

Prayer 101: What Is It?
Series: School of Prayer
Ephesians 6:18
July 10, 2022

Good morning class. My name is Professor Cow of Patty.

I will be teaching a series of courses on one of the spiritual disciplines of the Christian faith, and that is prayer. In order to get for credit in this class, you must attend every session. I will not tolerate spit balls, stink bombs, or snoring in this class.

Now, prayer is the first spiritual discipline one can practice. A child can pray before he or she can read the Bible or should be allowed to fast. It is the simplest of disciplines.

Today, I wish to answer to question “What is Prayer” so be prepared to take notes.

Paul tells us in Ephesians 6:18:

Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere.¹

First, Prayer is to converse with God. It is the conversation of the soul with God.

Everyone of us knows how to carry on a conversation with someone else. Some are better at it, but it is something we learned from our earliest days. We had conversations with our father or our mother or any siblings. We converse with friends about intimate details of our lives. We talk to relatives about family matters and events. We discuss with acquaintances around the proverbial water cooler last night’s episode of the popular TV series or the result of a sporting event. We dialogue with our neighbors about other neighbors, especially the guys that can’t mow a straight line. We know how to talk to others.

Prayer is simply that: a conversation, except it is with the One who created us, the One who knows us better than anyone else, the One who loves us no matter what we say or do. That should be as easy as any other conversation with any other person we might have.

Prayer is to converse with God.

Second, Prayer presupposes a belief in the personality and power of God.

Prayer believes in God’s ability and willingness to want to be part of our lives and His personal control of all things.

There was a woman at work when she received a phone call that her daughter was very sick with a fever. She left work and stopped by the pharmacy to get some medication for her daughter.

She returned to her car to find that she had locked the keys inside the car when she went into the pharmacy and was now unable to get into her car to drive home.

She didn’t know what to do and started to panic, so she called home and told the babysitter what had happened and that she did not know what to do. The babysitter told her to find a coat hanger and see if that would open the door.

The woman looked around and found an old rusty coat hanger that had been thrown down on the ground, possibly by someone else who also had locked their keys

¹ Ephesians 6:18 (NLT2)

in their car. Then she looked at the hanger and said, "I don't know how to use this." So she bowed her head and asked God to send her some help.

In so doing, she obeyed the command to never stop praying. Do you think God would reward her for that?

Within five minutes a motorcycle roared up and pulled into the parking space next to her car. A rough, dirty-looking biker got off and saw her situation. He asked if he could help her. The woman thought, "This is what you sent to help me, God?"

She finally told him yes, as she needed to hurry and get home to her sick daughter. He walked over to the car, and in less than one minute the car was opened. She hugged the man and through her tears she said, "Thank you so much! You are such a nice man."

The man replied, "No, I'm not, Lady. I just got out of prison for car theft."

The woman hugged the man again and with sobbing tears cried out to God, "You even sent me a professional."

Prayer presupposes a belief in the personality and power of God.

Third, prayer is not contemplation or meditation, but direct address to God.

Prayer is not sitting in your chair contemplating something. It is not the spiritual discipline of Christian meditation. It is direct address to God.

Jesus said in the Upper Room in John 16:23

At that time you won't need to ask me for anything. I tell you the truth, you will ask the Father directly, and he will grant your request because you use my name.²

To this point in the disciples' lives, one might suppose that they brought their requests to Jesus. But henceforth, Jesus said, you will ask the Father directly. You will not go through Him. You will not go through a priest. And you will definitely not go through Mary. You and I go directly to God. To say otherwise is a false teaching.

Prayer is a direct address to God.

Fourth, Prayer is both silent and oral.

Many of us like the silent prayer. Close your eyes for how many seconds you feel is appropriate, then get on with whatever you need to do. If it is in a public restaurant, 2 seconds maximum. At a church potluck, it's got to be 5 seconds. When you are asked to pause in silence to commemorate a tragedy, 10 seconds should be good.

We like praying in silents, but prayer is also oral. But according to unscientific polling – that is, this is the professor's opinion – praying (especially out loud, even amongst fellow believers) ranks third most dreaded thing to do, behind witnessing and speaking in tongues.

The psalmist said:

This poor man called, and the LORD heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles.³

Have you ever heard of "The Prayer of Cyrus Brown"?

One day, four Christian leaders were at the feed mill discussing how to pray

The deacon said, "The proper way for a man to pray, and the only proper attitude is down upon his knees."

The Sunday School superintendent said, "No, I should say the way to pray is standing straight with outstretched arms and rapt and upturned eyes."

² John 16:23 (NLT2)

³ Psalm 34:6 (NIV)

“Oh, no, no, no!” said the Elder. “Such posture is too proud. A man should pray with eyes fast closed and head contritely bowed.”

The Reverend said, “It seems to me his hands should be austerely clasped in front, with both thumbs pointing toward the ground.”

The feed mill operator was Cyrus Brown. He said, “Last year I fell in Hoskin’s well, headfirst, with both my heels a-stickin’ up, my head apointin’ down. And I made a prayer right then and there, the best prayer I ever said, the prayenist prayer I ever prayed was astandin’ on my head.”

Have you had any experiences like Cyrus Brown? Have been in any situations where at least metaphorically your heels were a-stickin’ up, and your head was apointin’ down?

Sometimes, the audible cry of the petitioner is the most heartfelt prayer.

Fifth, Prayer is both occasional and constant.

Most of the prayers uttered in the Bible are of the occasional variety.

Abraham’s servant prayed for success in finding a wife for Isaac.⁴

Moses cried out to the Lord when there was no water in the wilderness.⁵

Hannah prayed for a child.⁶

Elijah prayed at the contest with the prophets of Baal.⁷

I could go on. Prayer is occasional, at the moment, at the time of need.

But prayer is also constant. We’ve all heard the verse:

*pray without ceasing,*⁸

Oswald Chambers in “My Utmost for His Highest” writes, “We think rightly or wrongly about prayer according to the conception we have in our minds of prayer. If we think of prayer as the breath in our lungs and the blood from our hearts, we think rightly. The blood flows ceaselessly, and breathing continues ceaselessly; we are not conscious of it, but it is always going on. We are not always conscious of Jesus keeping us in perfect joint with God, but if we are obeying Him, He always is. Prayer is not an exercise, it is the life. Beware of anything that stops the offering up of prayer. “Pray without ceasing...” means maintaining the childlike habit of offering up prayer in your heart to God all the time.”⁹

Sixth, Prayer is both extemporaneous and formal.

It is a “beseeching of the Lord¹⁰”; a “pouring out the soul before the Lord¹¹”; a “crying to heaven¹²”; a “seeking unto God and making supplication¹³”; “drawing near to God¹⁴”; it is a “bowing of the knees.”¹⁵

⁴ See Genesis 24:12

⁵ See Exodus 15:24-25

⁶ See 1 Samuel 1:27

⁷ See 1 Kings 18:37-38

⁸ 1 Thessalonians 5:17 (NRSV)

⁹ Oswald Chambers in “My Utmost for His Highest”, May 26

¹⁰ See Exodus 32:11

¹¹ See 1 Samuel 1:15

¹² See 2 Chronicles 32:20

¹³ See Job 8:5

¹⁴ See Psalm 73:28

¹⁵ See Ephesians 3:14

If we exempt the Lord's Prayer, which is a model or pattern of prayer rather than a set prayer to be offered up, we have no special form of prayer for general use given us in Scripture.

Finally, Prayer is both intimate and corporate.

It is the prayer of the penitent sinner, the dying mother, the thanksgiving of the saint.

Psalm 61:2:

From the ends of the earth, I cry to you for help when my heart is overwhelmed. Lead me to the towering rock of safety,¹⁶

But there is also corporate prayer.

Jesus said:

Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.¹⁷

When Peter was put in prison, sure to be killed, the Christians gathered to pray, and he was miraculously released.

The Israelites prayed as they neared the Promise Land, as they dedicated the Temple, then again at the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem.

In 2005, Barna Reports said this, "Prayer is one of three critical spiritual dimensions which most local churches essentially ignore. Prayer is said to be one of the top priorities in less than 4% of the churches surveyed."

Someone once said, "A life without prayer is like a car without gas. Both may look good, but they are both powerless."

I like what Martin Luther once said:

"I am so busy now that if I did not spend three hours each day in prayer, I could not get through the day."

Let me close with this short phrase from a poem:

"Satan trembles when he sees
The weakest saint upon his knees."¹⁸

¹⁶ Psalm 61:2 (NLT2)

¹⁷ Matthew 18:19-20 (ESV)

¹⁸ Word Pictures in the New Testament, Ephesians 6:18