SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES FOR THE CHRISTIAN LIFE
Week Three: Personal Prayer

I. Review and Introduction

Last week, we discussed the spiritual discipline of Bible intake by focusing on the practices of Scripture meditation and memorization. Biblical meditation is not emptying your mind so that you can have some epiphany, but rather is filling your mind with Scripture so that you can understand, submit to, and apply the Word to your life. Scripture memorization, which is virtually a form of meditation, is memorizing the biblical texts so that they are spiritual resources that are always available to you. We talked about some specific strategies for meditation and memorization (see last week’s handout).

This week, we will look at the spiritual discipline of personal prayer. Nearly every Christian believes that prayer is important—at least in theory. However, many believers do not pray very much, have trouble praying, or are worried that their prayers are not heard or do not matter. This is unfortunate because prayer is one of the most important of the spiritual disciplines. As Don Whitney says, “prayer is not so much a duty as a privilege, and not so much a privilege as it is an expression of life…. The children of God, impelled by the impulses of the Holy Spirit, want to talk to their heavenly Father.”

II. Understanding the Discipline

There are many different definitions of prayer. For example, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines prayer as “an address (as a petition) to God or a god in word or thought.” This sort of definition makes sense, but it is really too formal and too vague. Christian prayer is simply our conversations with the Lord that flow out of our personal relationship with him through faith in Jesus Christ. As John Ortberg argues, “Prayer, perhaps more than any other activity, is the concrete expression of the fact that we are invited into a relationship with God.”

If you have a real relationship with someone, you almost certainly have more than one type of conversation with him or her. The same is true with prayer. Because Christians have a personal relationship with the Lord, there is more than one way to have a conversation with God; there is more than one way to pray. Examples include a prayer of praise or adoration; a prayer of repentance; a prayer of personal petition; a prayer of thanksgiving; and a prayer of intercession for others. Each of these types of prayers (and others) is modeled in the Scriptures.

III. The Discipline in the Scriptures

The Goal of all Spiritual Disciplines

Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. For to this end we toil and strive, because
we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe. (1 Tim. 4:7b-10)

Jesus Was a Man of Prayer

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, “Sit here, while I go over there and pray.” (Matt. 26:36)

And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. (Mark 1:35)

Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” (Luke 11:1)

So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me.” (John 11:41-42) (See also the “Highly Priestly Prayer” of John 17:1-26)

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. (Hebrews 5:7)

We Are Commanded to Pray by Jesus and His Apostles

And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matt. 6:5-15)

And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:9-13)

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 4:6-7)

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people (1 Tim. 2:1)
I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling (1 Tim. 2:8)

Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. (James 5:16)

Prayer Should Be a Constant Practice

Praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints. (Eph. 6:18)

Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. (Col. 4:2)

Pray without ceasing. (1 Thess. 5:17)

God Answers Our Prayers

Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. (Mark 11:24)

Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it. (John 14:13-14)

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. (John 15:7)

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. (John 15:16)

And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. (Heb. 11:6)

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. (James 1:5-6)

And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him. (1 John 5:14-15)

The Holy Spirit Helps Us To Pray

But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. (John 14:26)

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. (Rom. 8:26)
IV. Practicing the Discipline

Part of what it means to practice prayer as a spiritual discipline is to learn different ways to pray. As Ortberg notes, “Prayer is learned behavior. Nobody is born an expert at it. No one even masters prayer.” There are many different approaches to having a conversation with God. Some of the common prayer strategies include the following:

1) Pray the Scriptures back to God (this is also a form of biblical meditation)
2) Pray following the A.C.T.S. strategy (adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication)
3) Take a prayer walk (especially good for intercessory prayer)
4) Write out short prayers (great for folks with attention deficit issues)
5) Pray along with the saints of old (Valley of Vision; Book of Common Prayer [1558 ed.])
6) Pray through the Lord’s Prayer (what comes to mind with each petition?)

One of the reasons believers run into trouble in their prayer life is because they have not put enough thought into how to pray most effectively. Like many important earthly conversations, prayer often goes better with a bit of planning. As Don Carson reminds us, “We do not drift into spiritual life; we do not drift into disciplined prayer. We will not grow in prayer unless we plan to pray.” Here are some practical suggestions:

1) Pray in a focused way along with Bible intake at the same time every day as part of a “personal quiet time” (Jesus prayed first thing in the morning)
2) Pray in the same place as often as you can (preferably a quiet place)
3) Pray out loud as often as possible (remember, prayer is a conversation!)
4) Focus on prayer quality over prayer quantity (“True prayer is measured by weight, not by length. A single groan before God may have more fullness of prayer in it than a fine oration of great length” – attributed to C. H. Spurgeon)
5) Be intentional about making time for other brief prayers throughout the day (pray without ceasing)
6) Keep a prayer list for intercessory prayer (often those who do not write it down do not pray it up)
7) Pray for specific categories of people each day (Monday is for extended family, Tuesday is for coworkers, Wednesday is for our pastors, etc.)
8) Pray through the FBC Durham membership directory (know and be known!)
9) Keep a personal prayer journal (a record of answered prayers)
10) Find a prayer accountability partner (encourage each other in prayer)
11) Take periodic prayer retreats (block out an hour or two for focused prayer)

V. Recommended Resources


D. A. Carson, A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers (Baker, 1992).

Paul Miller, A Praying Life: Connecting with God in a Distracting World (NavPress, 2010).
Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer* (Fleming Revell, 1895).


Notes:


