

The Practices of the Christians Life – 2 - Prayer

A spiritual thermometer exists that takes your spiritual temperature for you every time you use it. It reveals your spiritual health. This spiritual thermometer reveals what kind of relationship you have with God, how close it is, how well you know Him. It is the thermometer of prayer.

What you are in prayer is really what you are in your Christian life. You are really as mature and close to God as you are in prayer. Because in prayer, you are quite simply 'before God'. You turn your back upon everything else, exclude everything else, and are face to face with God alone. And once you have tuned out all the noise, and stopped putting up fronts and masks and projecting an image, and you are alone with God – then what you say to Him, and how you act before Him is the purest and greatest test of your relationship with God.

Some couples are loads of fun when they are in company with others, but be a fly on the wall when they are alone, and they have nothing to say to each other. Many Christians love to talk about God, and teach and learn the things of God, but get them alone with God, and they have very little to say.

Prayer tests where you are in your relationship with God. When we think about the practices of the Christian life, arising out of meditation on the Word is the practice of prayer.

As we have considered the Christian life, we have arrived at the fifth section of this series – the practices of the Christian life. The practices of the Christian life are those distinctive disciplines that are essential to living in God's presence so as to come to know Him. Last week, we considered meditation on the Word as the foundational discipline. Responding to that meditation must lead to prayer.

Prayer is a real conversation between two personalities - you and God. In that conversation, we do many things, say many things, and speak in different ways, as normal conversations between persons do.

If we are to try and boil it down, we might say that prayer is a communion with God where we come to know God, and where we make our desires known, while allowing those desires to be shaped into God's desires. Through prayer you come to know God, His will, purposes, ways and nature.

When we are unsaved, and when we are newly saved, not many of our desires are in harmony with God's. Therefore, our prayers are immature in that they reflect desires not shaped by the Word of God. Prayer is often part of this transformation process. To illustrate, when a boat approaches the pier, the occupant might throw out a rope to hook it. As he pulls on the rope, is he pulling the boat to the shore, or the shore to the boat? In the same way, while prayer has real effects (like the tugging of the boatsman does), we are not 'pulling' God to conform to our wills; we are pulling our wills to conform to His.

Nevertheless prayer does change things. God answers prayer, not only by changing us, but by changing others, and changing circumstances. The Christian life is not truly Christian if it involves no prayer.

What then is Christian prayer? How are we to pray as a practice of the Christian life?

John 14:13-14 ¹³ *"And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ "If you ask anything in My name, I will do it.*

1) Prayer, for the Christian, is praying in Jesus' name.

What does it mean to pray in Jesus' name? Praying in Jesus' name has two aspects. We pray in Christ's name positionally, and practically.

Positionally speaking, praying in Jesus' name means you are not appearing before God in your own name. That is, you come to God based upon Christ's merits and righteousness, not your own. You appear before God 'in Christ', trusting in His status with the Father, not in your own works, or even in the sincerity of your prayer. We spent several messages considering what the position of the Christian life is. To be in Christ is to be accepted in Christ, secure in Christ and complete in Christ. When you pray in Jesus' name, you are coming to the Father, trusting in your Christ-given status. You are coming to God believing that in Christ you are accepted and can draw near.

On the other hand, practically speaking, praying in Jesus' name goes further.

John 15:4-8 ⁴ "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. ⁵ "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. ⁷ "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. ⁸ "By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.

To pray in Jesus' name practically is to abide in Christ, or as we have put it – to live in His presence by faith. We have already considered what this means. Abiding in Christ is the whole process of the Christian life. It is living in communion with Him, speaking to Him, seeing Him. We live with Christ, and so speak to Him about life. As we live in His presence, we confess when we are convicted, and conform to His will. Throughout Scripture, one of the secrets of answered prayer is a submitted, obedient life. In other words, if we are living in His presence, in the cycle of communion, conviction, confession, cleansing, and conformity to Christ, we will be praying in Jesus' name, because we will be abiding.

2) Prayer is prayed in faith.

Matthew 21:21-22 ²¹ So Jesus answered and said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' it will be done. ²² "And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive."

If prayer is what we do when we live in His presence, and living in His presence can only be done by faith, it goes without saying that prayer is an expression of faith. Actually, abiding in Christ enables greater faith in Christ. Therefore the first characteristic of true prayer leads into the second. Here are two reasons why an ongoing, abiding fellowship develops greater faith:

a) By abiding we know the character better of the One who underwrites the promises of Scripture.

Matthew 7:7-11 ⁷ "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸ "For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. ⁹ "Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ "Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? ¹¹ "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children,

how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!

Knowing His nature gives us absolute trust that He will always give us what is best. When you live in someone's presence, you come to know them, and understand what you can expect from that person.

b) By abiding we know the will better of the One with whom we are speaking.

To live with someone is to come to know that person's desires, will, hopes, wishes and loves. As you come to know God in communion, you come to know the kinds of things you say to Him and ask from Him, and the kind you do not. And when you know you are asking according to His will, then your faith grows. Knowing His will gives us absolute trust that we are asking correctly.

Psalm 37:4 ⁴ *Delight yourself also in the LORD, And He shall give you the desires of your heart. ;*

1 John 5:14 ⁴ *Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.*

A subset of faith is persistence. Persistence is not nagging; it is the unflagging hope that God's promises do not fail. Persistence is faith that does not fail, but keeps believing that God will be true to His Word.

Luke 18:1 *Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart,*

Luke 11:5-10 ⁵ *And He said to them, "Which of you shall have a friend, and go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves;'* ⁶ *'for a friend of mine has come to me on his journey, and I have nothing to set before him';* ⁷ *"and he will answer from within and say, 'Do not trouble me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give to you?'* ⁸ *"I say to you, though he will not rise and give to him because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will rise and give him as many as he needs.* ⁹ *" So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.* ¹⁰ *"For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.*

Colossians 4:2 ² *Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving;*

What will be the results of prayer prayed in faith?

Philippians 4:6-7 ⁶ *Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God;* ⁷ *and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.*

Prayer prayed in faith results in peace, because we cast our cares upon Him. It will also be thankful, because we are humbling ourselves under the sovereignty of God and looking to his faithful mercy.

3) Prayer is prayed in sincerity and truth.

Ecclesiastes 5:2-3 ² *Do not be rash with your mouth, And let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; Therefore let your words be few.* ³ *For a dream comes through much activity, And a fool's voice is known by his many words.*

Matthew 6:7 ⁷ *"And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words.*

Hebrews 10:22 ²² *let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.*

Since God already knows our thoughts before we pray, it makes no sense to pray pretentiously. If we pray to impress others, or even to impress God, we are not 'walking in the light'. We are being less than truthful with God. While we must always come reverently and humbly, we should nevertheless speak openly and frankly with God.

True Christian prayer is in Jesus' name, it is a prayer of faith, and it is a prayer of sincerity. To summarise: prayer is the natural conversation that arises out of Christian living in God's presence.

What are the components of prayer?

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by Thy name"

Lk 1:46-55, Rev 5:12-13

Prayer involves praise and adoration.

"Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"

Luke 11:2

Prayer involves surrender and consecration.

"Give us this day our daily bread"

"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil"

Lk 11:3-4; 1 Kings 8, Ps 77

Prayer involves supplications - requesting help from God.

"Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us"

Lk 11:4, Ezra 9, Neh 9, Ps 51

Prayer involves confession and repentance,

John 17, 2 Thes 3:1, Col 1:9

Prayer involves intercession for others.

Ps 5, 12, Matthew 6:9

Prayer involves asking for justice, and for God's name to be vindicated.

The Bible has given us many model prayers.

God does not want us to repeat these prayers by rote, He wants us to use them to understand what our priorities ought to be in prayer. These include the Lord's Prayer (*Luke 11:2-4*), and many of Paul's prayers (*Romans 15:31-32 Ephesians 1:17-19, 3:16-20, 6:19-20, Philippians 1:9-11, Colossians 1:9-11, 4:3-4, 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12, 3:1-2*).

Take some time at home to read these prayers and identify the things God teaches us to ask for.

What are some practical ways of growing one's prayer life?

1) Seek solitude and silence for extended times of prayer. Make sure you are not distracted and have

enough time. We are to have secret times of prayer (Matt 6:6)

- 2) Use the Word of God to help you to pray and assist you while you pray.
- 3) Learn to turn your thoughts into prayers inwardly and continually throughout the day. Practice the presence of God (I Thes 5:17).
- 4) Keep a prayer list for your times of intercession.
- 5) Read biographies and works of great men of prayer – George Mueller, E.M. Bounds, A.W. Tozer, Robert McCheyne, Hudson Taylor.
- 6) Attend the corporate meetings of prayer.