

Series: Basic Prayer

Title: Lesson 5 - Prayerlessness

Several years ago, the Lord confronted me with a subject related to prayer. Previously I had not ever really thought of it in depth. The subject is one we could call “prayerlessness.” As I finished typing that word into my word processing software, a red, squiggly line appeared underneath it. English dictionaries do not register the word, but rest assured that it represents a real spiritual condition.

At its most elementary level, prayerlessness involves the absence of prayer from one’s life. However, the condition is much more complicated than it seems. It is rooted in deep, dark soul problems. Charles Spurgeon said, “Prayer is the breath of the soul, and he that can do without it is dead in sin.”¹

Not only is prayerlessness tragic because of its root in sin, it also has staggering consequences. J.C. Ryle said, “In short, to be prayerless is to be without God, -without Christ, without grace, without hope, and without heaven. It is to be in the road to hell.”² Multiple and manifold harms come to the one who fails to pray.

My purpose in this chapter is to examine the subject of prayerlessness. By examining Scripture, we will discover results that come from our lack of prayer. We will then talk about the reasons for prayerlessness. Though both of these topics are negative in a sense, they will hopefully motivate us to see why and how we ought to shake ourselves out of the sad state of prayerlessness.

RESULTS OF PRAYERLESSNESS

An anecdotal story has often been told of a fictional character who died and went to heaven. Upon arrival at the celestial city, the individual was led to a vast warehouse. The interior of the facility was chockfull of all types of valuables and illustrious goods. The person asked, “What is all this?” A voice replied, “These are things you could have received through prayer.”

While the story above is a bit hokey, and though it perhaps places an unhealthy weight on prosperity, it has an important point nonetheless. The anecdote reminds us that we lose a lot when we don’t pray. It has rightly been said before that the problem with prayer is not unanswered prayer; the problem with prayer is normally un-offered prayer.

Powerlessness

James 5:16 says, “The prayer of a righteous person is very powerful in its effect.” The original language of the New Testament used two words to emphasize the strength of prayer. One of the words spoke of competency. The other spoke of effectiveness. Together, the terms stressed the wonder-working power of prayer. It may seem like a cliché, but prayer works!

¹ Spurgeon, C.H. *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Volume 27, 1881* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1984), 128.

² Ryle, J.C. *Practical Religion*. (East Peoria, IL: Versa Press, Inc., 2015), 61.

Why does prayer work? Is it because God chooses to throw out prizes as if He is some sort of cosmic vending machine? No. Prayer produces a result because it puts the human soul into contact with the living God. One cannot be exposed to His presence without being changed. Oswald Chambers explains this reality by saying, "Prayer is the exercise of drawing on the grace of God."³

To not pray is to cut oneself off from a divine storehouse of power. Prayer brings competency and effectiveness to all you are and all you do. Charles Spurgeon said:

There is real power in prayer; the Lord assuredly hears the cry of his people still. As certainly as...the laws of gravitation control the spheres, so certainly is prayer a mysterious but a very real power. God does answer prayer. We are as sure of this as we are that we breathe.⁴

If you are missing out on prayer, realize you are missing out on God's power in your life. There is good reason to shake off the sleepiness of prayerlessness!

Fruitlessness

The Christian life is to be a fruitful life. Jesus said, "The one who remains in me and I in him produces much fruit" (John 15:5). Paul picked up on Jesus' metaphor, and he spoke of how the Spirit of Christ produces the virtue of Christ in our lives. He said, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23).

According to Jesus, fruitfulness comes from the act of remaining in Him. The term rendered "remains" in John 15:5 conveyed the sense of relational intimacy. Anyone knows healthy relationships involve communication. We've already talked about how prayer is an act of talking to God. Putting all these things together, we see that prayer is a means of producing the fruit of Christ in our lives. When we spend time with Him in prayer, conversing with Him, we inevitably become more like Him. The fruit of His character begins to grow on the trees of our lives. Henry Blackaby has commented on this result of prayer:

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

³ Chambers, Oswald. *My Utmost for His Highest*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers, 2011), 365.

⁴ Spurgeon, C.H. (1834-92). *The Man Whose Name was Help*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner Of Truth, July 2017), 15-16.

intimately exposed to God's heart and remain complacent. The time spent with God will change you and make you more like Christ.⁵

Are you bearing fruit for Christ? Prayer is a path to fruitfulness and prayerlessness will lead to fruitlessness. There is good reason to grow as a prayer warrior.

Emptiness

Recently I ran out of gas. Yeah, I admit it. Embarrassing as it was, the worst part was that someone I know saw me walking on the side of the street. When they asked what was the matter, it was difficult to confess what had happened.

No one likes to run out of gas when driving, but did you know you can experience emptiness in another sense? If you don't regularly receive the spiritual refilling you need through prayer, you can get to the place in which your spiritual reserves are depleted. Peace, joy, strength, and emotional fortitude are hard to come by when you don't stay close to Jesus. It is for this reason that Jesus encouraged His disciples, saying, "Until now you have asked for nothing in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete" (John 16:24).

Do you feel spiritually empty a lot of the time? Could your problem be a lack of prayer. Prayerlessness will produce emptiness. Consider the following counsel from one pastor:

In counseling troubled people, I have discovered the most revealing question to ask is: "How is your devotional life?" In almost every case of defeat or depression, a weak devotional life has been one of the causes.⁶

REASONS FOR PRAYERLESSNESS

Not only is it important to consider the results of prayerlessness, it is also important to consider the reasons for the sad spiritual state. Getting to the root of any problem is integral to addressing the problem correctly. Not long ago, I had to visit a bone and joint doctor. Sharp pain was present in both my left knee and hip. I imagined that something was either broken or torn. Because I run regularly, I feared that I might have messed up my ACL or MCL. The doctor ordered x-rays, but the images didn't reveal any structural damage. I was a little bit discouraged, having hoped that I might get an explanation for the pain I was experiencing.

Fortunately, my doctor had seen many cases like mine; as a result, he was able to give a good diagnosis. He explained that runners sometimes suffer from what is called IT band syndrome. The condition involves pain in the knee and leg that is produced when the connective tissue extending from the pelvic bone to the shinbone becomes so tight that it rubs against the thighbone. Instead of prescribing medicine or surgery, my doctor encouraged me to do some regular exercises to massage the

⁵ Blackaby, Henry. *Experiencing God Day by Day Devotional*. (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 1998), 280.

⁶ Campbell, Roger. *Staying Positive in a Negative World: Attitudes That Enhance the Joy of Living*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2009), 34.

muscles and ligaments in my leg. Thankfully, his prescribed treatment has brought relief.

We are all aware of how important it is to get to the bottom of physical ailments. Why do we sometimes fail to see the need for something similar in the spiritual realm? When it comes to maladies of the soul like prayerlessness, we often plod along, never imagining that there might be a reason for our pain. We experience needless frustration and emptiness, blind to the fact that there is a source of healing in the Lord.

In what follows, I want to investigate some of the reasons why we don't pray. My intent is to play the role of a spiritual doctor. If we unearth the spiritual sicknesses that underly our prayerlessness, we will be more likely to experience healing. From Scripture, we find there are three primary reasons for a lack of prayer.

Faithlessness

Faith is one of the most important words in the Christian language. It is the means by which one receives Christ's salvation. Scripture says, "For you are saved by grace through faith" (Ephesians 2:8). One man once asked Paul, "...what must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30). The apostle replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). Faith in Christ's work is necessary for salvation.

But did you know that faith has an important place in Christian living as well? The virtue isn't something for the initial forays into Christianity alone. The Bible says, "The righteous will live by faith" (Romans 1:17). The entirety of the Christian life is built on the firm foundation of faith.

What does this mean for prayer? Well, Jesus provided teaching that gives us insight. In Luke 18, he shared a parable known as "The Parable of the Persistent Widow." The purpose of the story was to encourage disciples "to pray always and not give up." While there are many salient features within the story, one of the most impactful is found in verse 8. In that verse, Jesus concluded His parable by asking, "Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8).

At first glance, Jesus' words seem a bit strange. Why did He mention faith? Wasn't His parable about prayer? Didn't Luke say the entire purpose of the story was to encourage disciples to not give up in prayer? What was the reason for tacking on a statement about faith at the end of a story about a persistent widow who kept praying?

Jesus' point was to show the fundamental relationship between prayer and faith. Those who pray have faith; those who don't pray don't. Real faith is the fuel that drives one to pray. If prayer is absent, faith is absent to one degree or another.

Not Just "Believing"

At this point, it is important to define the nature of faith. Many think of faith as simply "believing in God." Such a definition is insufficient at best. It is misleading and soul-damaging at worst. The Bible teaches that even demons believe in God (James 2:19), so faith must be something different.

The Greek word used for faith in the New Testament is one that meant "to trust," "to rely," or "to have confidence in." Seen in this way, it is understandable why Jesus linked faith to prayer. The act of praying expresses dependence on God. It reveals the level of one's trust or confidence in Him. Many don't pray because they don't rely on God. Their faith is in themselves, something, or someone else, not the Lord.

When Jesus asked His question in Luke 18:8, He was in effect asking, “When I return, will I find faithful people who exhibit their trust in me through prayer?” Know this — prayer is like a thermometer that reveals the temperature of one’s devotion to the Lord. One cannot be strong in faith if one is not strong in prayer. Mark it down — if you have a prayer problem, you have a faith problem.

Pray about Prayer

If we realize we have a problem in this regard, what can we do? Faith isn’t a tangible thing. It isn’t something you can buy at a store, or add to your life through a workout routine. How can we grow our faith? The answer to that question is so simple that it is easy to miss. Prayer is the answer.

Be aware, prayer is an indicator of faith, but it is also a catalyst for faith. Consider another story from the life of Jesus. A man once sought healing for his young son. Our Lord told the man, “Everything is possible for the one who believes” (Mark 9:23). The man replied, “I do believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24). Jesus then healed the young boy with a great display of God’s power (Mark 9:25-28). He then concluded the healing session by giving the spiritual lesson intended by the miraculous feat. He said, “This kind can come out by nothing but prayer” (Mark 9:29). Jesus’ purpose in healing the man’s son was to convey important truth about prayer. While there are numerous applications to be found in the story, one is this — prayer is a means of increasing faith.

If you realize you are prayerless because you are faithless, pray about it. Do what the father did in the healing incident mentioned above, ask the Lord to grant you more faith. Confess your lack of prayer. Admit that you have a shallow faith. Tell the Lord all about your failure and struggle. He will be faithful to His Word. He will grow your faith. When He does, you will have a greater trust and confidence in Him that will drive you to your knees in prayer.

Ungodliness

There is a second reason for prayerlessness I would like to discuss. It involves a state known as “ungodliness.” The mention of that word evokes strong thoughts for many. Most immediately think of wicked and vile things — evil gangs dressed in dark garb, ready to wreak havoc on unsuspecting victims. Others may think of worldly, wealthy individuals who are blind toward God and who indulge in sensual vices and lavish excesses. Perhaps “ungodliness” makes you think of wicked murderers, thieves, or adulterers.

I used to think of ungodliness in such terms. It wasn’t until I read Jerry Bridges’ “Respectable Sins: Confronting the Sins We Tolerate” that my perspective began to change. That book made me see the difference between ungodliness and wickedness. One deals with internal matters; the other deals with external things. Bridges explains, “Contrary to what we normally think, ungodliness and wickedness are not the same...Ungodliness describes an attitude toward God, while unrighteousness refers to sinful actions in thought, word, or deed.”⁷ Do you see that

⁷ Bridges, Jerry. *Respectable Sins: Confronting the Sins We Tolerate*. (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2007), 53.

ungodliness is much more than doing ungodly things? It involves a state of mind in which there is little regard for God.

The Psalmist gave a picture of such an ungodly person. He said, “The wicked, through the pride of his countenance, will not seek after God: God is not in all his thoughts” (Psalm 10:4, KJV). Notice several marks of the ungodly person. He or she indeed does “wicked” things, but bigger problems exist. “Pride,” according to the Psalmist, rests in the recesses of the soul. What is pride? It is a condition in which one exalts him or herself above God and others. The psalmist indicated that such self-drive living leads one to “not seek after God.” The end conclusion of such a life style is that one never thinks about God — “God is not in all his thoughts.” Such is the warp and woof of ungodliness. The ungodly rarely, if ever, think about God.

What does ungodliness have to do with a lack of prayer? Everything. Those who never pray are guilty of the sin. Their failure to intercede, make supplications, and offer praise is rooted in a low regard of God. Because they rarely think about God, they rarely see the need to pray. Jerry Bridges said, “Ungodliness may be defined as living one’s everyday life with little or no thought of God, or of God’s will, or of God’s glory, or of one’s dependence on God.”⁸

God in a Box

When I was in college, an older Christian challenged me in regard to a particular aspect of my walk with the Lord. His challenge relates to our current discussion. He heard the way in which I talked about my daily devotional reading and he sensed there was a disconnect in my life. Knowing that I still struggled with some emotional sins, he put his finger on a source of my problem. He told me, “Patrick, I think you are a victim of the ‘God in a Box’ routine.”

I had never heard of what he was talking about. God in a box? My friend explained, “You do a good job of spending time in God’s Word each morning, but there is something wrong. It seems like you aren’t good at taking God with you throughout the day. It is as if you keep God in a box. Each morning, you take the box off a shelf, you spend time playing with God, and then you put Him back in the box without ever thinking about Him for the rest of the day.”

My friend was right. My Christianity was weak and anemic because I didn’t allow God to infiltrate my daily activities. Such is the essence of ungodliness. If we don’t live with an abiding awareness of the presence of the Lord in our lives, we are in one sense no different than those who do ungodly things.

All of this has major implications for prayer. Those who never pray are usually guilty of ungodliness. Because they never think about their Creator, they aren’t prone to talk to their Creator. Prayerlessness is only a fruit of a deeper root problem. If you want to grow as a person of prayer, you must wage war on ungodliness.

Get in Shape

To overcome, the question we face is one of how — how can we overcome our tendency to rarely think of God. Paul provided an answer in his first letter to Timothy. In 1 Timothy 4:7, he said, “But have nothing to do with pointless and silly myths.

⁸ Bridges, 54.

Rather, train yourself in godliness.” Notice that Christians have a responsibility to “train” themselves. In addition, note that such training is aimed at the condition of ungodliness. When one engages in the training of which Paul spoke, one can be more godly.

But what type of training was Paul talking about? The very next verse indicated that the training he had in mind was of a spiritual sort. In 1 Timothy 4:8, the apostle said, “For the training of the body has limited benefit, but godliness is beneficial in every way, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come in regard to godliness.” Interestingly, the word rendered “training” is one that literally meant “to work out naked.” It was the term from which we get our word “gymnasium.” Paul’s choice of vocabulary conveyed the idea of intense effort and exertion.⁹

So how do believers train themselves spiritually? The answer is simple — God has given us several means of grace for strengthening our souls. His Word, prayer, the church, Christian service, the Lord’s Supper, the fellowship of the saints, charitable giving, and more are all ways we condition our souls to have a greater regard for the Lord. As one’s awareness of God grows, one will be more likely to pray.

As with the trap of faithlessness, we see that the remedy for ungodliness that leads to prayerlessness is reciprocal. That is, the cure is tied to the disease. Prayer overcomes ungodliness; thus, prayer overcomes prayerlessness. When one prays, awareness of God grows and faith expands. If you want to become better at praying, pray! Robby Gallaty has rightly said, “There is only one way to cultivate an intimate, effective prayer life: pray, pray, pray.”¹⁰

Busyness

I want to now touch on what may perhaps be the biggest reason for prayerlessness amongst modern Christians. Busyness seems to be the most rampant form of idolatry in the Western world. Many are living at such a breakneck pace that they have little for God. Yes, they are marked by faithlessness and ungodliness, but such things mark their lives for a reason. Behind all other symptoms is a subtle addiction to busyness. A great number of people have so arranged their lives that there is simply no time for God, no time for the soul, and no time for prayer.

In his book “Free to Focus,” Michael Hyatt comments on the demise of our society, saying, “Researchers use the term *time famine* to describe the feeling of having more tasks than time. When we’re hustling on the wrong side of the Looking Glass, our lists outrun our hours, and there’s no way to keep up...the rat race has a direct, negative effect on our productivity and even our sense of well-being.”¹¹ Perhaps you nodded your head as you read Hyatt’s words. You are likely well-aware of

⁹ Friberg, Timothy, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller. *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 102.

¹⁰ Gallaty, Robby. *Growing Up: How to Be A Disciple Who Makes Disciples*. (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2013), 68.

¹¹ Hyatt, Michael. *Free to Focus: A Total Productivity System to Achieve More By Doing Less*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2019), 137.

the growing cancer of hyperactivity in our world. Even now you might feel the slimy tentacles of busyness squeezing and suffocating your life.

If we were to take a silent poll and ask believers if they value prayer, most would answer in the affirmative. It would be hard to find a Christian who doesn't support the idea of prayer. It is a novelty, an aspired value for most.

However, if you were to take a silent poll and ask believers if they actually pray, the response would likely be different. Many would have to confess to prayerlessness.

What if you took such a poll even further and asked, "Why don't you pray?" I propose you would get a common response. Most prayerless people would say, "I'm too busy."

The busyness of our culture is making many prayerless. What can be done? The answer is simple. One must make prayer a priority. It is a fixed axiom of life that we prioritize what is important. If one really believes prayer is a necessity, one will make time for it.

Consider the Psalmist. He said, "Lord, God of my salvation, I cry out before you day and night" (Psalm 88:1). Desiring to make prayer a part of his life, the man carved out time for praise and intercession during both the day time and night time. This is the key to overcoming the burden of busyness. We must make time for God. Did not Jesus instruct us to do such? He said, "But seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you" (Matthew 6:33).

Are you prayerless? Is busyness squeezing the life of God out of you? If you are too busy to pray, it could be that you are simply too busy. What can you remove from your schedule? What part of your day can you reserve for spending time with God? Are there hobbies, extracurricular pursuits, or television shows you could remove from your life? As you seek to become a person of prayer, remember these words from Horatius Bonar — "There is no time so profitably spent as the early hour given to Jesus only. Do we give sufficient attention to this hour? If possible, it should be redeemed; nothing can make up for it. We must take time to be holy!"