

(View the online sermon to watch the “Howard be thy name” video.)

We are talking about prayer today and I want to begin with a show of hands. How many of you have ever, at any point in your life, whether it’s a pre-dinner “good food, good meat, good God, let’s eat” prayer, or a quick “Lord Jesus, help me on this test!” prayer, or maybe you’ve got some Catholicism in your background and so you have the sign of the cross prayer down pat (*in nomine patri, et filli, et spiritu sancti*), or maybe this morning you uttered a heartfelt, sincere, devoted kind of prayer because you got here thirty minutes early to prepare your heart to hear the Word of the Lord proclaimed, to encounter the Living God (we all land in that last category, right?)—how many of you have ever, at any time, prayed before?

Ok, good. Looks like we don’t need this sermon then. Perfect. I’m kidding. It turns out that prayer is not only a Christian phenomenon; it’s a human one. But prayer in American society feels like it’s in a weird location in our cultural consciousness these days, doesn’t it?

On the one hand, there has been an outpouring of prayer for the people of Ukraine in recent days. And you even see news broadcasters awestruck at public prayer (view the online sermon to watch the video).

On the other hand, recently regarding different tumultuous events we’ve seen signs and sentiments like this emerge (view the online sermon to see the photo). Thoughts? Prayers? Are you kidding me? What we need is action. What we need is policy change. We don’t need overly simplified platitudes. We don’t want expressions of sympathy. We don’t need any more phony piety. We’re tired of meaningless catchphrases and empty gestures. We need something that will truly make a difference! I mean is it not true that “two hands working are better than a thousand grasped in prayer”?

I totally get this sentiment because often it *feels* like Christian culture in America is all too ready to modify our **Facebook** pages with prayer posts but we’re nowhere near ready to *actually* fall on our faces and cry out for God to intercede.

All of this makes me honestly ask, “What are we to make of prayer?” What role should prayer play in our lives? I don’t know about you, but taking in the critique of the “thoughts and prayers” protestors, it makes me ask, “Does prayer even matter?” Does prayer make a difference or is it cordial, spiritual drivel meant to help good people cope with hard situations in life? What are we to make of prayer?

With questions like that, ones that seem so complicated that I’m not sure where to turn, I often look to Jesus. I try to look to his wisdom. That’s the whole point of this series we’re in. To glean from Jesus’ wisdom. So, what does Jesus say about prayer? What might there be to learn about prayer from Jesus’ words and from Jesus’ actions?

When we open up the Scriptures, specifically in the gospel of Luke, we see three things in Jesus’ life regarding prayer. We see Jesus teach, emphasize, and exemplify: (1) the priority of prayer, (2) the power of prayer, and (3) the practice of prayer. Let’s start with the first one.

1. The Priority of Prayer

If you do a brief survey of Jesus’ prayer life, especially as it’s unveiled in the gospel of Luke, you quickly see that Jesus made prayer a priority. He is praying *all the time*.

- Jesus prayed at his baptism: “When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened” (Luke 3:21).
- He prayed after a hard day’s work: “Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed” (Luke 5:15-16).
- He prayed at all-night prayer meetings: “Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God” (Luke 6:12).
- He prayed at various (but “certain”) places: “Jesus was praying in a certain place...” (Luke 11:1).
- In his teaching, Jesus gave parables exhorting his disciples to prayer: “Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up” (Luke 18:1).
- Jesus, once he entered Jerusalem, walked into the temple and began cleansing it, driving out the people there who had turned the place of worship into a place of business. Jesus flipped tables and threw these people out, saying, “My house shall be a house of prayer...” (Luke 19:46).
- Then, as Jesus nears his end, we read of him telling his disciples to pray and we read of Jesus praying in moments of unbearable turmoil in Gethsemane: “On reaching the place, he said to them, ‘Pray that you will not fall into temptation.’ He withdrew about a stone’s throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, ‘Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done’” (Luke 22:40-42).
- And finally, we see Jesus, crucified on the cross, praying: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34) and “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46).

When we look at Jesus, he teaches his disciples to pray. He says certain miracles and signs and wonders can only happen through prayer and fasting. When he cleanses the temple, he says, “My house shall be a house of prayer.” Everywhere we look, Jesus is praying. At the genesis of his ministry, he’s praying. As he travels, he’s praying. As he heals, he’s praying. In times of grief, he’s praying. (When I’m in grief, I eat!) When he turns water to wine, he’s praying. When he raises Lazarus from the dead, he’s praying. When he multiplies loaves and fish to feed 5,000 people, he’s praying. As he laments, he’s praying. When hope seems lost, he’s praying. At his end, on the cross, he’s praying. Jesus. Prioritized. Prayer.

Everywhere we look in the Scriptures, Jesus is either emphasizing prayer or praying himself, which begs the question: if Jesus thought it was so important that he be praying ceaselessly, how much more then ought we to be a people of prayer? Am I *better than* Jesus? More *informed* than Jesus? More *spiritual* than Jesus? Um...no.

Jesus’ prayer life says something about the priority of prayer. If Jesus makes much of prayer, then I want to as well.

If I’m being honest, though, prayer isn’t my first response; it’s more like a last resort. As in, “Well, I guess all I can do now is pray.” It’s a last ditch effort. It’s me throwing up a “Hail Mary”!

Often times, though, I do the exact opposite. Instead of prayer being my last resort when someone asks me to pray for something or for them or whatever, I’ll do this thing in my head right then and there where I’m like, “Dear God, help this person. Amen.” so that I’m not one of those people who says they’ll pray for whatever and then they don’t, but also because, more transparently, I want to get it out of the way and not think about it anymore.

And you're a pastor! Trust me—I know. *BOTH* betray my prayerlessness. *BOTH* betray my disposition towards prayer. And *BOTH* result from the fact that sometimes I simply don't prioritize prayer because, at the root, I don't believe it has any power, which leads to my next point.

2. The Power of Prayer

Jesus talks in Luke's gospel as if prayer actually *does* something. He talks as if prayer has *efficacy*. He talks as if prayer has *power*. As if when it goes out, it will not return void.

I remember my dad telling me about a man in a church of his years ago. Everyone wanted that man to be an elder in that church, but my dad thought the guy had WAY too many red flags. But because most of the folks in the church wanted the guy to be an elder, Dad thought his hands were tied. The only thing he could do, he thought, was pray. So he did. He began praying, "Lord, this man isn't suited to be an elder in our church. Lord, please make something happen so that he can't take this role. Lord, even if he has to move out of town for another job, Lord..." Then, I kid you not, *the next day*, a *week* before this man was to be voted on and confirmed as an elder in the church, that man walked in the office and spoke with my dad and said, "Gary, I just wanted to let you know that I'm withdrawing my name from becoming an elder here. I took a job in another city so we're moving." All he could say was (*shocked face*), "GET OUTTA TOWN!" True story.

Prayer has *power*. More seriously though, I recently heard this story about a single mother named Monica, a mother of one boy. She grew up as a devout believer, she sang hymns and prayed over her baby nightly. He grew up to see the world quite a bit differently than his mom. He became known in their city for public drunkenness, and as a womanizer. Despite all that, he was incredibly intelligent. He became a professor of philosophy and used all his intellect to philosophically combat the faith that he despised that his mother carried. Monica didn't give up on him. She just kept on praying for her son. When he was 19 years old, she had a dream at night in which she believed that God was promising her that he heard her and would answer her prayers for her son. She grew more and more intense in prayer, but year after year she saw no change. Then, at the *nine* year mark, her son was alone in a garden on an otherwise ordinary afternoon, heard the voice of God, opened the Scriptures he had spent his life combatting, and came to faith in Jesus alone in that garden. His name is St. Augustine and he is arguably the most famous theologian in the Christian faith.

There's *power* in prayer. If you're not yet convinced with that from anecdotal evidence, try this from Jesus.

In Luke 11:5-8, Jesus starts telling a parable *about* prayer right after teaching his disciples *how* to pray. He says, "Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.' And suppose the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need." What a friend. Now, jump down with me to verses 11-12 and we read Jesus give another little parable on prayer: "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?"

What's Jesus' point in these parables? Jesus *isn't* teaching that God is *like* the friend who, when you need something in the night and you come and ask and you bang on the door and you keep banging, is going to say to you, "Go away! Don't bother me! It's late! I'm tired! Ok, fine...I don't want you to talk bad about me, so here you go." And Jesus *isn't* teaching that God is *like* the cruel dad who exchanges good gifts for his children for bad ones.

No, these are parables of *contrast*. Jesus' point is to say that that is *exactly* what God is *not* like. How do I know? Because after the *first* parable about the two friends, Jesus wraps it up by saying this: "So I say to you: 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" (Luke 11:9-10).

And after the *second* little parable between a father and his son, Jesus wraps it up by stating this in verse 13: "If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

When we come to God in prayer, we can know that prayer is mighty and effective and that it *does* something. It's in this sense that prayer is seen as a *compelling wonder*—not because it satisfies some magic formula, but because our petitions and supplications go to the Creator and Ruler of the cosmos, who is sovereign and providential over it all, and in our prayers and intercessions, we become participants in God's restorative initiatives.

Contrary to the cynics of prayer, Karl Barth says, "To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world."

Similarly, Eugene Peterson says, "Prayer is subversive activity...As we pray, slowly but surely, not *culture*, not *family*, not *government*, not *job*, not even the tyrannous self can stand against the quiet power and creative influence of God's sovereignty."

That is a *compelling wonder*—to see the hand of God move against the disorder of the world, to see prayer as subversive activity, bringing about the creative influence of a sovereign God. Amazing.

At the same time, however, it's a *confounding mystery*. I acknowledge this. Because while we can read Jesus saying, "Ask and ye shall receive and seek and ye shall find and knock and the door will be opened," sometimes (or most of the time) it feels like when we ask, God holds out on us. When we seek, we wind up more lost than where we began. When we knock, the door ends up slammed in our face. All too often prayer seems powerless, our mortal pleas being met with Divine silence.

Why God deems some prayers worthy of immediate and noticeable intervention and why the response to others is drawn out over the course of decades or seemingly left unread for all of life, I do not know. What I do knowingly wrestle with, however, is what the author Marilynne Robinson expresses in one of her books. She writes,

There are certain attributes our faith assigns to God: omniscience, omnipotence, justice, and grace. We human beings have such a slight acquaintance with power and knowledge, so little conception of justice, and so slight a capacity for grace, that the workings of these great attributes together is a mystery we cannot hope to penetrate.

While I may not know or understand or be able to comprehend why some prayers have Amazon's two-day shipping attached to them and why others always seem to get lost in transit, what I do know is that if God doesn't answer my prayers like I'd like, he must have a good and loving reason for doing so that makes utmost sense in conjunction with his omniscience.

Compelling wonder, confounding mystery—it's in that space between we are called to pray, to petition, to intercede, to cry out to God. God calls us to prayer which leads to my last point.

3. The Practice of Prayer

If prayer is a priority and there's power and expectation and promises to be had in it, what will our response be? Will we pray? There are probably all kinds of reasons we don't pray as much as we should – distractions, doubts, disappointments, etc. But perhaps the issue is just that we aren't sure *how*. There are all kinds of ways to pray.

Sometimes for me prayer is very much this quiet stillness, contemplating the goodness of the Lord. I totally have candles in my room where I live to remind me of God's presence with me. And so sometimes prayer is deep breathing in and out, breathing in the love of the Father and breathing out my struggles.

Other times, prayer is face buried in my tear-soaked bed, saying, "God, help me!" or "Why God? Why?" (*All in secret so I don't get questioned by my roommates, of course*).

And still other times, prayer is me with Ephesians 4 open before me at a coffee shop, praying for our elders, our staff, for you all (literally!) to "walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called with all humility and gentleness, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit of the bond of peace."

While the practice of prayer can take many forms, Jesus our Teacher, leads the way. There's no getting around the prayer he gave us in Luke 11:2-4. He said, "When you pray, say: 'Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation.'"

As we think about the practice of prayer, let's consider a couple of points drawn from Timothy Keller:

- Notice that Jesus begins with *adoration*. He's praying, "Father, hallowed be your name." "Father" invokes the character of this God. He is the good, providing Father. And he acknowledges that the Father's name is "hallowed," meaning holy, transcendent, set apart.
- Next, Jesus prays with *acceptance*. Jesus prays to God, saying, "Father, hallowed be your name, *your kingdom come*." Notice that prior to praying for our wants and requests, we're instructed to pray for God's kingdom and God's ways to come before our own wants, wishes, and desires.
- Then Jesus' prayer moves to *asking*. Once we've acknowledged in prayer that God is higher and holier and a good and benevolent Father to us all and we have prayed ultimately for *his will* to be done and not our own, we can begin to pray for what we'd like: "Father, give us our daily bread. Give us what we need."
- Once, we've *asked*, Jesus teaches us to move to *admitting*. Here, we humble ourselves before the Lord and rid ourselves of any prideful arrogance, noting that we are just as in need of forgiveness, mercy, and grace for our sin as anyone else. So, as we admit that we are sinners in need of help, so too do we move to forgive those who have wronged us instead of letting pride and false-superiority fester in our hearts.
- And lastly, after we've adored, accepted, asked, and admitted, Jesus urges us to *rebel against the evil one in prayer*. There is a supernatural Enemy and he's not the Russian people. He's not your political adversary. He's not your boss or co-worker or your ex-spouse (although all those people and more are susceptible to working in cahoots with demonic forces). No, as Christians, we

testify to the reality of evil spiritual forces, and we pray against those things. In prayer, we stand against evil. In prayer, we become agents of the Light and we battle against the Darkness.

This is how Jesus teaches us to pray. But, honestly, we can sit here and listen to a talk on prayer, we can hear about the priority of prayer, the power of prayer, and the practice of prayer, and we might walk away from something like this and think, “Yeah, I *should* pray.” But listen to me—our prayer lives will never change unless *should* becomes *must*. Nothing will change in our prayer life until “I *should* pray” becomes “I *must* pray!”

I grew up in a praying home. As I look over my life, it seems like I’ve sort of lost a bit of the zeal for prayer I grew up with. I grew up the son of a preacher and I have fond memories of praying at this specific red light every morning as my dad drove me to school. I remember praying before road trips to visit extended family at Christmas. I have fond memories of my little brother Tim praying, “Dear God, I hope you have fun. Amen.”

There are times I can think of in my life when *should* gave way to *must*. I remember many nights laying in my bed, asking for God to help me to witness to my friends. I remember begging God to free me from strongholds in my life. I remember times in life where I didn’t know what the future would hold and so I felt that my only option was to cry out to God. But as I’ve gotten older, in my pride, I’ve relinquished that childhood fervor. *Must* gave way to *should* and sometimes *should* was shrugged off for *I don’t need to, it’s no big deal*. But over the last several years, and even just this past week, I feel like God’s been changing my heart. *It’s no big deal* has shifted to *should* and *should* is shifting to *must*.

A couple months ago I was driving to Greenwood on an errand and thinking, “Man, I don’t pray like I should. I want to be a prayer warrior, I want to usurp the dominion of the devil, I want to call down Heaven, I want to flood the secular with the sacred!” I mean, I’m a pastor. I should have a robust prayer life! I follow Jesus of Nazareth after all—he who challenged us to “pray always and to not give up” (Luke 18:1).

I was thinking to myself, “How can I expect our church to become a people of prayer, when more of my time is spent in the office and the TV room and hardly any time at all in the prayer room? What does it say about me as a leader that I can be someone who leads others from a stage and can talk about prayer when at the end of my life I know for a fact that I’ll have back pain from all my sitting but won’t have knee pain from my praying?”

Well, I was going on like that for about five minutes and that whole time, as I was thinking about prayer, I wasn’t praying. It’s just me going on some sort of negative feedback loop about prayer! And then it hit me: I felt like *should* was changing into *must*. And I prayed right then and there. In my car. As I drove. And that has shifted something in me. I feel like prayer is essential. This photo shows is what I want my posture to be (view the online sermon to see the photo). *I must pray*. And *that* is what I want our church’s posture to be.

Right now, I think that as a church, *we must* pray.

This will be a bit different from how we normally do Sunday mornings, no doubt. But we’re going to pray this morning, together. It’s okay to do things that are different sometimes. If you’re a guest with us or not a Jesus follower, no pressure to do anything here, no judgement if you don’t join in. As Jesus people we want to make space to pray to our God and take communion. I’ll lead us through this.

What I want you to do is stand and find someone you came with, get in groups of two or three or four. If you don't have anyone to pray with, we're going to have people around the room that are available to pray with you.

Men, fathers, husbands, I want you to lead on this. The Scriptures say in 1 Timothy 2:8: "I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands."

We're going to work through those movements in the Lord's prayer together. I'll put them back up on the screen one at a time, explain what to pray for, and then give you a few moments to pray together. At the end, I'll wrap things up for us. Let's pray.

ADORATION – As you pray, praise God for who He is.

ACCEPTANCE – As you pray, ask God to let his will be done in your life and across the world.

ASKING – As you pray, petition God. Pray for the Ukraine, for the 317, and for the Creek.

ADMITTING – As you pray, request forgiveness for yourself and for our church through Jesus.

TAKE COMMUNION

REBEL AGAINST THE EVIL ONE – As you pray, pray against the machinations of the evil one.

FINAL PRAYER