

Essentials for Spiritual Growth

Lesson # 6 -- Growing in Understanding and Involvement in Prayer

Introduction

- A. Too often we consider prayer as the most dull and powerless area of the Christian life.
- B. In contrast, prayer, in the Bible is often associated with power.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine,
according to his power that is at work within us. Eph 3:20.

Finally, **be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power... And pray in the Spirit** on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. Eph 6:10, 18

The prayer of a righteous man (person) is **powerful and effective.** James 5:16

- C. It may be difficult for us to approach prayer by faith, and with a high degree of expectation, for a number of reasons.
 1. Perhaps we are in bondage to our emotions which usually teaches us error.
 2. Perhaps we are being influenced by the enemy -- all believers are to some degree.
 3. Perhaps we may not have had the privilege of praying with those who know how.
 4. Perhaps we may not have been taught how to pray or may not have learned on our own.
- D. The purpose of this lesson is to present a Biblical context in which prayer has been designed to operate and to make a few practical suggestions.

I. The Context of Creation -- We have been Created in the Image of God.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. Gen 1:27

- A. This verse teaches that we are basically spirit -- spiritual -- as the quality of our personhood. Spirit is who/what God is. And He has made us in His image. More information on this issue is found in lesson # 1.
- B. Being in the image of God means our most fundamental, basic, and greatest abilities are all in the spirit -- spiritual -- area of our life. Prayer is one of those abilities that were given to us in our original creation, and then recreated in the new birth. It is one of our greatest and most powerful abilities -- that is why our enemy is determined to keep us from prayer.
- C. It may help to affirm this truth: "I am created in God's image and this has all been reborn in my salvation. I am basically a 'spiritual' person. God has given me great abilities to use for His glory."

II. The Context of Calling -- We are Called to Exalt the Lord Jesus.

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, **who have been called according to his purpose...that he (the Lord Jesus) might be the firstborn among many brothers.** Rom 8:28, 29 (See also Phil 3:13,14; I Peter 2:9)

And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it. John 14:13

- A. It is overwhelming to see that we have been called to exalt the Lord Jesus. That is the reason God created us, as well as the universe and the angels. It is the very purpose of our life. The most vital areas in our life, pertaining to this calling, revolve around worship, prayer, and living in the Spirit.
- B. It is helpful and encouraging to recognize the importance of this calling, and its relationship to prayer. Many of us do not feel or even believe that we have anything of importance that we could offer God or do for Him. That is not true. The Bible teaches the very opposite. Every believer has an unusual ability to exalt the Lord Jesus and one of the most important is to do so through prayer.
- C. Understanding our calling gives us, not only a goal in life, but a daily goal. And, one important way of achieving that goal is to pray. We must not allow ourselves to evaluate our prayer life on the basis of our emotions. We must utilize the Bible as our standard.

III. The Context of Transformation -- We Have Been Redeemed.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old is gone, the new has come ... **And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation** II Cor 5:17, 19

- A. Through salvation, the old relationships of guilt and defilement are gone. The believer is one who has been spiritually reborn, completely forgiven, and cleansed. John 3:3,5; Col 2:13; Titus 3:5
- B. Through salvation, the image of God and all spiritual equipment has been renewed. Heb 13:20,21
This renewal is so complete the Bible makes use of such terms as "Blessed with every spiritual blessing," and "You have been given fullness in Christ," and "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness." Eph 1:3; Col 2:10; II Peter 1:3
- C. We must accept these truths if we are going to pray effectively. The grace and power of redemption does not become evident in our life, or through us in the life of others, until we obey God and put into practice the equipment He has given us.

IV. The Context of Enablement -- We Have Been Given the Holy Spirit.

For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, **but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father."** The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Romans 8:15,16

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. Ephesians 6:18

- A. The Holy Spirit has been given to us as the seal (guarantee/protection) of our salvation. We are His temples. Eph 1:13,14; I Cor 6:19 Consider the significance of this truth in regard to privilege, the opportunity to worship and fellowship with God, utilize His gifts, and experience His power.
- B. The Holy Spirit has been given to us to enable us to pray powerfully and with wisdom. Rom 8:26
- C. The Holy Spirit came into our life at the moment of the new birth. He dwells within us in all of His fullness. One may not be very aware of His presence due to lack of instruction or personal neglect. It is important that we start with the Bible, however, in evaluating our spiritual condition. I Corinthians 11:13

V. The Context of Office -- We Have Been Given the Office of Priesthood.

Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. . . .' Exodus 19:5,6

You also, like living stones, are built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. . . But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. I Peter 2:5,9

- A. To be a priest means we have the authority (right) and power (enablement) to serve God. The significance of these truths should be overwhelming to us. Many believers live their life and die without attempting to do anything serious for God. For many the Christian life rarely goes beyond attending Church and praying the same old prayer at the table. The affirmation made by James "The prayer of a righteous man (person) is powerful and effective" (5:16) is an unknown dimension for such a person.
- B. The office of priesthood is a legal relationship. We do not discern our office emotionally. We must put the office into practice before there can be any concrete manifestation of its grace and power.
- C. It is important that we encourage one another to serve God by faith.

VI. The Context of Ministry -- We Are to Administer God's Grace to Others.

We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. II Cor 5:20

Each of us should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, **faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.** I Peter 4:10

A. Consider the power of God's provision -- a believer can dispense -- administer (give away) grace!

The way this is done is through living and explaining the Word of God as well as utilizing the gifts God has given to us.

B. One of the gifts all believers has been given -- is that of prayer. **We can pray the will of God into some degree of actuality** in the life of others. Ephesians 6:18-20; James 5:17,18

C. Some Biblical illustrations of this encouraging truth.

1. Old Testament examples:

a. The prophet Elijah.

Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, **there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word.**" I Kings 17:1

Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. **Again he prayed,** and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. James 5:17,18

Comment: Elijah knew from Deuteronomy that God had promised to send drought if His people turned away from Him. The Lord must have made it clear to Him that that was what of He was going to do. Elijah turned it into prayer -- and it did not rain. He prayed the will of God into reality! (Deuteronomy 1:16,17; 28:23)

b. The prophet Daniel.

In the first year of Darius son of Xerxes (a Mede by descent), who was made ruler over the Babylonian kingdom--in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet, **that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.** Daniel 9:1-3

Comment: When Daniel read that the time of the Captivity was up -- he prayed for God's promise to be fulfilled. And, it would seem, since this is recorded as such in the Bible, that such an approach to the promises and will of God is being recommended to us.

2. New Testament examples:

a. Epaphras

Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. **He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, and fully assured.** Col 4:12

Comment: It is evident, from this verse, that Epaphras did not believe the will of God would automatically come to pass in the life of the believers in Colosse. He was assured, however, that if he prayed for them -- they would be able to enter into God's will and "stand firm" in His will. This is another example that we can make a difference in the life of others, and in some mysterious and spiritual way bring God's grace to them.

b. The Church at Philippi .

For I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. Phil 1:19

Comment: Paul firmly believed that the prayers of the people in Philippi would make a difference in his imprisonment. From the context of this verse it does not seem that he is thinking of his freedom from jail -- but deliverance from anything that would make him ashamed (V20) and hinder his testimony for the Lord Jesus.

These examples from the Bible should be a great encouragement to us and filled with instruction. We too can fit into this pattern of the prayer life. We have the authority and the ability to do priestly praying that will bring God's grace, and in some measure His will, into the life of others. If those we pray for are resisting God's grace and will -- then the amount of help that we can bring to them may be limited. However, that should not keep us from praying. God has the wisdom and the power to reach people.

VII. The Context of Priority -- Effective Prayer is Rooted in Spiritual Honesty.

If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. Ps 66:18

Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and **receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him.**
I John 3:22

A. **An honest priority regarding worship.** Psalm 63:1-8; John 4:23,24.

B. **An honest priority of loving God and one another.** Matt 22:37-40.

C. **An honest priority of seeking to know Jesus Christ.** Eph 1:17; Phil 3:7-10.

D. **An honest priority of cooperation with the Holy Spirit.** Rom 8:12-17; Eph 6:18.

E. **An honest priority of seeking to know and do the will of God.** Matt 6:9-13; Col 1:9-14.

Comment: I am not implying in this section that we must earn the grace of God, or within that grace, the privilege of prayer. On the other hand, we cannot live with the blessing of God upon our life and pray effectively if we are neglecting God and His will for us. The reason I use the word "honest" in the above outline is to emphasize what God wants in our life. We do not have to

be perfect to pray with grace and power -- but we must be honest with God -- or He cannot bless our prayer life.

VIII. The Context of Promise and Instruction

If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. John 15:7

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: **that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.** I John 5:14

- A. These promises are so simple, tremendous, and optimistic that they stun our thinking. They so overwhelm us we tend to back away from them.
- B. The instruction found in such promises has to do with the will of God. As we have seen from the life of Elijah, Daniel, Epaphras, and the Church at Philippi -- their prayers had to do with a "claiming" of the will of God for those who were the subjects of their intercession.
- C. What can we pray for regarding believers and unbelievers?
 1. For the unbeliever we can pray for conviction.

When he (the Holy Spirit) comes, **he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment:** in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.
John 16:8-11

Comment: This passage explains the work of the Holy Spirit in the non-Christian. His work is that of conviction -- in the three broad areas of guilt regarding sin (that they commit it), regarding righteousness (that they do not do it); and regarding judgment (which is inevitable for them). Since it is God's will that non-Christians be so convicted -- we need to pray that this will come to pass. This does not mean we are to pray "against" people. What we are praying for, is their salvation, and such conviction is the first step in that direction.

2. For the believer we can pray for the fullness of God's will. (The following is a sample only.)
 - a. We can pray that the believer will fully be surrendered to God.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. **Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will.** Romans 12:1,2

- b. We can pray that the believer will not be worldly.

Who (the Lord Jesus) gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, **according to the will of our God and Father.** Galatians 1:4

- c. We can pray that the believer will live worthy of God.

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, **we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will** through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And **we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord** and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. Colossians 1:9-12

- d. We can pray that the believer will live a pure life.

It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality. I Thessalonians 4:3

- e. We can pray that the believer will be joyful, pray, and give thanks.

Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, **for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.** I Thessalonians 5:16-18

- f. We can pray that the believer will be equipped for life and service.

May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, **equip you with everything good for doing his will**, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Hebrews 13:20, 21

- g. We can pray that the believer may know honest confession and healing.

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. James 5:16

Comment: These few verses, which express God's will for the believer, may serve as the content of our intercessory prayer for one another. And I have included in this list

James 5:16 as a reminder that the commands of God (Confess and Pray) may also be included in such prayers.

IX. The Context of Prayer Patterns

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "**When you pray, say:** Luke 11:1,2

Comment: One of the problems we all face in our prayer life has to do with requests: for what should we ask? This issue has been addressed somewhat in the former section: we can ask for whatever may be God's will for that individual. Based on that principle we could include many of the promises of and prayers recorded in the Bible that apply to all believers. This approach to

prayer is evidently commended to us when the Lord Jesus gave the Disciples' prayer to them and to us.

A. Sample promises.

And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. II Corinthians 9:8

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:6,7

B. Sample prayers.

"This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.' Matthew 6:9-13

I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength Ephesians 1:16-19

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge--that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. Ephesians 3:14-21

Comment: Many more promises and prayers could be added to this list. Experiment with these suggestions and find a pattern with which you are comfortable and effective. To pray many of the Psalms and Old Testament selections is also helpful.

Conclusion: Here are some simply suggestions many have found valuable.

- A. Dedicate your time to the Lord and then choose the part of the day when you can be alone and when you are alert. Reserve that time for your prayer ministry to the Lord and others. Fill that period with worship and prayer. Many have found the early morning to be the best.
- B. Select a place where you will not be interrupted. If you have young children and it seems to be impossible to be alone, then make an agreement with the family regarding devotions. A workable plan is for the wife to be allowed to have a time alone with the husband taking over the

children, telephone, etc. When she is finished (a set time should be designated) then it is the husband's turn. This procedure will work if the family is determined to make it work.

- C. Change the order of your devotional life. It will help to read the Scripture in different translations, and sometimes with a commentary. Sometimes pray first or read first. If pressed for time, and we all are, keep a Bible or devotional book in the glove compartment of the car, in the bathroom, and cut some pages out of a Bible and carry them in your pocket, or pin them up to the curtain at the sink. In all of this make sure to spend ample time in worship and intercession for others.
- D. Make sure to pray and read with the family. If you have young children then use appropriate material so they may be involved. Many good books are available today for the family.