

Back To Basics Part 2

Welcome to part 2 of our Back to Basics series. Last Sunday we talked about the bible and this morning we are going to focus on another of the basics of our Christian life: prayer. **Webster's dictionary defines prayer as "any spiritual communion with God."** That's a pretty good definition actually. I suppose that could include thoughts, art, meditation, music. There have been times I've sat at the piano and played and felt as if I was almost praying through the music, expressing my heart in worship. While prayer could include these things, the primary means of prayer is verbal. Since we are getting back to basics, put simply, **Prayer is talking with God.**

Think about talking with anyone. Talking is how we meet. Talking is how I get to know you. Talking is how our relationship grows and how I learn to trust you. Talking is a means to a good relationship and prayer is simply talking with God. Prayer is how I meet God as I repent of my sins and make Christ my Savior and Lord. Prayer is one of the ways I get to know God, spending time talking with him in prayer. Prayer is how our relationship grows. Prayer is how I learn to trust God and how I realize I want to know him more and spend more time with him. Prayer is talking with God. Makes sense, doesn't it?

But if God already knows everything and he already knows me and he already knows what I need, then why do I need to pray? Let me share some reasons why we should pray and then we will look at how we should pray. (I just returned from our General Council where I heard our General Superintendent George Wood speak. I'm borrowing some reasons as to why we should pray from something he wrote some years ago.)

Why pray? Because Jesus prayed and he taught us to pray. As you read through the gospels, notice how often we read of Jesus praying. He was praying when John baptized him and the heavens opened. He was praying all night before he chose the 12 disciples. He prayed on the mount of transfiguration. He prayed as he fed the 5,000. He prayed privately and with the disciples. He was praying when the disciples came to him and said, "teach us to pray." Jesus' life was characterized by prayer. If he prayed, we should pray. He sets the example for us. We call it product endorsement. We use products because some celebrity tells us it works. Jesus endorses prayer and we should pray!

Why pray? Because God has chosen to work through our prayer and not without our prayer. We often think, "What difference does it make if I pray?" Or sometimes I think,

“Lord, I trust you how ever you want to work this out so I won’t bother to pray. My praying won’t make any difference.” But then we look at the examples in the bible and we listen to what Jesus tells us and we realize, God has chosen to work through prayer and if we don’t pray, sometimes things don’t happen.

In Mark 9 a father brought his son to the disciples. The boy was possessed by a demon and the disciples couldn’t cast the demon out. Jesus cast the demon out and then when they were alone the disciples asked why they were unable to cast out the demon. Jesus said, **“This kind can come out only by prayer.” Mark 9:29** (Some translations add, “and fasting.”) The point is Jesus is saying there are some things than only happen in the spiritual realm as a result of being surrounded and bathed in prayer. Without prayer, it won’t happen. We must pray!

Jesus says “ask and you shall receive.” The bible says sometimes we don’t have because we don’t ask. There are some things God doesn’t give us unless we ask. George Wood wrote, **“We cannot suppose that God will do for us without prayer what he has promised to do only through prayer.” George O. Wood.** What a responsibility we have when we realize some things just don’t happen if we don’t pray! You got saved because someone prayed. Someone else is depending on you and your prayers. God has in some sense limited himself at times to work through our prayers. We must pray!

Why pray? Because prayer is the means to richer fellowship with God. Just like any relationship, communication is key. Marriages get in trouble when a husband and wife stop communicating, hiding from one another. Friendships get in trouble when friends stop talking and we get in trouble when we stop talking to God. We stop being truthful with him, stop confiding in him, stop depending upon him. We allow bitterness to stack up. We allow sins to stack up. Our heart becomes hardened and we begin to avoid talking to God. We stop praying, stop reading the bible, stop listening to God, stop attending church because we aren’t comfortable facing the Lord. It’s just like avoiding someone you stopped talking to for some reason. “I don’t want to go there because I’m afraid I’ll run into

But if we pray, it leads to this growing fellowship. **Prayer is transformative!** The more we pray, the more we know of God and his ways and his purposes. The more we understand, the more we trust, the more we love him and want to be with him and be like him. Don’t stop praying because of problems. Prayer is the means to dealing with those problems. Keep coming to the Lord in prayer and allow him to gather you into his rich and full fellowship.

Why pray? Because it is a means of keeping our heart pure. The bible says **“If we confess our sins he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” 1 John 1:9** It is through our prayer, constantly communicating with God, speaking to Him and listening to him, that we keep our hearts pure and we keep our way pure. By praying we keep sin from settling in our life and our habits and lifestyle. If we are consistently praying and talking to God, not just asking for things but truly talking to him about us, about our life and our desire to serve him and please him, about how best to surrender our life to him, then it is much harder to knowingly sin and do things that we know are displeasing to God. If you sin, confess and receive forgiveness. Pray and keep your heart surrendered and pure before the Lord.

Why pray? Because prayer brings spiritual strength and power in the battles of life. Make no mistake, serving Jesus is not a life of ease. There are plenty of battles and struggles along the way and the only way to be victorious, the only way to be an overcomer in the spiritual struggles of life is to pray! Get ready. You will have to fight the devil. You will have to war and struggle against your own flesh, your own desires. The good news is we aren't alone in the battles. The Lord is with us. He has given us his Holy Spirit to help us, to even show us what to pray for and how to pray.

In Ephesians chapter 6, the apostle Paul tells us to put on the full armor of God so we can stand against the devil's attacks. After describing the various pieces of “spiritual armor” Paul ties it all together with this final piece, **“And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.” Ephesians 6:18** Pray and keep on praying. Just a suit of armor won't do you any good. There has to be something to animate that armor and that something is prayer. Prayer demolishes strongholds of the enemy. Prayer brings us strength to fight the battles of life. The bible says, **“Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not faint.” Luke 18:1.** (NIV says “pray and not give up.”) You won't have strength to make it if you don't pray. Pray and don't give up. Don't faint.

I could go on but I hope you get the idea of the importance of prayer. Let's go a little further with this and ask some of the how questions. **How do we pray?** **Pray honestly.** You can't fool God so don't try. Confide in him. Confess your sins. Confess your fears, your desires. Ask him for help, deliverance, direction.

Pray with the confidence that God is listening. I find it interesting, non-religious people who will sometimes say “sending our thoughts and prayers”. Really? You’re praying? To whom? “I don’t believe in God but sometimes I say a prayer in case anyone is out there.” The prayer of a Christian is different. We have a relationship with the God of the universe who invites us to pray. We pray in faith with confidence that he is listening. The bible says, **“This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us...” 1 John 5:14.** God hears us when we pray. He is listening. And the God who is listening to us is the God who loves us and who delights in giving good gifts to his children. He is the God who invited us to pray in the first place. He said, “Call on me and I will answer you...” Jeremiah 33:3. Pray with confidence.

Pray continually. Pray and keep on praying. “Continually? Really? I have to work you know.” I understand. I’m talking about an attitude toward prayer. The bible says, **“Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18.** The idea here is that prayer is to be the first thing we do, not the last. Prayer is to become second nature to us. It is to be our immediate response in the bad times and the good times. You know that person you call when something really good or really bad happens to you? Prayer is like that. Whatever happens, Jesus is the first person you want to talk it over with. That’s the natural, continual part of prayer. Pray continually.

Pray intentionally. I just told you to pray continually, but the truth is, if you don’t pray intentionally, and by that I mean if you don’t have some kind of plan for exercising the discipline of prayer, you will forget to pray until an emergency or a crisis comes up. It helps to have a plan for prayer. First thing in the morning, last thing before bed, on the way to work. Pray along with reading your bible. Keep a prayer journal. Write down your prayers, your prayer requests, answers to prayer. Make a plan, a strategy to pray, intentionally.

Who are we actually praying to? Do we pray to God or Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

Who am I talking to when I pray? We believe that God is indeed One God, eternally existent in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So does it matter? When it comes to prayer and who we address in prayer, we look to the Scripture and specifically to the teaching of Jesus. He knows best how to pray, right? Jesus said, **“This then is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name...’ Matthew 6:9.** Jesus tells us to address our prayer to the Father. All of his prayers were addressed to his heavenly Father and this is the New Testament

pattern.

Jesus also said, “...my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.” **John 16:23**. We then pray to the Father in Jesus name. But what does praying “in Jesus name” mean? Some people believe you have to say that phrase at the end of your prayer in order to make it legit. “If you don’t say ‘in Jesus name’ at the end, God won’t hear your prayer!” That’s not what that means. **To pray to the Father “in Jesus name” means we are talking to God on the basis of what Jesus has done for us.** When I pray in Jesus name I am saying, “Father, I come to you, not in my own righteousness or on my own merits, but on the merits of Jesus Christ who gave me access through his blood shed on the cross for me.” That’s what praying in Jesus name is all about. It is not a magical phrase to be added at the end, it is the basis upon which we stand in faith to bring our prayers to the Father.

So we pray to the Father, in Jesus name, that is upon his authority. Sometimes you will hear someone say, “we ask these things through Christ our Lord.” We pray through his authority and we pray through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. The bible says, “the Spirit himself intercedes for us in accordance with God’s will.” Romans 8:26-27. The Holy Spirit helps us in our prayers. So we say we pray to the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit.

“Is it wrong to pray to Jesus?” No. Stephen prayed in Acts 7:59 “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” “Is it wrong to address the Holy Spirit?” No. There are times when we pray, “Come Holy Spirit.” But we understand that the Holy Spirit desires to testify of Jesus and bring glory to Jesus. And Jesus delights in bringing glory and honor to the Father. It all points to the Father. We want to pray as Jesus taught and so we focus our prayers to the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit.

Do I pray out loud or silently? Both. There are times to sit quietly in meditative prayer. There are times to pray in your mind and thoughts. The bible says of Samuel’s mother, **“Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard.”** **1 Samuel 1:13** There are times for silent prayer, but I think it is helpful at times to pray aloud. I don’t mean at the top of your lungs, but I think it helps at times to pray so that you can hear yourself praying. You hear the words coming out of your own heart and your mouth. When we pray in the service together, there is something powerful to me about the lifting of voices aloud to the Lord in prayer. It is a sound of unity, together calling upon God. It is spiritually energizing.

The bible speaks at times of crying aloud to the Lord. We are emotional beings and there are times when crying and praying with emotion, crying out to the Lord is the right way to pray. The bible says of Jesus, **“During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death and he was heard because of his reverent submission.” Hebrews 5:7.** The point is to pray with purpose, with intensity, with reverent submission.

I don’t know exactly what to say in prayer. Jesus gave us a pattern in what we call the Lord’s prayer or the model prayer. **“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one.” Matthew 6:9-12** In this model prayer we have worship (holy is your name). We have petition (give us daily bread). We have confession (forgive us our debts and sins). We have request for spiritual growth (lead us not into temptation). We have intercession (your will be done on earth as in heaven).

Remember we’ve been saying that prayer is talking to God. What do you want to say? What do you need to say? Then tell him! I would suggest including some of these things in your prayer. **Worship** (you are faithful, good, loving, just, merciful). **Thanksgiving** (I thank you for what you’ve done, saving me, providing for me, the blessings given to me everyday.) **Petition** (ask for needs to be met for you and your family and for others. Ask for your daily bread.) **Confession** (Lord forgive my sins. Help me forgive others. Help me in this area where I’m struggling today.) **Spiritual direction.** (Lord help me to be more like you. Help me be kind to others, a good steward of your resources. Teach me and show me your ways). **Praise** (Thank you that you hear me. Thank you for spending time with me as I pray.) **Listen** (Lord, help me to tune my heart so I can hear as you speak to me today.)

If you don’t know what to pray, pray the bible. Pray one of the Psalms. There are beautiful prayers that have been written by the saints over the centuries. Read them and pray them. I shared this prayer once before: **“Father, you alone know what lies before me this day, grant that in every hour of it I may stay close to you. Let me today embark on no undertaking that is not in line with your will for my life, nor shrink from any sacrifice which your will may demand. Suggest, direct, control every movement of my mind, for my Lord Christ’s sake. Amen”John Baillie in *A Dairy of Private Prayer***

The late John Stott was an Anglican pastor who was a favorite author of mine said that for many years he began each day with this liturgy which begins with praise and ends with prayer. **“Almighty and Everlasting God, Creator and Sustainer of the universe, I worship you. Lord Jesus Christ, Savior and Lord of the world, I worship you.**

Holy Spirit, Sanctifier of the people of God, I worship you.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Heavenly Father, I pray that this day I may live in your presence and please you more and more.

Lord Jesus Christ, I pray that this day I may take up my cross and follow you.

Holy Spirit, I pray that this day your fruit may ripen in my life – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Holy, blessed and glorious Trinity, three persons and one God, have mercy upon me.

Amen.” ...John Stott in *Through the Bible Through the Year*

Anne Lamott is a best selling author. In her book entitled *Help Thanks Wow The Three Essential Prayers* she included this prayer:

“Hi, God.

I am just a mess. It is all hopeless.

What else is new?

I would be sick of me, if I were You, but miraculously You are not.

I know I have no control over other people’s lives, and I hate this. Yet I believe that if I accept this and surrender, You will meet me wherever I am.

Wow. Can this be true? If so, how is this afternoon - say two-ish?

Thank You in advance for Your company and blessings.

You have never once let me down. Amen.”Anne Lamott

Whether you choose to pray with the insight of John Baillie or the majesty of John Stott or the simplicity and humor of Anne Lamott, the ultimate question perhaps is not why you pray or how you pray or when you pray but simply, **Will you pray?**

Are you ready to start praying daily? Intentionally? Purposefully? Pray because Jesus prayed. Pray because your life may depend upon it. Pray because someone you love is depending on your prayers. Pray because you can’t make it without prayer. Pray so you won’t faint. Pray because prayer changes things and transforms people. Pray!