

Finding God Through Prayer

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Just about every human being out there, at some point or another, has tried to pray. Even the most immoral and godless man may be brought to his knees if he finds himself in battle, or if a loved one has died, or if he faces some other crisis that threatens to overwhelm him. Sadly, once the crisis is past, many of those men return to their godless ways.

However, if we want to have a real relationship with God, if we want Him to be our Father and claim us as His children, using prayer as a spiritual 911 call isn't going to cut it. We recognize that any human relationship depends on constant communication. If a husband and wife go for several months or a year without speaking to each other, that marriage is most likely in terrible trouble. In the same way, our spiritual relationship with God is dependent on communication. He speaks to us through His word, but we speak to Him through prayer. If we go for several months at a time without talking to God, then it's likely that our relationship with Him is on the rocks too.

Sadly, this absence of prayer is all too common in the lives of Christians. I've known brothers and sisters in Christ who have been disciples for decades who admit that they never pray except during worship services. That's a terrible tragedy. Not only does it cost us our closeness with God, but it also causes us to forfeit the blessings we can seek through prayer. There are thousands of self-help books out there that lay out plans for the improvement of our lives, but in reality, the very best thing we can do to help ourselves is to ask for God's help through prayer. Even if we used to pray and have slacked off, even if we've never really been the praying type, God loves us and is willing to listen if we come to Him in the right way. Let's look this morning at this invaluable process. Let's look at finding God through prayer.

Who Can Pray?

However, simply because we want to pray doesn't mean that God will listen to us right where we are. Before we can examine how to pray, we must ask who can pray. First of all, the Scripture teaches that only baptized believers have the right to pray. The Hebrews writer makes this point in Hebrews 10:19, 22. Notice first of all that the writer here is addressing his audience as brethren. He's talking to fellow Christians, those who have the right to spiritually approach God's holy place in heaven through the blood of His Son. We know that we have this right when our hearts have been sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies have been washed with pure water, in other words, when we have been baptized for the forgiveness of our sins. Only after baptism can we draw near to God in prayer.

In the denominational world, a lot of people love to make a lot of noise about "the sinner's prayer." In reality, there is no such thing. Isaiah 59 teaches that sins separate us from God, so that He will not hear our prayers. The sinner can still seek God's forgiveness, but he has to do it on God's terms, and baptism is an essential part of those terms. If we want to pray and expect that God will hear us, we must be baptized into Christ first.

However, simply because we were once baptized does not ensure that God is listening now. Even as Christians, we can hinder our own prayers through our sins. We see one example of this in 1 Peter 3:7. If a man doesn't make the effort to live with his wife in love, if he doesn't try to understand her and see things from her perspective, if he just stomps all over her instead, he might as well not even bother trying to pray. His prayer is just going to hit the ceiling and bounce back. Nor is this limited to sins in our marriages. Any time a Christian is pursuing a pattern of constant, willful, rebellious sin in his life, he is also ensuring that God isn't listening to his prayers. If we aren't careful, that could be us.

This problem, though, isn't solved with baptism. After all, the Christian has already been baptized, and there is no such thing as re-baptism. Instead, the way that we resolve this difficulty in our lives is by seeking God's forgiveness first. When we come to Him in prayer asking for that, He will never reject that kind of prayer. He is always faithful to forgive us and cleanse us from our unrighteousness, and once the sin is out of the way, we can pray normally again.

How to Pray

Now that we know what kind of shape our lives have to be in before we can pray, we can look at how we should pray. In this context, one of the first things we must learn is not to worry too much about praying pretty, or even praying coherently. Let's look at what Paul writes in Romans 8:26-27. Here, he begins by describing a situation that is familiar to many of us. We're in some terrible situation. We want very badly to pray because we know we need God's help, but our minds are so scattered that we can't even put our prayer into words. In times like that, we should go ahead and pray anyway, even if we ourselves can't make any kind of sense out of what we're saying. In times like that, the Holy Spirit will intercede for us, so that the things that we can't put into words are put into words, so that God can understand exactly what we want even if we ourselves don't have a real good handle on that at the moment.

The point is, friends, that our prayers don't have to be these nice, neat, logical little five-paragraph essays like we hear in the Sunday morning assembly. They can be stream-of-consciousness. They can be sloppy. They can be

incoherent. They can even be wordless if wordless is the best we can do. God doesn't grade our prayers for elegance and style. He doesn't answer only the eloquent ones. Anything that one of His faithful children says to Him, He will hear.

Second, we must learn to pray in faith. James addresses this subject in James 1:6-8. Specifically, James is talking about praying for wisdom, but really, the lesson here applies to any prayer that we might offer. When we pray, we must do so with confidence that God will answer that prayer and bless us. Sometimes, this can be hard to do. We may have some fundamental doubts about God. We may question whether He exists or cares about us at all. At other times, our doubts may be more situationally specific. We may have prayed for something in the past, God didn't answer that prayer the way we wanted Him to, and so we find ourselves asking what the point of prayer is in the first place.

James' point, though, is that our faith must not be dependent on circumstance. We must recognize that we are not as wise as God is. When something in our lives doesn't go according to our plans or our prayers, that's not a sign that God isn't listening and doesn't care. It could be that God is going to answer as we wanted Him to, but He just hasn't done it yet. It could be that what we asked for isn't actually good for us, so God is withholding it for that reason. There are plenty of other explanations beyond those, too. In short, we should base our faith on His word, which we can understand, instead of basing our doubts on our life circumstances, which we cannot understand. Let's pray in faith.

Third, we should pray without ceasing. Paul teaches exactly this in 1 Thessalonians 5:17. What Paul is telling us here is that our prayer lives must be the exact opposite of the spiritual 911 call we talked about earlier. Obviously, God wants us to seek His help when we're in trouble, but that's not the only time that He wants to hear from us. To put this in perspective, let's imagine that you have a friend. This friend never has a social conversation with you. He never hangs out with you. The only time he wants anything to do with you, in fact, is when he wants something. When he needs to borrow a tool, you're sure to hear from him. When he wants help moving, you're the first name on his list. But then, once he's gotten the help he needed, he goes back to having nothing to do with you.

Hopefully, most of us wouldn't tolerate a friend like that. We'd see that he was just using us and didn't really care about us. Sadly, though, that's the way that a lot of Christians treat God in their prayers. He's useful when we need help, but otherwise, we don't have a whole lot to say to Him. Don't you think God sees through that too? If we think we deserve better from our earthly friends, then God surely deserves better from us. Let's make sure that we pray constantly, not just when we're in trouble. Let's treat God like a Father and a friend, not like a spiritual convenience store.

As part of this, we should pray thankfully. Paul raises this point in the very next verse, 1 Thessalonians 5:18. Just like we appreciate expressions of gratitude when we bless others, God appreciates expressions of gratitude from us. It's only right that we show him our gratitude, because every good thing we have is something we owe to Him. Our lives are overloaded with His blessings, from the very fact of life itself to the hope of eternal life that we have through His Son. In comparison to those blessings, the things that we lack are insignificant. Our prayers should reflect that understanding. We should come to God primarily to glorify Him for what He has done, then secondarily to ask Him for more.

Results of Prayer

If we pray in this way, there are two main good results that we will see. First, prayer will bring us peace. Paul explains this in Philippians 4:6-7. We receive this peace that passes understanding in two main ways. First, the process of prayer helps us to make our own way to it. When we make a point of thanksgiving, when we praise God for all that He has already done, that reminds us of all the prayers that He has answered in the past. That reminder should change the way we understand our current situation. When we think of God's past blessings, they reassure us that He will bless us in the future too. We don't have to worry about tomorrow. We can be confident that God is going to get us through it.

Second, though, God will intervene directly to comfort us and give us peace. In those very worst moments of our lives, when we are wracked with anguish and despair, that's when God will come to us with His compassion. Sometimes, we receive this peace from God as His other children comfort us; at other times, He soothes our spirits in ways that we cannot understand. Regardless, this blessing of peace is priceless, and it is ours through prayer.

Finally, though, we receive God's blessing as the result of our prayers. This doesn't always work out the way we expect, but it is always true. For example, look at 2 Corinthians 11:7-9. In context, here's what has just happened. Paul has received a special revelation, a vision of heaven itself. God was concerned that Paul would get a swelled head as a result of this exalted vision, so God allowed Satan to afflict Paul physically in some way. Paul prayed three times for this physical affliction to be removed, and God said no three times. This wasn't because God was being cruel. Instead, it was because God gave Paul what he needed, not what he wanted. God knew that the thorn in the flesh was what was best.

This might seem cruel to us, but don't we do the same thing with our children? Do we give them candy every time they ask for it, or let them stay up as late as they want all the time? Sure, our kids might enjoy getting everything they wanted in the short term. However, in the long term, we know it wouldn't be good for them. We protect them from the foolishness of their desires. It's part of our role as parents. Thankfully, our heavenly Father does the same thing for us. In His infinite wisdom, He gives us only what is best for us, so that we will eventually lead lives of eternal happiness.