

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

81 How Can I Improve My Prayer Life?

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:25-28

One of my favorite New Testament books is I Thessalonians. Paul wrote this letter to people who had been Christians only a matter of months. They had come to the faith and its resultant fellowship by way of Paul's three week visit to Thessalonica during which time he entered the synagogue of the Jews and reasoned with them out of the Scriptures. (Acts 17:1-4) The test of such a ministry has to do with the permanence of its converts. It is so very easy for new believers to drift, stray and go back to old ways because they have only had instruction of the most elemental sort or because, they have been otherwise neglected.

The teaching Paul gives in this epistle has to do with the life of these new believers as it would be lived in their pagan environment. He wants them to understand that the Christian life involves certain responsibilities. One must know what to believe and how to relate his belief to all of thought and life. The questions which the Thessalonians asked indicated that they sincerely sought to know what their responsibilities were. The letter closes with a brief review of these obligations. There is the request for prayer, love, and Bible reading. (I Thessalonians 5:25-27) This may appear to be an oversimplification of what the Christian life is all about. Yet, this is what young Christians are told to do even today. They are to walk with the Lord and love people. They are encouraged to pray, for this is the means of contact with the invisible, and eternal God. They are urged to have fellowship with other believers, because this is the way God encourages and blesses their lives. They are led to read their Bibles as God's way of increasing their faith and molding their lives. These three activities and responsibilities are laid upon the Thessalonian converts by St. Paul. Our concern this morning has to do with prayer.

We might begin by asking ourselves a simple question. If today there was no such thing as prayer, would my life be any different? It could be asked another way. If I were to stop praying, would it have any appreciable affect upon my life? The answers to these questions quickly reveal if we are praying at all and if it is a worthwhile activity. I suppose that we shall all have to answer these questions

for ourselves. It matters little that there are those who believe in prayer and, there are those who do not. There are brainy people whose opinions range from militant atheism to solid belief. It is the Christian teaching that prayer is necessary and worthwhile. Prayer releases forces in the physical world and in the world of the spiritual. For this reason prayer forms a basic part of the Christian's life. The believer cannot survive, and be known as such, without prayer. It is the channel of divine life to the soul, it is a vehicle through which faith is strengthened, it is the means by which the work of God is to be carried on, and it is the means of an on going relationship with one's heavenly Father. Such a relationship cannot exist without prayerful communication.

Prayer is the way for believers to have fullness of joy. (John 16:24) Prayer is the God appointed way for Christians to receive things. (James 4:2) Prayer is the means of deliverance from worry and anxious care. (Philippians 4:6-7) Prayer is the vehicle through which the power of the Holy Spirit is made available. (Luke 11:13) Prayer is the way we come to experience forgiveness of sins (Romans 10:13; I John 1:9) Prayer is the way God has chosen to silence the skeptic. (I Kings 18:36-37; Judges 6:12) Great and many are the reasons for prayer. Yet, strangely enough, prayer remains the most difficult and baffling aspect of the Christian life for so many of us. It is like a foreign land, it is strange and unfamiliar. We feel like tourists in this land of prayer. As tourists we are uncomfortable and out of place. As tourists we soon move on. We pray less and less. Is there one among us who feels like a native to that prayerful soil? I dare say there is not. We all seek a guide, we all look for all the help we can get in finding our way to a more effectual prayer life.

It is the purpose of our study this morning to make some suggestions which may be helpful in cultivating the art of prayer. Prayer is dialogue with God. It is knowing how to speak and listen to God. If the communication is to be meaningful it must go beyond small talk and that which is superficial. It should involve the total sharing of persons. Praying is opening ourselves to God as deeply and as honestly as we are able. It is God opening Himself to us and our being able to discern His presence and direction. Prayer is worth while. But some preparation is necessary for anything which is worth while. Many Christians have through the years been helped in their prayer life by following a pattern when they go to prayer. It is easily remembered by using the acrostic ACTS. **A** stands for **Adoration**. **C** stands for **Confession**. **T** stands for

Thanksgiving. Lastly, **S** stands for **Supplication**. Let us look at these four kinds of prayer.

I. ADORATION:

This is the act of coming into God's presence with the recognition that He is God. The word adoration or any of its forms is not in the King James Bible, but the idea is there. To adore God is to say to God, "I love you." The Psalms record the love David felt for the person of God. An example may be taken from Psalm 103:1-2, "*Bless the Lord, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.*" Also verse 1 of Psalm 104, "*Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, thou art very great: thou art clothed with honor and majesty.*" The Apostle Paul reflects that the love of God was in his heart as a kind of madness to those who knew not that love. He writes, "*For whether we be beside ourselves, it is to God: or whether we be sober, it is for your cause. For the love of Christ constraineth us.*" (II Corinthians 5:13-14)

Many times have I read the words of A.W. Tozer having to do with adoration. "Perhaps the most serious charge brought against modern Christians is that we are not sufficiently in love with Christ. The Christ of fundamentalism is strong but hardly beautiful. It is rarely that we find anyone aglow with personal love for Christ. Christ can never be known without a sense of awe and fear accompanying the knowledge. He is the fairest of ten thousand, but He is the Lord high and mighty. He is meek and lowly in heart, but He is also Lord and Christ, the Judge of all men. No one who knows Him intimately can ever be flippant in His presence. The love of Christ both wounds and heals, it fascinates and frightens, it draws and repulses, it sobers and enraptures." (A.W. Tozer, **It Takes A Man To Bow Down**, Moody Press)

Someone is going to say, "If adoration is the first step in praying, and it is telling God you love Him, I can't pray because I am not sure that I do love Him." I believe the answer to this is to be found in the realization that one has, at least, the will to love Him. The important question is not so much, "Do you love God?" The question is "Do you want to love God?" If you have come to the place where you want to, I believe that in time you will come to that love. God, reverently speaking, is lovable. He will help us to love Him. It was Francis of Assisi who once prayed, "O God, help me to want to love you." If we are able to make this our sincere prayer, we have adored Him. We have to begin somewhere. I failed to mention that adoration is having the desire to love God for who and what He

is, rather than for what He has done. We do not understand everything God does, nor do we like all He allows to happen. Adoration is to thank God for what He is in Himself. It is to be content in what He is and to find rest there. It is to be mindful of the love that is outpoured on all creation. Our adoring response is, "God, help me to want to love you." It is, "I love you."

II. CONFESSION:

There are several hindrances to prayer which are mentioned in Scripture. In I Peter 3:12 we read, *"For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers: but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil."* This same truth is mentioned in Psalm 66:18 and Isaiah 59:1-2: I Peter 3:7 talks about relationships which are important to a meaningful prayer life, Matthew 6:14-15 talks about forgiveness. An indifference to the Word of God is reason for hindered prayer. (Proverbs 28:9) Unconfessed sin grieves the Lord. (Psalm 66:18) Fundamental to the prayer of confession is the realization that in some way we have not obeyed the Lord and are therefore out of fellowship with Him and no longer on praying ground. No amount of effort on our part is able to restore fellowship. It is within this framework that we come to God, owning up to our failure and claiming the work of Christ as being the only means by which the separation can be overcome. Confession is part of our acknowledgement of the sovereignty of God. (Isaiah 6:1-5; Romans 3:19)

III. THANKSGIVING:

As in the prayer of adoration we thank God for himself and come to love Him in that way, the prayer of thanksgiving reflects upon what He has done. This is the third most important aspect of prayer. Prayers of thanksgiving are made possible by faith in God who orders all things for good through His sovereign control over the world. It is interesting to note in I Thessalonians 5:16-18 that Paul speaks about rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing, and giving thanks in everything. The grounds for good cheer in a world of trouble, tragedy, loss and disappointment is trust in the wisdom of God and faith in His goodness. The rejoicing here is a blessedness rather than the happiness which is sought after by the world. Clearly, we are to appreciate our blessings and accept our adversities. While we are not asked to be thankful **for** everything. We are to be thankful **in** everything. There is a difference. We can be thankful in bereavement, in persecution, in loss. The person who is thankful in these things believes that a personal power is behind the events which befall him. This is not

fatalism. Paul adds, "...*this is the will of God concerning you.*" God has a plan for everyone who is in Christ. We can be thankful it is being fulfilled.

One of the outstanding men of prayer during the eighteenth century was William Law. He wrote, "If anyone would tell you the shortest, surest way to all happiness and all perfection, he must tell you to make a rule to yourself to thank and praise God for everything that happens to you. For it is certain that whatever seeming calamity happens to you, if you thank and praise God for it, you turn it into a blessing. The true saint is not the one who prays most, or fasts most, who gives most alms or is the most eminent for temperance, but it is he who is always thankful to God, who wills everything that God wills, who receives everything as an instance of God's goodness, and has a heart always ready to praise God for it." The key to the prayer of thanksgiving is to take an increasing number of the events of life as parts of the gradual unfolding of God's plan. One day we will understand the plan. Now it should be our desire to be conformed to it.

IV. SUPPLICATION:

Supplication includes petition and intercession. Petition is prayer for ourselves and intercession is prayer for other people. Paul declared, "*Brethren, pray for us.*" (I Thessalonians 5:25) The fact that Paul was much in prayer for all his churches and converts is evident from the numerous affirmations of this practice. This very epistle begins with the words, "*We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers; remembering without ceasing your work of faith...*" He wrote the same way to the Colossians (Colossians 1:3), to the Philippians (Philippians 1:3-4) and to the Ephesians (Ephesians 1:15-16). Obviously, pastors should pray for the growth of their people. It would seem this should be done as a whole and by name when problems arise. Those who do not thus pray are but a fraction of what they should be.

The converse of such prayer is to have people pray for their pastors. Paul desired prayer for himself and his companions as servants of Christ, as missionaries of the cross, and as teachers of the Word of God. Paul had a particular need when he wrote this letter. He had been beaten. He could have died under any one of the five scourgings he received or the three beatings with rods, or the four shipwrecks or at the hands of robbers. But a divine providence saved his life. (Romans 15:30; Acts 20:22-23) Paul was frequently in discouragement, but through the prayers of God's people he was delivered.

(II Corinthians 1:3-10) Pastors today have needs as well. They suffer hindrances to their devotion and are in need of enlightenment. They would be used of God as teachers and men of vision. The need for prayer warriors is very great. Great is our responsibility to pray for one another. Again, we say with Paul, *“Brethren, pray for us.”*

This epistle to the Thessalonians concludes with the words, *“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you...”* (5:28) Grace is the source, and sum of all other blessings. It is God doing for us what we could never do for ourselves. One could wish no greater blessing upon anyone than the grace of God. Nevertheless, it comes through certain prescribed means. We have considered one of them today, namely, prayer. Let us be careful to observe this means. These four suggestions should be helpful in encouraging us to pray.

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