

“Why Pray?”

By Scott Runyon

First Baptist Church Birmingham

June 16, 2019

Ephesians 6:18-20

Today we are beginning our summer series by talking about some of those things we do as a community of people who follow Jesus, and asking ourselves why we do them. These things include: praying, singing, reading the book we call the Bible, giving our money and time, celebrating, gathering together as a community, and loving people we know will never love us back. We will also get into a couple of things that we often don't think about or maybe even practice much, like confessing what we have done or not done to each other, and resting.

All of these are part of our historic faith and have been practiced by Christians for a couple thousand years and many go back to our Jewish roots thousands of years prior. Let's not take them for granted, but dig a bit and get under the surface.

After taking a deeper look, we may want to throw out the practice because we conclude that it is outdated or unnecessary, and no longer serves a purpose in our lives. However, we also may

discover a deeper, real value and purpose in them, perhaps for the first time, and renew a sense of commitment to practice them more regularly.

This morning we are talking about prayer. Why do we pray? What does prayer do or accomplish? It can be honest to ask if God even hears our prayers, because frankly, it certainly seems that way sometimes.

Even so, a Pew Research study showed that more than half of adults in America pray daily and less than a quarter seldom or never pray. And prayer doesn't only include those who are “religious.” About 20% of people who are religiously “unaffiliated” pray daily and about 18% more pray weekly or monthly.

A man named Larry Dossey has become one of the country's leading experts on prayer and medical science. He points to research that proves sick people who are prayed for do better than those who are not. Interestingly, he also says that they do better regardless of the religious affiliation of those praying.

But beyond statistics and research, we want to consider today what prayer means to us personally and

perhaps for us as a church community.

Let's start with a passage from the end of the book of Ephesians where the author, a man named Paul, encouraged others to pray.

READ EPHESIANS 6:18-20

It is clear that Paul thought prayer was important. He also said that God's Holy Spirit was important related to prayer, because he encouraged the readers to continually "pray in the Spirit."

This assumed that they would already know God's Spirit and could identify what kind of prayer would be in unison with God's Spirit. That was the prayer Paul wanted them to pray.

Paul also asked the readers to pray for all other followers of Jesus and for him while he was in prison. Paul believed strongly that as they prayed, God's presence would inspire within him words that would strongly communicate the mysterious work of God in the world.

What do you think about what Paul believed about prayer and God?

Today I want to talk about three parts of prayer: the content, the expression, and the purpose.

But first let's start with the first question. What is prayer?

Perhaps the most basic way to put it is that prayer is communication with the divine, with God.

As we know, communication requires, a two-way interaction. So, prayer is not just talking to God, but also listening to notice the variety of ways that God communicates with us.

Just like in conversation with people, listening is perhaps the most important part of prayer. However 91% of our time in prayer is spent talking. If you are wondering where the 91% comes from, it is not from a scientific study, but my own guesstimate.

Would you say that the average time you spend listening in prayer is more or less than 91%?

Regarding the content of prayer, many people have made lists. If you look it up online you will find "the three main prayer categories," or "the four kinds of prayer," or "the seven types of prayer." Others make lists of no less than ten different sorts of prayers. They also make up acronyms to remind them how to pray.

These categories can be helpful for people to get their minds and

hearts around the content of their own personal prayers or praying in groups.

I'm going to share with you nine different types of prayer content. Which of these seem to resonate for you?

CONTENT OF PRAYER

1. **Prayer of faith.** Praying with faith that God will heal someone.
2. **Prayer of request.** People make all sort of request of God.
3. **Prayer of agreement.** Praying with agreement together in a group. It is thought, although I'm not sure the Bible truly supports the idea, that the more people who pray in unison, the more likely that God will hear and answer their prayer.
4. **Prayer of thanksgiving.** Expressing thanks, appreciation, and gratitude to God.
5. **Prayer of intercession.** We pray on behalf of someone else. To intercede is literally to stand in for someone else or engage on their behalf.
6. **Prayer of adoration.** Praising God, often with an acknowledgment of who God is and what God has done.
7. **Prayer of confession.** We seek forgiveness from God for what we have done or not done that has hurt ourselves, others, or the world.

8. **Prayer of communion.** Pray all day and all the time knowing you are always connected with God. You acknowledge that all your actions, and thoughts are already in God's presence, and the things that happen around you are in a way God communicating back to you — so all of life becomes communication with God, and a prayer. Perhaps this is what Paul meant when he wrote about praying without ceasing.
9. **Prayer of dedication.** Committing one's life for God's purposes, or a committing to raise a child a particular way.

The Psalms is a book of prayers and poetry found right in the center of the Bible. With a few exceptions, the Psalms are not God's word to us, but the authentic voice of our common, raw, shared humanity. They speak about life the way it really is without pretense or filter.

Some psalms celebrate life, and many are composed from inside the pit of despair, when it seems no hope is left. They remind us that nothing is out of bounds when we pray. We can be brutally honest and take anything and everything to God.

In the spirit of the Psalms, the following prayer was written by a

16-year-old boy in the violence of
1990s inner city gang life.

Consider that if not with God,
these words and feelings may
never have been expressed.
Imagine what might be available for
this boy after such a prayer.

A Sixteen-Year-Old Gangster's Prayer

Heavenly Father, please hear me
tonight.
I need so much guidance to live my
life right.
Sometimes the pressure is so hard
to bear,
I often wonder if anyone cares.

How can I wake up and face a new
day
Knowing I have to live my life in
this crazy way?
Heavenly Father, forgive all my
sins,
I want to change, but where do I
begin?

Please God, bless my family,
whose eyes silently plead
For me not to go out, as they all
watch me leave.
And God bless my mother, who
cries every night,
Worrying I'll be killed in another
gun fight.

Heavenly Father, please answer my
prayer

Please let me know you're listening
up there.

When will it end? What's it all for?
To prove to my homies I'm down,
I'm hardcore?

Sometimes I even wonder how I
will die,
By a bullet wound or a knife in my
side?
Heavenly Father, please hear me
tonight,
Give me courage and strength to
live my life right.

Please show me the way, Lord,
show me the light.
Help me change my heart so I
won't have to fight.
Thank you for forgiveness, Lord,
and for still being there.
Most of all, thank you for listening
to this sinner's prayer.
Amen.

Let's now look at some different
expressions of prayer. Our
intention and where we place our
attention makes all the difference.

EXPRESSIONS OF PRAYER

1. **Speaking words.** The most
common prayer expression is
speaking out loud or silently.
Some will keep their eyes
closed and fold their hands in
order to limit the distractions
and be respectful with their
attention on God. Some will

Speak their prayer, but with eyes open, maybe walking, driving, swimming, gardening, or doing something else. There is not one right or wrong way to pray.

2. **Offering emotions.** Sometimes a prayer can be without words, but sharing emotions with God. The Bible says the Spirit of God will interpret our feelings, or the groans of our heart and receive them. God also speaks to us through our emotions.
3. **Art.** Some people have found themselves wanting to pray but are too distracted to use words. They might be filled with emotions and random thoughts and so overwhelmed they can't focus to say a prayer, so they engage in some kind of art to communicate with God. Others find art the most natural way to connect with God. People color, draw, doodle, paint, sculpt, write, play music, dance, or move in some other way as an expression to God of what they hold deep inside. This becomes a prayer offering to God.

So, we have talked about the content and expression of prayer. Now let's ask about the purpose of prayer. Without a purpose, there is no point. The purpose of prayer comes first and shapes its content and expression.

People throughout time and across all cultures and religions have prayed. Interestingly, the purposes for prayer are consistent regardless of background, language, doctrine, or creed. Connecting with our purpose for prayer can draw out our deepest humanity.

So, why do we pray? Here is a sampling. Which speaks to you?

PURPOSES OF PRAYER

1. To satisfy a deep human longing to know a greater power, and somehow tap into the mystery of the divine by being still in the presence of God.
2. To create a bond of unity and common focus among a group or community of people.
3. To unburden ourselves by releasing concerns and worries to God.
4. For the healing, restoration, and transformation of people, relationships, and situations.
5. To awaken and give expression to a spiritual reality within ourselves.
6. To inspire love and aliveness.
7. To be the best version of ourselves.
8. To heal our spirit.
9. To allow us to be honest, and free ourselves from the burden of secrets we have not spoken.
10. To seek hope.
11. To express gratitude and praise God.

12. As a habit, to transform our self-centered preoccupation into love that is focused outward.
13. To be attentive to what is going on in our own life.
14. To reaffirm who we are and who God is and to clarify our relationship.

When our **attention** is on God with these **intentions**, it will shift our life perspective over time. In this way, prayer changes us, at the deepest level.

Walter Brueggemann, a noted author and theologian, speaks of the most powerful and life altering prayers being those that have us honestly and profoundly engage in the disorientation we all experience in life.

This happens in the chaos, and disorder of life. It could be a failed marriage, the loss of a job, a diagnosis from a doctor, anxiety over lost physical energy, news of war somewhere in the world, a sense that a part of our political system and society is falling apart, or the feeling of loneliness. It could even be something that feels smaller, like an unsettling email from a friend, or an awkward encounter at a grocery store.

The most powerful prayers come out of this space where we feel off kilter or disoriented. We have an

awareness that life is not the romantic, smooth sailing, peaceful and harmonious existence that perhaps we expected as a child. This is the place from which come many of the prayers of the Psalms.

We step into that reckless space and offer our raw feelings and concerns into the hands of a loving God, who can certainly take anything we offer. If we are brave enough to risk going there, this is where people have found God's transforming power in their lives.

By virtue of risking and trusting enough to lay our vulnerabilities down in front of a mysterious God that our lives that are full of disorientation can be surprisingly transformed and reoriented.

It's like author Mary Ford-Grabowsky says, "Like a grain of wheat, the heart only opens by breaking, by shattering..."

Are you willing to go to that next level of vulnerability and risk taking to God your deepest brokenness, your tender woundedness, and the disorienting unrest you experience in your life and the world?

If you do, you will be open to experience the wonder, the power and the mystery that is our God.