

“Pray”
(James 5:16)

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Introduction: The Most Neglected Resource on the Planet is Prayer!

- A. It is something we so much take for granted, but consider for a moment this very simple revelation from Sacred Scripture:

James 4:2: “You do not have, because you do not ask.”

- B. My ex-WW 2 Marine dad was very strict -- a great dad and a loving dad -- but also strict and it was never easy just to come out and ask him for the stuff I really wanted. But when I gathered up the nerve to ask for something really special – and as I look back on it – he was also amazingly generous. This wasn’t an incessant thing and because of the way he raised me, I was conscientious about not getting carried away, but I think back and there were big items: when I was a little boy, a great big GI-Joe set with an all-terrain vehicle and helicopter, then when I was a little older, a telescope, then a weight bench and weight set, and while I still in high school, a car...I look back on that, we were never rich, but my dad was extremely generous...I learned that he took his son’s ASKING very seriously.
- C. But we all have another Dad: our Heavenly Father, and He is very rich, very gracious, very generous, very loving, and He wants the absolute best for each of us...and He actually invites you and I...to ask! I am, however, just touching on one little element of what prayer is. Prayer is a great gift indeed and it is much more than just asking, but consider how much we do not tap into this resource.
- D. Our Lord says to His disciples, “Pray so that you will not fall into temptation (Matt. 26:41).”
1. Soak that in a bit: it may be accurately said therefore that if we fall into temptation by committing sin that it is because – at least in identifying one real cause according to Scripture – we do not pray.
 2. Prayer is God’s way of protecting us from committing sin and therefore prayer is a tremendous weapon and resource for blessing in our lives. And yet...how easily do we neglect it?!
- E. James 5:16 (from our epistle today) says that the prayer of a righteous man [of course righteous only on account of faith in Christ] is powerful and effective!
1. God has given to you and to me a powerful and effective resource! It makes a tremendous, impactful, and significant difference in our lives precisely because it is powerful and effective!
 2. How many of us would really like a powerful and effective resource in our life? And yet how easily we neglect this resource!
- F. 1st Peter 4:7 says, “The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.”

1. Prayer is so highly prioritized here that we are instructed by God to care for our own lives in such a way – by being self-controlled and sober-minded – that we are in a position to continue praying. Take care of your life in such a way that nothing will interfere with this amazing resource given to you by God: prayer!
2. Scripture seems to be teaching that after believing in the saving Gospel itself, that there is nothing more important for the Christian to do! And yet, we so easily neglect this gift from God called “prayer”!

Part I: But if we are going to truly repent and use this gift of prayer, then we must know exactly what it is (much of the following are highlights from an excellent document entitled “Theology and Practice of Prayer,” a report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, November 2011):

- A. First off, prayer is marked by dualities: it is instinctive and simple and taught and learned; *ex corde* (from the heart) and from a book; one’s deepest desires are given to God and at the same time, we pray for God’s will and not ours; and it is as easy as a breath, yet we often struggle to pray (6).
- B. But in going past these real dualities, let me offer you some great definitions for the sake of clarity:
 1. “Prayer is speaking to God in response to His speaking to us in His Word, just as sheep respond to the sound of the shepherd’s voice by ‘bleating back’ to him their inarticulate expressions of gratitude, affection, and dependence.” (p. 7)
 2. But Scripture itself gives no systematic or comprehensive definition (p. 12) To be honest, Scripture seems to be infinitely more concerned that we would actually be in the *practice* of praying rather than talking about it all day and theorizing.
 3. Still, here are two outstanding summaries of what prayer is:
 - a. Clement of Alexandria: “conversation and intercourse with God.” (12)
 - b. Francis Pieper: “the conversation of the heart with God (Ps. 27:8).” (12)
- C. But no matter how it is defined, this you can be sure of: prayer is only born and sustained by the Gospel of Jesus Christ...that is, you can only be in holy conversation if you know and believe that Jesus lived, and died, and rose for you to save you from sin, death, and the power of the devil. This saving and powerful Gospel launches you and it keeps you in a holy conversation knowing that God is on your side through Christ. But this is not easy to do, *because our sinful flesh resists this relationship with our Heavenly Father*. And so we must pray like one of those first original disciples of Jesus prayed – and not just once – but every, single day: **“Lord, teach us to pray!” (Luke 11:1) [let’s say that Scripture together, ready? “Lord, teach us to pray!"]**

Part II: We need that prayer, because there is a LOT of confusion about prayer:

- A. The original *English* meaning of the word prayer (notice that we are not talking about the original languages of Scripture -- i.e. Hebrew and Greek -- but the *English* background which is the popular background) is that prayer is a form of begging.
- B. Now let me be clear that there are some Biblical shades of prayer that resemble begging, but before we get Scriptural, I'm talking about popular ideas.
- C. Because begging is the popular idea, there is inherent in this idea that prayer must contain a real sense of alienation and doubt. It is like going up to a total stranger and begging them for money...they might help out or they might totally ignore us or tell us to get lost! In the popular idea, we have no idea if God [or whomever or whatever a person in the culture is praying to] is favorable towards us, if they are even listening to us, and finally, we have no idea if this request will ever be answered. Prayer becomes effectively – in this popular, non-biblical sense – something that is the roll of the dice.
- D. Now, as a result of this huge “UNCERTAINTY” sign above what the culture calls “prayer,” we end up permitting our gut instincts to dictate what prayer will be. That is, we become loosey-goosey when it comes to how to pray. So in one of the “Mummy” movies that came out about ten years ago, there is this scene where the mummy is going to get this guy, and the guy starts going through his collection of amulets around his neck. He’s got a rabbit’s foot, a cross, symbols of all kinds of false gods...and he starts “praying” to all of them so that he might get lucky to stop the big, bad mummy from getting him!
- E. And in this sense, people in general are very religious. Don’t forget what St. Paul said in Athens when he met the Athenians and saw their display of altars to many gods. Paul said, “Men of Athens, I see that you are very religious” (Acts 17).
- F. So in other words, apart from Scripture, the true God, the true faith, and what prayer actually is, you’ve got this wide-spread practice of popular, cultural pseudo-religious “prayer” already going on that is totally false.
- G. And here’s the point in bringing all of this up, question: ***“How much has all of this cultural junk affected YOU when it comes to prayer in your life?”***
- H. We need to ensure that what we are doing is not the pop-culture version, but that it is the real McCoy, the real deal, actual, biblical, God-pleasing, effectual and powerful prayer...powerful by the way not because of what we do, but because of the true God and the true Gospel that true prayer is connected to.
- I. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that it is “a dangerous error...to think that the heart can pray by itself. For then we confuse wishes, hopes, sighs, laments, rejoicing – all of which the heart can do by itself – with prayer.” (17)

J. But the pop-culture or the sinful heart version of prayer is not prayer at all. The false versions are:

1. Based on uncertainty
2. Based on our own failing power
3. Based often on forms of manipulation and deal-making: “O God, if you do this, then I will do that or stop doing that or start doing this, etc.”
4. Based sometimes on concepts of magic or mechanical incantations.

K. These are not the marks of true prayer.

Part III: So WHAT is true prayer?

- A. Prayer is “always a response of the believer to the grace of God.” (14)
- B. “If we want to learn to pray we must become like children...through faith in Jesus Christ.” (14) “For we must be completely certain that we are heard *on account of Christ* and that *by his merits* we have a gracious Father.” (16)
- C. Those who are in Christ are continually at prayer and live out what the Bible says, “Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17).” (17) This is a life of continual dependence on the grace of God the Father in and through His Son Jesus Christ and as a result, Luther says, “So then, you can not find a Christian who is not always praying.” (17)
- D. Hear how Daniel was so focused on grace when he prayed in Daniel 9:19: ***“O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive. O Lord, pay attention and act. Delay not, for your own sake, O my God; because your city and your people are called by your name.”*** (18) Daniel’s prayer was definite and absolutely confident, because the prayer was based on God’s grace, God’s person (Daniel says, “for your own sake”), and God’s name...and he prayed using the words, “O Lord” which is to pray in the name of the true God who has revealed Himself to be loving and merciful.
- E. And while prayer is not a means of grace, it is most definitely a RESPONSE to God’s grace that we have received and that we remain in as Christians. But here’s the thing that should immediately shock us, because we are so lackadaisical, this prayer that is in response to God’s grace is not incidental or optional for the Christian. (21)
- F. If you and I need God’s grace 24/7, then the response to God’s grace cannot be optional. And prayer is “a distinguishing mark of the sanctified life.” (22)
- G. Thus Luther said, “After the preaching of the Gospel whereby God speaks to us, this is the greatest and foremost work, that by prayer we in turn speak to God.” (22)

Part IV: But WHY Pray?

A. FIRST: Because it is God's COMMAND!

1. God quite simply knows what we need and so He commands us to do it.
2. Prayer is "a powerful tool and a weapon in our ongoing struggle – against the devil, the world, and our flesh – to live in obedience to God and his commands." (25)
3. Luther: "Consequently, nothing is so necessary as to call upon God incessantly and to drum into his ears our prayer that he may give, preserve, and increase in us faith and the fulfillment of the Ten Commandments and remove all that stands in our way and hinders us in this regard." (26)

B. SECOND: Because of God's PROMISES!

1. Luther: "Such promises certainly ought to awaken and kindle in our hearts a longing and love for prayer. For by his Word, God testifies that our prayer is heartily pleasing to him and will assuredly be heard and granted, so that we may not despise it, cast it to the winds, or pray uncertainly." (28)
2. God promises to hear us and answer us! He swears! (John 16:23, just understand the biblical qualifier).

C. THIRD: Because God gives the WORDS!

1. The Perfect Prayer (Matthew 6 and Luke 11): "The Lord's Prayer" or "The Our Father"!
2. The Book of Psalms, the Psalter: God's very own words!

D. FOURTH: Because of our GREAT NEED!

E. But...what difference does it make?

1. Prayer and the paradox of influencing an immutable God:

On the one hand, Malachi 3:6: "I the Lord do not change."; Numbers 23:19: "God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind."; Hebrews 13:8: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever."

On the other hand, Exodus 32:14: "the Lord relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people;" Jonah 3:10: "God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it;" Isaiah 38:1: "You are going to die; you will not recover." AND 2nd Kings 20:5-6: "I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you...I will add fifteen years to your life." AND James 5:16-18: "The prayer of a righteous person has great power in its effects."

OK, so "changing His mind" = a metaphorical concept that helps us to understand the true nature of God (32), we have a "both/and" proposition here:

On the one hand, the first group of verses say – as Reed Lessing says – "we are not in the hands of an unstable force." God is unchanging! Thank God! We are secure!

On the other hand, the second group of verses say that “God is ready and willing to change prior decisions in order to demonstrate His perfect love.” The Lord’s deep compassion demonstrates that our God is relational. (32)

2. Again, this is a paradox, but Scripture clarifies the tension.
 - a. “God does not, however, always answer affirmatively, for God’s immutable will is ‘good and gracious.’” (33)
 - b. All of His responses flow from love! (33)
 - c. So should you pray for your daughter to be healed, of this drought to end, or on account of financial concerns and good performance at the job, pray for your employer to increase your salary? Yes, of course! “who knows, perhaps for the sake of Jesus He may reverse a sickness, an infertile womb, a fractured relationship. But if not, (33) we also pray, ‘Yet not my will, but Thy will be done’ (Mark 14:36).” (34)

F. BUT why does God desire communication with us?

1. His desire for intimacy. (34)
2. God continues actively to seek us out. (34)
3. Because He rejoices over us! (35)

Conclusion: HOW do you Pray?

- A. Be encouraged, because Jesus is the answer! St. Augustine: “He prays for us, as our Priest; He prays in us, as our Head; He is prayed to by us, as our God.” (36)
- B. You have been given the Holy Spirit in your holy baptism, therefore, by the Spirit we are enabled to “cry, ‘Abba, Father’.” (Rom. 8:15; cp. Gal. 4:6) (36)

C. By faith you pray!

“We pray as children of God, ‘for that is what we are’ (1 John 3:1). Consider a child of two or three years, in new command of the gift of speech, and watch how she uses that gift with her mother and father. She relishes this ability, talking sometimes incessantly, never afraid to ask for what she needs or wants. She is confident, though she is also learning that not everything she asks is given. Her courage is in the loving care she receives from father and mother. So she speaks. She asks. She expects (Ps. 4:3).” (38)