

Enjoying God's Presence in Prayer

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According to the Gallup poll, 90% of Americans say they pray - even those who are agnostic or atheist.

When I was a young kid about ten or eleven years old, I had a routine that I had before I went to bed. We had a dog - a Boston terrier - who was older than I was. His name was Clancy. I had the idea that if I could pet that dog really fast twenty five times that would ensure that the dog would live through the night. Then I would say a prayer like: "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. And if I die before i wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." Have you ever really thought that? That's kind of a morbid prayer. But that's what I did, and it was a bit superstitious. I thought I could keep the dog alive and that I could make it through the night. It was more of superstition of what might go wrong if I didn't.

I also remember praying when I would face a crisis. When I was in eighth grade, I got a really bad report card. And more a statement of hope rather than any supernatural power, I prayed that when I got home that my parents no longer lived in that house. Well they did, and it was not a pretty sight when I got home.

Many people pray out of ritual. Many just pray before a meal. Many pray in emergency: "So God if you get me out of this situation just once I promise - I will pay my taxes, I will do what I'm supposed to do. I'll eat my broccoli. I'll - you fill in the blank." People do that in crisis.

There was a man who didn't believe in God. He was hiking. He fell off a cliff and grabbed a hold of a branch. He was going down and in desperation he said "Oh God, but if you do exist - help me! And out of Heaven a voice said "This is God. Let go of the branch and trust in me." To which he said - "Is there anyone else up there..."

But once I became a Christian, my attitude towards prayer changed. God actually started to answer my prayers. That's the topic that we're going to look at - enjoying God's presence in prayer.

Prayer is at the heart of Christianity, because at the heart of Christianity is a relationship with God

It's all about communication and relationship. So as we look at the topic of prayer and enjoying God's presence in prayer, there's a few questions that I just want you to kind of bring up and talk about.

- * What is Christian prayer?
- * Why pray?
- * Does God always answer prayer?

- *Where should we pray and
- * How do we pray?

Prayer is at the heart of Christianity, because at the heart of Christianity is a relationship with God and addresses the following questions:

- * What is Christian prayer?
- * Why pray?
- * Does God always answer prayer?
- * Where should we pray and
- * How do we pray?

What is Christian Prayer?

So what is Christian prayer? For the Christian, prayer should be one of the most important activities in our life. It's good communication with God. The Holy Trinity in is involved - the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Paul tells us in Ephesians 2:8 Through Him (that's Jesus) we both (Jews and non Jews, all of us) have access to the Father by one's spirit we prayed to. The father because of what has been accomplished in our behalf. Through Jesus Christ. We have access to him. We can talk with him, because they're with Jesus has done. We have the Holy Spirit who guides us - who directs us - who helps us as we talk to God. Prayer is a relationship rather than a ritual. A relationship with God. God made the entire universe and yet he is intimate enough that he is with us right now. And we can talk with him.

One writer of many, many years ago said "The power of prayer depends almost entirely upon our understanding of whom it is in which we speak." Now if I wrote you a check for a million dollars, you should probably think not much of it. In fact, I would encourage you don't think anything of it. But what if you happened to meet Bill Gates and he wrote you a check for a million dollars. There might be something to it.

We can talk to God, our Father, and the awesome, wonderful human god he is through Jesus Christ. It his possible because of God's Son, Jesus Christ

Again in Ephesians 2: For through Him, we have access to the Father by one Spirit. And Jesus through His death on the cross, he removed the barrier between us and God. He exchanged our sinfulness for his righteousness. While we were unworthy to come into God's presence on our own, we now have unlimited access to God because of Jesus Christ. And then as Ephesians 2:8 says: For through him, we have access to the Father by one Spirit.

Now some have made the comment. I don't know how to pray and I can relate to that. When we were at that point, that's where Scripture tells us:

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God. - Romans 8:26-27

The Spirit helps us even when we don't know what to say. He guides us. He encourages us. He comes along side us.

So what is prayer? Prayer is communication with God, to the Father, through the Son with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Why Should We Pray?

So why should we pray? I mean if God knows everything and He's got everything sorted out, why do we pray? Prayer is a way we can develop our relationship with God through that communication. God talks to us through His Word. In prayer, we can also talk with God. Prayer is about relationship - not ritual. It's about communication.

I love my wife Nancy. I treasure her friendship. I treasure her support. I treasure the relationship I have with her, so I talk with her. But imagine if I approached Nancy in a ritual type way:

- * Nancy, thank you for being the good wife.
- * Thank you for making the bed.
- * Thank you for making breakfast.
- * I pray that you make dinner on time and that you do the dishes.
- * And I thank you because you're a good wife.

What's up with that? Prayer is not a ritual - it's a relationship. It's a dialogue. There's wonderful rewards that I have for having a relationship with my wife. In an even more glorious way, there are wonderful rewards with a relationship with God through prayer. Prayer changes us. Prayer changes situations. Prayer can calm our anxious heart. God can bring peace in stormy situations.

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. - Matthew 7:7-8

Jesus tells us:

- * Ask, and it will be given to you.
- * Seek, and you will find.
- * Knock, and the door will be opened to you.
- * For everyone who asks, receives.
- * He who seeks, finds.
- * To him who knocks, the door will be opened.

The Word of God without compromise says that God answers prayer. Christians throughout the ages know through experience that God answers prayers. Now the skeptics might disagree me. Cynics may try to tell you it's just a coincidence and that's OK me. But with all that God does in our midst, we can have assurance that God does answer prayer.

I've seen God answer prayer in helping my sister, my brother, my father, my mother all come to faith. I was the first in my family to come to faith. In each one of them in truly, truly remarkable ways, God drew them to himself. My mom was the last raised in a Christian home, but it never took. She said "I'm too ornery to die," and most of us believe that to be true. But when she was diagnosed with terminal cancer and the doctors were not even giving her a month to live, Mom came to faith. And through prayer and through good medical attention, my mom became cancer

free and continued to live as a missionary just like John and Kelley, who are seeing God answer prayer time and time again.

Prayer actually preserved my life on several of the occasions. In answer to prayer, I have seen God send people - or maybe they were even angels - to fix my truck when I'm stuck in the middle of the African bush where there's no road service, there's no telephone, and there's no auto shop. I didn't speak the language. I had a seized engine, a dead battery, a hole in the radiator and a broken fuel line. A man came speaking perfect English asking "How can I help you?" and with only a piece of cloth fixed my car. Whao - that's my response, too. Coincidence? Not a chance. It's the power of prayer. I pray, because God answers prayer.

Does God Always Answer Prayer?

Now does God always answer prayer? You know if read the passage in Matthew 7:7-8 and in other New Testament passages that promise seems to be absolute. And in a sense they are if you accept “no” as an acceptable answer, but let's move past that simple type of thing – the easy way out. When we look at the world of Scripture, we do see that there's good reasons why we may not always get what we ask for. God cannot and will not contradict himself. Perhaps we can identify with that desperate and doomed prayer of a schoolboy heard after exam – “Oh God, please make Paris the capital of England.” It's not going to happen.

But also disobedience, unforgiveness and unconfessed sin causes a barrier between us and God:

Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear. - Isaiah 59:1-2

God never promises to answer the prayer of a person who is not in relationship with Him. He may graciously answer, but we have no right to expect that He will. Now I do believe in God answers one prayer - one type of prayer – from all of those who are not in fellowship with Him and that the prayer of asking for understanding about who God is. What He has done. And the prayer of repentance and putting our faith in Him.

Other times God chooses not to answer our prayer, because we asked with wrong motives or a misunderstanding of the will of God:

You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. - James 4:2-3

God knows what is, loves us and knows what is best for us. A good human father does not always give his children what they have asked for. Neither does our Heavenly Father. I remember our kids when they were young: They were playing with a sticks sword fight – “Daddy, can we have a real swords?” “I don't think so.” “What we really want is real swords.” “No, I don't think so.” A good father does not always give his children what they ask for. Neither does our Heavenly Father. Ruth Graham, Billy's wife, once said “God has not always answered my prayer. If he had, I would have married the wrong man. Several times.”

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. - 1 John 5:14

That is not a cop out. It's an encouragement. The more we get to know God, the more we call complete our relationship with him, the better we get to know His will, the more of our prayers will be answered.

Where Should We Pray?

So, where should we pray? There's tremendous value in community-based prayer. Scripture says:

But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. - Matthew 6:6

Now on the surface we might get the idea that it's best to pray alone - in private. But that may not be what Jesus is really getting at. That may not be what he has in mind. I want to look at this...

But first let me tell you about a boy named Bobby. Bobby was a little boy who dreamed of being a professional baseball player. Unfortunately, his little league coach was not too familiar with the game. Rather than gathering his players for regular practice, Bobby's coach sent the players home with a ball, and a bat, and a glove to practice the game - alone. Bobby tried, but he struggled to make progress. Each Saturday, Bobby's team lined up against the other team, but they could not win a game. They never learned how to play together as a team, and they never really learned any personal skills either. Bobby always wanted to be a baseball player. Now we couldn't leave those Saturday games fast enough. He gave up, and his dream died. Now if Bobby's coach had understood that baseball is a team sport, he would have been a great help to his team.

Where should we pray? There's tremendous value to community-based prayer. Christianity is a team sport. It's a community effort. We learn, and we grow together. And together we make a difference in this world. Now in our Western culture we seem to believe that it's more important to pray alone rather than with others and, unfortunately, most of us never learned how to do either very well. But I want to challenge that notion of only praying alone. And I want to challenge this notion from the Scriptures:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. - Acts 2:42

I believe that like most disciplines of the Christian life we learn best to do it personally when we've been taught in community. For instance, I learned to study God's word and to present it better through the example and the encouragement and the modeling of others. I see others do it. I do it myself. In the early church with these new believers, they had a balanced diet of community and spirituality.

Acts 2:42 says they devoted themselves to the Apostles teaching - and the fellowship - to the breaking of bread - and the prayers. They are holding themselves to the Apostles teaching their mind - fellowship - social interaction - the breaking of bread - physical and spiritual through the Lord's supper and to the prayers. Obviously, a spiritual relationship.

The Apostles' teaching - in community - Sunday morning services - the fellowship - being community in small groups - the breaking of bread - the Lord's Supper - a potluck - in community - and in prayers. This too was to be done in community. Prayer was one of the most vital

components in their community and in their personal spiritual growth. Young Christians learn to pray in community meeting with mature believers. Prayer is a vital part of discipleship. Community prayer is an important part of that process. So how do we learn to pray? In community. We learn to pray together.

Now some might say “Yeah, but doesn't the Scripture say we're not to pray to be seen by others and we're supposed to go into our prayer closet.” On the surface, it seems like a private prayer is a priority. But maybe we need to renovate our prayer process. Let's look to see what that prayer closet really is:

“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think 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. - Matthew 6:5-8

Now if we look at the context Jesus talking about three groups:

* The Pharisees - Jesus calls them hypocrites. They prayed with the wrong motives. Prayer was their opportunity to appear more spiritual and more righteousness. God is saying that prayer should be God-focused rather than man-focused. Jesus is not saying not to pray together. He is saying have the right motive - have your focus on God. The Pharisees - those hypocrites - had the wrong motive.

* But Jesus also talked to the Gentiles and, in this context, those who don't know God they pray by keeping up an empty phrases and many words. These Gentiles have the wrong method. They had a motion, but with empty words and meaningless repetition. So the Pharisees have the wrong motives. Those who don't know God had the wrong method.

* Jesus wants his followers - he wants us - to pray with pure motives and with effective methods. But that does not mean that we should only pray in private or in secret. Jesus says – and when you pray - not if you pray - and when you pray – he assumes that prayer gatherings would be a regular part of their spiritual community. And here the pronouns are all plural - to us you might say when you guys and gals pray, well here in the South when all you all pray he is talking about all of us.

When all you all pray, this is how I want you to go about it. When all you all pray, pray with pure motives. Pray with effective methods. Not like those praise-hungry Pharisees or those misguided Gentiles. And to prove the point, it's all plural - even in the Lord's Prayer where he teaches us how to pray. He doesn't say: “My father, who's in heaven, give me this day my daily bread. Forgive me my sin and lead me not in temptation.” He says “Our Father, give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins. Lead us not in temptation. Deliver us from evil.” It's community. It's community.

What about this prayer closet? Or as many of our translations must say - the room or that or inner room. Jesus when he says all you all go into your room and shut the door and pray to your heavenly father, he's talking to a group of disciples by using plural pronouns. It would either be a

very crowded private place with lots of sweaty disciples or He must have meant a place large enough for a gathering.

In this work, in meaning inner rooms or storm rooms we see that in Acts Chapter 1 - when Jesus was resurrected and the disciples were all together in the upper room out of the public eye in extended prayer – Verse 6 says there were about one hundred twenty people in that prayer closet. So we might need to renovate our prayer closet. Jesus is saying that it's good for believers to be together - away from the public view so that we can pray and focus exclusively on God.

So which is more important - community prayer or private prayer? Yes, both are essential. It's like saying which leg is more important to walk. We need both. We learn in community how to pray, which enhances our prayer life. As we develop a personal prayer life, it enhances our community prayer life. They go together, and we change the world.

How Do We Pray?

So how do we pray? If we're honest, most Christians think prayer is rather boring. What is that? Is our God boring? Is our relationship with Jesus Christ boring? Is our relationship with one another boring?

Maybe the problem is not God. In fact, I'm pretty sure it's not. Maybe it's our approach to prayer. It is so often we just come to God with a shopping list of requests. I actually heard of one man who with his prayer sheet would put his hand on the list and say "Father, you know all things - help us out." Now that's boring.

Prayer should start with worship: "Our Father, who art in heaven. Holy be your name. Then that lead has to respond to Him: "You're kingdom come. You're will be done." We pray because our God is worthy to be sought. Listen to Paul's prayer for spiritual strength:

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. - Ephesians 3:20-21

There's nothing boring about that. Nothing. That's exciting.

There's a world of difference between request-based shopping list prayers and worship-based God-focused prayers. It's really the difference between seeking God's hand and seeking God's face. Now, of course, the idea of God having a hand or a face is concepts to help us understand how God works and how we should relate to him. Basically when we seek His hand for what He does for us, but we seek His face for who He is to us. If we only seek His hand, he will answer but we may miss his Face and the relationship that both He and us really want.

If we only seek His hand, He will provide because He's a loving, caring Father but we may miss the intimacy He intends for us. But when we seek His face because of who He is, He delights in opening up His hand of blessing to us. The God who doesn't need anything loves for us to seek Him.

One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple. - Psalm 27:4

My heart says of you, "Seek his face!" Your face, Lord, I will seek. - Psalm 27:8

So what do we want? A gift? Or the giver? When we seek God's face and give Him our worship, He draws us close in intimacy. We enjoy His presence, and He opens up His hand with pleasure. Seeking after God makes prayer exciting and keeps us praying.

Now, so often we get so wrapped up in learning about how God that we neglect enjoying our relationship with Him. It's important to learn about God, and God helps us understand who He is

through His Word. But let's not stop there.

Nancy and I just recently got a brand new car – a Subaru Outback. It's a great car. I really like it. You can see it in the parking lot. Now imagine if the car was delivered to our house and sat in our garage. I walk around in it and look at the exterior. Check out the inside. Inside the glove box, I see a manual. So I take out the manual and I start really enjoying it. I underline special passages. I copy down portions and put them on my bathroom mirror so I can memorize them. I have beautiful nature pictures and calligraphy. I put things with manual underneath. I even compose some music to sing lyrics that come out of the manual. I become so knowledgeable about the manual that I give Proctor lectures about the Subaru All Wheel Drive and the adaptive cruise control that can actually speed up and slow down and stop without ever touching the gas or the brake. In fact, I even go to school to study Japanese, so that I can study the manual in the original language. But I never drive the car! The manual is there so that I can enjoy driving the car as I experience it. And so is God's Word. It helps us to enjoy God's presence in prayer. Enjoying God's presence in prayer.

There's one other thing that might even come a little bit naturally. It's OK for you to be real when you pray. It's OK to be open. It's OK to be honest. It's OK to share your hurt. It's OK, because Christianity is a community effort and we do it all together. Listen to what Paul says:

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate, the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. - 2 Corinthians 3:18-4:1

For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. - 2 Corinthians 4:5-7

Let me illustrate this: I have a vase here. It's a pretty vase. It's nice. I thought for a long time in order to be a good Christian that I needed to be on top of my game. I needed to be strong. I needed to be in control. I needed to be ready in each and every circumstance.

But I now come to realize that that's not the way it works. Not at all. Brokenness is a more important characteristic for the believer of Jesus Christ. We never really can be strong enough. We never really can be in control. We never really could be prepared for those situations that catch us off guard. In his severe mercy, God has a better way to prepare us for Christ-centered living. He breaks us, and then He put us back together, but the pieces never fit the way they were before. There's chinks - and crannies - and cracks - and we become weaker in ourselves and yet stronger in Him. Because it's Him who is working in us and through us. Paul says we have this treasure in Jars of Clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to Jesus - to God - and not ourselves.

It is as if I have the light of the Gospel in this container in my life and I try to have my whole life together - how much of the Gospel can you see? But God, in His mercy, has broken me, and He put

the pieces back together, and I'm not the same. I'm dependent upon Him, but the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is seen through us.

You know, every day with Jesus is not sweeter than the day before. Sometimes there are hurts, and God does that not just through his discipline because he loves us so much. And as we allow our weaknesses and our brokenness to be seen, God demonstrates His power in the most amazing way in our community, in our families and in our world. Enjoying God's presence in prayer.

We value Prayer. We believe prayer is the means by which our Christian life and church become effective. Prayer lets us experience God's warmth (Psalm 23), aligns us with His will (Matt. 6:10), and empowers us for His work (Eph. 6:19); It is also the place where we offer our praise and petitions before him.

Therefore we will:

- * Take time for real, meaningful prayer during our worship services.
- * Be a church that stops to pray with one another and with those in our community, in times of crisis, confusion, need, or gratitude.
- * Gather on a regular basis for corporate prayer.