



Core Seminar How to Grow Class 5: Prayer

I. Prayer Defined

Here's a helpful definition of prayer from The Westminster Shorter Catechism: "Question 98: *What is prayer?* Answer: *Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God,¹ for things agreeable to his will,² in the name of Christ,³ with confession of our sins,⁴ and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies⁵."6 Prayer is an act as well as an attitude — an attitude of dependency upon God.*

II. Prayer is Expected

In what has come to be called the "Sermon on the Mount" Jesus outlines how to pray in the "Lord's Prayer" in Matthew 6:5-8, and Jesus has an expectation that those who would be His disciples would pray:

Matthew 6:5-8

5 "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. **6** 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. **7** And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. **8** Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Colossians 4:2

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.

In the context, Paul has urged us to live in a manner consistent with our union with Christ. Because we have been raised with Christ, we are to seek the things that are above, and to put to death what is earthly and sinful. We are also to put on the virtues of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and love. At the same time, we are to let the Word of God dwell in them richly. All this is meant to be evident in various relationships in our Christian life. How are we to be faithful in living the Christian life the way Paul urges us to? We are to, "devote ourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful." Such prayer expresses our complete dependence upon God for help and strength.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

16 Be joyful always; **17** pray continually; **18** give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

In this verse, Paul exhorts us to be joyful, to pray continually, and to give thanks in all circumstances. The reason we should do so is because this is God's will for us in Christ Jesus. Prayer is not optional for

¹ Psalm 62:8.

² 1 John 5:14.

³ John 16:23.

⁴ Psalm 32:5-6; Dan. 9:4.

⁵ Phil. 4:6.

⁶ *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 2003), 315.

Christians, but it is God's will that we should meet with God in prayer continually and without ceasing. God expects us to pray just as a general expects to hear from His soldiers in battle. Prayer is a tactical radio for spiritual warfare, not an intercom to order room service.

Prayer is not only a divine summons, but a royal invitation, a great privilege. Imagine if Bill Gates or Steve Jobs offered to fix your computer every time it crashed. That would be a great privilege! We would be foolish to ignore his offer and try to fix any problems ourselves. How much greater a privilege, then, it is to approach our all-powerful, sovereign Creator of the entire universe with our requests! Through faith in Jesus Christ, we have access to God. Christ has reconciled us to God by His blood. Our sins, which once barred our way to a holy God, have been forgiven through the cross.

Ephesians 3:12

In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.

Paul goes on to say in v. 14 that he bows the knee in prayer because of the redemption and reconciliation that Christ has accomplished. Do we realize the awesome privilege that we have in Christ to approach God with freedom and confidence? Are we making use of this privilege?

III. Prayer is Learned

In one sense, prayer should be as natural as breathing for a child of God. We who have received the Spirit of adoption cry out "Abba! Father!" But at the same time, we grow in our ability to pray. Through teaching and practice, we learn to be more biblical in our prayers. Even Jesus' disciples asked Him, "Lord, teach us to pray." (Luke 11:1). How is prayer learned? Here are at least three ways:

A. Prayer Is Learned...by Praying

Like any discipline, be it a foreign language or musical instrument, you can take all the courses and study all the texts, but you won't truly learn it until you put it into practice.

We should pray until we pray. This is the advice that the Puritans used to give. What did they mean? We ought to pray long enough and honestly enough, in a single session, to get past the feeling of formalism and unreality. Often, our prayers begin coldly. But as we pray, our hearts are warmed and our minds become more active. Our praise and thanksgiving become more heartfelt, and our requests become more urgent. Don Carson counsels: "To enter the spirit of prayer, we must stick to it for a while. If we 'pray until we pray,' eventually we come to delight in God's presence, to rest in his love, to cherish his will."⁷

B. Prayer Is Learned...by Praying with Others

We can learn to pray from the godly examples of others. We should study the content of their prayers, their passion, their urgency and zeal. But do not mimic their expression or style. Here are some practical ways how we can learn from others:

1. Develop a prayer-partner relationship

Carson recalls how, when he was an undergraduate, he began meeting weekly with a pastor to pray. Those meetings taught him the fundamentals of prayer, and have informed much of his prayer life since.⁸ Likewise, we can learn how to pray through our discipling relationships or small groups.

⁷ Carson, D. A. *A Call to Spiritual Reformation, Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 35-6.

⁸ Carson, D. A. *A Call to Spiritual Reformation, Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 23.

2. Choose good models of prayer

How do we identify good models of prayer? They pray with great seriousness, passion, and urgency. They also use arguments and seek goals that are biblical. Some of them carry you with them into the very throne room of God; others are especially faithful in interceding for others; others have a far-reaching breadth of vision in their prayers. All are characterized by a God-honoring mix of contrition, humility, and boldness in prayer.

Where do we find such models of prayer?

- (a) The Bible
- (b) Sunday morning and Sunday evening services
- (c) Books like *Valley of Vision*,⁹ *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*,¹⁰ *Prayer and the Voice of God*,¹¹ Christian biographies (C. H. Spurgeon,¹² Martyn Lloyd-Jones,¹³ etc.).
- (d) Other Christians

C. Prayer Is Learned...by Meditating on Scripture

Most importantly, prayer is learned by meditating on Scripture. This is the practice of praying God's words back to Him. In our Christian life, we obey the Word, sing the Word, hear the Word taught, and we also pray the Word. By praying in this way, we are connecting the spiritual disciplines of Bible intake and prayer.

The English Puritans understood the role of meditation in prayer well. Consider the following quote by Thomas Manton: "Meditation is a middle sort of duty between the word and prayer... The word feeds meditation, and meditation feeds prayer. These duties must always go hand in hand; meditation must follow hearing and precede prayer. To hear and not to meditate is unfruitful... It is rashness to pray and not to meditate. What we take in by the word we digest by meditation and let out by prayer. These three duties must be ordered that one may not jostle out the other."¹⁴

So one helpful thing we can do to improve our prayers is to read Scripture before we pray. After reading, meditate on what we have read and then pray. As we read, look for what we can praise God for. Look for what we can thank God for. Let the Word convict us of our sins and lead us to confession and repentance in our prayers. Notice God's promises and purposes in Scripture and allow these to shape our prayers.

We will now look specifically at several prayers in Scripture. The content of these prayers should direct our own prayers.

IV. The Content of Prayer

A. The Lord's Prayer

Matthew 6:9-13

9 "This, then, is how you should pray:

⁹ *Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers & Devotions*. Edited by Arthur G. Bennett. Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975.

¹⁰ Carson, D. A. *A Call to Spiritual Reformation, Priorities from Paul and His Prayers*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006.

¹¹ Jensen, Phillip and Tony Payne *Prayer and the Voice of God, Listening to God's Living Word Will Transform the Way You Pray*. Kingsford: Matthias Media, 2006.

¹² Spurgeon, C. H. *Autobiography, Volume 1: The Early Years, 1834-1859*. Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1962. Spurgeon, C. H. *Autobiography, Volume 2: The Full Harvest, 1860-1892*. Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1973.

¹³ Murray, Iain H. D. *Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Volume 1: The First Forty Years 1899-1939*. Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982. Murray, Iain H. D. *Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Volume 2: The Fight of Faith 1939-1981*. Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1990.

¹⁴ Whitney, Donald S. *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NAVPress, 1991), 73.

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
10 your kingdom come,
your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
11 Give us today our daily bread.
12 Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
13 And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.’

“Our Father in heaven”

- We address our prayers to God as *our* heavenly *Father*. This reminds us of our privileged position because of what Christ has done on our behalf. In Christ, we are adopted as God’s children, and His Spirit dwells in us. We know God and have a relationship with Him through Christ, who has opened up for the way of access to God. We can have boldness and confidence in our prayers because of our adoption in Christ. Our prayers are addressed to God the Father, through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit.
- He is also our Father “in heaven.” Our open access God should not be taken lightly. The God whom we approach is in heaven. He is transcendent, high, and lifted up. He is the sovereign Creator of the entire universe. He is very great and glorious. He is the sovereign Redeemer, who unfailingly works out His plan of salvation for all of creation. This is the God to whom we come. Our prayers ought to be characterized by humility, awe, and reverence.

“Hallowed be your name”

- God’s name is a reflection of who He is—His character and perfections. To pray that God’s name be hallowed is to ask that God might be glorified and exalted. When we pray this, we are asking our heavenly Father to act in such a way that we and others will reverence God, glorify Him, consider Him holy, and acknowledge Him as the Lord God.
- This petition should set the tone for our prayers. We begin with God, not with ourselves. We should not be at the center of our prayers. This place belongs to God alone. It is His glory that we pray for and all our requests should have His glory as their goal.

“Your kingdom come”

- God’s kingdom refers to His saving rule under which there is life and blessedness. The kingdom has come in Jesus Christ, through His life, death, and resurrection. “Your kingdom come” is therefore a gospel-centered petition that asks God to extend His kingdom through the advance of His gospel. It is also to pray that God will usher in the consummated kingdom when Christ returns. To pray this petition is to have our eyes fixed on eternal matters. This petition lifts our perspective above earthly things and focuses it on the things of eternity. It expresses our eager longing for Jesus to return and to reign in a new heaven and new earth. It expresses our longing to be with our Lord and Savior forever.

“Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”

- This petition encompasses several requests:
(1) That God’s desires for righteousness will be as fully accomplished *now*

on the earth as they are *now* accomplished in heaven;

- (2) That God's desires for righteousness may *ultimately* be as fully accomplished on the earth as they are *now* accomplished in heaven;
- (3) That God's desires for righteousness may ultimately be accomplished on the earth *in the same way* that they are accomplished in heaven—that is, purely.

- If we are praying that God's will be done on earth, we are committing ourselves to two important responsibilities:
 - (1) We are committing ourselves to learning all we can about His will. This means sustained Bible intake.
 - (2) This petition is also our pledge that by God's grace we will do His will.

Notice how the opening petitions of the Lord's Prayer all center on God. They focus on God's name, God's kingdom, and God's will. When we pray in this manner, we are also asking that we ourselves will hallow God's name, submit to His rule, and do His will. It is impossible to pray these petitions in sincerity without humbly committing ourselves to glorify God and obey Him.

"Give us this day our daily bread"

- This petition reminds us of our constant, daily dependence on God. The significance of this petition is often lost on us, because of the abundance of food that we have. In Jesus' day, laborers were commonly paid each day for the work they had done for that day. Their wage was so low that it was almost impossible to save any of it. So the day's pay purchased the day's food. To fail to earn a wage was therefore to go hungry. When we pray this petition, we are acknowledging our complete trust in our heavenly Father to provide for our needs. In times of trial, we ask God for help and he shows Himself faithful and all-sufficient.
- This petition also reminds us that it is God alone who provides. Every good and perfect gift comes from our Father, who does not change. All that we have comes from Him. To pray this petition is to express our gratitude to God.

"Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors"

- Here, sin is referred to as a "debt." This is a petition of confession our sins to God and seeking forgiveness from Him. When we pray in this way, we are acknowledging God's holiness and how we have sinned against Him. It is also to recognize that God is gracious and merciful. Because God has loved us in Christ, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.
- Does this petition teach that God forgives us because we have forgiven others? No, it teaches us that we who have been forgiven much by God ought also to forgive others. This is the point that Paul makes in Colossians 3:13, "Bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive." John Stott writes, "Once our eyes have been opened to see the enormity of our offence against God, the injuries which others have done to us appear by comparison extremely trifling. If, on the other hand, we have an exaggerated view of the offences of others, it proves that we have minimized our own."¹⁵

¹⁵ Stott, John R. W. *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978), 149-50.

- This petition also expresses our love for others. It introduces the aspect of relationships into our prayer. It reminds us that believing the gospel has profound and far-reaching implications for how we ought to love one another in Christ. It is impossible to be self-centered and pray in the manner of the Lord's Prayer. In fact, we ought to pray while in fellowship with our believers. Notice how the prayer begins with "our." Carson writes, "There is, no doubt, a place for praying as an individual of God; but the general pattern of our praying must be broader than that. Therefore, when I as one follower of Christ among many, address *our* Father, my concern is to embrace *our* daily bread, *our* sins, and *our* temptations—and not just *mine*."¹⁶

"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

- Does this petition mean that God tempts us to sin? No, God cannot be tempted with evil and He Himself tempts no one.¹⁷
- What, then, does this petition mean? The key is to understand that "not" negates "into temptation." In other words, the prayer means "lead us, *not* into temptation, but away from it, into righteousness, into situations where, far from being tempted, we will be protected and there kept righteous." We will then be delivered from the evil one.
- This petition reminds us that, just as we depend on God for the physical sustenance of daily bread, we also need to depend on Him for moral triumph and spiritual victory. Indeed, not to depend upon God is already to fail because it reveals our sinful pride and self-sufficiency. An important mark of Christian maturity is that we sense our own moral weakness and rejoice that whatever virtue we possess is a fruit of the Spirit. More and more, we recognize the deceitfulness of our own hearts and the malicious cunning of the evil one. We are reminded that the Lord alone is our strength and our refuge. We therefore pray that we might be strong in the Lord, with the spiritual armor that he alone is able to provide (Eph. 6:10-18).

The Lord's Prayer is a model prayer for us. We are not to blindly mouth its words, but we are to use it as a framework model our own prayers. Paul's prayers are an excellent example of such God-centered, Christ-honoring prayers. His prayers reflect the priorities of the Lord's Prayer. So let's now examine some of Paul's prayers to see what we can learn from them.

A. Paul's Prayers

1. 2 Thessalonians 1:3-12

- Paul gives thanks to God (v. 3-4)
 - For how his readers' faith is growing
 - Paul gives thanks for how the Thessalonian Christians' trust in God and His gospel is deepening. He is thankful for their growing spiritual maturity.
 - For how their love for one another is increasing
 - For how the Thessalonian Christians are steadfastly persevering amid trials
 - What do we thank for God? Do we look for signs of grace in the lives of other Christians and give thanks to God for them?

¹⁶ Carson, D. A. *Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, And His Confrontation with the World, An Exposition of Matthew 5-10* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 66-7.

¹⁷ James 1:13-15 – Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully-grown brings forth death.

- Paul prays with an eternal perspective (v. 5-10)
 - Eager expectation of Christ's return
 - Vindication for believers (v. 7, 10)
 - Judgment for unbelievers
 - Do our prayers have eternity in view?

- Paul prays that God might make Christians worthy of His calling (v. 11a)
 - Does not mean that we are to be worthy enough in order to receive God's calling
 - As Christians, we have already been called by God in Christ. To be worthy of our calling means to live in a way that is consistent with the gospel that we profess. Paul prays that Christians would live in holiness, being obedient to God in all things. Do we pray for ourselves and others that our lives might be worthy of our calling in Christ?

- Paul prays that God might fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by His power (v. 11b)
 - Paul prays that God might enable the Thessalonian Christians to formulate gospel-centered goals and also to fulfill these goals with his power.
 - Do we pray for God to shape our desires and goals so that they are gospel-centered? Do we ask God for strength to implement these goals so that we might bear spiritual fruit? Whose agenda drives our prayer? Ours or God's?

- Paul prays that the Lord Jesus might be glorified (v. 12a)
 - Paul's prayer begins with God and ends with God
 - His glory is the chief end of our prayers and obedience

- Paul prays that believers might be glorified in Christ (v. 12b)
 - What does this mean? Paul is thinking of the final destination of our salvation in Christ. All those whom God has called are justified, and all those who are justified are glorified (Rom. 8:30). If we are in Christ, then we shall one day be made perfect when He returns. We shall receive glorified resurrection bodies like Jesus' resurrection body. When we are glorified, we are transformed into the likeness of Christ. We shall live in God's presence in the splendor of the new heaven and new earth.
 - Notice again how Paul's prayer is suffused with an eternal perspective. It is his conviction that the Christian life can be lived faithfully only if it is lived in light of the end. Paul's vision of that end, along with what that means for Christians here and now, helps to shape the ultimate goals he attaches to his petitions. Like Paul, our prayers too need to be shaped by an eternal perspective.

- Paul's prayer is founded on the grace of God and the Lord Jesus Christ (v. 12c)
 - In his prayer, Paul recognizes that every single aspect of our Christian life—from beginning to end—is founded on God's grace to us in Christ Jesus. We are called, justified, sanctified, and glorified by God's grace. We are to pray gospel-centered prayers that acknowledge our utter dependence upon God's grace.

2. *Colossians 1:9-14*

- Paul prays without ceasing
 - We are to intercede regularly for others (even for those we have never met personally!)
 - To pray without ceasing expresses our constant dependence upon God. We are saying that there we cannot live independently of Him. No, not even for a moment.

- Paul prays that believers might be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding
 - To know God's will is to obey what God has revealed in His Word. In Romans 12:2, Paul exhorts Christians not to be conformed to the world, but to be "transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." Paul is therefore praying that the Colossian Christians might have their character and lives transformed by the renewal of their minds, so that they might discover personally and experientially that God's will is best.
 - The knowledge of God's will consists of all spiritual wisdom and understanding. It is not merely intellectual knowledge, but it makes a real difference to how we live as God's people.
 - Do we pray for ourselves and others that we might grow in our knowledge of God's will?

- Paul prays so that believers might walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, in a way fully pleasing to Him
 - What does it mean to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord? It means to please Him fully. We see why we need a knowledge of God's will. Unless we know His will, how can we please Him in every way?
 - The purpose of Paul's prayer is so that believers might obey their Lord and so glorify Him. We bear the name of Christ, and we should live in a way consistent with our identity in Christ. This is reason why Paul prays for the Colossians. Do we pray this for ourselves and others?
 - A life pleasing to God consists of four things:
 - Bearing fruit in every good work
 - Increasing in the knowledge of God
 - Being strengthened by God so as to display endurance and patience
 - Giving thanks to the Father with joy, because of how He has graciously saved us in His beloved Son.

Other prayers of Paul:¹⁸

- Romans 15:14-33
- Ephesians 1:15-23
- Ephesians 3:14-21
- Philippians 1:9-11
- 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

¹⁸ cf. Carson, D. A. *A Call to Spiritual Reformation, Priorities from Paul and His Prayers*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006.

V. Encouragements to Prayer

A. God Answers Prayer

In Psalm 65:2, David refers to God as *“O you who hear prayer,”* and Christ tells us in Matthew 7:7-8:

Matthew 7:7-8

7 “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. **8** For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.”

1 John 5:14-15

14 This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. **15** And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.

Be persistent in prayer. Remember Jesus’ parable of the widow and the unjust judge.

Luke 18:1-7

1 Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. **2** He said: “In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. **3** And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’

4 “For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or care about men, **5** yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually wear me out with her coming!’”

6 And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. **7** And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off?”

B. God Is Absolutely Sovereign

Daniel 9:2-3

2 in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. **3** So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.

Prayer does not conflict with God’s sovereignty. From the beginning to the end of Scripture, God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility are laid out side-by-side, without apology and without any consternation by the people of God. There is no conflict between God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility to pray. God in His sovereignty has appointed us to be instruments for the carrying out of His will and one of the means He has given us to be His instruments is prayer.

Indeed, we pray because God is sovereign. He is able to bring His purposes to fruition. If we ask according to His will, He certainly is able to answer our prayers (1 John 5:14).

VI. Conclusion – Some Practical Helps for Prayer

A. Plan to Pray

- Cultivate a habit of prayer
- Set aside time to pray
- It is better to pray often with brevity than rarely but at length
- Redeem the time (while walking, driving, on the bus/metro, etc.)

B. Find Ways to Maintain Concentration

- Vocalize your prayers
- Pray through Scripture (eg. the Lord's Prayer, Paul's prayers, the Psalms, etc.)
- Pray over what we read in Scripture
- Praying through the hymns of praise
- Journaling and praying

C. Develop a System for Prayer

- Pray through the membership directory (Page 1 on the first day of the month...etc.)
- Pray through *Operation World*¹⁹
- Make a list (Carson: "All of us would be wiser if we would resolve never to put people down, except on our prayer lists.")
- Organize prayer categories around the days of the week

¹⁹ Mandryk, Jason *Operation World, The Definitive Prayer Guide to Every Nation, 7th Edition*. Colorado Springs: Biblica Publishing, 2010.