

Towards A Deeper Understanding Of Prayer

A sermon series by Rev. David Johnson, Prt 6

Many weeks ago, before the pandemic messed us all up, we began this series on the topic of Prayer. During that time we've discussed each of the 5 W's of prayer:

What is prayer?

Who should/can pray?

When should someone pray?

Where should a person pray?

Why should we pray?

Which leaves us with the final question, "How should we pray?" This is something that Jesus' own disciples struggled with thousands of years ago.

Luke 11:1 ...while Jesus was praying in a certain place, after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples."

Jesus then proceeded to instruct the disciples on How to pray, by using the pattern of the Lord's Prayer (*Matthew 6:9-13*). And we could do the same, but I think it's important that we go deeper, to some of the important Biblical principles we see in the broader picture of Scripture.

F. How Should a Child of God Pray?

1. Directly to God. Jesus is our only Mediator!

In the Old Testament, people understood that to get to God, you had to go through the prophets or the priests. You brought your sacrifice, offering, or questions to them, and they went to God on your behalf. Much later in church history, people were told that they had to appeal to the religious authority, or pray to God via his saints or the Virgin Mary. It was thought that the average person was just too soiled and unworthy to go to God directly. But Martin Luther and the other reformers took those misdirected believers back to Scripture for the truth.

The fact is that Jesus died precisely that we might have direct access to God. Jesus died in our place, taking our sinful shame upon Himself that we might go directly to God in His righteousness. Because of Jesus' blood shed on Calvary, every believer has the privilege to come directly into the loving arms of our Heavenly Father. Jesus Christ is the only mediator, the only go-between we need.

Matthew 27:50-51 And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. 51 And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom;

1 Tim. 2:5 For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus... (also Heb. 9:13-15)

2. We are to pray humbly, privately, not for show.

Matthew 6:1, 5-6 "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven..."⁵ "When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. ⁶ But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

We sometimes misunderstand passages like this. Jesus' problem here is not the location of the prayer, but in

the prideful, showy, prayers offered by the religious leaders of His day (*and our day as well*). He was not teaching against public prayer per se, verbalizing a prayer in the open. Jesus was directing his attention to the custom of some who used prayer as a way to flaunt their "superior spirituality" in front of others. Jesus' answer to their haughty display is that their reward will be the attention of others, rather than an answer from God.

Jesus even includes a very practical "how-to" example. He explains that you must first search your heart, making sure that your motives are pure and humble, not proud and showy. And one way to check your intentions is to find a nice quiet, private spot to meet with God. This will reduce distractions, while diminishing the need to impress others with your prayers.

3. Prayer is not about volume (number nor loudness) nor repetition. God is always listening and attentive.

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.

For years, I saw these two passages as simply reiterating what verses 5-6 had already discussed. I thought the emphasis was on the showiness of public prayer. Actually though, the concept of "not using meaningless repetition" could also be translated "Babble not." This would apply to both the words used, and your style of speech; repeating the same message, hoping to gain God's attention or approval by your many flowery words.

We see this very example in 1 Kings 18 as Elijah went against hundreds of Baal prophets.

1 Kings 18:26-29 Then they...called on the name of Baal from morning until noon saying, "O Baal, answer us."...²⁸ So they cried with a loud voice and cut themselves according to their custom with swords and lances until the blood gushed out on them. ²⁹ When midday was past, they raved until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice; but there was no voice, no one answered, and no one paid attention.

These false prophets, in their desperation, cried out to Baal over and over again, getting increasingly louder over time, hoping to appease or arouse their god. We still see this practice today in the case of Hindu and Mohammedan devotees, as well as in Catholic practices of ritual repetitions of the Lord's Prayer or praying through the rosary.

4. Rest in Prayer. God is at Work.

There are times when the pressure is so great, or the burden so deep that we feel helpless to speak the need to God. Our hearts feel as though they will break, and our souls are overwhelmed by the onslaught of the enemy. Yet, there is comfort for the child of God. Our heavenly Father remains faithful and hears even the softest whisper or the most desperate whimper. The Holy Spirit indwells each believer and translates our deepest groanings into prayers brought before the Father.

Romans 8:26-27 In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the

Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

5. Pray According to God's Will

Jesus Himself exemplified this principle as He knelt before the Father in the garden of Gethsemane.

Luke 22:42 "Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done."

In one of the most desperate times of His ministry, as Jesus looked ahead to the horror and humiliation of Calvary, His prayer was that the Father's will would be exalted. Jesus could have called 10,000 angels, as the old hymn declares, but He didn't. Jesus rested in the fact that God heard His cries. And though His journey would be extremely difficult, in the end, the Father remained with Him and worked all things according to His will; our redemption and Jesus' glorification.

1 John 5:14 This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.

Romans 8:27-28 and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. 28 And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

6. Pray in Confidence. Don't Doubt!

There is a fine line between points 5 and 6. On one hand we need to remember God is sovereign, and keep our hearts open to the fact that God knows what we don't. You may be praying for a new job. And there may be many good reasons why this would be to your advantage...so you pray for God to move.

But God may have you there for a purpose. He may need to: humble your prideful spirit, teach you patience or cooperation, strengthen some latent skills, reach the lost for Christ (*the very people you dread*), or He may be preparing you for a new and better place in that company. On the other hand, God may be using that distasteful situation to cause you to pray, build your relationship with Him, or prepare you for a new job elsewhere.

But with those things being said, there may also be times when we need to step out boldly, after seeking God, and pray in firm conviction. This is especially true of those things that are clearly delineated in God's Word.

- * Praying for God's Word to move the lost to be saved
- * Praying for personal wisdom and direction
- * Praying for the poor, the marginalized, the hurting
- * Seeking comfort for the sick and those who mourn

James 1:6-8 But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

When it comes to clear promises of Scripture, we must stand in confidence and not deviate in our prayers.

7. Persist in Prayer

Along with confidence, we must persist in prayer. We must remember that prayer is both relational (*building an*

intimate relationship with God), and combative (*battling the powers of darkness*). In battle, some confrontations take hours, days, or weeks to resolve. We must not think that just because Satan is a defeated foe, he will run with his tail between his legs at the slightest glance from us. Even against a strong disciple, there will be times when Satan tries to stand his ground in opposition. Even moreso for a nominal believer or someone living out of God's will. We must stand our ground in the victorious name of Jesus.

Daniel 10:12-13 Then he said to me, "Do not be afraid, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart on understanding this and on humbling yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to your words. 13" But the prince of the kingdom of Persia was withstanding me for twenty-one days; then behold, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I had been left there with the kings of Persia.

Ephes. 6:13 Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.

James 4:7 Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

8. Pray In "Jesus Name", under His covering

This is not a magical incantation or formula for your prayers. It isn't "in Jesus' Name" that carries the power. It's living in right relationship with Jesus that matters.

Luke 10:17 The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name."

Matthew 7:22 "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?'

We're like the King's servant who goes throughout the countryside enforcing an edict. There is nothing particularly special about the servant himself. Yet, people listen to him and obey his commands. Why? Because the servant carries the King's name, His authority. Likewise, we are God's servants, His emissaries, in this world. When we pray, "In Jesus' Name", we declare that relationship with Christ and our surrender to Him.

John 16:23-24 "...Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask the Father for anything in My name, He will give it to you. 24" Until now you have asked for nothing in My name; ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be made full.

It is with these principles in mind that we are able to do as Hebrews 4 suggests when we go to God in both humility and boldness:

Hebrews 4:14-16 Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.