

How Shall We Pray? ©

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18, Luke 18:9-14

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Last week we talked about why we pray and how God loves us so much and wants us to talk to Him and to trust that He hears us and truly does answer. The answer may not always be what we were asking for, but we can trust that God's answer – or God's timing in answering – is something we can depend on. We also talked about how praying opens up that channel of communication with our heavenly Father; the more we talk to Him, the more we sense His presence with us.

So, we know that praying is a good thing to do, but how should we pray? Is there some particular way that is better than others? Should we get on our knees to pray? Should we sit in a quiet room? Pray silently, or out loud? Pray in public, or in a closet where no one sees us or hears us? Is prayer private and personal, or to be done with others?

My dad, who lives in North Carolina, lived much of his adult life not attending worship, having nothing to do with a Christian life. He drank too much, cussed too much, lived above his means and just didn't have much to do with God or anything related to a godly life.

I did not have much of a relationship with my dad after he and my mother divorced (when I was around 8 years old). He moved away and we didn't see him but once in a while. It wasn't until after Fred and I were married that he began seeking out a relationship with me. I can say today that, while it isn't a perfect relationship, we do love each other and have become much closer. I started praying that my dad would find a church home and, even more important, that he would come to have a relationship with God; with Christ – as a Christian.

God answered that prayer years after I began praying. My dad and stepmother began attending a church, were baptized and became fairly active until their health got so bad they couldn't go as much. Even when my stepmom could not go, as long as dad was able, he would attend worship alone.

You can imagine how happy I was when I went to visit him and heard him praying in his room. Because his hearing is so bad, he talks very loud. It sounded like he was shouting at God, which is why I could hear him praying for me and my family, and for all his children. It touched me so deeply!

One morning, after I got up, I passed by his open door and he was sitting on the side of the bed shouting at God. So, I went in and sat down beside him thinking how meaningful it would be to get to pray with my dad. But, as soon as he realized I was sitting there, he just stopped praying. He told me praying was personal for him and made it clear that he was not comfortable praying with me, or anyone else.

I was disappointed but I do understand. Because some people do feel that they can only pray in the privacy of their room, or home, and do not want to have others hear them talking to God.

Some of it is embarrassment, perhaps. But, I believe that it's also about sharing our deepest desires with God; it's about being vulnerable and often, it's about asking for forgiveness for something we regret. Those things are personal and they reveal our deepest, emotional selves.

So, how shall we pray? Is one way better than another? Does it have to be words that are spoken, or could it be written prayers in a prayer journal? Sometimes, I find myself writing. I just need to write about my day or feelings I have about a relationship, or a concern. As I write in my journal, I begin to realize that I'm writing it as a prayer. Writing, for me, often times gets out my deepest feelings and longings better than just speaking the words.

There are many different ways of offering prayer. It can be in private, or in public, in corporate worship, or with family around the table. It might take place in a study, or an intimate support group; you might choose to pray while standing, sitting, lying prostrate on the floor, or kneeling beside your bed. It might be a body prayer, where you lift your arms and hands and head up to heaven – perhaps swaying gently as you talk to God – almost like a dance with the Spirit. Or, you may be one who keeps your head bowed and your hands folded in your lap or over your heart. You might prefer a prayer walk, giving thanks for the beauty of creation. Or perhaps you pray in bed, whispering to God as you drift off to sleep.

You might use prayer beads – kind of like a rosary – and as you move from one bead to another, you pray for whatever you have assigned to each bead. One might be for thanking God; another one for praying for the world; one might be for family; and the last one might be where you say The Lord's Prayer.

Maybe sometimes you say a breath prayer to help you be calm and find that peace that only God can give, breathing in a deep breath and silently saying with that breath: "Lord, Jesus Christ" ... and as you exhale, silently saying: "have mercy on me." Or "give me peace." Or "help this loved one."

When I am in the hospital for an extended amount of time, as a pastor with someone who is in a medical crisis, after the initial prayers that are usually said out loud with the patient and family, I often, then, just silently – as I breathe – say that little prayer – (inhaling) "Lord, Jesus Christ" ... (and exhaling) "have mercy on him, or her" – naming that person before the Lord.

How shall we pray? There are many forms of prayer, aren't there? Different positions – some appropriate in certain situations, some more so in others.

Jesus taught us a form of prayer; a kind of order for lifting up prayer to God. Using the Lord's Prayer we invoke God's presence as we begin with "Our Father, who art in heaven." We adore and praise God by saying "hallowed be Thy name." We make sure that we remind ourselves as we say to God "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We remember that while we ask, we also really do want God's perfect will.

Then we ask God to give us what we need and to forgive us for our sins, as we promise to forgive others. We ask that God would help us to not be tempted; to remove us from all evil.

And again, we praise and adore and express our trust in our God with “for Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.”

Another form that somewhat follows the form of the Lord’s Prayer is called **ACTS**. Using each letter of the word, we have a reminder:

A is to adoration. We are expressing our adoration and love for God.

C is for confession. We confess our sins before the Lord and ask to be forgiven and strengthened so that we might not repeat that sin again.

T is for thanksgiving. We have so much to be thankful for, don’t we? We should always have thanksgiving as part of our prayers.

S is for supplication. Prayers of concern. We offer prayer for others, lifting up their names and their needs.

Our passage today is a continuation of Jesus’ discussion on prayer. Luke tells us straight up that Jesus is especially talking to those who are confident that they are righteous, obedient, pious people.

Jesus gives the example of the two men, praying in the temple. One is a Pharisee and one is a tax collector. The Pharisees were devout temple leaders. They had studied long and hard and knew every aspect of the commandments and all the laws that went with them. They, in fact, could be called lawyers. They were the law-keepers, making sure the people followed the law to a tee.

We often have a negative view of the Pharisees because the Scriptures that talk about them usually point out that they were so bent on keeping the law and making sure everyone else did too, that there simply never seemed to be room for grace or forgiveness.

But many of the Pharisees were truly righteous men who did their very best to be obedient to God and to the law of Moses. They took their jobs quite seriously. Who can fault them for that? Well, Jesus could. He did often point out that their rigidness was to a fault. He often taught that God loved those sinners who saw their sin and confessed; who admitted how wrong they had been and repented.

That was who the tax collector in Jesus’ example was. The Pharisee thanked God that he was so good, he was not like the sinners – the adulterers, the thieves, the rogues and – even the despicable tax collector. Talk about a basket of deplorables! Well, there they were.

But this Pharisee was so good, so righteous. He fasted twice a week. He went above and beyond what was required. The law required that he fast, once a year – on the Day of Atonement. And his tithe – well done! Not only did he tithe a tenth of his income, but he tithed a tenth of everything he had! He certainly had reason to be proud and consider himself righteous.

And he surely was way above what this tax collector could be. We've talked about them before. They were hired by the Romans and they would take what was required by the Roman state and then take even more for themselves. They cheated people. They put hardships on people who had mostly nothing. They were hated by most people because of their corruption.

Yet, here he is, beating his breast with remorse. He was so regretful that he could not even lift his eyes toward heaven. His prayer was a cry of lament, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

And Jesus said, "I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." (verse 14)

Cynthia I. Hale writes in her commentary on this passage, "This man was a classic example of arrogance and pride, thinking more highly of himself than he ought to think, which the Scriptures warn us against."

Romans 12:3 says, "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned."

Hale writes that the Pharisees prayer was all about himself. "Have you noticed how many times he used the pronoun "I"? He thanked God for what he had been able to do for himself. There is no visible sense that God had done anything for him or that he needed God to do anything.

"Unlike the other man, the tax collector, on whom he looked down with disdain, the Pharisee lacked humility. A quick test to see how humble you are, especially in a conversation with God, or other humans, is to count how many times you use the pronoun "I" in the exchange.¹

How shall we pray? When we approach God with humility, acknowledging that we are sinners in need of forgiveness, admitting that we have fallen short, God is quick to forgive and to raise us up with grace and mercy and love.

The psalmist writes, in Psalm 51, "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."

How shall we pray? How about praying with authenticity; with love and humility? How about we be honest with God about who we are, trusting that God knows us better than we know ourselves. Trusting that God, who sent his only Son to die for our sins so that we might know forgiveness, salvation, and life with God through eternity will always show us mercy and grace. Always believing that this truly is our heavenly Father who promises that nothing will ever separate us from His amazing love.

¹ Cynthia I. Hale, Feasting on the Word, Luke Vol. 2, Commentary on Luke 18:9-14, ©2014 John Knox Westminster Press

How shall we pray? It matters not the position you pray in, or the form you use. What God desires is that you bring yourself – your honest, true self – to Him – because He knows you already and He loves you more than you will ever know.

Amen.

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