

PRAYER (PART I)

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Texts: Matthew 6:5-13 & Psalm 32

Psalm 32

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.
Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.
Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,"
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you;
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them.
You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.
Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,
else it will not stay near you.

Many are the torments of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord.
Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

Matthew 6:5-13

"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of

their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

“Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.”

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Today I’m starting a series of sermons on prayer. Why a sermon series on prayer? In church, we’re often told that prayer is an important part of spiritual life, and we’re encouraged to pray every day. But what prayer is, and how to pray, and why—these things are often left up in the air. Maybe the assumption is you’ll figure it out for yourselves. But in my experience, people often feel like they don’t know what they’re doing when they sit down to pray, and it ends up being a not very satisfying experience.

So the point of this series is to equip you with some knowledge and some tools to go a little deeper in your prayer life and hopefully get more out of it. And I guess the first question we should ask is, *Why? Why do we pray? What’s the purpose behind it?* That’s what I’m going to focus on today, and I’m going to lean heavily on Howard Rice’s book, *Reformed Spirituality*. Rice was a pastor, and a chaplain, and he was one of the people early on who introduced Presbyterians to the practice of spiritual direction.

Rice starts out by claiming that prayer “is a nearly universal human activity.” For as long as human beings have been around, we’ve tried to connect with those mysterious powers that seemed to control our fate. We’ve turned to whatever god or gods we believed in whenever there was a plague or famine or some kind of natural disaster.

So he calls this kind of prayer “natural” prayer because it’s so instinctual. And on the positive side, it’s very honest and genuine, and it demonstrates a basic belief in God’s ability to help us when we’re trouble—like we hear the psalmist declare this morning: “let all who are faithful offer prayer... at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them.”

Natural prayer does have its limitations, though. It’s transactional by nature, and if it’s the only kind of prayer we know, it’s easy to start thinking of God as nothing more than a great big vending machine in the sky. You put your prayers in the slot and out pops whatever kind of divine intervention you need. So there’s the danger of de-personalizing God. And beyond that, natural prayer also has a way of eroding our confidence in God even when our prayers are answered. We can still be left with lingering doubts and questions about our relationship with God. If we ask God for help, and we don’t get it, we might start thinking God doesn’t care about us. But even if help does arrive, we might still end up feeling uneasy about our relationship with God. We

got what we wanted this time, but what about next time? What if the vending machine runs out of candy bars? What are we going to do then?

So there's nothing wrong with natural prayer, but it does have its limitations. Only going to God when we need something is not the best way to build a strong, durable relationship. And that's what we want. We want to build a strong relationship with God, and that means building a relationship that's mutual—a relationship that's not just one-way, but where there's some back and forth; a relationship where we have some accountability; a relationship that challenges us to grow and change and evolve as human beings. And the only way we're ever going to have a relationship like that is if at some point we go beyond natural prayer and start interacting with God in deeper ways. And a great example of a deeper way to interact with God is the Lord's Prayer. The Lord's Prayer is the model Jesus gave us to follow, and compared to natural prayer, it focuses on God, and what God wants, rather than us, and what we want. It asks that God's name be honored, and that God's kingdom be established, and that's God's purposes be accomplished. And only then does it ask for a few basic necessities, like daily bread and forgiveness.

So natural prayer has a totally different purpose than forms of prayer that are more God-centered. The purpose of the one, as Rice puts it, is "to get something." The purpose of the other is "to become something." And if we want to get an idea of what that something is, a good person to ask is John Calvin. We've been talking about Calvin a little bit in the discussion group after church. He was a Protestant reformer, and he wrote a lot about prayer, among other things, and he offered four basic reasons why people pray. And each one of them has something to do with transformation—maturing in faith and growing into a deeper relationship with God. So let's go through them.

1. *Reason number one:* We pray, Calvin said, "that our hearts may be fired with a zealous and burning desire ever to seek, love, and serve [God]."

In other words, faith grows out of prayer. Which is interesting because we sometimes think it's the other way around. We sometimes think you have to already have faith before you can start praying. But that's like saying you have to already know how to play the piano before you can start taking piano lessons. We don't start out feeling close to God and then develop a prayer life. We develop a prayer life, and that's how we become more attuned to God's presence, and how we grow closer to God over time.

2. *Reason number two:* We pray so "that there may enter our hearts no desire and no wish at all of which we should be ashamed to make [God] a witness."

In other words, God sees right through us, like a mother who knows her kids inside and out. We can't get away with anything, and that has a way of making us

examine our motivations and whether they're worthy of God. It has a way of encouraging us look within and self-reflect. *Why are we asking God for this or that or the other thing? Are we doing it out of concern for other people, or is this maybe a selfish desire? Are we acting out of love and compassion, or maybe something a little less sincere?*

3. *Reason number three:* We pray "that we be prepared to receive [God's] benefits with true gratitude of heart and thanksgiving."

In other words, prayer helps us count our blessings. A big part of prayer is giving thanks. And the more we give thanks, the more we see how much we have to be thankful for—right down to our very existence, the breath in our lungs. And the more we see how much we have to be thankful for, the more we gain perspective. Most of us don't need any help seeing the challenges in our lives. We're good at focusing on our problems. Developing a mindset of thankfulness through prayer helps us balance the negative with the positive, the bad with the good. It doesn't solve our problems, but it allows us view them, as Rice puts it, "in relationship to our joys."

4. *Reason number four:* "Having obtained what we were seeking, and being convinced that [God] has answered our prayers, we should be led," according to Calvin, "to meditate upon [God's] kindness more ardently."

In other words, when our prayers are answered, it makes us think about and appreciate the goodness of the One who answered them. And I would argue that even when our prayers are not answered, or when the answer is *No*, God's goodness is still revealed in that moment. It may just take a little more digging to see. Because God is not a vending machine. God is not there to give us whatever we want. God is a living being, who's there to be in loving relationship with us. And sometimes *No* is the loving answer, as any parent will tell you. And sometimes silence is what we need to teach us how to listen and to give us room to grow.

So that's the ultimate answer to the question, *Why? Why do we pray? What's the purpose behind it?* Because prayer brings us into relationship with God—a relationship that's genuine and nurturing and always evolving, always deepening, and always challenging. But sometimes it's hard to pray. Sometimes we find it difficult. Sometimes we run into roadblocks. And that's what we're going to talk about next week. Amen.