

Session Three: Prayer

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[0 : 0 0] Hello, and welcome back to Gospel Growth. My name is Brian Hart, and we're carrying on talking about what it looks like to grow up into maturity and Christlikeness. A big part of that growing process are what we could call spiritual disciplines or practices or ways, things that Jesus did and modeled for us. Specifically, we're going to talk a little bit about praying and reading God's Word.

Now, those are things that Christians do to draw near to God and to grow in Christlikeness, but we can sometimes have wrong-headed ideas about them. We don't always think well about what those things are and even why we should do them. In fact, what's really terrible, ironic and terrible, is that those two things that are meant to bring us so much joy and peace and help for many people are sources of guilt or confusion, which is not ideal. That's the opposite of why they're there.

Prayer and Bible reading should be means by which we experience God's grace and His presence. We interact with Him, and they contribute to our relationship with Him. Now, for the next few minutes, we're going to focus just on prayer. And I am only going to be able to scratch the surface on what it looks like to develop a prayer life. So hopefully, if you really struggle with prayer, we'll help you take some steps forward. If you are wanting to grow more in this area, I will say there's a book I would highly recommend that's very accessible called *A Praying Life* by Paul Miller.

I found that book very, very helpful. But for the next few minutes, I'm going to do wave tops and just try to get the conversation started on prayer, the why and the how. First, we're going to talk about the why. Why should we pray? The reality is that for a lot of us, myself included, we don't always feel like we pray enough. I always say that's true. I don't pray as much as I should. I pray more than I used to, but probably not as much as I should. And so because of that, again, a lot of us, when we think about prayer, we mainly just feel guilty because we think about the fact that we're not doing it. So I want to point out that the reason that we pray, we do not pray for the sake of prayer. We pray for God. God is the point of prayer. And that sounds very obvious. I know that sounds very obvious, but we don't always realize that. We can often begin to think that praying is just something that good Christians do. It's just like one of the things that a box that you're supposed to check every day so you can kind of feel like you're doing the Christian thing.

The whole reason that prayer is important is because it is the means by which we connect with God. It is the means by which we talk to him and build relationship with him. He is the God of the universe, and he cares about what we think, and he wants us to interact with him.

[3 : 1 2] Now, when I don't pray, the reason that I might feel guilty is because I know that I am supposed to pray. I know I'm supposed to do that. But the problem with not praying isn't just that I didn't do something I was supposed to do. It's a problem because of how it affects my relationship with and my love for God. That is the problem with prayerlessness. It isn't that I just didn't do the right thing. It's that it is directly affecting my relationship with God and my love for him.

So you can imagine if you're married or even if you're single, think about what a healthy marriage looks like. If two people in a marriage aren't talking to each other, they don't have a talking problem. They have a relationship problem. And so prayer is about developing relational health with the Lord. That means that our prayer lives are actually really good barometers for our relationship with God. I think it's probably fair to say that you can consider someone's relationship with God in light of their prayerfulness. Now, if you're anything like me, that can be a bit of a scary thought. So I want to give us a few handles to focus on if we want to grow in our prayerfulness with the Lord. And there's really no better place to look for this than the Psalms. The Psalms have been called the prayer book of God's people now for really thousands of years. They served that purpose for Jews and then also now for Christians in the Christian church. And the Psalms themselves are prayers and some of them give us really good insights into what prayer should be like.

A great example is from Psalm 63 where the psalmist says this, Oh God, you are my God. Earnestly I seek you. My soul thirsts for you. My flesh faints for you as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I've looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory because your steadfast love is better than life. My lips will praise you. And then in verse seven, for you have been my help and in the shadow of your wings, I will sing for joy. My soul clings to you. Your right hand upholds me. This language is of desire and delight. So it's just worth saying that prayer is meant to be fueled by delight in God. David is enjoying God. He's coming to God in prayer, seeking after him. He talks about his soul thirsting. He's found in God something that he desires, something beautiful, someone beautiful. The reality is that we naturally go after the things that we delight in, the things that satisfies, the things that we like. It isn't hard work to do the things that you like or to be with the people that you enjoy. That just comes naturally to you. So David says that God's love is better than life and he says he realizes that after he looks on God in the sanctuary, after he beholds God's power and glory. So a good prayer life starts with or has to involve having a revelation of who God is. Starts with just considering him, taking time. I can't tell you how meaningful this has been for my own prayer life to take a moment before saying anything and just think about who he is. And many of you have done the same thing and you know this, how powerful that is and how much it changes your prayers once you're actually praying out of response to who he is and what he's done. What do you find most delightful? What really captures your imagination and gets you excited about life? Often it's those things, the things that give us the most pleasure that are, that there are things that actually are not able to satisfy us. And so it's worth just acknowledging that our desires and our instinct are sometimes warped but we don't realize it. So you can think of a child who only eats peanut butter and jelly, man, you can put the best steak in the world in front of that kid but that kid is going to choose the peanut butter and jelly every time. Why? Well, the desires inside are warped. That child has not learned to delight in something better. And so part of prayer is learning to delight in God. Your desires have been developed over a lifetime and they don't always change in a moment but they can change. And so I want to encourage you with that. If you find that you don't enjoy God, don't give up right away. In the same way, we might tell a child who doesn't like, who prefers peanut butter and jelly to steak, we might say, give it some time. You're going to find that this is better and better for you and it has more capacity for enjoyment at the end of the day.

A good prayer life has to, at some point, become about delighting in God. Also, prayer is fueled by dependence. David says, my soul clings to you, your right hand upholds me. One of the reasons that he prays is because he knows that he needs God. He knows that he needs God for the big battles and also in the little moments. That's very easy to forget. And I'm really bad about that. I've gotten much better over the years about knowing I need God for big decisions, but then in the small details, I think I got it on my own. I forget how much like a sheep I am, that I need him for everything.

[8 : 25] And that's just pride. You know, Jesus was the most humble man who ever lived. Isn't that remarkable? The man who worked all these miracles and yet he lived his life utterly dependent on his father.

He said, I only do the things that my father tells me to do. I only say the things that he tells me to say. So if that's true of Jesus, how much more should it be true of us? I just want to make a quick side note about fasting. Fasting is something that often goes with prayer to express that kind of dependence.

That's where maybe you skip a meal and you spend time with the Lord and it's a way of physically acting out what we say, which is that we need him more than we need anything else. For a lot of us, fasting is not a discipline that we're familiar with. And you can grow into that over time, but I would encourage you to try it out. When you're really feeling like you need God to come through, consider fasting for a meal. And instead of eating, taking that time to walk and pray and be with the Lord.

That's been a discipline that Christians have done for thousands of years as a way to increase and act out that sense of dependency. So that's a bit about why we pray. We don't pray for the sake of prayer. We pray for the sake of God, for accessing him and everything that he has for us. And we do it because we delight in him and we're dependent on him. But what about how? How do we pray? Well, you know, the disciples asked Jesus that and he didn't say, oh, it doesn't matter. No, he actually taught them. He gave them a way to pray and it's been called the Lord's Prayer.

Prayer. Now, I would say the Lord's Prayer is not a script to rehearse. It is a template or a model for what prayer should look like. Martin Luther, the great reformer, used to teach people, hey, if you want to learn how to pray, take the Lord's Prayer and then take each line and put it into your own words to fit your own circumstances. So we don't have time to do all of that now, but we're going to look at a couple of things about how we should pray just from the first line of the Lord's Prayer.

[10:18] Matthew 6, 9 says, pray then like this, our Father in heaven. The first thing we see here is that when we pray, it should be intimate, which means we're being very honest and talking to the Lord as if he's close and as if he actually loves us. You know, there's a lot of ways that Jesus could have taught us to pray. He could have said, hey, when you talk to God, say our King or our judge or our Lord or our Creator, you know, all those things are true. But he says when you come to him, it's best to say our Father. He is a Father who loves us and he has adopted us and he has brought us into his family.

I'm fortunate to have a good Father. I have a very good earthly Father and so it's easy for me to understand what this means. For some of you who may not have had good earthly fathers, this may not be as readily accessible for you. But I want you to know that God is a really good Father and he really loves you. And what this means is that every time you come to him, he wants you to come to him because every good father loves when his children come. Shame often gets in the way of prayer. We think that God's always, oh, he's so disappointed in me. He doesn't want to see me. No, no, no, he's a good father. Good fathers are never irritated by their children coming to them. That's the point of this.

I once heard a story about a soldier after the Civil War. His land was unjustly taken away and he tried everything to get his land back. Nothing helped. And so he went to President Lincoln himself to see if the president would do anything. But of course, this guy's merely a lowly soldier and he could never get in to see the president into the White House. And so he's sitting on a park bench, dejected and defeated. And a little boy found him and said, hey, why are you so sad? And so the soldier told the little boy his story. Well, the little boy got up and said, come with me. The boy took him by the hand and walked him straight into the White House, past the guards and the sentries, took him right into the presidential library where President Lincoln sat. And that little boy ran up and gave him a hug because that little boy was Tad Lincoln, the president's son. And the president's son brought the soldier in and gave him an audience with the president of the United States. And that's what Jesus does for us. He's the son of the king. He says, you get to come with me. But it goes way beyond that story of President Lincoln and the soldier, because Jesus says, you don't just get to come as a friend of Jesus. You get to come as a son yourself. You get to call him father, like Jesus calls him father. When you pray, that's how you get to talk to him, which means you get to come with every obstacle removed. Nothing stands in your way. I should totally change how we relate to God, because of the cross. We don't stand in fear. We run to him with love, knowing that he loves us.

And so we also don't just, when we come to him like that, Jesus says, you don't just say my father, you also say our father, our father in heaven. And so here we see that we pray confidently. This God, he is not just my God, he's our God and he's in heaven and he is always acting on behalf of all of us. He's not just the father who loves us. He's the almighty father in heaven who has numbered the stars. Psalm 147 verses three through six says, he heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. He determines the number of the stars. He gives to them all their names.

[13:46] You know, researchers have said that there's something like, I mean, the number of stars in the observable universe is almost mind boggling. It's the number 70 followed by 22 zeros.

70,000, million, million, million. Likely more stars in the sky than actual grains of sand on the planet. And God has names for all of them. And this is what it goes on to say about this God who has named those stars. Great is our Lord and abundant in power. His understanding is beyond measure.

And then it says, the Lord lifts up the humble. What does God do with his power? Well, he uses his power for people like you and me, people who come to him with big problems, problems that are too big for us. We come to him knowing that he not only cares about our problems, he's actually able to do something about them. And he is willing to do things about them. He is incredibly powerful. And so we come to him with confidence knowing he is able to do more than we can even think or imagine. And then finally, I just want to remember, I just want to remind you the significance of the our father being our father and not just my father. When we pray, we also pray in community.

This is an important aspect of prayer. I know some of us are terrified about praying out loud in front of other people. We don't want to look silly. And that's very understandable. But my hope is that as you grow in confidence over time, you will find joy and delight not only in talking to God, but praying with like-minded believers, praying with brothers and sisters.

Because he isn't just your father, he's the father of a family. And it's really good to experience him with the family. I've been so blessed over the years and seasons and moments of prayer where it's not just me praying, I'm praying with other people and their prayers are blessing me. My prayers are blessing them. He's not just my father, he's our father. So as you are gathering to talk about what you've learned, I'd encourage you to discuss what stands in the way of prayer for you. What are the things that keep you from doing it? And what are the reasons why you should pray? And then when you've talked about that a little bit, consider how you pray. How could you use the Lord's prayer? How can you use the ways that Jesus taught his disciples to pray to help give you language as you are discovering ways to talk and be honest to the Father yourself? God bless you guys. I hope you enjoy discussing what you've learned.