

Prayer: An Introduction to the 2013 Week of Prayer

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Prayer is one of the most misunderstood aspects of the Christian life. In a moment of unusual vulnerability, the disciples asked Jesus, *Teach us to pray*. Why would they ask Jesus this? They had never seen or heard anyone pray like Jesus or prioritize prayer like Jesus. They were used to prayers that were just repetition of the same words over and over again. Mindless praying. Zombie praying. To this day, at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, you can see hoards of orthodox Jews praying there. I have stood among them and their prayers sound like mantras repeated over and over again.

But Jesus? He prayed so differently...

The Prayer Life of Jesus

He prayed at difficult hours

- *In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God.* (Luke 6:12 ESV)
- *And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.* (Mark 1:35)

He prayed in times of blessing

- Before a meal (Matthew 26:26)
- Before a miracle (John 11:41)

He prayed in times of desperation

Gethsemane –*And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.* (Luke 22:44)

On the cross

- *"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"* (Matthew 27:46)
- *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."* (Luke 23:34)
- *"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!"* (Luke 23:46)

There was so much about Jesus' life that was radically different from anything the disciples had seen before. His prayer life inspired them. *"Teach us to pray."* We see there that prayer is not innate. You are not born with a great prayer life. It is something that can be learned; or why would Jesus teach them? It must be cultivated and worked at; or why would his prayer include, *"Give us each day our daily bread"*? (Luke 11:3) Daily need. Daily prayer.

What is Prayer? Talking with my Heavenly Father

When Jesus taught the disciples to pray, he began simply with, *"Our Father in heaven."* (Matthew 6:9) He is Almighty God. He is Sovereign of the Universe. He is head of the Trinity. But Jesus taught the disciples to pray *Our Father*. One of the most powerful and helpful realities of prayer is that prayer is **relational**. This doesn't mean that we should pray flippantly or irreverently, but he is our Father.

This assumes an important truth—that God actually *is* your Father. For God to be your Father, Jesus has to be your Savior. Before believing in Jesus, God is not relationally our Father in the truest sense. He is our Judge. He is our Jury. He and holy justice are our Condemners.

After believing in Jesus—who bore the death we deserved on the cross for us—in the most remarkable reversal of fortune, God our Judge becomes God our Father. Now he relates to us as a Father to his children. This is not a metaphor or illustration. We are actually adopted children of the eternal God. So the first question in prayer is not, *how do I pray?* but *who am I before God?* Is he my Judge or my heavenly Father? *Our Father who art in heaven.*

Do not miss the significance of this. God has arranged the universe in a way that when we communicate to God in our hearts or minds or verbalize those in spoken words, what I say here is heard there. Prayer is talking with God here (heart) or here (mind) or here (mouth) and the God of heaven promises to hear our prayers. God doesn't just listen in to our prayers like the NSA listens in to our phone calls, but he *really* listens like I do when I listen to what my daughter says.

My daughter turns five months old this week. Did you know she is already talking? She is. This is one amazing little girl. She is so verbal and so effective at communicating, particularly at such a young age. For example, when she is tired, she says, "Waa!" When she is hungry, she says, "Waa!" When she is scared, she says, "Waa!" She has a highly developed phonic language. At five months old, she is a brilliant communicator.

Why is "Waa!" effective? Is it because of the richness of meaning in the word or the fluent way she says it? Is it her eloquence? Is it her intelligence? No. "Waa!" doesn't work because of her, "Waa!" works because her parents love her. We hear her mostly selfish communication, her I want my-needs-met motivations, her I-am-the-center-of-the-universe demands, and interpret them through a grid of parental love that sometimes gives her what she wants, but always gives her what she needs.

It is the same with our prayers to God. They are often only slightly better than, "Waa!" Our prayers are often as whiny and self-centered as any baby's cry. Even our most articulate prayers do not in themselves require the movement of the hand of God. Our prayers are not effective because they are logical, eloquent, long or short, deep or wide. They are effective because our heavenly Father loves us.

This Week of Prayer, Bethel Church is spending extra time talking with our heavenly Father. He knows what we need before we ask him. We are not informing him of anything nor do we impress him with our prayers. We are simply crying out to the God who loved us in Jesus and who promises to hear us, to give us the joy of fellowship with him, and who will sometimes give us what we want and always give us what we need.

You may not be able to pray like Jesus. If that's the case, then pray like my daughter. God loves you and he rejoices when his children talk with their heavenly Father.

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