

Session 5: Prayer

Praying in the Church and Praying with the Church

Definition: Prayer is our lifeline to God. Prayer is the way we come to be in touch with the Spirit of God and live in the presence of God.

Testimony: Several years ago, I was pastor at Bow Valley Baptist Church, I was overwhelmed by the responsibilities I had. I was working fulltime as a French teacher in Calgary. I was doing the church work in Cochrane, raising a family, and starting the Arabic speaking church in Calgary. My plate was full. One day I woke up to the reality that prayer had taken a back seat in my life. I was exhausted. I was tired of running on my own power. One night during a Wednesday prayer meeting, I heard the distinct voice of God saying to me: Georges, I want you to become a man of prayer. I am thankful that I paid attention. It wasn't about taking more of my time to pray. It was about growing into a man who prays through life. So I embarked on this journey of becoming a person who prays. And I haven't looked back ever since. It has not been a steady climb to say the least. There are still days I don't pay enough attention and energy to prayer.

Jesus: The man of prayer we emulate. Before I present a 3-step process of the activity of prayer, I'd like to lay some foundation and rationale for it. Understanding why is very helpful to understand what and for keeping faithful in prayer.

The Psalmists: Jesus' and our prayer teachers: The Psalms have been my best models of learning how to pray and my attitude toward prayer. Praying them, and learning to pray them continually is the best prayer advice we can give anyone. They were the first prayers Jesus prayed along with other Scriptures. He learned many of them by heart and prayed them, or sang them. I'm sure he meditated on them constantly. They formed his life. He grew in favor with God and man as he prayed and obeyed. He learned how to suffer from reading the sufferings of the praying psalmists. He learned to lament by copying the psalmist who lamented before him in prayer. The Psalms are some of the most quoted parts of the Old Testament in the New by Jesus.

The Disciples learn to pray as Jesus prayed. Being a disciple of Jesus means we train to become people of prayer. It's really that simple. We learn to pray by praying. I may be able to teach you a few principles about prayer. I may give you a few handles on how to pray. But your best teacher on prayer is Jesus. Praying with him is like going to the school of prayer.

Often our teachers who teach us about the activity of prayer put a heavy accent on praying as individuals and tend to neglect praying in the church and with the church or the praying church. This is unfortunate. Corporate prayer is a pattern of prayer in Scripture. I'll have more to say on that later.

The Disciples want to pray just like Jesus prayed. After the disciples spent some time with Jesus, they realized that he prayed constantly. They saw the power of his life. They connected the two things together: A life well lived, in love with people of deep need, a life not focused on dos and don'ts, and a life that abounded in intimacy with God. They felt Jesus could teach them to pray and live the way he did. He was always running away from people to catch a few moments alone with God to pray. Paul tells us that the Spirit of Jesus will teach us to pray in Romans 8:26. No wonder then that the disciples felt that Jesus could teach them to pray. One day they came and asked. So he taught. Much of the prayer Jesus taught is in the plural, indicating that it was meant to be prayed publicly in a group.

What about reciting prayers? Did Jesus mean for us to recite the prayer he taught his disciples to pray? Did he mean to give us only an example, or immerse in the language of life in the kingdom of God when we pray? Is he setting down a pattern, or method, or model to pray? These are questions many people ask and answer.

For sure, we can't learn to pray by learning the words of a prayer, but when we repeat such words they become part of the discipline or activity of prayer. We do it all the time in our churches. Notice especially the prayers that are said at offering times. Praying effectively is learned just as a person learns an art. You need a careful method and constant practice. Any definite form of prayer will be helpful, especially the Lord's Prayer, which is the way Jesus prayed.

This prayer has all the signs of being an activity done in a group. Every time the first person is used it's plural. It's also quite possible that the disciples are asking for help in group-prayer. They'd heard John's disciples pray in imitation of John. So they asked Jesus if they could imitate him as John's disciples imitated John. It seems as if this common prayer is necessary for group praying. Not much else can join our hearts and unite us like words given by God to pray.

Some say we need to be more liturgical some say less liturgical. But praying the Lord's Prayer has played a positive role for both groups. One of the most intimate things we can do as churches is to invite each other into our prayer lives or prayer words. Jesus invites us into his prayer life and words. What an honor!

"Our Father" opens the prayer and leads us into a new reality in life where God, our Father rules: In the heavens. A real gift to any praying person! Our Father is a term of intimacy and shows the people who pray that they are children of God, not orphans. It shows the disciples that their main identity is that of a group or a people and not as individuals.

Now I'm not saying that praying alone is wrong or should take second place. But the act of praying, if we are really in tune with the human condition, must primarily be done in the company of others.

The prayer continues with give us our daily bread, forgive us our debts, lead us not, and deliver us from evil. All of these are plural actions that the church prays for God to do. All of these ours are plural. All the request made of God ask teach us how God dependent we are.

Often, we come at teaching prayer backward. We think we should teach people a particular formula to approach God rather than direct them to pray the way the church prayed, the way Jesus prayed, and the way the church prayed and taught its disciples to pray. The Didache gives instructions for the disciples to pray the Lord's Prayer 3 times daily. It is much more easier to learn to pray what is first given to us than to invent our own ways of praying.

So, I would like to approach the discipline of prayer not so much from the mechanics of praying but from the formational aspects of prayer. Remember that we have been saying that the disciplines of the inner life are God's means of grace to us, and are meant to bring us closer to become like Christ for the sake of others. Prayer is God's invitation to us to have fellowship with him, to experience his presence. It is his gift to us. That's what Jesus does when the disciples ask him to teach them to pray. He invites them into his prayer. Truly, there is no better prayer than the prayer God wants to pray through us.

So even when we pray alone we can pray the Lord's Prayer in a way that it forms our lives and shapes our hearts.

Here's the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to say:

Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come,
Your will be done
On earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our debts,
As we also have forgiven our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.

The Framework of Prayer: Is there a discernable pattern in this prayer that we can use as our pattern for praying? More significantly, how do we pray in a way that helps us change? What if we let the way this prayer unfolds teach us how to pray?

3A+A Praying. I am calling this way of learning to pray **the 3A+A framework of prayer.**

Function not form is what really matters. It's important to learn the form. But what's more important is to know why the form is used because form must always follow function. We put the form first and we get formality. We put the content and function first and we get meaningful functionality. That's what we desire in prayer, a way to pray that is really about talking and listening to God. Talking without listening is lecturing. We have nothing to lecture God about. **The 3A+A way of prayer has as much listening to God and our soul, as it has to do with talking to God. Any prayerful activity that does not teach us to listen as we pray is of limited use.**

Which A do we start with? It's more important to pray than to worry about which "A" to start with. Start with any "A" you want. The important thing is that you're talking to God.

Preparing to pray, or read, or listen. Always slow yourself down before you start, with whatever "A" you start. Slow down, pay attention to the condition of your heart. Pay attention to the presence of God in and around you.

1. The first A is for ADORATION.

A. The first thing Jesus does in teaching us to pray is to invite us into his way of adoring his Father. He invites us to imitate him. Jesus prayed like this all the time. Only one time did Jesus use a different word for adoring God! It was when he was on the cross: My God, my God...

What then is adoration? Adoration is seeing God as the source of all that is good in our lives and learning to praise him for it and give him thanks for it. This is not just lip service. It's a settled attitude of gratitude, and joy in God.

When we say thank you we are showing appreciation for what someone has done for us. This is the pattern for adoration. We discover what to give thanks to God for. Prayer is like saying please and thank you. This is what the thank you part looks like.

- 1) Now we can always adore God when we say thank you for what he did for us in the past. That's what the Psalms do. See especially Psalm 136. So as we continually read the Psalms and the Bible, we will always be finding what to say thank you for from the zillion things God has done. Thanking God is an endless privilege, a daily joy, a settled attitude of trust. In prayer we must always be listening to our souls to hear our attitude.
- 2) We can also always adore God when we say thanks for the promises of the future. There is no shortage of this either. The whole Bible is full of promises. "I will be with you always. Thank you. I will comfort you. Thank you. I will bless you. Thank you. I will prepare a place for you. Thank you. I will be coming back for you. Thank you. I will give you a new heart. Thank you. I will, I will, I will, and thank you, thank you, and thank you.

3) But we must also learn to say thank you to God for the present happenings of our lives. Here's when we get personal and specific. Did something good happen in your life today? This week? Recently? Small or big? When you pray adore God by saying thank you. Thank you for my job. My health. My friends. My family. My neighbors. For the cancer being gone. For the prodigal returning home. For my country. My, my, my... This is what's happening now in your life. And it's happening because God is making it happen. We adore God by saying thanks.

B. The second thing about adoration is praise.

Praise is different than thanksgiving. In praise we say thanks to God for who he is, and what he's like. When I say good boy when my grandson has done a good thing, or for being obedient, I am thanking him for a quality or a trait of his character. Again, if you look at Psalm 136 you see that all over the place. And the Bible is full of praise to God. God is loving. Praise. God is patient. Praise. God is merciful. Praise. God is full of grace. Praise. God is righteous and just. Praise. God is Lord. Praise. And the Bible is full of God's traits that we can praise. For example, Jesus says many things about himself that show us that his character is like God's character. So Revelation 4-5 is full of praise to Jesus. John shows us how worthy of praise Jesus is. He quotes many of the praiseworthy attributes of Jesus: I am the Light, Life, Way, Truth, Good Shepherd, Gate, and Resurrection. These are the qualities we admire in Jesus and we praise him for them.

2. The Second A that Jesus teaches his disciples and us is Acceptance or reception of his Rule of life or Kingdom. This is the heart of our participation in the prayer of Jesus and of listening to God in prayer.

How then do we pray this second A? We must first understand what this A is about. It's accepting and praying for the arrival of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is the heart of the message of Jesus. It's what the Gospel is mostly about. Prayer is the language of the kingdom and the Good News of it. It's not lip service acceptance. Not just saying the words. It's a deep trust in what we pray, and it's active participation in the answers God gives to our prayers.

Your kingdom come, you will be done, on earth at it is in heaven. This is a prayer that the Holy Spirit in us expands to reach our world.

What then is the kingdom of God we pray for in imitation of Jesus? When Jesus came preaching and teaching the good news or announcing what the Gospel is, these words came out of his mouth. The Good News is at hand, the kingdom of God has come near. It's now made available to each and everyone who trusts me and changes his mind about the kingdom. In other words repentance and trust is the way we live in this kingdom, or under the rule of God. We need to pray this daily because the temptation daily is to do life without God and his rule in our lives. The world tempts us to go it alone. It will always tempt us this way. We must always

resist it. The activity of prayer we engage in daily is to help us live repentant and trusting lives. It's to help us know we are received into the gospel life.

To understand this a little more and pray more intelligently, I would like to talk a bit about repentance and trust as the way of life in the kingdom of God, and as the foundations for talking and listening to God in prayer.

A. In order to live daily in repentance we have to engage in three steps and do so prayerfully. We listen to our lives, and we listen to God about our lives and his will.

- 1) We must, in prayer, become good **observers** of our lives. Here we observe the way we are reacting to the things that are happening to us. We notice our emotions. We note our thoughts. Are they in line with the way Jesus would think and feel if he were I? We have to be honest. We must pray for grace to see things as they are. If we are to change and to become like Christ. We must face our failings, our pains, and our fears. This is not easy to do.
- 2) We mustn't stop at observation. Repentance also demands **reflection**. We can observe our experiences but not change. We must think deeply about our failings, fears, and pain. If we don't these will come back with a vengeance. Repentance does not necessarily transform us. When we reflect on our observations we must ask why did I react the way I did in a situation. Why did I feel the way I did. Why did this event bring these thoughts and feelings to the surface?
- 3) After we observe and do some thinking about our observation, we **discuss** with others what we observed and thought. This is crucial. Lasting change happen when we invite other Christ followers into the process of repentance with us. We share our failures and our hurts with others so they can be honest with us.

So to ask that God's kingdom come and his will be done is to engage in the process of repentance. We study our lives, we think deeply, and we share our study and our reflection with others.

B. But we also must engage in the process of trust.

Jesus presented the two actions of the kingdom as ongoing. He uses the present tense not the past: Repent or change your mind about my kingdom, and me and trust in me, are habits of life in the kingdom of God. It's not that we just repent and trust one time and there that's enough for a lifetime. We have a deep need within us because of the assault of the world on our minds and souls to change our minds and our hearts daily. Not a day goes by where a change of mind about the arrival of the kingdom of God is not happening. That's how the disciples learned to imitate Jesus. Day by day he taught them about the kingdom of God arriving in their midst. It's like a seed, it's like a thief in the night and it's like this and like that. There is no end of the kingdom of God breaking into our local and ordinary lives. That's why we need

to change our minds about it daily and trust in Jesus for it daily. It's a daily thing in the ordinary and local venues where we do our lives. So prayer is not really a spiritual activity per se. It's simply asking for help in every arena of life. Prayer is a way of life.

What then do we do when we trust? If we stop at repent we will not change inwardly. To change we must trust that change is possible, that becoming like Christ in our lives is actually doable, and trust that God changes us.

How then do we trust God for change? What are the steps? There are 3.

1) The first step in the trust process is to **plan**. For example, let's say you let your anger get the best of you. I mean you gave a person a tongue-lashing he is still reeling from. In the process of repenting you observed your thoughts and feelings of anger. Perhaps there was some pain and fears behind your anger. Your strategy for recognizing why you flew off the handle has worked. Next time a similar situation happens how are you going to react? Just because you repented the last time has not solved the chip of anger you carry on your shoulder. Next time the ax you grind has been tampered with; you'll fly off the handle again. What would prevent that? Maybe God has already said to you that there is a Christ-like way of responding to anger. You must plan your next concrete response for next time.

Planning nearly always seeking the Kingdom of God first. No matter that the issue you face is, whether anger or lying, or whatever must be in harmony with the life I'm invited to accept or receive in the Kingdom of God. Next time I'll count to 10, I'll flee, I'll remain silent, or I'll walk away slowly.

2) The next step in trust after planning is to find another person or two who would hold us **accountable**. Make it known to others how you plan to respond next time you're angered. Change rarely happens in private. Fear of what others might think, say, or do is a killer of accountability and spiritual growth. Public knowledge of sin is the order of the day in Scripture. Let me name a few people and you'll be able to tell me their sins, I bet. Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, his twelve sons including Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Eli, David, Peter, Paul, and many others. All made their mistakes, and you will too. Their mistakes are public and don't think the less of them. Taking the step of accountability is the right thing to do. The discipline of prayer thrives on accountability for our actions. Go public, become accountable, and change awaits you.

3) The third step in the process of trust or faith is to **act**. Faith always surfaces and demands that we do something. Faith is not only a mental assent. Faith is motion; faith can be seen only in action. Acting on our plans, reviewing them in our minds while we are praying is always the right approach. Mark 2:1-12 is a perfect illustration of enacted prayer.

3. What then is the third part of the 3A+A method of prayer? It's asking. Prayer is asking. Help is our heart's most basic cry. We are born with it and we die with it. And we must learn to do life with it. Please is our foundational attitude. Prayer makes us the true beggars we are. The attitude behind the Jesus Prayer that many pray: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, is just this: A deep-seated need that only God can meet in each beggar's heart.

In asking there are two areas we pray for.

- A. First we ask that God provide for our material needs. Give us this day our daily bread. This expression is one of the main reasons that many think that this prayer should form the pattern of our prayer and be part of the way groups pray every time they get together.
- B. Second, we ask God to help us live in community with others in harmony with the kingdom of God and the Gospel. Forgive us our sins as we forgive others' sins against us. This is a daily need and a daily part of our activity of prayer. No day goes by, truth be told, when we don't need forgiveness for our sins and forgive others. Daily forgiveness is a must because daily sin is with us.
- C. Third, we ask God for his mercy on us. Testing will come. The Evil one is eyeing us. He will pounce when we're not watching and praying. We need supernatural deliverance. God gives it on request.

+A is the last A in this method of praying. The +A is the Amen.

The church added a closing to this prayer as they began to practice it daily. 3 times by the way. The church lived by an ordered way in being devoted to God. The Amen was added because of what Amen means. When we say Amen to something we are making a statement that we are in full agreement with what is being said. In prayer what is being said is our words to God and God's words to us. We approve what we hear and what we say when we intend to obey, and act on our prayers.

Here then, at the end of our method of prayer, we come to a time when we ask God to tell us what we must do, commit to do it, and actually do it.

We adore God, We accept God's kingdom arriving and adjust our lives to it, and we ask God to meet our all of our needs. He does. Now it's our turn to meet others' needs.

Using this same pattern of prayer, I would like to close with a couple of ideas on how we can **3A+A our neighborhoods. That is: taking our adoration, acceptance, asking, and "amening" to the streets.**

As you walk the neighborhood adore God with and for your neighbors. Job did for his kids what his kids didn't do. He offered sacrifices for them. So we too for our neighbors we offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise. We say thank you for blessing this home and that. We praise him for the mercy he has shown our neighbor in praise. We also accept the kingdom of God in our neighborhood asking

God to change minds, and build trust in our neighbor's lives. We ask they become people of faith, that they may receive eyes to see and heart to enter the kingdom of God. We pray for their hurts, and brokenness. We ask that God give them daily their needs, to daily forgive them and enable them to forgive others. Then when the opportunity comes, when God leads us we amen what we've praying for, not matter what it is. We may be the need provider our neighbor needs we amen God on that.

Or also from the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13) here is a pattern to pray:

1. Praying the Father's Character 6:9. Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.
2. Praying the Father's Kingdom 6:10. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
3. Praying the Father's provision 6:11. Give us this daily our daily bread.
4. Praying the Father's forgiveness 6:12. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.
5. Praying the Father's guidance 6:13a. Lead us not into temptation.
6. Praying the Father's protection 6:13b. Deliver us from the evil one.

Varieties, pray a phrase daily. Repeat often.

Praying God's character from any other passage of Scripture. Try Psalm 23.

The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want=God's Character.

He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul=God's provision.

He leads me in right paths for his name's sake=God's guidance.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil=God's guidance.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies=God's protection.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me=God's forgiveness and grace.

Dwell in the house of the Lord forever=God's kingdom.

How about other passages? You will no doubt uncover many other ways to apply this model of prayer to your life in general, and to many other passages. The object is really not to discover where you can plug these prayers. But when you sense God's provision, forgiveness, character, guidance, protection, and kingdom.