## **Transformed through Prayer**

"When I pray, coincidences happen, and when I don't, they don't."

- William Temple

**Homework summary:** Please read pages 113 to 126. The exercise on prayer is found on pages 119 to 120. The exercise on spiritual relationships is on pages 126 to 127. (Approximately 2 hours.)

We doubt there are many modern Christians who don’t have some issue with prayer. Most of us feel guilty because we don’t do it enough. Others of us are confused because we don’t understand how prayer is supposed to work. Many of us simply don’t know how to pray, or the methods we have been using don’t seem to work for us. And some just can’t seem to find the time and space to talk with God in the midst of busy lives. It is safe to say that prayer is a loaded topic.

Still, prayer is a primary way that we become more mature as disciples because it is one of the most intimate and personal ways that we strengthen our relationship with God.

**What is prayer and why is it important?**

Simply put, prayer is conversation with God. Prayer is paying attention to God in an intimate way. By calling God “Father” or “Abba” in his mother tongue, Jesus invites us to think of God as something much more personal than “God Almighty, the Creator of the Universe.” Jesus talked to God like he was talking to a loving parent. If one of our tasks as followers of Jesus is to deepen our relationship with God, then we first need to realize that God has invited us to enter into a relationship that is based on love, trust, and friendship.

Try thinking of it this way: if you were to meet someone you’d like to get to know better, what would you do? You’d want to have a conversation, exchange phone numbers, email addresses, and arrange times when you could get together. The same is true of your relationship with God. You need to have conversations, learn about one another, and set regular times when you get together.

Just like conversations with others can lead to changes in our ways of thinking, conversation with God can transform our world, and transform us. We don’t mean that God will necessarily change the laws of physics to create a miracle to fulfill our wants, rather, prayer begins by helping us to see ourselves and those around us through new eyes – through Christ’s “lens of love.” Prayer helps us to be more open to seeing God’s Spirit active in and through creation.

For the select few who have the spiritual gift of prayer, this all comes quite easily. But for the rest of us, prayer is a skill that has to be learned and which gets better with practice. At the beginning, prayer often feels forced or unnatural. However, as you become more practiced at it, you will find your relationship growing in trust and confidence.

***Barriers to prayer***

It seems that there are a lot of things holding us back from praying. Most of our first exposure to prayer has been in worship where often the prayers are carefully crafted and written, frequently with a beautiful poetic feel to them. The unintended result of such prayers is to communicate that all prayers should sound like that, which of course, is the farthest from the truth. The best prayers come from the heart. God doesn’t care if they are grammatically correct, use big words or flow without stopping while the pray-er searches for words. In fact, Paul wrote this:

**Romans 8:26-27**

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Another barrier for us modern people is that we don’t understand how or even if, prayer works. Before we can answer those questions, we have to ask ourselves, what do I expect from prayer? If you want prayer to somehow get God to do something that you want, then you might be confusing prayer and magic. Magic claims that it can get control of some sort of spiritual power (God) and then use that power for some purpose. Prayer, on the other hand, wants to bring the love and power of God to some situation so that God’s purposes will prevail. So, if you believe that by praying to God you can gain control over a situation, you are only going to succeed inasmuch as your goals happen to line up with God’s. However, if your goal in prayer is to share with God the troubles which lie heavy on your heart and mind, and then ask that those troubles be resolved according to what God sees as the best way, then your evaluation of whether prayer works or not is likely to be quite different.

As for how prayer works, who knows? Apparently, it is not for us to understand how God thinks. However, at the very least we can say that prayer does change the Christian who’s doing the praying. In fact, we can see that God very often changes a situation by changing the people in that situation. Perhaps prayer has as much to do with being in relationship as it does with wanting something to change.

***How to pray***

Although not feeling confident about ourselves as pray-ers, and not understanding how prayer works are significant blocks to prayer, by far the most prevalent are simply not knowing how to pray and not putting aside time to practice.

But, before we talk about prayer techniques, we will touch on two basic principles that apply to all types of prayer. First, and most importantly, remember that one of the most incredible truths of Christianity is that God desires a real relationship with you. So forget any ideas you may have about how to pray. You don’t need to worry about whether to use words or keep quiet; whether to kneel, sit, or stand; or whether you should put your hands together or hold prayer beads. You can pray at anytime, anywhere, in any way. The only prerequisite for prayer is that you be yourself. Simply remind yourself that God created you for the pleasure of getting to know you.

Second, you need to be intentional about your prayer life. Although there are prayer techniques that involve praying throughout your day, they are a very intentional discipline. We recommend that if you are just starting out, set aside 10 to 15 minutes a day in a quiet place that is free from distractions (smartphones, TV, children, and so on). Find a prayer practice that suits you and then stick with it. It won’t be easy or feel natural at the start, but with practice it will come much easier. Remember what Thomas Merton once said about prayer: “We do not want to be beginners, but let us be convinced that we will never be anything else but beginners all our life.”

Essentially there are three ways to pray. Verbal prayer, as the name implies, uses words to address God, whether in silence or aloud. This is the type of prayer we are most familiar with. The other two, meditation and contemplation, are less familiar to us in the Western church, but have been an integral part of the Christian tradition from the start.

***Verbal prayer***

You can think of verbal prayer as having two major purposes; building your relationship with God and making requests. When working on our relationship with God, typically we engage in four things: saying, ‘Thank you;’ saying, ‘Sorry;’ sharing your hopes and joys, struggles and disappointments; and saying, ‘You’re important to me.’

However, relationships work best when they are a two-way street. The obvious issue is how does God respond to our prayers? If we never hear a response, prayer either looks like a self-help exercise or an exercise in futility. Yet for thousands of years, people of faith have continued to pray so clearly they have heard God respond.

But how? For a rare few, God answers in really obvious and overt ways as though God was sitting opposite them at the kitchen table. For most others, God’s response requires some listening skills. As we know, God often works through others, so it is quite common to hear answers to your prayers being spoken by family, friends, and not too infrequently, strangers. Likewise, “coincidences” happen which very clearly seem to answer a prayer. Another common way is through the Bible. Think of God having started the conversation already, laying out responses to your prayers through the writings of people who had similar issues or requests thousands of years ago. Still others experience God speaking to them internally, as though God had put the words in their heads.

***Building your relationship With God***

*Saying, ‘Thank you’*

To state the obvious, saying ‘thank you’ is what we call “thanksgiving” in the church business. Just as we teach our children to say ‘thank you’ so they won’t take other people for granted, or think that everyone else is there to meet their needs, so we say thanks to God. We all know what it feels like to be taken for granted, and how that will weaken a relationship. So we need to remember and give thanks for all that God has done in and through our lives. Inevitably, as soon as you start to look for the ways that God is active in your life, you will be overwhelmed by God’s generosity to you. You will also begin to see the world in a different way as you realize how deeply God is involved in your day to day experiences.

As we mentioned in Session 5 on being “Uplifted by God’s Love,” gratitude is a powerful means of counteracting dissatisfaction in life. We also noted that research indicates that those who regularly practice gratitude feel significantly better about themselves and their lives. Many people combine their prayer and gratitude practices by simply listing out what they believe God has given them in their lives in a gratitude journal.

*Saying, ‘Sorry’*

Saying you’re sorry is hard to do (unless you’re a Canadian). Time and time again we watch ourselves and others give up on relationships because we are afraid to say ‘I’m sorry’ for something we’ve done. The humbling part of living in God’s grace is that we can confess the things we’ve done that have hurt others or God, and then we can start over. God’s forgiveness seems to know no limits. The importance of giving voice to our regrets and shortfalls is that we can be released from their weight. We don’t need to keep packing them around with us. With God we can leave our mistakes behind so that we can move on in our relationship without the burden of carrying them with us.

*Sharing your hopes and joys, struggles and disappointments*

Sharing your life with someone is a very important human need. To have someone who is interested in you and how your day is going is an immeasurable blessing. This is the simple conversation of life through which relationships are strengthened and nourished. Eventually, these relationships move to where we can share with God our feelings, hopes, dreams, and especially the struggles we have. You will be amazed at how quickly just telling God what is going on in your life will build your relationship, not to mention make you feel better.

*Saying, “You’re important to me”*

Finally, it is important to tell your partner in a relationship how you feel about them. In a marriage or other long term relationship, it is crucial to use the language of love to affirm and confirm the bonds between partners. This is the time that they take to say, quite specifically, what they enjoy and appreciate in each other. When we do this with God we call it praise or adoration. We tell God how much we value our relationship and we express our delight in all that we are discovering about God and ourselves.

***Making requests***

There is certainly nothing wrong with asking God for things. In fact, Jesus encourages us to do so.

**Matthew 7:7**

‘Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.’

As we mentioned earlier, prayer is not magic. Prayer does not put God in our control. However, God does seem to delight in making the world and our lives better. The trick here is not to make your relationship with God into something like a trip to the Supermarket. That is, don’t reduce your prayer life to little more than a shopping list. Being encouraged to bring our requests to God is not the same as being invited to a free-for-all.

The healthiest approach to the asking part of our prayer life is to orient it to our desire to become like Jesus. As we learn more about Christ and begin to model our lives on his, we learn to say ‘yes’ more often to God’s vision of what God would like to see happening in the world (the kingdom of God). As this happens, we are more able to bring requests that are in keeping with this vision and which will bring it closer to becoming an ongoing reality. That kind of prayer is far removed from self-centred shopping lists.

***Meditation***

Meditation and contemplation are forms of prayer which aim more at listening for God's word to us, rather than expressing ourselves to God. Both forms of prayer require some practice to master, but are well worth the investment in time.

The term “meditation” can cause some confusion. There are literally dozens, if not hundreds of meditation techniques spanning all of the major world religions, plus many more non-religious meditation techniques. As a Christian prayer discipline we are defining meditation as those techniques where the person meditates or concentrates on an image or phrase from a biblical text.

One commonly used meditation technique was developed by St. Ignatius, the founder of the Roman Catholic Jesuit order. “Ignatian meditation” asks the one who is praying to first find a phrase or image that somehow “speaks” to them and then to reflect on that image, hold it, and remain with it. Hanging around in the text often opens new ways for God to speak to us.

Another method of meditation, more popular in the Mainline churches, is *Lectio Divina.* (Forms of *Lectio Divina* include the Lambeth and African Bible Study models.) Typically it is done as a group, but is also quite effectively used by individuals. *Lectio Divina* involves meditating on a biblical text until a word or phrase emerges, and then staying with it during the exercise and often beyond it.

A typical *Lectio Divina* exercise can take anywhere from ten to thirty minutes. The practice follows the following pattern:

1. Choose a scripture with which you would like to pray. This can be as simple as flipping open the Bible and reading a passage or reflecting on a scripture read at church.
2. Take a few moments to get comfortable – quiet your mind.
3. Read through the text, slowly, listening for a word or a phrase that seems to speak especially to you in the moment. Let that word or phrase fill your thoughts. Repeat it to yourself until it sits in your memory. Don't be frustrated if your mind wanders off – take a look at those thoughts and see how they are connected to the word or phrase. That's part of this practice.
4. Talk with God about the word or phrase. It doesn't matter if it's in the quiet of your thoughts, or out loud. Talk with God as you would someone you love, and as someone who loves you. Hear the word or phrase as a gift from God to you. Explore what that gift might mean at this time in your life.
5. Rest in the conversation. Relax. You may find yourself going back to the text, and repeating the process. If so, let it go where it takes you. If not, accept that you have taken the time you needed.
6. Throughout the day, hear the phrase in your mind or heart. Listen for God speaking to you though the words and actions of others.
7. Say, “Thank you!”

***Contemplation***

Contemplation is the prayer and practice of internal silence. The idea is to sit silently in the presence of God. Contemplation typically involves the silent repetition of a mantra, whether a single word, a short phrase, or a series of short phrases. The purpose of the mantra is not to become the object of contemplation, but a way of giving the mind a focus so that the rest of the self can sink into silence. Ultimately, the purpose is to go to the place beyond and beneath all words and images, to descend to the deepest level of our selves where we are more open to God.

Centering prayer is the most commonly used contemplation technique in the church. It is a method of prayer which prepares us to receive the gift of God's presence. While there are a number of different forms of centering prayer, most of them begin with sitting quietly, slowing the busyness of the mind by focusing on breathing, or on a word or phrase that matters to us.

Of course, it will take some experimenting to find the prayer type that is suitable for you for there are truly as many types of prayer as there are people. But if you stick with it you will find your relationship with God will strengthen, improve and deepen. Plus you will find renewed energy, focus for your life, as well as compassion and care for those around you.

***Personality and Prayer***

Personality can play a major role in how a person approaches prayer. For extroverts (people who gain energy by being with others and who lose energy by being alone) praying silently or by oneself can be difficult. The more contemplative or meditative prayer forms can often lead to unplanned naps, especially when trying to establish the discipline. One of the practices that many extroverts find helpful is something we call, “Praying the Coffee.” This practice is quite simple: commit to meeting with someone you trust at least once a week, to share the important things in your lives. As you listen to each other, give your complete attention. Imagine that you are God's ears. Ask questions. Be supportive. Answer questions. Be supported. Drink your beverage. When the conversation has come to an end, take a moment to talk out loud with God. Share what you've heard – the joys and the sorrows. Ask that God continue to bless and work in your prayer partner's life. Be specific. Celebrate that God is present in the conversation as well as in the quiet!