

Series: “Basic Prayer”

Title: Lesson 6 - “Prayer: Delight or Drudgery?”

No one will commit to anything that seems like a drudgery. Many physical trainers will tell you an exercise routine must contain some level of enjoyment in order for it to become habitual. Those who find little joy in something will likely quit. Surely you have life experiences that confirm this is true.

These things have application for our prayer lives. Many never stick with prayer because it seems like a pain. Instead of being a blessing, it's a bore. It delivers drudgery instead of delight. All of this is sad when we consider that prayer is a form of interaction with God. The Psalmist said, “...in your presence is abundant joy; at your right hand are eternal pleasures” (Psalm 16:11). Out of all the things we do in life, prayer should be one of the most enjoyable. In this chapter, I would like to share two important clarifications that will help us experience prayer as a delight. We will talk about what prayer isn't and what prayer is.

WHAT PRAYER ISN'T

Defining a matter is often the first step in understanding it. One must know what something is before someone can use it. It is equally important to know what something isn't. I recently purchased a new lawnmower. Before putting it to use, I had to read the instruction manual. I gained important insights concerning how to use the device and how not to use it! Such realities can be applied to prayer. To become strong in the discipline, one must be aware of four things it isn't.

Religion

Religion isn't necessarily a bad word, but it can become one. In the most basic sense, the term refers to a set of beliefs about God and the practices that flow from those beliefs. Though it is often intended for good, religion can become negative, if one approaches it from a legalistic motive.

Jesus had a lot to say about this reality. He often rebuked the religious muckety-muck of his day for having a veneer of religion that was devoid of substance. He blasted the Pharisees in one of His sermons, saying, “On the outside you seem righteous to people, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Matthew 23:28). Jesus' words emphasized the severe consequences associated with dead religion. To experience the full life of Christ, we need to be on guard against empty and hollow approaches to God. We must be careful that we don't merely go through the motions of Christianity while missing the real meaning of Christianity.

Prayer is a realm in which we are especially susceptible to these dangers. From a young age, many of us were taught certain customs for prayer. We've all picked up various assumptions from personal experience, pop culture, and prevailing Christian thought. As a result, it is easy to form habits that overlook the heart. If we are not careful, we can glibly engage in religious rigamarole that is devoid of true worship.

Jesus told a parable about this very subject. In Luke 18:9-14 he gave an account that we often refer to as “The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.” In the story, the two different men went to the place of worship for prayer. The first,

assuming he was righteous, engaged in his regular ceremonious pomp and circumstance. He bragged on himself as he prayed, proclaiming, “God, I thank you that I’m not like other people—greedy, unrighteous, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of everything I get” (Luke 18:11-12). Notice that the self-righteous man’s focus was on externals. He thought he was accepted by and approved before God because of what he had done.

The second character in Jesus’ story had a different perspective. He knew he was a sinner, and he knew he needed grace from God. He prayed, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner!” (Luke 18:13). Jesus commended the second man’s approach, saying, “I tell you, this one went down to his house justified rather than the other; because everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:14). Our Lord’s analysis of the two characters would have shocked His original hearers. Pharisees were often venerated and tax collectors were some of the most despised people in society.

What was the point of Jesus’ comparison? He wanted to show that man-centered religion means nothing in prayer. Humility is the primary pre-requisite for a powerful prayer life. Neither the motions of religion nor the accomplishments of man mean a thing when one is on his or her knees before the Holy God.

If you want to experience prayer as a delight, be leery of the trappings of man-made religion. Learn to approach God as a bare soul in need of grace. Be careful in getting caught up in words, phrases, customs, time limits, and requirements that aren’t important to the Lord. Avoid legalism and empty religion. Don’t trust in what you’ve done for God. Rely on what He has done for you through Jesus Christ. Approach Him from a posture of humility, authenticity, and need.

Ritual

Some never experience meaningful fellowship with God because they focus too much on following what is thought to be proper protocol for prayer. I can still remember learning how to pray in Sunday School as a young child. A well-intentioned teacher instructed us to bow our heads, close our eyes, and fold our hands. She gave a detailed explanation on why each action was important. To this day, I sometimes feel a bit guilty if I don’t follow her advice!

All of us have been engrained, to one degree or another, with certain expectations for prayer. We have to be careful that we don’t make such things binding. Prayer isn’t about performing a certain ritual, it is about experiencing a personal relationship. Don’t let fellowship with God become lost in an over-concentration on a minutia of ritualistic requirements. The catch-phrases, clauses, and customs we often associate with prayer aren’t really necessary. In the end, the amount of time you spend, where you pray, the exact words you use, and the outline implemented for prayer aren’t what’s most important. Intimacy with God is what matters most!

The Pharisees failed in this regard. Jesus rebuked them for the way in which they thought they would impress God by “their many words” (Matthew 6:7). Understand the meaning of Jesus’ words. Christian clichés don’t make prayers powerful. A humble, heart-felt yearning for God is what matters. Don’t get caught up in jumping through hoops and checking a list. Make it your aim to simply talk to God!

A Requirement

When I was a young Christian, I had a skewed perspective on prayer. If I missed a morning prayer time, I fell into a funk. My entire day was ruined. I felt like I had blown it, and I imagined God was mad at me. I would stay somber until the next day. If I happened to start the following morning with prayer, my mood brightened. I assumed God was happy with me.

My mistake was that I viewed prayer as a prerequisite for a right relationship with God. I misunderstood the difference between union with Christ and communion with Christ. As a pastor, I've witnessed many people struggle with this concept. They view prayer, as well as other spiritual disciplines, as means to make God happy. The prayer closet, Christian service, witnessing, worship, private devotions, and acts of generosity are all secretly viewed as avenues for earning God's approval.

If you approach prayer in this way, you will surely struggle. A spirit of legalism will stifle your love for the Lord. Always remember "...you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is God's gift" (Ephesians 2:8). Prayer is not a way of earning salvation, it is merely a way of experiencing salvation. If you have repented of sin and placed your faith in Jesus for deliverance (Mark 1:15), you are a new person in Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:17), and nothing can change that (John 6:35-37)!

Instead of viewing prayer as an obligation, regard it as an opportunity. If you are born-again, the Spirit of God is within you. As a result, you have the opportunity to communicate with the Creator of all things! The Bible says, "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear. Instead, you received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father!'" (Romans 8:15). Don't confuse relationship and fellowship. If you have trusted in Jesus, there is no longer any condemnation hanging over your life (Romans 8:1). God is not mad at you. He loves you, and He invites you to daily enjoy His presence. Don't pray in order to make God happy. Pray because He is already happy with you, and pray to experience more and more of His awesome presence!

A Reward System

I can remember one of my first experiences with prayer. I was a child and I had heard talk of the subject, but I had never made any attempts at it. All that changed one day when I watched one of my favorite gameshows on television. The popular show aired on a new cable station with programming for children. During the commercial break, an announcement was made that the gameshow was accepting applications for participants. Viewers were invited to apply. My sister and I took action immediately. We had visions of traveling to California and becoming famous!

Our soaring expectations came crashing down when my mother explained that our chances at selection were slim. She told us thousands of applicants would likely apply for a spot on the show. Deterred only a little because of her words, we decided prayer was our best recourse. We began to hammer God with requests! For the first time in my life, I prayed, prayed, and prayed.

My infantile approach to prayer was based on a common misconception. Many regard prayer as little more than a reward system, a way to get things out of God. In such a perspective, the Lord is regarded as a gregarious, heavenly Aladdin, waiting to dispense rewards to those who ask.

Jesus warned of the reward approach to prayer. In the Sermon on the Mount, He said, “When you pray, don’t babble like the Gentiles, since they imagine they’ll be heard for their many words. Don’t be like them, because your Father knows the things you need before you ask him” (Matthew 6:7-8). Our Lord’s words reveal that a trust in His goodness and sovereignty is necessary for a strong prayer life. When we imagine God will reward us for the right types of prayers, we have a faulty perspective that will sabotage our souls and prevent us from healthy interaction with God. A tit-for-tat mindset isn’t good in any relationship.

Recognition

In condemning the empty religion of self-righteous Pharisees, Jesus warned His disciples, “Beware of the scribes, who want to go around in long robes and who want greetings in the marketplaces, the best seats in the synagogues, and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows’ houses and say long prayers just for show. These will receive harsher judgment” (Mark 12:38-40). The Greek word translated “for show” was a compound one that literally meant “to appear before.” One could translate it as meaning “to shine.” As used by Jesus the term depicted “an outward show or appearance, a pretense or pretext put forth in order to cover one’s real intent.”¹

The human heart is so depraved that it can even use prayer as a platform for pride. We stand in constant need of examining our own hearts. If we, in any form or fashion, use our prayer life for the advancement of self, we are likely to succumb to a sad spiritual state. Prayer will become yet another conduit for fulfilling our carnal hearts, and we will cut ourselves off from the joy of pure fellowship with God. To make prayer a delight we must be on guard against pride in prayer.

WHAT PRAYER IS

Though I didn’t realize it at the time, I grew up in a home with a mother who was a good cook. Naive concerning the quality of food in our household, I usually craved junk food as a kid. I would have rather eaten at McDonalds every day of the week. As I got older, however, my perspective began to change. I gradually saw that the quality of my mother’s cooking was a lot better.

Some believers need a similar change of perspective in the spiritual realm. They see prayer the wrong way. Because they have worn-out religious conceptions of the activity, they stay prayerless. Instead of being a delight, prayer is a drudgery. How can we flip the script on prayer? Let’s consider four Scriptural realities that teach us what prayer is. Through these, we will gain a new vision of prayer that will make us more likely to pray.

Rest

First, prayer is an encounter with rest. Have you ever been physically diminished to the point in which you had a deep need for sleep? Perhaps you know what it is like to finally climb into bed after an exhausting day of work. Or maybe you are familiar with

¹ Zodhiates, Spiros. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*. (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000), [CD-Rom].

the refreshment a vacation can bring after a prolonged season of busyness. Whatever the case, you know how important physical rest can be.

Did you know that you have been called to live in a perpetual state of spiritual rest? Jesus talked about these matters. In Matthew's gospel, He said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take up my yoke and learn from me, because I am lowly and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30). The word translated "weary" in verse 28 referred to one who was physically exhausted as a result of working hard. Matthew depicted Jesus as using a present tense verb, indicating a continual, ongoing state of exhaustion and fatigue.²

The word rendered "burdened" was often used in the ancient world to describe a ship loaded down with freight or cargo.³ Used spiritually and emotionally, it figuratively represented one being weighed down with troubles and difficult circumstances.⁴ Matthew portrayed Jesus as using the word in the perfect tense of the Greek language, indicating a completed, accomplished state of weariness. The imagery was of one carrying an intolerable emotional and spiritual load.

What was the meaning of the metaphors Jesus used? In the first-century world, the teaching of rabbis was often likened unto yokes. When Jesus' taught, His listeners would have been well familiar with what He was talking about. Most regularly worked in fields and pastures to eke out a living. In a more primitive agricultural society, a yoke was a necessary piece of technological equipment. It was a bar that joined two plow animals together, harnessing the energy of both to perform important work.

In Bible times, a yoke figuratively represented an obligation. Interestingly, many rabbis used the word to refer to the influence they had over their pupils. When one chose to follow a certain rabbi, it was said that he or she was under that individual's yoke.

Jesus employed the metaphor from first-century rabbinical practices in reference to His own teaching. As the true Shepherd sent from God (Isaiah 9:4; John 10:11-18), Christ offered an easier and lighter yoke. Most first-century rabbis had teaching characterized by obtuse and unrelenting demands. The Mishnaic code of ethics handed down by the tradition of the elders was their standard for teaching (Matthew 15:9). Jesus' teaching was from God. By believing and trusting in Him for salvation, one received a new nature that enabled one to fully fulfill the Law of God by loving God (John 3:3; Matthew 5:17, 22:37-40).

All of these things have a bearing on our prayer lives. We are not called to prayer because of legalistic constraint. The religious tradition of men are not our motivating factor. For us, prayer is not a raw discipline devoid of life. Sure, prayer requires a prayer of discipline. However, it is not an experience of empty duty and

² Rogers Jr., Cleon L. and Cleon L. Rogers III. *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan House Publishing, 1998), 25.

³ Zodhiates, [CD-Rom].

⁴ Friberg, Timothy; Barbara Friberg and Neva F. Miller. *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), [CD-Rom].

dullness. Instead, it is a pathway for spiritual rest. When we genuinely pray from a posture of faith, our inner nature is refreshed and rejuvenated.

Release

Several years ago, I felt it would help to visit a Christian counselor. Some stressful situations in life had piled up on me, and I needed encouragement and instruction. Over a number of sessions, the counselor shared a number of things that helped me. One of them centered on prayer. He directed me to a passage of Scripture. Together, we read Lamentations 2:19, a verse that says, “Arise, cry out in the night from the first watch of the night. Pour out your heart like water before the Lord’s presence. Lift up your hands to him for the lives of your children who are fainting from hunger at the head of every street.”

I was encouraged to consider the meaning of the verse. The words of Lamentations were penned by the prophet Jeremiah while Jerusalem was being ransacked by invading hordes. In Lamentations 2:19, the prophet invited the people of God to cry out to the Lord in prayer. Jeremiah is now famously known as “the weeping prophet.” Why did he gain that title? Because he understood a fundamental aspect of prayer. When God’s people pray, they have an opportunity to pour out their hearts to the Lord.

Some miss this. They regard prayer as a dull duty. It is approached with a checklist mentality. Remember the context of Jeremiah’s experience. He had witnessed flames burning his hometown (Lamentations 2:3). He had seen friends and loved ones shot down by the enemy’s arrows (Lamentations 2:4). The holy temple had been ransacked and defiled (Lamentations 2:6-7). The cries of motherless young children and babies had filled his ears (Lamentations 2:11). What did the prophet do with his grief? He prayed. He lifted up his hands and he told God how he felt.

Don’t miss what Jeremiah’s experience teaches us. Prayer is an opportunity for pouring out our emotions before the Lord. In His presence, we can give full vent to how we feel. Prayer provides a platform for processing our perspectives concerning the pains and problems that plague us. It is an avenue for filtering our emotions with the realities of God’s truth.

Have you learned this secret? Approaching prayer in such a way can radically transform how you look at intercession and supplication. Instead of being a drudgery, prayer can be a delight. When we regularly experience the emotional release that is available in prayer, we will be more likely to pray. Do what Jeremiah did. Pour out your heart like water before the Lord’s presence!

Relationship

My wife and I try to maintain a weekly time for a date. We normally use Fridays to get away for lunch or some other excursion in which we can be completely alone. I normally look forward to such times. Why? Because the time provides an opportunity for relational connection.

You should look at prayer in a similar way. It is not a religious chore or task to be accomplished. It is an opportunity for you to relationally connect with the God of the Universe. As a being made in His image (Genesis 1:26-27), you have been made to relate to God. You have a soul that has been created by God and for God. If you don’t

regularly connect with Him, you are missing out on what it means to be a full-orbed human.

Jesus referenced these realities when teaching us to pray. Do you know the Lord's Prayer? How did Jesus begin the prayer? He taught us to pray, "Our *Father* in heaven, your name be honored as holy" (Matthew 6:9). The title "Father" was significant. It indicated that prayer was to be regarded as a relational activity. Many first-century Jews would have been shocked to hear Jesus' teaching. Luke 18:11 reveals that most Pharisees addressed the Lord with the rather generic title of "God."

Jesus taught His disciples to address the Lord with the title "Father" for a reason. He wanted them to know that prayer was an opportunity for relationally connecting with their Creator. The application for us is obvious. We too should regard prayer as a relational activity. When we see it any other way, we will be slow to pray. Prayer will be regarded as something we *have to do*, instead of being seen as something we *get to do*.

Renewal

Lastly, prayer is an opportunity for spiritual renewal. All of us fade and weaken overtime. The demands and duties of life seem to sap spiritual energy. Just as we frequently recharge cell phones and other electronic devices, we need to be regularly renewed in the Lord's presence. Isaiah referenced these realities, saying, "those who trust in the Lord will renew their strength; they will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not become weary, they will walk and not faint (Isaiah 40:31).

Notice that Isaiah spoke of the need to "trust in the Lord." At the same time, remember from earlier in our study that Jesus likened prayer to an exercise of faith. We learned such is true from our Lord's words in Luke 18:8. Thus, prayer is one way you can exhibit your trust.

When you express faith in the Lord through believing prayer, you experience spiritual renewal. Isaiah likened the experience to soaring "on wings like eagles." His words were addressed to Jewish hearers who had been carried away as captives from their homeland. They were undoubtedly emotionally and spiritually distraught. They needed encouragement. The prophet proposed a profound trust in the Lord as a remedy.

One Bible scholar has noted a remarkable picture in the original language of Isaiah 40:31. The Hebrew translated "renew their strength" literally meant "change their strength." The language provided a picture of one changing into fresh clothes or exchanging a worn-out item for something new.⁵ What a compelling description of prayer!

Have you ever worn the same outfit for a long period of time? Or, have you ever engaged in an activity that made you sweaty or dirty? I'm sure you have had such experiences. It can be so refreshing to get cleaned up and changed when you've been in the same clothes for a while, or after you've worked out or done yard work. A simple shower and change of clothes can make you feel fresh and new!

⁵ Carson, D. A., R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, and G. J. Wenham, eds. *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*. 4th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), [CD-Rom].

Similar realities exist when it comes to prayer. Life can make you feel worn out and dirty. Getting alone in God's presence has a way of cleaning you up and making you feel better. Time spent with Him is renewing.

Are you familiar with these realities? Do you pray? There are some times that I go into my prayer time wearied and worn out from life's demands. A part of me often doesn't feel like praying. However, time spent with God is always rewarding and renewing. I normally walk away from my prayer closest thinking, "It has been so good to spend time with God!"

If you want to move from seeing prayer as drudgery, flip the script on how you see prayer. It can be a delight, when you approach it with a relational perspective. Through pouring out your heart in prayer, you can receive the rest, release, and renewal you need in life. When you see prayer in such a way, you will be more likely to pray.