

Learning to Pray – *Philippians 4:6*

One of the clearest evidences of Christian discipleship is prayer. Just as physical health can be measured by blood pressure, heart rate and cholesterol, spiritual health can be partially measured by prayer.

When Jesus' first disciples saw and heard him pray, they were totally impressed. They went to him and asked, "Teach us how to pray." Jesus told them to go find a private place and try a prayer like this:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

They wanted Jesus to teach them how to pray. Prayer is not something we are born with. Prayer is learned. It has to be practiced in order for us to be good at it. As disciples of Jesus Christ we are learners. We're learning to be and to do like Jesus—and that includes prayer.

The premise of prayer is that a disciple lives by faith. We believe that God exists, that we have a special relationship to him through Jesus Christ and that he can be trusted to impact our lives for good.

The opposite of living by faith in God is trying to handle everything on our own. We take full responsibility for our health, family, employment, relationships, government and everything else. I could never do that. I would be a nervous wreck. I need God. I need God's help. I need to turn the issues of life over to him.

That's where prayer comes in. We are told in *Philippians 4:6* that we should "not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." We have a choice. We can live by sight or live by faith; we can try to handle everything

ourselves or we can trust God; we can be stressed out with anxiety or pray.

The premise of prayer is that we choose to live by faith and that's why we pray. If we make that choice, there are principles of prayer that are helpful to learn if we're going to pray like Jesus taught us to pray.

Principle number one is to understand that prayer is communication with God. Prayer is not asking for something, although asking certainly is part of prayer to God. If we think prayer is just asking, we've significantly missed the point and misunderstood prayer.

Many women become frustrated with their fathers and husbands because they always try to immediately fix things. She starts to talk about what happened today at school, work or home and immediately he interrupts with an action plan to solve what he thinks is the problem. She blurts out, "Can you just be quiet and listen? I'm not asking you to do anything except listen and try to understand." Now, it may later come to a request and action, but sometimes we just need someone to talk to, especially someone who loves us.

God loves us. He wants us to talk to him. We

are invited to share our lives, express our hurts, describe our dreams and celebrate our successes. *Philippians 4:6* says, "Do not be anxious about any-

thing, but in *everything* by *prayer and petition* . . ." we should communicate with God because disciples of Jesus Christ talk to God through prayer.

A second principle of prayer is that prayer should be God-centered. Jesus did not teach his followers to start out requesting their daily bread. Instead, Jesus taught them to begin by saying, "Our Father in heaven." A disciple is a follower and learner. Someone else is the teacher. Someone else is the boss.

As American Christians we often miss the point on that. We mistakenly think that we are first,

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we are most important, what we want is what we are supposed to get and that God is a supernatural robot whose job is to make us happy.

I have heard people say, “I told God what I wanted, and he didn’t do it. I don’t think I can ever trust him again.” But God is not a celestial mail order service. Prayer is not connecting to God.com to place an order. Our goal should be God’s purposes and pleasures—not our own.

Prayer is not to bring God into alignment with us but us with God. When a pilot is approaching the airport there is communication between the cockpit and the control tower. The purpose is to get the aircraft aligned with the runway. The pilot doesn’t ask the airport to move the runway 5 degrees or 50 yards to the left. The runway doesn’t move to accommodate the plane; the plane moves to align with the runway.

And so it is with prayer. The purpose of prayer is not to align God with us but to align us with God. Prayer is communication with God in order to line up our lives with his will and righteousness. Confession of sin is part of the alignment, admitting where we have gone off course, asking for forgiveness and getting us back on track. Alignment includes the words of one of Jesus’ prayers when he said, “. . . not my will but your will be done.”

It is within the context of the first three principles of prayer that we experience the fourth principle of prayer—that God hears and answers Jesus’ disciples. This is a most amazing truth. Disciples of Jesus Christ connect with God and communicate through prayer so that we don’t need to be “anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, (we) present (our) requests to God” who hears and answers.

When we pray, these principles are turned into experience. This topic and the words of Philippians 4:6 were chosen months in advance as part of the series “Becoming Jesus’ Disciple.” But a week ago Saturday night when we arrived home after the Saturday evening church service there was a telephone voice message saying that my mother had

fallen, been seriously injured and had been taken by ambulance to the hospital in Boca Raton, Florida. I phoned the hospital and talked to the ER nurse who said that she had been there for an hour or two and was on a gurney in the hallway waiting to be seen by a physician. I thought about her there—alone, in pain, perhaps scared . . . and I cried. What could I do half a continent away? I was scheduled to preach on Sunday morning. It was too late on Saturday for a flight. I was anxious.

Charleen took my hand and we prayed together. “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” So we asked for God’s help to do what we couldn’t do.

Within an hour there was a pastor by her side whom my mother has known all of his life. Within 12 hours she had successful surgery completed by an orthopedic surgeon whom Charleen and I grew up with and who repeatedly reminded me that my mother was his Sunday School teacher when he was five years old. (Which is to say, if you’re a teacher of a five-year-old, be nice to them because you never know when you may need them later in life!) Within less than 24 hours Charleen and I were by her side in Florida. Within less than a week she was dismissed from the hospital and recovering well.

All our lives are filled with uncertainty, surprises, anxiety and things we cannot control. What do we do about it? Disciples of Jesus Christ live by faith. Disciples of Jesus Christ pray.

Since disciples learn to pray, let’s talk about the actual practice of prayer. Jesus said in Matthew 6:6, “When you pray, go into your room, close the door and prayer to your Father.” Jesus often slipped away from family and friends for private prayer.

Each of us should establish a place for regular private prayer. It may be our bedroom, office, basement, porch or car. Ideally, it should be a place where we can sit, stand or kneel, and a place where we can be silent or pray out loud. It isn’t the only place to pray because we should pray throughout

the day, but there should be a regular place and time for private prayer.

But there is another practice of prayer that is very important and that is to pray publicly. The Bible tells about many prayers. The only way we know about any of them is that they were publicly shared, including the Lord's Prayer. There is a special supernatural power and blessing which accompanies prayer with others. Specifically blessed are marriages where the couple prays together. Life-long impact shapes the lives of children who grow up hearing their parents pray. Amazing things happen when small groups of Christians pray together.

Some Christians find public prayer difficult and uncomfortable. The reasons may be many. Some are shy; some are reluctant. Some haven't prayed in private so they are not very good at praying in public. And many are simply afraid of saying the wrong thing.

But remember that prayer is learned. So pray out loud when you're alone. Then move from that to praying out loud in the presence of those who are trusted—members of the family and close Christian friends. Think through your prayer in advance. If necessary write it out, practice it, read it. You will discover that it gets easier and better with time. But there is a wonderful spiritual benefit to learning to pray with others.

Practice number three is to pray frequently. Just as conversation is spread through our day, we should converse often with God. In the car, while out running, lying in bed before we fall asleep, during emergencies, at church, in business meetings, at school—talk often to God about everything. We are told in 1 Thessalonians 5 that we are to pray continually. Praying continually doesn't mean non-stop. It's more like carrying a cell phone and making multiple calls throughout every day. In other words, stay in touch with God.

Number four is to pray supernaturally. Prayer is not natural—it's supernatural. We should rec-

ognize that we are tapping into God. There is presence. There is power. It goes beyond anything merely human and ordinary. We should expect to experience God. It is an experience unlike other experiences in other relationships that we have. So ask the Holy Spirit to empower you. Request a spiritual encounter with God when you pray. Expect to experience God in wonderful ways that will be impossible to later explain. Expect God!

From Romans 8:26 we learn a little about how supernatural prayer works. When we are praying, connected with God, but run out of words to say, the Holy Spirit takes over our prayers and goes beyond human language with supernatural sounds for which there are no human words. The Bible describes it as "groans"—perhaps because there is no other word that we would understand. So, pray supernaturally. Expect God!

The normal pattern of prayer is that we pray in terms of the Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. While we may pray to one or all three, there is a normal biblical pattern to prayer. Pray to God the Father, in the name of Jesus the Son, through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit lives in every Christian. Our souls are connected to the Spirit. We use that connection, pray in the name of Jesus and talk directly to God the Father.

The typical content of prayer should be worship, confession, thanksgiving and requests. Certainly we can pray in different ways with different content, but there are some helpful biblical guidelines about the structure of a disciple's prayer and what to say.

When we phone someone there is a typical routine. "Hello, this is Leith Anderson. I'm calling for George. Hi, George, how are you today? It's always good to talk to you. I'm sorry I didn't call sooner. I want to thank you for shoveling my driveway last week and I was wondering if you could help me out again tomorrow." This conver-

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sation included greeting, praise, apology, gratitude and a request.

When setting aside a special daily prayer time, the pattern that is clearly taught in the Bible is a pattern of worship, confession, thanksgiving and requests. In worship we tell God how great he is: “Our Father in Heaven, holy is your name.” Confession is telling God what we have done wrong and requesting his forgiveness: “Forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” Thanksgiving is telling God we are grateful for him and all he does: “. . . in everything, with prayer and petition, *with thanksgiving*, present your requests to God.” Then the requests themselves, asking God to show us what he wants and to give us what we need: “Your will be done . . . give us our daily bread . . . lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.”

Jesus said that a disciple is someone who obeys all that he has commanded, and he has commanded us to pray.

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