

Prayer has always been fascinating. Our experiences are different but one thing we can all agree on is the metaphysical mysticism of prayer effects change in various situations. So it is safe to suggest if you are reading this it has fascinated you as well. One of the reasons we are so fascinated by prayer is because we know in our hearts that prayer is what connects us to God. Also, we are reading this because we find prayer to be something difficult to fit into our routines and we just haven't quite figured out how to get the most out of your prayer time. Don't lose heart. We've all been there. Let me share something with you that I ran across a few years ago that helped me think about the "problem" of prayer in a new way. It comes from a sermon preached by Gregory of Nyssa, a Bishop almost 1600 years ago, who raised the issue of prayer with his congregation. He says,

"Now I make bold to add a little to what Scripture says; for the present congregation needs instruction not so much on how to pray, as on the necessity of praying at all, a necessity that has perhaps not yet been grasped by most people. In fact, the majority of [people] grievously neglect in their life this sacred and divine work which is prayer.... For I see that in this present life [people] give their attention to everything else, one concentrating on this matter, another on that; but no one devotes his zeal to the good work of prayer."

After reading this I was relieved. I wasn't the only one who found it difficult to find time to pray. I hope you find it a relief as well. But that does not take away from the "problem" of finding space in our lives for the practice of prayer.

It sounds so simple. Just make time in your day to find a quiet place to pray, but we all know it is more difficult than just that. Prayer is a practice that draws us and frightens us at the same time. We often do not know what to say to God. Prayer books help, but we, frequently, want to say much more to God. We want to fulfill the words of Abba Poemen, one of the desert fathers, who said, "Teach your mouth to say what is in your heart." How do we capture in words those things that burn within us that we cannot always explain to ourselves? The apostle Paul can help here. He wrote in Romans 8:26-27, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God" (NRSV). In other words, don't worry about the words. If your prayer does not exactly capture everything you want to say, be assured that the Spirit always intercedes for us to make sure that even our "sighs too deep for words" are made known to God.

The exact words are not important. Whether you use a prayer book, recite a prayer you have remembered, or speak directly from your heart, God searches and knows what resides in you. It is not the words, but the practice, that matters when it comes to prayer. As Gregory reminds us, the busyness of life often distracts us from meaningful prayer life. Let me let you in on a secret I've learned; if you cannot find time in your busy schedule to pray, then you will never be the human being God sees in you.

### **Teach Your Mouth...**

#### **Creating a deeper relationship with God**

Prayer shapes us to be the human beings God sees in us. As we stated earlier, it is not the exact words that matter, but the ongoing practice of communication that prayer represents. That's right. Prayer is above all a practice of communicating with God. It is sharing ourselves with our Creator and receiving into our lives what our Creator desires most for us. You can call it a process of give and take, but I prefer the grander idea that prayer is a practice of communication. I say this because I see prayer as more than simply saying, "God I want this" or "Deliver me from that." When we enter into prayer we are seeking a deeper relationship with the God who made us.

When we communicate with someone, if we are serious about the idea of communication, we are really entering into a relationship with that person. The same is true of God. When we pray, we are inviting God to be in a deeper relationship with us. Likewise, we are seeking a deeper relationship with God. In other words, prayer is not simply a monologue, a one-way conversation. Simply telling God what I want is not really prayer. Prayer involves listening to the voice of God as it responds to our petitions and concerns. Real prayer is a dialogue, a two-way conversation, between us and God.

We pray because we desire to see and participate in the vision our Creator has for us and the world. Of course, we all have our own immediate requests and concerns. These we communicate to God in our prayers. But this is not the end of it. In prayer we also listen attentively to God's voice as it tells us God's vision for the world we inhabit.

God invites us to pray because it is the most direct way God has of communicating with us. Of course, God speaks to us through the Bible, but God desires a more intimate connection with us; God speaks to us through worship, and preaching, but most importantly God speaks to us through the practice of prayer. Often, we

struggle to hear God's voice amidst other voices that demand our consideration. If you want to hear God most directly, then you only do it through prayer.

### **You Can Develop a Practice of Prayer**

As a form of communication, prayer is a practice. Some would call it a ritual, but I think that makes it sound quite formal. Whether you call it a practice or a ritual, prayer forms us as human beings. We can say that prayer is a formative practice.

#### **What is a formative practice?**

We practice to prepare for important events. In that sense, it is a kind of rehearsal. Whether it is for an upcoming football game or the big recital, a practice prepares us for an event. Thinking about it another way, a practice forms us into the wide receiver, pianist, or actor we need to be when the event comes. There would have never been an "Air Jordan" without practice. Michael Jordan was an amazing basketball player, but he still had to practice his jump shots.

Practice is an action we do that forms us into the kind of person we desire to be.

Practices are important. They are more than just something we do. They shape and form us into certain types of people. There is an ancient principle that you must learn if you are going to be the man or woman God desires: to shape your character you must shape your behavior to conform to the vision God has for you. It has never been a one-time deal. It must be repeated. It is not just thinking a certain way. It must be embodied. This is what the writer of James meant when he said, "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (2:17). He goes on to say that what makes our faith meaningful is that it is brought to its proper end when it expresses itself in what we actually do-our practices.

When we practice prayer, we shape ourselves into the kind of human beings we want to be and that God sees in us. This may sound like a do it yourself venture. That would be incorrect. Of course, there is a dimension of any spiritual practice that requires that you do something. But the majority of any spiritual practice- the part that really makes a difference- is opening yourself up to the experience of interacting with God. We come to understand the depth of our own ability to love, for example, by opening ourselves up to experiencing the love of God.

In Romans 12:6-8 Paul talks about spiritual gifts. He says, "We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us" (12:6). Often some have wondered what Paul meant when he talked about spiritual gifts, and how we received and developed the spiritual gifts, and how we received and developed the spiritual gifts within us. This list in Romans is especially interesting because it speaks of the gift

of generosity (12:8). When we experience love, generosity, grace, and other spiritual gifts through our spiritual practices, it empowers us to be loving, gracious, generous, patient, peaceful, and so forth in our own lives. To put it another way, our spiritual practices form us to think and to act in the image of God.

### **Discover and Develop Your Own Prayer Practice**

Prayer is not entirely a do-it-yourself type of enterprise. Still, this does not mean that we must not prepare ourselves for our experiences with God. If you want your practice of prayer to be effective, it must be carried out intentionally and in opposition to the obstacles that will most certainly arise to stop you. There is so much around us to distract us from prayer. The worst of these is the distraction of having little or nothing to say to God. Far too often I have paralyzed from praying because I could not figure out the exact words I needed to say. What is worse is that some avoid the Lord's Prayer because praying this prayer that Jesus taught His disciples was another way of avoiding coming up with an extemporaneous prayer of our own.

In order to begin the journey of spiritual development you must commit yourself. God desires to have a closer relationship with you, but this can only happen as long as you remember that you are working on the practice of prayer. Whenever we dedicate ourselves to those spiritual practices that bring us closer to God, God's faithfulness meets us along the way.

For the next few weeks we will examine the Lord's Prayer as it relates to where God wants us to be regarding our relationship with him. We will discover and develop our own spiritual practices of prayer. Our focus will be the Lord's prayer, but I believe this examination will assist us in developing our own personal practices of prayer regardless of its focus and, hopefully, you will gain a new appreciation for the Lord's Prayer in the process.