



Prayer - Week 1

Why study prayer?

Why study prayer at all? Theoretically, prayer should be at the top of our list of topics we should continually be studying for our whole lives. Yet, prayer is rarely taught in depth. Perhaps, this is because of the common assumption made about prayer. This assumption is that everyone - especially those who have grown up as Christians - inherently know how to pray. If this assumption is true, then the main factor determining whether or not we have a vibrant prayer life is merely the time and effort that we are willing to put into prayer. We might think to ourselves “if only we were willing to set aside more time and put more effort into prayer, then we would surely advance in our prayer lives!” Yet, this is not necessarily the case. We hit what we can call a “saturation point” at which the capacity that we have for prayer becomes limited by the theological understanding we have of prayer, as well as the practices of prayer that we have access to. I relate this to a golfer who demands to be self-taught. No matter how many balls you hit (effort), or how many hours you spend practicing (time), you hit a saturation point where improving at golf becomes a stalemate. Without proper instruction, and guided training, you aren’t going to improve. So it goes with our prayer lives. Time + effort *alone* will not equal a more vibrant prayer life. Rather, it requires biblical teaching around prayer, as well as retrieving ancient prayer practices taught by the church over the last two millennia. As Eugene Peterson puts it:

If we insist on being self-taught in prayer, our prayer, however eloquent will be meagre... Unstructured and untrained, our prayers are something learned by tourists out of a foreign language phrase book: we give thanks at meals, repent of our grosser sins, bless the picnic, and ask for occasional guidance. Did we think prayer was merely a specialized and incidental language to get by on during those moments when we happen to pass through a few miles of religious country? But, our entire lives are to be involved. We need fluency in the language of the country we live in.” (Working the Angles, 57)

Another reason to study prayer is because prayer is the heartbeat of the Christian life. Without prayer, spiritual formation is *impossible*. Christians for nearly two thousand years have survived at times without sermons, sometimes without singing due to persecution, without the latest Bible studies, or books by Christian authors, and usually *without a Bible itself*. The idea of a personally-owned Bible that you are free to read in your own language is a very recent phenomenon on the spectrum of Christian history - mostly because of limitations in printing and illiteracy. However, *never* have Christians attempted to get by without the sacraments, and prayer. The connection of both we will hopefully see in later weeks.

For us, this means that spiritual formation/growth *can be accomplished without*, sermons, songs, classes, Bible studies, and it is even possible without access to a Bible itself; yet, *spiritual formation is impossible* without prayer. There is no scenario in which a Christian - even one flooded with access to Bible study programs, classes, worship music, endless sermons, etc. - will grow in their faith in any substantial way *without prayer*. Without prayer we will be stuck in spiritual infancy, at an early saturation point wondering where to go. So then, prayer should be at the top of the list of what we need to develop so that we may grow into the image of Christ. To *not* learn to pray is to commit ourselves to our own spiritual immaturity. So may we, like the disciples, say “Lord, teach us to pray!...” (Luke 11:1)

Notes:

What is Prayer? - Pentecost

A mistake often made when one learns to pray is to head first to technique or habits, without learning what prayer even is in the first place. But, one thing we may learn from prayer is that tips and tricks will not serve us in the long run. A vibrant prayer life is not just around the corner, waiting to be found by us if only we'd place our hands in the right way, or begin and end our prayers a certain way. A vibrant prayer life is *forged, not found*. A vibrant prayer life is forged using a variety of means that we will discover through this class, not simply found by incorporating a few new practices. The place I believe is most helpful to beginning a study in prayer is in Acts 2, and the events of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-12). Very simply, as promised by Christ, the Holy Spirit descends from heaven and fills all of the believers. This scene of the descension or presence of fire marking the divine presence is a familiar one, as it has happened many times before. First at the burning bush (Exo 3), then at Mt. Sinai (Exo 19:18), next upon the Tabernacle (Exo 27:20-21; 40:38), and later the First Temple built by Solomon (2 Chron 7:1). This motif of course has continued with the believers of Acts 2, showing us the clear image that the divine presence, the sacred space of the Lord is not on a mountain, not in a tent, nor in a beautiful temple - but within each of us who are in Christ. The reason to start here when learning about prayer is because we each must recognize that the Lord is not far away from us, he is not distant, he is not bound to a location, nor do we have to "send prayers up" to him as if he were Santa at the North Pole. Rather, he is closer than we can even fathom. He is closer to us than the air we breathe or our very spirit. Grasping the reality of his presence is necessary for understanding with prayer - because if we fail to grasp the fact that God has chosen for his dwelling place to be with(in) humans, then at best our prayers will be like writing letters to the Lord far away instead of communing with the Divine personal presence of the Lord within us.

Trinity - reciprocal indwelling

It is not merely that the Lord dwells within us, as if that weren't enough. Because of Pentecost, we have also been made to dwell in him. Basically, through the presence of the third person of the Trinity within us, we have been made to be "in Christ" as you'll see in Paul's writings, or to "abide in him" as we see from the mouth of Christ, through the pen of John. This is what theologians call "reciprocal indwelling." Reciprocal indwelling is physically impossible, but spiritually true. The closest relationships that two objects can have is for one object to be inside another object - water in a cup for example. Yet, there is a closer relationship two things can have that is physically impossible, which is for both objects to be within the other object at the same time. While water is "inside" the cup, we would not say that the cup is at the same time "inside" the water. There are physical images that we can use that certainly come close, however. A child within a mother's womb is certainly inside the mother, but we may say that at the same time the mother (by means of nutrients, blood, oxygen, etc) is inside her baby. Or, to dissolve one liquid into another liquid so that the two become indistinguishable comes close. Both of these metaphors eventually fail at some point, yet they may serve us in grasping "reciprocal indwelling." A much better image - by virtue of the one who speaks it - is the branches or vines of a tree, as Christ teaches in John 15. That we are the branches attached to him, the vine, which are both not the same thing, yet dwell within one another. Space does not permit us to go through the whole of John 14-17, but in these chapters we see the new relationship we have to the Lord as he describes what will happen to us upon the promise of the Holy Spirit coming to live within believers. "In that day" referring to the descension of the Spirit, Christ says "you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you..." (John 14:20). The reciprocal indwelling of Christ with the Father, and Christ with us, in regards to relationship brings us into the Trinity. Not that we become in essence a "fourth person" of the Trinity, for we are certainly still human. But, in regards to relationship, status, and intimacy, we dwell within the love and fellowship of the Trinity the same way that Christ does. Meditating upon this truth takes a lifetime, but it is necessary for understanding the potential of prayer. Reading through John 14-17 time and time again certainly helps. It's because of this truth that Peter can write: "you may become partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). This is

much deeper than just believing in Christ and obeying him from a distance, the presence of the Holy Spirit puts out his proverbial arms and pulls us into the love of the Trinity itself, so that we can consider ourselves partakers of the divine nature. We caught up in the relationship of the Father and the Son - because we are in Christ, and he is in us. We can experience the very love the Father has for the Son because we are in the Son and he in us by virtue of the Spirit. This is why Christ can say *"I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me..."* (John 17:23). We are known and loved by the Father in the same way that the Son *himself* is known and loved by the Father from all of eternity past. If this is true, then the potential for prayer is far greater than we often give it credit.

Prayer as Communion

Prayer has often suffered under reductionistic ideas in which what prayer is has been watered down to be simply one *component* or *type* of prayer. The best metaphor I can think of that will serve as our benchmark for defining prayer is marriage. Marriage is the closest relationship that two humans can possibly have. Since the goal of marriage is to *become one flesh*, it should be no surprise that that we find parallels in the relationship of spouses and ours to the Lord. The aim of marriage isn't (or shouldn't be) to simply be happy. Nor, is it to have a forever best friend, or a talking partner, or someone who helps develop your character. These are all good things, and are all *components* of marriage, but each of them in themselves is insufficient to describe what marriage as a whole *is*. Marriage is not "just talking with your spouse" or "someone who helps you become a better person." Marriage is the *communion* of husband and wife, of *two becoming one* - and so it is with our relationship with the Lord which is even deeper than marriage. Yet, we often reduce prayer down in ways similar to marriage, saying things like "prayer is just talking with God" or better yet "the point of prayer is that it changes *you*." Surely these are components *of* prayer, yet they are not in themselves what prayer *is*. If the purpose of your marriage is that it changes you, then the point of marriage is *you*, and therefore very selfish. If the point of prayer is that it changes me, then prayer is primarily about *me*, which is selfish at best. Of course, prayer *does* change us, and prayer can consist of talking with the Lord. Yet, if the point of your marriage is to always have someone to talk to, your marriage will dwindle when you run out of things to say - likewise many people's praying has suffered the same fate.

If the goal of prayer/marriage is *communion*, then there are many components to this. Communion with your spouse *may* and usually *does* consist of talking, but often may instead be long bouts of silence interrupted by a few well thought out words. If this is the case, then prayer is mostly silence, and not speaking. Prayer/ marriage is not simply asking your spouse for things - what is usually called petitional prayer. It *certainly will include this* but does not *only* consist of petition. If your marriage is *only* requesting help from your spouse, then you have a servant, not a spouse. Rather, the goal of *communion* in marriage, like prayer is served in a multiplicity of ways. Communion in marriage is often silence, petition, thankfulness, honesty, openness, reflecting upon them, asking questions, having them examine you for faults you cannot see, laughing with them, crying with them, sitting in silence with them, asking their forgiveness, complaining to them, even being upset with them. This is identical to prayer, as we of course see in the psalms. The psalms is a prayer book, but "prayer" to the psalms doesn't only refer to the part of certain psalms where the psalmist may ask for help. Prayer to the psalms is mediation on God, on nature, remembering his past deeds, complaining to him, being upset with him, sitting in wordless contemplation, and all the things listed above.

Prayer for Eternity

In a sense, the whole of the Christian life is about prayer as defined in the sense of communion. It's not as though in the New Creation we will no longer have a need for prayer "since we'll have everything we need" it's that in the New Creation we will *only be praying* - in the sense of being in *communion* with the Lord. Heaven is our unhindered, uninhibited communion with the Lord in the *fullest sense possible*. So then when we pray now we are partaking in a foretaste of heaven early. We are in communion with the Lord in a small way *now* as a foretaste of the *full* communion we will have when Christ returns. Therefore it is in that sense that

prayer is the whole point of life, and eternity. The entire point to existence is prayer - that is, *communion* with the Lord. Whatever we do *now* is trying to better our “prayer life” that is, our communion with the Lord. Sermons, classes, bible study, worship, and most importantly *the sacraments* are trying to make us more prayerful, that is, in deeper communion with the Lord.

We will therefore look at habits, practices, thoughts, and patterns that help serve us to deepen this communion with the Lord in the coming weeks.

Scriptures:

- *John 14-17, Romans 8, Acts 2*

