

Teach Me to Pray – Part 4
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I. INTRODUCTION

Well, today we're going to continue working with God's Word to bring our current view of prayer (how we think it works and why we do it) into line with God's view of prayer. These two perspectives on prayer are often quite different since our view of prayer has usually developed as we've watched other Christians, as we've heard bits and pieces of Scripture, and as we've often allowed ourselves to think it's just something we should do because the Bible tells us to or because we can feel more spiritual after we spend a few minutes doing it. So our goal in this study on prayer is to put aside whatever our current view of prayer is and allow it to be corrected or even completely replaced with the way God views it...a view that he has clearly shared with us throughout his Word. Today's message is "Teach Me to Pray – Part 4," and our focus will be on praying in the Spirit.

During communion, I shared with you the first two parts of a gospel prayer I wrote for myself focusing on 4 different aspects of the good news we have through Jesus Christ. The first section focuses on who I was before I trusted Christ, reflecting on why I personally need the work of Christ on the cross...remembering that I did nothing to deserve salvation through Christ. The second section focuses on who God is and what his love motivated him to do in order to rescue you and me from ourselves and bring us into relationship with him. I want to read for you now the third section, which focuses on who I am now...my new identity in Christ...the amazing gifts and blessings that were given to me in the moment I repented of my sin and trusted Christ alone for salvation.

I share this with you to begin our message, because the gift and privilege of being able to pray in the Spirit flows out of the complete transformation that occurred within me when God brought me to life through faith in Christ. As I read this prayer, I want you to pay attention to every amazing that happened at that moment of salvation. And if any of you here haven't yet made that decision to trust Christ and personally invite him to be your Savior and Lord, I'd like you to consider all the amazing blessings that can be yours should you choose to believe in him.

So this is the "Who I Am Now" section of my gospel prayer:

God, thank You that in the moment I trusted in Jesus, my old self died and I came to true life for the first time. You made me a new creation, You forgave all my sins, past, present, and future, You credited Christ's righteousness to me, You adopted me as Your forever child, You gave me Your Holy Spirit, You freed me from slavery to sin, and You invited me to live life with You. Jesus, thank You that the penalty for my sins has been completely paid for by Your death on the cross and that you've taken all the wrath I deserve. There's none left for me. God, thank You that I have peace with You right now and that there is now no condemnation for me in Christ. Please let these truths sink into my heart.

My friends, we have a completely new identity in Christ. To use the words of Ephesians chapter 1, verse 3: ***"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places..."***Amen?! But the blessing I want to focus on today that relates specifically to praying in the Spirit, is our adoption as sons and daughters of God. Praying in the Spirit is tied directly to the amazing truth that we've permanently moved from being slaves to sin, to being sons and daughters of the Most High God.

We're going to look at several passages of Scripture today, but our primary focus will be Romans chapter 8, so go ahead and turn there in your Bibles if you would. In this chapter of Romans, Paul gives us a beautiful picture of our new life lived in and by the power of God's Holy Spirit dwelling within us. As we read verses 1 through 17, I want you to notice the contrast between the flesh and the Spirit that Paul clearly lays out for us. Beginning in verse 1, Paul says:

1 Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. 3 For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, 4 so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. 5 For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. 6 For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, 7 because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, 8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. 9 However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. 10 If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. 11 But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.

12 So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh — 13 for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. 14 For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. 15 For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" 16 The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.

May the Lord bless the reading of his Word.

II. PRAYING IN THE SPIRIT

A. Praying in the Spirit versus praying in the flesh

So as we consider this Romans passage, I hope you noticed the repeated contrast between life in the Spirit and life in the flesh. Over and over in Scripture this idea of being in the flesh is presented as being the exact opposite of being in the Spirit. Being in the flesh is connected with human effort, with trying to keep the law, with being a slave to sin, and even with death itself. In fact, in this passage we're given the clear statement that as long as we're living in the flesh we cannot please God...it's an impossibility, no matter how hard we try and how many "good" things we do...the flesh, our human effort, is simply not capable of pleasing God. Why? Because living in the flesh is living as if we don't need God. It's saying, "I'm smart enough, I'm strong enough, I'm good enough and I can do this without God's help." It's focused on me justifying myself before God, rather than allowing him to justify me. It's the underlying spirit behind all sin and life lived this way always ultimately leads to failure and death.

So as we consider what it means to pray in the Spirit, it may help us to first think about what it would look like to pray in the flesh. First of all, pride would certainly be one of the key characteristics of praying in the flesh. The Pharisee telling God how religious and spiritual he was as he prayed pops into mind...justifying himself before God, rather than coming in humility with an awareness of his desperate need for God and being honest about his continued struggle with sin.

Secondly, praying in the flesh would also involve a posture of telling God what needs to be done...approaching him not with a seeking of his wisdom and his will...but with a seeking of what we think needs to be done or what we want personally for our own comfort or enjoyment. Thirdly, praying in the flesh involves treating prayer as a religious duty or a way to earn God's approval. And finally, praying in the flesh remains focused on us rather than on God. Even though we're talking to God, our focus is still on ourselves and what we want. ***“For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace...”***

Paul, in Philippians chapter 3, points us away from this self-focus and reliance and presents a much different picture of how we approach God. He says in verses 2 to 4:

2 Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision; 3 for we are the true circumcision, **who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh**, 4 although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh.

Notice Paul's harsh description of those who seem religious and spiritual, but who are really still operating in the flesh and relying on themselves rather than God. He calls them dogs...evil workers...the false circumcision. You see Satan loves religious people...people who seem to be doing well at keeping a list of rules and trying to be good, but who remain spiritually dead on the inside. He wants them to keep relying on themselves and never come to understand their desperate need for God. He's happy because they haven't really come to new life in Christ, even though they may feel very religious and spiritual.

On the other hand, Paul describes much differently those of us who have truly come to new life in Christ and are now in the Spirit and learning to walk by the Spirit. He describes us with three defining characteristics: 1) We worship in the Spirit; 2) We glory in Christ Jesus; and 3) We put no confidence in the flesh.

Notice that nothing is done in ourselves or in our own strength anymore. Previously we tried to worship and please God by performing religious duties and keeping a list of rules. Now we realize that what pleases God and truly glorifies him is a surrendered life lived in complete dependence on his Spirit. Previously we gloried in ourselves and what we had done for God. Now we glory in Christ Jesus and what he's done for us. Previously we relied on our own strength and wisdom and willpower. Now we put no confidence in any of our own abilities, but rather trust in the power of the Spirit within us.

So to pray in the Spirit is to come to God in humility with our eyes fixed on him, seeking his will and not our own. To pray in the Spirit is to turn our eyes from ourselves and behold God...to know him and delight in him...to glory in Christ Jesus and what he's done for us. To pray in the Spirit is to put no confidence in our own human wisdom or abilities, but to come to our Father seeking a better way...seeking wisdom from above.

I was meditating on Psalm 63 this week and I found that it profoundly expressed what praying in the Spirit looks like. As I interacted with its truths, this is the prayer God gave me:

O God, you are my God. Earnestly I seek you. My soul thirsts for you in a world full of pain, suffering and endless demands. I want to behold you as you are and in the beholding be transformed in the way I think and live. I want to know your power and glory and understand the depths of your steadfast love more fully. I believe that your steadfast love is better than life itself. I will find true satisfaction and fulfillment and joy in you alone. Teach me to remember you and meditate on you at all times, knowing that you alone are my help and hope. You keep me in the shadow of your wings and your right hand upholds me. My soul clings to you, O God.

Are you getting a picture yet of what praying in the Spirit is about?

B. Praying as sons and daughters rather than slaves

Well there's more. To pray in the Spirit is also to come into the presence of God not as slaves, but as his very own sons and daughters...his own kids. Meditate on that truth for a moment. Notice that in verses 14 through 17 of Romans chapter 8, being able to pray in the Spirit is intimately related to our adoption as God's children:

14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. 15 For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" 16 The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. (ESV)

What we see here is that it's by the Holy Spirit, who has sealed our adoption as sons, that we are able to cry out to God as "Abba! Father!"

I was listening to a podcast sermon by Timothy Keller last week and he noted that the word, "Abba," is best translated, "Da-da," representing the simple request of a toddler to be in the arms of his father, resting on his shoulder and experiencing his love and affection. The word, "Da-da" as opposed to "Daddy" speaks of approaching God just to be near him, enjoying his presence and warmth, rather than approaching him with a desire to manipulate or get what we want from him. We've all heard older kids use the word "Daddy" to try and sweet talk their dad into giving them something they want. But that's not the idea expressed here.

To pray in the Spirit is to pursue the presence of our "Da-da," enjoying him with childlike faith...getting to know him and learning to be like him. It's coming to him just to be with him and learn what he's like and allow him to care for us and provide us with what we need. What an amazing reality it is to think we can approach the God of the Universe as our very own Father and that he loves to be with us and share himself and his wisdom with us. We're no longer slaves, but sons and daughters of the King who can enjoy his presence at any time night or day. This is the amazing privilege and gift that's available to us through praying in the Spirit.

Listen to Galatians 4, verses 4 through 7:

4 But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, 5 so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. 6 Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"

7 Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.

Let's not approach prayer as if we're slaves still, required to perform the religious duty of prayer. Instead let's enjoy the privileges of sonship bought for us by the very blood of Christ, and start enjoying our perfect Father as we pray in the Spirit. Are you enjoying your Father as you pray? Well this is where the Spirit is leading us in prayer.

C. Praying in the Spirit through the groaning

I want to return now to Romans 8 as we look at one more important truth about praying in the Spirit today. What we learn there is that praying in the Spirit involves crying out to God in the midst of the groanings and sufferings of life. I'm going to start reading again in Romans chapter 8, verse 18:

18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. 19 For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. 23 And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. 24 For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.

26 In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; 27 and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. 28 And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

Has anyone here managed to avoid the groanings and sufferings of life? We've all experienced groanings and sufferings in varying degrees, haven't we? This world is under the curse of sin and one thing we all have in common is suffering and pain. Everything in the world as we know it is subject to corruption and decay. Do you feel it in your bones? Do you see it in the world around you? Creation itself is groaning as in the pains of childbirth. The ladies here can give you an idea of how much that hurts!

What we need to know about praying the Spirit is that it's not about becoming free from problems and pain and suffering as we make them all go away through prayer. Instead, praying in the Spirit is about walking with God through the problems and pain and suffering of life and experiencing his presence and power and joy in the middle of it...in the process being made more and more like Christ.

Yes, there are times when through prayer God removes problems, heals diseases, brings financial success, and blesses us in ways the world would consider a blessing. God still performs miracles all the time. But there are also times when through prayer God allows us to walk with him through suffering and pain and hardship to accomplish a greater good in our lives than material blessing and physical healing and comfort could ever bring.

And in those hard times, we can know that the Holy Spirit is enduring them with us and through prayer granting us the strength to keep on walking as he intercedes for us with the Father. Notice that the Spirit groans on our behalf...the same word used for the groaning we experience. He is there walking through it with us and crying out to the Father on our behalf...and with such an intensity of groaning that words can't even express it.

Praying in the Spirit is walking through the groanings and sufferings and joys of life in constant communication with God...coming as you are to your Father and pouring out your heart to him. It's sharing your life with God and looking to him for everything you need. As David says in Psalm 62, verses 5 and 8:

For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him...Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us.

That's another profound picture of praying in the Spirit. Turning your eyes away from yourself and coming into the very presence of Almighty God, your Father, your refuge, your only hope...pouring out your heart to him...your struggles, your concerns...but then waiting for and seeking his solution rather than telling him what he needs to do about it...and finally, trusting him and waiting for his perfect timing.

III. CONCLUSION

As a final summary of what we've learned about praying in the Spirit today, I would say this:

As adopted sons and daughters of God...no longer slaves, but beloved children who can cry "Abba! Father!"...Put absolutely no confidence in your human wisdom and abilities, but through prayer rely on the Holy Spirit within you...Remain in the Father's presence in constant communication with him...talking to your "Da-da" without pretense...longing just to be near him, behold him, and know his steadfast love and tender care...groaning with the realities of life and asking for what you need to endure them and even thrive in the midst of them.

This is praying in the Spirit.

As we close today, I just want to share with you the final section of my gospel prayer relating to "How I Now Live" as a child of God. I think it's a fitting ending for this study of praying in the Spirit:

God, thank You that this new life and identity and freedom and power You've given me is real and life transforming right now. Thank you that because of your Holy Spirit within me, I never need to face life and its challenges on my own or carry out your will in my own strength and wisdom. Keep me always aware of the weakness and inability of my flesh and always reaching out for Your power as I learn to pray at all times in the Spirit. Root out any remaining areas of darkness and sin in my daily life and choices. Guide me into the good works that have been prepared for me. Let me always remember that wherever I go and whatever I do I am Your ambassador. Let me glorify You in all things, as I delight in You.