

Healthy Habits: Prayer – Psalm 95

Through the month of January we have been looking at healthy habits for our spiritual lives. We have been using Psalm 95 as our guide. The healthy habits we have explored thus far are reading scriptures and worship. Today we explore the third healthy habit, which is prayer.

In Psalm 95 the phrase that turns our thoughts towards prayer is found in verse 6 where we read, “Let us kneel before the LORD our Maker.”

Early in my life I learned that kneeling is what you did when you prayed. We knelt each week in our worship service as the pastor led us in the pastoral prayer. We knelt at the altar as we confessed our sins to Jesus. We knelt each time the pastor visited our house and led us in prayer. We knelt each night by our bed as we said our prayers before going to sleep. It did not seem like you were serious about prayer if you did not kneel.

That is why, when I was a teenager, I was prepared to kneel by my bedside to say my prayers before going to sleep but found myself flat on my face. I had been out late with my friends, so I was being as quiet as possible, trying not to disturb my parents who were already in bed. I decided I didn’t even need to turn the light on to my room, thinking the light might disturb my folks (their room was next to mine). Ever so quietly I crept into my room, went down on my knees and prepared to plant my elbows on the bed as I prayed. What I did not know was that my mother rearranged my room that day, and where the bed once sat there was nothing. I fell forward with the sickening reality that there was no bed to lean on, and soon I was hitting the floor with a loud thump. So much for not disturbing my folks! They were soon at the door checking to see what happened, trying to hide the chuckles that rose up within them as they heard my story.

I still believe in kneeling when I pray – I am just a little more careful about where I kneel these days!

I also know that I can pray standing, sitting, even walking or driving the car now. Prayer is not simply a ritual, the reciting of a few words we memorized, nor the posture one takes as we say those words. Prayer is communicating with God, a conversation with the living God where we speak to God but also listen to what He says to us.

Prayer is an ongoing, vibrant, open-ended conversation with God. The Apostle Paul had this in mind when he wrote to the church in Thessalonica:

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray continually, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)

Someone has said, “Prayer is the most important conversation of your day. Take it to God before you take it to anyone else.”

How important is prayer in our lives as followers of Jesus? Let's take a look at the life of Jesus and see how important prayer was in His life. What we soon discover is that Jesus was constantly conversing with God the Father. The Gospel accounts record over two dozen times Jesus prays to God and the disciples saw Him (we can imagine there were many, many more prayers that the disciples did not hear).

Jesus prayed when he was alone, and when he was with others.

Jesus prayed before he healed someone and he prayed after he healed someone.

Jesus prayed before meals, and he prayed before making big decisions.

Jesus prayed in the early morning and late at night.

Jesus prayed after he was nailed to a cross, and prayed as he died on that cross.

In the "7 Day Guide to Prayer" I read the following:

"What Jesus' prayers tell us is that he depended on His Father for everything, and He was the Saviour of the world! If He needed time with God in prayer, we most certainly do. Why? Because we exist in a world that is constantly throwing new things at us and begging us to divert our attention from walking with God. Prayer allows us to relate to God and be guided by Him."¹

Following Jesus' example we should bring everything to God in prayer. Note that in Psalm 95 the first thing that David brings to God in prayer is praise and adoration. A good place to start your prayers is with thanksgiving and gratitude. Far too many people see prayer as simply a way to get something from God, a way to present our demands or wishes before God. They forget to thank God for all He has already given us and done for us.

We have already read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 but we need to hear it again:

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray continually, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Praying and rejoicing go hand in hand. We rejoice when we are happy. Now the happy are not always grateful, but the grateful are always happy. The happiest people you will meet are those who are grateful for what they already have, and they are not whining about what they do not have. A great place to develop a grateful heart is in our prayer life, thanking God for what He has done for us through Christ, granting us forgiveness, mercy and eternal life. We can thank Him for the health we do have before we ask Him to fix the ailments we also may have. We can thank Him for our homes, food, friends, family and the list can go on for a long time.

Developing a grateful heart is a choice. We choose to be grateful or not. Choose gratitude.

¹ 7 Day Guide on Prayer, You Version, Day 2

Another important aspect of prayer is confession. This is where we get honest with God and confess our sins to Him. We all do the wrong thing at times, say the wrong thing, even harbour wrong thoughts. The truth of the matter is, we are usually getting honest with ourselves when we confess our sin. God already knows all our sins. But as we confess our sins we see where we need to grow, where we might have hurt someone else, where we did not do the good thing God put before us. It is an opportunity for growth.

And here is the good news about prayer: **“If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”** (1 John 1:9) We not only see ourselves for who we really are, but God gives us another chance as we repent of our sins. Repenting is acknowledging we have done wrong and, with God’s help, we turn and go in anew direction: we go God’s way.

It was C.S. Lewis who said confession is the threshold of prayer. It is the starting place of authentic and real relationship with God. We do not like to admit we have done wrong, that we have sinned, but when we get honest with God and ourselves, we are able to develop a deep and intimate relationship with God.

Now, some may say, I am too messed up to come before God. Pastor, if you knew what I have done, or if you could get into my head and see what I am thinking, you would know I cannot come before a holy and righteous God. My life is such a mess now that God wouldn’t want anything to do with me...

My friends, you can never be too messed up for God. Yes, in Psalm 24 it asks, **“Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place?”** and the answer is, **“The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god.”**

But here is the good news – it is Jesus who gives us clean hands and a pure heart. He does the cleaning up of our lives, no matter how messy they have become. In the book of Acts, 15:9, we read that **God purified the hearts of the people by faith.** As they put their faith in Jesus, God started to clean up the mess of their lives.

So come to Jesus just as you are. He will accept you and listen to your prayers.

Yes, we can bring everything to God in prayer, even our needs, requests and petitions (prayers for others).

In Philippians 4:6-7 we read:

⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

God says we can come to Him in prayer no matter what situation we find ourselves in.

Is there a health need? We can pray.

Is there a financial need? We can pray.

Is there trouble in the family? We can pray.

Is there trouble in our nation? We can pray.

No matter what is troubling us, we can bring it to God in prayer.

“But Pastor,” you say. “God sometimes doesn’t answer my prayers. I don’t know if He is even listening. Sometimes I pray and pray and pray and nothing happens...”

I think every believer knows what you are talking about. But we have also discovered this truth: there are no answered prayers. Sometimes we simply miss God’s answer because it was not the one we wanted. We are like children who ask their parents for something, and when they do not get what they want they accuse their parents of not listening. The truth is, the parents have listened and the answer was “No.”

God can answer with His “Yes”, but He can also say “No.” He can sometimes say, “Not now” while at other times say, “Not your way, but my way.” God always answers prayer.’

Here is where faith comes in: Do you believe that God truly is good, and He loves you? That is the main message of the whole Bible. If that is true, and it is, then whatever answer God gives flows from His love and it is good. Sure, from our perspective it may not look that way – a teenager dies of a rare disease, one of the twins dies weeks after birth, that dear saint dies a painful death with cancer, that village is swept away by a mud slide – but from eternity’s perspective God sees He can work good even in these situations.

Did you catch what it said in Philippians 4:6-7? When we bring all things to God in prayer, then “the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”

When we have released our requests into the hand of God, and prayed as Jesus did, “Not my will but your will be done,” then we can have God’s peace – peace the world cannot give and a peace the world cannot take away.

As Paul E. Miller correctly observed, “Learning to pray doesn’t give us a less busy life; it offers us a less busy heart.”

As we learn to take everything to God in prayer and trust in His answers to our requests and petitions, we will learn to ask less often “Why did God allow this to happen?” and instead ask, “How is God going to use this situation for His glory?”

Prayer, said Mother Theresa, is “simply putting one’s self in the hands of God.” What a wonderful place to be.

Just as there are many ways to communicate with a friend, so there are many ways to pray. Sometimes we send a text, or a brief “hello.” When we send that to God it often sounds like, “HELP!”

At other times we have time for a long call, or write a letter or email. Sometimes we take more time to commune with God in prayer in our devotions or prayer gatherings.

Sometimes we get to sit and chat for the whole afternoon or day with our friend. Oh the pleasure of having a day alone with God.

Sometimes you will pray alone in a quiet spot. Sometimes you will pray as you drive to work, or walk the dog, or do the dishes. Sometimes you will gather with others and pray with them, adding your voice with theirs, finding great encouragement as you pray together.

Sometimes the words just flow. Sometimes you can't get a word out. Isn't it wonderful to know that the Holy Spirit, God within us, will help us in our praying?

Hear what Romans 8:26-27 says:

²⁶ In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. ²⁷ And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

There is so much we can say about prayer, but the bottom line is simple: do it! Nothing will draw you closer to God, and release His power and grace into your life more than prayer. Bring your thanksgiving, your praise, your confessions, your requests to God in prayer. The more you learn to do this, the closer you will feel to God.

As we conclude this look at prayer as a healthy habit for our spiritual journey, I am inviting you to take a few minutes this morning to pray. Pray for your needs. Pray for your family. Pray for the people of our community, especially those who do not know Jesus yet. Pray for our leaders and for our land. It is a sad day in Canada as Bill C-4 was passed, a bill that muzzles any discussion about homosexuality, gender issues or sexual deviation. We do not know how this horrendous bill will be used, but it seems to target those who want to proclaim God's standard for family and healthy sexuality. Pray for our land...

I invite you to pray where you are, or come to the altar and kneel here before the Lord our Maker. We will take as much time as we need before we invite the worship team to come and lead us in our closing songs.