



Highlight (Scripture references and Introduction.)

When my wife and I were a young couple we had bought our first home from a local builder/realtor. This home must have been a spec home for the builder because on one occasion he called and asked if he could show our home to another potential buyer. We graciously allowed him to do so without expecting anything in return. So, to our surprise about three months later we received a gift card in the mail for our willingness to allow him to show our home. With that gift card was a note that read, "Sorry for being late with this. Good intentions pave the road to hell." At the time of this incident we were still in our early 20's and you might say very immature, or at least I was. When we received the note it was a little shocking. I did not quite understand the saying at the time. As I have matured and have many years of experience behind me I have a much better understanding of the saying now. Good intentions not followed by action never gets around to the task that needs to be done. As far as eternal salvation is concerned some may have good intentions but just never get around to the decisions or commitments that are required to follow Christ in obedience. Prayer is no different. We may have great intentions of praying, but we just do not get around to it.

Over the last several months we have been focused on the theme of *Spiritual Disciplines for the Purpose of Godliness*. Prayer is a discipline. In 1 Corinthians 9:27 the Apostle Paul wrote, "*But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.*" Paul was well aware of the human nature. We never seem to get around to good intentions. Jesus warned His disciples about the weakness of the body that would hinder their prayer life unless they disciplined themselves. In Matthew 26:41 we read, "*Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.*"

Donald S. Whitney in *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* writes, "It's time for general intentions about prayer to become specific plans (Whitney, 96)." He adds from Piper,

"Unless I'm badly mistaken, one of the main reasons so many of God's children don't have a significant prayer life is not so much that we don't want to, but that we don't plan to. If you want to take a four-week vacation, you don't just get up one summer morning and say. "Hey, let's go today!" You won't have anything ready. You won't know where to go. Nothing has been planned. But that is how many of us treat prayer. We get up day after day and realize that significant times of prayer should be a part of our life, but nothing's ever ready. We don't know where to go. Nothing has been planned. No time. No place. No procedure.... The opposite of planning is the rut.... If you want renewal in your life of prayer you must plan to see it (Whitney, 96-97).

If we are ever going to experience a vibrant, living, and fruitful prayer life then we must discipline ourselves to pray. Knowing that God expects and desires communication with His children, then we must learn to pray and be persistent in prayer.

Explain (Context and Commentary for the Scriptures.)

Point 1: Since prayer is expected, will you pray?

Read: Mark 1:35, Luke 5:16, Matthew 14:23 (Mark 6:46)

Discuss: The word ‘pray’ or at least some tense of the word is mentioned over 375 times throughout the Bible. We studied a few weeks ago concerning the expectation of prayer. As Jesus taught about prayer He spoke in the affirmative. He did not say, ‘if you pray’, but ‘when you pray’. Jesus communicated to His disciples an expectation of prayer. After Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection the disciples and church exemplified obedient prayer to God. In fact, the witness of God’s power is intricately associated with the disciples’ prayer (ex. Acts 1:14, 24; 2:42, 4:31, etc.). The Book of Acts records for us the acts of the New Testament church. If you were to study Acts you would find the word ‘pray’ or one of its tenses used over 30 times. In fact, out of 28 chapters there are only 10 chapters where prayer is not mentioned. Careful study of some of those 10 chapters reveal that the events recorded had been prayed about in previous chapters. It would be safe to conclude then that prayer is essential to the life of the disciples’ of Christ and movement of the New Testament church.

In the verses we read for this section we realize that Jesus not only expected His followers to pray but exemplified His faithfulness to communicate with the Father as well. We have examples of Him praying in the early morning and in the evening. In Luke 5:16 we read that Jesus often withdrew Himself to pray. The New Testament is full of examples of the disciples committing themselves to prayer at specific times. Acts 3:1 reveals that Peter and John went to the temple to pray and the ninth hour. The Apostle Paul seemed to maintain a specific prayer time also. Acts 16:11-16 seem to indicate that Paul and other believers had specific times of prayer. Not that prayer should always be at a scheduled time but a specific prayer time is helpful when turning intentions into action. In several places Paul encouraged prayer to be made continually (Romans 12:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:17). Steadfast and continual prayer speaks to the relationship that God’s children can enjoy with the Father. Prayer without ceasing indicates a constant desire and dependence to commune with the Father.

We should be able to conclude from God’s word that prayer is necessary and vital to a healthy relationship to one we call Lord, Savior, Father and Friend. He desires to communicate with His children and His children should desire to communicate with Him. So, will you set a specific time to communicate with the Father and allow Him to communicate with you? Will you also prepare yourself to take opportune times throughout your day to communicate to your Father?

□ **Questions:**

1. Why do you think the gospels record many instances of Jesus praying in the early morning?
2. What is the difference between corporate prayer and private prayer? Is both necessary? Why or why not?

3. What time would be best for you to set aside time for prayer?
4. Will you make the necessary plans, set a time and gather the necessary resources (i.e. Bible, pen, and paper) to initiate this discipline tomorrow?

Point 2: Since prayer is learned, will you learn to pray?

Read: Matthew 6:9-15 and Luke 11:1-4

Discuss: As you study prayer in the Bible you will realize that there are many different reasons that those who had a relationship with the Father prayed. A careful and intentional read through the Psalms is beneficial for discovering reasons God's children pray. Some of those reasons include: praise, expressions of obedience, confessions, petitioning, times of thanksgiving, expressions of surrender, expressions of need, and some from a desire to commune with the Father (Psalm 4:1, 6:9, 17:1, 39:12, Psalm 51, etc.). This list is not exhaustive but gives us some good reasons why God's children prayed and why we as His children might pray. Reading through the Psalms is a great way to learn to pray. One way we learn to pray is by observing others. It would be a fruitful exercise to read through the Psalms and observe the prayer life of those who voiced their prayers to the heavenly Father. As you observe the reasons why others prayed and how they prayed these would serve as examples for us to pray.

Jesus also gave us an example of prayer. In Matthew 6:9-15 we observe the lesson that Jesus gave to His disciples concerning prayer. He told His disciple, "In this manner ..." you pray. In His instructions we observe praise and recognition for God's holiness (9). We observe surrender to God's will and purpose (10). We observe the acknowledgment of our dependence on God's daily provisions (11). In verse 12 Jesus instructs His disciples on the need to maintain a right relationship with God and man. We also observe our constant need for God's hedge of protection from the enemy (13). We also observe in verse 13 an acknowledgment of God's preeminence (proper place) in our lives. Jesus' instructions to His disciples provide us with some helpful insights that help teach us to pray as well.

There are several other helpful tools that might help us in the process of learning to pray. One such acrostic is ACTS. The acrostic stands for Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. Using this acrostic helps us praise the holiness of God and to enter into His presence with the right perspective on who He is. When we realize who He is then we must confess to Him who we are in light of His holiness. However, confession turns to thanksgiving when we realize who we are and can be in Christ Jesus. And then I believe we can bring others and our own supplications (needs) to our heavenly Father. Just as an earthly father who desires to provide for his children, so the Heavenly Father desires to bless His children (Matthew 6:33, Luke 11:13).

It is not only important to set a time to pray, but if we are going to turn good intentions into actions then we must also have a plan to pray. A specific plan to pray will guide our prayer time and keep us focused in our communication with our heavenly Father. Learning will come by way of desire and obedience.

□ **Questions:**

1. Have you ever desired to be able to do something and it required effort to learn how? Give some examples. (i.e. quilting, sewing, woodworking, learning to tie flies for fishing, etc.)
2. How did you go about learning whatever it was that you wanted to know how to do?
3. How is praying similar to the other things that we have a desire to learn? Or is it?
4. If you agree that prayer is learned, then what will you do to learn to pray?

Point 3: Since prayer is answered, will you persistently pray?

Read: Luke 11:5-13, Luke 18:1-7 and 2 Corinthians 12:8-9

Discuss: One truth we must learn concerning prayer is this, the Bible does not say that God will always answer prayer according to our wishes, but He will answer prayer according to His will. The beloved disciple, John, presented this truth in 1 John 5:14, *“Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.”* And in his gospel record he writes that a believer’s prayers are answered with respect to their efforts in kingdom work. It has been said of those who desire the will of God, “that God gives us whatever we want, because we want what He gives (source unknown).” It is not that God will not ever answer a personal request but as believers we must learn to abide in Him with our lives. When we abide in Christ then we are ever conscience of what God desires to do in and through our lives. Part of praying is learning to want what He gives.

Just after Jesus taught his disciples how to pray, He also taught them to be persistent in praying. In Luke 11:5-13, Luke records a parable and its explanation. He teaches of an incident where a friend comes to another at an inopportune time and makes a request for provisions for some unannounced guests. At first the friend denies the request, but eventually fulfills the request due to his friend’s persistence (8). Luke also records the importance of persistent praying through another parable that Jesus taught in Luke 18:1-8. Here Jesus teaches that ‘men ought to pray and not lose heart’ (1). He tells of a widow who seeks justice for herself from an uncompassionate judge. The judge is slow to respond to the request, but because of the widow’s persistence he acts on her behalf (5). Jesus teaches that the widow’s persistence was an example of the believer’s faith in God.

Not only does Jesus teach persistence in prayer but the Apostle Paul demonstrates persistent praying. In 2 Corinthians 12:8-9 the Apostle Paul has made a personal request of God for what appears to be a physical healing. He was persistent in his request, but God did not answer according to Paul’s wishes. The lesson Paul learned was that God was showing Himself strong through Paul’s weaknesses. He did not get what he wanted but learned to rejoice in what God gave Him. Part of learning to pray is to learn to seek God’s will in and through our lives.

We know God answers prayer because of examples in His word and because we have personally experienced God answering prayer. According to Luke 15:9, God promises to answer prayer. We may have to be persistent in prayer, but God does promise to hear and respond. This same truth is taught throughout the Old Testament as well. The Lord Himself promises to answer the prayers of His children in Psalm 91:15. You may have a testimony of God answering personal prayers for you or your family. As God does answer prayers we should record them in a journal, so that, we can go back to those answered prayers. If you are like me, then you may tend to forget answered prayers and God’s response of goodness to my needs. A written record of answered prayer would help during times of persistent praying. Remember God does answer prayer, but sometimes we may need to align ourselves with Kingdom business instead of our own business.

□ **Questions:**

1. Can you give an example in the Bible where God answered a person's prayer?
2. Can you give an example in the Bible where God did not answer prayer?
3. What do you think is the reason God answered one prayer and not the other?
4. Do you think it is appropriate to make personal requests of God?
5. Can we be confident that God does answer the prayers of His children?
6. What does truth have to do with God answering prayer?

Application (What does God want me to do?)

God desires communication with His children, we need communication with our heavenly Father and communication between God and His children is expected. We learn from God's word that while prayer is expected we must learn to pray. Good intentions sometimes never come to fruition. The fruitfulness of our relationship with God is directly related to amount of discipline I am willing to commit to. Failure to discipline yourself in prayer is not only disobedience but it is also evidence of an undisciplined life. Just as a physical body shows signs of an undisciplined person so will our spiritual life. Will you commit yourself to the discipline of prayer?

Respond (What specific commitment will I make?)

I will commit myself to the discipline of prayer. I will set aside time to be alone with God and His word. I will start _____ (Specific Date) and I will commit to the time of _____ (Specific time. The resources I need to turn my intentions into actions are: Bible, notepad, pen, _____ and etc. I will share this commitment with _____ (Specific person) for the purpose of accountability.

Additional Study Resources

1. Additional Bible Study tools are available at www.biblecc.com.
2. Additional Bible Study tools are available at www.biblegateway.com.
3. Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life, Donald S. Whitney, 2014.

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