

Your Prayer Life

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PART 6

Matthew 6:1-6; 7:9-12; 18:19-20; Luke 18:9-14; Acts 9:7-11

“Nothing can be as extravagant to God than one of His children bowing before Him in prayer, for in His joy He will reward, answer, and abide forever.”

- Larry Harper

Every believer should practice what Christ modeled. He turned aside from the moments and pressures of the days and prayed, demonstrating the rhythm of His life. What He considered a part of His routine should be considered even more important for us who are His followers.

Developing a personal prayer life and quiet time with the Heavenly Father is a must for a faithful walk with the Lord. With the discipline of solitude and silence before God, the noise of the world will not rule you. Let's consider some important aspects of the personal prayer life.

The Beginning

First, your personal prayer life begins at conversion. Conversion places us under the principles and promises of the Sovereign Father, and one of the promises is the privilege and power to pray. Once forgiven and assured of that salvation, the believer is compelled to commune with the Lord.

When Saul of Tarsus was confronted with Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus, he was changed forever. Once filled with animosity toward anyone who professed the name of Jesus as the Christ, Saul and his friends were now filled with awe and reverence.

So they led him by the hand into Damascus...In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"..."Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying (Acts 9:8-11).¹

Literally blinded and astounded by what had happened to him, Saul prays. One who just a few days before was zealous to wipe out the young Christian movement was now praying to its Christ. His response to his conversion was humble prayer. Communion with God is a result of conversion.

The believing community should take seriously its role in helping new converts understand the significance of their salvation and the marvelous privileges and blessings given them by a gracious God. We must teach and encourage them to pray, assuming we are convinced about our own conversion.

Do you have a desire to commune with God? Do you look forward to the moments when you can break away to talk and listen? If you cannot, perhaps your next prayer should be that of the psalmist, "Restore to me the joy of Thy salvation, and sustain me with a willing spirit" (Psalm 51:12).

¹ *The New International Version*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House) 1984.

Contemplate the Cross of Jesus. Remember the reality that without God's grace to effect your conversion you were in rebellion against Him and in the cross hairs of His wrath upon sin. God has turned away His wrath to pardon you, all because of your faith in His "only begotten Son." Amazing!

The Closet

Secondly, your personal prayer life is to be private. When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, He gives to them a command and some directions. The model prayer, "Our Father, who art in heaven..." (Matthew 6:9-13) was the directions. The command was a call to privacy.

And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you (Matthew 6:5-6).

Personal prayer is private both in process and in reward. Why would Jesus command His followers to pray "in a closet" (KJV)? Remember to look at the context. He was deeply disturbed by the superficial religious practices of His day to the point that He would encourage His followers to be very careful about "practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them" (Matthew 6:1). Further, when He sought to teach His disciples something, Jesus had to clarify the images that they may have about the subject or truth He was addressing. In this case, when He said "prayer," the disciples most likely had the image of the Pharisees who loved "to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners, in order to be seen of men" (Matthew 6:5). Possibly, the disciples felt they could not pray as religiously or as eloquently as the Pharisees could, so they asked Jesus to teach them to pray.

Praying as a lifestyle was important to Jesus but it was not to be used for elevation of self, but rather it was to be the humiliation of self before the Sovereignty of God. Consider the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican.

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted (Luke 18:9-14).

Prayer had become a public performance rather than a holy practice. To Christ, praying was a dynamic part of being united with the Heavenly Father whether or not anyone ever noticed. The important thing is that the Father pays attention and rewards this type of personal, humble praying.

The Community

There is another part of your prayer life that is also important for growth and faith. On the one hand your prayer life is private, but on the other hand, it is also public. It is a community or companion-

type praying. This is prayer that is enjoined by others in common mind and will. Notice this teaching of Jesus.

...if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by my Father who is in heaven. For where two or more are gathered together in my name, there I am in their midst" (Matthew 18:19-20).

This is a saying that has left many a believer deflated in their prayer life. They have prayed agreeing with others for the salvation of a loved one or the healing of a family member or friend, only to be disappointed when no answer came. The true depth of companion-praying is that God responds to those prayers that depend upon His answer, while the pray-ers give up their answer. Corporate prayer demonstrates the willingness of a group of believers, regardless of number, to pray for the will of God "to be done on earth as it is in heaven." When you gather with other believers for the purpose of praying, there seems to be a clearer focus in the praying and a renewed sense of purpose. For sure, it is the truth that Jesus said, "Where two or more are gathered in my name there I will be in the midst of them."

Years ago, Minister Joe Wright was asked to open the new session of the Kansas Senate, everyone was expecting the usual generalities, but this is what they heard: "Heavenly Father, we come before you today to ask Your forgiveness and to seek Your direction and guidance. We have lost our spiritual equilibrium and reversed our values. We confess that. We have ridiculed the absolute truth of Your Word and called it Pluralism. We have worshipped other gods and called it multiculturalism. We have endorsed perversion and called it alternative lifestyle. We have exploited the poor and called it the lottery. We have rewarded laziness and called it welfare. We have killed our unborn and called it choice. We have shot abortionists and called it justifiable. We have neglected to discipline our children and called it building self-esteem. We have abused power and called it politics. We have coveted our neighbor's possessions and called it ambition. We have polluted the air with profanity and pornography and called it freedom of expression. We have ridiculed the time-honored values of our forefathers and called it enlightenment. Search us, oh, God, and know our hearts today; cleanse us from every sin and set us free. Guide and bless these men and women who have been sent to direct us to the center of Your will, to openly ask it in the name of Your Son, the living Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen"

The response was immediate. A number of legislators walked out during the prayer in protest. In 6 short weeks, Central Christian Church, where Rev. Wright is pastor, logged more than 5,000 phone calls with only 47 of those responding negatively. The church is now receiving international requests for copies of this prayer. Commentator Paul Harvey aired it on his radio program, "The Rest of the Story." He received the largest response than any other he has ever aired.

Public prayer can unite the hearts and minds of faithful, God-fearing people. God is glorified in those types of prayers because the pray-ers are united in a corporate cause of faithfulness.

Proactivity

In the fourth place your prayer life also produces a unique ethic. To pray is to position yourself under the will of the Father, but consider that the will of the Father is not just what He has in store for your life, but His will is also what He expects in action from your life. Your personal prayer life

should produce action. This becomes apparent at the close of one of Jesus' teaching sessions on prayer.

Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you...(Matthew 7:9-12).

The closing comment in this passage is recognized as the Golden Rule. It is interesting that it is included within a prayer lesson.

Almost all the world's religions have some form of this saying, but in a negative way. One Rabbi receiving a convert said, "What is hateful to yourself do to no other, that is the whole Law..."² Confucius put it, "What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others." The Greek Stoics maintained, "What you do not wish to be done to you, do not do to anyone else." Past ethical teachings have centered on this negative axiom; however, Jesus is the only one who puts it in a positive, proactive way. "Do to others what you would have them do to you." Instead of refraining from any action toward another person, which the negative saying promotes, Jesus tells us to be proactive toward others. "Don't wait for someone to do for you. Do for them what you want them to do for you."

The Christian faith is not a meditative, cloistered one but a vibrant faith that approaches others with goodwill and the actions to prove it. Our faith's expression is what I call a "first-step ethic." We do without regard to what has or hasn't been done to us. We are motivated by the willful love of the Father not by some axiom that sounds nice or politically correct. Ours is a faith that takes the first step, mirroring God's initiative toward us. We become to others what God has been to us individually.

Therefore, your personal prayer life is the preparation for your ethical one.

"But," you might say, "I cannot find the time to develop a personal prayer life. There are too many demands on my schedule. I can't get done now what I need to do. How can I develop more time to devote for silence and solitude with God? It sounds great, but is it practical?"

We must refuse to let time be an excuse for not retreating to "our closets," so to speak. I have found it to be true, we will do what we want to do. Even with the demands of busy family schedules, it is possible to have a quiet time. Parents, you can model for your children your commitment to have a time with God, and they will most likely develop the discipline too. Several parents have shared that there is an agreement in their family that whenever someone is in a particular place in their home with their Bible, they are taking time to pray and be with God for a moment, and other members of the family are to respect that. Others have shared that they make an appointment with God in the morning. They say, "I make arrangements to insure I make my doctors appointments, so why shouldn't I consider my Heavenly Father more important than my doctor?" Be creative and figure out how you are going to make time for a personal, private time with the Lord. Remember...you will do what you want to do.

² Barclay, William, *The Daily Study Bible Series, Matthew, Vol. I*, (Philadelphia Westminster Press) 1975.

One day an expert in time management was speaking to a group of business students and, to drive home a point, used an illustration those students will never forget. As he stood in front of the group of high-powered overachievers he said, "Okay, time for a quiz." Then he pulled out a one gallon, wide mouthed Mason jar and set it on the table in front of him. Then he produced about a dozen fist-sized rocks and carefully placed them, one at a time, into the jar. When the jar was filled to the top and no more rocks would fit inside, he asked, "Is this jar full?" Everyone in the class said, "Yes." He reached under the table and pulled out a bucket of gravel. He dumped the gravel in and shook the jar causing pieces of gravel to work themselves down into the space between the big rocks. Then he asked the group once more, "Is the jar full?" By this time the class was on to him. "Probably not," one of them answered. "Good!" he replied. He reached under the table and brought out a bucket of sand. He started dumping the sand in the jar and it went into all of the spaces left between the rocks and the gravel. Once more he asked the question, "Is this jar full?" "No!" the class shouted. Once again he said, "Good." Then he grabbed a pitcher of water and began to pour it in until the jar was filled to the brim. Then he looked at the class and asked, "What is the point of this illustration?" One eager beaver raised his hand and said, "The point is, no matter how full your schedule is, if you try really hard you can always fit some more things in it!" "No," the speaker replied, "that's not the point. This illustration teaches us: if you don't put the big rocks in first, you'll never get them in at all."

What are the 'big rocks' in your life? Your children....Your spouse...Your profession.... Your dreams....Your health...Your faith? Remember to put the "big rocks" in first or you'll never get them in at all. If you sweat the little stuff (the gravel, the sand) then you'll fill your life with little things you worry about that don't really matter, and you'll never have the real quality time you need to spend on the big, important stuff (the big rocks).

We might think the problem is making time, but in actuality, it is deciding on the priorities.