

Prayer Helps

Matthew 28, the Great Commission, says, “**19**Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **20**teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” [[1]](#footnote-1)

Most of you have heard me say it before, but what I find interesting about this commission is that Jesus doesn’t simply say “Teach the facts,” but he says “Teach to observe.” In other words, I am to teach the facts and to teach them in such a way that I help others to actually live out the truth. The reality is that Jesus has promised to minister his grace through his children to his children. In order to grow as disciples, we need other disciples in our lives helping us as disciples as we make disciples. All the way, our Savior leads us, shepherds us, teaches us, trains us, guides us.

I say all of this as an introduction on what I’m doing tonight. Tonight I’m going to be focusing on practical ways we can implement what we’ve been learning in our prayer series. Disciplines we can incorporate into our prayer to help us to 1) actually pray, 2) focus in our prayers, and 3) grow in godliness.

Having said this, many of the things I’m giving as suggestions tonight are not commands (maybe most things). Now, you might recoil at that, but again how are we to teach people to observe without giving practical pointers? Also, as I say that these things are suggestions that should keep us humble so that we don’t become legalistic. In other words, if I give a suggestion of reading through the psalms as a guide to your prayers, don’t create this habit and require it of others. Also, don’t look down on people who don’t do that. It’s a good discipline, but it’s not required.

So now, I hope what I say here are helps for growing in your relationship with God through prayer. Tonight we’ll be talking about the format, the content, and the posture of our prayers.

It was a few years ago that I was reading a book to my children called, “The Barber Who Wanted to Pray.” In this story, I learned about the historical account of Martin Luther’s Barber who asked Luther how he could learn to pray. Per the request of the barber, Martin set out to write a brief response. Actually, in our day it would seem quite lengthy. In book form today, it’s around 30 pages!

I confess I haven’t read Luther’s response, but I did read the children’s book, and there were helps in that book that had affected my prayers quite a bit. And it leads me to the first point tonight: the format.

1. **The Format of our Prayers.**

Martin Luther’s basic advice was to memorize the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer and the Apostle’s Creed. In memorizing these things, he believed that you would have the basic understanding of the major points that should be included in our prayers. In the 10 Commandments, you see God’s overarching commands. In listening to the Lord’s prayer, we see the heart of God for his glory, for us and for others. In the Apostle’s Creed, we have the truths of Scripture systematized – truths that all believers throughout all times should remember, embrace and grow in.

Luther’s perspective was that if we memorized these things, we would never lack for things to pray about. I appreciate his advice. I personally did not memorize the Apostle’s Creed, but I did utilize the Lord’s Prayer and the 10 Commandments as guides for my prayer time. It helped to focus my mind, by keeping it on task for things to pray about.

As I’ve said the last couple of weeks, too, I do believe memorization and meditation on Scripture is integral for true prayer. When we hear of *praying in the Spirit,* that doesn’t mean, “praying with no plan or focus.” Too often, people think “Spirit-led” means “thoughtless.” But the Spirit guides us into all truth and the Spirit teaches and convicts. So, I believe prayers that are bathed with Scripture are Spirit-driven prayers. It may be helpful for you to memorize the Lord’s Prayer and the 10 Commandments and use it as a guide. Or, as I’ve suggested the last couple of weeks, go through the psalms. Take one a day and let that psalm guide *how* you are going to pray for the things you’re praying about.

One personal caveat that I would give in this is that we are prone to laziness; so, while I appreciate Luther’s advice, I also think it’s helpful to change things up. Praying through the psalms, utilizing the Lord’s prayer, letting Fighter Verses guide your prayer times. Maybe change from week to week or day to day.

In addition to letting Scripture guide, it can also be helpful to know *what* Scripture calls us to *in prayer.* In other words, you may have heard people talk before about the “ACTS” method of prayer: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication. Or to go back to Luther, he suggested the ITCP process. Meaning, “Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, Prayer.”

These seem to include the general pattern for prayer. We are to give thanks always. We are to pray always. We are to confess continually. We are to pray in such a way that God hallows his name in our hearts and thus we are to adore him.

Now you might say, “Why does it matter if I have these elements in my prayer?” Well, the Bible says we are to pray with all prayer and supplication. These things are commanded. And actually I would encourage you to evaluate your own prayers. Do you have these elements in them? Or, could you be lop-sided?

For example, is your prayer time a shopping list time? “There’s this and that and the other thing. Check. Check. Check.” Do you spend time pondering and praising God for his magnificence? Do you pray “hallowed be your name? Do you rehearse the greatness of God to yourself and praise God for who he is and what he does?”

What about confession? Is it simply “I’m sorry. . . .” The Bible says that the ones who have been forgiven much, love much. I don’t think God wants us to wallow in self-pity, but he does want us to *agree with him* about the sinfulness of sin. How can we agree with him if we’re just saying “Oh, forgive me and help me do better.” I think of The Valley of Vision book with Puritan prayers, and there’s a whole section on confession. Let me read to you some from a prayer entitled “Continual Repentance.” What beauty! What help. Oh Lord, help us to know the exceeding sinfulness of our sins so that we can know the exceeding greatness of his grace and know how loved we truly are.

What about Thanksgiving? Do you really spend time *thanking God.* In our fight against sin Paul says, “and be thankful.” The psalmist preaches to his soul to “Bless the Lord and not forget all his benefits.” If we’re praying in Jesus’ name, we ought to be rehearsing the gospel of Jesus to ourselves in prayer, reminding us of the privileges that Jesus gave us to be able to be heard by the Father and to give him our requests.

What about actual “prayer” in our times of prayer? By that I mean, “What about our asking?” I’m talking about the narrow definition here. Prayer always seems to culminate in *asking.* Just as we want our children to ask, God wants his to ask because it shows humility and it recognizes he’s in control and we trust him. Do you spend time asking? Also, do you spend time being specific in asking? James says “you have not because you ask not.” Then when we look at specific examples in the Scriptures of prayer, so often we have specific requests. Do you pray specifically? Peter says we are to cast our anxieties before God. Do we get to a point in prayer that our hearts are bare before him. We actually lay our anxieties there. Or are we still trying to protect ourselves emotionally in our asking? Are you yourself humbling yourself before God? God wants our hearts – not just our words.

When it comes to asking for others, too, do you ask specifically? Or is it just “I pray for so-and-so that you’d be with them and help them. . . .” Now, please know that may be all you know what to say, but if we are commanded by Paul to pray with all prayer and supplication, that sounds like really seeking to learn what and how to pray specifically with zeal.

So, Ventura, my encouragement in growing in prayer is to evaluate your format. Memorize and meditate on Scripture and ask yourself if there’s Instruction (the Scripture), Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication.

Now that you have some questions for *format,* let’s get into the next point.

1. **The Content of our Prayers.**

You could be really good and getting a format, but you’re still very generic. How do you grow in specificity? Well, we do know that the Bible does require content. God knows what we need before we ask, and that assumes we’re asking for what we need. We also know that we are to cast our anxieties before the Lord, too. Last week I gave different examples of how prayer affects people, nations and timetables. In all of this we see the Bible calls us to specificity. So, how do we grow in that specificity?

Well, there are many ways to go about it. None of these are commanded in Scripture, but hopefully they help you to observe the commandment to pray.

* Ask people how you can be praying for them.

Alright, we’ve all heard it said, and we’ve probably all done it before. Someone asks us to pray for them. We say we will. We don’t. They say “thank you for praying for me,” and inside you think, “AAAAHHHHH, I forgot!”

We don’t like that feeling, do we? I know I don’t. I know some people will then say, “I’m just not going to commit to praying for people because I’m so forgetful,” but to me that response seems to think more of yourself than it does think about how you can better love. If I consistently forgot to show love to my wife, would I then say, “I’m just not going to say ‘I love you’ to my wife anymore.” No. I better work on showing love and communicating it. I think the same is with prayer. We’re commanded to pray for others. We are to “confess our faults” to one another. So, we ought to be more faithful in our prayers for one another.

So, in conversation, “ask” how you can be praying for people. Make it a part of general conversation. If you have people over, before they leave ask them how you can be praying for them. If you’re in church and someone talks about a need, maybe pray for them right then and there.

Also, if someone is nebulous in a request, feel free to say, “Do you have anything more specific you can share?” Then let them know you’re praying for them – not to boost your ego, but to encourage them!

Now I know that you could say, “But I’m scared I’ll forget!” Well, me, too. And what I’m about to suggest may not be fool-proof, but it is helpful.

* A Prayer List or Prayer App

I know I’ve mentioned this at various times, but I’m serious – look into having a written prayer list that you carry with you or a prayer app that you can type in. This will affect *the content* of your prayers! Also, if someone’s talking to you about a request and you start writing down their request while they’re talking, I would hope they wouldn’t be offended. You’re trying to remember!

I hope you’re not offended by that. Honestly, I can be so forgetful that it can feel as though my brain is against me and will erase the thought by the time I’m done with my next conversation with someone else!

If God knows we’re forgetful. He knows our frame and remembers we’re dust. He has to continually call us to “Remember,” then we ought to recognize this weakness and then benefit from helps and reminders. I’m grateful for my phone that I can (and have) spoken into and said, “Remind me on Tuesday at 9:00 AM to pray for. . . .”

* 3x5 Cards

Only slightly different from a prayer list would be to use 3x5 cards. If you have a 3x5 card for each request, you can write down specific people and then a list of requests for that person. If a request was answered, you can also use the card to write out the answer. In addition, since it’s not on an electronic, you might be less prone to get distracted with someone else on your phone.

With 3x5 cards, you can also take a certain number of cards a day to pray through. To merge with something I said last week, you could write out a prayer card for *every person* in our church directory and also missionaries. If no request is on that card, you can ask the person or you can use the Scriptures of that day to pray for them.

The next piece of advice I’d give is to

* Praying with others

How does that affect content? Praying with others helps keep your brain focused. Having people around you can remind you that God and others are listening. In the Scriptures, we have many examples of corporate praying and also examples of how we are to have a corporate mindset. While Jesus says to his disciples to “go into a room” to pray, he also says that we are to pray “Our Father.” In Acts, we have Christians gathering *together* to pray. And we’re told the church committed itself to *prayer.* A church that doesn’t pray together doesn’t stay together!

That’s why we pray together on Sunday nights and encourage prayer in Mid-Week Fellowships. Your vocabulary in prayer increases as God ministers his grace through his children to his children through prayer.

In a similar way that children learn vocabulary from their parents and siblings, so disciples of Jesus learn the vocabulary of prayer through God’s Word and through God’s children conversing with his children. As you pray with people, your content in prayer will grow.

Finally, here’s a piece of advice that I’ve found helpful at times.

* Typing/Writing out your prayers

When I feel my brain is all over the place and can’t focus, I’ve sat down at the computer and typed out my prayers – or I’ve opened a journal and poured out my heart before God. The psalmist clearly did this, and I think it can be quite helpful in focusing, but in also seeing my own heart before me. What am I praying? What am I thinking? What am I laying at God’s feet?

So, here are a few helpful pointers in the content of your prayers. Now, let’s to the posture of prayer.

1. **The Posture of Prayer**

This may be a very neglected aspect to prayer, and some people really might think there’s no point in me bringing this up. Some might even say, “God never commands me to get on my knees or raise my hands or lay down prostrate. These are just examples.” And it’s true that they’re examples, but it’s not true that God never commands bodily responses from us. We’re commanded to lift our hands in the Psalms. We’re called to kneel before the Lord our God, our Maker. Maybe those are just speaking metaphorically, but I’m not convinced. When it comes to the posture of prayer, I think we’re like children saying, “Well dad didn’t say I *had* to do this.” But if they really loved dad, why wouldn’t they want to learn more about him? In the Scriptures we have postures. Why?

If we are to worship God with all our beings – heart, soul, mind and strength. And we are to worship him with the bodies he’s given to us, and we are creatures who have a body, why wouldn’t we worship him with our bodies? The early church certainly thought postures were meaningful. The apostle James was known as camel-knees because of his prayer posture. Now, please know that postures aren’t magical. But I do believe they can help us to both express our dependence on God and to also remind us of how dependent we are on God. In kneeling, I could be feeling and embracing the fact that the Lord is King. Other times, I may not feel it, but I need to physically bow my knee! The posture confesses who I am and who God is. So, my words in prayer and my posture say the same thing.

Let me express some different prayer postures that God mentions in his Word.

**Kneeling**

**6**Oh come, let us worship and bow down;

let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker! [[2]](#footnote-2)

Acts 20:36 – **36**And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Prostrate**

And they fell on their faces and said, “O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin, and will you be angry with all the congregation?”[[4]](#footnote-4)

David therefore sought God on behalf of the child. And David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Lifting Hands**

**2**Hear the voice of my pleas for mercy, when I cry to you for help, when I lift up my hands toward your most holy sanctuary.[[6]](#footnote-6)

With lifting hands, we even have Paul talking about men “lifting holy hands,” referencing prayer by this phrase.

Do you seek to respond with your mind, will, emotions and body to God in prayer – laying your whole self before him, engaging your whole being?

In saying all of these things, some could think, “Wow, this is just so stilted. I have to make rules to get me to pray.” I remember a time when a pastor-friend of mine was talking to me about how he sought to love his wife. This was almost 15 years ago, and so he had a Day-Timer for his schedule, but in his day timer, he would write in each day “Call my wife.” Once his wife found this and said, “You have to write me into your schedule?!” Then he explained his weakness. He’d forget, and he doesn’t want to forget. He loves her.

I bring this out because we have to recognize that any of these disciplines don’t matter without loving God. If these things simply because some kind of stilted formula, you’re missing it. You’re not praying in dependence on Jesus, desiring God’s named to be hallowed in you.

Oh, may we never forget the great love of God for us. At great cost to himself, Jesus was forsaken. On the cross, his prayer was left unheard. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And Jesus was forsaken so that we would always be embraced! In prayer, God hears us. God answers us. God grows us.

So, let’s grow in communing with God through prayer both individually and corporately – recognizing it’s because of the great love of Christ that we can grow in prayer with our God.

1. *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Mt 28:19–20. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ps 95:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ac 20:36. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Nu 16:22. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), 2 Sa 12:16. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ps 28:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)