

Soul Satisfying Habit of Prayer

Luke 5:16

For the next several weeks the sermons are going to be part of an ongoing invitation for us to seek a deeper relationship with God, intimacy with Christ, and a greater fullness of the Holy Spirit. We will be looking at several practices or spiritual disciplines that God has given us to experience more of him and talking about how to turn them into habits in our lives in order to go deeper and satisfy our souls in him. These are habits that focus our attention on seeking God; and the promise he's given in Jeremiah 29:13 is that those who seek him with all their heart will find him. So if you want to experience greater depth and delight in your relationship with God, you must practice these things. There are no shortcuts.

We are following the order of the book, [Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life](#) by Donald Whitney and this week we come to the habit of prayer in chapter 4. Prayer is one of the most important and well-known habits for Christians to participate in, but it's also difficult for many to do consistently and in a way that's encouraging, spiritually refreshing, and life-giving. I think a lot of Christians try to do it because we know we should, but it's often a struggle. It doesn't come naturally for many; we aren't sure if our prayers make a difference; it can be hard to stay focused – we face many distractions, and there is a fire hydrant of teaching and resources that make it complicated and overwhelming. So prayer often gets neglected and I think it's something that many Christians associate with feelings of failure.

But prayer is a gateway to the treasure of intimacy with Christ and a deep relationship with God. It is critical to satisfy the yearning in our souls. So this morning I want to try to bring some clarity and encourage you to pursue a certain practice of prayer to start with and make it a habit. I was happy to see that the book highlighted the same practice and has some great information if you are reading it. I want to talk about what prayer is, what prayer looked like in Jesus' life, and then focus on the practice I think all of us should start with.

What is prayer? Depending on your background, there can be a lot of things that come to your mind when you think of prayer. Different kinds of Christians approach prayer in different ways. Most false religions have some form of prayer, and it can also be popular among unbelievers. When it comes to

Christian prayer, you see it all over in the Bible and it's a concept that captures many, many things. In general, I would say it's communicating with God. It includes things like talking to God, praising him, thanking him, crying out to him, asking for help, confessing sin, admitting guilt. It also includes complaining, lamenting, and crying out in desperation. It can be done out loud with your voice or quietly in your heart.

But it's important to understand that prayer isn't just one way communication from us to God. The Bible shows us it also includes God communicating with us by his Spirit. Both Testaments are filled with examples, but for us I'll focus on the New Testament and early church. The book of Acts is a historical account of things that happened in the early churches and missionary efforts of the Apostles. It records the new covenant outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 and gives several examples of the Spirit communicating with various believers in prayer throughout the rest of the book. I found at least 13 different examples or stories (Acts 4:31; 8:29; 9:4-6, 10-16; 10:19; 11:28; 13:2; 15:28; 16:6-10; 18:9; 20:22-23; 22:17-21; 23:11). There's also a passage in 2 Corinthians where Paul tells a personal story of hearing from the Lord in prayer. 2 Corinthians 12:8-9 says, *"Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this (an affliction), that it should leave me. ⁹But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*

So the teaching of the Bible is that prayer isn't just one way communication. God listens when we pray and he communicates and responds by his Spirit in our inner being during times of prayer. This is unlike any other relationship we have and we must learn how to listen and hear from him. Sometimes his response is immediate and clear like a conviction, prompting, assurance, or impression, but often it is subtle, quiet and comes with time. Sometimes he brings revelation of truth and clarity about a decision or direction for where he wants us to go and what he wants us to do. Sometimes he gives reassurance of his promises or his deep, deep love for us as his children. It is through times of prayer and communion with God that we find strength, comfort, and peace, and our faith is renewed and deepened. But it is also through prayer that God brings conviction of sin, the realization of how we've strayed, the desire for repentance, and the resolve to recommit ourselves more fully to him.

So prayer is communing with God in our souls, it's described in the Psalms as "deep calling out to deep." And it is absolutely critical when it comes to growing deeper in our relationship with God, experiencing intimacy with Christ, and the fullness of the Spirit. Prayer is the gateway for satisfying our souls in God and finding joy and fullness in him.

Jesus is the best example of prayer and what we want to aim for when it comes to prayer in our lives. And I encourage you to look mostly to him. With all the different teachings out there based on all kinds of different ideas and examples of people in the Bible or church history, or even today, the best thing we can do to learn about prayer is to look at Jesus. Learn how to pray from his example. What a monk in a monastery did, or the founder of an orphanage in England, or a Jewish guy who drew circles in the sand, or a mysterious guy named Jabesh in the OT, or whatever – they might be interesting stories that may or may not include God telling them something he wanted them to do, but I wouldn't pattern your prayer life after those things or those people. I would pattern it after Jesus. If you do that you won't go wrong or be led astray. But you will experience a deep relationship with your heavenly Father and the fullness of the Holy Spirit that will give you clarity, direction, joy, peace, and strength throughout your life.

Jesus teaches us wonderful things about prayer. A lot of things came to mind this week from studies that I've done; I also read several articles online that try to capture the essence of Jesus and prayer. There are some clear characteristics that come to the surface when you look at Jesus' example, of which I'll share a few.

Jesus taught and modeled the habit of regular and persistent prayer. When his ministry and popularity started taking off and he was in high demand, Luke pointed out in Luke 5:16: "*But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.*" Mark 1:35 tells us what he did after a long and exhausting day of ministry in Capernaum: "*And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.*" On the night before choosing his disciples, it says in Luke 6:12: "*In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God.*" After the miracle of feeding 5,000, it says in Matthew 14:23: "*And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray.*" In Luke 18 he taught a parable about a widow who persisted in presenting her

request to a judge and in verse 1 it says: *“he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.”*

Prayer was a foundational habit in Jesus’ life. It was an ongoing, regular part of his lifestyle. He regularly found a quiet place where he could be alone to pray. And then he would regularly turn to prayer in whatever circumstances he was in. His life of prayer demonstrated that he had a deep relationship with his Father, an awareness of his presence with him wherever he went, and that he depended on him in and through prayer.

Jesus regularly spoke about how everything he said and did came to him from spending time with his Father in prayer. In John 8:26-29 he said: *“I have much to say about you and much to judge, but he who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him.”*²⁷ *They did not understand that he had been speaking to them about the Father.*²⁸ *So Jesus said to them, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me.”*²⁹ *And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him.”*

How did Jesus hear from his Father? How did he speak just as the Father taught him? How did he know he always did the things that were pleasing to him? It was because of his regular, ongoing habit of spending time with his Father in prayer. Jesus was always seeking his Father’s will and listening for his direction. He relied completely on the Father, so he often went to be alone and pray. And we see the effect that had on his life. When he came back from praying he had clarity of direction, clarity for decisions, clarity for what he was to teach, where he was to go. He was able to move forward in confidence and in the power and fullness of the Spirit because his heart, mind, and will was aligned with the Father.

Jesus needed to spend time with his Father in prayer for all of these reasons and as he did, he experienced a deep, abiding relationship with him and fullness of the Spirit. He was able to withstand every temptation the devil threw at him, every danger and trial he faced. He wasn’t swayed by the opinions and threats of man but confidently walked in his Father’s will. He didn’t lose hope in the mission despite the weakness and immaturity of the disciples and the fickle nature of the crowds. He was able to endure the pain

of loss, betrayal, disappointment, persecution, torture, and death on the cross. And all of this came from his times of prayer.

That is the kind of strength, confidence, and clarity God wants for you, and that's what he'll give you as you develop the habit of prayer in your life. But I want to acknowledge again the difficulty of experiencing a deep, life-giving, soul-satisfying life of prayer that many of us face – and this is true for me. Prayer is a struggle for me; one I've wrestled with most of my life. When I go to prayer it is often a battle in my mind. It seems that within just a few seconds I'm thinking about the things on my to-do list, my agenda for the day, a current project I'm working on, a problem I'm trying to solve, what the weather's going to be like, and so on. The thoughts are relentless and just keep coming. And then, in the times when it's not a struggle and my mind is at rest, it usually means my stress level is down, I'm more relaxed, and you know what happens... I start falling asleep.

I have learned that one of my basic problems is that I have too many things going on to have a soul-satisfying prayer life. Too many projects and interests. And even if I can manage my time effectively and get everything done, and take time for prayer, it doesn't leave my mind in a place of rest and my prayer life suffers. I've found that writing out my prayers in a prayer journal is about the only way I can consistently stay focused, and I've been doing it for years, but I don't want to continue in that pattern. I don't want to rely on a notebook and pen. I want my relationship with God to be my highest priority. My soul desperately needs to commune with him on a daily basis and no task or project or goal aside from that is nearly as important. So for me that means I have to cut back. I have to do less. I have to limit myself for the sake of being able to commune with God in prayer.

I know I am not alone in this, so I encourage those of you who can relate to me, to cut back as well. Our souls needs more of God and that's not going to happen unless we cut back, let our spirit and mind find rest, and give more time and attention to prayer.

Now, I want to encourage you to follow a certain practice when it comes to your daily habit of focused prayer time. I think this practice needs to come first and be the foundation for other practices of prayer you try to incorporate into your life. If prayer is communication with God where we not only speak to

him, but he also speaks to us, we need to put ourselves in a position of being able to not only speak to him but listen and hear from him.

And I believe we need to do this a certain way in order to truly hear from God. A lot of people have a way of listening to God that I think opens them up to being led astray by their own imagination or by the deceptive whispers of the enemy. I've heard a lot of people say some really bizarre things about what God supposedly told them – things that cause them to do foolish things, excuse sin in their lives, put themselves through unnecessary suffering, create division in the church, and cause them to sin against other people. Yet they are so convinced that God spoke to them there's no way to question or convince them otherwise.

The practice I think you should avoid, is what I'll call "cold-listening." It's a practice where you start by entering a time of prayer and just try to have an open mind and listen for the voice of God. Maybe you have a difficult decision to make; maybe you're in a tough situation; maybe you're wanting a word from God for you or someone else; maybe you just want to try to connect with Jesus. So you clear your mind and listen. When you do that, things are going to come to your mind. But how do you know those things are coming from God?

At that point there are three possibilities of where your thoughts are coming from: they could be coming from the Holy Spirit, but more likely your own imagination which could be good or bad, or even a demon. Based on what the Bible says about how our hearts and minds work, I think we have a greater likelihood of experiencing thoughts from our imagination or a demon if that's the approach we take. Our own thoughts might sound a lot like something God might say, especially if you've been a Christians for a while, but that doesn't mean God's speaking to you. And Satan is a master of deception and can make his ideas sound like they're coming from God.

So I urge you to not take that approach. Instead, what the Bible teaches us to do to listen to God is what I spoke about last week – to meditate on the living Word of God. Rather than emptying your mind and clearing your thoughts to hear from God, fill your mind and saturate it with the Word of God. The same Spirit that inspired the words of Scripture is living and active in your spirit, and when we read and meditate on God's Word, the Spirit of God speaks truth to our hearts. He's revealing himself and his will through his Word – opening the

eyes and ears of your heart to being able to see him and hear from him. That is the posture we need to put ourselves in to hear from God. That is when we truly commune with him by his Spirit.

Now, it may be that during that time you believe you've heard a unique word from God to you or for someone else. The Bible has examples of this like I mentioned before and it talks about the gift of prophecy and I believe that gift is for the church today. You don't need to ignore or deny what you believe to be a unique word from God, but the Bible does make it clear that you are to test it. Test it against the Word of God. God will never speak to you something that is contrary to his Word. And test it by sharing it with other believers in humility and asking them if they would confirm whether or not they think it is from God. I encourage you to not tell people God spoke to you or told you something without first submitting it to the Word and to other believers for testing. No matter how confident you are that you've heard from God, if you don't submit it for testing, you're actually disobeying God and you could be wrong.

So the practice of prayer that I encourage you to make into a habit in your life is to incorporate prayer into your daily practice and habit of meditating on God's Word. This is what the book highlights as well. Saturate your heart and mind with God's Word like I spoke about last week, and then turn to God in prayer in response to what you've learned. Speak to him, share your thoughts, confess your sins, praise him, thank him, ask for help, and then listen and allow his Spirit to minister to you.

You are seeking to satisfy your soul and delight yourself in him. And by this you will grow deeper in your relationship and experience intimacy with Christ, and the fullness of the Spirit. This is God's gift to you and he wants you to draw near to him.