

What Is Prayer?

When I was a boy in grade school, each day before I would leave for school my Mother would stand by me at the door, put her arms around me and have me recite a prayer that is a quotation from Psalm 19:14: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.”

When I was a teenager there was a February holiday and I had big plans for the day. Suddenly because of circumstances beyond my control, my plans were shattered. I was home alone, upset and disappointed. My emotions were a surprising mix of tears and anger and sorrow. Out of that came something that was far more significant than the circumstances that precipitated it. I sensed a need for God and I knelt down, the first time in my life I can remember doing that voluntarily, and all alone I prayed and acknowledged to God that I needed him. I told him that I was rebellious against him in my heart and asked for his forgiveness and for him to take control over my life. It was a significant turning point in my life.

As an adult I have prayed tens of thousands of times, early in the morning in personal devotions, late at night in the crisis of a sick child; often privately, many times publicly, sometimes in the carefully written out words of a prayer that I penned into my journal, other times the rather routine, glib words of prayers before meals.

You’d think with all the practice I’ve had that I would be something of an expert at prayer but I consider myself to be a novice. And I’ll confess something else to you and that is that the selection of topics for services and for sermons is made as much or more for me than for the congregation. That is why this series on prayer was chosen. Because I wanted to learn more about prayer. Because I want to pray more and better.

What is prayer? It is a simple question and deserves a simple answer but I have trouble finding a simple answer. I took out a yellow legal pad and a pencil and picked the dictionary off the shelf next to my desk and found for me a wholly inadequate answer. Then I took some more books off the shelf

but I really couldn’t find anything that I thought to be particularly satisfying.

I know that prayer is more than asking. It includes adoration and worship, confession, meditation, submission, intercession, thanksgiving and much more. I decided that defining prayer is somewhat like defining love. It is better defined by experience than by words. So I gave it my best shot and came up with a short definition: prayer is communion with God.

I started out thinking that prayer is communication with God. That certainly is true but prayer is much more than that. When you call someone on

the phone and get their answering machine because they aren’t home, the message you leave is communication but hardly “communion.”

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Prayer is communion with God. I don’t mean the sacrament of bread and wine but the sense of intimacy in a close relationship. It’s the communication between a mother and a baby that is nursing at her breast. It’s the communion or the communication between two people who are the very best of friends. It’s the dynamic between a man and a woman who are in love.

That’s what prayer is. It is communion with God and sharing a relationship with God himself. About 1600 years ago St. Augustine wrote, “True whole prayer is nothing but love.”

Christians are those who are related to God through Jesus Christ and prayer is both the introduction to that relationship and the basis of the maintenance of that relationship. It is a love communion with God himself where he first loves us and then we love him. While admittedly at times we drift away and sin, yet there is a pull that is stronger than gravity that sucks us back to him. Then we are called upon to confess our sins with the guarantee in advance that our relationship will be fully restored and we will be forgiven. It is a communion in which we can share with him the deepest secrets of our hearts, known to no other. God alone truly understands us. He shares the heights of our joys and the depths of our sorrows.

Prayer is an intimate connectedness with God. It is the language of the soul as it talks to God and hears him in return. Prayer is sharing this relationship in words, sometimes in thoughts, sometimes in songs, sometimes in silence. Prayer is the language of the soul communicating with God himself.

There is so much to be said about prayer. You read the Bible and prayer is like a thread that is woven through every book and almost every story. Over the last two thousand years there have been thousands of books written on the subject of prayer and they have not begun to exhaust all that can be said and understood. But when it comes to the basics, to the essentials of prayer, we must go back to Jesus Christ. For to be a Christian is to pattern one's life after Jesus and to pray is to pray as Jesus prayed.

From the beginning of his public ministry, prayer characterized Jesus' life. For example, Luke 3:21 describes crowds of people being baptized in the Jordan River by John, Jesus' cousin. Just as Jesus calls us to be baptized in order to identify with him, he chose to be identified with us in baptism. John was reluctant. Although he had baptized hundreds of other people it seemed inappropriate to baptize Jesus, but Jesus insisted and so there in the Jordan River he was baptized by John. As Jesus was being baptized we are told that he prayed. He wasn't thinking about the temperature or the depth of the water or what the other people were thinking or how he looked. Throughout the entire experience of baptism Jesus was praying and communing with God. And a stunning thing happened:

As he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

That's what prayer is. It is the key that opens up heaven. Prayer is something that touches the very heart of God. Prayer is two-way communion of love and relationship. There is no record of what Jesus said in his prayer — perhaps it was too private for us to know. What is important is that he prayed. And so for we Christians who pattern our lives and our prayers after Christ, prayer is love communion with God that is the key that unlocks heaven.

But that was just the beginning. Just as people today love to know about the private lives of the rich and famous, people have always been curious

about the life of Jesus. Mark 1:35 gives a fascinating insight into the private life of Jesus: "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed."

This is an especially amazing declaration in light of how Jesus spent the day before. When you read the rest of the first chapter of Mark, you discover that the previous day he had preached to crowds in the synagogue, expelled a demon from a hostile man and was constantly pursued by people seeking his attention. The word had spread that Jesus was in town and although he had been physically and spiritually drained and was seeking rest in a private home, the people still came, wanting their questions answered, wanting to be healed, wanting to see and touch him. When he went to bed that night he must have absolutely exhausted. Then early the next morning, before dawn, after that kind of a day, he gets up and goes to a solitary place in order to pray.

We sometimes think of Jesus in his humanity as somehow stronger than we are but that is a false assumption. He got tired as we do, he had emotions as we have emotions and when his days were long and he was tired, it was hard for him to get up the next day.

I try to understand a little bit of what Jesus faced although I think I have never faced a day quite like that day. I preach several times on Sunday mornings and that for me is a draining experience. By noon on Sunday I am not good for much of anything. It's as if I've done a week's work. I'm tired out.

Like Jesus, you and I have been confronted by difficult people, people who are in your face, yelling at you, people who are full of evil and it is as if you are dealing with the devil in person. And even if you come out okay, you can hardly move or talk after that kind of ordeal. We understand with Jesus what it is like to have one of those awful, memorable days of dealing with children and parents, sickness, or difficulties at work — until by the end of the day you just plop on the bed wondering what more could happen.

When Jesus got up the next morning I'm sure it was not an easy thing for him to do. When he went to pray I suspect that he was drowsy at best. I might go so far as to think that when he prayed his prayers some of his sentences were never finished because

he dosed off, simply from the exhaustion of the day.

I'm not suggesting that when we have our difficult days that we need to set the alarm before dawn, nor that there is anything more virtuous about praying before the sun rises. But if as Christians we are to pattern our lives after the Christ then prayer must also be a priority for us.

I like the title of Bill Hybels' little book, Too Busy Not To Pray. That's a great description of Jesus and the pattern he set for us. He recognized that when he was up against the wall with life's circumstances that he needed to pray all the more.

Luke 5:16 tells us that after a draining and busy day "Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed." Jesus gave priority to privacy in his prayer life. Not that he didn't pray in public because he did. A number of his public prayers are recorded in the Bible. But it's almost as if the prayers of Jesus were like an iceberg with only the small tip showing above the surface while there was this huge structure down below that was in private. No one could see it yet it supported what could be seen. All of the miracles that he did, all of the knowledge and resources that God provided for him, all of that was based upon not what happened in public but what happened in private.

When his followers came and asked him, "How are we supposed to pray? Teach us to pray," Jesus said in Matthew 6:6, "When you pray, go into your own room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." Jesus' private relationship with God fueled the rest of his life in public. That's the pattern for us to follow. The combination of the priority and the privacy of prayer gives the best of relationships with God and fuels us for everything else in our lives.

In Luke 6:12 there is another insight into Jesus' practice of prayer. It tells about when he made an extremely important decision, perhaps one of the most important of his entire career. It was the day when he picked his disciples — the ones who would communicate his message to the rest of the world and to future generations. On that day he wisely chose Matthew who wrote his biography, Peter who would make the insightful declaration that "You are

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the Christ" and would write part of the New Testament as well. He chose John, another of his biographers, Thomas who would first appear to be the ultimate doubter but eventually would become the apostle to Asia and India. What's amazing is that before Jesus made this important decision, he spent the entire night in prayer. He went out to a mountainside and spent the night praying to God and when morning came he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them.

That's what Christians are to do — pray significantly before making big, important decisions. It may not be all night, although that could be a very healthy practice. Wouldn't it be great if every Christian were to devote an entire night to prayer, to seek the mind of God and the direction to go before getting married, accepting or quitting a job, starting a business or filing for divorce? Imagine if all of the decisions that we made in life followed the pattern of Jesus Christ who prayed before he decided anything important.

Last Wednesday Charleen and I had breakfast with a couple in Wisconsin and in the course of the breakfast table conversation he asked my advice about something. His response to my suggestion was, "Before I could make a decision like that I would have to pray about it for two or three days first." I liked that — it is a communion with God that shows dependence on the Lord rather than independence from the Lord.

It was several years ago that the members of Wooddale Church voted that I become senior pastor of this church. It was a major decision both for Wooddale and for me and my family. One of the most comforting and exciting parts of the call was the information that long before they ever heard my name, over 400 Wooddalers had committed in writing to daily prayer that the right decision would be made. We who are Christians, who pattern our lives after Jesus Christ, would do well to so prepare for all the important decisions of our lives.

There is one more part to Jesus' biography that helps us see his pattern for prayer. Matthew 26:36-44 is a part of the New Testament that I always read with difficulty for it was a time of great pain and great sorrow in Jesus' life. It was the night before

he was crucified and no matter how many times I read it I always feel like I am snooping in a place too holy for me to look. Let me read it for you.

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."

Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing but the body is weak."

He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."

When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

That night Jesus experienced deep sorrow because of the horrors in his life. He grieved over the losses he faced. He felt the pain of other peoples' sins. He felt the helplessness of the inevitable.

I think it sad that too often when we read this we get hung up on the sleepiness and the behavior of his followers. That's really not what this is all about. It is a glimpse into the sorrow and submission of Jesus Christ. Jesus did what we all do — he tried to think of alternatives. He prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me." When we're up against it, when we feel crushed in by things that may or may not be our fault, we plead with God, asking for other alternatives.

Jesus was lying face down on the ground praying with such intensity that he had to take a prayer break and he went to check on his friends. Then he went back and he prayed the same prayer again, "Father, there's got to be some other way. Wouldn't it be possible for me not to drink this terrible cup that you have put on the table before me?" He

struggled it through and then prayed the same thing. "God, there's got to be some way out of this. I mean, in all of your infinite wisdom there's got to be another approach. But not my will, but your's be done."

It was hard. It was the same prayer as many of us who are served with unwanted divorce papers, or given a surprise terminal diagnosis or unjustly lose our job. We pray, "God, there's got to be another way." But finally we submit and say, "God, if that's the cup you've laid before me, if that's what you want, I'll drink it. Not my will, but your will." You see, the issues of sorrow and submission are real and they are the depth of communion with God.

You have patiently listened to prayer defined as communion with God that is patterned after Jesus. As you have listened, a thousand different thoughts about prayer and life have ricocheted through your mind. My question for you is, "Would you like to pray like Jesus?"

When the followers of Jesus saw and heard him pray, they said, "This is special, this is different — that's the way we want to pray!" Luke 11:1 says: "One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray.'"

I would like you to consider a challenge to pray that prayer, whatever it may mean, "Lord, teach me how to pray."

Let's assume a posture of prayer with eyes closed, heads bowed. Don't say it because I suggest it but only if you really want to ask Jesus, "Lord, teach me to pray."

O Lord Jesus, for those of us who have prayed that prayer, please answer. Teach us to pray as you prayed, open heaven to make it a priority, in privacy as well as in public, for the big and small decisions of life — even to the depth of sorrow and submission.

Teach us to pray. Amen.

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