

Prerequisites to Prayer

I have a question for you. Do you think that America is a praying nation? If your answer is a strong “yes” then you are in agreement with research that shows that about sixty percent of Americans say they pray everyday. Seventy-eight percent say that they pray at least once a week and one percent of the population say they never pray.

My next question is who do you think prays more — older adults or younger adults? If you answered younger adults you’re right again. According to the National Opinion Center based in Chicago, adults born between 1939 and 1954 pray less on a daily basis than adults born between 1955 and 1970. The explanation to this finding that’s given is that prayer tends to become more popular with problems and apparently people born between 1955 and 1970 have a whole lot more problems than those born 1954 and before.

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It could also be argued that this is an appropriate time with all of the problems that face our world and our nation for prayer to be a popular thing to do. Interestingly, at the national headquarters for the National Day of Prayer 7,000 requests were received for information in 1992, and in 1993, there were 18,000 requests for information.

Next question — does prayer make a practical difference in peoples’ lives? The answer again appears to be “yes.” Omni Magazine reports some recent research about those who pray, saying that there is a direct correlation between the amount of prayer that someone engages in and the reports of happiness in that person’s marriage. I’ll read the sentence. “For regular practitioners of prayer, marital and personal happiness are added benefits of the ritual with the satisfaction index increasing with its frequencies.” They also said that married couples who pray often have superior sexual relationships and a very high happiness rate. So, if you know someone who says, “I’m not as happy as I should be in my marriage,” then you can say, “You don’t pray much do you?” You’ve got them there!

If prayer is this popular and this powerful, why is it that people seem to talk about prayer as if they are not very good at it? When I hear people talk

about prayer, they often say, “I don’t pray enough. It’s a weak area of my life.” I’m not sure that I have ever heard anyone say, “When it comes to prayer, that is my greatest strength. I’m really good at praying. I’d say over all I’m in about the 99th percentile.” I’ve never heard anyone even come close to that kind of statement. I think the reason is that prayer, like a lot of things in life, is rather simple at the front end but it gets increasingly complex as you move farther into it.

It reminds me of one summer when I worked as a camp counselor for junior-age boys. I try not to think of it too often, actually. It was in New York state and it was basically a 23-hour a day job. I had one hour off each day when my campers would go to the archery range and it was one of the better hours of the day.

The campers would regularly invite me to come and watch them and participate with them and I regularly declined in order to have that one hour of peace and quiet. One time I made a foolish comment. I said, “I’ll tell you what, if you’ll clean the cabin up so it’s absolutely the way it’s supposed to be, I’ll go with you to the archery range tomorrow.” I knew there wasn’t a chance that would happen, but, to my amazement, they did it!

The cabin looked habitable for that one brief fleeting moment and so I went with them to the archery range. Then they said, “Will you shoot an arrow?” And I said, “No, I just said I would come.” They kept pushing and pushing and so finally I gave in. I took one of their bows, took an arrow, mounted it on the string, pulled back the string and tried to hold my hands steady, and aimed as best as I could. I slowly released the string — and hit the center of the bullseye! They were impressed. I was impressed. I couldn’t believe it. I didn’t even think I would hit the target, much less hit the bullseye in the center. Then one of them said, “Do it again.” I said that I would if I didn’t have some other things that I had to do so I had to leave.

I didn’t want to try it another time because I knew how little I knew about archery. I did every-

thing I knew about archery and just got lucky the first time. I didn't know anything about bows and strings or different types of arrows the way a person who was really into archery would.

The same thing is true with hockey and baseball or wrestling or carpentry and chemistry and writing. At the front end it is very simple to get started but there is more and more the farther into it one goes. A runner doesn't start with a marathon. You start out by doing something easy — like walking to the refrigerator! After you get good at it, you might try to run a 10 K .

It's the same with prayer. We don't start with an all night prayer vigil. We start with a simple communication with God. And so our purpose is to begin simply, sort of with the prerequisites of prayer. We begin with some basics.

We must first understand that prayer is a relationship. In fact, everything about prayer is based upon relationship. If there is no relationship then we're just talking to ourselves. The relationship may be good or bad, it may be new or old, it may be close or distant, warm or cold, but there is no such thing as prayer without relationship.

Remember when Jesus' followers came up to him and said, "Teach us to pray?" Jesus' example for them was, "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be your name." He started immediately with the relationship with the Father in heaven. Later on when explaining to them how prayer works, Jesus told them that when they talk to the Father in heaven to be sure to mention his name. It's sort of like those radio commercials that say, "When you go to the store say that I sent you." People have prayed ever since "in Jesus' name" because Jesus gives us access to God in a way that otherwise we wouldn't have. It's all about a relationship.

Prayer is to relationship as swimming is to water. You can pretend that you swim, you can go through the motions on dry land, but it isn't real unless you're in the water. In the same way, prayer is not the real thing unless it's in a relationship with God.

Prayer is a relationship, but it is also communication. It is the communication link with God. It's very hard to have a relationship without communication or communication without relationship. The two are always tied together.

If you have caller ID service on your telephone, before you answer it when it rings you look to see

whose name and number is on the display. If it's the name and the number of someone that you value, who's close to you, that you want to talk to, you'll immediately pick it up and answer it. But if the number is unknown to you, or the name is unfamiliar — maybe a phone survey or something like that — you probably won't answer or you'll be very hesitant because you don't have a relationship.

It is like that with prayer. Prayer is not magic, it's not saying some memorized, ritualistic form or words. It's communication — communication with God that is based upon relationship.

Perhaps a harder thing to understand about prayer is that it is multi-faceted. You know, like the different facets on a diamond. There are a lot of different parts to it. Some people think that prayer is just asking but that is only a part of what prayer is all about.

The Bible gives many examples of the facets of prayer. Let me give you a few examples. I Samuel 1:15 is the prayer of the infertile Hannah who so much wants to have a child. She goes to the temple and prays and the record says that she poured out her soul to the Lord. She was so emotional, so passionate, that they tried to kick her out of the temple because they thought she was drunk.

In Psalm 88:1-2 the Psalmist cried out to God to please listen. Did you ever have a relationship with someone and while you're talking you wonder if that person is really listening at all? The Psalmist said:

*Oh Lord, the God who saves me,
day and night I cry out before you.
May my prayer come before you;
turn your ear to my cry.*

It is almost as if that Psalmist is reaching up and grabbing God's shoulder and saying, "Turn this way, turn your head and hear my cry. Listen to me, God!"

In almost all relationships there are complaints and that is a facet of prayer as well. The Psalmist in Psalm 142:1-2 said:

*I cry aloud to the Lord:
I lift up my voice to the Lord for mercy.
I pour out my complaints before him;
before him I tell my trouble.*

Complaining is part of praying. Jeremiah was one of the greatest prophets of the Old Testament. One of the biggest books of the Bible was named after him. In Jeremiah 20:7 he prayed:

O Lord, you deceived me, and I was de-

*ceived;
you overpowered me and prevailed.
I'm ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks
me.*

He's saying, "God, you tricked me and you used all your power to do me in." He wasn't complaining about somebody else. He was complaining to God about God.

Then, of course, prayer includes asking. In Matthew 7:7-8 Jesus said,

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

That's just one example. There are many others like it. Philippians 4: 6-7 says:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Sometimes prayer is passion. Listen to Hebrews 5 verse 7:

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death.

Sometimes, prayers are silent. In Romans 8 is an example of a person who is praying and just runs out of words and says "God, I don't know what else to say — I'm stuck." It says that the Holy Spirit picks up and starts praying on our behalf. I've had that happen. I've had times when I was praying and I couldn't come up with the words. I was so frustrated that I just quit. Not that I ended the communication with God but I stopped saying words and asked that the Holy Spirit pick up and say whatever words I should be saying because I couldn't figure them out.

I think that one of the best examples of a good relationship is when we can be silent. You've got to be a really good friend with someone to be comfortable enough to be able to ride along in a car for an hour or two in silence. Sometimes prayer to God takes place in silence.

All of this is like the rest of the relationships

that we have: husband and wives, parents and children, employers and employees, and best of friends. Sometimes there is passion, sometimes silence, sometimes praising, sometimes pleading, sometimes comforting, sometimes complaining. Prayer communicates in all these and more different ways, all within a relationship with God.

But all these forms of prayer communication assume something. They assume that the person who prays believes in God. Even if you forget all the references we have looked at today, there is one that you ought to remember. Hebrews 11:6 says,

Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

Think about it. Why would anyone pray if they didn't believe that God exists? That's like sending a daily letter to Santa Claus whom you are convinced is a myth. It is stupid — it doesn't make sense. However, an interesting sidelight is that surveys have found that a significant percentage of atheists and agnostics in America pray. Sociologist Andrew Greeley said, "They must start their prayers by saying, 'To whom it may concern.'"

What do you think? Do you think God hears and answers the prayers of atheists? I think he does. I think the difference is that he has not obligated himself to do so and so someone who does not have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ cannot go to God and say, "God, you have committed in advance that you will hear me and answer me." But God, at least occasionally, out of his goodness and generosity, hears the desperate prayers of people with whom he has no relationship.

We've all heard stories of people who are not believers but because of some wartime or emergency room experience blurt out a prayer that, to that person's surprise as much as everyone else's, God answers. Maybe that's been your experience. Perhaps even before

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becoming a Christian you prayed a prayer that God clearly answered. Maybe that was one of the reasons why you became a Christian. But there's a difference in the way God relates to the atheist or the non-believer. He hears and may answer their prayers, but he has not obligated himself in advance to do so. It's different for those who have a rela-

relationship with God through Jesus Christ because with that relationship God has obligated himself. He has committed in writing that he will hear and that he will answer.

Think of it this way. If a total stranger walks up to me and asks me to do him a favor, I may or may not do it, depending on what he asks. We have no relationship and I feel no obligation to him. On the other hand, if my wife asks me to do her a favor my answer is, “Yes — What do you want me to do?” Because of the marriage relationship, we have an obligation to each other.

God may graciously hear and even answer the prayers of those who are not believers, but he hasn't obligated himself to do so. But he has obligated himself to both hear and answer the prayers of Christians who believe in him.

Once we understand the basics of prayer and once we are sure that we really believe in God, the next step is to begin praying. I think that many of us pray little because we just never get started. And many people don't get started because they are afraid they won't get it right. They're afraid that somehow they won't be articulate. I often hear people say that they could never pray out loud in front of other people because they are afraid they won't know what to say or they might say the wrong thing. In fact, a lot of people never pray privately for the same reasons. They sense that there's a prescribed way to pray and if you don't get it perfect, then the prayer doesn't count and you might offend God.

Talk to a parent whose child or children live out of town and ask that parent, “What would you say is the right way for your son or daughter to call you on the phone?” They will give you a blank stare in return. They have no idea what you are talking about. Parents who love their children will tell you there is no “right way.” They are glad to get the call day or night, at home or at work. Sons and daughters can phone home when they have nothing special to talk about or when they face life's biggest crises. It's okay to call Mom and Dad to tell a joke or to cry, to dial direct or call collect. There just isn't a “right way.”

And so it is with God. You don't need to worry about getting prayer “right.” God loves to hear from you — any time, any place, any topic. You can ask him for money, plead for comfort or just talk about what happened at the office during the day. God

has amazing tolerance. He understands. So don't ignore him. Don't treat him as if he's not there and miss out on the greatest relationship you'll ever have.

Sometimes we go to God and we just let him talk to us. Maybe it's because we're upset and we really don't know what to say. Richard Foster in his book entitled “Prayer” tells the story of a man who took his two-year old to the shopping mall. The child was fussing and fuming. Nothing worked to quiet him down. Then the father reached down and picked up his two-year old and just held him close to his chest and began to sing to him. It was an impromptu love song. It had no known tune, the words didn't rhyme, he was off key. He sang, “I love you, I love you, I'm glad you're my son. You make me happy. I like the way you laugh.” The child began to relax and to settle down and that Dad just kept singing through all the corridors, all the way into the parking lot. When he opened the car door and was buckling the little boy into his car seat, he stopped singing and the child said, “Sing it to me again, Daddy, sing it to me again!”

That's a little bit what prayer is like. God scoops us up in his arms. He holds us and sings to us and tells us he loves us and we may sing back to him, telling him what's on our minds and in our hearts. It is the expression of a relationship that is very important. And the more we experience this relationship with God through prayer, the more we keep saying, “Again, Father, let's do it again!”

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