

Foundations Of An Effective Prayer Life Part 2

Selected Scriptures

This Week's Prayer Requests:

Memory Verse: "Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need," Hebrews 4:16.

Lesson

We stated in our last lesson that if you want to experience a powerful prayer life, you must first have a solid foundation. And as we said before, any builder knows that a structure is never stronger than its foundation. No building can stand long without a strong foundation and the same truth applies to the practice of all the spiritual disciplines. In order to build a consistent biblical prayer life, you must have the right foundation. Without this, your relationship with Christ will be weak and inconsistent.

The first foundations that we covered concerned the nature of God as He relates to prayer. We said this:

Review: If we know God hears and answers prayer, what does this tell us about His nature and how should this impact your own prayer life?

1. It is God's Nature to Both Hear and Answer Prayer (Ps. 65:2).
2. Many attributes of God are implied in the fact that He hears and answers prayer.
 - a. A prayer hearing God is a living God.
 - b. A prayer hearing God is a personal God.
 - c. A prayer hearing God is an all-knowing God.
 - d. A prayer hearing God is an all-powerful God.
 - e. A prayer hearing God is a God of infinite wisdom.
 - f. A prayer hearing God is a God who works miracles.
 - g. A prayer hearing God is a God of love and mercy.
3. It is impossible to come to God or please Him unless you believe He is a prayer-hearing and prayer-answering God (Heb. 11:6).

Once we have this basic understanding about God, Beloved, we are now ready to move forward into the more personal and specific foundations of how to conduct our prayer lives with great confidence, encouragement and boldness.

But let's answer this questions first: Why are these foundations important for us spiritually? Let me see if I can answer that questions with a common illustration among preachers:

What would you do if you were the coach of a sports team, and you had a player that never came to practice, but still wanted to play?

One day a huge student walked up to the football coach and told him that he wanted to play football. The coach was thrilled and said, “Son, I’m glad you want to play. We sure need a player of your size and strength on the line. Then the coach told the student to be at practice the next day and assured him he would get a chance to play on the team.

For the next three days, the coach watched for the young man, but he never showed up for practice. About a week later, the student came again to the coach and said, “Coach, I sure love football and I really want to be on the team.” The coach said, “I’m glad to hear it, but you never came to practice. Son, if you want to play ball, then you have to come to practice.” The student assured the coach that he would be at practice the next day.

A whole week passed, yet the boy never attended a single practice. Later, the student saw the coach walking at a distance and he yelled for the coach to wait up so he could talk to him. But rather than stopping, the coach just kept right on walking. The young man ran up to him and got in front of him and started to give the familiar speech. The coach suddenly interrupted him and said, “No son, you really don’t want to play football. I told you in order to play you must come to practice. The truth is, you would rather do other things than pay the price to be on the team. When you say you want to play, but you won’t come to practice, you’re really just kidding yourself. Now excuse me while I go and coach the boys who are waiting at practice. You see son, **they** really do want to play football.”

Can you relate this illustration to your own spiritual life?

How many of us could hear this same response from God with regard to our spiritual lives? Many of us say that we want to grow spiritually. We say that we want to be used in the Kingdom. We say that we want to see revival in our hearts and in our church and nation. We say that we want to be filled with the Holy Spirit and lead lives of spiritual power. But God could immediately say, “No, if you truly wanted these things you would pay the price and show up to pray. Now excuse me, while I go and meet with those who are serious about these things.”

With this in mind, let’s begin now with more foundations for a powerful prayer life. The first one is this:

1. You must not view your daily prayer time as a legalistic duty (Matt. 6:7; 15:8).

In Matt. 6:7, the Lord calls attention to a widespread problem of His

What are some dangers of viewing prayer as a legalistic duty?

day. He says, “And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words.” Then He mentions another very closely related problem in Matt. 15:8, “These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.”

There are a number of faults that can creep into a person’s prayer life, oftentimes even unconsciously that these verses are meant to guard us against. What are they:

How can legalistic tendencies creep into your prayer life unnoticed? How can you guard against these?

1. Prayer becoming ritualized. When the words and the forms are set and simply read or repeated from memory, then prayer can be given with almost no attention paid to what was being said. It becomes routine. A faithful Jew would repeat the Shema early in the morning and again at night. And then there was the Shemaneh esray, a series of eighteen individual prayers, which a faithful Jew would repeat every morning, afternoon and evening, regardless of where they were or what they were doing. They would stop at 9 a.m, 12 p.m., 3 p.m., each day and repeat the set prayers, and this is the kind of thing the Lord is driving at with the people

When these ritualized, formal, set, routine prayers were given, the question naturally arises, were they really baring their hearts in communion with God or simply following a set routine out of a sense of legalistic duty? Now obviously different people could have different attitudes. Some might speak with sincerity of heart, with a genuine desire to worship and glorify God. Others, and undoubtedly most, based on Jesus’ teachings in the gospels would simply speak with indifference, going through the motions in an effort to simply be a good and righteous person.

Can you name some ritual prayers?

Now does God ever in His Word call for this kind of ritualized set formal repetitive kind of prayer life? Absolutely not!!! What God does call for and reveal to us in the many examples of His children is genuine, sincere, heartfelt prayer. Not formalism and ritualism, which generally just breed indifference.

Even in the Lord’s prayer which follows the admonition of Matt. 6:7, the Lord begins “In this manner” which is one word in the original Greek οὕτως (houtos) that simply means “along these lines.” So the model prayer is not just a set or group of words to be repeated mechanically. It is a guideline. Oh it is certainly

Name some religions that rely on ritual prayers. Have you ever been part of a religion or a church that did this? What was your prayer life like?

fine to memorize it and to rehearse it in our minds and meditate on it in our hearts. But we are not to treat the model prayer as some kind of ritualistic magic genie that you can just say and be all happy about yourself because you've done your duty in prayer. No, it was given by the Lord as a skeleton, showing us the kinds of areas and things that we are to pray about. It is a pattern that we are to flesh out with our own words or praise, adoration, petitions and so on. It is not a substitute for our own prayers, but a guide for them. And it teaches us the true nature of prayer that is pleasing and honoring to God.

2. Prayer becoming formalized for various occasions (e.g. meals, bedtimes, etc.). Not only did the Jewish people have ritualized prayer, but they had also developed prescribed prayers for every object and every occasion. There were prayers for light, darkness, fire, rain, the new moon, traveling, good news, bad news, etc., prescribed and formalized prayers for specific situations. Prayer was offered when the time came or the situation arose, with no regard for genuine desire or need.

Do you ever use pattern prayers or prayers you've memorized? How?

Once again the fault was not necessarily with the words or the fact that they prayed regularly. The fault was indifference and a flippant, half-hearted or apathetic attitude towards communion with God, which was encouraged by the formal requirements. Daniel prayed three times a day, but when he prayed it was from the bottom of his heart. It was with a heart of love and longing for God above all others. It was not by rote, and it was not for the sake of ritual. It was also not a vain effort at attaining personal piety or righteousness. It is the heart that makes the difference.

How do you think a person might respond if his/her spouse spoke to him in formal patterns and repetitions?

3. Prayer can be highly esteemed for the wrong reasons. For instance, there was fault in the Lord's day in esteeming long prayers, in believing that a prayer's actual effectiveness was directly proportional to its length. Jesus warned of the scribes who, "for appearance's sake offer long prayers" in Mark 12:40. Praying long to impress others. Some ancient rabbis taught that the longer the prayer, the more likely it would be heard by God. As if God, you know, might be dozing off or watching TV and not immediately realize that someone is talking to Him. Verbosity was often confused with effectiveness and length was substituted for sincerity.

What's the difference between ritual vs. relationship? How would this difference impact a marriage, for instance?

In the same way, some people want to sound really good when they pray, so they use high-and-mighty theological terms designed to impress others: "Lord, we thank You and praise You for the glory of the hypostatic-union and Kenosis of Your incarnation." And these words must be said with a certain depth and weightiness of voice. God undoubtedly waves His hand and goes, "Phhht" at such prayers.

4. Prayer can become a meaningless repetition, similar to the prayers of Islam and other pagan religions. You will remember in their contest with Elijah on Mount Carmel how the pagan prophets called on the name of Baal from morning until noon saying, "O Baal answer us," and then they "raved until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice" (1 Kings 18). Hour after hour they repeated the same phrase, trying by the very quantity and repetition of their words to make their demonic god hear and respond.

What are some of your favorite prayers in Scripture?

You must not view your daily prayer time as a legalistic duty, and you must watch out for and avoid all of these faults like the plague. But the positive side of this fault gives us another foundation:

2. You must view your daily prayer time as a relationship with God (James 4:8).

Scripture abounds with example after example of people drawing near to God in sincerity and truth. These are the kind of worshipers that the Father desires (John 4:23-24). James 4:8 tells us simply, "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you."

What do these tell you about the person's relationship to God?

It is important to remember that the Pharisees spent much time in regular prayer and fasting, yet they had no real personal relationship with God. A powerful prayer life is not just about discipline and not a matter of ritual. From God's perspective, prayer is the expression of that which He desires for you, love, surrender and trust. Prayer, then, is meaningful time in a personal love relationship with the living God. (Note 1 Cor. 13:1-3 as it relates to this).

When you were dating your spouse, did you ever say, "Honey you are so important to me and because you are, I'm going to try and give you five whole minutes each day!" Or did you ever say, "Honey it's just so hard for me to spend time with you, but I'm going to force myself to do it for a few minutes each week!" If you ever did do that, I can only say that it

is a miracle you are married today. Why do those statements sound crazy? It's very simple. When you truly love someone, you enjoy and want to spend time with him or her. If you love someone, the close relationship is a joy, not a duty.

What's the meaning of commitment?

Many of us must relearn the crucial lesson of Luke 10:38-43. In this text, Martha and Mary were two sisters with very different views of what was important to the Lord. Martha was busy doing all kinds of tasks for Jesus, but did not spend time simply sitting at His feet. Mary, though, put her first priority on making time to sit quietly in His presence and listen. After a while, Martha approached Jesus and asked Him to rebuke Mary for being lazy. Much to her surprise, Jesus rebuked Martha and said that Mary had chosen the "better part" that would not be taken from her. This story contains a truth of enormous importance. We need personal time with God, before we attempt to work for God, and we need to greatly value this personal time at His feet.

Can you relate this word to your prayer life?

If we would become mighty in prayer, we must learn to view our prayer time as a relationship and not a religious chore or legalistic requirement. Viewing prayer as a natural part of a daily love relationship is a critical foundation of a powerful prayer life.

3. You must make a *commitment to consistent prayer* (Luke 18:1).

God values commitment greatly (e.g. 2 Chron. 16:9) and He especially values commitment to consistent persevering prayer as Luke 18:1 and the following parable make clear.

First, let's discuss this idea of commitment. The word commitment in the sense I'm using it here means dedication. Dedication to prayer means that your prayer time becomes a major priority that you carefully schedule and guard. You plan for it and you take steps to protect it. But why should you make this commitment. Three crucial reasons:

How consistent is your prayer life?

a. Commitment is essential to survival and victory in the spiritual war surrounding you. (2 Cor. 10:7; Eph. 6:10-17).

Since prayer and Scripture are your primary weapons, it is little wonder that the enemy will do anything to keep you from praying with dedication and consistency. He will also fight to keep you from praying effectively. And if your commitment to prayer is not strong and firm, the enemy will certainly pressure you out of its daily practice through business, stress, worry or

some other issue. He will cause you to “settle” for a shallow ineffective prayer life. You will even be tempted to duty swap as Martha was, trading “good things” for that which is “best.” Has the enemy been successful in your life?

Why is commitment to prayer so hard?

b. Commitment is essential because your flesh will strongly resist prayer.

Note Matt. 26:40; Rom. 7:14-18. From these texts we see that serious prayer is often more like a spiritual battle than a brief moment of peaceful reflection and conversation. The enemy is not only without but within as well. Powerful prayer frequently involves intense spiritual labor and warfare against your own sin nature.

c. Commitment is essential because the world’s views of acquiring strength and obtaining success are the opposite of God’s (Ps. 20:7)

Why is this commitment important?

The world’s pattern for success emphasizes organization, strategy, methodology, human programs, strengths and abilities. It is very easy for a Christian to fall into this kind of thinking, but God teaches us that the true key to success in this life is through faith and dependance upon him. God’s pattern is often to bring us to the point of recognizing our utter weakness and total reliance upon Him (e.g. 2 Cor. 12:9). He is displeased when we put the predominate emphasis on our own methods and very little or no emphasis on prayer.

As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:5, “Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as *being* from ourselves, but our sufficiency *is* from God.” Dedicated, consistent prayer is a very simple and glorious recognition that our sufficiency is not in our selves but in God.

What about consistency? Beloved, brief, inconsistent prayer times never produce powerful Spirit- filled believers. In our generation, we have made a “god” of convenience and ease. And we want to give God a brief minute or two and try to fit Him into our busy schedules; if it is convenient. But the God of the universe should have far more devotion than this. Is it any wonder that our lives are characterized by spiritual weakness rather than strength.

What are the different occasions you have for prayer? Which one is foundational & why?

The Spirit says, “that men always ought to pray and not lose heart.” God values perseverance, especially in light of difficulty and potential discouragement. He desires His children to cry out “day and night” (Luke 18:7). He desires that our prayers be “fervent” (James 5:16). One completely inextricable aspect of truly “fervent” prayer is consistency.

A fourth foundation is this:

4. You must make a commitment to secret, solitary & uninterrupted prayer (Matt. 6:6).

Jesus says, “But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.”

Do you have a regular place and a time for secret prayer? Why or why not?

There are two critical aspects to this foundation. The first is “secret & solitary” prayer. Now this is not to say that there is no place for public prayer before all men, congregational prayer, prayer in small groups or family prayer. All of these kinds of prayer are taught to us by example and precept in the Scripture. However, one very unfortunate aspect of our sin nature is that we will often treat these things as a substitute to secret & solitary prayer time with God, rather than treating our secret time with God as foundational to everything else.

Even worse, some people give into temptation to pride in their hearts and actually pray with the desire to be seen and heard and thought well of by other people. Praying with this motive is intended to satisfy personal pride, and regardless of the form or words of the prayer, the motive is sinful self-glory, a true perversion of prayer. After all, according to John 14:13, the ultimate purpose of true prayer is that the Father might be glorified in Christ Jesus, the Son, not for anyone else to receive the glory, including you and me. And extremely helpful guard and protection against this particular sin, according to Matt. 6:6, is a commitment to secret and solitary prayer.

You must pray, Beloved, when you are all alone and nobody else in the world has the slightest clue what you are doing. Whatever it takes, find a way, even as Jesus, who was in constant demand from huge crowds of people did by rising “a long while before dawn” and departing “to a solitary place” to pray (Mark 1:35).

The second critical aspect of this foundation is “uninterrupted” prayer. Why uninterrupted? There are four reasons this is crucial:

Why is secret & solitary prayer important?

- a. Time alone with God is the biblical example of the Lord. Since the Lord Jesus is our primary example, this practice is clearly something we should embrace (Luke 6:12; 9:18; Mark 1:33-35).
- b. The scripture specifically commands it, and we know that it is crucial to loving God and maintaining spiritual health (Matt. 6:6).
- c. When we pray, we commune with the God of the entire universe and He deserves our undivided attention (Jer. 29:13). How can we even imagine having a serious audience with the God of the universe while we are distracted by other things? We would never treat an earthly leader with such disregard or dishonor, why should we treat God that way? Guard your time with God even more than you might guard an appointment with the Governor or the President.

What do we discover about Jesus' pattern of prayer in Mark 1:35? What does Christlikeness require of you?

- d. Fretfulness does not honor God, but stillness before Him (Ps. 46:10). God often speaks in our stillness, granting discernment to our hearts in those times. And let us remember, "In quietness and confidence, shall be your strength" (Is. 30:15).

In no way do I mean to suggest in laying this foundation that we shouldn't pray throughout the entire day. Paul said we are to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17). It is certainly important to pray while we drive to work or wash the dishes. It is often important for us to pray in our hearts even in the middle of carrying on conversations with others. But this kind of prayer can never replace the intense undivided prayer to which God has also called us to give ourselves.

A final foundation for this week is this:

How much time do you spend in prayer ever day?

5. You must make a commitment to spend significant time in prayer (Mark 1:35).

Time and again this principle is modeled for us in scripture. I think about the prayer in the upper room or the Lord's stinging rebuke in the midst of His great struggle in Gethsemane, "What! Could you not watch with Me one hour? Watch and pray" How many of us would also fail and cringe to hear the same rebuke if the Lord asked us to pray for "one hour."

Is this adequate? If not, what can you do to make it better?

The simple truth is, Beloved, that in some ways, love for God or anyone else is spelled TIME, and not just time but meaningful time. If you doubt me ask your little ones. It's one thing for me to say to my four year old daughter or my eight year old son, "I love you." That's nice as far as it goes and needs to be frequently affirmed. But it's a completely different and more powerful thing to sit down with one of them and play for a time and show them love by my desire to be with them and be involved in the things they care about.

It's interesting. If I have a tea party with my daughter and then say "I love you," she will often respond with a huge grin and say, "I know daddy." How does she know? Because I've just spent half an hour showing her my love.

What is your greatest hindrance to significant time in prayer? How can you better guard your prayer time?

Perhaps the greatest hindrance to modern spirituality is the busy hectic pace of today's society. Modern believers have often bought into the notion that a three or four minute daily "quiet time" constitutes a powerful prayer life. This is simply ridiculous. Biblically and historically nothing could be further from the truth. Certainly there is an important place for brief momentary prayer devotions, but we must never think these can replace our "closet prayer."

As we view the prayer practices of Jesus and the faithful of Scripture, it is clear that they regularly spent much time alone in fervent prayer. It is also clear that believers and churches of every Great Awakening averaged more time in prayer **daily** than the average American Christian does in two months. When we study the lives of people mightily used of God, we find one great common denominator: they spent much time in fervent daily prayer.

What does this mean practically to consistently spend significant time alone with God? I believe the best understanding is a **daily** time with God. Beyond question, that is the strongest biblical pattern. However, as we stated earlier, it is important to avoid legalism. Remember, your prayer time must be viewed as a relationship, not some duty or rigid requirement. Though it is vital to be disciplined for a regular time with God, you should not feel condemned when there are occasional variations to the pattern. God does not want you to be "fearfully" watching your clock or dreading His condemnation if you fall a few minutes short.

It is also important to understand the meaning of significant time with God. Just how much time is significant? Though I would never try to

specify a required amount, I can say what is not significant time. A three of four minute daily devotion is not what is meant by a powerful prayer life. In such a brief period, there is simply not enough time to develop and experience all the essential types of prayer. A handful of minutes is simply not enough to fully develop a powerful, well rounded relationship with God.

I will, therefore, make the general suggestion of spending at least 30 minutes to an hour in a daily prayer time. Though there is nothing magic about a 30 minute minimum, this usually provides enough time to cover the basics of praise, thanksgiving, confession, intercession, petition and meditation.

How many of us will blow thirty minutes every day on a sitcom or spend thirty minutes just piddling around arranging the papers on top of our desks, standing the break room, going to get a soda or whatever. Surely if we can find time to do those things, we can spend some real time with our Lord and Savior, God and King, the Creator of the Universe who gives us life and all things and holds our very breath in His hands.