

Spiritual Discipline Series: Prayer
Romans 8:26-27
WRCoB 7.26.2020

I spend a lot of time thinking about people.

I think about my parents, in their 90s
Coping with the struggles that come with old age.

I think about my children, their children, my grandchildren.

I think about my wife, her work
Her family in Nigeria.

I think about the ongoing crisis in Nigeria
The destruction, desecration, and disruption of lives
By the terrorist group Boko Haram
And the marauding nomadic Fulani.

I think about all those affected by corona
And the hardships brought on by the pandemic.

I think about families affected by violence in our own country.

I think about wrongs committed against the African American
Over the past 400 hundred years
And the current Black Lives Matter movement.

These concerns are always on my mind
Sometimes nagging at me
Sometimes pulling at me
Sometimes yelling at me not to forget.

I consider these thoughts a form of prayer.

Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:17

Pray without ceasing.

Though I don't start this form of prayer with, "Dear God"

Or end it with, "Amen"

It is a prayer nonetheless.

As the Psalmist declares

Psalm 139:2, 4 NRSV

2 . . . [God], you perceive my thoughts from afar. . . .

4 Before a word is on my tongue

you, Lord, know it completely.

God considers my concerns and knows my heart.

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We continue our Sermon Series on Spiritual Disciplines.

Last week we discussed the practice of meditation.

We considered how time spent

In uninterrupted silence and solitude

Dwelling on the good things of God

Deepens our spiritual life

And gives us strength for daily living.

Today, we look at the discipline of prayer.

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The disciples asked Jesus

Luke 11:1 Lord, teach us to pray

And so too, we ask Jesus to teach us how to pray.

When we look to Jesus in the Gospels

We discover five things about him and prayer.

- Jesus prayed regularly!
- He prayed with boldness and confidence!
- He taught his disciples to pray with persistence!
- He prayed out of compassion and earnestness.
- He prayed to God in an intimate fashion.

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Jesus' own habits inform us to pray regularly.

Mark 1:35 NRSV In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.

Luke 5:16 NIV But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

Matthew 14:23 NRSV And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone

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If Jesus, our Lord and Savior

Took time out of his busy ministry

And felt the need for solitude and prayer

So should we.

The second thing Jesus teaches
Is to pray with boldness and confidence!

Foster in his “Celebration of Discipline”
Writes about the prayers of the disciples.

Their praying was so positive that it often took the form of a direct, authoritative command: ‘Walk,’ ‘Be well,’ ‘Stand up.’

According to the Bible, Foster writes, *There [is] no room for indecisive, tentative, half-hoping, ‘If it be thy will’ prayers.*

John Wesley writes, *God does nothing,
Except in response to believing prayer.*

Often what discourages us in praying boldly
Is our own skepticism.

Deep inside we don’t believe prayer changes anything.

Life goes on
The laws of nature are in place
God has set the wheels of life in motion,
And nothing we can do change it.

And since we can’t change fate, why bother to pray?
It is what it is!

Foster writes, *Those who emphasize acquiescence or resignation to the way things are as the will of God [do not know their Bible]!*

The Bible chronicles a God that changes his mind
Due to the prayers of the people.

For example, in Exodus 32
Moses comes down from the mountain
After receiving the Ten Commandments.

He discovers that Aaron created a golden calf
And the people are worshipping it!

God is beside himself with anger.

Exodus 32:9-10 ESV ⁹ And the LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. ¹⁰ Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them”

But Moses pleads with God.

He reminds God these people are God’s chosen ones.

Why would God bring these people out of captivity
Only to strike them dead in the wilderness?

Exodus 32:14 ESV And the Lord relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.

Moses prayed to God and God changed his mind!

Pastor Chuck Smith writes,

*Prayer does not change the purpose of God.
But prayer does change the action of God.*

When we believe God hears prayers and answers them
We become serious about praying.

Pray with boldness!

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Along with praying daily with confidence
Jesus teaches to pray with persistence.

He does so in two parables.

One is in the Luke 11 and the other is in Luke 18.

Instead of reading the texts

Let me use the comments of Frederick Buechner
From his book, *Wishful Thinking*.

According to Jesus, by far the most important thing about praying is to keep at it. The images he uses to explain this are all rather comic, as though he thought it was rather comic to have to explain it at all.

He says God is like a friend you go to borrow bread from at midnight. The friend tells you in effect to drop dead, but you go on knocking anyway until finally he gives you what you want so he can go back to bed again (Luke 11:5-8).

Or God is like a crooked judge who refuses to hear the case of a certain poor widow, presumably because he knows there's nothing much in it for him. But she keeps on hounding him until finally he hears her case just to get her out of his hair (Luke 18:1-8).

If your prayer is not immediately answered
Keep praying.

God hears you.

And if it is not answered in the way you prayed
God, in God's infinite wisdom
Answered it according to God's will and way.

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Our fourth lesson from Jesus concerning prayer
Is to pray with compassion and earnestness.

Anytime Jesus prayed
Anytime Jesus healed
He did so out of compassion.

True prayer then, involves the heart not the mind.

True prayer doesn't have to be flowery or eloquent.

Rather, it is to be earnest and sincere.

True prayer, C. H. Spurgeon writes, is measured by weight, not by length. A single groan before God may have more fullness of prayer in it than a fine oration of great length.

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When I was in training for chaplaincy work
Our supervisor shared this story on prayer.

She was a young mother at the time
And her son was seriously ill.

She sat in the family waiting room
While the medical staff attended to him.

She and another woman were in the room alone.

They got to talking.

The other woman, too, had a child, seriously ill.

They shared with one another their stories.

They talked of faith, and talked of prayer.

The other woman asked if she could pray for my supervisor?

And if so, how could she pray for her.

My supervisor responded
That she would like to have prayer
For courage, for acceptance, and for the will of God.

The other looked disbelievingly at her.

“What? Is that it?”

“You don’t want me to pray for your son?”
“you don’t want me to pray for God to heal him?”

My supervisor said she was scared to pray that.
Scared to pray what was really on her heart.

Encouraged by the other woman's sincerity
And drawn together by the Holy Spirit

They got on their knees in the family room and prayed.

Most of what they prayed was unintelligible
With unleashed and pent-up emotions
Between both mothers despairing for their children.

Romans 8:26 NRSV Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

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In terms of praying earnestly
We take our cue from Jesus' prayer
In the Garden of Gethsemane.

There we see Jesus, the very Son of God
Pleading with his Father in Heaven.

Mark 14:36 . . . Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.

The prayer in Gethsemane is a prayer
Filled with confidence and passion.

We also learn something else about prayer from Jesus
Our fifth lesson.

Jesus prays to God in a deeply personal and intimate way.

“Abba, Father.”

Never in the Bible has anyone
Other than Jesus
Addressed God in such personal terms.

God invites us to see him as a child sees a parent.

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Five lessons we learn from Jesus concerning prayer.

Take them to heart and use them.

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Teach us how to pray, the disciples asked Jesus
And Jesus taught them the Lord’s Prayer.

A good prayer to learn by “heart.”

Pray regularly
Pray with boldness and confidence
Pray with persistence
Pray with feeling
And pray close up and personal.

Gandhi once said, *It is better in prayer to have a heart without words, than words without heart.*

And someone else said, *When we pray, God hears more than we say, answers more than we ask, gives more than we imagine, in God’s own time and in God’s own way-- (Anonymous).*

May it be so!