

2016-01-03 Sermon – “Prayer and us”

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Over the next month-and-a-half we will be exploring various spiritual disciplines based upon C F Foster’s book: Celebration of Discipline. Today we are examining the Discipline of Prayer.

In the passage that Steve N just read, it says “[One of His \[Jesus\] disciples said to Him, “Lord, teach us to pray.”](#) The disciple was a good Jew. He or she had undoubtedly been praying their entire life. However, the disciple saw **how** Jesus prayed and felt that they could learn how to pray better. If a disciple of Jesus could learn to pray better, then so can we.

The Church has taken Jesus’ teaching from Luke 11:1-4 and its longer parallel in Matthew 6: 9-13 and formalized it into what we call the Lord’s Prayer.

The Lord’s Prayer is an example of a formal prayer—the words were composed ahead a time and we memorize it, and we recite what we have memorize. We just done this along Mike Clark leading us in our congregational prayer time. It is a beautiful prayer and we should all know it and pray it.

We can study the Lord’s Prayer and learn from it how Jesus said that we should pray. During the Children’s sermon last week, Chris Bencher explained how we can pray by using the Lord’s Prayer as a template.

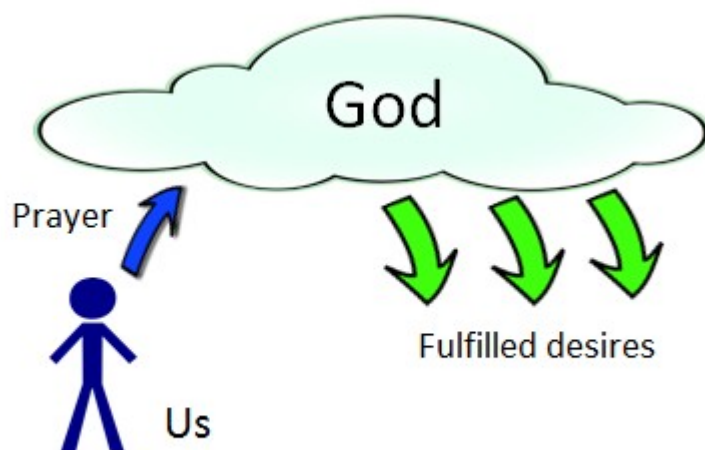
One way that I learned how to remember the various components of prayer is through the acronym: ACTS

- A is for Adoration or worship.
- C is for Confession agreeing with God about the things that we have done wrong
- T is for Thanksgiving or being thankful to God for what He provides.
- S is for Supplication or asking for our needs or for the needs of others.

For example, one might pray: “Dear God, You are my Lord. I often fall short of what I should do. I thank you for all the good things that you provide me. Please watch over me as I drive home from work. Amen.” Of course you can expand on any/all of the sections and change it from a 15 second prayer into as long of a prayer as you like. I like to augment the Adoration section with a characteristic of God that I’ve just read about in Scripture—in the case of our reading this morning it might that God cares enough about us to teach us how to pray or that He is open to answering our questions.

There are other acronyms: PRAISE and PRAY for example. We teach this to our children in Sunday School.

I want to mention one word of caution here. Humans have been known to be selfish. We can take ACTS and focus only on the asking part—our list of what we are asking God to do. We see God as some sort of cosmic waiter whom we can control and make do our bidding. It is like this picture (P1).



We pray, God hears, God does what we want. Prayers can become “Dear God, I’ve been bad in the past but now I’m good, thank you for what I’m about to receive, now give me a million dollars so that I can be happy.”

Worse yet our petition could be “forgive me for the sin that I’m about to commit but I can’t help myself.”

There is more to prayer than getting what we want. Prayer is not just asking for things for our pleasure something that we recite together to appease God. It should be about learning what God desires. In James 4:3 we are warned “[When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.](#)”

Enough of that caution.

There is more to prayer and more types of prayer than formal prayer. One book in my library, Calhoun’s *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, lists the following types of Christian prayer which you may want to explore on your own:

- Breath prayer
- Centering prayer
- Contemplative prayer
- Conversational prayer

- Fixed-hour prayer
- Inner-healing prayer
- Labyrinth prayer
- Liturgical prayer
- Prayer of recollection
- Prayer partners
- Praying scripture
- Prayer walking

Foster mentions two new types of prayer that I had never heard of: Frank Laubach's suggestion of "Flash Prayers" or experimenting with "swishing prayers" (44-45). These are just samples. I could spend an entire sermon on each of these.

Some types of Prayer*

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| • Breath prayer | • Liturgical prayer |
| • Centering prayer | • Prayer of recollection |
| • Contemplative prayer | • Prayer partners |
| • Conversational prayer | • Praying scripture |
| • Fixed-hour prayer | • Prayer walking |
| • Inner-healing prayer | • Flash Prayers** |
| • Labyrinth prayer | • Swishing prayers** |

* Spiritual Disciplines Handbook - Adele Ahlberg Calhoun

** Frank Laubach

Foster says "Real prayer is something we learn... Something about the quality and quantity of Jesus' praying caused them [the disciples] to see how little they knew about prayer. If their praying was to make any difference on the human scene, there were some things they needed to learn" (36).

That is a new thought – that we need to learn how to pray better. However, it is in essence what the disciplines in Luke 11:1 were doing, learning how to pray better.

How do we learn to pray better? How do we learn to do anything?

- 1) We assume that we can learn and that God answers our prayers,
- 2) We try something, and
- 3) We pay attention to the results.

To illustrate this let me tell you a story of my mother and her first cell phone. Although my mother was older, I thought that she should have a cell phone. It was new technology and it didn't work the same as the old house phone. She picked it up, dialed a number, and put it to her ear. She looked puzzled and then disgusted. "It doesn't work! I dialed Judy's number but I

don't hear anything! This thing doesn't work." She put it down and I'm sure that she never wanted to try it again. She did not know to push the talk button.

That is what some of us experience with prayer. As new Christians we might have prayed and didn't get what we asked for. From that we conclude that prayer doesn't work. Just like when the phone did not work the way that my mother thought, she gave up. It is easy to give up on prayer if you don't understand how prayer works.

Learning something new means paying attention to the results of your efforts. When things don't work, try something else. When I was a software engineer and the program that I was working on didn't work, I didn't just throw up my hands and say that it was broken, the way that my mother did with the phone. I started small. I tried something and then observed how it worked. Then I tried something else. Eventually I would try bigger things because I knew how the smaller things worked. If my mother would have tried this approach, she would have looked at phone, tried the various buttons and eventually pushed the Green button with the phone image on it that dialed the number. Prayer works like that. We have to experiment and grow.

Learning to pray is like this picture (P2).



We pray, God listens, God speaks, we listen, we learn, and we are changed!

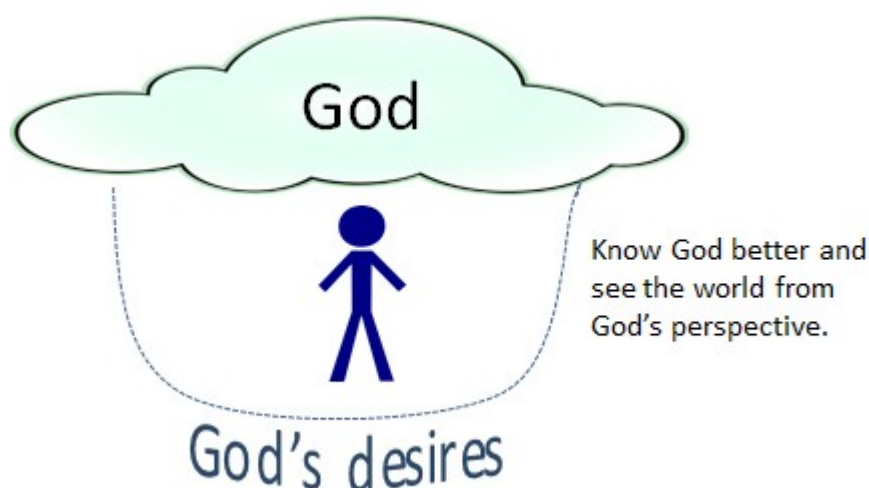
Kierkegaard said "A man prayed, and at first he thought that prayer was talking. But he became more and more quiet until in the end he realized that prayer is listening" (39).

Foster says "One of the most critical aspects in learning to pray for others is to get in contact [listening] with God so that his life and power can flow through us into others" (38).

Even if you have been praying for years, you can still learn to pray more effectively. You may be saying in your head that “I know how to pray. I pray hard and I pray a lot.” That may be true but do you pay attention to the results? Are you growing? You may just be stubborn and keep trying the same thing over and over again with not much success. Foster admits this of himself: “For years I had prayed for many things and with great intensity, but with only marginal success” (36).

Our objective in all things is to grow closer to God. Prayer is no exception, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 says that we should always be in prayer: “16 Be joyful always; 17 pray continually; 18 give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.”

When we practice prayer, we grow closer to God. P3 shows what happens.



When we listen to God, we appreciate God's view of the world. We understand better God's plan for the world, how God wants things to be. Prayer ceases to be a task that we must do and becomes time with a good friend.

CF Foster says: “To pray is to change. Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us. If we are unwilling to change, we will abandon prayer as a noticeable characteristic of our lives. The closer we come to the heartbeat of God the more we see our need and the more we desire to be conformed to Christ ... In prayer, real prayer, we begin to think God's thoughts after him: to desire the things he desires, to love the things he loves, to will the things he wills” (33).

So how do we learn this deeper prayer?

- 1) Learn the will of God before we pray. “Perhaps the most astonishing characteristic of Jesus’ praying is that when he prayed for others he *never* concluded by saying ‘If it be thy will.’ Nor did the apostles or prophets when they were praying for others. They obviously believed that they knew what the will of God was before they prayed the prayer of faith” (37).
- 2) Choose a proper time and place to pray. (37) Jesus prayed in public, in private, in the Temple, and alone with his disciples. Try different times and places. Driving in the car, in the shower, at work, when you wake up in the morning, before bed in the evening. Join us on Tuesday morning for group prayer. Try adding a new prayer time.

Consider whether it is time to pray for something. Perhaps prayer for a particular situation should be delayed until God shows you what you should be praying for.

- 3) Seek out people who are more experienced in prayer. Ask their advice. Search for books on prayer (37).
- 4) Expect change (38).
- 5) Pray now, don’t wait. God wants to hear from anytime and in any form.
- 6) Have faith. Ask like a little child asks a parent for something. If it is good for the child, a good parent will always grant the child’s request. We have a good God, who knows what is good for us, those around us, and for the entire world. He will grant our good requests.

1 John 5:14-15 “14 This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. 15 And if we know that he hears us-- whatever we ask--we know that we have what we asked of him.”

- 7) Keep prayer simple. Don’t make prayer too complicated. Be like the little children that Jesus invited to Him. Practice talking with your Father in heaven.

We are warned about complicated prayer in Matthew 6:7 “**7 And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.**” Keep it simple and listen.

Conclusion

There is so much more that I could say. This is just a taste of the discipline of prayer. My challenge to you is to break out of your existing prayer routine and learn one more thing. Take a step back, look at your prayer life, see what works and what does not work, pick something new to try, expect change, and grow closer to God.

Join me in prayer.

Dear Jesus, You are our Lord and Savior. We do not deserve to be called Your followers because at times we do so poorly at it. We confess that we sin. We confess that we act in our own selfish desires and not always according to your will. Forgive us for what we have done.

We thank you that You still accept us and that you show us the way to grow closer to you. We thank you that you took the time to teach us how to pray. We thank you for what you did for us on the Cross.

We ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen.

Just as Jesus taught us how to pray, He also gave us instructions on how to remember Him and His redeeming death upon a cross.

We shift our attention now to remembering Jesus as He taught us to do.