



Prayer - Week 2

Spontaneous Prayer and Recited Prayer

For the sake of simplicity can divide prayer into one of two general types: spontaneous prayer, or written prayer. Spontaneous prayer is prayer that is off the top of our heads, using whatever thoughts or phrases come to mind, and praying for whatever comes to mind. Recited/written prayer is prayer that uses a previously written prayer as one's own prayer - whether that be a psalm or from a prayer book. In recent history in evangelical church traditions spontaneous prayer has been valued far above recited prayer. Recited prayer is often rare - if ever seen at all. However, tracing the historical development of the distaste for recited prayer is difficult because it is not an exclusively Protestant practice. There are certain practices that were disregarded out of a desire to look as non-Roman Catholic as possible (crossing oneself for example), but disregarding recited prayer does not seem to be one of them. Many Protestant traditions rely heavily upon recited prayers and liturgically praying the Psalms such as Lutherans, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Episcopalians, Methodists, and even the Puritans - who strived to "purify" themselves of anything that whiffed of Catholicism. So, whatever the cause is, it seems to be a strictly modern evangelical phenomenon.

There are a few reasons that are often cited for why Christians will see recited prayer as less "genuine" than spontaneous prayer. Perhaps the most common is the fear that recited prayer leads to *mindless, thoughtless, heartless prayer*. What is often cited is Matthew 6:7, saying "when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases (KJV: vain repetition) as the gentiles do, for they think they will be heard for their many words." Yet, even in this verse we can clearly see that what is *not* condemned is all repetition or phrases, but *empty* phrases - phrases repeated that don't actually mean anything. As well as *vain* repetition- repetition that serves no purpose. Christ is not condemning *all* repetition or *all* phrases, but *empty* phrases. The addition of "as the gentiles do" also adds a cultural layer of the way the pagans of the first century prayed - showing that Christ was likely targeting a specific pagan practice, not once-and-for-all condemning all recitation or written prayer.

This begs the question as to whether repetition or recited prayer is mindless. The answer is: it certainly *can* be. But, so can spontaneous prayer. Just because prayer is spontaneous does not necessarily mean that one is thinking deeply about what we're saying, or speaking with clear intention in every word. Nor does reciting from a prayer book or psalm mean that we are mindlessly reading words without any thought as to what is being said. Mindlessness and heartlessness derive from the mind and heart, they are not products of recitation.

In fact, what many have found through experience with recited and written prayer is the furthest thing from mindlessness. What many have found is that when prayer is predetermined (whether it be a psalm or an ancient prayer) their mind is actually *free* to focus on what is being said instead of having to focus on the next thing to say. Many have found that when doing exclusively spontaneous prayer the mind can wander off far too easily.

In my own journey in prayer, it wasn't until I gave myself historical permission to use recited prayer that my prayer life finally grew. I finally came to the conclusion that, historically speaking, *I was the strange one* for not using recited prayers at all. God's people as far back as the B.C Jews have *always* used recited and written prayers, *all* Christian traditions east and west without exception have (and continue) recited prayers and Psalms as a normal part of their prayer lives. Only in very recent history exclusively in evangelical traditions have they often gone by the wayside. But, to accept recited prayer in our own prayer lives we must

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accept that *genuineness does not rely upon spontaneity*. Prayer can be genuine whether or not it has been written down beforehand, or whether or not it has originated in our own minds.

To use our marriage litmus test from week one, many of the things we do in marriage are not spontaneous but are genuine. Many people will return home, and ask their spouses the same questions about their day, say the same things to them repeatedly, or have a scheduled, predetermined date night. Not all marriage is the exciting spontaneity of late night, last minute college coffee dates. But, this doesn't make it any less genuine. Genuineness is a matter of the heart.

The Lord's Prayer

Interestingly, when the disciples ask the all-important question of "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1), Christ's response is first to give them a prayer to recite, what has now been called the Lord's Prayer. For two thousand years the Lord's Prayer has been recited morning and evening by Christians from various traditions east and west. While at one level the Lord's Prayer can be seen as a skeleton for prayer to build a prayer around, something we'll explore in later weeks, the reciting of the Lord's Prayer itself has been beneficial to countless Christians for 2000 years. When we commit ourselves to reciting the Lord's Prayer - thoughtfully, slowly, and intentionally - what we see is that we remind ourselves of some of the most important truths of our faith every day. Even the first word of the prayer: "Our..." reminds us that we do *not* pray alone, nor are we independent of other Christians. The first words out of our mouths in the morning is that we refuse to try to live an independent life that is free from the family of believers. To those who suffer from feelings of loneliness or isolation, this can be a helpful truth to remind oneself of daily. We are reminded by a variety of other things as well: the refusal to live our life for ourselves every day, reciting "*your* kingdom come, *your* will be done...", or releasing any debts of resentment we hold toward others, saying "forgive us our debts, as we forgive those indebted to us." Lastly, my personal favorite is the dragging of the evil one into our crosshairs every morning, saying "deliver us from the evil one." It seems that the evil one would want nothing more than for us to forget daily that we have an enemy who is out to get us, and hates us. Yet, the Lord's Prayer when recited daily does not let him slip out of our sight. The end of this prayer sets him in our focus every day, leaving us more prone to recognizing where he is active in our lives every day.

Acts 4 and the First Christians

This practice of recitation is not only a very old practice, it is one of the first practices we see when the church comes together in Acts. Before the gospel has even gotten a chance to extend outside of Jerusalem we read:

"And when they heard it, *they lifted their voices together* to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them [Psalm 146:6], who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit,

"'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed'—" [Psalm 2:1]

(Acts 4:24-25)

What is usually recognized - shown by being set apart as a block quote in many translations- is that the first Christians gather, and lifting their voices *together* they recite Psalm 2 with one another. Yet, what is often missed is that they also directly recite Psalm 146:6 together. What is *most likely* happening is not that they all continually quote one verse out of the Psalm over and over, but that they recite the whole of these Psalms together, and Luke (the writer of Acts) chooses to write which verses in the Psalm was most immediately relevant to their situation - the arrest of the apostles at the hands of gentiles. It's a shorthand way for Luke to show that the earliest Christians have certain Psalms that feel uniquely relevant to their situation that they all cling onto as a community and recite together. To add to this, they also did not have personally owned leather bound Bibles with maps and a scripture index in the back. So, this means either someone would recite the line

of the Psalm, and the believers would repeat after them, *or* that this was one of the Psalms that they had committed to memory. What is important is that in the following verses the believers then go into spontaneous prayer, praying in their own words about the immediate situation that they find themselves in. So, we should not think that this is an either/or with recited prayers or spontaneous prayer, but they work in tandem. Although many have pitted spontaneous prayer against recited prayer, what actually is the case is that recited prayer gives life, energy, words, and vibrancy to our spontaneous prayers.

How recited prayer helps us

Using recited and written prayer helps us develop in prayer in many ways. One way is that they teach us what to pray for, and how to pray it. When we use recited prayers, we will see prayers that pray for that which we would have never thought to pray for. One example is a prayer near and dear to me recently - the prayer of St. Philaret of Moscow (18th century). In his prayer he says “In unforeseen events, let me not forget that all are sent by you. Teach me to act firmly and wisely, without embittering and embarrassing others.” I would have *never* thought to have prayed every morning for the *unforeseen* events of the day along with God’s provision in them, or for protection from myself in the event that I’d embitter or embarrass others.. Yet, through using the prayer of St. Philaret I now have added these phrases to my prayer vocabulary, and when I *do enter* into spontaneous prayer without the aid of a prayer book, I now have these things to pray for close at hand. Another example is the recited prayer of the Lord’s Prayer in which Christ says for us to say “forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Frankly, this is an insane prayer. It is a dangerous prayer. We are putting a stipulation on our forgiveness, and asking the Lord to withhold forgiveness if we withhold it from others. Certainly, never in a million years would I have thought to pray this if it weren’t for the recited prayer Christ gives us.

To use a contemporary example, from the book *Every Moment Holy vol. 1*, a prayer that has been very helpful for me is the prayer before Consuming Media. It is a longer prayer - which in itself is an antithesis to the instant gratification that media often provides - and one line from it says: “let me experience mediums of art and expression, *neither as a passive consumer nor as an entertainment glutton.*” Never in my life would I have thought to pray against the entertainment gluttony that comes from the instant gratification of different forms of media and technology. But, this is where the recited prayers from much wiser and more experienced believers helps us. They show us what we ought to pray for. The Psalms of course, is this idea in full gear, as the Psalms explore the range and death of the whole human experience, giving us language to use for every event in life.

Learning to Pray

The reason this is all so important is because we *all learn how to pray*. In the same way that we all learn language as children, we all also learn the language of prayer. In developing language, we learn words, then phrases, and eventually sentences. It is the same for developing a prayer language as well. We learn to say ‘father,’ ‘amen,’ and ‘in Jesus name we pray.’ Yet, usually in developing our prayer language we may learn it from older family members, or leaders at church - both of which can be great. This is where we pick up phrases like “bless the food and the hands that prepared it” or, “guard, guide, and direct us.” These memorized phrases are certainly fine, as long as we really mean them when we repeat them, or else even spontaneous prayer can become “empty phrases.” But, this goes to show that we all develop a prayer language that sticks with us for life. Recited prayer through prayer books or the Psalms is so beneficial because they teach us this prayer language. “Prayer language” is broad just like learning regular language. In developing language and prayer language, we not only learn the vocabulary, but we learn mood, *when* to say things, *how* to say things, the *tone* and *situation* in which to say them. This is where the Psalms help us tremendously, because they teach us the words to pray with, the tone in which to pray them, and even show us the ways in which we can pray. Left to our own devices, we would have possibly thought that prayers of frustration or anger with the Lord were inappropriate, but the Psalms teach us that this is not the case. Yet, they also develop our prayer language by showing us that in these prayers of frustration, in the end we must bow ourselves in submission to his will.

Interestingly, for this reason, public prayer is incredibly important, because not only are you speaking to the Lord on behalf of others, you are also teaching everyone listening *how to pray* - especially younger believers who are still developing a solidified prayer language. They can tell how it is to speak to the Lord, or they can tell if what's important is hitting a word count so that our prayers are not awkwardly short or uncomfortably short.

Routine

Hand in hand with *structured prayers* from the Psalms or a prayer book is *structured time* for prayer. Simply put, we are liturgical beings by nature. Meaning, we are designed by God to have events, holidays, celebrations, routines, and practices that mark the years, seasons, months, days, and hours. We see this all throughout the Jewish Holiday calendar created by the Lord in which there are many God-ordained markers of the seasons, years, new moons, harvests, holidays, and even the weekly schedule in regards to Sabbath. The point of these routine liturgical times are to *shape our heart and mind, conforming them to the Lord*. This is actually the effect of *any* liturgical routine.

If you think of a Saturday home game at Texas A&M, you'll see this on full display with repeated processions, marching in the same way they have for 100 years, playing the same songs they have for 100 years, walking in to the stadium the same way, with the same video, Reveille running the same way, the same yells, telling the same stories, etc. The point of all of this is to conform the hearts, affections, and minds of the watcher. For many, all it takes is the first few notes of a fight song to bring up a well of emotions that were formed through years of attending games. This is how we are designed by the Lord, to have our hearts and minds conformed by routine.

Shema routine

We see this in God's idea of daily routine in the *Shema* passage in Deut 6:4-9, which says

"And these words that I command you today *shall be on your heart*. You shall teach them [commandments] diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when *you sit in your house*, and when you *walk* by the way, and when you *lie down*, and when you *rise*... You shall write them on the *doorposts* of your house and on your *gates*."

We can see that God's plan for his words *being on our heart* is through the daily practice of intentional routine. Dwelling on his commands when we wake up, lie down, go from room to room, and exit and leave our homes. These are all regular time period markers throughout the day that we all experience.

What should be noted is that the *world has a liturgy/routine in its own rite*. The world's liturgy is often noticeable (and probably different for each of us), to wake up, check your email, skim social media, worry about your day. What we are able to do through routine times, such as the *Shema* schedule, is to counter being liturgized by the world, and avoid being conformed to the world's way of living. The world is constantly trying to get us on *its schedule*, and scheduled prayer routines can counter this by conforming us to God's schedule. Before we get up and have a chance to worry about the day, the Lord's Prayer has us pray a petition asking the Lord to provide for the day. Before we've got a chance to wake up and ponder what is on *my agenda* for the day, the Lord's Prayer invites us to remind ourselves that we exist to establish *his kingdom*, and so on. Waking up and praying through Psalm 90 reminds us to give an account for the few days remaining in this life, that we may use them faithfully, and not selfishly, and so on. Frankly, the liturgy/routine of the world (and our flesh) is too strong to not intentionally combat with a prayer routine of our own that fights against the flesh and against being conformed to the world. What I have found personally is that if I rely solely upon spontaneity, the only time I make for prayer is when I lay down in bed to sleep. But if I make a habit of praying at scheduled times, I bring my day under Christ's authority, not letting my day control me, but rather have the day become obedient to Christ.

For us

Practically, what might recited prayer and prayer routines look like for each of us? For us this would look like the historic practice of setting specific time aside every day to use for prayer. One practice that has been historically used since the beginning of the church is the recitation of the Lord's prayer every morning and evening. Upon the beginning and completion of the day, as well as intermittently scheduled times throughout the day have been used by God's people since Deuteronomy 6 was written. In the technology age it makes sense to use the tools we have to our advantage. There are many apps that can set reminders for us to pray, give us prayers to pray *through*, as well as read the Psalms to us. For auditory learners, or more artistically minded believers, musicians such as *Poor Bishop Hooper* have a song for each Psalm in which they sing through the psalms. Or, *The Corner Room* who sing a word-for-word Psalm in the ESV translation. For manual learners, it may help to journal the Psalms, reading through them and writing down reflections. For verbal processors it may be verbally reciting the Psalms out loud as has been done for thousands of years. For intellectually driven people, it may be expositing a Psalm to see what every line is included for, the general movement of the stanzas, or the overall intent of the Psalm.

For many, what has proven helpful are prayer books, whether old (like the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, or Puritan Valley of Vision), Ancient prayer books containing some of the oldest Christians prayers ever, or contemporary prayer books, such as *Every Moment Holy*. Whatever it is, it certainly will involve much experimentation to see what each individual person responds to the best. To wake up and recite an ancient prayer will excite some, but put others to sleep; while praying line by line through a psalm is wonderful to some, and listening to the Psalms read for you is wonderful to others.

However, there is fruit to discipline, and pushing through that which does not feel immediately comfortable or natural will prove formative to us. It may take weeks of reciting Psalms or prayers to feel the effect of why this has been practiced for so long. It is the component of battling the flesh and forcing ourselves to be uncomfortable that can prove to be so fruitful in prayer.