

Towards A Deeper Understanding Of Prayer

A sermon series by Rev. David Johnson, Prt 5

For those of you who know me, it would not be a real shock for you to find that I, by no means, am what some would call an art enthusiast. I mean, I appreciate the work and diligence of photographers and artists. But you probably wouldn't find me in an art gallery somewhere staring at a painting for hours critiquing the artists' color schemes and motivational themes. I am, what most would call, quite utilitarian when it comes to art and design.

In fact, it's a rather humorous thing to observe my wife and I watching home-decorating or house-flipping shows. I mean, HGTV and Pinterest are not high on my list of channels or apps to use. While Vicki is gathering decorating ideas, I am watching the interaction of the characters, identifying which couples will most likely be in counseling or bankruptcy after the project is done.

I did, however, come across a brief write-up on a piece of art that intrigued me, not for its artistic qualities, but for its spiritual poignancy. The portrait being discussed was Millet's, *The Angelus*.



"The evening bell rings, and a man and woman, as they hear it, cease work, and together bend their heads in prayer. That is all, but the whole picture breathes with an atmosphere so rare...that prayer seems the natural action of the onlooker as well.

But the picture not only produces the emotional condition in which prayer is natural, it pierces into the heart of all worthy praying. These two humble folk pray with simple, confiding faith. They pray as children. They drop their work and turn to God with a perfect ease and naturalness, without the slightest incongruity or irreverence. Things hidden to the wise and prudent are revealed to their childlike minds. God is near. God is their Helper. There is nothing in their work which makes them ashamed to pray; there is nothing in their prayers which makes them ashamed to work. How many of us can pray thus?"

How indeed? But we shouldn't stop at the question of, "How can we pray as this man and woman?" For there is yet another puzzling question that must be asked in tandem, "Why should we pray like this man and woman?" Or to put a finer point on the question, "Why should we pray at all?"

In order to deal with the issue of "Can I pray like them," I must ask myself, "Why do they pray? Why are they so committed to prayer? And why should I be equally committed to prayer?" Those are the questions we will look at together today.

E. Why should the believer pray

1. To maintain and deepen our relationship with God

As you recall, when we discussed "*What was Prayer,*" some of the definitions for prayer were:

"To pray is to let Jesus into our hearts. ... It is Jesus who moves us to pray. He knocks. Thereby he makes known His desire to come in to us." (O'Hallesby)

"The whole man must be given to God in praying. The largest results in praying come to him who gives himself, all of himself, all that belongs to himself, to God." (Bounds)

"Prayer is converse with God; the intercourse of the soul with God, not in contemplation or meditation, but in direct address to him." (Easton)

We understand, therefore, that the ultimate purpose for prayer is relationship. Oh, we hear the voice and heart of God through His Word. But in prayer, mankind interacts and communes directly with God. In fact, it was this yearning for divine intimacy with God which was one of Jesus' last instructions to His disciples as He went to the cross. More than anything, Jesus wanted His followers to "Abide" intimately with His heavenly Father (*John 15:4-11*)

This is why we pray; in the same way that a husband and wife converse to maintain an intimate relationship. When communication ceases in a marriage, distance develops and intimacy is broken. It's only a matter of time before the marriage itself begins to dissolve. The goal of prayer therefore, as with communication in marriage, is to pursue intimacy with God. In fact, part of the pain of Israel's exile into Babylon, was a separation in relationship, which would be healed one day at the restoration.

Jer. 29:11-13 ...I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. ¹² Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.

When Jesus spoke of *Abiding*, He was implying three aspects of an intimate relationship; to *stay*, to *abide* (*dwell*), and to *remain*. In the John 15 passage alone, Jesus uses *Abide* 10 times. Likewise, the apostle John uses this term 36 times throughout his gospel and epistles.

Jesus' inference is that two entities, share deeply their very natures, just as a vine energizes the branch, and the fruitful branch remains, or is intimately connected to the vine. And to the extent that we experience this genuine intimacy in prayer, so also we will experience added fruitfulness in the fulfillment of our prayers.

John 15:7 "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

But as important as the development of intimacy is, there are other reasons we should pray.

2. God commands us to pray

Matthew 6:7-8 "And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸ So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

One of the arguments against a regular prayer time comes from vs.8. People will ask, "*Why pray if God already knows what you need (or want) before you ask? I mean, what's the point of praying?*" And in asking that question, our first point is completely overlooked; prayer

is about relationship. Prayer isn't only about asking for things, it's about being grateful for what we're given.

But it is also about obedience, for we are repeatedly commanded to pray. Even in our Matt. 6 passage, vs. 7 implies that prayer should continue. Jesus assumes His people will keep praying. But other passages carry this assumption forward, to the level of divine commandment:

Psalm 105:4 Seek the LORD and His strength; Seek His face continually.

Isaiah 55:6 Seek the LORD while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near.

Luke 11:9-10 "So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it will be opened.

Luke 18:1 Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart,

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

However, along with these two reasons, the Bible emphasizes other purposes for being a people of prayer.

3. Pray for forgiveness, cleansing, and restoration

2 Samuel 24:25 David built there an altar to the LORD and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. Thus the LORD was moved by prayer for the land, and the plague was held back from Israel.

2 Chron. 7:14 and My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

4. Pray to bring physical, emotional, and spiritual, healing to the sick and oppressed.

James 5:13-18 Is anyone among you suffering? *Then* he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises. ¹⁴Is anyone among you sick? *Then* he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; ¹⁵and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. ¹⁶Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.

Mark 9:28-29 When He came into *the* house, His disciples began questioning Him privately, "Why could we not drive it out?" ²⁹And He said to them, "This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer."

5. Pray that the spiritually blind would see and that believers would have understanding.

Ephes. 1:18 *I pray that* the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints,

Col. 1:9 For this reason also, since the day we heard *of it*, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,

6. Pray to help further the Gospel of Christ

Col. 4:2-3 Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with *an attitude of* thanksgiving; praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word, so that

we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned;

Ephes. 6:19...and *pray* on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel,

2 Thes. 3:1 Finally, brethren, pray for us that the word of the Lord will spread rapidly and be glorified, just as *it did* also with you;

7. We pray to keep each other on track.

Ephes. 6:18 With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints...

Colossians 1:3-4 We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, ⁴ since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints;

8. We pray to get rid of the burdens of life

Philip. 4:6-7 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.