

“Learning to Pray” - Part 1

Text: 2 Thessalonians 1:3-12

Delivered at Central Baptist Church on October 6, 2019 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Today we are beginning a new series called “learning to pray.” In one sense, learning to pray is the easiest thing in the world. Prayer is nothing more than the child of God opening his or her mouth to speak with God our Father. And just like any good father, God is deeply pleased when his children speak to him.
 - When my son, Josh, starting learning to talk he would call, “Dadada.” The extra syllable is obviously incorrect but I didn’t care. It thrilled my heart. Likewise, God delights in hearing his children cry out to Him in childlike faith saying, “Father.”
- But God also wants his children to mature in their relationship with Him. It’s perfectly fine for Josh to call me “Dadada” at 2 years old. But if he was still saying that at 18 it would be a sign that he hasn’t matured.
 - This is what happens to many of us in prayer. We’ve learned how to thank God at meals and ask for safety in travel but we don’t know how to commune with him for 30 minutes, let alone an hour.
- Speaking personally, I have set times of prayer and have enjoyed many wonderful times of communion with God. But if I am honest, I am usually less satisfied with my prayer life than with any other part of my Christian life.
 - It is deeply encouraging to me then to hear some of the great Christians in history speak of their difficulties in prayer. Listen to this quote from John Bunyan. He lived in the 17th century and is the author of a famous book called *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. He spent time in jail for preaching and is known as one of the great heroes of the faith. Yet he writes this:
 - **(SHOW SLIDE2)** *“May I speak of my own experience, and from that tell you the difficulty of Praying to God as I ought. . . . As for my heart, when I go to pray, I find it so reluctant to go to God , and when my heart is with him, so disinclined to stay with him, that many times I am forced in my prayers; first to beg God that he would take my heart, and set it on himself in Christ, and when it is there, that he would keep it there.”*¹
- So in light of all of this I want to begin a 6-part series entitled, **“Learning to Pray.”** It is my aim in this series to help us learn to pray and mature in prayer. This fall is also the time when we are seeking God for what he would have us do for the next three years. We want these next few months to be saturated in prayer.
 - So in order that we might learn to pray and be a people of prayer, we are going to look at six prayers from the apostle Paul. Most people think of Paul as a great theologian, evangelist, and missionary. He certainly was each of these. But I am convinced that it was because he was preeminently a man of prayer.
 - So today we will see four ways to transform our prayer lives from this prayer that Paul makes for the Thessalonian Christians.

ORIENTING YOUR LIFE AROUND THE JESUS’ RETURN

¹ John Bunyan, *I Will Pray With the Spirit*. (Language has been updated)

- **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** First then, **learn to pray by orienting your life around Jesus' return.**
 - Before we get to the content of Paul's prayer in verse 11, notice carefully those few words at the beginning. **READ 11a** – ***"To this end we always pray for you."*** To what end? Paul is saying that the prayer he is about to pray is directed to the end of what he has just been talking about in verses 3-10.
 - In those verses, Paul's mind is awestruck by that future day when Jesus will return. This is one of those passages that makes my soul tremble and soar with joy. It is terrifying and beautiful. Horrifying and captivating. We learn two things about that day.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 4)** First, it teaches us that **for believers there will be vindication at the return of Christ.** Look at verse 6. **READ 6-7a** – ***"since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you. ⁷ and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us.*** When Paul? When will God make things right? Keep reading.
 - **READ 7** - ***when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels.*** And look down at verse 10. **READ 10** – ***when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.***
- Oh what a glorious picture of the future. This is what I long for beyond anything else. A day is coming when the sky will light up like fire. The angels of heaven will surround this planet. And He will be revealed. When Jesus' people see Him the text says we will glorify Him and marvel at Him.
 - On that day God's people will be vindicated. No longer will people laugh at Christians, mock them, torture them, or kill them. He will bring relief.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 5)** In the second place, this passage also teaches that **for unbelievers there will be retribution at the return of Christ.** Let your soul tremble under these words in verses 8-9.
 - **READ 8-9** - ***inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.***
 - Those who do not know God *are* those who refuse to obey the gospel of Jesus. They refuse to admit they are sinners or that they need Jesus to save them. They are those who say to their Creator, ***"I will live for myself."*** And so they ignore and disobey the very one who gives them life and breath and everything else.
- For unbelievers that day will be terrifying. You see like any good King, God is patient with people living in rebellion against Him. But his patience and offer of pardon will only last so long. Like any just and good king, He will eventually punish rebels and remove them from his planet.
 - My heart can hardly bear the weight of those next words: ***"Everlasting destruction."*** And even worse, ***"Shut out from the presence of the Lord."*** Hell is not a place where people party, laugh, and enjoy themselves. All laughter, fun, and enjoyment are gifts from God. But unbelievers are shut out from God. In short, those who reject God will for all eternity be rejected by God.
 - I cannot go any further before asking you if you have obeyed the gospel, the good news, of Jesus. The gospel is the royal summons of God your king to admit your sins, to bow the knee to Jesus, and seek his pardon that you might be given

eternal life. The good news is he will pardon all those who ask for mercy. This offer of mercy still stands this hour. Don't wait for it to expire.

- But now we need to bring all of this back to prayer.
 - When, like Paul, you orient your life around Jesus' return it changes the way you pray for people: ***“Father please heal her of her sickness but more than that Lord I pray that you would use this sickness to draw her to yourself.”***
 - When your life is oriented around Jesus' return you get really serious about praying for things you often neglect, like world missions.
 - You start caring about the persecuted church, ***“Father, bring relief to our brothers and sister around the world who are in jail or are being persecuted or even killed for their faith.”***
 - Your prayers move beyond your family, ***“Father, bring salvation to people in Victoria. Pour out your Spirit. Use us Lord to bring your good news to many. May we see many people embrace your Son and be saved.”***
 - You see when you orient your life around Jesus' return it changes the way you pray.

PLAN TO PRAY

- Let's move along to the second point. This one will be quick. **(SHOW SLIDE 6) Second, learn to pray by planning to pray.**
 - Look again at verse 11. **READ 11** – ***To this end we always pray for you.*** Note that this great man of prayer does not pray occasionally or haphazardly. He is “always” in prayer for them.
 - DA Carson writes these wise words: **(SHOW SLIDE 7) “We do not drift into spiritual life; we do not drift into disciplined prayer. We will not grow in prayer unless we plan to pray. That means we must self consciously set aside time to do nothing but pray.”**²
- Carson is right that at a most basic level we do not pray simply because we do not plan time to pray. Life is busy and so we must plan. It may look different for each person. Some people find it far more effective to wake up early in the morning. Others prefer a prayer walk over their lunch break. Others prefer the evening.
 - If you have no disciplined time of prayer I want to encourage you to begin today. Start small. Set aside 15 minutes at the same time every day. Spend the first half in reading the Bible and the second half in prayer.
 - Husbands, lead your families in this. Find 10 minutes a day to worship with your family. With the age of our kids we find it best to do this just before they all go to bed. Dads, gather the family. Read a portion of Scripture and choose just one thing to pray about. Again, you must plan or it will not happen.
- When you are at prayer you will need a method for prayer. Many people enjoy using the ACTS acrostic. **(SHOW SLIDE 8) A = adoration.** Take time to adore God for who He is. **(SHOW SLIDE 9) C = confession.** Confess your sins. **(SHOW SLIDE 10) T = thanksgiving.** Thank him for the many gifts in your life. And **(SHOW SLIDE 11) S = supplication.** Supplication means requests. Bring your requests and needs before him. So that is the second point. Learn to pray by planning to pray.

² DA Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, 19.

- We are now ready to get into what we actually pray about. These first two points are more of the framework for prayer. But when we actually pray what do we pray about?
 - Really the answer is anything. Just as no child's request to his or her father is too small so we should bring everything to God. But as we mature in life and in prayer we learn that some requests should take priority.

PRIORITIZE YOUR REQUESTS

- So in the third place we will say this: **(SHOW SLIDE 12) learn to pray by prioritizing your requests.**
 - So many of our requests are focused around health, comfort, and financial blessings in this life. Again, I emphasize that much of this is right and good. In 3 John 2, John prays for his friend Gaius saying, **(SHOW SLIDE 13) "I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you."**
 - But he does not end there. He adds, **(SHOW SLIDE 14) "even as your soul is getting along well."** John cared about Gaius' physical well-being but he cared even more about his soul. We see the same thing in Paul. Paul makes two requests.
- First, we see from how Paul prayed for the Thessalonians that learning to pray means **(SHOW SLIDE 15) asking for Christian brothers and sisters to grow in maturity. READ 11 – ¹¹ To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling.**
 - Now let's be clear on what Paul is saying and what He is not saying. Paul is not praying that they would live such good lives that they would be worthy for God to call them to his kingdom. No. We don't earn God's calling. Salvation is a gift. They are already Christians. They have already been called into God's family. In verse 3 he calls them brothers and sisters.
 - Paul is praying that they would live up to that calling. Since they are citizens of God's kingdom, he is praying that God would enable them to live in a way that reflects this reality.
- So you see when your mind is oriented around Jesus' return you don't just pray for other people's physical health or their need for work, as important as those things are. Your ultimate concern is where they stand with God. Once they become Christians your ultimate concern is that they live in a manner that pleases him. You care about their health but most of all your care about their soul.
 - This is clearly one of Paul's highest priorities. He prays for the Colossians that **(SHOW SLIDE 16) "you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way."** To the Ephesians he says, **(SHOW SLIDE 17) "I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received."** This is clearly one of Paul's highest priorities for believers.
- Is your own walk with God one of the chief things you pray about? Is the growth of other believers a principal concern in your prayers?
 - Parents how do you pray for your children? By all means pray for their exams, for good jobs, and for a good relationship with them but, above all, pray that they might know Christ and live lives worthy of the calling they have received.
- The reason we must orient our lives around Jesus' return is because eternity is so much longer than this life. So how do your prayers reflect not just what others are doing this week but what they will be doing 50 billion years from now?

- ***“Oh Father, I do long for a good relationship with my kids. I pray they would do well in school. But most of all I cry out that you would save them. I ask that you would give them wisdom to know how to live for you in their school. I pray you would lead them away from temptation. Give them friends who will influence toward Christ and not away. Deliver them from the evil. Give them hearts to love you. Give them gifts to serve you.”***
 - So that is the first request. When you pray for your own self and others pray for Christian maturity that we might walk in a manner worthy of the calling we have received.
- Second, we see from how Paul prayed for the Thessalonians that learning to pray means **(SHOW SLIDE 18) asking for fruitfulness in service to Jesus.**
 - Look at verse 11 again. **READ 11** – ***“To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power.***
- When a person becomes a Christian they start to dream and think about how they can serve Jesus. How can I share Christ with my family? How can I love other people? How can I use my life for his glory? And God brings purposes or ideas to us. Paul is asking that God would fulfill all these purposes. But good ideas without action are useless. And so Paul asks that God would take their good ideas and actions that are prompted by faith and fulfill them.
 - But note those key words, ***“By his power.”*** Without God’s power even our best ideas and actions will fail. As Psalm 127 says, ***“Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain.”***
 - This is why Paul ends his prayer the way he does in verse 12. Look at 12. **READ 12** – ***“according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ..”*** Do you see then that all prayers are really requests for more grace – for the grace we need for each and every moment? Our actions cannot produce fruit and so we ask that God would bring the fruit. We cannot live as we ought to so we ask for the grace to do so. We cannot change hearts and so we ask God to do it.
- This fall we are beginning to plan for the next three years. These verses capture everything about this season. We want to be a people of prayer and a people dedicated to serving Jesus through good deeds. We recognize that we cannot do anything apart from God. So join us next week on the 6 days of prayer.
 - Give thanks for what has been accomplished. Then pray for fruitfulness as we move into the future. Pray that we can be more effective. ***“Father, we thank you for the many good things that have been accomplished: for Neighbourhood Market, Street Teams, Youth, 456, Christianity Explored, Mission San Quitin, Compassion, our global missions efforts, and the many baptisms we have seen this year. Father we pray that you would make us more fruitful in these ministries. Draw more people to Jesus. Give us new ideas. Make us more effective in reaching this generation for Jesus.”***
 - How can you get involved? For some it is service. For others it is prayer. Let’s be on mission together praying that God ***“may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power.”***
 - Learn to pray by prioritizing your requests.

RECALL THE GOAL OF PRAYER

- (SHOW SLIDE 19) Learn to pray by recalling the goal of all prayer. Look at verse 12.
 - **READ 12** – *so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.*
- The end goal of all this is not our maturity or our fruitfulness—as important as those things are—but the glory of Jesus. The goal of all prayer requests is that people might praise, worship, adore Jesus – that he might be famous and honoured as he deserves.
 - When this goal is before your eyes you will always pray rightly. Think about all the things you prayed for this past week. Why did you pray for them? Was your prayer controlled by an earnest desire to see Jesus glorified or was it so your life would be better?
 - So we don't pray, ***“Lord get me out of this situation.”*** We pray, ***“Father, please deliver me but whatever you happens enable me to glorify you.”*** We don't just pray, ***“Save this person”*** but ***“Save this person in order that greatness of Jesus might be on display for everyone to see.”***

CONCLUSION

- Do you want to learn to pray? This week begin by planning to pray. Orient your life around Jesus' return. Come in prayer seeking the glory of Jesus.
 - This will transform the way you pray. You will cry out for Christian maturity for yourself and others. And you will cry out for fruitfulness in purpose and plans of your life and the lives of others.
 - So what is your plan for prayer? What time of the day will it be? Where will you do it? Let's spend these next few weeks learning to pray.