

Experiencing God Through Prayer

Theme

We have an amazing God with whom we are invited to have a lifelong, ongoing conversation. That's what prayer is, a conversation with God. Many of us have good intentions for developing richer prayer lives, yet we often walk through our busy lives without taking time out to talk with or listen to God. The purpose of this session is to explore ways in which we can more fully develop our prayer lives. "Lord teach us to pray."

Life Issue
How can we
connect to God
through prayer?

Community Building & Opening Question

- What is your favorite way to stay in touch with people you care about?
- Share something you did that was a challenge for you.

Opening Prayer

Lord, you called your followers together in Christian community when you walked the earth. Gather us together today, so that we may grow closer to each other and closer to you. Be present with us, as we are present to one another. Guide us and renew us with your love and grace. Amen.

What does the Bible say?

Matthew 6:5-15

"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

"Pray then in this way:
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 do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

What do others say?

Why does it seem so hard to pray? Why do so many of us, when offered the opportunity to pray – either publicly or privately – keep our mouths shut or avert our eyes, hoping someone else will do it? Why does praying seem so intimidating?

Perhaps we are too preoccupied with the kind of public prayer that Jesus scorns in the reading from Matthew. We get so worked up about what people will think that we forget that prayer is not about proper mechanics or flowery, churchy language. Rather, it is about connecting and developing a deeper, more intimate relationship with our God who created us to be in relationship with Him.

For others, myself included, we really want to pray, but we get stuck at our intentions – we start and we stop. For most of my adult life I have been challenged by two limiting beliefs: “I am not a runner” and “I am not a pray-er.” Mind you, these things did not necessarily need to be true, but I held on to them tightly. Now, as I look back, my reasons for believing them were a bit absurd.

In both areas, I was stymied because I couldn’t do them gracefully and proficiently from the get-go. I remember running in my sixth-grade gym class – my face turned red, I was breathing heavily, and I was slow – yet it seemed so effortless to others. As I grew up, I was always self-conscious about my face turning red, that I would breathe heavily from exertion, and that I was slow. These anxieties have lingered into adulthood. Now I realize how silly that is: if you never run, you can’t very well expect to go out and run one mile or five miles and not feel the awkward cry of unused muscles.

We have prayer muscles as well that atrophy from disuse, but that doesn’t mean that they can’t be developed. But how do we do that?

The first thing to do is get over this notion of “proper” prayer, of right words and right postures and right timing. Prayer is about our intimate connection with God, about talking with God as you would your best friend or your confessor. Prayer is also about listening, as the best relationships are mutual. Each of us needs to discover, “What works best for MY relationship with God?”

Secondly, when we are training or preparing for something important, it helps to have a plan. When I started running, I found a “walk to run” plan that seemed to fit for me. It helped me build up slowly and gain strength and confidence along the way. Similarly, when I got to the point where I craved a deeper relationship with God, I realized I needed to be more disciplined about my prayer life. So I found a prayer devotional book that helped me build the muscles of my prayer life. Using it helped me stay accountable to a more regular quiet time with God and helped direct my prayer and study to parts of the Bible that I may not have turned to on my own.

When we start talking about “What do I pray?” God shows us the way. Jesus says in Matthew 6, “Do not heap up empty phrases... your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then in this way....” In the Lord’s Prayer, God says come and be with me, honor me for who I am, remember I have a plan for this world and your life, talk to me about your daily needs and worries, ask for forgiveness, create space for my will to be done in your life. These

are the many components of our relationship with God, and they can be incorporated at many different points in your day.

I have found lately that my running life and my prayer life intersect. I often pray while I'm running, because prayer helps me to focus on something else when the running gets hard. When I find myself running into a strong wind (especially if there is wind and rain), I pray "Come, Holy Spirit" over and over. The rhythm of running also helps me to pray a single Bible verse, or to work through my list of people for intercessory prayers. Other times, it is simply "Help me" or "Thank you" or "Good morning, God."

In the end, the "how" of prayer is only important for how you are able to connect to and experience the holiness of God, however that looks and feels to you. For me, it happens when I force myself to sit quietly with God, or push against the rush of the wind as I pray "Come, Holy Spirit," or when I bask in the cleansing power of exhilarating relief that comes from the pure promise or challenge of God's Word in an unfamiliar or rediscovered Bible passage. In those times, God envelops me in God's presence, with God's peace, and a desire for God's will to be first, and I am strengthened for this journey.

Think About...

- What promises or words of comfort does Jesus offer about prayer in the Matthew text?
- Prayer has been described as an "intimate relationship with God" or as a conversation with God. What phrases or images come to mind when you think of prayer?
- What settings or situations move you to prayer? What would help your prayer life become a regular means to experience God's love?
- The reflection talks about the ways we stymie our prayer lives with our own conceptions about what prayer "should" be. What are some of your perceptions about prayer that either encourage or hinder your prayer life?
- Theologian and philosopher Soren Kierkegaard describes prayer as listening more than talking. How might we be more attentive to listening to God? What types of prayer help you to listen to God?
- Think about how community prayer, either in worship or with friends and family, strengthens your own prayer life. In what ways does communal prayer strengthen individual prayer?

What's my response? Select one or more ideas...

- Try a TRIP Prayer. In a TRIP prayer, pray about:
 - **T**hankful: What are you thankful for?
 - **R**egret: What do you regret or for what would you like forgiveness?
 - **I**ntercede: What or whom are you moved to pray for?
 - **P**urpose: What action are you moved to take?

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- Make a list of some of the tasks that you perform on a daily basis, such as taking a shower, brushing your teeth, turning on a light, stopping at a stop light, drinking a glass of water, etc. Think about ways you can transform these tasks into opportunities for prayer.
- Choose a quiet place in your home as your prayer/scripture-reading place. It doesn't have to be an entire room; try a chair or your kitchen table! Pick a time of the day when you are alert and receptive to listening to what God says to you through scripture or prayer.
- Use one of the psalms for your prayer (Psalm 5 or 6 if you're troubled or ill; Psalm 8, 11, 25, 33, 68, 97, or 100 to praise or thank God). Use one phrase from the psalm to create a breath prayer, a short prayer that you repeat periodically throughout the day (e.g., "Give me strength, O Christ").
- Choose an object to carry with you at all times – it can be a pebble, a small cross, a prayer card, anything small that you can fit in your pocket. The purpose of carrying this object is to remind you to be conscious of God's presence in your life or to remind you to pray.

Closing Prayer

Loving Savior, you taught your disciples how to pray and you continue to invite us into a conversation with you each day. We thank you for hearing our prayers, spoken and unspoken. We thank you for sending your Holy Spirit who intercedes for us when we don't have the words, or may not even know what we need. Help us to slow down and listen to your gentle whisper that breathes calm into our lives. In the midst of our requests and intercessions for others, help us to remember to praise and thank you for the blessings you shower on us each day. We pray in your name. Amen.

Reflection written by Jeanne Hartfield

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