

“Establishing a Life of Prayer”

Luke chapter 11, verse 1 says this about Jesus: “He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.’” Jesus’ disciples saw Him pray. Apparently there was something in His praying that they envied, something they were lacking. So they say, “Lord, teach us to pray. Can you identify with their request? Ever felt, “Lord, teach *me* to pray.”

Do you pray? Regularly? We probably represent different levels of prayer. Some of us, perhaps, hardly ever pray – except in an emergency, or when we’re in church, or when we want something badly. For others of us, prayer is a hit or miss kind of thing. Some days we have our “devotional time”, other days it never happens. We may have spells where we pray fairly consistently, but then other spells where it’s pushed to the side. Hopefully, some of us have a regular time of prayer each day, and it really is an indispensable part of our life and walk with God.

I want to talk about establishing a life of prayer – developing a consistent spiritual discipline of daily prayer. I could call this sermon, “Prayer Life, 101”. We’ll look at some practical steps to starting and maintaining a meaningful prayer life.

But perhaps I first should just say a few words about prayer itself. *What is prayer?* A popular assumption is that prayer is asking God for things, and hoping we get the answers we want. A Sunday School teacher asked a little boy if he prayed every day. He answered, “No, not every day. Some days I don’t want anything.” In line with this view, the value of our prayer life is measured by the number of answers we get – i.e. God gives us what we ask for. Jesus did tell us to ask the heavenly Father for things. But if this represents our total understanding of prayer, this is a very shallow and inadequate understanding of prayer.

Basically, prayer is communication with God. Talking to God, and listening to God. Prayer is the primary means of nurturing our relationship with our Creator. When we come to Christ, we are spiritually reborn and adopted into God’s family as daughters and sons. Prayer keeps that relationship with God vital and healthy. Saying we’re Christians, and having little communication with our heavenly Father, is akin to having a child grow up in a family and hardly ever having a conversation with their mom or dad.

Prayer is not so much *getting* as it is *becoming* the sons and daughters God wants us to become. As I’ve often said, *prayer is not getting God to give us what we want, but allowing God to make us what He wants!*

Okay, let’s look at some practical steps to starting and maintaining a life of prayer.

First step: Make prayer a priority. If prayer is the pipeline that keeps our communication with God alive and well, then it is much more important than a lot of the other things we do. For instance, think how much time we spend watching TV, or having our nose in our cell phone, or how much time we spend with our hobbies. It’s easy (consciously or unconsciously) to think

that time spent in prayer is wasted time, down time. Gee, we've got all this other stuff to do, and there are only so many hours in the day!

So, we begin by *making* the time. If we pray only when we feel like it, or "if we have the time", we will never have a consistent prayer life. Resolve to set aside a block of time each day to be alone with God.

Jesus is our example here. Mark 1:35 tells us: "And in the morning, a great while before day, he rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed." (Jesus got up very early just to pray). Luke 5:15-16 also informs us of Jesus' prayer life: "But now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds were gathering to hear him and to be cured of their diseases. Meanwhile, he would slip away to deserted places and pray." (Apparently Jesus would pray at times throughout the day).

So, choose a time when you can be alone with God. Preferably when you are fresh and alert! It may be the morning. For those on shift work, their "morning" will be a different time of the day. Our best time could be evening – hopefully, not when you're so tired you're half asleep. Morning is usually best for me. When I was a teenager, I would come home from school and have my prayer time late afternoon (no one else was home). Many people today have busy schedules. One stay at home mom with 5 kids told me she sometimes has to lock herself in the bathroom just to be alone with the Lord!

The first step gets us going: We simply have to *make a conscious decision* to set aside a time each day to pray, or it won't happen.

Next: Be quiet. Learn to listen for God. Psalm 46:10 says, "Be still, and know that I am God." Be still! Be careful not to spend the whole prayer time *talking*! Do you know anybody who's a *talker*? Someone who just talks and talks and talks – and hardly ever listens. You can't get a word in edgewise. Aren't they annoying! So, let's not be that way with God. After all, maybe God has something important to say to us!

The listening part of our prayer time can be used in conjunction with the *Bible*. Read a passage from the Bible. Then think about it, chew on it, allow God to speak through that Bible passage.

Some people ask: Does God speak to us in an audible voice? Some claim that this has happened to them. I can't honestly say I've ever heard God speak to me in that way. It's more like a thought comes to my mind. Or I get an impression that just kind of sticks with me, as if the Holy Spirit is prompting me in some way.

A problem many people have when praying and meditating is that our mind tends to wander off, or we get distracted. Like you suddenly think of something you forgot to do, or need to do, or your thoughts drift off into another area. Don't get upset. This is common. One way to deal with this is to pray with a pen and paper nearby. Jot down the thought, or what you have to do, so you don't have to try to remember. Then go back to praying.

A third suggestion in developing a prayer life is this: *Be yourself*. Be honest with God. Be real. God knows what you're thinking and feeling anyway. Don't worry about any special prayer language: just talk to God, listen for God.

Kids can teach us much about being real and natural in talking to God! Here are some examples.

Lucy: "Are you really invisible, or is that just a trick?"

"What does it mean you are a jealous God? I thought you had everything." - Jane

"Thank you for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy." - Joyce

"It rained for our whole vacation and is my father mad! He said some things about you that people are not supposed to say, but I hope you will not hurt him anyway."

- Your friend (But I'm not going to tell you who I am

"Please send me a pony. I never asked for anything before. You can look it up."

- Bruce

"My brother is a rat. You should give him a tail. Haha! - Danny

Certainly we should be reverent, and not treat God with no sense of His holiness; but we can still just be ourselves, and say what's really on our mind and heart.

Another pointer: Use various types of prayers. It's fine to ask for things, but also mix in prayers of praise and thanksgiving. Maybe you've heard of the acronym **A C T S**.

Adoration – praising God, adoring God, worshiping God.

Confession – admit our shortcomings and sins.

Thanksgiving – thanking God for specific blessings.

Supplication – praying for yourself, and intercessory prayers for others.

A well-rounded and healthy prayer life will include all of these types of prayers.

Sometimes people have asked me: Is it okay to pray for myself? Of course it is! Jesus prayed for Himself – for guidance, for strength. He told us to bring our own needs to God. That's not selfish – unless you're the *only* person you ever pray for!

However, praying for others (intercessory prayer) is a priceless ministry! Doesn't it mean a lot to you if you know some people are praying for you? Many people keep a prayer list - written down names of people and situations to pray about.

Another tip for having a solid prayer life: Keep tuned in throughout the day. In addition to having a designated "quiet time", short prayers throughout the day can keep us in touch with

God. I developed this habit early on as a teenager when I was a new Christian. In high school I'd start most classes with a short, quiet prayer. "Lord, I didn't do my homework; please have mercy on thy servant!" "Jesus, please don't let me fall asleep in this Latin class." Lord, I wouldn't object if you made that hot girl in row 3 seat 2 fall in love with me." (Only kidding about the topic of my prayers – but I did pray as each class was about to start). I had a Sunday morning paper route. So early Sunday morning, when the streets were quiet and most people were still asleep, I'd pray as I walked my route. Often I pray mowing the lawn, driving in the car, or if a police car or ambulance whizzes by me with sirens going. No doubt at least some of you do this too.

Another suggestion: Wherever possible, turn your prayers into action. If you're praying for a friend who's lonely, maybe give them a call, text, or visit. If you're praying for a family going through hard financial times, give them some money if you can. If you're praying for a family member or neighbor to become a Christian, ask that the Holy Spirit will create an opportunity for you to share the gospel with that person if it's God's will for you to do that. Where possible, put your praying into action!

Finally, stick with it. Don't give up! Disciplining ourselves to pray every day isn't easy. Achieving a satisfying and consistent prayer life is not gained without effort and perseverance. There will be times when our prayers seem empty, forced, and God seems far away. David Head, a British clergyman, wrote several little books on prayer. Funny books! Prayers you may *think*, but not verbalize. One is: "O Lord, talking to thee is like talking to a brick wall."

Really now! Haven't you ever felt that? Even the greatest saints, even the most seasoned prayer warrior, will have times when God seems far away, and our prayers seem like hollow ritual. But hang in there. Don't allow *feelings and emotions* to rule the day. God is present even when we don't *feel* God present. And like so many other things in life, it's when we stick with it – even days when we don't feel like praying, or pray and don't feel anything special – it's when we stick with it that those very special times with God are more likely to come.

Let me close with some honest, personal words: I don't want to give the impression that my own prayer life is the greatest in the world. I struggle with prayer, just like you. Periods when my devotional time has been a joyful and uplifting experience, and spells where it's been colorless and frustrating. I've struggled with clearing time for prayer. Contrary to what most people think, any pastor worth his or her salt spends many hours a week working. Add to that raising a family, dealing with personal and family issues – and it's just as hard to *make* that time for prayer as it is for you. But I know it's important. And I know it's only when God's people pray that the greatest advances in God's kingdom are made. So I keep at it.

Here's what I hope will happen as a result of this sermon. For those of you who already have a prayer life - you pray and have a devotional time most every day – I hope this will encourage you to keep at it, and work to make this part of your Christian commitment even more rooted in your life. And for those of you who don't have that "quiet time" or "devotions" each day, I hope you will take that step *now*, and ask God to help you form that Christian habit.

