

Teach Me to Pray – Part 3
Sermon by Pastor Joe Davis
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I. INTRODUCTION

Well, today we're going to continue on in our journey of learning to pray... learning to stop walking by our own strength and wisdom and start walking every day and every moment by the power of the Holy Spirit within us. Today's message is called, "Teach Me to Pray – Part 3," and in it we're going to discover 4 essential characteristics of effective prayer. And I want to remind you that in this prayer journey, we're simply learning what Scripture teaches us about how to communicate better with our God and depend on him more fully. I'm not giving you a new to-do list or trying to guilt you into praying more. Instead, I'm sharing with you through God's Word how to use the secret weapon he's graciously given to us...your lifeline. In this study, we're learning together how to walk through life as Jesus did, in humble dependence on the Father and the power of the Spirit within us.

Listen to how Peter described, in Acts 10:38, what happened as Jesus walked this way:

You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him.

As Jesus walked in a life of prayer (constant communication with and dependence on the Father) the Spirit worked powerfully and miraculously within him for God was with him. People were healed spiritually and physically; they were set free from demonic oppression; they were raised from the dead; storms were calmed; and he spoke words of truth that set people free. This way of walking through life is also available to us through prayer, as we learn to walk in God's strength rather than our own.

Do you every try to bear the burdens of the world on your shoulders? Do you every find yourself trying to solve the problems of the world through your own

brainpower? As you go through a typical day, trying to get your to-do list done, trying to put out all the fires that arise, trying to make it to your appointments on time, trying to strategize solutions to problems, trying to stay on task, trying to get dinner made, trying to keep the house clean, trying to keep your boss happy, trying to solve relationship problems, and on and on and on...Do you every feel the tension in your shoulders building? Do you feel the stress tighten them until they seem to be rising higher and higher along with your temperature and blood pressure?

I seem to carry a lot of my tension in my shoulders. When my brother Nate was here he tried to give me a back rub and I just about doubled over in pain. It's amazing how the pressure to get things done and stay on top of the madness and busyness of life can have a noticeable effect on our bodies. This last week as I sat down to pray I was thinking about what we learned last week through the Lord's Prayer and applying that to how I was praying. Remember how we talked about that acknowledgement that God is in heaven and we're on earth...that contrast between gigantic and miniscule...between the universe as a whole and the tiny little speck called earth...between an all-knowing and all-powerful God and tiny little finite me who so easily gets consumed and focused on my own little world?

Well as I sat down to pray and considered that God is heaven and I'm on earth, I literally felt my shoulders relax and drop as I was reminded that I can't keep it all together and solve all the world's problems...that I don't have within myself the perfect answer to all the difficult questions of life...but in Jesus' name I can come right now to the One who does know it all, can see it all, can do it all and has blessed me with the privilege of being able to hand it over to him in prayer and experience his wisdom and power providing me with everything I need for each moment and problem I face. As I comprehended that truth and believed it, I literally felt the tension in my shoulders drop and I received a peace for the challenges of the day.

Does that mean that I'm forever peaceful now and will never allow tension to build up in my shoulders again? Definitely not. Life's a battle and I constantly have to fight my old self trying to take the reins and carry the burdens of life by my own human strength and abilities. But this is where God is leading you and I in prayer: to more and more stop relying on ourselves and trying to deal with life apart from him...what I'd call the road to tension and stress and despair. But

instead to accept God's invitation to dwell with him in humility, fully aware of our inability to keep it all together, seeking him, delighting in him, and trusting that he will provide us with everything we need as we ask for it...what I'd call the road to peace, life and fruitfulness. Which would you prefer?

II. FOUR ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTIC OF EFFECTIVE PRAYER

A. Pray with humility (James 4:6-10; Luke 18:9-14)

So this brings us to today's 1st essential characteristic of effective prayer, and that is, *humility*...approaching God with the settled conviction and peaceful acceptance that God is God and I am not.

Have you truly accepted that truth yet and does it show in the way you conduct your day-to-day life and approach God in prayer? Humility is the attitude captured in that 1st phrase of the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father who is in heaven." It's the attitude that relieved the tension in my shoulders last week: one that's cultivated by understanding how awesome, powerful, majestic, and holy our God is, and yet how deeply he cares about you and me and longs to provide us with what we need as we turn to him. True humility is really the underlying basis of all prayer itself and what causes us to turn to God in the way he desires.

Listen to these verses from James chapter 4, verses 6 through 10:

6 ...Therefore it says, "GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE." 7 Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. 8 Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.

I want you to notice something very significant and eye-opening in these verses. We're provided here with a major contrast showing us the way God interacts with two different types of people. We're told first that God is opposed to the proud. And secondly, that he gives grace to the humble. What we see here is that God isn't just passive and indifferent to the proud, but that he's actually opposed to

them. I don't know about you, but I wouldn't want to be facing God as an opponent...somebody that's coming to fight against me. My chances of victory would be calculated at a complete zero. There would be no path to winning the battle. You see God isn't just ignoring the proud or having nothing to do with them; he's actually working actively against them. Drink that truth in for a moment.

But look at the beautiful alternative for those who draw near to him in true humility. Instead of actively working against them, he's actively giving them grace, drawing near to them, exalting them, and causing the devil to flee. These are just a few of the benefits of coming to God in humility as we pray. God comes to act with us and provide us with everything we need to face life and do his will. He steers us away from temptation and delivers us from the evil Satan tries to tempt us with or bring against us.

Jesus shared a parable in Luke 18, verses 9 to 14, that gives us another great contrast between the proud and the humble and shows how God interacts with each:

9 And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: 10 "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 "The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' 13 "But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' 14 "I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

The proud man viewed himself as being much better than other people around him. In fact, he really wasn't even seeking the Lord as he prayed, but was instead telling God what a great person he was. His focus was on all he had done for God. That phrase, "and was praying this to himself," has some irony, doesn't it, since he himself really was the focus of his prayer rather than God.

The humble man, on the other hand, was completely and utterly aware of his own failings and inadequacies and of his desperate need for God. He was expressing his humility even in the position of his body as he refused to even raise his eyes to heaven. This man truly was seeking God with his whole heart and doing it in humility. And what happened? God responded and he went away justified and right with God. ***"...for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."***

Humility is the only appropriate way to approach God in prayer and when we come this way, he responds and graciously provides us with everything we need.

B. Pray believing (Psalm 5:1-3; Mark 11:22-24)

The 2nd essential characteristic of effective prayer is *faith*...praying with belief and trust...what I'd like to call the expectant prayer of faith. What I believe is the most beautiful expression of what this looks like, is found in Psalm 5, verses 1 to 3. I can't think of a better description of what it looks like to pray believing than this. David says:

***1 Give ear to my words, O Lord, Consider my groaning.
2 Heed the sound of my cry for help, my King and my God,
For to You I pray. 3 In the morning, O Lord, You will hear my voice;
In the morning I will order my prayer to You and eagerly watch.***

Notice first his humility: he's crying for help. He can't do it on his own. Then notice his confidence that God is listening and WILL hear his voice. "In the morning, O Lord, You will hear my voice." You start to see the belief and confidence in God coming through. But then we see his confidence and trust in God blossom as he says, "I will order my prayer to You and eagerly watch." He's expecting that God will listen to his prayer and respond with action. He's so confident in God that he's going to be watching eagerly to see what he does. He's not going to let himself miss it!

How often do we approach God in prayer with such confidence, believing that he is going to take some sort of action and then eagerly watching to see what it's going to be? This is what I call the expectant prayer of faith. Moving beyond just throwing up a half-hearted prayer and expecting nothing to happen to praying

ferently and with confidence that God is going to hear our prayers and take action in accordance with his will. We eagerly watch to see what it will be, knowing that God has the best solution and that it may not be what we exactly expect to happen. This is the attitude toward prayer that we need to ask God to give each of us...the expectant prayer of faith.

Jesus and James both talked about the importance of praying with faith, believing that God hears us and will respond to our prayers. And Jesus puts no limits on what God can accomplish when we pray believing. He said, "...all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive." And in Mark 11, verses 22 to 24, he said:

... "Have faith in God. 23 "Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him. 24 "Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you.

Does this mean Jesus' is telling us to try and physically move mountains by mustering up enough faith as we pray? There's certainly no evidence in Scripture or in other historical records that the apostles or anyone else ever physically moved a mountain through prayer. So I would say, "No." But what I do believe Jesus is communicating to us is that the power of God working through the believing prayers of his saints is beyond what we can comprehend. He's telling us that when we learn to walk in humility by the Spirit through continual communication with God in prayer, not even the sky is the limit of what God can accomplish through us. Even the least in the kingdom of heaven can become the greatest when we learn to walk in humble, believing prayer.

And let's not make this more complicated than it is. I think we've often made a mess of this teaching from Jesus about believing as we pray. We've made it out to be some kind of weird process where we try to believe harder or muster up more belief through mental gymnastics. We've allowed ourselves to think that if our prayers didn't get answered in the way we wanted, we just didn't believe hard enough. Christians have even been known to tell other Christians that they didn't get healed because they didn't have enough faith. I've struggled with thinking that of myself sometimes. If I just had more faith, I could do this or that.

Well, I've become convinced that such thinking is a dead-end road and leaves us trying fruitlessly within ourselves to generate something we are powerless to generate. It's a way of thinking that causes many believers to stall out in their faith and slow down their growth process in the Lord. And that's because this kind of thinking turns us right back to depending on ourselves and our human abilities rather than God, the very opposite of what God is calling us to do in prayer. Just like legalism and trying to keep a list of rules is powerless to change us on the inside and lead us into the Spirit-led life to which God is calling us, trying to muster up more faith or believe harder is not something that is within our human capabilities. Remember, even faith is not of ourselves, but is a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8).

God has given us each the grace to have simple faith in him and to be able to make simple belief choices every day. So if you want to grow your faith, don't look to yourself, but instead start talking to God and asking him to grow it within you. ***"For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure"*** (Philippians 2:12). If you're talking with him, he's already given you some faith...now ask him to build that seed of faith he's placed within you. Rather than asking us to try to muster up more faith on our own, God is simply asking us to draw near to him with the simple faith he's already given us and watch as he begins to grow it exponentially. When we come this way and begin eagerly watching for God's work in response to our prayers, we'll soon see it and our faith and ability to operate in the power of God will begin to sprout and grow.

I. Pray with your mind engaged (Colossians 4:2; 1 Peter 4:7)

This brings us to our 3rd essential characteristic of effective prayer: *praying mindfully*...or praying with our minds fully engaged. We won't spend a lot of time on this one since we already addressed this somewhat as we looked at Jesus' warning against using meaningless repetition in prayer, but there a couple more things we can learn from Scripture in this area. The idea here is that as we interact with God we keep alert and fully engaged with our minds, rather than just going through a prayer ritual that we can check off our list for the day. This is a call to keep our communication with God alive and active and meaningful, rather than just going through the motions of something we know we should do. It's also a call to pay attention to and listen for God's direction and communication back to us.

I think we can all relate to the way our minds can daydream or drift to other things as we pray. It's a struggle we all face, but one that we should make every effort by the Spirit to conquer. Paul says in Colossians chapter 4, verse 2:

Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving;

In this verse we see not only how important prayer is to Paul, but also his call to keep alert as we pray. The idea is that as we pray we keep our minds active and aware while we're doing it, communicating clearly and listening and watching for God's communication back to us.

One helpful tool I've found for keeping my mind alert and focused as I pray is Scripture itself. We often tend to separate prayer and Scripture reading into two totally separate activities. But I'd like to encourage you to pray diligently as you study. And as you pray use Scripture to keep your mind focused. Use it to inspire prayer, remind you of things to praise God for, help you be in awe of who is, and so forth. You'll be amazed at how it will help keep your mind focused and alert and praying according to God's will.

Peter also speaks of the need to have a clear mind as we pray. In 1 Peter 4, verse 7, he says:

The end of all things is near; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer.

The indication here is that if we're to pray effectively we need to have sound judgment and a sober spirit...we need to have a clear mind and a calm and collected spirit.

This, of course, is a major struggle for us in 21st century America, where we tend to fill every moment of our lives with activity and overbook ourselves at every turn...and when we do finally sit down we stare at the TV and let it guide our minds. It's a difficult struggle, but one we need to engage with and proactively fight against. Because if we can never slow down and quiet our minds, we can't learn to pray effectively and we'll slow our growth in the Lord. We can offer up lots of one-liner prayers as we rush from activity to activity (which we should do

as we pray continually), but getting away by ourselves as Jesus did, having sweet fellowship with Father, discerning his will, and doing serious warfare won't happen unless we consciously make it a priority...unless we specifically make a choice to forgo some other activities.

C. Pray with an attitude of thanksgiving (Colossians 4:2; Ephesians 5:20; Ephesians 1:15-16; Philippians 4:6)

And this brings us to our 4th and final essential characteristic of effective prayer: *an attitude of thanksgiving*. The number of verses referring to thanks and thanksgiving in the context of prayer is more than you may even realize. Here's a quick sampling:

Colossians 4:2

Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving;

Ephesians 5:20

always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father;

Ephesians 1:15-16

15 For this reason I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you and your love for all the saints, 16 do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers;

Philippians 4:6

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

Why is thanksgiving so important as we pray? Because it expresses our recognition and appreciation that God is the One who is at work within us, "***both to will and to work for His good pleasure.***" If we're still relying on our own human strength and abilities, we won't be praying much, and if we are praying we'll probably be doing it just because we know we're supposed to. If, on the contrary, we're learning to walk by the Spirit instead of by our flesh, God is going

to be working through us in power as we pray, and thanksgiving should be pouring out of us as we praise him for all that he's accomplishing.

Paul took this thanksgiving thing pretty seriously: he always gives thanks to God for all things. He's even able to rejoice in and be thankful for his sufferings, because he knows they have a purpose and that God is using them to build his character and teach him to walk more and more by his power.

Thanksgiving is an essential ingredient of effective prayer. If we're not grateful to God for who he is and what he's accomplishing through us, we're probably beginning to take credit for what he's done and stealing the glory only he deserves. And God's not going to continue working powerfully within someone who's stealing his glory. Thanksgiving is the natural fruit of a heart of humility. Lack of it is evidence of pride sprouting up within us.

III. CONCLUSION

Humility, faith, mindfulness and thanksgiving...these are 4 essential characteristics that need to be cultivated within us if we're to learn how to pray effectively. Isn't the Word of God powerful and full of life changing truths?! Lord, keep teaching us to pray and keep changing the way we think and act and approach life and its challenges. Let our lives become one constant prayer. Let it become like breathing to us!

If you're struggling in any of these areas today, take it to the Lord. Ask him to start cultivating and growing these characteristics within you as you pray. Just keep drawing near to him, meditating on his Word, sharing your life with him, and begin eagerly watching to see what he does.