we come to Him in prayer.

[1 : 28] We recognize the privilege of prayer, that prayer is available to someone who acknowledges themselves to be a sinner, someone who is sincerely seeking truth and righteousness.

And prayer is also available to sincere followers of Jesus Christ who have Him as their high priest. We've talked about the principles of prayer, that we must pray in faith, pray with humility, seek to pray in harmony with God's will, and above all this, seek to pray with thanksgiving, and to pray in Jesus' name.

Then two weeks ago, I know that feels like a million years ago, it was before the blizzard of 2024 we're about to experience. We focused on the persistence of prayer.

Maybe you remember that. We saw that in both the teaching and real life examples of Jesus and the Apostle Paul. And so what it truly means to be persistent in prayer in our lives, we looked at that.

No matter what our circumstances may be, we're called to be people of prayer in persistent prayer. And hopefully, this is my hope for you, that this has increased our desire to pray.

[2 : 46] It's helped us to pray more fervently and with more consistency in our lives. I hope that's the case for you. And if not, there's a couple weeks yet, and we'll light the fire yet, I promise.

So hopefully, it's also helped you to recognize all the ways in which we can benefit from the many things that prayer has to offer us. And I believe we can be encouraged to pray even more if we consider some of the nitty-gritty details, some of the practical things behind developing a more active and vibrant prayer life.

So with all that in mind, our sermon this morning is titled, The Practice of Prayer. And many of you know that I love movies, and I like trilogies. I like two-part movies.

So this is part one of a two-part series, mini-series within the series. So this is part one, the first half, so be sure to check out the second half next week.

So what kind of practical stuff should we be thinking about here? What are some of the things that we really need to consider? Well, you know me. I like to give you bite-sized chunks.

[3 : 56] So I'm going to give you, suggest, four things to keep in mind, and we'll walk through these together this morning. How should we pray? When should we pray?

With whom should we pray? You notice I, English major, didn't say, who should we pray with? That's wrong. With whom should we pray? And for what should we pray? What are the things that we should bring to God in prayer? So let's begin with how. So maybe that seems like a silly or obvious thing to you. Pastor Ken, I've been praying all my life. All my life. Trust me, I know how to pray. I've got it, really. You're wasting your time with me here. So fair enough, fair enough. But considering we're praying to the eternal God, who was and is and is to come, maybe it never hurts to check in once in a while and ask, Lord, teach us, remind us, teach me how to pray.

So as we consider briefly in our last sermon two weeks ago in this series, Luke 11 is our best how-to resource for prayer. So let's look at Luke 11, verse 1, where we read, one day Jesus was praying in a certain place.

[5 : 19] When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples. So we see here that Jesus was specifically asked by his disciples how they should pray.

They wanted a guide. They wanted a prayer 101. But what prompted them to do that? Well, there were a few things here at work that prompted them to ask this.

First of all, they had just watched Jesus himself praying. And they also knew that John the Baptist had taught his own disciples how to pray. So also as Jews, they would have known how to pray in many ways, would have likely prayed themselves many times as well.

So they would have come to see Jesus, see that he had more to teach them about prayer, just in observing him, in listening to how he spoke about prayer.

So continuing in Luke 11, verses 2 to 4, we read Jesus' response. So he said to them, when you pray, say, Father, hallowed be your name.

[6 : 28] Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread and forgive us our sins, for we forgive everyone who is indebted to us and lead us not into temptation.

And don't panic, because you know that I often read from the ESV translation. So is that the Lord's Prayer or not? It is. So that's just a slightly different translation. So this model, the Lord's Prayer, should be familiar to all of us, right?

It's most commonly known across cultures, continents, centuries, denominations, as the Lord's Prayer. That's how we know it. It's also found in Matthew 6, verses 9 to 13.

And it seems clear that Jesus intended it to be a model for how his disciples come to the Father in prayer. So Christians around the world recite those words as a prayer in and of themselves.

And sometimes, maybe you notice this, other than using them as an example or recognizing that Jesus gave them as an example. He gave them to us as a way to shape our prayers, a way for us to model our own prayers, which that's how it seems that Jesus intended that to be.

[7 : 48] But the Lord's Prayer itself has become a deeply ingrained liturgical exercise in lots of denominations, certainly in the Catholic Church.

And it's become an activity that people do. And that's not wrong. And that's not to say the Lord's Prayer is not a prayer, because it is. It absolutely is.

So people have latched on to the example itself, word for word. This is an epiphany I had as I was preparing this sermon. People have latched on to this example that Jesus gave, rather than recognizing it as an example or a jumping off point for us to form our own prayers.

It's interesting, right? So people took that prayer of Jesus, that model of Jesus, and then said, I'm going to pray this word for word. And again, I said, it's not wrong, but it's very interesting.

And I guarantee you, I have Catholic friends who would think I'm crazy to even say that. Because absolutely, you need to pray that word for word. That's what Jesus said.

[8 : 56] That's what we have to do. It's worth thinking about. So if we recognize the Lord's Prayer then as a model for our own prayers, what can we learn from it?

Well, Jesus is very clear in his direction to the disciples. He doesn't say, well, fellas, you know, this is one way you consider using. I've used it for the last few years.

Or he doesn't say, he's not suggesting, I pray like this, but you can pray however you want. Jesus says, when you pray, say the following.

Structure your prayers like this. And then he goes on to lay out a template that I believe it's important to follow. Now you hear me say the word model or template or whatever, and you think, that sounds awfully sterile.

But no, Jesus is giving us a rich example for how to set our prayers, how to structure our prayers. And maybe that feels too structured for you. Maybe you're not a type A, kind of, I need to follow the steps and I'll get there for you as well, I promise, because I'm kind of in between.

[10:04] So don't worry. So Jesus begins by addressing God the Father when he says, our Father in heaven. And then he is expressing reverence for God.

He says, hallowed be your name. He begins with recognizing and praising God. And it's critical, as I've said before in this series, that it's critical for us to express humility in our prayers.

We need to be humble before God himself and to be humble in what we ask in our prayers. So then next, we come to the Father with supplication.

And I've talked about that before. Humbly asking God to provide something, either for ourselves or for others. And it can include, and the Lord's Prayer lays these things out, it can include supplication for things like God's purposes, God's will.

Jesus says, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven, in Matthew 6.10. Our physical needs are another thing we can come to him with.

[11:15] Give us this day our daily bread. Basic physical needs and provision. Matthew 6.11. Our spiritual needs.

Forgive us our debts. Forgive us our sins. Forgive us the things that we have done wrong. In Matthew 6.12. The spiritual needs of others.

As we forgive our debtors. As we forgive those who sin against us. We're extending grace to other people. Matthew 6.12 as well. Guidance and help in our struggle against sin and Satan.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Some translations say, the evil one. In Matthew 6.13. So then we transition from supplication or asking into praising God in Jesus' model. Jesus says, for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen. And that's also in Matthew 6.13.

[12:26] So when he taught about prayer, Jesus stressed the importance of some other things. And let's highlight those a little bit. In Matthew 6.7-8, we read, Jesus said, And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do.

For they think they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Jesus stressed that prayer should be simple. And hear me on this. That doesn't mean simplistic, but simple, clear, direct, not unnecessarily wordy, not complicated.

In Matthew 6.14-15, we read, The importance of forgiveness. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

And you've heard me say this, talk about this passage before, because I think we tend to drift off at that point and miss the important second half. But, halfway through, if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

[13:48] I think we're very quick to go, oh yeah, I've got forgiveness. Perfect. But there's a caveat there. We are expected to be people who forgive. So Jesus was clear there, that forgiveness of other people, forgiveness of things other people have done to us, is both an expectation and a requirement for receiving forgiveness from God.

It's worth noting. So as we learned in our sermon on the persistence of prayer, we recognize that Jesus also encouraged people to persist in, one, and be patient in prayer, right?

He didn't say, ring the doorbell, and God will answer, and it's all good. He said, ask. He said, seek. He said, knock. He didn't say, do it once, it should be fine.

There's an implication of persistence there. So next, let's consider when we should pray. So here's the type A, type, I don't know what the opposite of type A is, type D, type L, type C for casual.

So here's the very structured and very casual folks, and there's grace and space and a place for all of us in this. So when we pray, we should consider and have room in our prayer lives for both scheduled prayers and spontaneous prayers.

[15:19] Because as human beings with busy lives that are filled with appointments and deadlines and relationships and priorities and Netflix and social media, dare I say, I believe it's critical that we schedule prayer time in our lives.

How do you react to hearing me say that? Do you think somehow that seems artificial or false?

Well, do you personally believe that unless prayer comes from the heart and spirit and only in that very moment, it's somehow not genuine, somehow not something God is going to hear?

If you scheduled it, if God knows that Bob is going to show, specifically Bob because we have no Bobs, specifically that Bob will pray to the Lord at 8.15, Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, God is just waiting and unless Bob prays at that exact time, I'm not going to hear it.

No. It's not how it works. My friends, prayer is a discipline, though. It's a discipline more than anything. Prayer is a skill, prayer is a habit that you need to develop in your life.

And for some of us, it's not that easy. I would include myself in that group. I read a book by a pastor recently who's a well-known author and well-known pastor, and I won't name his name, but he said he realized in his ministry that his prayer life stunk.

[16:57] He was talking about prayer and rarely did it himself. It was something that he got to when he remembered, so he recognized in his own life that he needed to grow that discipline.

He needed to create space and time for his prayer life to exist even. So that may be the case for some of us. And then there are others who will pray anytime, all the time, right?

And that is a gift. That is absolutely a gift. So with, just like with anything in our lives, with our diet, with our exercise habits, if we don't schedule prayer, there's a chance, quite a good chance actually, that it will get sidelined by something else.

Something that happens out of the blue. Something that is more shiny and draws our attention. Because prayer can be hard. So let's consider, with that in mind, the practices of two great people of God.

And this is not to make us all feel really guilty, but it's to see these practices of scheduled prayer. prayer. In Psalm 55, verse 17, you can see it on the screen there, we read the words of David, a man who God described as, quote, a man after my own heart.

[18:14] And David says, evening and morning and at noon, I utter my complaint and moan and he hears my voice. Does that mean David was just a complainer?

No. Complained a lot though. Does it mean that evening, morning and noon is the model that you have to follow? No. It's just an example. But that is scheduled prayer in action, right?

In Daniel 6, verse 10, we read about, surprisingly, Daniel. He was a man who the angel of God described as a man greatly beloved. That he got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God.

So this was Daniel's habit of prayer three times a day and not dissimilar from David's. So both David and Daniel clearly made it a habit.

They made and set specific times during the day for prayer. And I believe it wouldn't hurt us to imitate them or consider that in some way.

[19:21] And I'd encourage you, myself included, all of you, have a chat with God which is what prayer is. Ask him to help you identify a good time for you.

There are two distinct types of people in my home right now and even before two of them moved out. There are morning people who are full of joy, make the coffee, prepare the breakfast, are sunshine and lollipops, except if you're an evening person.

So we have both. So the morning people, of which I am one, have learned to temper their excitement, their enthusiasm early in the day. The evening people also know that not to engage in a deep and meaningful marriage relationship related conversation after, say, six.

So you see that, though. There are better times and worse times for all of us and we would know that. When is the best time for you to spend in conversation with God?

Any time scheduled in this way. So prayers, now all of this being said, prayers should not simply be limited to set times.

[20:36] I've told you before that I will have conversations with God in the most random moments often. And so in Luke 6, verses 12 and 13, we read, In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God.

And when day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve whom he named apostles. Jesus, bringing his discernment of the apostles before God.

Jesus spent all night in prayer before selecting his apostles. And that's not me saying, once a month, set a night. So remember, this is not scheduled. This is Jesus thinking, this is an important decision I'm going to bring to the Father.

So how often, how often, why am I moved to tears by this? Well, because I am guilty of this. How often do we devise our thoughts and our plans and our ideas and then bring them to God?

God, I have this great idea. Stamp it. I have this great idea. Bless it. When we're actually supposed to start before.

[21 : 50] Come to God and say, Lord, I feel drawn to this. Direct my steps. Lord, I get excited about this idea. How could you use me in that way? There are all ways to consider things like that.

Coming to God last is not always the best choice. We do it. So in Acts 16, verse 25, we read, about midnight, Paul and Silas were praying.

I don't pray at midnight, just FYI. Praying and singing hymns to God and the prisoners were listening to them. They just spontaneously began to pray. Paul and Silas prayed when they were facing trying circumstances.

A few of you know this, but not everyone. on the trip back from visiting Connor last weekend, our car died. We had to have it towed home from Red Deer.

It is completely dead if anyone knows a car priest. It is completely dead. So we are now in the process of looking for another car. So I began earlier this week to start looking.

[22 : 59] And then I went, this is a dumb idea. And I stopped and I said, Lord, we need a car. Help us find a car. You know which one it is.

I'm not just going to wander around looking aimlessly. Point me in a good direction. I'm having trouble being patient. In Nehemiah 2, verses 4 to 5, we read, Then the king said to me, What are you requesting?

So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said to the king, if it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in your sight that you send me to Judah to the city of my father's graves that I may rebuild it.

Nehemiah is an example there. He prayed on the spur of the moment. Right? The king wanted something of him and he went, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. I got to start with prayer. It's a good teaching moment for sure.

In 1 Chronicles then, we read, 1 Chronicles 5.20, And when they prevailed over them, the Hagrites and all those who were with them were given into their hands.

[24 : 07] For they cried out to God in the battle and he granted their urgent plea because they trusted him. The Israelites prayed to God in the middle of, in the heat of, a battle.

They submitted what they were doing to God in the moment. So what we learn from all these examples is that we, these spontaneous examples, we should pray whenever and however the occasion calls for it.

Our goal is to be, as 1 Thessalonians 5.17 says, people who pray without ceasing. Scheduled. Spontaneous. Both.

D. all of the above. So having scheduled times to pray will help us develop experience in prayer. Will help us to build our prayer muscles, in other words.

And, but also, praying spontaneously will develop a natural response. A natural tendency to pray in every circumstance. If our first reaction in every situation is to come to the Lord, that will quickly become a habit.

[25 : 27] And the best habit we could possibly have. So between weaving both scheduled and spontaneous prayer into our lives, those things will help us to reach that goal of praying without ceasing.

So structured prayer will help us to build our own formula, our own habits. Spontaneous prayer will give us the opportunity to put those things into action. So this morning, we have looked at, I cheated because I told you all four first thing.

We're covering two next week. Ha ha! But now you're hooked so you will come back. Exploring the practice of prayer this morning, we've considered how to pray with the Lord's prayer as a guide.

We've considered when to pray. Suggesting both set times and spontaneous prayer. And as we develop both the experience and the natural responses to pray, we're going to consider next week with whom we might pray.

Alone? With others? Maybe both? For what we should pray? Besides the things that we've already looked at. We'll be doing that together next week in the second part.

[26 : 44] Tune in for part two of the practice of prayer. May we be people who pursue prayer in our lives. May we be people for whom the Holy Spirit lights fire under our prayer again.

Drives us, gives us passion to cry out to God in prayer in every moment. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.