

## **The Habit of Prayer**

"If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples." John 15:7-8

### **Prayer is expected**

"When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full." Matthew 6:5

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

"Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart." Luke 18:1

"Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving." Colossians 4:2

"Pray without ceasing." 1 Thessalonians 5:17

### **Prayer is learned**

#### **1. By practicing it**

Learn to pray intensely (focused) and casually (while you do something else).

#### **2. By studying about it**

Learn why, how, and for what to pray.

#### **3. By example**

Watch and listen as others pray.

## Four Basic Prayer Habits

### 1. Developing the Habit of Devotional Prayer

"In the early morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went away to a secluded place, and was praying there." Mark 1:35

Develop a pattern of daily Bible reading/meditation and prayer with the purpose of growing in your knowledge of God. As much as possible have a routine time and place. Use a reading and a prayer plan well suited to your interests and personal needs. If you encounter an interruption to the routine, resume it as soon as possible. If you find boredom setting in, feel free to be flexible and creative in order to keep your time fresh and stimulating. Fundamental to your devotional time is your fellowship with God, not the particular method or routine you follow.

There are two elements of prayer you will want to learn and practice during your devotional time. As you become accustomed to these elements you will begin to blend them. They will become nearly indistinguishable. In time, one will spark the other and you will discover new and enduring energy in prayer.

#### a. Prayer Lists

A prayer list is a simple way of recording and sorting what you pray and how God answers. There are numerous ways of organizing your lists, so be creative and practical. Suit them to your personal needs. Try different ways of organizing your lists until you find a method that works well for you. Then, stick with that method. Otherwise, your prayer lists become scattered, useless, and frustrating. Make separate lists of the basic areas of concern which you need to pray about using a notebook dedicated for this purpose, or creating documents in your computer. For example, one list may include 'Personal Needs' while another records 'Family Members' needs. Create additional lists for 'Lost and Back sliders', 'Members of my Bible Study' and so forth. Other pages may be titled 'Missionaries' and 'Government Officials'. The point is to sort your prayer requests specifically enough to be manageable, but not so extensively that you can't pray through them all.

Do not feel that you need to have lists for every conceivable subject. Begin with the basics, meaning those areas most important to you. Let God guide you to create new lists.

As your lists get longer consider sorting your lists by the day of the week. For example, you may pray for your family and personal requests each day. Other lists may be prayed through less frequently.

During your devotional time take a few moments to review one or two of the lists. Then, as you read and meditate on the Scriptures pray thoughts which apply to requests on your list. The next day you would simply pray through another list. By doing this over a period of time you are able to pray for all the areas which concern you.

#### b. Praying Scripture

This simple yet powerful method of praying allows the words and phrases of the Bible to guide your praying. You begin by asking God to assist you by stirring your heart to pray and by opening your spiritual eyes to see wonderful things in His Word (Ps 119:18). Then, slowly and reflectively begin reading the passage you have selected.

As thoughts come to your mind turn them into prayers. For example, if you are reading in the Psalms and the passage speaks of gratefulness take some unhurried time and thank the LORD for specific ways He has been good to you in the past weeks. You may want to pray that the LORD would give a grateful heart to the members of your family or the individuals in your Bible study. Another example may be, if you are reading through the Gospels and see an instance of Christ's compassion for the needy, pause and pray that He would build His compassion into your life. Pray over specific individuals you know have great needs and ask the LORD to show you ways you can express His love towards them.

After you have finished praying all that the first line prompts, continue with the next, then the next. Some verses may suggest little for you to pray. That's fine, just move on until you find a word or phrase that does.

As you become familiar with this method of praying you will find that your desire to pray will increase, and you will need more time for prayer. Don't get frustrated with yourself if you are not able to read all you hope to read during that session. Focus on prayer, not on the amount of reading you do. You can finish your Bible reading later that day.

If you are just beginning this method you may find it helpful to spend your time in the Psalms, Proverbs, or New Testament letters since they tend to be easier to pray than narrative passages.

## 2. Developing the Discipline of Praying Without Ceasing

In 1 Thess 5:17 Paul instructs us to "pray without ceasing". There are two possible ways we can understand this. One is to think of 'without ceasing' as 'long term' or 'enduring'. That is the idea in 1 Samuel 12:23 where Samuel states, "Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by ceasing to pray for you." The second interpretation of 'without ceasing' is 'continuously', 'constant', 'uninterrupted' 'recurring'. This is the idea Paul is getting at in this passage.

Simply stated, praying without ceasing is a mind that naturally and routinely goes to God in prayer amid the duties, opportunities, and frustrations of a day.

This is illustrated in Colossians 3:1-2 where Paul says, "If then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth." The Christian is to have an attitude which is 'set on things above'. This means that he is to seek and cherish eternal things more than temporal ones. And he is to routinely think on those things throughout the day. This is done by meditation and prayer.

How then does a Christian develop a habit of praying ceaselessly?

### a. Begin your day by committing to pray throughout the day

Simply take a few moments before you begin the duties of your day and commit to relying on the Lord and filling the day with prayer.

You may find it helpful to collect favorite passages which have impressed you during your daily Bible reading. Review these passages and use them as a reminder of how God will work in your life through the day and how He wants you to respond to Him.

For example, Ps 37:4 and Ps 40:8 both speak of delighting in the LORD. You may begin your day with a prayer like this, "LORD, today I will delight in You regardless of what happens during the day. I trust You to give me what my heart desires. And, I rely on You for the strength to do Your will." With this as your commitment and prayer, go through the day routinely delighting in God, praying for Him to meet your needs, and asking Him for the power to do His will as you enter each situation.

### b. View your day as a continuous fellowship with God

Fellowship with God is not something you must 'stop' when you leave church or end your devotional time. Instead, think of your day as continual communion, with occasional interruptions. Train yourself to set your mind on 'things above' during idle moments.

One man imagines his entire day as a continuation of the communion he enjoyed in his morning quiet time. In each situation he watches for opportunities to make practical application of that morning's insights. And he is alert to illustrations of God's personal work in his life throughout the day.

"You might think of praying without ceasing as communicating with God on one line while also taking calls on another. Even while you are talking on the other line, you never lose your awareness of the need to return your attention to the Lord."<sup>1</sup>

### c. Getting in the Habit

- i) Develop the habit of meditating on Scripture throughout the day. Use the truths in the passage as a "launching pad" for your prayers. Example: "Lord, You promised in Psalm 81:10, "open your mouth wide, and I will fill it." I'm needing you right now, and so I open the mouth of my thirsting soul. I'll watch to see how you fill me in the next few moments. I thank You in advance for Your faithfulness to keep Your promises to me."

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<sup>1</sup>Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NAVPRESS, 1997), 64.

- ii) View every situation and relationship that you encounter during your day as an opportunity to experience God.
- iii) As you enter a new situation, send up a mental prayer regarding that circumstance or conversation. Imagine your day being made up of a series of rooms. Each room is a situation. As you enter that room, ask the Lord to be honored by what He performs in and through you. Commit the situation to the Lord and ask Him to fill you with His Holy Spirit so you might glorify Him in the situation.
- iv) As you walk in this attitude of reliance, obedience, and prayer you will be aware of the leading of the Holy Spirit.
- v) This is a normal and necessary experience for a Christian. By faith, pray for God's leading in each situation, and then anticipate Him providing that leadership. Be alert to impressions, thoughts, or assurances in your conscience. Make certain they are consistent with the word of God. Then, by faith, follow through with what the Lord has led you to do.
- vi) See each temptation as a springboard to prayer. Instead of trying to overcome temptations in the power of your flesh, take your thoughts—temptations and all—to God and ask Him for victory. This can be a great opportunity to pray through a passage of Scripture that deals with victory. (Examples: Luke 10:19; Eph 6:10-12; 2 Thess 3:3; James 4:7; Rev 12:11; Rom 12:21; Rom 13:14; 1 Cor 12:13; Heb 2:18; 1 Jn 4:4; Rom 6:1-23; Col 3:1-17)
- vii) If the Holy Spirit reveals sin to you during the day, be quick to confess it to the Lord and ask Him to forgive you.
- viii) Claim His forgiveness and cleansing based on the promise of 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." There is no need to wait until the end of the day to appropriate forgiveness and to recommit your life to following the Lord.
- ix) At the close of the day, review and reflect on the root attitudes that gave rise to your sins earlier during the day. Pray for God purge you of those attitudes, and ask Him to instruct and protect you as you encounter temptations the next day.

### 3. Developing the Habit of Extended Time in Prayer

- a. Prayer Retreats
- b. Prayer Walking

### 4. Developing the Habit of Corporate (Group) Prayer

- a. "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." Acts 2:42

#### b. Five Elements For Leading Effective Small Group Prayer

1. Have defined leadership. The role of the leader is to plan the meeting, create an atmosphere which facilitates freedom and community, remind the members of God's character and ability to answer their prayers, and guide the group to pray freely and earnestly for the matters they have agreed to pray for.

#### If you are leading the group:

- i. Get the meeting started on time
  - a. This communicates honor to those attending and gives a sense of security.
- ii. Create a comfortable atmosphere characterized by freedom, affirmation, and acceptance.
  - a. Give people an opportunity to visit and discuss how they are doing. They will be more inclined to pray together if they have talked with one another.
  - b. Take time for prayer requests (unless the prayer is to be focused on items prepared in advance by the leader).
  - c. Sit in circles. And be prepared to subdivide the group into smaller groups if necessary.
2. Give an overview of the direction for the meeting.
  - i. This helps people know what to expect.
  - ii. "Here is what I've prepared for tonight. Is there anything we need to add to this list?"
  - iii. Let the group list requests.

3. Initiate the group's prayer.
  - i. Take a moment to bring the group into an attitude which encourages their prayer.
  - ii. Sing a praise song together.
  - iii. Read a Psalm or Scripture promise.
  - iv. Give your group time to meditate on God's goodness, His power, His eagerness to answer, His glory.
  - v. Give the group time to silently confess any known sin or to cast any personal burdens on the LORD.
  
4. Next, give the group a simple plan for praying over the matters outlined at the beginning of the meeting.
  - i. Mention to the group, "Let's take the next \_\_\_\_\_ minutes and pray about \_\_\_\_\_."
  - ii. It may facilitate the group if the leader goes ahead and prays for that subject.
  - iii. Or, the leader may want to request one of the members to begin their prayer for the matter to be prayed about.
  - iv. The leader may want to mention something like this, "Let's pray about \_\_\_\_\_. After 3 or 4 of us have prayed, we'll move on to the next prayer item."
  - v. Give the group unhurried time to pray before moving on to the next item.
  
5. What to do with silence?
  - i. The leader should admit to the group that silence is inevitable and that people usually feel awkward when there are long pauses in the prayer time.
  - ii. He should then help the group recognize that silence does not mean there is something *wrong*. Nor does it mean someone has to *make noise* by

making up a prayer. Rather, the group should cherish the silence as a time to focus on the Lord.

- iii. Instruct group members to use silence to evaluate the motives of your heart.

#### c. Praying in a Small Group

1. Pray concisely – honor the others in the group by not dominating the time by going on and on and on.
2. Pray authentically and earnestly – pray in a way that is passionate and is consistent with your personality.
3. Pray one point at a time.
4. Pray clearly – pray loudly enough that others can hear you, and use statements that help everyone know what you mean by what you say.
5. Don't allow prayer to become a form of gossip - don't verbalize confidential information.

#### Why Are So Many Christians such Wimps when it comes to Prayer?

Don Whitney gives these possible answers:<sup>2</sup>

1. Why, then, do so many believers confess that they do not pray as they should? Sometimes the problem is primarily a lack of discipline.
  - a. We fail to plan to pray.
  - b. We give up and fail to persist in prayer. In other words, we quit too easily.
2. We doubt that anything will actually happen if we pray.
  - a. We don't understand God's ways.
  - b. We don't have patience and persistence.
3. We lack a sense of the nearness of God, and thus we become discouraged with prayer.
4. We see little real need (i.e. "I can handle this on my own."), thus there is little real prayer.
5. When our awareness of the greatness of God and the gospel is dim, our prayer lives will be small.

6. Another reason many Christians pray so little is because they haven't learned about prayer.
  7. Busy: the barrenness of a busy life.
- I would add for the sake of the guys...
8. We don't see prayer as a "guy thing." 'Real Men' don't need to pray.

## Prayer Essentials

### 1. You must be saved

"The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD, but the prayer of the upright is His delight." Proverbs 15:8

"The Lord is far from the wicked, but He hears the prayer of the righteous." Proverbs 15:29

"We know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is God-fearing, and does His will, He hears him." John 9:31

### 2. Desire God and His will

"But from there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find Him if you search for Him with all your heart and all your soul." Deuteronomy 4:29

"Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded." James 4:8

### 3. Confession of any known sin

"If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear." Psalm 66:18

### 4. Thankfulness for God's provision

"In everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." 1 Thessalonians 5:18

"Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name." Hebrews 13:15

### 5. Faith that God will answer

"But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord." James 1:6-7

## Prayer is developed by meditation on Scripture

Meditation may be the most fruitful way to grow in prayer. You combine meditation on God's Word—which is God speaking to you—with prayer—which is you (primarily) speaking to God. This allows your prayers to be in response to what God is saying to you or to have your prayer requests answered more thoroughly.

"Give ear to my words, O LORD, consider my groaning." Psalm 5:1

Here we have David reflecting on the virtues of the Word of God:

"The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether. They are more desirable than gold, yes than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them Thy servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward." Psalm 19:7-11

Here we have David's prayer, in response to his meditation on God's Word:

"Who can discern his errors? Acquit me of hidden faults. Also keep back Your servant from presumptuous sins; let them not rule over me; then I shall be blameless, and I shall be acquitted of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my rock and my Redeemer." Psalm 19:12-14

### Quotes and explanations of this concept

"Meditation is the missing link between Bible intake and prayer."<sup>2</sup>

"And our speaking to ourselves in meditation, should go before our speaking to God in prayer."<sup>3</sup>

"David's prayers were not his words only, but his meditations; as meditation is the best preparation for prayer, so prayer is the best issue of meditation. Meditation and prayer go together."<sup>4</sup>

One of the most prolific Puritan preacher/writers was Thomas Manton. In a message on Isaac's meditation in the field (refer to Genesis 24:63), he points

<sup>2</sup> Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 67.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Baxter, *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter: Select Treatises* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), 103.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 3 (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell,

directly to meditation as the link between Bible intake and prayer. He wrote, "Meditation is a middle sort of duty between the word and prayer, and hath respect to both. The word feedeth meditation, and meditation feedeth prayer. These duties must always go hand in hand; meditation must follow hearing and precede prayer. To hear and not to meditate is unfruitful. We may hear and hear, but it is like putting a thing into a bag with holes...It is rashness to pray and not to meditate. What we take in by the word we digest by meditation and let out by prayer. These three duties must be ordered that one may not jostle out the other. Men are barren, dry, and sapless in their prayers for want of exercising themselves in holy thoughts."<sup>5</sup>

#### First, study and meditate – then, pray in response

William Bates, called 'that most classic and cultured of the later Puritan preachers' said, "What is the reason that our desires like an arrow shot by a weak bow do not reach the mark? But only this, we do not meditate before prayer...The great reason why our prayers are ineffectual, is because we do not meditate before them."<sup>6</sup>

William Bridge, one of the best of practical Puritan writers, penned the following about meditation. "As it is the sister of reading, so it is the mother of prayer. Though a man's heart be much indisposed to prayer, yet, if he can but fall into a meditation of God, and the things of God, his heart will soon come off to prayer...Begin with reading or hearing. Go with meditation; end in prayer . . . Reading without meditation is unfruitful; meditation without reading is hurtful; to meditate and to read without prayer upon both is without blessing."<sup>7</sup>

A modern British writer, Peter Toon, in his book *From Mind to Heart*, summarizes the teaching of the Puritans on these things, "To read the Bible and not to meditate was seen as an unfruitful exercise: better to read one chapter and meditate afterward than to read several chapters and not to meditate. Likewise to meditate and not to pray was like preparing to run a race and never leaving the starting line. The three duties of reading Scripture, meditation, and prayer

belonged together, and though each could be done occasionally on its own, as formal duties to God they were best done together."<sup>8</sup>

George Müller operated an orphanage in Bristol, England, for two-thirds of the 19th century. He cared for as many as two thousand orphans at a single time and supported mission work throughout the world. Millions of dollars came through his hands. He did all of this without ever incurring any debt or ever soliciting or advertising. His tens of thousands of recorded answers to prayer are legendary.

"Before this time my practice had been, at least for ten years previously, as an habitual thing, to give myself to prayer after having dressed in the morning. Now, I saw that the most important thing was to give myself to the reading of God's Word, and to meditation on it, that thus my heart might be comforted, encouraged, warned, reprov'd, instructed; and that thus, by means of the Word of God, whilst meditating on it, my heart might be brought into experimental communion with the Lord.

"I began therefore to *meditate* on the New Testament from the beginning early in the morning. *The first thing I did*, after having asked in a few words of the Lord's blessing upon His precious Word, *was to begin to meditate on the Word of God*, searching as it were into every verse to get blessing out of it; not for the sake of the public ministry of the Word of God, not for the sake of preaching on what I had meditated upon, but for the sake of obtaining food for my own soul. The result I have found to be almost invariably this, that after a few minutes my soul has been led to confession, or to thanksgiving, or to intercession, or to supplication; so that, though I did not, as it were, give myself to prayer, but to meditation, yet it turned almost immediately more or less to prayer. When thus I have been for a while making confession or intercession or supplication, or have given thanks, I go on to the next words or verse, turning all, as I go on, into prayer for myself or others, *as the Word may lead to it*, but still continually keeping before me that food for my own soul is the object of my *meditation*. *The result of this is that there is always a good deal of confession, thanksgiving, supplication, or intercession mingled with my meditation*, and that my inner man almost invariably is even sensibly nourished and strengthened, and that by breakfast time, with rare exceptions, I am in a peaceful if not happy state of heart.

"The difference, then, between my former practice and my present one is this: formerly, when I rose, I began to pray as soon as possible, and generally spent all my time till breakfast in prayer, or almost all the time. At all events I almost invariably began with prayer . . . But what was the result? I often spent a quarter of an hour, or half an hour, or even an hour on my knees before being conscious to

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Manton, *The Works of Thomas Manton*, reprinted by Maranatha Publications, n.d. Worthington, PA, pp. 272-273.

<sup>6</sup> William Bates, *The Whole Works of the Rev. W. Bates*, Arr. and rev. by W. Farmer, Vol. 3, reprint (Harrisburg, PA: Sprinkle, 1990), 130.

<sup>7</sup> William Bridge, *The Words of the Reverend William Bridge*, vol. 3, reprint (Beaver Falls, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1989), 132, 154.

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Toon, *From Mind to Heart: Christian Meditation Today* (Grand Rapids, MI:

myself of having derived comfort, encouragement, humbling of the soul, etc.; and often, after having suffered much from wandering of mind for the first ten minutes, or quarter of an hour, or even half an hour, I only then really began to pray.

"I scarcely ever suffer now in this way. For my heart being nourished by the truth, being brought into experimental fellowship with God, I speak to my Father and to my Friend (vile though I am, and unworthy of it) about the things that He has brought before me in His precious Word. It often now astonishes me that I did not sooner see this point . . . And yet now, since God has taught me this point, it is as plain to me as anything that the first thing the child of God has to do morning by morning is to obtain food for his inner man.

"Now what is food for the inner man? *Not prayer, but the Word of God; and here again, not the simple reading of the Word of God, so that it only passes through our minds, just as water passes through a pipe, but considering what we read, pondering over it and applying it to our hearts.*

"When we pray we speak to God. Now prayer, in order to be continued for any length of time in any other than a formal manner, requires, generally speaking, a measure of strength or godly desire, and the season therefore when this exercise of the soul can be more effectually performed is after the inner man has been nourished by *meditation on the Word of God*, where we find our Father speaking to us, to encourage us, to comfort us, to instruct us, to humble us, to reprove us. We may therefore profitably *meditate* with God's blessing though we are ever so weak spiritually; nay, the weaker we are, the more we need *meditation* for the strengthening of our inner man. Thus there is far less to be feared from wandering of mind than if we give ourselves to prayer without having had time previously for *meditation*.

"I dwell so particularly on this point because of the immense spiritual profit and refreshment I am conscious of having derived from it myself, and I affectionately and solemnly beseech all my fellow believers to ponder this matter. By the blessing of God, I ascribe to this mode the help and strength which I have had from God to pass in peace through deeper trials, in various ways, than I have ever had before; and having now above fourteen years tried this way, I can most fully, in the fear of God, commend it."<sup>9</sup>