

**Series:** Basic Prayer

**Title:** Benefits of Prayer

**Text:** Matthew 7:9-11

When Jesus taught His disciples about prayer, he said things like, “when you pray” (Matthew 6:6) and “you should pray like this” (Matthew 6:9). The way our Lord talked about prayer revealed that prayer should be a natural part of a believer’s life. In a matter-of-fact way, He assumed that His disciples would pray. Prayerlessness was regarded as illogical and contradictory to the normal Christian life.

Despite Jesus’ teaching, many believers struggle to develop strong prayer lives. Though communion with God is a fundamental part of the Christian life, many find it to be an allusive thing. Prayer is often an aspired value without being an actualized one. One has commented, “There is nothing that tells the truth about us as Christian people so much as our prayer life. Everything we do in the Christian life is easier than prayer.”<sup>1</sup>

Is there any hope? How can we reverse trends of prayerless lives? Where can we find strength and motivation? I believe our prayer lives can be helped by considering some of the biblical benefits associated with communion with God. In what follows, we will examine five benefits that come our way when we commit to prayer.

### **PROTECTION AGAINST TEMPTATION**

We live in a broken world. Though man and woman were created for a perfect relationship with God, sin marred the Lord’s original intent. Our world is stained and sullied by imperfection and immorality. Scripture says, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

Being a believer doesn’t make us immune to this problem. Scripture teaches we have been made righteous. It says, “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). However, Scripture also acknowledges that we still battle the promptings and passions of sin. It says, “we all stumble in many ways” (James 3:2). Because of the problem that besets us all, Scripture outlines means and measures of forgiveness for a believer who sins (1 John 1:8-10).

Through the work of Christ, Christians have been forgiven of sin, but they still have a struggle. In short, they are positionally right before God, but they still practically wrestle with sin.

### **No Perfection Until the Resurrection**

Until the Second Coming of Jesus, we will all wrestle with our fallen and finite natures. One day we will be perfectly cured of sin, but that day has not yet come. The Bible says, “Dear friends, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet been revealed. We know that when he appears, we will be like him because we will see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). As long as we inhabit our mortal bodies, we will experience promptings to sin and enticements to evil.

We shouldn’t be too surprised. Jesus Himself endured such temptation (Matthew 4:-11; 26:36-46). In overcoming, our Lord provided us an example to follow. However, He also demonstrated the power of prayer. He revealed that it is one of our foremost weapons against temptation.

### **In the Garden**

In Matthew 26, we read of the way in which Jesus agonized in the Garden of Gethsemane. He knew crucifixion was near. Though He dreaded the physical pain associated with the event, He most dreaded the spiritual agony He would experience. Many have remarked on the fact that

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<sup>1</sup> Umpleby, Alison. *On Weariness*. The Banner of Truth Magazine. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner Of Truth, April 2021), 15

the only time Jesus cried in anguish at Calvary was when He experienced separation from God (Matthew 27:46). Consequently, as Jesus prayed on the night before His crucifixion, the spiritual alienation of the cross was at the forefront of His mind.

Knowing the darkness that awaited Him, our Lord took His disciples to Gethsemane. Undoubtedly, the Twelve had retreated to the place for prayer on numerous occasions. The hour was late. Many believe it was around midnight, or even later. Jesus would receive no sleep. He would hang on a Roman cross within hours.

As He and His disciples entered the Garden of Gethsemane, he said, "Sit here while I go over there and pray" (Matthew 26:36). Jesus engaged in prayer to exhibit the way in which one can draw power from the Lord through such activity. He later encouraged His disciples to pray with Him. Knowing they would soon be tempted to deny Him, He said, "Stay awake and pray, so that you won't enter into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41). Sleepy and spiritually out of touch with all that was going on, the disciples slept on. Their failure to pray would contribute to their pending spiritual failure (Matthew 26:56).

### **A Weapon Against Temptation**

Jesus' example and instruction in the Garden of Gethsemane reveals that protection against temptation is one of the foremost benefits of prayer. When we are prayerless, we are more likely to succumb to the promptings of sin. Hearts that aren't steeped in prayer are more likely to be enamored with the ways of the world. However, when we pray, our souls are conditioned to stand strong against the muck of our fallen world.

It is for this reason that Jesus devoted a portion of the Lord's Prayer to the topic of temptation. He taught the disciples to pray, saying, "Therefore, you should pray like this...And do not bring us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one" (Matthew 6:9, 13). Do you have areas in which you struggle? Perhaps you have a habit or hangup you can't seem to shake. Know this — an abiding prayer life may be the key to gaining victory over a besetting sin or struggle (Hebrews 12:1). Strong prayer lives make us more and more impervious to the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (1 John 2:16).

### **EMOTIONAL TRANQUILITY**

The hippie movement of the 60's and 70's generated the mantra, "Give peace a chance!" Most people today are not opposed to peace. They would love to see it realized on the international scene, and they greatly desire to experience it in their personal lives. The problem with peace is that it seems allusive. Many try to find it in possessions, pleasure, and personal prestige, but such things never satisfy.

### **Positional Peace**

The word rendered "peace" (eirēnē) in the New Testament is one that spoke of an absence of war. Amongst first-century Jews, the Greek word was seen as synonymous with the Hebrew concept of Shalom. Thus, it referenced much more than just the cessation of hostilities between two parties. It included ideas of prosperity, abundance, and joy.

The word was used in the New Testament to figuratively speak of a spiritual disposition enjoyed by believers. Because of the work of Christ at Calvary, believers can regard themselves as being at a state of peace with God. The Bible says, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). Whereas the Christian was previously in a state of enmity with God (Ephesians 2:1-3), the work of Christ removed all hostilities by making the believer holy and righteous. In short, regeneration and justification render one right with God. Perfect peace is enjoyed in a positional sense. The prophet Isaiah rightly called Jesus "the Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6).

### **Practical Peace**

Such positional peace, however, does not guarantee practical peace. Though believers are right with God, they can struggle to maintain a tranquil state of mind. It is for good reason that Jesus had to tell His disciples, “Don’t let your heart be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me” (John 14:1). Our mere humanity beckons us to worrisome, anxious, and fretful living. As long as we are on Earth, we will struggle with maintaining a calm, Christian composure devoid of fear and anxiousness. All will wrestle with worrisome behavior to varying degrees. Fortunately the Lord has provided hope and help.

Through our abiding relationship with Christ (John 15:4-5), we experience practical peace on a daily basis. The Bible teaches that prayer is one of the foremost means of receiving such peace. In Philippians 4:6-7, Paul said, “Don’t worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”

The “peace” of which Paul spoke has been defined as a “disposition characterized by inner rest and harmony.”<sup>2</sup> The meaning of the word was “freedom from anxiety.”<sup>3</sup> When writing to the Romans, Paul referenced the way in which believers can experience such peace on an ongoing basis by saying, “Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you believe so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:13).

### **A Prayer Fortress**

What’s interesting about Paul’s remarks in Philippians 4:6-7 is the fact that prayer is the source of such peace. It is the means and method of delivering ourselves from worry and a plethora of mental maladies that often plague our minds. Notice Paul’s emphasis on prayer through words like “prayer,” “petition,” “thanksgiving,” and “requests.” More will be said later in this study about the various types of prayer. For now, notice that a robust prayer life has the potential to pave a path of peace in one’s mind.

Paul said that such prayer produces a result in which the peace of God “will guard” our “hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” The Greek word for “guard” was one used in the ancient world to speak of one of the responsibilities of a Roman soldier. It referred to the act of protecting a strategic location. Paul used the word in an active sense in Philippians 4:7. His intent was to depict the virtue of peace as actively erecting a bulwark in the lives of those who pray. Like the walls of an ancient castle, prayer proactively keeps worry and anxiety from entering into the lives of God’s faithful.

Notice from Paul’s words that he referenced two different domains of human nature. He spoke of “hearts and minds.” The first term was used to speak about the seat of human emotion — the soul. The second one referred to the place of human thought — the mind. Paul knew that anxiety and worry have a way of plaguing both our emotions and thoughts, our feelings and our thinking patterns. He presented prayer as an active way of protecting those two aspects of human nature.

When we make prayer a priority, we do a lot to curb the onslaught of anxiety in our lives. We set ourselves up for protection. Time with God readies our hearts and minds for the stresses and struggles we experience throughout the day. When difficult problems and people beckon us to worry, a soul steeped in prayer will be less likely to despair. There is great benefit in praying!

### **EFFECTIVENESS IN CHRISTIAN SERVICE**

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<sup>2</sup> Friberg, Timothy, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller. *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 132.

<sup>3</sup> Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 132.

Christians are called to be lights for Jesus in a dark world (Matthew 5:16). Such a responsibility cannot be accomplished through mere humanity. It requires help from the Spirit of God. One can not represent Jesus adequately unless the Spirit of Jesus shines through one's life.

Jesus remarked on these realities in His famous Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). After commissioning His disciples to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19), He said, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). The promise of His accompanying presence was undoubtedly a reference to the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had previously made a promise of another helper, saying, "Nevertheless, I am telling you the truth. It is for your benefit that I go away, because if I don't go away the Counselor will not come to you. If I go, I will send him to you" (John 16:7). The Holy Spirit is a permanent guide by a disciple's side, providing continual encouragement, enlightenment, and empowerment.

The presence of the Spirit is especially helpful in relation to Christian ministry. We know this is true because of Jesus' promise concerning the Spirit in His Great Commission. When Luke shared his version of the Great Commission in the book of Acts, he depicted Jesus as saying, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The word rendered "power" was a Greek word from which we get our word "dynamite." It was used in the ancient world to speak of military might (Mark 13:25). Jesus used the term to convey the idea that the Holy Spirit has a way of giving believers supernatural might when they witness for Jesus.<sup>4</sup>

No human being has the power to convert a soul. Anyone who has worked in ministry, shared the gospel, or attempted to influence another for Christ knows this to be true. When one attempts to make an impact of Christ, one is eventually confronted with feelings of helplessness. The ways of the world are useless in affecting lasting spiritual change. One needs power from the Holy Spirit.

### **The Path to Power**

The question we face is how — how can we tap into the power available in the Holy Spirit? Talking about power from God is nice, but how can we practically receive what we need? The answer lies in the subject of our study. Prayer is the pathway to receiving power for gospel ministry.

A story from the gospels illustrates this point. Jesus' disciples once attempted to heal a demon-possessed boy who was subject to fits of rage. Their best efforts all ended in futility. When our Lord approached the boy's father, the man said, "Teacher...I asked your disciples to drive it out, but they couldn't" (Mark 9:17, 18). In grace and compassion, Jesus proceeded to heal the boy.

The father and the crowds who gathered for the spectacle were certainly amazed at the wonder-working power of Jesus. The disciples, on the other hand, had a different perspective. They were befuddled. Voicing their bewilderment, they asked Jesus, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" (Mark 9:28). Jesus responded, "This kind can come out by nothing but prayer" (Mark 9:29). Our Lord's response indicated that prayer is a pre-requisite to Holy Spirit power and strength in ministry. One has rightly said, "The backbone of any work done for God is prayer."<sup>5</sup>

### **An Exercise of Faith**

Have you ever wondered why God desires prayer? Reflecting on the story we just considered, one might be tempted to question why prayer is a prerequisite for God to work in power. A

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<sup>4</sup> Gingrich, Wilbur F. And Frederick W. Danker. *Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*. (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 52.

<sup>5</sup> Hughes, R. Kent. *Disciplines Of A Godly Man*. (Crossway Books, 1991), 171.

clue to such a query is found in the gospel story we mentioned earlier. When Jesus had discovered that His disciples were unable to cast the demon out, He said, "You unbelieving generation, how long will I be with you? How long must I put up with you?" Bring him to me" (Mark 9:19). Our Lord's indictment revealed that faith was the real issue at stake in His disciples' failure. Their lack of prayer was a result of their lack of faith.

This all reveals the reason the Lord takes delight in prayer. He loves prayer because it is an evidence of faith (Luke 18:8). When one bends his or her knee to address the Lord, one exhibits a trust in the Lord's power to help. We know that such faith greatly pleases Him (Hebrews 11:6). In addition, we know that such faith paves the way for mighty works of God in the lives of His people (Matthew 17:20).

It is often said that "prayer is powerful," or that "prayer changes things." When we study Scripture, we find that such statements are not empty religious clichés, nor are they vain spiritual slogans. They reflect fixed, spiritual truth. The powerful working of God accompanies humble, faith-filled praying. May such truth motivate us to pray more and more.

### **GODLY CHARACTER**

Prayer has a way of shaping us into what God wants us to be. The reason for this can be found in the nature of prayer. The activity is a relational one. All relationships have a way of transforming us. Over time, husbands and wives seem to grow in the likeness of one another. Close friends mimic character traits. Human experience, along with the teaching of Scripture (Psalm 1:1; 1 Corinthians 15:33), teaches us these things are true. The company you keep will shape who you become. The Bible says, "Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17).

These principles have application to our prayer lives. Since prayer is a relational activity, it has the ability to make a relational impact. When we pray, we experience a connection with God and our time with Him transforms us. 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 -- His love, His compassion, His truth, His integrity, His humility."<sup>6</sup>

Scripture remarks on the way in which prayer has a transformational effect on our character. In giving instructions on prayer, Paul said, "First of all, then, I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all those who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity" (1 Timothy 2:1-2). Notice that Paul prescribed several types of prayers within the church — petitions, intercessions, and thanksgivings. In addition, he spoke of the practical result of prayer. He indicated that real prayer results in "a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity."

The apostle's words were addressed to first-century Christians living within the city of Ephesus. He wanted the church to pray for governing authorities. His prayer request was remarkable, considering the fact that the murderous, idolatrous, and sexually immoral Nero was the Emperor of the Roman Empire at the time of his writing. Nero had a heavy hand toward the church. History books are replete with tales of his murderous rampages towards God's people.

Paul knew that some believers may have found it difficult to live tranquil, quiet, and godly lives in the face of such evil. He offered prayer as a way of developing the holy character. In praying for governmental leaders and others, believers in Ephesus would

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<sup>6</sup> Hughes, R. Kent. *Disciplines Of A Godly Man*. (Crossway Books, 1991), 83.

experience a powerful work of God. While most would have anticipated such prayers producing a change in others, Paul knew prayer would first change those who prayed.

Such is a benefit of faithful praying. When we pray, we can be confident that our prayers will make a difference. By talking to God, we become more and more like God. If you sense a need for transformation in some area of your life, seek it through prayer. One has said:

“Prayer is not designed to change God; it is designed to change us. Prayer is not calling God in to bless our activities. Rather, prayer takes us into God’s presence, shows us His will and prepares us to obey Him....God will use your prayer times to soften your heart and change your focus. As you pray for others, the Holy Spirit will work in your heart so that you have the same compassion for them that God does. If you do not love people as you should, pray for them. If you are not as active in God’s service as you know He wants you to be, begin praying. You cannot be intimately exposed to God’s heart and remain complacent. The time spent with God will change you and make you more like Christ.”<sup>7</sup>

### **GOD’S BLESSING**

We have already spoken of several specific benefits of prayer. A final benefit is the way prayer brings God’s general blessing into our lives. Intercession, supplication, and requests have a way of blanketing our lives with the presence and provision of God. They fill our lives with innumerable blessings, many of which we are not fully aware. Those who fail to pray rob themselves of innumerable joys and delights.

James made an innuendo to these realities when he wrote to first century believers. Knowing that many of his readers were living compromised lives devoid of prayer, he said, “You do not have because you do not ask” (James 4:2). In the original language of the New Testament, James placed emphasis on the word “you.” His words were intended to stress the personal failure on the part of his readers. One could translate his admonition as saying, “You, you are not asking of God.”

James meant to rebuke his readers for the sin of prayerlessness. To awaken them to their spiritual duty, he reminded them that “they did not have.” Some could mistakenly interpret James’ words through the lens of the prosperity gospel. In doing so, they might suppose that the author promoted prayer as a path to prosperity. Such thinking is rampant in the Western world. Many believe they can get whatever they want from God, so long as they have enough faith. Regarding God as some sort of heavenly genie or cosmic vending machine, they presume godliness is a means of gain (1 Timothy 6:5). False teaching of this sort has brought great harm to the souls of many.

James by no means meant to advocate for any sort of prosperity gospel. In fact, an earlier portion of his letter promoted the blessings associated with not being rich in worldly wealth (James 1:9). In addition, a latter portion of his letter was designed to remind rich people of the temporary nature of earthly wealth (James 5:1-6). Instead of promoting a get-what-you-want-from-God approach to praying, James meant to uphold prayer as a means of experiencing pure, honest, and righteous blessings from God.

The word translated “ask” in James 4:2-3 indicated that prayer is a means of receiving from God. As used by James, the verb appeared in the middle voice in the original language of the New Testament; thus, it referred to one performing an action on him or herself. His instruction could be translated, “Ask for yourself!”<sup>8</sup> James’ admonishment revealed that prayer is indeed a means of securing God’s blessing in our lives. His perspective was surely built upon Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. In his seminal sermon, Jesus said, “Ask,

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<sup>7</sup> Blackaby, Henry and Richard Blackaby. *Experiencing God Day by Day Devotional*. (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 1998), 280.

<sup>8</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 561.

and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7).

We cheat ourselves of untold blessings when we fail to pray. If our eyes could see the spiritual riches that await us, we would be more prone to seek the Lord on our knees. May God give us grace to hunger for the spiritual power and prosperity that comes from prayer. Charles Spurgeon once said, “Oh, that we could keep in perpetual motion the machinery of prayer. Pray, pray, pray, and God will give, give, give, abundantly, and supernaturally, above all that we ask, or even think.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Spurgeon, C.H. *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, Volume 26: 1880*. (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 2005), 262-263