



FORMED BY PRAYER

SERIES: FORMED INTO CHRIST

7th Message
John Hanneman
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Recently a series of experiments were conducted at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville to evaluate the ability of people to be quiet and alone with their thoughts. One experiment involved sitting:

alone in a room with access to a device to jolt them with an electric shock from a 9-volt battery. All had previously given themselves a test shock as part of the experiment so they wouldn't choose it out of curiosity. They deemed it painful and said they would pay to avoid experiencing it again. A dozen men, or 67 percent of the group, gave themselves at least one and as many as four shocks, as did 6 of 24 women. What is striking is that simply being alone with their own thoughts for 15 minutes was apparently so aversive that it drove many participants to self-administer an electric shock that they had earlier said they would pay to avoid.¹

No wonder we find it difficult to "be still and know that I am God" (Ps 46:10 ESV). It's easy to find times of prayer squeezed out by more pressing matters. Most of us want to spend more time in prayer but incorporating prayer into the rhythm of our days runs counter to our culture and contradictory to our natural inclination for constant activity. It seems we deem unproductive, inefficient, non-stimulating time as non-useful and wasteful. And yet the Bible indicates that prayer is essential to spiritual growth and formation.

Our focus this summer is being formed into Christ, not only being a new creation but also living as new creations and accepting the idea that God is at work in all areas of our lives to complete the work he has started—"the historic process of ongoing conversion, of sanctification, of living into our shared human call to holiness."²

The topics for this summer break into two halves with Word and Prayer at the center. We began our series with what God has done: formed by God, formed in love, formed into a new creation, allowing the inner work of the Spirit in suffering and waiting. The first five weeks have dealt with inner transformation. At the center of our series are the spiritual practices of Word and Prayer that are foundational to our growth in Christ. Next week we will start moving out into the world—forgiving, loving, serving, and relating. This structuring was not intentional. Obviously, the Spirit has been at work. Today we look at prayer.

Each moment of every day we are called in contradictory directions. One direction is away from God and towards our flesh or sin. The other direction is towards God and the Spirit. Prayer is a spiritual activity that keeps us connected to God throughout our days.

Prayer is aimed at our deepest problem: our tendency to forget our liberating connectedness with God Gerald May well states our situation when he says, "The mind is a child of the Spirit, but likes to run away from home."³

The Nature of Prayer

What is prayer? Prayer is not primarily making requests of God for divine favors or getting things done. This makes God out to be a cosmic genie we manipulate for our agendas. Nor is it spiritual work, which would give the impression that there is a division between spiritual time and ordinary time. Prayer is not primarily even something we do. Prayer is what God does in us through the Spirit. Prayer is a gift and privilege given to us by God.

Prayer is the way we live with God in this world, the way we live a "with-God" life that keeps us from living disconnected and separate from God. Prayer is more like being in a relationship with a person, more about being than doing, and thus involves a dialogue rather than a monologue. Prayer is an invitation to be with God in trusting openness and attentiveness in faith, a way of being in union with God and abiding in Christ. The goal is not to develop a prayer life but to live a life of prayer, a praying life.

This is what the apostle Paul alludes to when he writes:

Pray without ceasing. (1 Thess 5:17)

Be constant in prayer. (Rom 12:12)

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

Jesus made the same point when he told a "parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart" (Luke 18:1).

Paul is an example of a life of prayer, for in many of his letters he mentions that he prays for the church he is writing to always and constantly.

"Prayer is not primarily saying words or thinking thoughts. It is, rather, a stance, a way of being present. It's a way of living in the Presence, living in awareness of the Presence, and even of enjoying the Presence."⁴ Prayer is like breathing, a constant activity that sometimes we are not even aware of, but is life giving and soul sustaining. Prayer is foundational to being formed into Christ.

The People Who Pray

Who are the people who pray? Even though non-religious people will often say; "our thoughts and prayers are with you," prayer has primarily characterized the people of God. In the OT we see that prayer permeated Israel's history. Worship, sacrifice, and remembering the acts of God was part of the fabric of their days and years. God even gave Israel a prayer book, the book of Psalms, to give them language for being in relationship and maintaining a dialogue with him.

When we come to the gospels we see that prayer was central to Jesus' life. In our recent studies in Luke we have encountered several occasions when Jesus went off by himself to pray

But he would withdraw to desolate places to pray. (Luke 5:16)

Now it happened that as he was praying alone, the disciples were with him. (Luke 9:18)

Important milestones in Jesus' ministry were marked with prayer: his baptism, choosing the disciples, the transfiguration, and preparation to be crucified.

When Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, (Luke 3:21)

In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God. (Luke 6:12)

And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white. (Luke 9:28–29)

And he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed,. . . And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; (Luke 22:41, 44)

The disciples were steeped in a history of prayer and yet as they watched Jesus spend time with the Father, they sensed something different about him. Finally, this led the disciples to ask Jesus to teach them to pray, the only request for instruction made by the disciples.

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)

When we come to the book of Acts, once again we see prayer as an essential part of the continuing ministry of the disciples and the early church. Soon after the ascension we read:

All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers. (Acts 1:14)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42)

Over the past several weeks we have completely altered the paper the ushers hand out on Sunday mornings. Instead of being a bulletin with information we now have a worship guide. Initially, we dropped the prayer requests hoping that people would share more in detail with the elders and staff. However, we received a great deal of input from you all concerning the omission of these prayer requests. We listened to you and as a result have once again included them. This demonstrates how important prayer is to the people of God. Prayer is not just for leaders but all the saints. We are to be a Word-centered and Prayer-centered church.

The Reasons for Prayer

Why do we pray? God knows our thoughts, concerns, and needs. So why should we take the time and effort to talk with him? There is so much we could say, but let me enumerate a few things. I am going to use the Lord's Prayer from Matthew 6 as a guide. This prayer also instructs us on what to pray.

Prayer cultivates intimacy with God

How do we develop intimacy in marriage or closeness in any relationship? It usually doesn't happen in a planning meeting or balancing your checkbook. Intimacy happens when we open our hearts and our dreams to another person, when we simply sit together without an agenda or structure, when we take a walk and waste time. If indeed God is loving, personal, and relational why would it be any different with him?

You don't create intimacy; you make room for it. This is true whether you are talking about our spouse, your friend, or God. You need space to be together. Efficiency, multitasking, and busyness all kill intimacy. In short, you can't get to know God on the fly.⁵

We pray: "Our Father, who is in heaven." We are reminded that we are part of God's family in Christ with a new identity. Heaven isn't up the clouds somewhere, but everywhere around us. God is near and he indwells our hearts.

Cultivating intimacy with God is not easy and there can be long periods of time when we do not feel close to God at all. I know this is the case for many of you. One reason for this problem is that we believe that God doesn't really love us or care about us. But this is a lie and we should not give up our desire to be intimate with him. The more we can see God as a kind, generous, and benevolent Father the more we will want to spend time with him.

Prayer is an act of trusting God and his character

Another issue we face as God's people is whether we can really trust God, believe that he has our best interests in mind, and pray in confidence that he hears our cries. The danger lies in becoming double-minded, as James suggests, by having a changeable faith that leads to an unstable life:

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. (Jas 1:5–7)

We pray: "Hallowed be your name" or "let your name be holy." Name has to do with the character and essence of a person. In prayer our focus changes from our doubt to God's holy character—his goodness and steadfast love. We aren't trying to make a Babel-produced name for ourselves but we are trusting in God's name. We are confident that God hears our prayers and cries because he is not a fickle or capricious God. God will uphold his name in our lives. Over and over the Psalmist ends his prayers by expressing renewed confidence and trust in God even when he is in difficult circumstances.

Prayer engages us with the work of God

Jesus both preached and inaugurated the kingdom of God. Now, as a new creation in Christ, we are living in this kingdom as people indwelt by God. God wants us to partner with him, to join him in his plans of salvation and redemption through the strength and power he provides.

We pray, "your kingdom come." Prayer keeps us involved in God's kingdom, the kingdom of heaven, rather than the kingdom of this world or a kingdom of our own making.

James tells us: "The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working." (Jas 5:16). This verse seems to indicate that our prayers have power to get things rolling and energize God to act. Sometimes God is waiting for us to get on board until he begins to work.

James gives us the example of Elijah:

Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit. (Jas 5:16–18).

Elijah didn't make up his prayer, but rather God told Elijah what to pray very specifically. He just wanted Elijah to be involved. Prayer aligns us with God and his kingdom.

Even though the circumstances may not change, prayer changes us

Many times we come to prayer frustrated, angry, confused, or restless. We pray for circumstances to change or relief from annoying people. We cry out to God and ask him to solve our problems and eliminate our stress. But time in prayer can reveal to us our selfish ambitions, wrong attitudes, and impure motives.

We pray, "your will be done." As we give God space we can find him softening our hearts and changing our perspectives. We discern new insights on how to respond to difficult circumstances and people. Instead of trying to fix people who we think are problems we can begin to pray for them. When we pray for others our compassion for them increases and God gives us the desire to help them.

We also labor with a great deal of worry and anxiety. Most of our anxiety is over things we can't control and therefore of little benefit. Worry is inconsistent with the kingdom of God. In prayer we share with God our worries and anxieties and release them to his care. The result is that God can give us a peace "which surpasses all understanding." (Phil 4:7) Prayer changes us.

Several times during the day, but especially in the morning and evening, ask yourself for a moment if you have your soul in your hands or if some passion or fit of anxiety has robbed you of it If you have gone astray, quietly bring your soul back to the presence of God, subjecting all your affections and desires to the obedience and direction of His Divine Will.⁶

Prayer cultivates dependence on God

Prayer runs counter to our arrogant independence, our strong self-will, our inclination to rely on self-effort, and our tendency to run our own lives. We think we can live with the motto: "I can handle it."

If you are not praying, then you are quietly confident that time, money, and talent are all you need in life. You'll always be a little too tired, a little too busy. But if, like Jesus, you realize you can't do life on your own, then no matter how busy, no matter how tired you are, you will find the time to pray.⁷

And so we pray, "give us this day our daily bread." In prayer we acknowledge the fact that we are not in control, life is bigger than we are, and we need God not only for the big things but also for the little things every day. In prayer we become conscious of his daily provision to sustain us.

Prayer frees us from the guilt and shame

Many of us do not feel worthy to approach God in prayer. We feel unclean. A sense of failure keeps us in bondage. The shame of the past can be debilitating. Perhaps we feel like we have to clean up our act first or do some work of contrition before we can approach God. This is another lie that keeps us from spending time with God.

And so we pray, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." God invites us to come to him freely and openly, to confess our sins and shame, to release our unworthy self-images to him, to seek healing and cleansing through the blood of Christ. Through prayer we find total acceptance before God, not because he has ignored our sin and mistakes, but because Christ has dealt with them completely and fully on the cross.

We rely on what the apostle John wrote:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

And then the acceptance and forgiveness we receive from God we offer to others. A praying life is a forgiving life. Forgiveness is the topic for next week, so I will leave it at that.

Prayer acknowledges evil and our need for God's protection

We pray "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Life is hard and we have an enemy. Paul tells us that our struggles are not against "flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12).

The reality is that we will be tempted by the world, the flesh, and the devil and we can't fight these battles on our own strength. Prayer acknowledges our weakness, reminds us that we have spiritual weapons in Christ, and a God who is a rock and a fortress. Right after Paul mentions our spiritual armor in Ephesians 6 he tells us to pray.

The Ways We Pray

How do we pray? Most of us are conditioned by our experience and traditions. For example I grew up in a traditional church where people didn't talk much about their faith. I had never witnessed people praying out loud in a small group until I started attending an evangelical church. This was pretty scary and uncomfortable to me, especially when I tried to pray out loud. It took a long time to get used to it. Let me suggest that there can be great diversity in the ways we can pray, ways that can suit each and every one of us.

Active prayers

Most of us think along the lines of active prayers—intercession, petition, confession, thanksgiving, and praise. These are shaped through our day-to-day circumstances.

One of the most helpful prayers can be prayers of thanksgiving—thinking and perhaps writing down the things for which you are grateful. This takes our focus off what we might lack to see how God is blessing us in so many ways.

We might use written prayers, like those we find in Scripture or those penned by great saints throughout church history. The Book of Common Prayer has a great tradition in the church, as do the writings of so many. Hymns can also be a tremendous resource for us, giving language to express ourselves to God. Or we might pray a phrase from Scripture or a name of God repeatedly.

Stillness and quiet

But we also come to God in stillness and quiet, setting apart time simply to be with God and to listen to him. Over the past few years I have found myself listening more and talking less.

Mother Teresa was asked by a reporter what she said to God when she prayed. She replied, "Mostly I just listen." The reporter then asked what God said to her. "Mostly he just listens," she replied. Could it be that the loving, attentive, mutual listening of the soul and the Spirit constitute the greatest expression of spirituality?⁸

Quiet prayers might include contemplating Scripture you have read, taking the words into your heart and asking God what is there for you personally. It might involve immersing yourself in a gospel story and imagining what it would have been like for you to be there hearing Jesus talk personally to you.

Prayer might involve thinking through your day or week and asking God to show you where he was present. We might notice when we were moving toward God or away from him, when we were submitting or resisting. We might pay attention to how we reacted internally to a previous conversation but didn't have time to really think about it at the time. We confess our sins and release them to God. We look for where God was at work without us even being aware of his presence.

Stillness is all about creating space and margin for God, that our prayers might descend from the mind to the heart and bring our whole self into the presence of God. Stillness allows for a deep meeting with God and words are no longer necessary. As the Baltimore Catechism says: "Prayer is the raising of the mind and the heart to God." As I wrote about in the e-bulletin this past week I am dealing with a kidney issue by taking a high dosage of a strong drug. One of the side effects of this drug is that I cannot sleep and I wake up early in the morning, like 5:00 a.m. or so. But there is a benefit to this. I find myself loving these early morning times of reading and quiet. From 5:00 to 8:00 I seem to experience Jesus no matter what I am doing, whether reading Scripture, a good book, or the newspaper. I have sensed how deeply I crave this time with God and how much it can mean to me.

Our bodies can also be a factor in how we pray. We can pray prostrate before God, on our knees, or sitting. But we can also pray while walking, dancing, or working in the garden. We can pray with eyes closed and head down or while gazing at a piece of art. Even being aware of our breathing can lead us into prayer.

There is great diversity in the ways we can pray and we can find ways that suit our personalities and the ways we connect to God. But much more important than the mechanics of how we pray, is our attitude. We come to God in humility and openness. We pray with hearts and minds. We start where we are. We pray as we can, not as we ought. We live in an ongoing dialogue with the Father that makes us aware of his presence each and every moment of our days.

The Spirit and Prayer

Finally, as I said at the beginning, prayer is not something we are even doing through our own efforts. Prayer is a mystery that involves the Spirit working in and through us. Michael Casey writes:

Prayer cannot be measured on a scale of success and failure because it is God's work—and God always succeeds. When we believe we have failed at prayer, it is because we decided what shape our prayer should have, and are frustrated that there is nothing we can do to implement our ambition. Prayer is nothing more or less than the interior action of the Trinity at the level of being. This we cannot control; we can only reverently submit.⁹

Paul tells us that we can address God in the same manner as Jesus did by calling him "Father" or "Abba." But this happens through the Spirit:

And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' (Gal 4:6)

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" (Rom 8:15)

Paul also tells us that the Spirit can help us in our weakness to pray on our behalf. Deep calls to deep through the Spirit.

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)

Therefore we depend on the Spirit to bring us into the presence of God and even to supply the words when we don't know what to say. We pray "at all times in the Spirit."

God wants us to pray and will tell us how to begin where we are. The Holy Spirit moves us to want to pray and to pray as we must, leading us to the things of Christ. Thus what begins as our desire to pray, as our seeking after God, may turn out to be God stirring in us, opening us to grace. The main thing is God touching the self, bringing it into conversation.¹⁰

Let me close with these words by Alford, Lord Tennyson:

More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of.
Wherefore, let thy voice
Rise like a fountain for me night and day.
For what are men better than sheep or goats
That nourish a blind life within the brain,
If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer
Both for themselves and those who call them friend?
For so the whole round earth is every way
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God.¹¹

"The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace." (Num 6:24–26)

1. <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/print/2014-07-03/shocking-many-pick-electric-jolt-over-solitude-in-study.html>
2. Tilden Edwards, *Living in the Presence*, (Harper Collins, NY, 1987), 11
3. *ibid*, 11
4. Brian McLaren, *Naked Spirituality*, (Harper Collins, NY, 2011), 213
5. Paul Miller, *A Praying Life*, (NavPress, Colorado Springs, 2009), 47
6. St. Francis de Sales
7. Miller, *A Praying Life*, 49
8. McLaren, *Naked Spirituality*, 223
9. Michael Casey, from David Benner, "Personal Spiritual Formation for Ministry" Audio Course (Regent College, Sept. 2007)
10. Ann and Barry Ulanov, from David Benner, "Personal Spiritual Formation for Ministry" Audio Course (Regent College, Sept. 2007)
11. *The Contemporaries Meet the Classics on Prayer*, compiled by Leonard Allen, (Howard Publishing, West Monroe, LA) 203, 280