

### Spiritual Formation Lesson 3: Prayer

**Purpose:** To discuss the importance of prayer as well as practical ideas to help people as they continue to develop the discipline of prayer

Note: It is doubtful that you will have time in your class to make it through all the material. You might pick and choose what material would be best for your particular class.

**Review:** Last week we talked about the practice of silence and solitude. Did anyone have the opportunity to practice this? If so, how did it go?

**Opening Question:** Growing up, what did you learn about prayer? How were you taught to be pray - either by words or example?

Prayer is a way that we interact with God - The *Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible* defines prayer in this way: An interactive conversation with God about what we and God are thinking and doing together.<sup>1</sup>

Prayer is important to God! It is a way of growing in relationship with him, learning to trust Him, depending on Him for our needs. To recognize the importance of prayer in

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Foster, et al., *The Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible*, 2302.

Scripture, go to a concordance or a Bible search engine, and search “pray” or “prayer.”

The number of verses that will come up is startling! The Old Testament is filled with prayers - prophets pray, kings pray, regular men and women pray. The book of Psalms is mostly a book of prayers. God says in Isaiah 56:7, “For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”<sup>2</sup> He says in Jeremiah 29:12, 13, “when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you see me with all your heart...”

Jesus not only shows the people the importance of prayer by his constant turning to prayer, he also gives them instructions on prayer and a specific example of how to pray (Matt. 6:9-13, Luke 2:2-4). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and **acts on them** will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.” (Matthew 7:24). The NIV says, “puts them into practice.” We are not only to know that praying is important, we are to pray! The early Christians in Acts took Jesus’ example and teaching of prayer seriously. Luke writes several times that they devoted themselves to prayer (Acts 1:14, 2:42, 6:4) and gives many specific examples of people praying (Peter and John prayed for new believers Samaria in 8:15, Saul is praying in Acts 9:11, Cornelius in 10:2, Peter in Acts 10:9, the church Acts 12:5, the list goes on and on!). When leaders of the church write letters to different churches, they instruct believers to pray! Prayer is an important way we seek God and follow God! If we are wise, we will pray.

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<sup>2</sup> All Scripture quotations in this lesson from New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989.

Last week we discussed the importance of spending time in silence and solitude, time that we give to God to allow Him to transform us. During these times, one thing that we can do is offer ourselves to God in prayer.

As we think about the spiritual discipline of prayer, we will start with some practical ideas. There is a reason that prayer is considered a spiritual discipline - it does not always come easy. It can begin to come naturally but only after practice - just as running 5 miles becomes more natural after one has practiced running! But, even for those who run, sometimes the first mile or two is the hardest. For Christians, even when prayer has come naturally and easily for a time, there are still times it may not come as naturally.

We will talk about some different ideas to help us in our prayers lives.

As we work on developing the habit of praying, there are two practical things that we can do to help us: set aside a specific time and place to pray.<sup>3</sup> We regularly schedule time to be with people who we want to be with - even when we live in the same house with them. We schedule meals with people, appointments with people - we get in the habit of being with certain people so that when we are not with them, we miss them! It is the same with praying - we need to set aside time with God to make sure that it happens and to get in the habit of being with God. We talked last week about setting aside time to spend in silence and solitude, prayer can go along with this - when you set aside time of silence

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<sup>3</sup> Henri Nouwen, 64-66.

and solitude, one thing you can do during that time is pray. If we do not set aside time to pray, we are likely to forget that God is near and that we can rely on Him.<sup>4</sup>

Finding a specific place to pray is not absolutely necessary, but it is helpful. You notice in the gospels, that when Jesus withdraws to pray he often goes to a mountain or a “lonely” place. While some of us may have a room we can go to pray, many of us may just have a specific chair we might sit in when we pray. The benefit to finding a place to pray is that you will notice after you return to that place time and again, especially at certain times, you will more naturally enter into prayer. Your mind and body will be accustomed to praying in that place at that time.

(For example, a living room that is normally devoted to television or children playing in it, can also be a place, you train yourself to naturally connect with God when every day at a certain time, you sit in the same chair to pray.)

**Does anyone have any experience with setting aside a time and place for prayer?**

**Did it help you become more “in the habit” of praying?**

Prayer was so important to Christians in the first few centuries that they were often given instructions on how often to pray - these instructions ranged from being told to pray the Lord’s prayer three times a day, to being told to pray at meals and three times a day and at

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<sup>4</sup> Henri Nouwen, 65.

night, to being told to pray five times a day.<sup>5</sup> In a book called *The Apostolic Tradition*, they are instructed to pray at the 3rd hour, 6th hour, 9th hour, and before they go to bed; they are to rise again at midnight to pray and when the cock crows in the morning.<sup>6</sup> These instructions may have been given to help them learn how to “pray continually” as Paul instructs in I Thessalonians 5:16.

### **How do these instructions for early Christians strike you?**

For many of us growing up, the main prayer that we may have learned is the prayer of intercession, where we pray for others. It may seem overwhelming to think of praying so often for others! Do we pray for the same people over and over again? Doesn't Jesus teach that many words are not necessary to be heard by God and that He knows we need before we ask him (Matthew 6:7-8)? When Jesus teaches the apostles the Lord's Prayer, it seems so simple - how is that stretched out into praying all day long? Throughout history, faithful Christians have struggled with this idea of praying continually and have come up with creative ways to pray, often using Scripture to do so.

### **Breath Prayers:**

One way that people learned how to pray “continually” is through breath prayers.

Houston Heflin, a professor at ACU, writes about breath prayers in his book *Pray Like*

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<sup>5</sup> Everett Ferguson, 153.

<sup>6</sup> *The Apostolic Tradition*, <http://www.bombaxo.com/hippolytus.html>.

*You Breathe.* He writes that they are prayers that are short, repeated prayers, “aligned with a person’s breathing so that the first half of a sentence is prayed while inhaling and the second half of the sentence is prayed with exhaling.”<sup>7</sup> You breathe in while saying part of the prayer and breathe out while saying the other part. Since it is hard to purposefully take a breath and breathe out and speak at the same time, these are usually silent prayers. Some people believe that breath prayers originated with the Israelites during the days of the Old Testament when they might have repeated phrases from the Psalms in prayers such as “Why are you downcast, my soul? Put your hope in God.”<sup>8</sup> (Psalm 42:5, 42:11, 43:5). Early Christians started saying what they called the “Jesus prayer” based on the following Scriptures:

**Mark 10:46-48:** They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “**Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!**” Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “**Son of David have mercy on me!**”

**Luke 18:13** (In the parable about the Pharisee and tax collector praying to God): But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, **God be merciful to me, a sinner!**”

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<sup>7</sup> Houston Heflin, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Houston Heflin, 14.

**Matthew 15:22:** Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “**have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David,** my daughter is tormented by a demon.”

Based on these stories, early Christians began to pray, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”<sup>9</sup> To practice doing this, you breathe in while praying, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God,” and breathe out while praying “have mercy on me, a sinner.” For those of us growing up in the Church of Christ, this may sound strange. We tend to want to pray using new words and new thoughts. However, this is a practice worth trying. When you are angry or anxious, try saying this breath prayer ten times in a row. Or set a timer and say it over and over for one minute or more. This can be done with other verses from the Bible, “Give us this day our daily bread.” (Matthew 6:11), “Show me your ways, Lord - teach me your paths.” (Psalm 25:4), “When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.” (Psalm 56:3). While this is a different practice for us, it is a way of offering ourselves to God to be transformed by Him.

### **Prayers of Gratitude:**

Paul often instructs churches to give thanks to God for everything.

I Thessalonians 5:16-18: Rejoice always, **pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances;** for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.

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<sup>9</sup> Houston Heflin, 16.

Philippians 3:4-7: Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication **with thanksgiving** let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Colossians 4:2: Devote yourselves to prayer, **keeping alert in it with thanksgiving.**

**Why do you think Paul thought it was important to remind Christians to pray with thanksgiving?**

**How does it change us to live with gratitude to God?**

Some ways to practice prayers of gratitude is to lift up a short prayer to God every time we are thankful for something - remembering that God is the giver of all good things.

Some people like to keep a journal where they list everything they are thankful for each day. This can also be a prayer. As we look for things to thank God for, we can begin to see God in more of our lives. The Psalmist writes in Psalm 105:1-5:

O give thanks to the Lord, call on his name,

Make known his deeds among the peoples.

Sing to him, sing praises to him;

tell of all his wonderful works.

Glory in his holy name;  
let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.  
Seek the Lord and his strength;  
seek his presence continually.  
Remember the wonderful works he has done,  
his miracles, and the judgments he has uttered.

The more we thank God for what He is doing and has done, the more we can recognize what He has done in the past and when He is at work now.

### **Contemplative Prayer**

In contemplative prayer, we sit with God, we are silent with God, allowing Him to work in us, to become more aware of His presence.<sup>10</sup> In contemplative prayer we trust that what Paul wrote in Romans 8:26-27 is true:

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weaknesses; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We do not have to rely on what we know and what we are capable of saying, we can rest in the Spirit, allowing him to know us and form us and lift prayers for us. We may feel that if we do not have words to say, then we are not really praying - but we are assured

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<sup>10</sup> Adele Calhoun, 239.

that this is not the case. We can rest in God, knowing that we are with Him even without words. In this kind of praying, there is little that we do - instead of clinging tightly to control, we give it up, trusting that the God who is “able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine” (Eph. 3:20, NIV) is working in us, transforming us.

In Psalm 42, the psalmist struggles to find God. He longs for God, and the people ask him, “Where is your God?”

#### Psalm 42:5-8

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?

Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.

My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you  
from the land of Jordan and of Heron, from Mount Mizar.

Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts;

all your waves and your billows have gone over me.

By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,

and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.

**What emotions do you hear in this Psalm?**

**Do you see any signs of contemplative prayer?**

The psalmists trust that God is with Him - with his love and his song - when God's song is with him, the psalmist trusts that it is as a prayer to the God who rules his life.

Contemplative prayer does not need to be practiced simply when life is difficult. It can also be used for times of learning to center on God and rely on God. Other ways of practicing contemplative prayer, include choosing a Scripture to meditate on - or to recite in your head. Scriptures that remind us of who God and Christ are are good for this:

(These are just a few!)

**Deuteronomy 10:17** "For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe."

**Psalms 46:1** "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

**Psalms 54:4** "But surely, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life."

**Psalms 68:20** "Our God is a God of salvation"

**I Corinthians 1:9** "God is faithful."

**Colossians 1:15** "(Christ) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation"

**Hebrews 1:3** "(Christ) is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of GOD's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word."

**I John 4:16** "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."

### **Crying Out to God:**

When we pray, we turn to God, with the expectation that He hears us and can help us. At times, maybe many times every day, we may need to cry out to him, “Please help me!”

How many times do we rely on our own power to help ourselves rather than asking God for help? Sometimes we cannot move into any kind of prayer, before we cry out to God. Psalm 77 is an excellent example of this!

### **Read Psalm 77.**

**Does the Psalmist seem to “feel” close to God at the beginning of the prayer?**

**As the Psalm progresses, what emotions do you hear? How do his thoughts about God seem to evolve during the Psalm? Why do you think this is?**

It seems that the Psalmist cries out to God in his distress in the first four verses. As he cries out to God, he moves into meditation and searches for God. As he wonders where God is in his troubles, he begins to remember the things that God has done and who God is! God is holy (vs. 13); he is great (vs. 13), he works wonders and displays his might (vs. 15); he has redeemed his people (vs. 16)! The psalmist focuses in on the exodus through the Red Sea - when God parted the sea for the Israelites and how he led his people. One can't help wonder if as he remembers what God has done for his people, he will also remember that God is also leading him. In verse 19, he says, “yet your footprints were unseen” as he led the people like a flock. While he prays, the psalmist cries out to God, wondering where God is! As He moves into meditation and

remembering who God is and what He has done for His people, the psalmist recognizes that sometimes God's work is unseen. Even though at the beginning of the Psalm, he cannot be comforted, he finds comfort as he seeks God through the night.

### **Confessional Prayer**

There are times that we need to confess our sins before we can pray more. We know that God forgives us, but sin can build a wall between us and God - especially when we are unwilling to admit our sin. Crying out to God for mercy is something that helps open our relationship with God back up when it has become stagnant or closed off. We often try to manage other people's impressions of us - we want them to see us as good, intelligent, kind people. Sometimes we do the same with God. But God is not into impression management - he wants the real us, with all of our faults. In confession, we bare ourselves to Him, not pretending to be anything that we are not. Instead of trying to change ourselves with our own will-power on our own, we turn to Jesus and repent.<sup>11</sup>

Psalm 139:23, 24: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

Psalm 51 is a great example of a prayer of confession for anyone who would want to read an example.

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<sup>11</sup> Adele Calhoun, 102.

### **Prayer of Intercession:**

Once we give up control and impression management, we are better able to pray for others. How many of us use prayer as a way of grasping control? As we grow in our relationship with God in prayer, we should learn to trust God with everything.

It is important to pray for those we are close to and for those who are sick. When someone is sick, we know that we have no control! And it comes naturally to pray for those we love because it is a way of helping them when we might not be able to do anything else. We will talk more about praying for those we love when we talk about community in a few weeks. As we briefly talk about prayers of intercession, we will talk about two kinds of intercession that Jesus specifically tell us to do:

1. Pray for our enemies - Matthew 5:44 “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

**Do you think this is as radical of a teaching today as it must have been during Jesus’ day?**

**What could change in us as we pray for our enemies? Or even just for those who think differently from us?**

In today's divided world, divided country, praying for those who are different from us could bring a healing that we cannot even imagine. Try not praying for them to change - try praying for their good!

2. Pray for the church - Jesus gives us an example of praying for his disciples in John 17. Paul writes about his prayers for the churches over and over again in his epistles.

In Colossians 1:9-14, Paul wrote his prayer for the Colossian church:

For this reason, since the day we heard it, **we have not ceased praying for you** and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

**What does Paul pray for the Colossian church?**

**What could we be praying for churches today?**

**Is praying for churches a regular practice for us today? How could the practice of praying continually for other churches and other Christians transform us to be more like Christ?**

**Conclusion:** We discussed many different ways to pray today - breath prayers, prayers of gratitude, contemplative prayer, confessional prayer, crying out to God, prayers of intercession. God has given us many different ways to connect with Him! There is no “one” way of praying correctly - obviously, the Lord’s prayer is a great model for us - learning how to pray that prayer is a great place to start. Pray it using the words from your Bible. Pray it by rewriting it into your own words. The most important thing to do is to talk with God and give Him the space (silence) to allow Him to work in you.

Through prayer, we grow in relationship with a God who pursues us.

This week, try one of the new ideas for prayer that we discussed. Or, take the Lord’s prayer in Matthew 6:9-13 or Psalm 23 and rewrite it in your own words.

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Spiritual formation is the name for that process by which Christians, in union with Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit, become conformed both internally and externally to the character of Christ for the purpose of communion with God. The closing of the year and the beginning of a new one is an opportune time to reflect on our spiritual formation and to develop habits to help us become more like Jesus.Â What is prayer, then, in the fullest sense? Prayer is continuing a conversation that God has started through his Word and his grace, which eventually becomes a full encounter with him. . . . The power of our prayers, then, lies not primarily in our effort and striving, or in any technique, but rather in our knowledge of God.