

THE PRAYER TEACHINGS OF JESUS

Personal Prayer Life

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I've begun a series on prayer that studies prayer in the New Testament and we're spending the first evenings on prayer in the life of our Lord. Last night we looked at the theme the prayer life of our Lord and noted the 15 occasions in his life when he is said by the gospels to pray. This does not mean he only prayed 15 times. But the gospels relate to us 15 specific times. Tonight we're going to share together the prayer teachings of Jesus. Then next Sunday night we're going to look at the prayers Jesus prayed.

We looked last week of the prayer life of Jesus I asked nine questions at the close of that message deduced from his times of prayer. Are we praying in the great moments of life? Do we pray when it's physically inconvenient? Do we often withdraw to pray? Can we be found praying in the draining and the stressful moments of life? Are we intensively praying prior to making major decisions? Do our common table prayers give thanks to God? Are we praying for others? Do we employ the psalms in our prayers? Are committed to pray over the long haul?

Tonight we look at the prayer teaching of Jesus. There is no lengthy discourse by Jesus on prayer. There is lengthy discourse on life in the kingdom. The Sermon on the Mount. A discourse on kingdom parables. Seven parables which show what the kingdom of God is, Matthew 13. There is a lengthy discourse by him on humility and forgiveness, Matthew 18. And a length discourse on discipleship, Matthew 10. And a lengthy discourse on the future, Matthew 24-25, Luke 21, Mark 13. But he gives no such similar length discourse on prayer. Perhaps it's because of his aversion to the habits of his day, the religious habit, of people making a display of prayer.

When we look therefore at the prayer teaching of the Lord, the subject of prayer rises quite necessary in the course of his day to day life and in the course of his ongoing teaching. When you look at the gospels for references to Jesus' teaching on prayer the gospel of Matthew has ten such references, the gospel of Mark five references, Luke ten and John three.

His teaching on prayer what Jesus personally taught on prayer in his verbal message can be summarized into fifteen statements. We will take these statements in chronological order. As they occur during the course of his ministry.

First time Jesus ever said anything about prayer in his ministry – I was astounded that this is where he began in his teaching on prayer. Pray for your enemies. Matthew 5:44, the first reference by Jesus in his teaching on prayer. "I tell you pray for your enemies." Then Luke 6:28 tells us the same thing. Jesus indicates the reason why we are to pray for our enemies is that we are to have the character that is modeled after God our father who lets his rain and sun shine and fall on the just and the unjust. He treats all with equal generosity. Therefore we are to have not an approach to life where our face is a mirror of the people around us. But we are instead to project a portrait of the personality of the Father to them who is smiling at mankind. Even his enemies. Praying is part of a four-part response we are to take of our enemies – love them, speak well of them, do good to them, pray for them.

Maybe it's not so surprising that Jesus would begin in his teaching on prayer to focus on our enemies because some of the things we get stuck at, at times is how do I pray and what should I

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pray, and how can I avoid praying the same old thing. If we will begin our prayer by focusing on our enemies we might have some creative ways to more adequately pray.

Second lesson that Jesus gave in his prayer teaching was pray privately. Matthew 6:5-6 The hypocrites love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners. But we instead are to “go into our room, close the door and pray to our father who is in secret.” Spiritual sins invades even the highest spiritual disciplines and there are individuals who will use spiritual expressions in order to advance status. Not everyone even in the body of Christ is serving out of a sincere motivation. There is enough sickness and sin to our humanity that perverts even our noblest ideals. The great temptation that Satan uses with ministers by and large is pride. Being called Reverend, the respect of people. Jesus said don’t stand in the synagogues, on the street corners and advertise your spirituality.

Jesus is saying pray privately. But he’s not telling us to abandon praying in public. Later on we’ll see he tells us to pray together. But what he is correcting is he defective thinking of someone who uses the spiritual discipline to enhance their standing with another person. Jesus shows an aversion to persons who think they are more spiritual to others because they act pious. Pray privately.

The third thing that Jesus teaches us about prayer is pray to the point. I’m referring to the Lord’s prayer in Matthew 6:7-13 and Luke 11:1-4 where Jesus corrects the long praying and the vain repetitious praying of both the Pharisees and the heathen. In the prayer is the recognition of all praying. A recognition of who we’re praying to – our Father in heaven. A bringing to God requests – first requests that relate to his glory and his concerns and then requests that relate to ours – the presence – give us what we need today; the past – forgive us; the future – lead us. There’s a pattern to praying. It’s praying to the point. Not with vain repetitions. Jesus says, Don’t get your mind on automatic pilot. Stay engaged. Stay engaged in mind and spirit. Even charismatic believers must be careful that we do not park our minds while we’re praying except we do it while praying in the Spirit which is actively engaging the self. Christian prayer calls for the active interaction of our mind and Spirit with God. The Lord’s prayer is therefore given to help us pray to the point and pray effectively.

A fourth thing which Jesus teaches us about prayer is to persist in prayer. The two passages that are teaching this says the same thing – Luke 11:5-13 and Matthew 7:7-11. Luke gives a little bit different end to it. Go on asking, go on seeking, go on knocking. What are we to be persistent in prayer for? The Lord says in the gospel of Luke you’re to do this because the Father wants to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him. Luke 18:1-8 Jesus also tells a parable on persistence and prayer. The widow and the unjust judge who doesn’t want to hear her request but she cries out night and day. And God’s people on earth encounter injustice too. So the Lord says “Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry out to him night and day.”

It’s interesting to note this teaching on persistence in light of what Jesus will say later about wherever two or three of you agree in my name as touching any one thing. Because whatever that means Jesus himself in his teaching on persistence did not mean it to be interpreted that always whenever we pray and ask any particular thing we snap our fingers and it’s automatically done and we can leave it behind. There are moments when a miracle of faith comes over us and what we ask for immediately happens. But there are other times when we must continue to pray. There’s persistence involved. That’s the balance to our praying.

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In fact Jesus is so concerned about whether there would be persistence in prayer when he tells that parable of the widow and the unjust judge he closes it with a question, However when the Son of man comes will he find the faith on the earth?

A fifth teaching which the Lord gives on prayer is that we are to pray for workers in the harvest. "Seeing the multitudes Jesus went up and he said to the disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.'" Mathew 9:38, Luke 10:2. On two separate occasions. On one occasion is before Jesus chose the twelve. The second occasion is when he chose the 70. Both times before he chose these people for their mission he is saying to his followers, Pray for the workers in the harvest. Jesus knows that the real problem in the church will always be the matter of the need for workers. The harvest is ripe.

A sixth teaching that the Lord gives on prayer is to pray because authority depends upon it. Mark 9:29. When we are not praying we will not have the spiritual authority that we need to deal with the problems in life that we face. The disciples had this problem in Mark 9:29. They were trying to cast out a demon. They come to Jesus. He casts it out and turn around and says, This kind cannot come out except through prayer. Some translations add "and fasting." But that's debatable. Jesus when he cast the demon out of the boy had just spent time on the mount where he was transfigured. During that time he had been praying. Because he had been praying he had authority. Prayer makes a difference in our life and our strength level as we face the problems of life. So pray.

Then a seventh thing that Jesus teaches us to pray about is pray in unity with other people. Matthew 18:19-20. "Again I tell you agree about anything you ask for it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name there I am with them." Unity. There are things in the body of Christ that are never done unless we agree together will happen. That's why the Lord has the disciples meet for ten days prior to the day of Pentecost that they might agree on their mission which he had given them. Go to Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and the uttermost part of the world. The early church gave considerable time to meeting together as a people of God. An hour of worship a week will not give us the strength we need or allow the church to be the body it needs to be in the world. We have to spend more time with one another to be the church.

We'd like to fully develop the calling and talents and gifts of every person in the church so that the body of Jesus Christ might be as fully talented and as fully gifted as God wants it to be. We want to help couples build Christ centered marriages and families through teaching, example and encouragement. We'd like to involve every person in the church to fulfilling their calling and responsibility to the church. We'd like to achieve the participation of every person o the church in supporting the church with tithes and offerings because stewardship is a vital element of being a Christian. We'd like to include every person in giving of their time in prayer and in service. We'd like to minister to every person in the church experiencing times of need, difficulty, tragedy or opportunity. Those are statements of what we can agree upon together. Pray in unity.

"If any of you ask anything in my name." That sounds like carte blanche. How do we understand "anything." The New Testament qualifies "anything" for us. Anything does not include that which is asked from a sinful or selfish motivation. Anything does not include anything that is asked outside of Christ's name. John 13:13-14. When we use at the end of our

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prayers, “In Christ’s name” means that his character stands behind. It’s praying with understanding of the character of Jesus behind it.

Then “anything” also does not include that which is outside of God’s will. 1 John 5:14-15 “This is the assurance we have in approaching God that if we ask anything according to his will he hears it. And we know that if he hears us, whatever we ask we know we have what we have asked of him.”

There’s the qualifications for “anything.”

We want to make sure that what we’re praying for lines up with the will of God. If we’re not sure let’s pray it anyway but understand as we’re praying it to leave it to God to be the disposer of it.

An eighth lesson that Jesus gives us on prayer is that we are to pray honestly and with humility. Luke 18:9-14 is the story of the Pharisee who went up to pray. He boasted about who he was and the tax collector went up to pray and he simply looked down and said, “God be merciful to me a sinner.” He had prayed honestly and with humility and the Lord heard his prayer.

A ninth thing which the Lord teaches us about prayer is that places of worship should be places for prayer. In all three of the synoptic gospels – Matthew 23, Mark 11, Luke 19 – Jesus declares that the temple should be a place of prayer. Matthew adds “for all nations.” Here we have not one person leading in prayer but each person in a place of worship praying. Here again we need to let our modern day worship services be corrected by scripture. If we come to worship and only one person leads in prayer and we only sing, only learn, only stimulated but never pray we have missed what part of our function is when we gather. So when we come to worship may at some point we bring our own prayer to God and be found as the body of Christ as a people of prayer. I want to encourage you to be comfortable praying in church and praying with each other and praying during the course of a service or at the end of a service.

The tenth thing that Jesus teaches us about prayer is that we are to pray with faith. Mark 11:22-24 “Have faith in God,” Jesus answered. ‘I tell you the truth that if anyone says to this mountain, “Go throw yourself into the sea and does not doubt in his heart but believes what he says will happen, it will be done for him.’ Therefore I tell you whatever you ask in prayer believe that you have received it and it will be yours.’”

This scripture has been a stumbling stone in the body of Christ today. Especially there are those who use it as carte blanche to say anything and God’s got to be obligated to come through. They’re the name it and claim it group. Then on the other side there are the passive saints who never ask anything because they say whatever Allah wills. That’s Islam not Christianity. The gospel gives us a chance to interact and faith is part of our praying.

A common characteristic identified of a successful person was their total lack of the concept of prayer. Enormously successful people, when asked point blank, Have you ever failed at anything, they went blank and said no they’ve never failed at anything. They all agreed that they could have done some things differently but they didn’t admit failure.

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The people who succeed in the kingdom of God are people who don't know the meaning of the word "defeat." It isn't some hare written rule that says anytime you say anything it's going to happen. It's a life motivational kind of thing. Not a passing kind of fancy. A life motivational thing that says my attitude and my prayer is such that with Christ dwelling in me there is no way I can end up failing and not succeeding in what God's purposes are for me. Defeat? No I've learned a few things on the way but never defeat.

There are levels of faith. There is bedrock faith, which is our basic faith in Christ. There's action faith, which seeks for God to change circumstance. Then there is the acceptance level of faith, which says, "Though He slay me yet will I trust him." Bedrock faith, action faith and acceptance faith. All part of saying to this mountain, Be moved.

The eleventh thing the Lord teaches us about prayer is to pray with forgiveness. Mark 11:25 "When you stand praying if you hold anything against anyone forgive them so that your Father in heaven may forgive your sins." And also the Lord's prayer teaches us to ask that our debts be forgiven and Jesus there says that if we do not forgive others their debts to us, the Father will not forgive us our debts to him. So when we're praying Jesus says Look around. Have you got anything against anybody? Forgive them as you're praying. He adds one additional word in Matthew 5:23-24 "When you go to the altar [that's a place of prayer as well] if you remember that anybody has anything against you, you go be reconciled to them." So there's a two pronged approach there. If you have anything against anyone when you're in the place of prayer, forgive them. And if you remember that if anybody has something against you, you have an obligation as a spiritual brother or sister under God to go and help them. Because if they have not forgiven you, they're having spiritual struggles in their own life. So we need to do our best to help them as well. Forgiveness.

The twelfth thing that Jesus teaches about prayer is to pray with moral integrity. He accuses the Pharisees in Mark 12:40 and Luke 21:36 of using their prayers to exploit advantages over others. He says "They devour widow's houses and for a show make lengthy prayers." In other words here are people you find in the synagogue and on the street corner and they look so religious. But if you find them at nine in the morning they're foreclosing on a note that they have engineered on a widows house at 22% interest knowing that she couldn't pay it off. They're cloaking their greed and their exploitation of others by outward spiritual guise.

I don't think the body of Christ today has as many problems with money wrong like the Pharisees did. I think what happens in the contemporary body of Christ is often we feel that what the Lord lays down in terms of our moral life and our moral choices and our sexuality that somehow we can be whatever we want to be in between Sundays and then be pious. The Lord tells us in all areas of life to let our prayer life be marked with integrity so that what we are on the inside is squaring to what we are saying to God. Pray with moral integrity.

Then he tells us a thirteenth lesson on prayer. Pray to be kept safe in times of terrible tragedy. This is the phrase use in the first three gospels – Matthew 24:20, Mark 13:18, Luke 21:36. It is a reference to the tribulation. He's saying to his disciples "Pray that your flight not be on the Sabbath or in the winter." Why is he saying that? It's very difficult to flee on those days. He's telling them in the time of the tribulation pray that things will be easy for you to escape.

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By way of inference he's telling us that anytime of trouble that we can escape that terrible time and that things can go easier for us.

The last two lessons on prayer is that we should pray in Jesus' name. John 14:13-14. John 15:7, John 16:23-26. We're to let our prayers be in the name of Jesus indicating that the authority of Jesus Christ stands behind what we are saying.

The last thing that Jesus teaches us about prayer in his earthly ministry is that we are to pray to avoid temptation. Luke 22:39. He tells Peter and the disciples who are falling asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Pray that you not enter into temptation." We will be spiritually weak without prayer.

We look at those fifteen instances and we go back over them and we ask ourselves meditative questions. I'd encourage you to take this outline and phrase questions and let this be in our prayer notebooks. We can take the nine questions that were asked last week and add to them fifteen and grow in these questions as we seek to turn our No's into Yes's when we pray.

Do I pray? Jesus took it for granted that we would pray. Maybe we shouldn't take that for granted. Do I pray?

Do I pray for my enemies?

Do I pray privately?

Do I pray to the point? It's so easy to let our mind ramble. I find myself when I'm praying to come back and say, What am I praying about and who am I praying to?

Do I persist in prayer? Or is prayer sort of like turning in an order at the restaurant and if it doesn't get met within a half-hour I get discouraged and say forget it. Am I persisting in prayer?

Am I praying for workers in the harvest? Am I praying for workers in the church? Am I praying for the next generation of Christian workers to arise? Am I praying for workers?

Do I prevail because I have prayed? Am I getting beaten around by life solely for the reason I'm not praying?

Do I pray in unity with others? Can I single out times right now, right in the last few days or weeks when I've gotten together with several people and we have specifically agreed in prayer.

Do I pray honestly and with humility?

Do I pray when I'm in a place of worship? Do I come to church and expect to pray?

Do I pray with faith?

Do I pray with forgiveness? Is my life clean? Is there anyone that I need to forgive? Prayer is a wonderful way of having the Holy Spirit talk to us about our life. We won't pray long before things that need to be corrected in our life, the Holy Spirit will nudge us about.

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Do I pray with moral integrity?

Do I pray to be spared in times of tragedy?

Do I pray in Jesus' name?

Am I praying to avoid temptation?

That's all basically that Jesus taught us about prayer. You would think that there would be more. When we come to the rest of the New Testament there is more but that's a good beginning. Fifteen lessons on prayer in all the teachings of the Lord on the subject.

Lord, we say, teach us to pray.

Father, we come to you this evening. We're here because there is a hunger in our hearts to know you more. We want to be people of prayer. So many things compete with that desire in our life. Our own sin competes with that desire. There are times when we're so devastated by our own actions and attitudes that we feel that maybe you wouldn't like to hear us today. Then there's our own busy schedules. How that comes against us. Then maybe there's a continuing record of prayerlessness and it's so hard to overcome inertia in our life. Hard to overcome failure. But Lord, we're here with a new hunger in our life. We ask that if we've never prayed consistently before in our life that all that will be put behind us even this night. And that we'll begin to pray and take time to find that special place where everyday we can come to you, a special time when we can bow, or sit or kneel or be prostrate in your presence and pray. Teach us to pray. Help us as a church to be a church filled with prayer. That all that you want to accomplish through us can be done. Help us to be listening to you, to have a heart sensitive to you. Revive the ministry of prayer in our midst. We adore you and worship you and have power with you. Lord, Jesus, we ask this in your name that you would teach us to prayer. Thank you Lord for helping us pray. Amen.