Believe: How Do I Grow Through Prayer?
Psalm 66:18-20

As we return to our Believe series, we are looking at what it means to ACT like Christ. Last week we considered the spiritual discipline of worship, and this morning we will turn our attention to the spiritual discipline of prayer.

Before I launch into this subject, I want you to know that MOST Christians do not feel GREAT about their prayer life…including your Lead Pastor. That’s not to say that we don’t pray…we do…but I think the vast majority of Christians in the world know that there is a lot of room for growth when it comes to their inner life of prayer. A man named Brother Lawrence wrote a book on prayer, and these are his words: “For many years I was bothered by the thought that I was a failure at prayer. Then one day I realized I would always be a failure at prayer, and I’ve gotten along much better ever since!” Another profound think on the subject, Thomas Merton once wrote, “We do not want to be beginners. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything else but beginners, all our life!” So…whether you pray every day or only in moments of great need, please know that you are in the “safe harbor” of God’s grace, and every person here is welcome to be where you are on this subject without shame. Having said that, I’m asking God to increase my desire for Him…to increase my desire to meditate, fast, and pray…and I would invite you to do the same. Again, prayer is not a matter of “trying harder” through the power of our will. Even the desire to pray is a gift of God’s grace, so before we dig into this subject this morning, let’s stop and ask God for a fresh outpouring of His grace…for the gift of prayer and the desire to pray.

Now…PRAYER is an important and profound subject. In preparation for this message I was challenged and encouraged by reading Richard Foster’s Celebration of Discipline, particularly the chapters on meditation, prayer and fasting. Foster recommends we read Andrew Murray’s With Christ in the School of Prayer, and I suspect Andrew Murray would have us read a few other works on prayer! Many wonderful books have been written on this subject and I encourage you to read deeply in this area. Due to our time restrictions, I will only be able to address a few key points. To that end, I will address the discipline of prayer under three subheadings: the privilege of prayer; the practice of prayer; and the power of prayer.

I. The Privilege of Prayer

As is the case with all of the spiritual disciplines, prayer is not something we should do, it is something we GET to do! We get to communicate with God…the Creator and Lord of all the universe. We get to talk to God personally, and we get to hear from God personally. Christian prayer is a privilege that Jesus purchased for us on the cross. Let me unpack that for a minute.

When we look back upon the biblical narrative, we discover in Genesis 1 and 2 that, for a short time, communication between God and humanity happened as freely and clearly as I am communicating with you right now. That was always God’s intent. But sin frustrated our ability to communicate with God. When sin entered into the world, our first inclination was to hide from...
God. Our next inclination was to lie to God, to shift blame, and to dodge our accountability under God’s law. When read of Adam and Eve, Cain and Able, Lot, Sodom and Gomorrah, and so many other stories, we find that the communication between humans and God becomes more and more difficult. Now…there are notable exceptions to be sure. God communicates clearly with Abraham and Moses, the prophets, and the judges, but what we find is that the general mass of humanity is always looking for a mediator to communicate to God on their behalf.

Richard Foster writes, “As a people…the Israelites realized that being in God’s presence was a risky business and told Moses so: ‘You speak to us, and we will hear; but let not God speak to us, lest we die.’ In this way they could maintain religious respectability without the attendant risks.”

He sums up the situation with a profound insight: “Human beings seem to have a perpetual tendency to have somebody else talk to God for them…such an approach saves us from the need to change, for to be in the presence of God is to change. We do not need to observe Western culture very closely to realize that it is captivated by the religion of the mediator.”

Why are humans so afraid to address God directly? Well…the problem of sin creates serious issues when it comes to prayer. Consider God’s words to the Israelites in Isaiah 1:15, “When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause.”

As we’ve said so many times over the course of this series, sin separates us from God. According to Isaiah 1, the “blood on our hands” can block our prayers from being heard by a Holy and Just God. In the passage we just read, God spells out what needs to happen in order for our prayers to be heard: we need to washed and made clean; our evil deeds need to be removed from his sight; we need to learn to do good and to seek justice, etc. That is a daunting list, and it explains why many of us feel hopeless when it comes to prayer…we know we have blood on our hands…we know we need to be washed and made clean.

Now consider the Gospel! When Jesus came as our mediator, He atoned for our sin on a cross and conquered the power of sin when He rose on the third day. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5 that God made Jesus “to be sin who knew no sin” so that the right standing of Jesus might be imputed to us as a free gift of grace. All we need to do is repent and place our faith in what Jesus accomplished on our behalf, and that channel of communication is reestablished. Jesus makes us clean; the Holy Spirit empowers us to do that which is right in the eyes of the Lord, and once again, God hears our prayers.

Before Christ, only the priests could enter the Holy of Holies, but in Christ, we all have direct access to the Father.
In Hebrews 10 we read, “Therefore since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”

Did you hear how Jesus satisfied the requirements that God commanded in Isaiah 1 so that our prayers could be heard?

Foster writes: “God is speaking in the continuous present and wants to address us. Jesus and the New Testament writers clearly state that this is not just for the religious professionals—the priests—but for everyone. All who acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord are the universal priesthood of God and as such can enter the Holy of Holies and converse with the living God.”

Again, the writer of Hebrews speaks the truth: “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in times of need.”

Can you see that prayer…hearing from and speaking to our Living God…is a privilege? It is a privilege Jesus purchased for us on the cross…and it is a privilege He clearly intends for us to utilize in our daily lives.

II. The Practice of Prayer

Now, let us consider the practice of prayer. There are many ways to pray, and I’m not interested in giving you some particular formula to use as “the standardized way of praying.” There are a few points I would like to make that I think are essential and necessary when it comes to our prayer life.

1) To pray is to tune into God’s frequency. Right now, at this very minute, there are literally hundreds of messages buzzing through this room on various frequencies. There are FM frequencies and AM frequencies, WiFi frequencies and 4G frequencies. We can’t hear them because we are not tuned in, but if you were to turn on a basic radio and begin flipping through the stations, we all know that those frequencies are available to us right now.

Prayer is similar in that God is always present; He is eager to communicate with us; and He is available for us to communicate with Him. But in order for that communication to happen, we must “tune” our spirits to align with His frequency. This is particularly true if we ever hope to HEAR from God. I suspect God can hear us on any frequency, but for us to hear God speak to us, we must take time to tune in. So, how do we tune in to God’s frequency? Again, there is not one way, and quite frankly, we all need to approach this process of tuning in as students who are eager to learn through experimentation. I will give you a few ideas that I find helpful for tuning into God’s frequency.
a) Step away early. Jesus often needed to step away from the fray to pray. In Mark 1:35 we read, “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went to a solitary place, where he prayed.” If Jesus needed to step away, it stands to reason we will need to step away for a time in order to tune our hearts to the Father’s. I know that’s hard for some of us. There are many mornings that I will use time in the shower, time in my truck, 15 minutes between meetings…whatever space I can carve out to get tuned in to the Father. And the earlier the better. Waiting until the end of the day to get tuned into God’s frequency is like tuning your violin after the concert is over!

a) Come clean. Confession and repentance are a staple in my prayer life so that I am not hiding or arguing with God about my sin. I know Jesus makes me acceptable before the Father, but I need to confess my sin and repent in order to tune in to God’s frequency and to hear from Him.

b) Get quiet. Our lives are full of noise. It’s hard to hear God amidst all the noise, worries, and distractions that fill our thoughts and minds. Sometimes for me, tuning in to God means “tuning out” some of the noise of my life so that I can hear the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit.

c) Agree with God about what He has already said. There is no substitute for reading scripture when it comes to tuning in to God’s frequency. When we read the scriptures as God speaking to us, we hear not only what He has said, but we will also hear what He is currently saying about our worries, concerns, and circumstances. This also includes praying the Lord’s Prayer. You know you are tuning in when you pray the prayer the Lord taught us!

d) Worship God. Nothing tunes my heart to hear from God and to speak with God more than worship. Singing to God has a powerful effect on my heart and allows me to get tuned in with my Father in heaven. Corporate worship…right here on Sunday mornings, is a critical part of tuning my heart to hear from God as well.

2) Once tuned in, the practice of prayer begins with listening. When we think of prayer, most of us think about talking to God. But prayer is actually MORE listening than talking. Consider what Paul writes in Romans 8: “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. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” I have been blessed to know several true Prayer Warriors in my life. Without exception, those who have learned the disciplined life of prayer spend more time listening than talking, and they even wait to hear from the Lord regarding what they are supposed to be praying for! In other words, they don’t bring an agenda to their prayer time. They come before the Lord attentively, and then they pray for those things that God brings to their minds. It may take some time for us to recognize the way that God speaks to us. God often uses scripture, our imaginings, our dreams, words through another believer, or a powerful, convicting phrase to get our attention…but God does speak, and it is our privilege to listen.

3) When we pray, think ACTS. Many of you are familiar with the acrostic ACTS that we often use as a model for prayer. A stands for adoration. So we begin by proclaiming our adoration and love for God simply because of who God is. The C stands for confession. As we draw close to God, His perfect light reveals our darkness, so it is always appropriate to confess our sins to God. T stands for Thanksgiving. As we touched on last week, God is always pleased to hear our
prayers of Thanksgiving for all that He has done, and we all should be particularly thankful for Jesus and our salvation. Finally, S stands for supplication. After we have praised God for who He is, confessed our sin, and given thanks for our salvation...it is appropriate to bring our requests before God. This includes our requests for ourselves as well as our intercessions for others. Richard Foster’s treatment on the art of intercessory prayer is worth the price of the book in my opinion. One of the most important points that Foster makes about intercessory prayer is that God will guide us to pray for people if we are listening. God bring people to our hearts and minds, usually through a supernatural outpouring of compassion for the person’s situation. Foster writes, “The inner sense of compassion is one of the clearest indications from the Lord that this is a prayer project for you. In times of meditation there may come a rise in the heart, a compulsion to intercede, an assurance of rightness, a flow of the Spirit. This inner “yes” is the divine authorization for you to pray for the person or the situation. If the idea is accompanied with a sense of dread, then probably you should set it aside. God will lead someone else to pray for the matter.”

Foster’s description really resonates with my own experiences of intercessory prayer. Again, there is so much for us to learn when it comes to the various kinds of prayer, but I think we should all be asking God all day long WHO He wants us to be praying for specifically. That leads me to my next point.

4) Pray all day. When I interviewed for this position ten years ago, the search committee asked me about my prayer life. I wanted to crawl under the table. I knew they were looking for a classic pastor answer like, “I get up at 4 a.m. every morning and pray until 7.” I had no such answer. In fact, I’ve struggled to set aside a regular prayer time for most of my adult life due to my four kids and our inconsistent schedules. I’ve confessed that to you before, and I even had church members reprimand me following that confession. But here’s the truth: I pray all day long. In other words, it has never occurred to me that prayer was something I would “do” and then “be done with.” I start my day talking to my Father, and I never “hang up the phone.” I do think that dedicated time away to pray is important, but I want to encourage you to pray all day…to keep the line open and be attentive to the Lord’s presence and His direction as you work, as you engage with your family, and as you respond to all that life is throwing at you. As Paul says in 1 Thess. 5:16 “Pray without ceasing.”

III. The Power of Prayer

I think many of us, if we are honest, have wondered what actually happens when we pray. In other words, do my prayers make a difference? Do my prayers change anything? Foster writes, “It is easy for us to be defeated right at the outset because we have been taught that everything in the universe is already set, and so things cannot be changed. And if things can’t be changed, why pray? The Bible does not teach that. The Bible pray-ers prayed as if their prayer could and would make an objective difference.”

When we think of those who pray throughout the Bible, you would be hard-pressed to find one biblical character who did not firmly believe that God answers prayers, and that our prayers
make a difference as to what happens here on planet earth. Moses prayed boldly and interceded for the Israelites when God was going to wipe them out for idolatry, and we read in Exodus 32:14, “And the Lord relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.”

When Peter prays over the lame man at the Beautiful Gate, he prays with faith that God will move and heal the man, and that’s exactly what happens. When God announces through His angel that Sodom and Gomorrah is about to be destroyed, Abraham intercedes and negotiates with God in prayer in an effort to save the righteous people in that region. Foster writes, “We are working with God to determine the future! Certain things will happen in history if we pray rightly. We are to change the world by prayer.”

Prayer is powerful. Prayer brings about change.

1) Prayer changes us. When we commune with God, we will be changed. It is impossible to genuinely pray and not be changed by your encounter with God. Prayer will increase our humility. Prayer will reveal our sin and lead us to repentance. Prayer will change our perspective. Should you actually pray for your enemies, your heart will be softened towards them and you will see your enemies in a totally different light. The same is true when you pray for your spouse or your children. Prayer changes the one who prays…which is likely one of the reasons we often fail to pray. We don’t want to be changed…we feel justified in the way that we are, and we likely intuit that we might have to change should we humble ourselves in prayer. But Church…that is exactly why we should pray. God will accomplish His purposes in our hearts, our character, and our thinking if we will only pray.

2) Prayer changes the atmosphere. Remember that, according to a biblical worldview, there is an unseen but very real spiritual reality that is always at work all around us. When we pray, we are engaging in spiritual combat against the powers and principalities of darkness that are very real and often wreak havoc on our lives, our families, our church, and our community. Prayer changes the spiritual atmosphere because we are invoking the power and the presence of God into a particular area or set of circumstances. I wish I could tell you exactly how that works, but I can’t…I really cannot explain it in a way that would satisfy you. I can, however, bear witness that prayer works. Particularly prayers “in Jesus’ name.” In John 14:12-14 Jesus says, “Truly I tell you that whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.” All throughout the world believers have given testimony that when they were haunted by darkness, facing horrible times of depression or suicidal thoughts, when they were tempted to sin, when they faced down demons or found themselves under spiritual attack, a simple prayer in Jesus’ name would immediately change the atmosphere and give them the courage and power to overcome the situation. In fact, this is the PRIMARY reason that Hindus and Muslims convert to Christianity. They place their faith in Jesus because when they prayed in HIS name, He answered…things changed, and that was a qualitative difference from when they prayed to other gods.
Real prayer in Jesus’ name is powerful…and it’s always powerful. Half-hearted prayers with no faith, no love for Jesus, with no effort or desire to attune one’s heart to God…are a waste of breath.

So Church, do you want to change the world? Do you want to see your life transformed into the Light of Christ? Do you want to see supernatural power working in your life and the lives of those you love? Do you want to push back the darkness and fight the good fight?

Then pray. Pray in Jesus’ name. Pray with faith, and don’t hedge your bets. Pray without ceasing. And let’s start now. Will you pray with me?