

1.10.21 **What is Prayer and How Do I Do It? Luke 11.1-13, Isaiah 56.6-8**

Pastor Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

How comfortable are you praying? With 1 being very uncomfortable and 10 being totally comfortable, rate yourself, where do you fall? Prayer is one of those things like exercising that many of us know and feel we should do because it's beneficial, but we struggle with how to do it and making time to do it. Today we're continuing our series on **tools to build our spiritual life**, and we're going to talk about **prayer**. Here's a way to think about prayer: **Prayer is not a button to be pushed, it's a relationship to be pursued**. Our tool for today is a walkie talkie which is representative of the fact that prayer involves both speaking and listening.

Some of our earliest memories of prayer may be simple prayers taught to us by a parent, grandparent, or Sunday school teacher. The earliest prayers I can remember learning were, *"Now I lay me down to sleep I pray the Lord my soul to keep,"* and *"God is great, God is good, and we thank him for this food. By his hand must all be fed, give us Lord our daily bread."* I learned both of those when I was preschool age. I didn't quite understand the table grace because I was confused by part of it, but I didn't want to admit my ignorance to the rest of my family. One night after we said grace, I finally couldn't stand it any longer and I asked my mom and dad, *"What's an emwe?"* They looked at me with confused faces and said, "What do you mean what's an emwe?" I replied, *"You know, 'God is great, God is good emwe thank him for this food...'"*

Everyone had a good laugh and explained that it was "and we," not "emwe." But at times it was said so fast out of habit, it was hard for me to understand the words and I didn't want other people to know I wasn't getting it. Often that's the way we feel about prayer, we don't want other people to know we're not getting it.

From that childhood memory there are several truths that stand out to me.

Prayer is something we can learn if we're willing to be taught.

Prayer is something we grow in over time; we shouldn't pray the same way as an adult as when we were children.

It is important not to rush through words in praying, but to truly hear what we are saying and to give God time to speak.

We don't need to fear our lack of knowledge or experience in prayer, because truly we will always be beginners.

A little boy and his brother went to visit their grandma. As the little boy said his evening prayers, he was shouting at the top of his voice, *“Please God send me a bicycle, send me a tool chest,”* and all that. His brother said, *“Not so loud. For crying out loud, God isn't deaf.”* The little boy replied, *“I know, but Grandma is.”*

The God we pray to is not deaf, although there are times when our most earnest prayers are not answered for reasons we don't know and don't understand. Many of us have prayed for loved ones who were sick or in harm's way to live, and they didn't make it. But we've also seen prayer change people perhaps by seeing them healed or come to faith or strengthened to face adversity or even to face death with dignity and grace.

Richard Foster writes in *Celebration of Discipline*, *“Prayer catapults us onto the frontier of the spiritual life. It is original research in unexplored territory. Meditation introduces us to the inner life, fasting is an accompanying means, but it is the discipline of prayer itself that brings us into the deepest and highest work of the human spirit. Real prayer is life creating and life changing.”*

In a sense, all that increases our awareness of God is prayer. “On the one hand, prayer is a gift. It is something we receive, and we are to wait in silent expectation for the gift. On the other hand, we can learn how to pray, and we are to give ourselves to the discipline of learning how to pray.”¹ There are various ways to pray. Christians of the 2nd and 3rd centuries spoke of **three methods of prayer; verbal, silent thought, and contemplation**, a type of prayer in which we focus our attention on a brief prayer or word. **To nurture prayer in our life we will need to create a space in our days for solitude and silence.** Our prayers may include time of adoration of God, confession of our sins, praying for others, and praying for our self. **Ole Hallesby** a Norwegian Lutheran theologian, author and educator (1879-1961), describes prayer this way: “To

¹ Norman Shawchuck, *A Guide to Prayer*, Upper Room, Nashville, 1983, 12.

pray is to let Jesus into our hearts. It is not our prayer which moves the Lord Jesus. It is Jesus who moves us to pray. From time immemorial prayer has been spoken of as the breath of the soul. The air which our body requires envelopes us on every hand. The air of itself seeks to enter our bodies and, for this reason, exerts pressure upon us. It is well known that it is more difficult to hold one's breath than it is to breath. We need but exercise our organs of respiration and air will enter into our lungs and perform its life-giving function to the entire body. The air which our souls need envelopes all of us at all times and on all sides. God is round about us in Christ on every hand, with his many-sided and all-sufficient grace. All we need to do is open our hearts."

Prayer is the breath of the soul, the organ by which we receive Christ into our parched and withered hearts. Jesus says (**Revelation 3:20**), *"If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in."* It is not our prayer which draws Jesus into our hearts. Nor is it our prayer which moves Jesus to come into us. All he needs is access. He enters of his own accord because he desires to come in. And he enters in wherever he is not denied admittance. God has designed prayer as a means of intimate and joyous fellowship between God and ourselves."²

Prayer can be defined in many ways, but a simple definition is, **"Prayer is a believer's communication with God."** Prayer involves three major components: God, two-way communication, and a person, usually a believer. However, God also hears the prayers of those who don't yet possess faith.

Prayer involves God because if we don't believe there is a God who hears and answers prayer, we won't pray. Our conception of who God is and what God is like will have a tremendous impact on our desire to pray and the nature of our prayers. If we conceive of God as a tyrannical being who enjoys catching people doing something wrong and punishing them, our approach to prayer will be quite different than someone who conceives of God as powerful and mysterious but also merciful, gracious, and loving.

² Ole Hallesby in *A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants*, 17-18.

Prayer involves two-way communication. When we pray, we speak, and we listen in silence. Frank Laubach wrote (1884-1970), *“The trouble with nearly everybody who prays is that he says ‘Amen’ and runs away before God has a chance to reply.*

Listening to God is far more important than giving Him your ideas.” Prayer requires believing a loving God exists and wants to be relationship and communication with us. It involves listening even more than speaking. Prayer was a regular experience for Jesus, he prayed at the decisive moments in his life. His prayers are brief and appear to be spontaneous. He spoke to his Father and he listened to God’s voice. **In Luke 11 Jesus tells us how to communicate with God in prayer – keep it short, keep it simple, and keep it up.** That something we all can do. Jesus didn’t criticize anyone that I can recall for praying too briefly. He did criticize people for praying too long, to be seen by others, or for not believing their prayer could make a difference.

Prayer involves God, two-way communication, and a believer. Alan Ecclestone writes in *Yes to God*, ***“Prayer remains the means by which we grope our way towards that which alone can satisfy the profoundest need of our human life: to know that we are known and loved by God.”*** God has all the pieces to a puzzle to which we only have one or two. God’s perspective is so much greater than our own. Preacher and author Tony Campolo tells a story about being at a worship service in Pennsylvania where a man prayed aloud for a friend. *“Dear Lord,”* he said, *“you know Charlie Stoltzfus. He lives in that silver trailer down the road a mile. He’s leaving his wife and kids. Please do something to bring the family together.”* The man prayed again, repeating the location: *“the silver trailer down the road a mile.”* Annoyed, Tony wanted to say, *“Enough already. Do you think God’s asking, ‘What’s that address again?’”*

After the service ended, Tony was driving home to eastern Pennsylvania on the turnpike when he noticed a hitchhiker. He decided to give him a ride. *“My name’s Tony,”* Campolo said. *“What’s yours?”* *“Charlie Stoltzfus,”* the hitchhiker said. Campolo was dumbfounded. It was the man for whom the prayer had been offered. Campolo got off at the next exit. *“Hey where are you taking me?”* asked the hitchhiker. *“Home,”* Campolo said. The hitchhiker stared in amazement as Tony drove right to the young man’s silver trailer. That afternoon that man and his wife gave themselves to each other and to God.

Henri Nouwen observed, “**We do not take the spiritual life seriously if we do not set aside some time to be with God and listen to him...**The amount of time will vary for each person according to temperament, age, job, lifestyle, and maturity...**The more we train ourselves to spend time with God and him alone, the more we will discover that God is with us at all times and in all places.** Then we will be able to recognize him even in the midst of a busy and active life.”³ It’s very important that we not project our style or commitment to prayer onto others, as Nouwen said, but we need some time to be alone with God in prayer.

Jesus says at the end of Luke 11 that what awaits us when we desire to pray, when we want to be in communion and communication with God is the Holy Spirit. God will give the Spirit to those who ask and return persistently to pray. Piri Thomas in the book, *Down These Mean Streets*, has a scene in which a prisoner is speaking. “I went back to my cell the night before my hearing. I decided to make a prayer. It **had to be on my knees**...I couldn’t play it cheap. So I waited until the thin kid was asleep. Then I quietly climbed down from my top bunk and bent my knees.

I knelt at the foot of the bed and **told God what was in my heart.**

I made like he was there in the flesh with me.

I talked to him plain...no big words, no almighties...

I talked to him like I had wanted to talk to my old man so many years ago.

I talked like a little kid and I told him of my hopes and disappointments.

I asked the Big Man...to make a cool way for me...

I felt like I was someone that belonged to somebody who cared.

I felt like I could even cry if I wanted to, something I hadn’t been able to do for years.

‘God,’ I concluded, “*maybe I won’t be an angel but I do know I’ll try not to be a blank.*

So in your name and in Cristo’s name, I ask this, Amen.’

³ Henri Nouwen, *Making All Things New* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1981) 71.

A small voice added another amen to mine. I looked up and saw the thin kid, his elbows bent, his head resting on his hand.

I peered through the semidarkness to see his face, wondering if he was sounding me.

But his face was like mine, looking for help from God.

There we were, he lying down, head on bended elbows, and I still on my knees.

No one spoke for a long while. Then the kid whispered, *“I believe in Dios also. Maybe you don’t believe it, but I used to go to church and I had the hand of God upon me. I felt always like you and I feel now warm, quiet, and peaceful like there’s no suffering in our hearts.”*

‘What is he called, Chico, this what we ask for?’ I asked quietly.

“It’s called Grace by the Power of the Holy Spirit,” the kid said.⁴

What a wonderful summary of the practice and power of prayer.

It had to be on my knees – we humble ourselves before God in prayer.

I told God what was in my heart and I talked to him plain – prayer involves heart to heart communication in plain language.

I talked like a little kid and I told him of my hopes and disappointments.

We pray personally and share with God our deepest thoughts, hopes, and fears.

I felt like I was someone that belonged to somebody who cared.

In prayer we know in a deeper way we belong to a loving, caring God.

I felt like I could even cry if I wanted to. In God’s presence in prayer we can be real and bring every emotion and aspect of ourselves. Ultimately, *“The purpose of prayer is not to get things from God or to get God to do things for us – but in order to conform our will to God’s will (Gardner Day).”* Keep it short, keep it simple, and keep it up even for five minutes a day, and God will meet you and transform your life.

⁴ William J. Bausch, *A World of Stories*, Twenty-Third Publications, Mystic, CT, 1999, 316-317.

Blessing: *“Pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”* 1 Thessalonians 5:17-18

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Discuss or reflect on the statement, *“Prayer is not a button to be pushed, it’s a relationship to be pursued.”*
2. What are your earliest memories of prayer?
3. What do you find challenging about prayer, for example, believing it makes any difference, praying for someone or something and not seeing the result you prayed for, making the time to pray, etc.?
4. Christians of the 2nd and 3rd centuries spoke of three methods of prayer; verbal, silent thought, and contemplation, a type of prayer in which we focus our attention on a brief prayer or word. If you are not familiar with these methods, try one or more them in the coming week.
5. A simple definition of prayer is: *“Prayer is a believer’s communication with God.”* Prayer involves three major components: God, two-way communication, and a person. Why is it important not just to speak our prayers but to take time to listen to God?
6. Alan Ecclestone writes in *Yes to God*, *“Prayer remains the means by which we grope our way towards that which alone can satisfy the profoundest need of our human life: to know that we are known and loved by God.”* How does regular prayer help us to grasp we are known and loved by God?
7. Make a commitment to take at least 5 minutes in prayer a day this week. In those minutes express some **A**doration to God – praise God for who God is, **C**onfess any sins weighing on your spirit, give **T**hanks to God for your blessings and what God has done for you, and offer **S**upplications – prayers for others, the world, and yourself. Notice that “ACTS” is a memory tool to help keep these types of prayer in mind – Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication.