

Series: Basic Prayer
Title: A Theology of Prayer
Text: Colossians 4:2

Prayer should be a priority for every believer. Scripture says, “Devote yourselves to prayer; stay alert in it with thanksgiving” (Colossians 4:2). Concerning the high value of prayer, J.C. Ryle said, “Prayer is that point of all others in religion at which you must be on your guard. Here it is that true religion begins: here it flourishes, and here it decays. Tell me what a man's prayers are, and I will soon tell you the state of his soul. Prayer is the spiritual pulse: by this the spiritual health may always be tested.”¹ Most would agree that prayer is indeed important, but few actually ever become strong in this area. Prayer is often an aspired value without being an actualized one. Why is this?

I believe a part of the problem is that most people see prayer as little more than a cold spiritual discipline. They regard it as something they have to do, not something they get to do. It is many times seen as a drudgery, something akin to a strict diet or harsh exercise routine.

A number of well-intentioned believers have read challenges similar to the one you are reading now. Afterwards, they have immediately made new resolutions. For a season, they strictly followed a regimen of prayer, but they eventually fizzled out. Overcome with guilt and shame they silently concluded that new attempts at praying are useless.

Why do so many stay stuck in a cycle of prayer-less living? Again, I believe our lethargy is rooted in an insufficient view of prayer. Too many see it as nothing more than a spiritual discipline, a commitment, or a task to be accomplished. To become people of powerful prayer, we must learn to see the activity in light of who God is. We must cultivate a frame of mind in which we see it as communion with our Triune Lord. A conviction must grow in our hearts that we are made for fellowship with the Lord.

Many are too earthly, too man-centered, in their approach to prayer. It is no wonder they fail. One should not marvel that such people rarely pray. In what follows, I will aim to help us develop a theology of prayer that will drive us to our knees. To do so, I will examine our subject in light of who God is, who Jesus is, who the Holy Spirit is, and who we are. When we understand prayer in light of these persons, we will be more drawn to pray.

PRAYER AND GOD

A study of our subject starts with God. Without Him, there would be no prayer. A survey of Scripture reveals that true supplication and intercession is always directed toward Him. Prayer is more than a recitation of beliefs, a focusing on one's wishes and desires, or a meditation on a paradigm of priorities or principles. First and foremost, prayer is communion with God.

Calling Out to God

The origin of prayer in human history is recorded in the book of Genesis. In Genesis 4:26, we read, “At that time people began to call on the name of the Lord.” Notice that God was the object of the first prayers. Prior to the first sin, Adam and Eve communicated with the Lord in an intimate fashion. They enjoyed leisurely walks and conversations in the garden of God (Genesis 3:8). Sin messed that up. As a result of their transgression, Adam and Even were expelled from the presence of God (Genesis 3:24). They were no longer able to talk with God in a face-to-face fashion.

Since they were physically removed from the Lord's presence, humankind had to engage in spiritual communication. It is for this reason that people “began to call on the name of the

¹ Ryle, J.C. *Practical Religion*. (East Peoria, IL: Versa Press, Inc., 2015), 88.

Lord” in Genesis 4:26. The Hebrew word rendered “call” was a strong one. It was sometimes used of the wild yells of animals. The word was an onomatopoeia. Similar to modern words like “buzz” and “bang,” it created a sound that conveyed its meaning. The sound highlighted the strong emotion associated with the type of call depicted by the verb.² God’s people are invited to lift up their voices and call out to their Creator for help and assistance in life.

The word used for “call” in the Greek version of the Old Testament also appears in Romans 10:13 of the New Testament. In that passage, Paul used it to say, “For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Romans 10:13). As used by Paul, the word meant “to invoke, pray to, worship.”³ In both the Old and New Testaments, men and women are invited to cry out to God. If we want to become strong in prayer, we must grasp that our Creator summons us to call out to Him.

“Our Father in Heaven”

When He gave His famous “Lord’s Prayer,” Jesus highlighted the way in which prayer is an exercise of calling out to God. He did so in the opening words of the prayer, saying, “Therefore, you should pray like this: *Our Father* in heaven...” (Matthew 6:9). For many first-century Jews, the idea of calling God “Father” would have seemed ludicrous. Most would have regarded the Lord as being too high and lofty for such a term of address. Jesus used the moniker for a reason. He wanted to convey that prayer is a relational activity. It can be likened to a conversation enjoyed in the context of a healthy relationship between a father and a child.

Other passages of Scripture confirm these realities. In 1 John 4:8, we are told that “God is love.” Our Heavenly Father desires communion with us. We never need to doubt His heart. Earthly fathers may have let us down at times, but God’s affection toward us is constant. Though we are finite and imperfect, our infinite and perfect Lord wants to hear our prayers.

As an earthly father, my relationship to my children provides me with a picture of how the Lord looks at us. My kids are still at the age in which they love to talk to me. Each day, they address me and ask me questions numerous times. Sometimes their appeals interrupt me from a task. It isn’t uncommon for a child to call out from his or her room multiple times a day. I regularly hear calls of “Dad!” Because of my love for my children, I am usually quick to respond to their cries. I don’t want them to ever be insecure about their relationship to me. I like to think that they have a child-like confidence that their father is willing to listen to them.

You can have a similar perspective toward the Lord. Scripture calls Him “the one who hears prayer” (Psalm 65:2). Because of His loving nature, His ear is always open to our cries. You never need to doubt His perspective toward you. When you have a firm confidence that God is your Heavenly Father, you will be more likely to pray.

PRAYER AND JESUS

As mentioned earlier, the original sin of Adam and Eve created a barrier between God and man. Conversation was continual and pleasant in the Garden of Eden, but sin messed everything up. Man and woman were banished from God’s presence. In order to fellowship with God, sacrifices were required. The first such sacrifice was made when Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden. The Bible says, “The Lord God made clothing from skins for the man and his wife, and he

² Gesenius, Wilhelm, and Samuel Prideaux Tregelles. *Gesenius’ Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures*. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2003), [CD-Rom].

³ Zodhiates, Spiros. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*. (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000), [CD-Rom].

clothed them" (Genesis 3:24). The skins from dead animals were intended to cover the shame of sin.

The Ultimate Sacrifice

When the Lord established the nation of Israel, He required sacrifices in order for people to approach Him. Every day, burnt offerings were offered before the Lord (Leviticus 1:1-17). Because the consequence of sin was death, something had to die in order to make appeasement for sin. Man and woman could not approach God fully and effectively without the sacrifice of a life.

The levitical system of sacrifices was gory and tedious. Thankfully, the Lord instituted a better way for humanity to receive cleansing from sin. The author of Hebrews commented on the ultimate inability of the Old Testament sacrificial system to give full access to God. He said, "For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4). Later, however, he commented on the way in which Jesus made a better way to God. He said, "By this will, we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all time" (Hebrews 10:10).

In Old Testament times, worshippers relied on the work of a priest to grant them real access to God. In the New Testament, worshippers can trust in the work of Jesus. On the behalf of His people, Christ gave Himself so that we might have access to God. The author of Hebrews contrasted Jesus' work with that of an Old Testament priest who entered into the Holy of Holies and made sacrifices for the people. He said, "For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with hands (only a model of the true one) but into heaven itself, so that he might now appear in the presence of God for us" (Hebrews 10:24). We have immediate access to God because our High Priest has provided covering for our sins.

Veil in the Temple

A couple of New Testament passages confirm these realities. One is found in one of the crucifixion narratives in the gospels. Matthew described the events that accompanied Calvary in vivid detail. He told of the precise moment of our Lord's death by saying, "Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and gave up his spirit. Suddenly, the curtain of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom, the earth quaked, and the rocks were split" (Matthew 27:50-51).

What was the significance of "the curtain of the sanctuary" being torn in two? Well, the tapestry was what safeguarded the most holy place in the temple. It provided a barrier between man and the manifest presence of God. The miraculous event of it being torn open at Jesus' death demonstrated that Jesus' sacrifice provided access to God! Because of what our Lord did at the cross, believers can have immediate access to the presence of God through prayer.

An Open Line

If you are like me, you talk on the phone just about every day. Cell phones are great, but they don't always work well. Have you ever had a bad connection when you've placed a call? I have. Sometimes I dial a friend only to hear a choppy voice or static. Usually, the remedy to such a connection is to hang up and redial.

When it comes to talking to God, we can have confidence that there is always an open line to Him. We never have to worry about having a poor connection. Because of Jesus' payment for our sins at Calvary, we can approach the Lord at any moment and in any situation. There is no barrier or blockade between us and Him. Our sins have been paid for. When the Lord looks at us, He sees us as being as righteous as His Son. Consequently, He freely accepts our prayers!

PRAYER AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

Christian prayer is not a cold, mechanical exercise. It is a spiritual activity involving a soul connection with God. In ways beyond our full comprehension, supernatural things happen when we pray. Invisible spiritual battles take place as our intercessions ascend into the heavenly realm.

Prayer for the believer is a supernatural, spiritual exercise because of the role of God's Spirit in prayer. When most people pray, their prayers are lifeless to a degree. Because they lack the presence of God in their souls, they have no ability to connect with the Lord in a meaningful way. True believers have a different experience. The Spirit of God energizes their prayers, making them effectual.

You Must Be Born Again

The potential for powerful prayer comes from the Christian experience of salvation. According to Scripture, Christian conversion involves much more than a commitment to follow Jesus. When one becomes a believer, he or she doesn't sign up to simply follow a set of religious customs and creeds. The Christian life is built upon something Jesus called being "born again" (John 3:3). Faith in Christ is marked by a radical change in one's soul. Some call this event "regeneration."

Paul spoke of it in 2 Corinthians 5:17, by saying, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come!" At the moment of conversion, one is forgiven of his or her sins. In addition, God's Spirit permanently inhabits one's soul (Ephesians 1:13-14). Prior to salvation, one is little more than a physical shell of a human with a soul devoid of God's presence. At salvation, one becomes a full-orbed person, possessing both a physical body and a soul inhabited by the Spirit of God. The indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit is what gives one the ability to pray in a meaningful and effective way.

Worship In Spirit and Truth

Jesus remarked on these realities when ministering to a first-century woman. John told of an event in which our Lord conversed with a woman at a well. She was a Samaritan. Most Jews regarded her people as being ethnically and spiritually inferior. Consequently, the woman likely lived with an inferiority complex when it came to spiritual things. This is seen through the fact that the woman was surprised at Jesus' attempts to talk to her. When our Lord addressed her, she replied, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" (John 4:9).

In love, Jesus graciously told the woman of the way in which He was willing to provide the woman with spiritual water for her thirsty soul. He let her know that the opportunity to worship God was available to her. Though others made her believe that prayer and praise were off limits for a Samaritan, Jesus extended an open invitation for fellowship with God. In John 4:24, He said, "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and in truth."

What did Jesus's words mean? Why the reference to "Spirit" and "truth" in the context of worship. More will be said about the role of truth in prayer and worship later in this study. For now, let's focus on the place of the Spirit. Our Lord meant to convey the way in which the Third Person of the Trinity gives God's children a capacity to worship in a way that far transcends manmade forms of worship.

Because a born-again believer is inhabited by the Spirit of God, he or she enjoys a real spiritual connection with God. The prayers of others are little more than religious recitations or man-centered meditations. The prayers of believers are different. Because of the presence of God's Spirit in their lives, believers have confidence that God really hears their prayers.

Prayer Groanings

Paul spoke of these realities when writing to the Romans. He said, "In the same way the Spirit also helps us in our weakness, because we do not know what to pray for as we should, but the

Spirit himself intercedes for us, with inexpressible groanings” (Romans 8:26). Various explanations have been offered for the meaning of Paul’s words. Some of those explanations are suspect. There is a level of unknowable mystery in Paul’s description of the Holy Spirit’s role in prayer. Those who seek to fully explain what Paul meant normally err. It really is true — most false Christian teaching comes from attempts to fully explain something that can’t be totally explained.

We may never completely know what Paul meant in Romans 8:26. The exact way in which the Holy Spirit groans on our behalf may remain a mystery for us as long as we are on Earth. The overall meaning of Paul’s words, however, is obvious. When we pray, the Holy Spirit labors on our behalf. From the posture of His presence in our hearts, he takes our feeblest prayers and takes them to the Father.

The book of Revelation provides a beautiful picture of how all this works. When John received a vision of the presence of God, he caught a glimpse of our prayers being teleported to the throne of God. In Revelation 5:8, he saw angels holding “golden bowls filled with incense, which are the prayers of the saints.” The picturesque description was meant to beautifully portray the way in which the Holy Spirit helps us in prayer. When we pray, He carries our prayers into the very presence of the Lord.

Be careful that you don’t have a low view of prayer. Avoid a man-centered perspective in which you trust in your words, abilities, or religiosity. Realize that real prayer is built upon more than flesh and blood. If you are a believer, the Spirit of God is in your soul. He stands ready to take your prayers into the presence of God. Pray with faith in His power to assist and accompany you.

PRAYER AND HUMANITY

Let’s close our discussion of a theology of prayer by talking about humankind. In both theological and secular academic fields of study, one refers to the study of humanity as “anthropology.” The Bible has much to say about the nature of mankind. It’s very first chapter depicts God creating man, saying, “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness. They will rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, the whole earth, and the creatures that crawl on the earth.’ So God created man in his own image; he created him in the image of God; he created them male and female” (Genesis 1:26-27).

God Doesn’t Look Like Us

For millennia, theologians have debated what it means for man to be made in God’s “image.” The Greek translation of the Old Testament used at the time of Jesus used a word from which we get our word “icon” to speak of the way God made the first man and woman. As a result, we can deduce that the image of God involves some sort of likeness or resemblance to God.

But in what way does humanity resemble God? Does the image of God refer to some sort of physical likeness? That seems completely improbable. Scripture attests that God does not have a physical likeness. It is for this reason that idolatry was prohibited (Exodus 20:4-6). The eternal, infinite God cannot be reduced to a human form. By His nature, He is holy. Holiness involves the idea of being distinct and different; thus, the Lord is completely separate and set apart from the human realm.

Scripture depicts God’s brilliant holiness by describing Him as dwelling in “inapproachable light.” Our Lord is immortal and no one has ever seen Him fully, nor can anyone see Him fully (1 Timothy 6:16). Other portions of Scripture compare His likeness to a “consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:29). What does all of this mean in relation to the image of God? Plain and simple, it means that the image of God in mankind has nothing to do with any sort of physical

likeness. Furthermore, it reveals that the Lord is completely different than humanity. He is high and lofty, transcendentally bigger than and better than mankind.

A Relational Connection

So, if the image of God construct doesn't correspond with any physical attribute, what does it mean? Theologians and Bible teachers have often offered three different perspectives. Some see the concept as referring to the functional nature of humankind. Just as God created the Earth and exercised stewardship, man and woman were commissioned to manage God's creation. This idea seems to be portrayed through what God said in Genesis 1:28-31.

Another perspective centers on what is called the structural nature of humanity. Like God, men and women have a constitution that is marked by differing character attributes. Like God, they have the ability to possess knowledge and wisdom. They have capacities to express emotions like love that far transcend the emotive expressions found in the animal kingdom. In addition, they can emulate character traits like holiness and righteousness.

The functional and structural ideas indeed have warrant, but there is one other aspect of the image of God we should consider. It has a relation to prayer. Many argue for what is called the relational view of the image of God. This is based on the wording of Genesis 1:26-27. If you pay special attention to what God said when He made the first man and woman, you will notice that the Lord spoke of Himself in the plural form. He said, "Let us make man in our image" (Genesis 1:26).

The use of the plural personal pronouns provided a hint regarding the nature of the image of God in man. Just as the Lord has always existed in a trinity of relationships, humankind has been made for relationships. Men and women have an ability to relate to both God and one another that far exceeds the capacity for companionship seen in the animal kingdom. For all of eternity, there has been perfect fellowship between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Humankind is made to enjoy a similar sort of three-in-one relational connection. Men and women are made to enjoy fellowship with other humans and with God.

Jesus underscored these realities in giving the Great Commandment. He said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39). He also expressed them in one of His prayers for us. Shortly before His death, He prayed, "May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe you sent me" (John 17:21). Humankind is made to experience a relational capacity that is not found in the animal kingdom.

Prayer is talking to God

So what does all of this have to do with prayer. Plain and simple, prayer is a means of communicating with God. Any relationship involves talking, and prayer is a form of talking. It is a bridge that connects our soul to the Lord. One has said, "Prayer is like a time exposure to God. Our souls function like photographic plates, and Christ's shining image is the light. The more we expose our lives to the white-hot sun of His righteous life (for, say, five, ten, fifteen, thirty minutes, or an hour a day), the more his image will be burned into our character."⁴

As you set out to become a person of prayer, remember this simple reality – you are made for a relationship with God. Those who never pray are shortsighted concerning these realities. They live life blind to their need for communion with the Divine. As a result, they spiritually and emotionally limp through life, never living up to the very reason they are alive – to know God and enjoy Him forever!

⁴ Hughes, R. Kent. *Disciplines Of A Godly Man*. (Crossway Books, 1991), 83.

