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## Understanding Prayer (Matthew 6:5-13, ESV)

### INTRODUCTION:

We are in the midst of a teaching series on prayer. If you were here last week or the week before, when we've taken extended time during the worship service to pray, I imagine you may have been stretched a bit. And that's good. Worship should stretch us. And as worship relates to prayer, we've got to shake this idea that prayer should be easy. Nothing of great importance ever comes with great ease. Today I want to look at three common challenges to prayer and then I want to suggest a path forward.

### THREE CHALLENGES TO PRAYER:

#### Challenge #1 – I'm too busy to pray.

- \* Busyness is something almost all of us struggle with—kids, work, friends, extended family, church, board meetings, practices, grocery shopping, cleaning, laundry, financial responsibilities. If you're like me, some mornings you wake up and before prayer can even cross your mind you're flooded with thoughts of all you have to get done.<sup>1</sup>
- \* But if you and I were to see prayer the way the Bible portrays it, busyness would no longer be a hindrance. In fact, our busyness would lead us to a greater commitment to prayer.
- ✓ I read a story this week about a couple who was driving along a state road when they noticed a late-model Cadillac pulled to the side. Its driver appeared a bit agitated so the couple stopped and asked if he needed any help. The man went on to explain he had known he was low on fuel but he had an important business meeting so he had left home in a hurry and hadn't bothered to stop for gas and now here he was stuck. The couple happened to have a gallon of gasoline with them so they put it in his tank and told him that a couple miles ahead he'd find a station. The man thanked them and sped ahead. Several miles later they passed him again on the side of the road. Worried he'd be late, the man had hoped he could make it to his meeting on that one-gallon of gas.

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<sup>1</sup> Even when we happen to find a free moment, we often fill that time with activities that even though they make us feel busy they demonstrate we're really not. One author observes, "When we stop rushing and performing and doing, many of us park ourselves in front of a television or computer screen and simply absorb what is dished out. The result is that we seldom take time to think, to meditate, to wonder, to analyze; we seldom take time to pray" (Carson, 91).

- ✓ Unfortunately, many of us go through life with that same approach. We press on from agenda item to agenda item without taking time to refuel in God's presence. The Bible warns us about this.
- *38 Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. 39 And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. 40 But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." 41 But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, 42 but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:38-42, ESV).*
  - Many of us, like Martha, invite Jesus into our house, i.e. into our lives, and then we go about frantically moving from task to task without ever simply sitting in his presence. Without allowing Christ to give us his perspective on our life and relationships and all the tasks we need to complete. Jesus says Mary chose the better way. She didn't rush through her agenda; she just enjoyed his company.
  - Jesus is teaching us one of two lessons. Either 1) getting more things done shouldn't always be our top priority or perhaps better yet 2) the best way to get more things done is by setting aside time with Christ. Either way busyness leads us to increased time with Jesus.
- I want to show you one more interesting passage about being too busy to pray—1 Corinthians—*3 The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. 4 For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. 5 Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control (1 Corinthians 7:3-5, ESV).*
  - The guy who writes this passage is named Paul. He starts by talking about the importance of sex in marriage. He basically says, "Don't hold out on your spouse. You share a life you should also share bodies."

- Now you have to understand up front, Paul isn't some sex-addict; he was actually single and celibate. But he knows how important physical connection is to keeping a relationship healthy. He also knows how busy and stressful life can get. His point is you have fight to make time for intimacy, otherwise it's easy to let days, weeks, or months go by. Paul says, "That's not healthy."
- But get this—as highly as Paul values a couple's marital obligations in the bedroom, he says there may be moments you decide to take the time and energy you would have used to connect with your spouse sexually and instead you connect with your spouse in prayer. Don't let anything hinder your sex life, he says, *except prayer*. It's that important.<sup>2</sup>

### **Busyness will always be a challenge to prayer, but don't let it be an excuse for not praying.**

#### Challenge #2 – **When I try to pray it feels unnatural or dis-genuine.**

- \* Pastor Timothy Keller says, "*The first thing we learn in attempting to pray is our spiritual emptiness—and this lesson is crucial. We are so used to being empty that we do not recognize the emptiness as such until we start to try to pray.*"<sup>3</sup>
- \* There's a sense in which prayer reveals how spiritually unhealthy we are.
- ✓ Do you remember the first time you went to have a conversation with that cute boy or pretty girl? You might be dating or even married now, but at first it was awkward, right? You may have even come up with a list of things beforehand to talk about so that once you got into conversation you'd sound more intelligent or interesting. But when the moment came it probably didn't go as well as you had envisioned. There's a bit of an awkward learning process in any relationship even our relationship with God. But awkwardness doesn't mean the relationship isn't worth pursuing. It just means there's room for growth. Most of my best friends aren't people I connected with immediately. They are relationships that have been forged over time. With time and practice our conversations with God become more and more natural.

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<sup>2</sup> I'm indebted to Carson's chapter on "Excuses for Not Praying" for this insight.

<sup>3</sup> Keller, 24.

- ✓ That feeling of spiritual emptiness may be a hindrance for you, but it's not a hindrance for God. He's already provided you a way to come to Him through His Son, Jesus. And He invites you to pray precisely because you're empty. He wants to fill you with more of Himself. And He does this, primarily, through prayer. **So don't let the struggle of prayer shame you into giving up; let it inspire you to press on.**

### Challenge #3 – I don't know what to say when I pray.

- \* We've all had a moment when we didn't know what to say. Let me tell you, I get them all the time. Fortunately there's help.
- \* Eugene Peterson, a pastor and author from Baltimore, makes the observation that in every area of life we only learn to speak as spoken to. When a toddler learns to use language they mirror what they hear from their parents, siblings, and sitters. How many times has a kid repeated something they heard from you and you thought, "*Probably shouldn't say that anymore*"? We learn to speak as we are spoken to. When you start a new job, you learn the office decorum and language by the way other people speak. If you travel to other countries (like Eastern KY) you learn to speak as spoken to. It only makes sense that we learn *how* to pray and *what* to pray by getting into God's Word.<sup>4</sup> The Bible is God's speech to us. Human experience provokes our prayers, but it shouldn't condition them. That means the things you experience in life might be what drive you to prayer, but how you actually go about praying—that's got to come from Scripture.

### TRANSITION:

We have to let our prayer life be shaped by the Word of God. Otherwise we'll only speak from the experiences and perspectives we already know. The Bible gives us a rich history of men and women who have wrestled with God in prayer and seen God act in the world and come to a deeper understanding of his purposes through prayer. So it'd be foolish of us not to lean in to the Bible for instruction and support on how to pray. In fact, today I want to use the Lord's Prayer as a model for understanding what prayer is and how we go about it. If you have Bible turn with me to Matthew 6 (turn). But before we get to the Lord's Prayer itself, I want to show you what Jesus says immediately prior to it because the context of the prayer will help us understand its content.

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<sup>4</sup> See Keller, 54-56.

TEXT:

*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 (Matthew 6:5-6, ESV).*

- \* First thing Jesus says about prayer is it's not designed for show. **The litmus test of your spiritual life isn't the impression you give in public it's the consistency you have in private**—*Go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father who is unseen.* This doesn't mean it's wrong to start a prayer gathering at your place of work or that it's improper to pray in public. But if you only find yourself praying within earshot of someone else, Jesus would say you've proved you're not praying to God or for God, you're praying for yourself.
- \* There's a certain power in secrecy. I'll give you an example. Apart from Jesus, there's no person I'm closer with than my wife. Now I speak about Sarah in public quite often and with great admiration and love, but there are parts of our relationship that are just for us. In fact, if you share everything about a relationship with the rest of the world it just shows that the relationship is shallow. I'd say if you never have a moment with God that you keep to yourself your relationship with God is relatively shallow. Jesus is saying you've reached a level of depth and intimacy with God when you engage Him in prayer, publically or privately, and you don't care if others know about it.

*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 (Matthew 6:7-8, ESV).*

- \* Some translations say, “And when you pray, stop babbling like pagans.” There's a common idea out there that the louder you pray or the longer you pray or the more passionately you pray or the fancier your prayer that you might somehow impress God and get Him to do what you want. That's not a Christian idea. The belief that you and I can manipulate deity by using the right words at the right time in the right order is rooted in animism and pagan thought.

- \* The Old Testament wisdom book, Ecclesiastes, actually says, **2 Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few (Ecclesiastes 5:2, ESV).** It's not that we shouldn't pray. It's that when we pray we recognize that God isn't impressed by us going on and on.

In v. 9, Jesus gives us an example of what thoughtful, God-honoring prayer looks like—**9 Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. 10 Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. 11 Give us this day our daily bread, 12 and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. 13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil (Matthew 6:9-13, ESV).**

- \* Now before we get into the details, understand, this isn't a magical prayer; it's a model for prayer. This is not the only way to pray; it's an example of how we can pray. Jesus gives us the form of God-honoring prayer; we are invited to supply the content ourselves.
- \* Let's look at the components of his prayer and then we'll talk about how we fill in the gaps.
  - ✓ Jesus says we should start prayer by acknowledging the One who is being addressed—*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name.*
    - To say that God lives in heaven is to say that He has wisdom and perspective we need. To say that His name is hallowed is to acknowledge that it's a privilege to speak with Him. He is holy. He is powerful. He is good. He provides. And the only reason we can even speak to Him freely is by the grace of Jesus.
    - The beginning of prayer is designed to awaken us to the fact we're going to be spending time in the presence of the God of the universe. That's a big deal. We should enter prayer with a level of respect, not rush into it with a laundry list of things we want God to do. How does that go in any other relationship? Not good in my house—*do these things for me, honey... have I told you how beautiful you look today.* You don't start with a list. You begin prayer by reminding yourself Who you're speaking with; why you're speaking with God over anyone else; and thanking God that He cares enough to listen.
  - ✓ Then Jesus says because God is God we pray for His will to be done rather than our own—*Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*

- Notice Jesus encourages us to pray that God's will be done not just in our own lives but on the whole earth. Sometimes I listen to my own prayers and realize how selfish I can be. Even if I don't start with a list of wants, I often start by praying that God's will would be done in *my life*. That God would bless *my family* or that He would expand *my ministry*. As if I were the center of the universe rather than Him. Or as if my kingdom was more important than His.
- Prayer is designed to widen our perspective. We begin by reflecting on who God is, then we pray for His world in which we happen to live. We start with the big picture and work inward. If we start with the little picture, most of us will struggle getting beyond ourselves to the big picture. We run out of time or energy on our own needs.
- ✓ It's only after we've praised God for who He is and prayed His will would prevail that we ask Him to supply our own needs—*Give us this day our daily bread*.
  - This is the time we pray for ourselves. By now we're in a better position to assess our needs because our perspective has been reoriented to God's point-of-view. Jesus encourages us to pray for our ***daily bread***. Daily bread is a reference to the manna God gave the Israelites in the Old Testament. It was how He provided for them one day at a time. Jesus is saying, "*Ask God to supply your needs today and don't worry yet about tomorrow.*"
  - It's not that we can't pray about our future; we should. But Jesus realizes that if we're really going to trust God, we've got to start with today. Prayers for the future are often about things we want, prayers for today are more often about the things we need. And when we learn to live on what we need rather than what we want we learn what it means to honor God as God. That's what prayer is all about.
- ✓ Next, Jesus says pray about your relationships—*Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors*. Prayer is a good way to work through the bitterness we have with other people. We recognize God has forgiven us for our sins against Him and so we pray that He will give us the same strength to forgive those who have sinned against us.
- ✓ And then finally, Jesus tells us to pray—*Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil*. This is an opportunity for us to pray for the personal struggles and sins we need God to help us with.

## TRANSITION:

The simple fact is that we can't enjoy what we want out of life until we first enjoy God as God. Prayer isn't just how we get things from God it's how we get more of God himself.

Again, Tim Keller is helpful, when he says, *"Prayer makes it safe for God to give us many of the things that we ask for... A rich, vibrant, consoling, hard-won prayer life is the one good that makes it possible to receive all other kinds of goods rightly and beneficially."*<sup>5</sup>

## APPLICATION AND PRACTICE:

So here's what I want to do with the remainder of our time. There are pieces of paper at the end of each aisle. There are also pens in the seats in front of you. Please pass those down and take one if you need. You can also use your phone or a journal if you have one with you.

I want us to practice using the Lord's prayer as a model for our own prayers. I'm going to take you through each component of the prayer, give you some prompts to write and then we'll take a moment to voice our prayers to God.

### ***Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name***

*Write a few thoughts about who God is according to the Bible—His character, His holiness, and all that makes Him special and worthy to be prayed to.*

### ***Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven***

*Identify a few global, national, or even local concerns that you believe God cares deeply about and write them down. If you can't think of anything, write down the names of some public leaders that you can pray for. You don't necessarily have to agree with their politics to pray for them. In fact, that's all the more reason to pray for them.*

### ***Give us this day our daily bread***

*Write down a few of the short-term needs and concerns you or your family may have. Again, these are needs not wants. A new car isn't the right thing to write down unless you*

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<sup>5</sup> Keller, 18, 20.



*don't have a reliable means of transportation. And even then, pray for the need not how God might provide it. We box God in too much. If what you need is reliable transportation, pray that God would answer the need—don't tell Him how—let yourself be surprised at the different ways He may do it.*

### **Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors**

*What has God forgiven you for?*

*Is there anything you need to ask Him to forgive you for?*

*Who has forgiven you recently?*

*Who do you need to ask forgiveness from?*

*Who do you need to forgive?*

### **Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil**

*Write down a few of the temptations or struggles you're currently facing.*

Now what we're going to do is take the things we've written and work through them in prayer. I encourage you to use your paper or phone as a guide as you mouth the prayers quietly at your seats. Take your time. After a couple minutes I'll close us in prayer and move us into a time of response.

#### TRANSITION:

Close with my own example of praying through the Lord's Prayer.

#### CONCLUSION:

The God of the universe invites you into a dynamic, growing relationship with Him. That happens through prayer. Prayer is hard. But everything worthwhile is. By carving out some time to pray and using Scripture as your guide you can take great steps in your prayer life.

Invitation

## Resources

Carson, D.A., *Praying with Paul: A Call to Spiritual Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014).

Keller, Timothy, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York: Dutton, 2014).