

Bible Study for January 30th & February 1st

Prayer is Expected

I realize that to say prayer is expected of us may make the children of a nonconformist, anti-authoritarian age bristle a bit. Those who have been brought under the authority of Christ and the Bible, however, know that the will of God is for us to pray. But we also believe that His will is good. Furthermore, it is a Person, the Lord Jesus Christ, with all authority and with all love, who expects us to pray. These excerpts from His words show that He Himself expects us to pray:

Matthew 6:5 - “And when thou prayest . . .”

Matthew 6:6 - “But thou, when thou prayest . . .”

Matthew 6:7 - “But when ye pray . . .”

Matthew 6:9 - “After this manner therefore pray ye . . .”

Luke 11:9 - “Ask . . .; seek . . .; knock.”

Colossians 4:2 says, “Continue in prayer.” The word **continue** means to be devoted to. Everyone is devoted to something. Most of us are devoted to many things. When you make something a priority, when you will sacrifice for it, when you will give time to it, you know you are devoted to it. God expects Christians to be devoted to prayer.

First Thessalonians 5:17 states, “Pray without ceasing.” While “Continue in prayer” emphasizes prayer as an activity, “pray without ceasing” reminds us that prayer is also a relationship. Prayer is in one sense an expression of a Christian’s unbroken relationship with the Father. So we must see the expectation to pray not only as a divine summons, but also as a royal invitation. As the writer of Hebrews tells us, “Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need” (4:16).

God expects us to pray just as a general expects to hear from his soldiers in the battle. John Piper reminds us that “prayer is a walkie-talkie for warfare, not a domestic intercom for increasing our conveniences.” God expects us to use the walkie-talkie of prayer because this is the means He has ordained not only for Godliness, but also for the spiritual warfare between His Kingdom and the kingdom of Satan. To abandon prayer is to fight the battle with our own resources at best, and to lose interest in the battle at worst.

This much we know – Jesus prayed. Luke tells us, “And he withdrew himself into the wilderness, and prayed” (5:16). If Jesus needed to pray, how much more do we need to pray? Continual prayer is expected of us because we need it.

Why, then, do so many believers confess that they do not pray as they should? Sometimes the problem is primarily a lack of discipline. Prayer is never planned; time is never allotted just for praying. Often, we do not pray because we doubt that anything will actually happen if we pray. Of course, we don’t admit this publicly. A lack of sensing the nearness of God may also discourage prayer. When there is little awareness of real need there is little real prayer. Some circumstances drive us to our knees. But there are periods when life seems quite manageable. Although Jesus said, “Without me ye can do nothing” (John 15:5), this truth hits home more forcefully at sometimes than at others. When our awareness of the greatness of God and the gospel is dim, our prayer lives will be small. Another reason many Christians pray so little is because they haven’t learned about prayer.

Legislators’ Weekly Bible study meets each Tuesday (except following a Monday holiday) and Thursday in Capitol Annex Room 436 from 12:00-12:30 pm. It is the same study both days to allow flexibility for everyone’s committee schedules.

Prayer is Learned

There is a sense in which prayer needs to be taught to a child of God no more than a baby needs to be taught to cry. But crying for basic needs is minimal communication, and we must soon grow beyond that infancy. The Bible says we must pray for the glory of God, in His will, in faith, in the name of Jesus, with persistence, and more. A child of God gradually learns to pray like this in the same way that a growing child learns to talk. Note the ways we learn how to pray.

By praying. If you've ever learned a foreign language, you know that you learn it best when you actually have to speak it. The same is true with the "foreign language" of prayer. The best way to learn how to pray is to pray.

By meditating on Scripture. Meditation is the missing link between Bible intake and prayer. The two are often disjointed when they should be united. At least two Scriptures plainly teach this by example. David prayed in Psalm 5:1, "Give ear to my words, O LORD, consider my meditation." In Psalm 19:14, David said, "Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer." Notice that both verses are prayers and both refer to other "words" spoken in prayer. Yet in each case meditation was a catalyst that catapulted David from the truth of God into talking with God.

The process works like this: After the input of a passage of Scripture, meditation allows us to take what God has said to us and think deeply on it, digest it, and then speak to God about it in meaningful prayer. As a result, we pray about what we've encountered in the Bible, now personalized through meditation. And not only do we have something substantial to say in prayer, and the confidence that we are praying God's thoughts to Him, but we can transition smoothly into prayer with a passion for what we're praying about.

William Bates, a Puritan preacher, said, "What is the reason that our desires like an arrow shot by a weak bow do not reach the mark? But only this, we do not meditate before prayer.... The great reason why our prayers are ineffectual, is because we do not meditate before them."

By praying with others. The disciples learned to pray not only by hearing Jesus teach about prayer, but also by being with Him when He prayed. In a similar way, we can learn by praying with other people who can model true prayer for us. But we pray with them to learn principles of prayer, not phrases for prayer.

By reading about prayer. Reading about prayer instead of praying simply will not do. But reading about prayer *in addition to* prayer can be a valuable way to learn. Reading the books of wise men and women of prayer gives us the privilege of "walking" with them and learning the insights God gave them on how to pray.

Let me add a word of encouragement. No matter how difficult prayer is for you, if you will persevere in learning how to pray you will always have the hope of an even stronger and more fruitful prayer life ahead of you.

Prayer is Answered

I love how David addresses the Lord in Psalm 65:2 – "O thou that hearest prayer." Perhaps no principle of prayer is more taken for granted than this one – that prayer is answered. Try to read this promise of Jesus as though it were for the first time: "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened" (Matthew 7:7-8). Since God answers prayer, when we "ask and receive not" we must consider the possibility that something is amiss or wanting in our prayer.

God doesn't mock us with His promises to answer prayer. He does not lead us to pray in order to frustrate us by slamming Heaven's door in our face. Let's discipline ourselves to pray and learn about prayer so that we may be more like Jesus in experiencing the joy of answered prayer.

Men and women of God are always men and women of prayer. As J. C. Ryle said, "I believe that those who are not eminently holy pray *little*, and those who are eminently holy pray *much*." Would you be like Christ? Then do as He did – discipline yourself to be a person of prayer.

This study adapted from chapter four of *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* by Donald S. Whitney.