

HOW TO PRAY EVERY DAY
Personal Prayer Life
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These three Sunday mornings of January I have been dealing with the theme of prayer. Last Sunday morning, “Why pray?” Next Sunday morning we’ll look at the theme of unanswered prayer. Today we’re looking at the them, How to pray every day.

Paul says writing to the Colossians in 4:2 “Devote yourselves to prayer.” The word “devote” carries with it a strength of intensity. It’s not every once in a while think about it. Or when you get around to it. But it’s to make a dedicated effort.

I had a praying mother; that is one of the great blessings in life that God gave to me. Mom went to be with the Lord in 1979 at the age of 81. All the years I was growing up and the years after I had left the home, I knew my mother to be a woman who always spent the beginning of every day in prayer. You could always find her at a sofa kneeling on the floor when the daybreak came. She was at her place of prayer.

Not too long before she died I was talking with her one day and I said to her, “Mother, has there ever been a day in your life when you failed to pray for me?” Maybe I asked the question because I would be a little bit guilty if one of my children asked me that question. She said “George, there may have been 2 or 3 days when I didn’t pray for you.” Did that stagger me! It made me realize she had not only prayed for me but obviously my brother and sister and family and much of the blessings we had enjoyed in life as a family flowed out of the context of her prayers and dad’s prayers.

I’m convinced that most Christians really want to pray. Yet there’s sometimes a great distance between our wanting to pray and our actually doing it. That’s why this practical little message today is simple. I just have two main points about how to pray every day.

One thing we all need to do if we’re going to pray every day is to have a time and place to pray. We need to set the time and we need to appoint the place. Then we need to show up and pray. Psychologists I think are saying about life, Are you living it with intentionality? That is, is life just happening to you and you’re just taking whatever comes along. Or do you order your life? A lot of you keep Daytimer calendars so you know what it is to order your life and have your list of priorities, the top thing that you’ve got to do every day and on down the list.

Prayer needs to be at the top. Prayer is much like any other spiritual discipline. If it’s not at the top it doesn’t get done. It’s like the discipline of stewardship or giving. If we wait until very thing is paid and then begin to tithe you’ll find you never have enough money to do that. Never be able to give. You have to start by putting it at the top.

The same way that if you live a day and you haven’t made a point to pray it just seems like as you close the day there has not been enough time in that day to pray. So we make intentions and stay with them.

I would suggest to you as I closed the service last week I mentioned the fact that when you begin to pray be realistic. Set a limited amount of time. If you’re not praying you’re not at the

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discipline level to do what Paul says, Pray without ceasing. Start with something more manageable. Whether 5 minutes or 10 minutes or 15 minutes combination Bible reading and prayer. But spend some time and begin at that level. If you will pray at that level you'll find that God will make you more able to pray more. But if you don't pray at that level you'll find that you'll begin praying less. And ultimately when you stop praying all together you seem to lose the ability to pray meaningfully. And prayer is reduced to a series of SOS calls. When we're in danger we fire up a quick telegram and that's about the extent of our praying.

The teaching of Jesus: "To him who has more will be given but to him who has not even what he has will be taken away." That's the same principle at work with prayer or any other spiritual discipline. You use it or you lose it. By not praying you begin to lose your capacity to pray. So it becomes a real effort. How do you get the capacity back? By setting a time and a place and sticking with it. If after a week or two you still don't have any feelings and you say, "Prayer is still difficult for me," stay with it until it becomes not so difficult. Until it becomes an instinctual habit of life. You'll find as you grow in prayer you'll become capable of praying more and more and your time will become freer and freer. Like playing the piano: in the early days you're locked into your notes and your fingers. After you've developed the skill and the disciplines suddenly you're free to roll all over that keyboard and do all kinds of things. Prayer fits that model.

Jesus had a regular time and a place to pray. Mark 1 for example gives us a typical day in the Lord's life. He begins it in the synagogue then he goes home for lunch, then at nighttime he has the crowd surrounding him who want to be healed. But the next day Mark 1:35 "Very early in the morning while it was still dark Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place where he prayed." It was his instinct to go pray. If he wasn't praying early in the morning he was praying late at night. Matthew 14:23 after the day went by in which he fed the 5000 we read "After he had dismissed them [that is, the disciples and the crowd] he went up into the hills by himself to pray. When evening came he was there alone."

Even Judas knew that when Jesus was in Jerusalem he had a regular place to pray. So John 18:2 tells us that Jesus who betrayed him knew the place where Jesus had often met with his disciples. He knew the Lord liked to pray in Gethsemane. So Jesus had his time and his places for prayer. The apostles picked this up from Jesus. "They devoted themselves to prayer." – Acts 2:42. Peter and John, Acts 3:1, are going to the temple at the hour of prayer. Acts 10:9, Peter at noon is personally in a time of prayer, going up on top of the low-lying Palestinian flat roof to pray.

These examples in Jesus' life and in the life of the early church perhaps teach us that we best pray when we open our day and when we close our day. If that's not the best time for you, find a time that is. But early morning prayer allows us to present the day to God and ask him to direct and bless us in it. Late evening prayer allows us to review the day and make necessary course corrections. Find a place and a time to pray.

The second thing that needs to be shared in building a prayer life every day is then use a pattern of prayer. If you are not praying now, all of us are helped by patterns of prayer.

A few weeks ago when I was teaching from Luke 11, I dealt with the Lord's prayer and I gave at that time a pattern for prayer from the Lord's prayer, which spelled out CHRIST.

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- C – Concentrate. Our Father.
- H – Hallelujah. Hallowed by thy name.
- R – Rule. Christ’s rule in me.
- I – *I Give me* this day.
- S – Savior. Forgive me of sin.
- T – Triumph. Lead me not to testing but deliver me.

Then all of life could be brought under that umbrella.

Let me give another pattern that is just as helpful. It’s a pattern that many of you are familiar with. It’s simply from the book of Acts – ACTS. It’s a simple way to pray. You can do all kinds of expansions off this but this is kind of the skeleton, the backbone.

A – Adoration. We begin in prayer not by rushing into God’s presence with “Help me!” As a beginning but to take time to consider whose presence we are coming into and the magnificence of God. Great Christian praying learns to focus in on adoration of God. When the church first began meeting, Acts 1, they started with a prayer meeting. What would they be praying for 10 days? The Lord had told them to wait in Jerusalem. I doubt if at that particular moment they had many prayer requests. It seems that their only pressing request was who’s going to take Judas’ place? What were they doing in those 10 days of prayer? I suspect that they were adoring God. And in prayer – they had talked to Jesus in the flesh and now they were talking to him in heaven. They were saying, “Thank you for what you’ve done in our lives. Thank you for calling us from our fishing nets, from our tax collecting office. Thank you (Mary would be saying) for the privilege of knowing you as I have been privileged above all others to know you. They were thanking the Lord for his miracles and his teaching and his crucifixion and his resurrection. I think to substantiate the fact that they were praising God is when the Holy Spirit came upon them in Acts 2 and they spilled out into the temple courts and were speaking in languages they had not learned, what they were speaking was the magnificence of God. They were telling the mighty deeds, the magnificence of God. It was only natural they were praising him in language and it spilled into language they didn’t know. They were adoring the everlasting, ever loving God.

Our experience will be better if we can begin our prayer with adoration.

C – The second part of prayer is 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.” Every one of us I think every day needs to review our life and see in it what needs to be brought to the Lord for cleansing. Does this mean we’re driven by some sort of guilt complex we’re so guilt ridden as Christians we need to continually be emptying out the soul and dredging up all the muck that’s there? It’s not that idea at all. Just a factual recognition that in attitudes, in actions and in words and disposition we all have moments when we fail God and prayer helps bring us back on course. We realize we need a correction. Confession gives us that frank acknowledgement. If we keep ourselves clean regularly it doesn’t hurt nearly so bad. But when we let things pile up it becomes a cataclysm in our life to set it straight. We allow so much grime to build up on our soul that God practically has to use a Brillo pad to get through and get us cleaned up. That’s why we sometimes say Ouch with conviction because we’ve let it build up.

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So confession on a regular level allows us to deal with things as they emerge. It allows us for example to not let the sun go down on our wrath. That is, don't go to bed angry. It helps us to deal with our life so there's never a chance for a root of bitterness to develop. It gives us an opportunity to have a regular checklist in prayer and say, Lord, is there anything I need to confess?

Several years ago I got in a private plane. The pilot turned the key, revved up the motor, taxied down the runway and took off. For any of you who have ever flown in an airplane you know he omitted doing one essential thing. He didn't run through a checklist. I was apprehensive when he did this. As we were flying along, I think we were headed for Dayton, Ohio, I looked down and I saw a lot of planes circling below us and some beside us. I saw lengthy runways with a lot of jets on the runways. I was sitting in the back seat and said to the pilot "There's sure a lot of planes around here? Look at all of them in the air." I was really wanting to call it to his attention so we wouldn't run into one! He suddenly flipped out his maps and began scrambling like crazy. I knew when he did that something was wrong. Then cracking into the radio was the control tower and they were letting him know in language which does not bear repeating that he was in the wrong place messing up jets who were trying to land and take off and would he please get out of there. He was over the Cincinnati airport. Way off course.

No wonder he's off course. If a guy won't do his checklist before he takes off no wonder he winds up off course getting to where he's supposed to be going. I think there's an analogy to that in the spiritual life. Prayer is kind of our checklist. It helps keep us on course. Keeps us from veering off into directions that God isn't in. And brings us back to where we need to be. It's not just wicked people that need to confess. I'm convinced that it is God's saints who have a far better profound understanding of sin than people who are thugs and rapists and murders and the like. They've met with God and they know what God wants and what God doesn't want.

It's like Isaiah in the Old Testament. Isaiah was perhaps the most perfectly righteous person who ever lived outside of Jesus who was without sin. We never read of a flaw in Isaiah's personality. When he sees God high and lifted up the scripture says he cries out, "Woe is me for I am undone!" What's happening is when he sees the purity of God in his own life he realizes there is a need for him to get to God and have his sins covered? It's like wearing a diamond. It may look ok in the natural light but put it under a jeweler's instrument and you can see the flaws. Our lives may look ok but get it under God's searchlight and we can see the flaws. We become sensitive even to things other people wouldn't be sensitive about. I think prayer where we have regular contact with the Lord and confession helps our spirit stay sensitive. Confession.

T – Thanksgiving. Adoration, confession, thanksgiving. Jesus did this when he was facing the cross. "He took the cup and when he had given thanks he gave it to them." Philippians 4:6 "Don't be anxious about anything but in everything by prayer and petition with thanksgiving present your requests to God." I know there are times in our life where it's difficult for us to be thankful for things. I understand that what the scripture is telling us to do that when things happen that we don't like or are unpleasant or are tragedies, we don't thank the Lord explicitly for that tragedy itself. But we thank the Lord for what he is going to work in our life as a result of that and through that. Give thanks.

Paul says in Romans that the problem with the pagans was that they neither honored God nor gave thanks to him. Their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. God's

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done wonderful things for us. We can always find reasons to be grateful and thankful. Prayer gives us that ability to do that. We thank God for what he has done in our life. We thank the Lord for each member of our family. If you have a member of your family you say, I can't give thanks or them after the words I've had with them, the inability to give thanks suggests a hurt in a relationship that needs to be corrected.

Have we thanked the Lord for our trials and what he is doing in them? Have we thanked the Lord of the church, the body of Christ? Give thanks.

S – Supplication. For specific requests we bring to the Lord. John 17 when Jesus had adored and given thanks he had no sin to confess so in his supplication he prayed for himself, he prayed for the people closest to him, his own, and he prayed for the people farther out, all of us. When we pray it is well that we pray, Lord what do you want to change in me? So often I want to come to the Lord and ask him to change my circumstances. Then I reach out beyond that to my circle of immediate concern, to my family, to my friends, to the body of Christ. Then beyond that to those who do not know the Lord. To the needy, to the nation.

If you look carefully through the book of Acts you'll find that the early church five times prayed specifically for something to happen. They often prayed and their praying was praise or the request wasn't given. But five times we have the request. And each time God answered. They requested a replacement for Judas, Acts 1:24. Stephen prayed that his enemy would be forgiven and the Lord gave the church Saul of Tarsus a Paul the apostle. Peter and John in Acts 8:15 prayed that the Samaritans would receive the gift of the Spirit and they did. The early church prayed for Peter when he was in prison and he was delivered from danger, Acts 12:5. And Paul prayed for a sick man in Acts 28:8 and he was healed. Supplication – praying.

To this ACTS let me add one other thing about prayer. It doesn't fit the neat outline. It's the word *Listen*. As part of praying we need to develop the ability to listen to God. Not that God is going to speak to us in an audible voice. I've never had him speak to me audibly although he's certainly welcome to do it. But there is a sensitivity of the heart when you're in continual communication with God in prayer. You begin to pick up his voice. Jesus says, "My sheep know my voice." The Lord will begin to suggest things to you and the direction you should take and habits you should have and attitudes you should have and words you should say.

God is far more interested in me as an individual than any product of labor. He's not going to use you for what he can get out of you. He's honestly interested in you.

We need to stay sensitive in our prayer. What is the Lord saying to us? Is he telling us to go somewhere? Is he telling us total with someone? Is he reminding us of some part of his word that we need to hear? What is he saying?

There's many other things that can be said about prayer. We can take the Bible into our prayer life and when we're reading along say, Lord, in this scripture I just read is there any principle you want me to apply? Help me to put it into my life. We can review the past day and take it into our prayers. We can review the coming day and take it into our prayers. We can put our desires into our prayers. We can keep a prayer journal or a prayer notebook so we can keep track of what we are praying and see how God answers our prayer over a period of time. There are a lot of ways to grow in prayer. My idea today is if you're not started just get started and don't

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worry about all the mechanics. Just take ACTS, have a time and a place and go for it. And God will grow you out of that.

There's a little paper back book on prayer by R.G. Sproul called Effective Praying. I was attracted by the cover. It shows a man praying, he's kneeling. He's covered in an ice block up to his waist. It's obvious by looking at the picture that the ice block used to totally encase his body. But then he began to pray and the ice had begun to melt. Now it had halfway melted. The implication of the picture is as he continues to pray the ice is going to melt all together.

That so beautiful expressed what prayer does for us. If we feel cold in our spiritual relationship or estranged from God I know of no way better to melt that coldness than to come faithfully to God in prayer and see that hardness and rigidity in our life broken by the tenderness of the Spirit of God.

May the Lord help us as individual people to be people of prayer. May he help us as a church body to be a church of prayer. I believe God has some marvelous things in store for us as individuals and as a church in the year 1986. I want to be able, if the Lord tarry, at the end of this year to look back and say it was in January we purposed in our hearts to begin praying, or to be more effective or be more intense and more faithful in our praying and look at what God did when we all made a commitment to pray. That's the kind of year I want to have. It's the kind of year you want to have.

Lord Jesus, we come to you as did your disciples and our request hasn't changed. Lord, teach us to pray. We so need to pray. You've got so many things you want to do through our prayers and in us while we pray. Help us to be men and women, young people of prayer. We ask it in your name. Amen.