

**Series:** Basic Prayer

**Title:** Lesson 9 - "Prayer As A Way of Life"

New commitments to prayer sometimes feel like the latest exercise or diet fads. Earnest believers quit a routine nearly as quickly as they start it. Prayer never becomes a mainstay in their lives. Such is unfortunate when one considers the admonitions of Scripture. The Bible tells us, "...pray constantly" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). According to Scripture, prayer is to be an ongoing, habitual, and continual part of our lives. Commenting on these realities, John R. Rice noted, "God never commanded us to sing without ceasing, nor preach without ceasing, nor give without ceasing, nor work without ceasing; but he did command, 'pray without ceasing.'"<sup>1</sup>

As we close our study, there is a possibility that we may never appropriate what we have learned. Let us remember that the Bible encourages us to be both hearers and doers of God's Word (James 1:22). The question before us as we close our study is one of *how* — how can we make prayer a practical part of our lives? Ultimately, we need heart transformation that moves us to pray. In addition, however, there are several practical things we can do to be more consistent in prayer. Let's consider four such things.

### **ACCOUNTABILITY**

Several years ago, an old friend called me. We had been buddies since college. He had a pressing issue. Acutely aware of his need for help in the Christian life, he asked me to serve as what he called an "accountability partner." I had heard of such a relationship, but I was a little leery. Did I really want to become vulnerable with another? What would the time requirements be? Frankly, I knew some who had tried such things, but it seemed like most failed.

Despite my initial hesitancy, I gave the thing a shot. We began having a weekly conversation each Friday. Following the examples of men like John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards, we created a desired attribute list. Questions were crafted in areas of personal spirituality and discipline. Topics dealt with things like Bible reading, purity, honesty, witnessing, Scripture memory, time management, eating habits, family relationships, and more. Our weekly check-in time lasted about an hour. When we talked, we would briefly discuss how our week went and then we would go through the list of questions, asking each other how we were doing in each category.

Some don't agree with what I share here. They don't see the benefit of such a relationship. Many have heard disastrous reports of untrustworthy people tattling and sharing confidential details. Others have tried accountability and they feel it is useless. A good number of people would also claim there is no Scriptural precedent for what I am endorsing.

I realize there are potential pitfalls with what I am endorsing here. In addition, I understand the Bible doesn't explicitly outline requirements for such a relationship. However, I do think an argument can be made from Scripture for the principle of accountability. The Lord clearly intends for His children to have meaningful

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<sup>1</sup> Rice, John. *Prayer, Asking and Receiving*. (Murfreesboro, TN: Sword of The Lord Publishers, 1942), 25.

relationships with other believers. Isn't such implied though the second half of the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:39)?

Other passages of Scripture highlight the helpfulness of close Christian friendships. Think about the positive light in which the Bible speaks of David's relationship with Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:26). Also, consider Solomon's advice to his son — "Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17). What about the plain teaching from the author of Hebrews? He told believers, "...consider one another in order to provoke love and good works" (Hebrews 10:24).

Close Christian relationships have a way of spurring us on in our pursuit of Christ. Each Christian needs someone who serves as David's Jonathan, a meaningful friend who provides strength and support. Think of such a relationship as a part of your discipleship journey. You don't need to get hung up on terms. You need fellowship. You need other Christians to build you up and bless you.

Why do I share these things? Early on, my accountability partner and I decided one of our weekly accountability questions would focus on prayer. There are some weeks we miss, but for the most part, each week someone asks me, "How are you doing in your prayer life?" Such regular accountability has been a game changer. At first, I believed such a question would guilt me into praying. I regarded it as a little more than a motivating factor. Overtime, however, I discovered that the weekly question spurred me on to pray in three ways.

### **Honesty**

First, regular accountability made me more honest about my prayer life. I've discovered that many Christians are more lenient with themselves than they are with other people. Some typically judge themselves on what they intend to do, while judging others on what others actually do. I have also discovered that many Christians live in the land of aspirations, not actualities. They seem to always be focused on what they will do some day, while never fully embracing and actualizing what they aspire for. Prayer is one issue in which all of these things is put on full display. Most know they should pray, and most want to pray. However, few pray consistently.

I've found accountability helps with such things. It makes me honest. Because someone asks me about the quantity and quality of my prayer life each week, I am more in tune with how I am really doing with the discipline.

### **Humility**

Because accountability breeds honesty, it also evokes humility. Regular questions concerning my prayer life make me aware of how prone I am to fail. Cognizant of my apathy, I am often driven to confess my shortcomings. I am regularly made aware of my great need for the grace of Jesus. Many times I have prayed, saying something like, "Lord, I realize how prone I am toward prayerlessness. I confess I have a hard heart. I don't desire to talk with you as much as I should. Please touch my heart and give me a greater passion for you!"

If accountability makes us more humble, that is a good thing. We all need regular reminders of our lowly estate. God's blessing is more prevalent when we are aware of how spiritually insufficient we are. The Bible says, "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you" (James 4:10).

## **Holiness**

Lastly, I've discovered that accountability creates a greater thirst for holiness. Initially, my weekly conversations generated a degree of dread and despair. I was overwhelmed with how broken I was, how unable I was to live up to the virtues I desired. In time, I began to see the benefit of accountability. Through the fellowship and discipleship that took place, a great zeal for holiness was born. Isn't such a zeal what the Lord desires? Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (Matthew 5:6).

### *Putting It into Practice*

You don't have to do things the way I do them. There are no hard and fast rules for what I'm talking about. You don't even have to use labels like "accountability" or "accountability partner." I simply encourage you to have someone to talk to. Pray that God would send someone your way. For purposes of discipleship and fellowship, it is critical that you have a close Christian friend with whom you can confide. It is more likely prayer will be a way of life if you have someone else spurring you on.

## **PRAYER PARTNERS**

On top of employing the help of an accountability partner, I have discovered another type of relationship can serve as a catalyst for prayer. In particular, I've found regular prayer partners can be a big help. As with my accountability experiences, I was introduced to the benefit of this second type of relationship by the providence and goodness of the Lord.

It was when I was pastoring my second church that a deacon gave me a call. He told me, "I want to pray with you regularly." My schedule was busy, so I was a bit averse to his offer at first. Nevertheless, I acquiesced, figuring it wouldn't be too pastoral to reject a deacon's offer for prayer! We began meeting for a simple thirty minute prayer time at 4:30 p.m. on Mondays.

When Norman and I met, we started by taking ten minutes or so to share requests and talk about life. We then each spent about ten minutes praying. The timeframes I mention are approximate. My point is that our meeting was rather simple and straightforward. I did not anticipate that a once-a-week get together would be so easy. To be honest, my late afternoon hours weren't really productive in the first place. Reserving the last thirty minutes of my day for prayer ended up being like a smart move.

Now, I realize you may not have the liberty to use a part of your work schedule for prayer. As a pastor, I was able to do such a thing. Be careful of making exact comparisons of your life to another. Each has different life stations and schedules. Every believer must handle personal and vocational responsibilities and requirements uniquely. I don't expect you to do things the way I did them. All I suggest is that you find a way to engage with prayer partners on a regular basis.

Is there a Scriptural standard that upholds the idea of meeting with other believers for prayer? There certainly is. The Bible is replete with descriptions of such things. The book of Acts describes the early church by saying, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to

prayer” (Acts 2:42). Jesus was so concerned with the issue of prayer amongst His people that He called the local gathering of believers “a House of Prayer” (Matthew 21:13).

Acts 4:23-31 describes a prayer meeting amongst the early church. Verse 24 tells of the way the first believers “raised their voices together to God.” What a picture of corporate prayer! The most amazing thing of the account is the result of such praying. Acts 4:31 says, “When they had prayed, the place where they were assembled was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God boldly.”

Modern churches would do well to follow the early church’s example. Believers experience innumerable benefit through cooperate prayer. I’ve heard accounts of the way in which such gatherings were common at Charles Spurgeon’s church. The Baptist pastor oversaw the Metropolitan Tabernacle in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century. He is renown for being one of the greatest preachers in the history of Christendom. One could say he was a sort of preaching prodigy. The nickname “Prince of Preachers” has been given to him.

While Spurgeon was a master in the pulpit, he readily acknowledged the source of his strength — prayer. It is reported that a prayer gathering occurred every time he preached. Fittingly, believers met in the basement of the church, right under the pulpit. Spurgeon was known to say something like, “If you want to know where the power in this church rests, don’t look to me. Instead, look to the small group of people assembled together right now!” The Baptist preacher’s words extol the power that can be found in meeting with prayer partners. Church history attests to the veracity of these things over and over again. If you study any major movement of revival, you will often find a renewed commitment to prayer gatherings at the heart of such movements. There is power in corporate prayer. Personally, I’ve found that prayer partners have helped my prayer life in a number of ways.

### **How to pray**

Praying with other believers has taught me a lot about how to pray. Disciples of Christ are always in need of learning more about how to offer intercessions, supplications, requests, and the like (Luke 11:1). Hearing more mature believers pray can provide many powerful lessons. Over my times of gathering with God’s people, I have picked up on many phrases, Scriptures, and approaches I can use in prayer. My prayer life is more robust because of the example and encouragement of others.

### **Fellowship in prayer**

Praying with others has a way of bonding hearts together. As I’ve written what is before you, I felt compelled to message and thank a brother in Christ. The two of us have enjoyed numerous times of mutual prayer. Because of our time together, we have a bond of kinship that far exceeds surface-level relationships with other believers. Those who pray together often bond together. Mutual edification and encouragement is found when we are on our knees with other believers.

## **Passion for prayer**

Many times I leave prayer meetings with other believers feeling like I could spiritually burst! There is something about corporate prayer that stokes the fires of passion for private prayer. It may seem like the time requirement of meeting with prayer partners would diminish personal times of prayer. The opposite actually seems to be true. When I am more regular in meeting with others for prayer, I am more likely to pray by myself.

## **Answered Prayer**

A final benefit of corporate prayer times is the way in which it gives a platform for tracking answered prayer. In sharing requests and praying for one another, prayer partners develop a keen awareness of the physical and spiritual needs of each one. When prayers are answered, it is obvious. Prayer partners have opportunity to celebrate. A sense of affirmation and validation concerning the importance of prayer grows. Corporate prayer highlights and emphasizes the power of prayer, because it provides a witness to the way in which God answers prayer.

## *Putting It into Practice*

There is a large group of men who meet at my church for prayer early each Wednesday morning. After their meeting, they go out for breakfast together. I'm sure each of those men could give testimony to the benefit of having prayer partners. Do you have a similar practice in your life?

Know this — your prayer meetings with other believers don't have to mimic what I do, nor is it necessary that they imitate the practice of others. There is not a particular hour of day that is better. Find what works for you. Think about people you could meet with. Don't be passive. Ask people to join you in prayer. Pray that the Lord would provide prayer partners. You don't have to meet every week. An every-other-week prayer meeting can bring the same benefit. Whatever you do, get some prayer partners and pray!

## **TOOLS**

I have vivid memories of my first forays into spiritual growth. Though I had been a born-again believer for years, I didn't know much about walking with Christ. Previously, I regarded Christianity as involving little more than a decision. Because I had asked God to save me of my sins, I felt relief that I was going to heaven when I died. Unfortunately, I knew little more beyond that.

Things began to change in my college years. Interactions with a campus student ministry were impactful. In addition, a friend happened to give me a study Bible and my church had given recent high school graduates a copy of a popular Christian book for young people. Somewhere along the way, I heard a challenge to have a daily time in God's Word. Driven by a desire to be closer to the Lord, I began reading through my study Bible, paying careful attention to the notes in the margins at the bottom of the pages. I also started reading through the book my church had given me at graduation.

As I committed myself to using such tools, I noticed something happening. My perspective in life began to change. I was expanding in my understanding of who God

was, and of who He wanted me to be. Joy and peace began to grow in my life. It felt like I had a sense of purpose and direction I had never known.

Why do I share these experiences? My desire is to give testimony concerning the power of tools and resources in the Christian life. I've heard it said that who you are in five years will be determined by the friends you associate with and the books you read. Such a principle can be applied to prayer.

Does Scripture encourage the use of resources and tools in the Christian life? I think it does. Consider a verse we've mentioned earlier in this study. Luke 11:1 documents the way in which Jesus' disciples made a request, saying, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John also taught his disciples." That verse sets a precedent for prayer. It reveals that disciples often stand in need of learning more and more about the subject. Each of us should be in a continual growth pattern. Our understanding of and approaches to prayer should morph over time.

In addition, Scripture seems to support the place of tools and resources in the Christian life. I often think about some of Paul's last recorded words. In appealing to Timothy for help and encouragement, the apostle said, "When you come, bring the cloak I left in Troas with Carpus, as well as the scrolls, especially the parchments" (2 Timothy 4:13). What were the supplies Paul requested? They undoubtedly contained portions of Scripture. Quite possibly, they also involved spiritual writings and lists that provided Paul with encouragement and strength. Though the man was only one of Twelve apostles, though he was a pillar of the church, though he was used by the Lord for writing a large portion of our New Testament, and though he was well-advanced in the faith, Paul still saw the need for drawing regular encouragement from sacred writings and spiritual resources.

Do you have tools to help you in your prayer life? Let me encourage you in this area. First, be aware of the benefit of good Christian books. Theology books can help you learn more about God and His ways, giving you an awareness of how to better pray. In addition, there are several wonderful books written on the subject of prayer. I recommend some of the classics. John Bunyan's work on prayer, though a bit difficult to read, is a Godsend. T.W. Hunt's book "The Doctrine of Prayer" was immensely helpful to me in my early Christian journey. Along with these, Christian biography can do a lot to strengthen your prayer life. The autobiography of George Müller and the biographical account of David Brainerd that was drawn from his journals have lit hearts afire for prayer over the years.

In addition to the types of books mentioned above, I also endorse using prayer books as a tool. I have touched on this earlier, so I will only briefly reiterate this point. There are numerous volumes containing prayers of bygone saints. Such volumes can be read devotionally. However, they can also be used as a guide for praying. I love reciting prayers contained within "The Valley of Vision." The volume cannot be recommended enough. Sure, we want to avoid coldly reciting the prayers of others from an empty heart. However, tools like "The Valley of Vision" can be a great encouragement.

## **WRITTEN RECORDS**

One final prayer tool involves written records. In our study we have already made mention of the use of prayer journals. Notepads, notebooks, and the like can all be a

powerful help in cultivating a rich prayer life. How so? Such things give us a way of tracking prayer requests. By seeing our prayers on paper and by checking off answered prayers, we can have a record of God's goodness and faithfulness to us.

Is there Scripture precedent for such a practice? There certainly is. Have you ever stopped to consider why we have so many written records of prayers within the Bible? God's Word is filled with prayers because the people of God felt impressed to write prayers down over the generations. When Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, the nation penned the words of his famous song of praise (Exodus 15:1-2). Hannah's epic anthem of rejoicing at the birth of Samuel was also written down (1 Samuel 2:1-10). Some of Daniel's prayers in Babylon were recorded for the good of God's people (Daniel 2:20-23).

In the New Testament, there is also ample support for the practice of writing prayers down. The most famous prayer of all — the Lord's Prayer — comes to us via the pen of an apostle (Matthew 6:9-13). Paul often wrote many of his prayers out. See his words in Ephesians 1:15-19, 3:14-19; Colossians 1:9-12; and Philipians 1:9-11. In 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2, he gave details concerning how he wanted others to pray for him.

It is important to clarify something about this matter. In advocating for using prayer journals and the like, I am not saying our written records of prayers have the same weight as Scriptural accounts of prayers. All I'm saying is that there is evidence that saints in Bible times were faithful to write down the content and concepts contained within important prayers. Their prayers are now regarded as Holy Scripture, but our records of prayer won't be.

However, there is still benefit in keeping a written record of our prayers. Such a practice can do a lot to make prayer more of a way of life. How does this work? I've already mentioned one benefit earlier. Written records of our prayers can help us track answered prayer and God's faithfulness toward us. In addition to this benefit, they can help provide focus. By seeing the content of our prayers in one place, we often receive clarity for prayer. In addition, written records of our prayers can serve as an encouragement for future generations. Our prayer journals and notebooks may one day be seen by family members and friends. Who knows how the Lord might use our records to encourage and edify others?

Since I am a pastor, I am looked to for a number of things in my family. One of them centers on prayer. Many times, the pastor in the family is the de facto prayer person at family gatherings and events. Another interesting dynamic revolves around family Bibles. It seems many people like to give me the Bibles of loved ones who pass away. I currently have a collection of nearly a dozen volumes that belonged to grandparents, great-grandparents, aunts, uncles, and the like.

One such Bible is a blessing to me. It was owned by a woman in my family who kept a written record of prayers on the back flyleaf. Interestingly, a number of names of deceased family members are on that page. One column lists family members who were previously not Christians. Amazingly, some of those individuals professed Christ as Savior while they were still living! The written record of prayer I hold in my hands stands as a record to the power of prayer.

You don't have to keep a written record, but I've discovered such a practice can be a blessing. If you feel so led, use a journal, notebook, or the flyleaf of your Bible to

write our requests. You can merge this practice with the prayer bank and prayer list we talked about earlier in our study. Through such a discipline, I believe you will be encouraged to press on, making prayer a way of life.