

DEVOTE

Acts
2:42

TEACHING | FELLOWSHIP | BREAKING BREAD | PRAYER

DEVOTE : PRAYER

© 2013, Cornerstone Church Johannesburg

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License.

This means that this work may be copied and distributed freely as long as the work is credited to Cornerstone Church and that the work is never sold in any way or form. This work cannot be used for commercial purposes.

The work may also be altered or adapted, provided that it is made clear that the alteration or adaptation is not part of the original work and not endorsed by Cornerstone Church Johannesburg, unless the work is endorsed which would be agreed upon with Cornerstone Church Johannesburg.

If you alter, transform, or build upon this work, you may distribute the resulting work only under the same or similar license to this one.

See the details of this Creative Commons license at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

DEVOTE
PRAYER

DEVOTE : ACTS 2:42

PRAYER

*“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”*

- 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

The intention of this booklet is to help guide Life Group leaders in leading their groups through a series based on Acts 2:42, where we see the Christian life as one of devotion to the Apostles' Teaching (the Word of God), Fellowship, Breaking Bread and Prayer.

This section is on Prayer. The early disciples of Jesus were devoted to prayers and they present a challenging example for us today.

It's doubtful whether there is any Christian who has not found it difficult to pray, even many times. Very few people would feel comfortable joining the word 'devoted' to their prayer experiences. Let us change that!

There is a difference between knowing about prayer and actually praying. What we learn about prayer in Scripture is written to help us to actually pray. For the majority of Christians their knowledge of prayer outweighs their actual prayer.

“Prayer is the measure of the man spiritually, in a way that nothing else is, so that how we pray is as an important a question as we can ever face.” - J.I. Packer

Our hope of that you will be informed about prayer and its many aspects to get you to feel more comfortable, challenged and eager to actually pray, and pray with more joy, depth, pleasure, power, regularity and freedom!

For this reason the booklet will be broken into these parts:

Contents

Part One: What is Prayer?	page 6
Part Two: Learning to Pray	page 11
Part Three: Considerations in Praying	page 16
Part Four: Practicals	page 26

Part One

What is Prayer?

Christian prayer is communication with a personal God.

Jeremiah 9 : 23 - 24

²³ Thus says the LORD: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, ²⁴ but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands **and knows me**, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD."

God wants to be known. He wants to be in a personal relationship with us. He says that our joy and sense of accomplishment in life ought to come not from our possessions or abilities but from knowing Him.

John 17 : 3

And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

Knowing God is the promise of the New Covenant.

Hebrews 8 : 11

*And they shall not teach, each one his neighbour and each one his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for **they shall all know me**, from the least of them to the greatest.*

It would not be wrong to say that a first-hand relationship with God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit is the greatest of all things in the Christian life. Our prayer is, simply put, about talking with God (talking *with*, not talking *to*!) - the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the creator God; the Lord of all who is also to be the Lord our Father, the Lord our friend.

When Gods speaks of having given us the ability to know Him personally we should notice that He is also expressing His desire for our company. God likes your company.

R.T. Kendall says:

“I cannot imagine a greater motivation to pray than that God enjoys having me in His presence. He enjoys my company. He delights in listening to me! He doesn’t get bored with my repeated requests. He doesn’t moralise me if I get it wrong with what I ask for. He doesn’t laugh at me if I put out silly, even impertinent questions. He never makes me feel stupid. There is no rejection, only total acceptance”.

Exodus 33 : 11

“Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.”

You may say, *“Well that was Moses! What about me?”* Good question. God did enjoy Moses’ company; He enjoyed Abraham’s too. Remember Jesus says to the disciples in John 15:15 that, *“I have called you friends.”* What a compliment! The truth is that God feels the same way about Moses, Abraham and the disciples as He feels towards you. He wants to become our friends. His invitation is open; He expresses His desire for it and His affection towards us as much as He expresses His affection for Jesus (John 17:26). God likes our company and will enjoy as much time as you give Him.

Don’t rush through this thought!

Meditate and answer these questions before moving on:

1. Do you think you know more about God than you actually know Him?
2. Is there anything that makes you feel that God doesn’t enjoy your company?
3. Maybe you know that this is the goal of the Christian life, but why do you think it quickly becomes about other matters? How could you remedy this?

Why pray?

This is a question that needs to be answered. Again however, the answers are not intended to fill the mind with facts. Far from that, the Bible reveals why we should pray so that we would be thoroughly encouraged to do it!

Jesus tells us in **Matthew 6:8** that, *“the Father knows what we need before we ask Him”.*

And He also says in **Mark 11:24**, “I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, **believe** that you have received it, and it will be yours”.

A central reason for prayer is trust. Prayer expresses our trust in the Father. We are to trust that:

1. He hears us.
2. He cares about us.
3. He will act for our good in response to our asking.

When we pour ourselves out in prayer it shows that we believe in God’s character and in His person. It reveals all we think and feel about God.

Another reason to pray is the point mentioned above. **Relationship**. God wants us to become personal friends with Him.

Thirdly, He wants us to be involved in matters that are of eternal importance. Asking “let your kingdom come” (Matthew 6:10) is giving us the opportunity to participate in God’s plan for the world.

More reasons to pray

1. Prayer changes the way God acts

Consider the following three Scriptures:

2 Chronicles 7 : 14

... if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

James 4 : 2

You do not have, because you do not ask.

Luke 11 : 9

And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 10 For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.

God acts when humans play their part. If we really believed that God does in fact do things when we ask and that He really does act when we call Him to do so, we would pray a lot more and much more confidently.

2. Prayer does incalculable good for others

Acts 12 : 5

So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.

Romans 10 : 1

Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.

When we pray for others we are doing for them what cannot adequately be measured here on earth. God does act when we pray. Prayer for others is calling God into action on their behalf.

3. Prayer will change us

Prayer brings us into contact with God's absolute power. Very few privileged people have access to those who can 'make things happen'. God can make anything happen at any time! And we have access to Him and the right to bring every matter, in all its detail, to him in person. He runs the universe but is not too busy to listen to us. Prayer brings us into continual contact with the God of absolute power. It's like having a personal line to the president, but more!

There's even more than that, though. When we pray, we must always be ready (and make ourselves ready) to hear God speak back. It's in this speaking - when he encourages us and instructs us - that we will find ourselves changed in our obedience to Him.

Jesus makes prayer powerfully effective.

1 Timothy 2 : 5

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.

You may argue that anyone can pray and talk to God. This is true, but only God's children have the ability to be heard.

Jeremiah 29 : 12

*Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and **I will hear you.***

Prayer - spending time growing our friendship with God - is life changing. Like any relationship it takes time to cultivate.

2 Corinthians 3 : 18

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

Paul says that the 'beholding of the Lord's glory' is part of what changes us from glory to glory. God's glory is essentially his character, it's the sum total of all that He is. So Paul is teaching here that when we gaze upon / watch / look at the character of the Lord, that changes us. When we get to understand and know God as He is, we become more like Him. How wonderful! To be like God is sharing the same character traits as Him! What a motivation for prayer!

These are some introductory thoughts as to the what and why of prayer. I encourage you to slow down a little and consider the points carefully. Ask questions about thoughts on prayer, thoughts of God, motivations in life.

Why do many people not pray? They fail at the point of motivation and forget the reasons for it, what it is and why it can be so wonderful. Or, and more sadly, they don't want what is on offer - worldly things can become more important than godliness. But let that not be said of us!

Please pray.

Part Two

Learning to Pray

Anyone can pray. But there is prayer, and there is prayer. Are there any indicators to know we are doing it right? Too often people say, “I just am not sure I’m doing it right, maybe that’s why it’s not working”. There is a lot to learn when it comes to praying and there are a number of considerations that Scripture puts forward to help us pray more effectively. These are not prescriptive but are rather principles and guidelines.

Here are some positive points when it comes to praying. There are so many scriptures on prayer but only two will be considered here.

Philippians 4 : 6

*...do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by **prayer** and **supplication** with **thanksgiving** let your requests be made known to God.*

1. Prayer is to be the place where we are to lose our anxiety

Pray, knowing whom it is you are talking to. Remember how in the last part we spoke about talking to the ‘absolute power’? God wants the praying person to approach Him aware of who He is. This pleases Him. God is our Father, He is on our side. He takes care of us. He hears us and listens to our requests.

This also means that when you have asked God for something, to perpetually worry about it is wrong. When we ask, we are to leave it with Him. Leave the request on ‘his desk’ and walk out. This is what the Bible teaches. It doesn’t mean that you cannot ask Him for the same thing again, it means that in-between asking, you don’t worry about it knowing He is working on your behalf.

2. Prayer is to be a natural talking to God

Matthew 6 : 5 - 8

⁵ *And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be*

seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ⁷ “And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Luke 18 : 9 - 14

⁹ He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: ¹⁰ “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

What’s unimportant

- How you look to others
- Eloquent language
- How morally good you have been. Although obedience does matter in the Christian life, moral goodness is not a prerequisite to the ability to pray.

What’s important

- Awareness that you are talking to the Lord God, your Father – talk as though He is standing right there in front of you.
- Awareness that he hears and cares
- Content that prayer is showing your weakness and inability

Question: Can you pray in your mind or do you need to talk aloud? Motivate your answer.

Part of prayer is asking God to attend to pressing needs

This is the word “supplication” from Philippians 4 above. It carries the thought of ‘pressing needs’, which you present to the Father.

Some things are more important than others. God wants to know about every aspect of our lives. We might pretend to others that we have very few fears and pressing troubles in our life, but don’t do this with God!

Prayer should be surrounded with saying “thank you” to God for many things

In this day and age this should probably be the first point made. Thanksgiving is incredibly powerful. Try it, that’s the only way to prove it’s true.

Thank God for everything you can think of. Thank Him for what you know is true about the world and yourself according to Scripture.

Thanking is, in a way, ‘affirming truth’. For example, “Thank you Father that you reward those who do good deeds in secret,” or “Thank you Father you see my generosity,” or “Thank you Father that I don’t need to fear what other people fear.”

Thank Him for everything you can think to thank Him for!

Thanksgiving and praise have a connection. Praise is the part of the Lord’s prayer where we “hallow His name” (Matthew 6:9). Praise is declaring how great God is to God - Praising His character, power, and all that comes to mind that makes Him the God above all gods.

Praise is just as powerful as thanksgiving in affirming truth for those who doubt and need encouragement. It sets the scene of our life in true perspective: “Praise you Father for nothing is impossible for you. You work all things for our eventual good - be praised for that is true of who you are!”

Wow.

Secondly let us consider **Romans 8:26-27**:

²⁶ “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. ²⁷ And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

In the same way as we are saved but not yet in heaven, we don't always know what to pray because our minds are not yet in heaven.

If we were to pray exactly what God wanted us to at all times we would at all times see our prayers answered in exactly the way asked. But it doesn't work like this. We are still without heavenly bodies.

1 John 5 : 14 - 15

¹⁴ And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. ¹⁵ And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.

If we knew what to pray we would always succeed. This must be why Jesus always knew what to ask and was always successful. Having prayer answered is called having “spiritual power”. It means knowing what to pray for in a given situation.

The Holy Spirit is given to help

The Holy Spirit knows exactly what is on God's heart. He helps us to know what we are to ask for in a given situation. In two ways, He will tell us what to pray for:

- 1.** He will reveal it through the Bible.
- 2.** He will give us unintelligible words that will be a perfect prayer. (This is called ‘praying in tongues’.)

It is possible to know what God wants in a situation. In fact, many situations. God has revealed His desires, will and purpose in many Scriptures. Many of the recorded prayers (especially Paul's) reveal what God wants us to ask for and what He wants to do.

It is a good idea to pray for the same things as what the Scriptures teach. Praying Scripture is a good skill to learn.

Then, the Holy Spirit may help us 'directly'. Some people talk of 'groaning' as times when they experienced such a burden that all there was a type of groan given by the Holy Spirit. This moves us into the realm of unexplained experience. More than this we do not know. There are many theories as to what this could be. It could be speaking in tongues at a time when words fail. All we can be certain of is that this is help given to us by the Holy Spirit. If the Spirit tells us God's will, then we pray it; if he gives us unintelligible words then we can pray in confidence knowing that God is praying through us a perfect prayer.

Prayer is listening to God

Part of prayer is waiting on God and hearing what He has to say. He may encourage us; He may instruct us; He may reveal things to us from the Bible or about our situation. We need to let Him speak and make ourselves available to listen.

Jesus said in **John 5:19**, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.”* This must have come through hearing God.

So likewise, when God speaks to us in prayer, we must obey what He says. Obedience is key - we can't ever say God is not speaking to us when we keep ignoring what He is telling us to do!

Part Three

Considerations in Praying

There are a number of things we need to consider when it comes to praying. Here are several important considerations taken from Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*.

1. God's will

We spoke a bit about God's will in the previous part and now we will expand on this point.

We see the example of Jesus in **Matthew 26:39**:

"My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."

And Jesus does teach us to pray in **Matthew 6:10**: *"Your will be done"*.

But how can we know God's will when we pray?

There are a few aspects to consider when it comes to praying the will of God.

Firstly, we affirm that God does have a will. Then, not only do we acknowledge that He has a will, but we acknowledge that we would rather have His will done than ours. This is praying, "God do it your way, do it the way that is best according to you, not what seems best to me."

Secondly, we can sometimes know what God's will is. The Bible reveals a lot about God's will on many points. Pray that what God says He wants to be done will, in fact, be done and you will see Him answer.

Thirdly, there is the notion that there will be times when we won't know what God's will is. God knows certain things we don't know, in this case we may well say at the end of our request: "If this pleases you..."

At this point praying for wisdom is also warranted.

James 1 : 5 - 8

⁵ *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. ⁶ But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷ For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.*

We should not discount personal relationship in this regard. The Holy Spirit may well change our heart or show us an aspect of a matter we never realised before and we come to pray with more clarity.

2. Faith

Mark 11 : 22 - 24

²² *And Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God. ²³ Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. ²⁴ Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.*

This teaching from Jesus is both wonderful and deeply challenging. The first question we would have here is certainly, "How do I get faith to a level where it gets everything it asks?" Faith is a simple yet complex subject. The biggest problem is not understanding what it is but *actually having it*.

Jesus' first sentence gives us a clue to this momentous promise. He doesn't tell us to have faith alone, as if He were telling us to get a mystical pouch of faith from the realm of spiritual things and when we get it things will begin to happen. He is teaching a fundamental principle of faith and praying. The principle is: "Talk to your Father when you are talking and keep in mind and heart exactly what that means."

You are talking to GOD. He keeps His promises, He is majestically powerful... and so on. Jesus says Have faith *in* God. Believe in God, trust God, don't trust your prayer ability, trust the one who told you to ask and promises to listen and act. Trust God, not promises or prayer.

Let's look more closely to verse 24. Jesus says, '...believe that you have received it' not 'will receive it' as some translations put it. Clearly this is not something we can muster up or work up, we will be simply lying to ourselves.

How can we really know we have received it? The answer is when He tells us that we have. Many devoted Christians speak of God at times giving a sense of assurance that he has agreed to grant our request. So we must remember that Jesus isn't saying that we need to have something that seems impossible. This is not the case. When God tells you that he is going to answer it, it is answered and you will receive it. Believe Him and it will happen as He said.

"We were once holding an outreach in a cinema complex in Sunday mornings. I was due to preach the next Sunday. I was praying on the Tuesday evening in my room asking God for 100 people to come and listen (this was a big request as there were about 60 the week before). As best I could hear the Father, He told me that there will be 100 there on Sunday. I was so certain I never asked again. On the Sunday morning when our friends prayed together before the meeting all I said was "Thank you Father for 100 people here today". As I looked up to address the crowd, there they were, 100." - Shaun Mackay

3. Obedience

Psalm 66 : 18

If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.

1 Peter 3 : 12

For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.

Displeasing God will hinder prayer. Prayer is enjoying a personal connection with God and displeasing Him will hurt progress.

Notice the merciful words in this Psalm, like the word 'cherished'. We do not need to be sinless and perfect before we can pray and expect answers to our prayers. If this were the case no one other than Jesus could have prayer answered. (And in any case, as believers we are 'in Christ'.) A person who still sins but doesn't want to and

wishes it would happen less and less can expect to have their prayer listened to. If you love sin, don't want to leave it and find it pleasing, God says He will not answer your prayer. Put positively, the more we live like God wants us to, the more we will see answers to prayers.

4. Confession

1 John 1 : 9

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

We don't need to ask for forgiveness of sin every time we pray in order to get to heaven one day. For the Christian, confession of sin is for keeping our day-by-day relationship with God real and alive. A person certainly cannot commit obvious sin and carry on relating to God as if He doesn't see and doesn't care. We are to tell him we were sorry and ask Him not to hold it against us knowing that Jesus provides the means for forgiveness every time we ask.

1 John 2 : 1 - 2

¹ My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. ² He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

Sometimes we may even pray like David in **Psalms 19:12**: "...cleanse thou me from secret faults" (KJV).

5. Forgiveness

Mark 11 : 25

And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.

As with forgiveness of sin, Jesus does not have initial salvation in mind here. If we view things in terms of our relationship with God, this makes sense.

When we come to pray and relate with God we are asking Him to hold nothing against us. But if we hold bitterness or have a desire to harm anyone in our heart, prayer will become difficult because God will withhold the experience of sweet fellowship from us until we forgive those we are harbouring something against.

6. Humility

James 4 : 6

But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

Anyone who wishes to have any close relationship with the God of the Bible needs to know that God is the only God. He tolerates no rivals and never will. Humility is essential for effective prayer because pride displeases God.

7. At the right time

When God takes His time over issues it can be difficult for us. God does not live by the clock as we do. He does know more than us and doesn't have any hidden agendas. He will give us what is right, when the time is right, and only then. When He knows the time is right, it is right, no matter how we perceive the situation. All facts considered (and we don't know all the facts) God takes the right amount of time, every time.

- Genuine prayer may pray the same thing more than once:

Mark 14 : 39

"And again [Jesus] went away and prayed, saying the same words."

- Prayer may be asking more than once for the same thing:

2 Corinthians 12 : 8

"Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me."

- Prayer is an ongoing privilege

1 Thessalonians 5 : 17

"...pray without ceasing,"

You may have heard the saying “P.U.S.H.” – Pray Until Something Happens. This is true. But there is also a concern here. Prayer is not a mechanical begging and pleading with a tight fisted, frustrated God who when pestered enough will relent and give us reluctantly what we ask for. If this comes to mind when you think of P.U.S.H., it’s wrong.

God will answer when the time is right. He is a patient, perfect, and lavishly generous Father who simply knows more than we do.

Scripture presents the principle that the Father welcomes prayer over and over again even in the same words and for the same thing. When the time is right, He will answer or act.

8. Earnestness

Hebrews 5 : 7

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.

You can almost feel Daniel’s passion and tension in **Daniel 9:19**:

“O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive. O Lord, pay attention and act. Delay not, for your own sake, O my God, because your city and your people are called by your name.”

When we truly begin to see and understand what God sees it will only be natural to sometimes pray with intense emotion. If this emotion isn’t ‘worked up’ by ourselves, it can be a sign of a real work of the Holy Spirit in helping our prayers.

Emotional intensity in prayer should not be faked. An outward show carries no power in prayer. Emotion is not a sign of power, just as no emotion is also not a sign of power. The important emphasis is on relationship and you working out your own prayer with the Holy Spirit.

9. Waiting

Psalm 27 : 14

Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!

Wayne Grudem gives this illustration in his book, *Systematic Theology*:

“If I wish to invite someone for dinner there are various ways I can do so. Firstly, I can issue a vague, general invitation: “It would be nice to have you come over for dinner sometime”. Almost no one will come to dinner based on this kind of invitation alone. This is rather like the vague general prayer, ‘God please bless all my aunts and uncles and all the missionaries, Amen’.

“Secondly, I could make a specific but hurried and impersonal kind of invitation, ‘Fred, can you come to dinner Friday?’- but as soon as the words are out of your mouth you rush away, leaving Fred rather confused and puzzled with little time to respond. This is like many of our prayer requests. We simply speak words to God as if the very act of voicing the words without any heart involvement in what we are saying will bring an answer from God. But this kind of prayer forgets that prayer is a relationship between two persons, God and me.

“There is a third kind of invitation, one that is heartfelt, personal and specific. After waiting until I am sure I have Fred’s full attention, I can look him directly in the eye and say, ‘Fred, Margret and I would really love for you to come to dinner at our home on Friday night at 6. Could you come?’ - and then, continuing to look at him, wait patiently while he decides how to answer. He knows from my tone, demeanour, timing and general attitude that I’m talking to him as a friend. My waiting for an answer shows my earnestness, my sense of expectancy and my respect for him as a friend. This is the kind of prayer of an earnest Christian who comes before God, gains a sense of His presence, earnestly pours out a request before Him and waits for a sense of assurance for an answer.”

This is not to say that hurried prayer is wrong. Some situations in the Bible show a hurried prayer may well be answered, but that would be the exception.

10. Privacy

Examples and teaching in Scripture encourage us to pray alone or in a place where we are free from 'onlookers', distractors and distractions.

Luke 5 : 16

But [Jesus] would withdraw to desolate places and pray.

Prayer in this way is allowed to be totally honest, free from pretence and hypocrisy.

11. With others

There are numerous examples of people praying together in Scripture. The Lord's Prayer is mostly in plural language, "*Give us our daily bread, forgive us our trespasses*".

Praying with others can be wonderfully liberating and powerful. We can also learn from those who pray with us.

In talking of the church's authority being expressed, Jesus says, "*Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.*" - **Matthew 18:19-20**

This text alone should make all Christians want to pray with others. For many, praying aloud with others is scary. Overcoming fears and concerns about praying aloud can be done. The worst is when we let our fears drive us from entering the blessing of a group or church prayer meeting. Just remember, even though prayer may be with others, it is still God you are talking to. Those who do it for a show have lost God's intention for this.

12. Fasting

The New Testament does not specifically require that we fast or set definite times to fast, but Jesus assumes we will - "*And when you fast*" (**Matthew 6:16**). There are also many examples of prayer being linked to fasting.

Judging from the Scriptures there are a few reasons for fasting:

1. You long to have a closer relationship with the Lord. Fasting can bring a deeper connection with God.
2. You wish to give more focussed time to prayer.
3. A situation has so affected you that you cannot think of eating and simply want to talk to God about it, forgetting about food. This is a common reason for fasting in the Old Testament.

A few other comments regarding fasting:

1. It is by no means a way to 'twist God's arm' to get an answer quicker. God won't be manipulated, even with good intentions.
2. Not everyone can fast. Medical reasons may prevent some from doing so.
3. You may fast things other than food.
4. The blessing you receive from fasting may not happen immediately.

It is good for every Christian to develop in this area of prayer.

13. Unanswered prayer

We will have to realise that as long as God is God and we are people, there will be some unanswered prayers.

This subject takes up the pages of many books on prayer. A few comments will suffice for this study.

1. Have you ever considered how terrible it would be if God did answer all your prayers? Who would you have married? That car may have put you into serious debt; and fame at the wrong time would kill you. Actually... thank God for unanswered prayers!
2. An unanswered prayer is in fact as deliberate an answer to prayer as an answer. It may very not be the answer we were hoping for, but is an answer nonetheless. Consider Paul's answer to asking to have his problem removed in **2 Corinthians 12:9**: *"But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* In other words - "no."

3. By leaving a prayer unanswered, God is doing other work in the background in our lives, that while we may not know what it is, it is valuable beyond measure. In his book on Prayer, R.T. Kendall gives the example of Lazarus and Mary and Martha. He says that Jesus was clear in **John 11:14-15**:

*“Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, **so that you may believe.**”*

Jesus didn't respond to their request because He was going to teach them an invaluable lesson in faith, which was that we must believe without seeing. Would they believe what Jesus had already said in **John 11:4**: *“This illness **will not** end in death”* without seeing it happen the obvious way? Would they still believe His words?

“Unanswered prayer is the greatest thing that could happen to us. This way we get what God says we need. It is always better than what we thought we wanted.”

- R.T. Kendall.

It's not always the major things that help us a great deal when it comes to prayer. A true thought here or there can help a great deal for someone on the journey of learning to pray more effectively. These points will mean something to those who are trying. In the end, there is only one way to grow in prayer and that is to pray.

Part Four

Practicals

We can learn from those who have gone before us when it comes to the practicals of praying.

Learning from Jesus' example

The best person to look at is Jesus, of course, and we can see certain aspects of his prayer life from the Scriptures.

Luke 4 : 42

"And when it was day, he departed and went into a desolate place. And the people sought him and came to him, and would have kept him from leaving them..."

Luke 5 : 16

"But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray."

Luke 6 : 12

"In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God."

Luke 9 : 18

*"Now it happened that as he was praying alone, the disciples were with him."
(They must have come and found Him.)*

Luke 9 : 28

"Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray."

Luke 11 : 1

*"Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.'"
(Jesus expounds on the Lord's prayer after this.)*

Luke 22 : 39

“And he came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives, and the disciples followed him.”

Question: Can you see some trends in Jesus’ prayer life? Discuss these.

Jesus clearly made time available to spend with His Father. He would often go to be alone. He would find a certain place to pray. He would pray before or in response to major challenges he faced. He would pray all night if it was necessary!

The Son of God needed to pray! This is both inspirational and encouraging for us. We can see that even though He was the Son of God, and He had the Holy Spirit, He still needed to make time to pray and needed to be *alone* to pray. He would find certain times when He could do this – early in the morning, late at night, and so forth. These are times when He could be alone, practically, without needing to worry about all of His responsibilities. There are enormous implications here when it comes to our daily life and how we should find a time and a place to pray in earnest.

Learning from the examples of other Christians

1. We don’t pray because we don’t plan to pray

Some people believe the best way to pray is when you are ‘led’ to pray. Most cite Jesus’ seemingly irregular approach to prayer, but as we’ve seen above, it was both regular and irregular. One should remember that those mentions of Jesus’ nights and early mornings in prayer were outside his usual temple prayer time, which was regular. Even in Acts 3 the disciples are seen going to a regular prayer meeting.

It’s clear that Jesus always made time. He had a daily rhythm of His own, which sometimes He might change (through an early morning or a late night) depending on the situation. But He always prayed, both spontaneously and He also planned to pray.

No plan, no prayer. This isn’t legalism, this is just about a spirit that is willing but is being overcome by the flesh.

2. Adopt practical ways to impede mental drift

Many find it hard to maintain focus when praying. Each person will have to find their own ways of helping them control wayward thoughts.

Four most common helps are (1) praying aloud; (2) using the Bible and other written prayers; (3) using a list; (4) posture.

- 1.** Talking aloud helps keep your mind focussed on what you are saying because you are actually saying it. Talk aloud, it will help.
- 2.** The Psalms and the rest of the Scriptures can be used in our prayer times and help to get us into a mode of prayer. After all, the Psalms themselves are written as prayers!

There are also prayer books available (such as the “Book of Common Prayer”) which orders Scripture into daily themes of prayer. However, please note that some modern day prayer books may require discernment and there tends to be a lot less Scripture in them.

Some consider prayer books to be ‘religiously dead’, but if the prayer book makes use of Scripture and if the heart is to pray and speak to God (not just finish a liturgy, but using that liturgy as a tool to get you focused) there is no need to see prayer books in this negative light.

- 3.** Some consider a list to be legalistic as well and against the flow of the Spirit but it needn’t be. If one simply blabs through a list every morning then it has been what was not intended. A list can bring to your mind issues and people. If the Spirit stirs something else then by all means go where He is leading.
- 4.** If you try to pray lying down after a long day, why are you surprised when you fall asleep? You can find support for many different positions in Scripture. The point is that one is not more powerful than the other, but one may help you to be engaged in prayer more than another.

3. Develop a prayer-partnership relationship

The right person can be a great blessing to prayer. Regular praying with a trusted friend is a help to many.

4. Tie it all as close to Scripture as possible

The Bible gives you a wonderful reference for what to ask and how to ask. Use it. Learn to pray the principles, words, and priorities in the Bible. It will give you so much of the right thing to say. (The Psalms are a great way to start – but even some of the letters, like 1 Peter, can be used very well in prayer.)

5. Work at public prayer

People would do well to give their public prayers careful attention. Many people are prone to repetitive statements at the end of every sentence, sometimes as long as the sentence itself. Others think that shouting, or whispering, or some other kind of method is more effective. No, the point is to pray, not to impress anyone. God answers prayer, not our formulas for prayer!

6. Pray until you pray

Praying is challenging when it is not obvious that God is right there listening. This is when we're praying without a sense of God and without feeling the immediate help of the Holy Spirit.

But realise that prayer is a melting pot of your whole life. Tiredness, happiness, pressure, and all your faculties are involved in prayer. It's not uncommon to not be 'desperate to pray'; unfortunately most people stop when they have this feeling. But the feeling eventually goes. Many talk of a 'space' and 'patch' that you have to journey through until you break into praying in more freedom and with a sense of God giving you words and thoughts flowing freely in the mind.

Be encouraged to push through this 'space'. Sometimes it's not there, other times it passes rather quickly. It always passes, so pray until you pray!

7. Time

Mornings seem to be a special time for people in the Bible. David seems to enjoy the mornings spent with God.

Psalm 55 : 17

Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and he hears my voice.

Many throughout Christian history have stated that they found the morning to be the best time. But there is no 'better' time to seek God. It depends on your job, family, life rhythms, etc. It is reasonable to say, however, that beginning and ending a day with God is sound advice. Find a time that suits you - just find a time, the best time for God.

8. In Jesus' name

John 14 : 13 - 14

Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.

What is meant by praying "in Jesus' name"? Does this mean adding the words 'in Jesus' name' at the end of any prayer?

Jesus is not teaching about adding words at the end of a prayer here. In fact, none of the prayers recorded in Scripture have the phrase 'in Jesus' name' at the end of the prayer.

So what does it mean? Praying in Jesus' name means that we pray using the authorisation of His name. It means we pray believing that we talk with God expecting Him to treat us as He would treat Jesus. In ancient times a name represented a character and an authority. We can come near, be heard and have fellowship because Jesus has said we can use his character and authority to do so. We come to the Father confidently in Jesus' name.

It is not wrong to use the statement "in Jesus' name" at the end of a prayer, but it isn't necessary and it would be good if we knew what it meant when we said it.

9. To Jesus and the Holy Spirit?

Can we pray to Jesus and the Holy Spirit or only to the Father?

Surveying prayer in the New Testament, we see that the majority of them are addressed to the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit. But that is not the rule, as such. There are prayers addressed to Jesus in 1 Corinthians 16:22 and Revelation 22:20. So we can address Jesus in prayer.

Likewise the Holy Spirit may be addressed in prayer. Although he is never directly addressed in the Scriptures he is called our Comforter, Counsellor and the One who will walk along side us. He will teach us and guide us and be our help and support. To say we may never address Him means that we cannot talk to Him personally which seems to violate relationship.

Overall, however, the dominant pattern in Scripture is prayer that is addressed to the Father.

Excuses

Prayer is a physically expressed value. If you value relationship with God, you will surely pray. Well, at least that is the hope. There are many who express the value but never seem to get to the practical. Let's examine the most common excuses for prayer in light of Biblical truth.

1. I am too busy to pray

We live in a place that operates at a feverish pace. Most people simply rush from one thing to the next. We manage, settle, and service demands most of the day and night. When the time finally comes where we can take a break from that, most of us go into a semi-vegetative state in front of the TV or simply fall asleep on the spot.

We seldom take time to meditate, analyse, and pray. D.A. Carson in his book *A Call to Spiritual Reformation* tells an amusing story:

“A lady and her husband were driving along and happened to notice a late-model Cadillac with its bonnet up, parked at the side of the road. Its driver appeared

agitated and somewhat perplexed. The husband and wife pulled over to see if they could offer assistance. The stranded driver hastily and somewhat sheepishly explained that he had known that he was rather low on fuel when he had left home but he had been in a great hurry to get to an important business meeting so he had not taken time to fill the tank. The Cadillac needed nothing more than refuelling. The couple happened to have a spare litre of petrol with them, so they emptied into the thirsty Cadillac and told the driver there was petrol station a few kilometres down the road. Thanking them profusely, he sped off.

10 kilometres or so later, they saw the same car, bonnet up, stranded at the side of the road. The same driver, no less bemused than the first time, and even more agitated, was pathetically grateful when they pulled over again. You guessed it: he was in such a hurry for his business meeting that he had decided to skip the station and press on in the dim hope that the few litres that were put in would take him to his destination. It's hard to believe anyone would be so stupid, until we remember that many of us go about Christian living in exactly the same way."

In response to being too busy Jesus says to Martha in **Luke 10:41**: *"But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."*

If you are too busy to pray, you are too busy. Cut something out.

2. I feel too spiritually dry to pray

Our days are filled with a thousand emotions and events. All of them can affect our desire to pray. We can easily feel as though we don't have enough energy to really pray. There are at least three presuppositions that are wrong here:

1. Prayer is spiritually and emotionally taxing.

While almost all Christians know of a 'difficulty' in prayer, it is essentially a place where we can be recharged. It is a place of gentleness and rest and should be in complete opposition to the performance driven world we exist in.

2. Feelings are able to dictate our future.

Which athlete feels like training every single day? Not many. Do they? Yes. Why? They don't let their feelings get in the way of what they want.

3. *Misunderstanding the relationship between feeling and faith in prayer.*

R.T. Kendall says there are at least four kinds of prayer:

- Praying with great feeling and little faith
- Praying with great faith but little feeling
- Praying with minimal faith and minimal feeling
- Praying with great feeling and great faith

Too many Christians are overly concerned with feelings. They do count, but faith counts more. Don't be overly concerned with how much 'passion', loudness and energy you 'feel'. Just pray.

3. I feel no need to pray

This in effect is making the statement: *"I believe in prayer, for others more than myself. I seem to be getting along just fine, nothing seems to change much whether I do or don't. I'm doing quite well actually."*

The answer to this problem is a question. What is it that you value most? If you are looking at material factors, then you may be doing well. If you are looking at godliness, spiritual power, and friendship with God, you would not be so confident.

4. I am too bitter to pray

Matt 6 : 14 - 15

¹⁴ *For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,* ¹⁵ *but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*

What is Jesus teaching here? He is not talking about salvation, he is talking about relationship. In other words, Jesus is saying: *"If you wish to come to the Father in prayer, in friendship, expecting Him to overlook your many faults but won't do the same with others, I can't pretend that things are right between you and I. They aren't. I don't like that behaviour."*

This will hinder your desire to pray.

5. I am too ashamed to pray

This is a common problem. Sin will make us feel as though we cannot approach God confidently. We may possess a dirty conscience. We may feel as though our sin keeps us from coming to God, and so we hide from him until we feel it's been long enough and we can talk to Him again.

This is simply wrong. It shows a poor understanding of the Gospel and Jesus' work on the cross. If you have sinned, the very place you should go is to God in prayer. He is patient, slow to anger, doesn't expect perfection and that is the very reason He sent Jesus. He just wants you to come to Him. Tell Him what you have done and that you're sorry. The truth is that He is the only one who can help you out of sin. But if you persist in not coming to him, it will only get worse.

6. I am content where I am

Some Christians profess faith and love for Jesus but actually don't want to be seriously inconvenienced with it. Jesus' words, however, will resonate with anyone who wants to know true spiritual depth.

Matthew 16 : 24

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Jesus makes an offer - "if." If anyone wants to know true spiritual life and success then he will have to walk the path of Jesus. If you are content with where you are, you may not have tasted the real thing.

At the end of it all there is one thing left: work this out for yourself.

Bibliography

- Murray A 1982. *Teach Me to Pray*. Minnesota USA: Bethany House Publishers.
- Kendall R.T. 2009. *Did You Think to Pray?* Lake Mary, Florida: Charisma House.
- Carson D.A. 1992. *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
- Grudem W 1994. *Systematic Theology*. Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press.
- Rodman Williams J 1990. *Renewal Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.



CORNERSTONE
CHURCH

tel: 011 616 4073
email: info@cornerstonechurch.co.za
web: www.cornerstonechurch.co.za