

Prayer
Series: Catalysts for Spiritual Growth
Phil. 1:3-11, and others
January 18, 2009

If you are planning to attend the Inauguration on Tuesday, you'd better have a map of DC. As you probably know, access by car to the District is quite restricted. They are expecting 2 to 3 million people to attend, depending on who's making the prediction. There will be 5,000 portable toilets on the Mall and along the parade route. (In case you're wondering, that is 1 porta-potty for every 600 people.) And there will be 10 video walls on the Mall for watching the ceremony. Because you won't be able to get that close, unless you have a ticket, and even then, you won't be too close. They're expecting gridlock in Washington, DC on Tuesday. You won't be able to drive to the ceremony or get very close to the new president.

And yet, consider this amazing thought: We have totally free 24/7/365 access to Almighty God through Jesus Christ. No restrictions, no bag searches by the Secret Service, no checking your water bottle at the gate. This access is called 'prayer.'

We are in the midst of a series on Catalysts for Spiritual Growth. We've talked about this spiritual continuum identified by some recent research with churches of many sizes, styles, and denominations. We said last week that the study found that reflection on Scripture is by far the most influential spiritual practice for growth along this spectrum from Exploring to Growing to Close to Christ to being Christ-Centered. The Bible is the most powerful catalyst for developing an active, personal and intimate relationship with Jesus. And the study also found that prayer is one of the top five spiritual practices that cause people to grow closer to God. Can we assume that we all know what prayer is? I read an article in the paper yesterday that said that a woman who identified herself as an atheist offered a prayer at the interfaith service for our new governor this week. I'm pretty sure her understanding of prayer is different from mine.

So, WHAT IS PRAYER? Glenn McDonald: "Prayer is intelligent conversation about matters of mutual concern." But not conversation with just anybody, of course. Prayer is conversation with God. At its most basic, prayer is talking to God. But a conversation is a two-way deal. 'Matters of *mutual* concern.' So prayer includes listening as God talks to you. When you study the Hebrew words for prayer in the Bible, you find that biblical prayer is spontaneous, personal, motivated by need, unconditioned by time or place. It is marked by a childlike simplicity, sincerity and confidence. You know, it's very interesting. Despite all the detailed instructions there are for sacrifice in Israel's worship, there is no fixed liturgy of prayer found in the Bible. It was to be spontaneous. There are many examples of prayers in the Bible, especially in the Psalms. The Book of Psalms is often called the prayerbook of Israel. But even the Psalms do not give us a formula for prayer. Prayer is not convincing God to do something for you. And it's not informing God about something that requires His attention. It's not even so much asking God for things. "Prayer is offering yourself to God." (*Praying Church Sourcebook*, p. 25) That's what we really see in the Psalms: the writer offering themselves – just as they are, right *where* they are – to God. When we come to God in prayer, we are opening ourselves up to God. The Psalms are full of examples of people crying out to God in desperation and pain and fear. In prayer, we lay ourselves before God, and hold nothing back from Him, being open to receiving

whatever He wants to speak to us. Prayer is a primary way that we show we believe in God and depend on God. Just as talking to someone is a primary way we relate to them, prayer is a primary way that we relate to God and develop our relationship with Him.

WHY PRAY?

Prayer is not an option for us. Prayer is expected and commanded by God. Jesus said “*When you pray,*” do this or that, not “*if you pray.*” Acts 2:42: *They devoted themselves* to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and *to prayer.* Col. 4:2: *Devote yourselves to prayer,* being watchful and thankful. 1 Thess. 5:17: *Pray continually.*

Jesus' prayer life was pervasive. He frequently got up early in the morning and went off by Himself to speak with His Father. He prayed before He encountered Satan in the wilderness. He prayed before He selected the twelve apostles. He prayed before He went to the cross - both for Himself and for His followers. He prayed after He sent out the disciples to minister and after the miraculous feeding of the 5,000. If Jesus prayed, how much more do *we* need to pray?! The Bible says that God’s desire is that we become more and more like Jesus. To be like Jesus, we must pray.

But prayer is not only a divine command, it is also a royal invitation. When we pray, we have access – direct access – to the God of the universe. When we pray, we enter the throne room of the King of heaven – not as a servant or slave, but as a beloved child. And we can run right up to the throne and climb up into the lap of the King, our Father, and feel His arms around us and *know* that He desires to hear all that is on our hearts and minds. He desires to hear and to respond. *That’s* access. We don’t have to sneak in the back door. We don’t have to be properly attired or know a special password. We are invited to come, just as we are. *That’s* access. But to take advantage of this access we have to God - if we’re going to be devoted to prayer as Scripture commands, to experience the power that is available to us through prayer – we’re going to have to make prayer a priority.

Here’s how Martin Luther once described his struggle with the priority of prayer in his life: “In a typical day I am charged with the pastorate of three congregations. “I teach regularly at the seminary. I have students living in my house. I am writing three books. Countless people write to me. When I start each day, therefore, I make it a point to spend an hour in prayer with God. But if I have a particularly busy day and am more rushed than usual, I make it a point to spend two hours with God before I start the day.”

Well, that’s Martin Luther, you may say. He was a great saint of the church. He was a pastor. I’m just an ordinary person. I could never spend an hour praying. The problem here, as it is with reflecting on Scripture, is not that we don’t have the time. It’s convincing ourselves it’s important enough to set aside the time. Consider this: John Wesley said, “God does nothing but in answer to prayer.” And in James 5:16 we read: “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.” NAS: “Can accomplish much.” RSV: “Has great power in its effects.”
1 John 5:14-15.

Jesus said: Matt. 21:22: “If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.” Did Jesus mean what He said? Was Wesley right? Did James the brother of Jesus and John the beloved disciple know what they were talking about? Then why don’t we pray more? And why don’t we pray bigger, more faith-filled prayers?

Here are some reasons, some barriers to prayer: Prayer doesn’t seem sufficiently productive to us. Its effects are not always measurable, and certainly not measurable right away. Then there’s the problem of time. Distractions. Hectic schedules. Sometimes people say they don’t feel worthy, they’re not good enough to expect God to hear them. Of course, there’s the problem of time. Maybe you don’t believe God really hears or will answer. Your mind wanders. We don’t have time. We don’t make the time. We don’t hear anything. We have no sense of God’s nearness. Did I mention time?

In fact, after last week’s message about reflecting on Scripture, one person said to me, “I know I should read and reflect on Scripture more. I know I should pray more. But I don’t.” Maybe you have said that very same thing. Well, let me ask you this: What do you think is going to change that? If ‘where you are’ is not ‘where you want to be’ with regard to prayer, you need to decide ‘what’s next for you. If you think extra time is going to just drop out of the sky so you can spend more time in prayer, think again. If you think wishing you had more time to pray, or wishing you *felt more* like praying, or wishing you understood prayer more, is going to help, think again. One of my favorite preachers says we need less wishbone and more backbone. Wishing and hoping isn’t going to get you anywhere. Wishing won’t produce spiritual growth in your life, won’t develop your relationship with God. You’re going to have to decide that it’s a priority. You’re going to have to *do something*, not just *wish* something. Think about someone you know who has a vital, intimate, personal relationship with God, who spends time reflecting on the Word and praying. Got that person in mind? Listen: That person made a decision, probably a whole series of decisions, to order their life in such a way that the Word and prayer are priorities for them. It’s not that they’re more holy than you or closer to God than you are and that’s why the Bible and prayer are priorities for them. It’s the other way around: The Bible and prayer are priorities for them, and *therefore* they are more holy, they are closer to God, they are growing in their relationship with God.

HOW SHOULD I PRAY?

Maybe you feel like you don’t really know *how* to pray. I mean, it seems so simple, doesn’t it? Talking to God. And yet I suspect that most of us would say we have much to learn about how to pray. Well, here’s some good news: Prayer can be learned. We don’t necessarily intentionally teach our children to talk, but we do teach them how to speak *well*, how to speak *correctly*, how to speak *effectively*. So don’t be embarrassed if you feel like you need to learn how to pray. There are lots of books in our library, many classics on prayer as well as newer works. A new study on prayer is just beginning on Wednesday evenings. It’s not too late to join that group. One great way to learn how to pray is by praying with others. Prayer Groups, LIFE Groups. Another way to learn how to pray is by praying Scripture. And the neat thing about that is it connects with that most influential spiritual catalyst, reflecting on the Word. Read....reflect...pray. Example: Psalm 46:10.

Study the prayers of Scripture. Psalms. Paul always prayed BIG prayers. He usually begins his letters by telling his people that he prays for them all the time. Phil. 1:9-11. Look what Paul prays for the Christ-followers in Philippi: That their love may overflow, not just as a *feeling* of love, but as love that comes from the knowledge of God and His love. A love that operates out of deep insight into the will of God. *For a reason:* that they might know what is best and may live pure and blameless lives, that their lives might bear fruit so that God is glorified and praised.

Of course, the best way to learn how to pray is by praying. There are no special words or tone one must use to pray. Just talk to your heavenly Father. Tell Him what is on your heart and filling your mind. Pray as you *really are* – not as you think you ought to be or as God expects you to be. Share with Him your hopes and fears. You don't have to pretend with God. There are no bad prayers. And you can't really hide anything from God, anyway, you know. He already knows. You're not giving God information when you pray. But you are demonstrating your faith and trust in God. And you are deepening your relationship with Him.

A couple of models for prayer that might be helpful:

ACTS: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication (to ask humbly and earnestly).

PRAY: Praise, Repent, Ask, Yield

Our prayers, whatever form they take, matter to God. The prayer of a priest or minister does not matter more to God than anybody else's prayer. When I pray for someone it is not somehow more effective or more likely to be answered than when anybody else prays. We all have equal access through Christ. And let me just settle this once and for all: *There are no little prayers.* You know how people often say, "Let's have a little prayer"? Think about that for a minute: When we pray, we connect with the God who designed and created and maintains the universe. We connect with the One who is all-powerful and all-knowing and all-loving. There's nothing *little* about that!

And maybe the best reason to prayer is this: Prayer is answered. Prayer is always answered. I think one reason many folks *don't* pray is that they *have* prayed and have not received answers to their prayers, as far as they can tell. But the Bible assures us, *Jesus* Himself assures us, that prayer *is* answered. Matt. 7:7-8: "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..." Now, I know, this seems too good to be true. But Jesus said it, so it must be true. But I know – you have asked and have not received, as far as you can tell. So have I. But one writer points out that, "Prayer involves communication in the spiritual realm. Many prayers are answered in ways that cannot be seen in the material realm. Many prayers are answered in ways different from what we asked." And sometimes, the answer we get is, "No." But know and believe and rely on this truth: *Everyone who asks, receives.* Jesus said that, not me. Was Jesus telling the truth? I think so!

One of my very favorite biblical prayers is Paul's prayer for the Ephesian church in Eph. 3:16-19. It's a great prayer to pray for your spouse, your child, a friend. It is my prayer for you – each of you and all of us. Where are you now in your prayer life? Where do you want to be? What's next for you?