

I. Set Up

A. Welcome. Introduction, Guests.

B. This is week two of our new series, *The Way Forward*. Today's focus is on prayer – which is the amazing opportunity we have to step more fully into communion with our Creator, who loves us and is there for us.

C. Meeting with God is one of the great privileges of being a Christ-follower. We know from all kinds of polls that almost everyone prays, but most people think that they do not pray often enough or as well as they should. Today we will be taking a look at that and hopefully set you up to pray more often and with greater confidence and intimacy.

D. Right now...

II. Intro

A. This week someone called me with a novel idea. They wanted to enter into a year-long effort to be totally focused on God, and they wondered if I was interested in helping them do this, and also in documenting it in a video journal for later use. They said, “this is a year that I am going to zealously live for God. I’m expecting significant changes. I’m going to do this, do you want to help?”

B. And I said, “Wow, I love your desire to grow closer to God. I am sure He loves that desire as well and will honor it. I want to encourage you to race towards Him. But your plans sound a bit off:

1. For starters, it sounds like religion 101. It’s all about what you are going to do – how hard you are going to work to be good, pray, be disciplined, with the expectation that this leads him to love you more and bless you more.

2. Second, the one year part strikes me as a non-starter. Imagine saying to someone you are dating, “I am going to give you 100% of me... for the next year. I am going to zealously pursue you for the next twelve months. After that, well, I won’t be able to keep it up.”

3. I didn’t say, but I could have, “I’ve tried this, about twenty times and failed.” What I did say was, “By the way, you’re not going to make it a year.” I then encouraged him to take an a look at grace.

C. This is not the only one suggesting this. A while back, a college student asked for my help coordinating a forty day fast for a bunch of his classmates. He said that he was sick of the half-hearted devotion he saw among Christians and so he was calling on his fellow students to “go all in.” And going all in was going to start with a forty day fast. He asked if I’d help. And I said, “I love your heart. God bless you. I do want to help you. But I think your plan needs some help. Organizing a forty day fast for 19 and 20 year olds, some of whom are probably already struggle with eating disorders, strikes me as a bad idea. But let’s talk about growing closer to God and how you can do it and help others.

D. What do we do? What does it look like to seek God? As I noted in week one, this series is predicated on the idea that: 1) we want to get better; 2) we can get better; and 3) we do play a part in that.

E. Our salvation pivots entirely on the work of Christ. We do not do, we accept. But our “sanctification” – which is the theological term for “getting better” is a joint project. As Augustine noted, “We cannot change our lives alone, and God doesn’t do it alone.”

F. We are told: to discipline ourselves for godliness; to work out our salvation; to press on towards the goal for the prize. Effort and sacrifice are implied. But how exactly? What are we called to do?

G. Last week we focused on confession – which is agreeing with God on where we are – on who we are. I noted that we often experience it in one of three ways:

1. In a confession that leads to faith. We become a child a God – we are adopted into his family – when we confess our sin and declare both our need for him and our allegiance to him.
2. Secondly, we may experience confession in a breakthrough moment when we own up to things that have been piling up. Things we are not being honest about, perhaps even from ourselves.
3. And thirdly, confession describes the need for the ongoing posture of humility we are encouraged to embrace. We need to examine our heart on an ongoing basis – assuming we are blind to many of our sins – and we need to participate in corporate confession.¹

H. All of that to say, the way forward starts with confession. And I hope that you have a few friends – perhaps in your small group – that you can share openly with. One of the things we are told to do is confess our sins to one another. I hope that you have someone who you are transparent with. They know your struggles and when you talk with them they hear your sin and pray for you and assure you that the grace of God is bigger than your sin. Who makes it clear that they love you even though they know the worst about you.

I. Confession was last week. Today we are thinking about prayer. This series is only eight weeks long, which means it’s not exhaustive. There are more than eight things we can do. And what I cover and what I leave off may surprise you.

1. I leave later today for Germany to retrace some of the big moments in Martin Luther’s life. This October 31 is the 500th anniversary of his nailing the 95 theses on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany. There are lots of debate about the Reformation, but one of the things that almost every scholar agrees on is that that moment kicked off the events we call the Reformation.
2. Luther is a fascinating guy. He was brilliant and fearless and a bit crazy. And – and this is what I will be speaking on in two weeks – tenacious. He pursued God with energy and courage and a tenacity that we can learn from. I am going to be reflecting on that in a sermon you might not expect.

J. So, some of what is on the list may surprise you. But today’s topic should not. If we want to grow closer to God, I think everyone thinks that part of that is going to involve more or “better” prayer.

III. So, prayer is today’s topic. And it’s a big one.

A. Virtually every book in the Bible comments on prayer or assumes it or includes prayers in it.

B. Over the last thirty years I have probably read two dozen books and five hundred articles on prayer; I've preached several dozen messages on it and attended hundreds – if not thousands – of prayer meetings.

C. For kicks, a while back I pulled out all of my files on prayer and started skimming through them. My prayer, while sifting through the articles and old sermons on prayer, old prayers I had prayed, was to find something new or helpful to say. The challenge in talking on prayer is not finding something to say, but in figuring out what to leave out.

D. What I realized after sifting through things, was that things sorted themselves out in a few categories.

1. There was a big section on motivation to pray.

a) There are passages in the Bible designed to get us to pray. Some do so by commanding it. Jesus and Paul and others tell us we need to pray and also clearly assume that we will.

b) Other passages motivate us to pray by: 1) rehearsing the promises of prayer; 2) assuring us that God hears our prayers; 3) or by telling us stories where prayer changed everything.

2. There was a second section on the mechanics of prayer. When to pray; where to pray; how to pray; how to structure our prayers; how to listen to God; how to keep and use a prayer journal or prayer lists; how to fast and pray; how to use the Psalms to pray; how to structure an extended time of prayer;

a) We regularly hold workshops on how to pray

b) In my blog this week I posted some counsel from Sheri on prayer. I admire her prayer life more than just about anyone else's. I asked her for a book recommendation on prayer and she said, "People need to stop reading books on prayer and just pray." So, I said, "OK. So, write up something short about how to spend extended times in prayer."

3. A third category of passages, sermons and articles in my file addressed what I'll call the mysteries of prayer. How does it work? Are prayers changing outcomes? Changing me? How do I hear God's voice?

4. And finally, my files also contained prayers. I have gone through seasons where I write out my prayers. I have also gone through seasons where I find great value in praying prayers others have written. So there are lots of prayers in the prayer file.

E. I sorted through all of this for a while, a bit overwhelmed at how much good stuff there is on prayer. And then I decided to do two things: first, leave you with a few things to ponder; and second, pray.

IV. So, let me share three things I hope will help you lean more deeply into prayer as part of The Way Forward.

V. First, we need to see prayer as an opportunity not an obligation.

A. You get to spend time with God. You get to step more fully into the presence of your wonderful, loving, kind, wise Father. And just who are you that you should get this? Stop and think about that. It is a meeting more amazing than any you might arrange with a powerful politician, a wealthy philanthropist, a famous athlete or iconic celebrity. Can you imagine how much you'd pay for this opportunity? What you might be willing to bid for it in a silent auction?

B. While flipping through my files, I was not only struck by how everything sorted itself out into four buckets – motivation, mechanics, mysteries and actual prayers. I was also struck by a few other things:

1. How much culture has moved. Notes from sermons and articles twenty years ago often spent time defending prayer. Rationalism was more prominent. Those who were not Christians tended to deny the supernatural. Now, everyone who is not a Christ-follower claims to be “spiritual” and so, even though they don't pray they offer to “send good thoughts.”² (I hope you don't do that, by the way. I appreciate the good intention of someone who says that. It's obviously a kind gesture. But as a Christ follower don't say, “I'm sending good thoughts your way.” Say, “I will pray for you.”)

2. A second I was struck by was how much my prayers have changed. Early on there were lots of asks. When I look at old prayer lists they strike me as an expose on my greed and fear. Today's prayer lists have asks, but I am a lot less interested in what I want than I am in more of God. And I would argue that, when we read Paul, it sure seems as though he sees prayer less as a way to get things from God and more as a way to get God.

3. But the big take away from the files was how much effort goes into trying to get people to pray. As I noted, there is biblical precedent for that. We are commanded to pray. But I found myself thinking, “I'm not going to beg you. I am going to tell you, you need to stop seeing prayer as a have to – something akin to a diet to be followed or a homework assignment to turn in – and understand it as a privilege and opportunity. Many people view prayer like they view an ab work out or like checking the pressure in their tires – it's a good thing to do, but a bit of a chore. That's the wrong attitude.”³

C. Prayer is something you get to do. If you do not get that, then you are thinking about it wrong.

VI. Second: You will have to fight for it.

A. Some times prayer is easy, fun, transcendent. Most of the time it is work. And, there is no convenient time to pray in our culture. There are always other things to do. There will always be things that are more urgent or more fun. I suspect we are more distracted now than ever before.

1. These things are not just alarm clocks, they are an instant temptation to check the score from last night's game, and then the headlines, and the weather, and what is my schedule today...

2. One hundred years ago we walked places and there was time to reflect and pray. Now we take a car – with the radio on. Or if we are not driving, with the Internet available, and texts to answer and send.

B. It's harder now, but it's never been easy. At one level, prayer is an act of war and we have an enemy that wants to undermine us. As a side point, the Bible is full of passages that suggest that people got up early to pray:

1. In Gen. 19 we are told that "Abraham arose early in the morning and went to the place where he stood before the LORD."
2. In Psalm 5 we read: Early in the morning, O LORD, You will hear my voice. In Ps. 119:147: I rise before dawn and cry for help.
3. In Mark 1:35: In the early morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went away to a secluded place to pray. In Luke 5:16 we are told that: Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

C. These passages and others suggests that those who pray had to make time for it. You do as well. Prayer is like a lot of other important things, it seldom becomes urgent. You are going to have to get control of things to make this work. And, oh by the way, if you want to get up early to pray, you will have to go to bed earlier.

D. Men and women, time with God will change you. It does not require hours and hours, though you can profitably spend hours in prayer – and some of you should push yourself. Think 10 + 10.

1. Sign up for the next prayer workshop, or join one of the prayer meetings that happen during the week – all three campuses have them.

VII. Three: The final thing I'll say before we go to prayer is: Avoid Shallow Puddles

A. This is the term C.S. Lewis used to refer to prayers that are little more than vanilla platitudes and churchy clichés. If you are going to get in the water, jump in the deep end. There are many ways to deepen your prayers and strengthen your prayer life.

1. Write out your prayers long hand.
2. Find someone at work and set aside time every day (or every Tuesday) to meet at lunch (or before work) to pray together.
3. Go on a prayer walk.
4. Use the Book of Common Prayer – or some other book of prayers – to help you grow as a prayer.
5. Or, pray the Psalms or some other section of Scripture.

B. About a year ago, back when we were going through Luke, we came to a passage on prayer, and I decided that instead of preaching on it we would just pray. If you were here you know that we broke the service into four sections

1. We opened with Adoration – praising God for who He is.
2. We then moved into Confession - both corporate and private
3. We then spent about ten minutes thanking God. (We praise him for who He is, we thank God for what He has done).
4. Finally, we ended with requests – with supplication. That's an odd word but we needed an S to spell ACTS – which can be an easy mnemonic device to help us think about how to pray.

C. I thought we'd do something related today. We are going to close with a bit longer time in prayer. Let me pause here to call up the musicians up. And while they are coming let me tell you a story. Years ago a friend of mine called me to say that he's just attended the most amazing staff meeting ever. Which got my attention. Most people are not calling to tell you about a staff meeting!

D. He was on staff at a larger church, and one of the pastors – Don Cousins, now famous because his son, Kirk Cousins, is the quarterback for the Washington Redskins. Don Cousins was apparently frustrated with the prayer life of the staff. And he said, "I do not know what else to do, so I've decided to have you watch me have my morning devotions. Be here tomorrow morning at 7 for an extended staff mtg."

E. And so the next day they showed up and found him sitting in the corner of a dark room with his back to the wall. And they said, everyone came in and sat down, no one said anything. And for a while – he said ten minutes – it was quiet. And they were like, "What are we doing here?" Don was reading. They were watching him read. And then he started to pray. And he alternated kneeling and pacing. And then at various times he was begging and pleading and wrestling with God. And my friend said it was one of the most intense things he had ever been at.

VIII. So...I am not doing that. That is not my style and I am way to private to try it. I am not going to sit and read with my back to you. I am not going to pray for specific people. This is not that. But I thought that I could model praying Scripture, using the Lord's Prayer.

IX. You could do this with a Psalm or some other section of the Bible. We are using The Lord's Prayer because:

- A. It is designed to teach us how to pray
- B. It is one of the things I often use to start my day.

X. Our Father in heaven

A. Heavenly Father. Abba Father. Dad. It's me.

1. Thank you for the chance to come before you this morning. Thank you for the opportunity to call you Dad.
2. I cannot believe that you, the All Powerful one, would meet with me and allow me to call you Dad. To be your child.
3. Help me be shaped and defined by being your son. Help me learn to live in a way that reflects that. Help me feel secure in you. Help me find joy and peace by the fact that you are my Father. That you know my name. That you know me. That you love me.
4. Heavenly Father, I long to bring you joy today. To make you smile that I am your son. I want to make you proud.

B. Our Father

1. Lord God Almighty, help me remember that I am not praying "My Father." Help me remember that I am not in this alone. Help me remember that I am part of a family and a church – that I am linked with others.
2. Help me see others. Help me serve others. Help me be part of caring for those who are hurting.

3. Bless my family God. Provide for them. Protect them. Draw them close to you.
- C. Our Father who art in Heaven
1. Lord God, help me live today in light of heaven.
 2. Help my thoughts and attitude by shaped by eternity, not just by the moment.
 3. Help me raise my sights. Help me expand my small thinking. Help my decisions be shaped by a vision of you sitting ruling over all things and brining about your kingdom.
 4. Help me gain confidence in the knowledge that you are in heaven, and in control, and that no matter what goes wrong today, nothing in heaven changes. You are still My Father. You are still on the throne and Christ is still at your right hand. And you will rule and reign forever.
- D. Hallowed Be Thy Name
1. Lord God, please glorify yourself today.
 2. Be exalted today. Be exalted in my life today.
 3. Be lifted up. Be hallowed. Draw people to yourself, let them see your glory. Let me see your glory. Be Hallowed God.
- E. Your kingdom come;
1. I am tired of the kingdom of man. I want to live in a land where your grace and mercy and love prevail.
 2. Come quickly Lord Jesus. Bring your kingdom to earth. I am tired of living in a broken world. I am tired of living amidst the powers of darkness and hate.
 3. I want you to be King and your rules to apply.
 4. I am tired of the broken and corrupt systems that are in play today. I am tired of the nonsense and the fighting and the small thinking.
 5. Come quickly Lord Jesus. Bring your kingdom.
- F. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
1. Lord God, I want your will not my own. Help me to want your will. Help me to see your will more clearly.
 2. I confess that even as I say that I often default to my will. But as this day begins, I want to want your will because I know it is better.
 3. Bring your will. Make your will known to me. Give me energy and strength to seek it.
 4. May heaven come down to earth. May your church help push back the night and shine the light and bring hope and help to others, especially the oppressed.
 5. Allow me to be part of that. Use Christ Church to help others – to help others come to faith and to flourish.
- G. Give us this day our daily bread
1. Father I ask for your provision for today.

2. The truth is, I want provision in the bank for a lot more than today. I want it for the next ten years. Help me learn to rely on you.

3. Help those who are hungry today. Help those who are fighting to get by in Puerto Rico and other parts of the world. Help us know how to direct our energy and funds to help those in need. Help me better see those in need. Thank you for supplying for my needs so abundantly.

H. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

1. Lord Jesus, Savior and Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.

2. Forgive me for my sins. Forgive me for pride and greed and lust and lack of faith. Forgive me for not leaning more fully into you.

3. Help me be gracious to others, including those who have wronged me. Help me be as gracious with them as you have been with me.

I. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

1. Lord God, help me avoid evil. Keep temptations and traps far from me. Protect me from myself. Protect me from the enemy. Protect those I love.

2. Lord God, please prevail in my life today. Please guide and protect those I love today. Help me live in this broken world in a way that brings you joy.

J. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

XI. Wrap up

A. The way forward includes prayer. I want to encourage you to grow in prayer.

B. If you would like to be prayed for, there are people up front who would welcome a chance to pray with you.

C. If you would like to join with others in prayer, you can do that:

1. At this campus, every Sunday at 7:30

2. If you are sick you can call and ask for your name to go on the prayer list

3. You can also ask for the elders to pray for you

D. Let me add two other things here.

1. If you want to talk about the way forward with someone, sign up for a spiritual check in. We have been investing a lot more time and attention on this and it has been getting rave reviews from those who have done it. You need to do it. You can sign up on the Connect Card. (TAKE IT OUT)

2. If you have not yet been baptized – we will be having our next baptism in a few months. You can sign up today by ??????

XII. Benediction.

¹ We are not just in this alone. Daniel is the only major biblical character other than Jesus who does not appear to sin, but he has a prayer of confession, because he owns his part in the ongoing sins of his people.

² I appreciate the kindness of those who offer to “send good thoughts.” But disappointed when Christians use this language. I want to encourage Christians to be bold and say, I will pray for you.

³ As a side note, in reflecting on The Lord's Prayer I was struck by the fact that Jesus taught the disciples to pray in response to their request to be taught how to pray. They obviously saw prayer as a critical part of Christ's life and part of what made him different than them. They wanted to know how to do it. It occurred to me that we may be forcing prayer on those who do not see the value. Perhaps the right approach is to tell you you can't pray or hold out until you are begging for instruction on it.