

Praying Like Jesus

by Bill Hybels, from “Too Busy Not to Pray”

When the disciples asked Jesus for instruction on prayer, Jesus began by saying, “When you pray...” (Mt. 6:5). He simply assumed the disciples would have a regular time for prayer. That’s a big assumption to make about Jesus’ disciples today. Most of us say we just don’t have time for daily prayer. But do we want prayer to become a vital part of our lives? If we want to develop in any other area – piano, basketball, physical fitness – we practice regularly. The America’s Cup team from New Zealand practiced intensively for two years, six days a week, eight hours a day, and they brought sailing maneuvers to a level never before achieved. People who are serious about something always make room for it in their schedules. It is important to have a regular time for prayer, because without regularity prayer will never become a habit. If we want to live in God’s presence, we need to shut the world out and tune in God once a day, every day, without fail. We need to lay aside our other concerns and focus on God, look at him, talk with him listen to him sit quietly before him.

Get away from Distractions

If establishing a regular prayer time is important, so is making a regular prayer place. Some people pray in public places, at social gatherings and at mealtimes, just so they can be seen and heard and assumed to be religious. But prayer, Jesus says, is not a spectator sport. It is not something we are to engage in to give off signals of spirituality. Forget that idea, says Jesus. When you pray, go into your room and shut the door. Find a closet, an empty office, the workshop out in the garage, some secret place away from people and alone with God. That’s where you can pray most effectively. Why the emphasis on privacy? Why shut the door? First, there is an obvious, practical reason. A private place ensures a minimum of distractions, and most people find distractions deadly when it comes to making connection with God. Almost any kind of noise- voices, music, a ringing phone, kids, dogs, birds – can cause me to lose my concentration during a time of prayer. Even a ticking clock can catch me up in its rhythm until I’m tapping my foot and singing a country song to its beat. Jesus knows how our minds are put together, and he counsels, “Don’t bother fighting distractions, because you’ll lose. Avoid them. Find a quiet place where you can pray without interruption.”

The practical reasons for privacy are important, but I think there is also a more subtle wisdom in Jesus’ advice to pray in a secret place. Once you identify such a place and begin to use it regularly, a kind of aura surrounds it. Your prayer room, even if it is a laundry room in the basement, becomes to you what the Garden of Gethsemane became to Jesus – a holy place, the place where God meets with you.

Create a Special Atmosphere

Some married couples have a favorite restaurant where they go for important nights out. They love the atmosphere. They find it easy to talk in that environment, and they look forward to going there. It’s a special place in their relationship. Some families have a regular vacation spot that feels almost like a second home to them. Great things happen to the family there; special memories are created. The families look forward to their vacation times. In a similar way, when you create a secret place where you can really pray, over time you will look forward to going there. You will begin to appreciate the familiar surroundings, sights and smells. You will grow to love the aura of the place where you freely converse with God. I created such a prayer room near the credenza in a corner of my former office. In my prayer place I put an open Bible, a sign that says “God is able,” a crown of thorns to remind me of the suffering Savior, and a shepherd’s staff that I often hold up while making requests. That office corner became a holy place for me. I arrived there around six o’clock in the morning, when no one was around and the phone was unlikely to ring, and there I communed with the Lord. I poured out my heart to him, worshipped him, prayed for members of my congregation and received remarkable answers to prayer. My office has since been relocated, and I now have a new prayer corner. But I have warm memories of the old one – not because there is anything holy about the corner itself but because of what happened there. Every morning for several years I met with the Lord, and he faithfully met with me. Thinking of that corner is like thinking of home. If you want to learn how to pray, find yourself a quiet place free of distractions. It doesn’t have to be a chapel. It can be the utility room, the kitchen pantry, the barn, your office or the front seat of your pickup truck, as long as the surroundings are familiar and quiet.

Go there during the best part of your day – in the morning if you’re a lark, late at night if you’re an owl or whatever time you feel most alert. Meet with the Lord there regularly, every day.

Mean What We Say

Not only did Jesus tell his disciples to pray secretly; he also told them to pray sincerely. “Do not keep on babbling,” he said. Be careful of clichés. Don’t fall into the habit of using meaningless repetition. How easy it is to use sanctified jargon while praying! Certain phrases sound so appropriate, so spiritual, so pious, that many people learn to string them together and call that prayer. They may not even think of the implications of what they are saying. For example, I sometimes hear a mature Christian say very earnestly, “Dear Lord, please be with me as I go on this new job interview,” or “Please be with me as I got on this trip.” When you first hear it, this request sounds holy. Unfortunately, it doesn’t make sense. I’m often tempted to ask the one who is praying, “Why do you ask God to do what He is already doing?” In Matthew 28:20 Jesus says, “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” In Hebrews 13:5 God says, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” Jesus tells his disciples in John 14:18, “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.”

One of Jesus names, Emmanuel, means “God with us.” We don’t need to ask God to be with us if we are members of his family. Instead, we need to pray that we will be aware of his presence, that we will be confident because of it. Asking God to be with us when he is already there is one kind of “babbling.” Another kind of meaningless repetition is often heard at the dinner table. A person sits down to a meal that is a nutritional nightmare. The grease is bubbling, the salt is glistening, the sugared drink stands ready to slosh the stuff down. “Dear Lord,” the person prays, “bless this food to our bodies, and grant us strength and nourishment from it so that we may do your will.” God’s will might be for the person to say “Amen,” push back from the table and give the meal to the dog – except that dogs matter to God, too! The apostle Paul tells us God’s will in 1 Corinthians 6:20; “Honor God with your body.” That means putting the right things into your body. Don’t ask God to bless junk food and miraculously transform it so that it has nutritional value. Doing that is acting like the fifth-grader who, after taking the geography test, prayed, “Dear God, please make Detroit the capital of Michigan.” That’s not how God works.

Pray from the Heart

God doesn’t want us to pile up impressive phrases. He doesn’t want us to use words without thinking about their meaning. He wants us simply to talk to him as to a friend or a father – authentically, reverently, personally, earnestly. I heard a man do this once when I least expected it. I attended a conference at which a number of high-level Christian leaders were present. The conversation was intense; I had to strain to keep up with the theological and philosophical issues being discussed. Lunchtime came, and we all gathered at a nearby restaurant, the Hole in the Wall. A seminary professor was asked to pray. As we bowed our heads I thought, *This prayer is going to sound like theology class.* The theologian began to pray. “Father,” he said, “I love being alive today. And I love sitting down with brothers in the Hole in the Wall, eating good food and talking about kingdom business. I know you’re at this table, and I’m glad. I want to tell you in front of these brothers that I love you, and I will do anything for you that you ask me to do.” He went on talking like that for another minute or two. When he said, “Amen,” I thought, *I have some growing to do.* His sincere prayer showed me how often I pray on automatic pilot. But God isn’t interested in stock phrases. Psalm 62:8 says, “Pour out your hearts to Him.” Talk to him. Say, “Lord, this is how I feel today. I’ve been thinking about this recently. I’m worried about this. I’m depressed about that. I’m happy about this.” Talk to the Father sincerely.

Pray Specifically

Besides praying privately and sincerely, Jesus counseled his disciples to pray specifically. He showed them what he meant by giving them a model prayer, the prayer we have come to call the Lord’s Prayer. Jesus Prayer begins with the words *Our Father*. Never forget that if you are God’s child through Jesus Christ, you are praying to a Father who couldn’t love you more than He already does. The next phrase, *who art in heaven*, is a reminder that God is sovereign, majestic and omnipotent. Nothing is too difficult for Him. He is the mountain mover; he is bigger than any problem you could bring to him. Fix your eyes on his ability, not your worth. *Hallowed by thy name.* Don’t let your prayers turn into a wish list for Santa Claus. Worship God

and praise him when you come to him in prayer. *Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.* Submit your will to God's. Put his will first in your life – in your marriage, family, career, ministry, money, body, relationships and church.

Give us this day our daily bread. The apostle Paul wrote, "In everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Phil. 4:6). Lay out all your concerns, whether big or small. If you need a miracle, ask for it without shrinking back.

Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. Be sure you're not the obstacle: confess your sins, receive forgiveness and begin to grow. Live with a forgiving spirit towards others. *Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.* Pray for protection from evil and victory over temptation. *For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.* End your prayer with more worship. Acknowledge that everything in heaven and earth is God's. Thank the Lord for caring about you, for making it possible for you to talk to him through prayer. *Amen.* Let it be so. God-honoring prayers are not simply shopping lists. They are more than cries for help, strength, mercy and miracles. Authentic prayer should include worship: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name" (Mt. 6:9). It should include submission: "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (v. 10). Requests are certainly appropriate:

"Give us today our daily bread" (v. 11); as are confessions: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (v. 12). The Lord's Prayer is an excellent model, but it was never intended to be a magical incantation to get God's attention. Jesus didn't give this prayer as a paragraph to be recited; in fact, he had just warned against using repetitious phrases. Instead, he gave it as a pattern to suggest the variety of elements that should be included when we pray.

Reflect on Your Time with God

The trouble with magical incantations is that they are mindless. Too often we go through life without thinking about what we're doing and what it all means. If we approach prayer thoughtlessly, we can't expect powerful results. I used to be the chaplain for the Chicago Bears. Every Monday during the season I would lead a Bible Study in Halas Hall. Often I'd get there a little early and listen in as the coaches worked with the team. I was struck by how Mike Ditka and the other coaches would replay each individual play of the previous day's game. Before moving into preparations for the next game, the team would reflect on the one they had just played. At that same time I was reading Christian authors who were saying that if Christ's followers don't grow, it's because they do not make a habit of evaluating their lives. Those authors were describing me. I was moving fast, always on the go but never looking deeply inside. I never did the kind of reflection that leads to growth. And I was paying the price – committing the same stupid sins over and over and over, living with the same heavy load of guilt. So I made a difficult decision. I decided that each day I would try to honestly assess my soul's condition. I would look inside myself, and I would write down what I saw. Feeling awkward and embarrassed, I took out a spiral notebook and started to write. "God, here are some frustrations in my life. They aren't going away, so I might as well take a look at them." Or, "Here's a relationship I'm concerned about. It's not god, and I don't know how to improve it." Or, "Here are some blessings you've poured into my life." After writing a paragraph or two, I would reflect on what I had written.

Above All, PRAY!

It's been nearly fifteen years since I started writing reflections about my day. I soon began writing out my whole prayer and reading it back to God. I've been blessed in many ways because of this discipline. It helps me concentrate. I used to get no further than "Dear God" and I'd already be thinking of the person I was going to meet for lunch, or the board meeting agenda, or what my family would be doing after dinner. When I'm moving a pen across paper, it is much easier to keep focused. Writing also forces me to be specific; broad generalities don't look good on paper. And it helps me see when God answers prayers. At the end of each month, I read over my prayer journal and see where God has done miraculous things. Whenever my faith feels weak, I turn to my journal and see evidence that God is answering specific prayers. If I can list a number of answers to specific prayers in January, I feel better prepared to trust God in February. I write out my prayers every day; I have not been able to grow in my prayer life any other way. Experiment and see what works best

for you. Try writing out your prayers once a week at first. If you find it helpful, do it more often. If it cramps your style and makes you uncomfortable, find another way that is more effective for you. Whatever helpful disciplines you choose, practice praying Jesus' way. Make your prayers regular, private, sincere and specific. Remember that God's prevailing power is released through prayer. He is interested in you and your needs. He is able to meet any need, and he has invited you to pray. His Son, Jesus, the expert on prayer, has given instructions so that you know just how to pray. For the miracle of prayer to begin operating in our lives, we must finally do only one thing: we must pray! I can write about prayer, and you can read about it, and you can even lend my book to a friend. But sooner or later, we have to pray. Then, and only then, will we begin to live moment by moment in God's presence.

List three things that God is showing you that could help to make your prayer time more effective:

1.

2.

3.