

BUILDING A MEANINGFUL HABIT OF PRAYER

Dowlen Road, January 11, 2009 PM

INTRODUCTION:

- A. Luke 11:1.
 - 1. Some would find this request a little odd. They would see prayer as more of an innate ability, something people just naturally do. It really isn't something we are taught to do. Consequently, if we struggle to pray, there must be something wrong with us.
 - 2. However, this incident from Luke's gospel demonstrates that the opposite is true. Prayer is a learned activity – something we are taught to do.
 - 3. In fact, Jesus goes on to TEACH His disciples HOW to pray. In verse 2, He tells them what to say. In verse 5, He discusses the need for persistence. In verse 11, He discusses God's eagerness to respond to our prayers. Jesus is teaching His disciples how to pray.
- B. Like the early disciples, prayer will also be learned activity for us.
 - 1. If I want to develop a meaningful habit of communicating with my God, then I need to learn HOW to do it. I need to be taught to pray.
 - 2. The good news is that the Bible is loaded with all kinds of instructions that will help us develop a meaningful habit.
 - 3. In this lesson we want to examine these instructions and see what we can find to help us build our own habit.

PRAY ALL THE TIME

- A. I mention this for two reasons.
 - 1. First, this is what the scriptures teach us to do (Romans 12:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). The idea is to pray all the time.
 - 2. Second, we see Jesus doing this (Luke 5:15-16). We will note several other references to His prayers in this lesson. Jesus prayed all the time.
 - 3. One of the things the scriptures teach about praying is the need to be doing this all of the time. We need to pray constantly.
- B. To help us do this, remember that every prayer does not have to be an ordeal.
 - 1. For some praying becomes much like having company for dinner. Some never do this because it just requires too much preparation. I have to figure out who can come and when they can come. I have to clean. I have to decide what to fix. I have to shop. I have to prepare the food. I have to set the table. Because it is so much trouble, it's just easier not to do it. Now it doesn't have to be such an ordeal; we make it this way.
 - 2. We make the same mistake with our prayers. We make it an ordeal. I have to find thirty minutes of free time. I have to find a quiet spot. I have to be sure everyone has something to do so I'm not interrupted. I have to figure out what I'm going to say for all that time. For most, that's so hard to pull off that they decide that they just don't have time to do it.
 - 3. What's the point? There ought to be moments when we find a quiet spot and spend an extended period of time in prayer to God (Mark 6:12). There are times when we need to make the effort to create the time and solitude necessary to pray. This is clearly what Jesus did (Matthew 14:23, Mark 1:35). We must do the same.
 - 4. However, not all prayers have to be such an ordeal (Nehemiah 2:1-4). I don't get the idea that Nehemiah rushed from the room, went off to a mountain and spent the night praying. I suspect that within his heart he made a quick appeal for God's help at this critical moment.
 - 5. We need to do that too. We need to have a running conversation with God, feeling free to turn our thoughts to Him at any moment and communicate with Him. As you drive through the mountain on vacation, praise God for His beautiful creation. As you sit in traffic, ask for patience. As you listen to the news, pray for God's help for our nation.
 - 6. The more we get in the habit of doing this all the time, the more natural prayer becomes and the easier it is to talk to God.

PRAY FROM THE HEART

- A. This seems obvious, and yet we don't always do it.
 - 1. Sometimes we are driven to pray out of a sense of obligation. So, we find ourselves muttering through some old phrases to fulfill the obligation, sometimes with little thought for what we are actually saying.
 - 2. Jesus made clear that God has no interest in hearing us mindlessly recite words (Matthew 6:7-8). It doesn't do much for us either.
- B. We need to pray from our hearts.
 - 1. We need to pray with a sense of His presence. We need to remember that He promised to attend to our words when we pray (Psalm 34:15). We need to think about that when we are praying to Him.
 - 2. We need to talk to Him, just as we would talk with a friend. We should avoid making this some kind of formal speech, especially in our private prayers. Sometimes in my prayers I stumble over my words, repeat myself, express frustration, try to find a way to express myself – just as I would if I were talking with a friend.
 - 3. Don't miss the point. There is certainly nothing wrong with thinking about what we want to say when we pray. This is especially important for men who lead the congregation. Forethought and preparation are vital to effective public prayer. However, even these must be offered with a sense of God's presence. We're not just making a speech; we're talking to God. But there is another extreme to avoid, especially in our private prayers. We should avoid turning prayer into a stiff, formal presentation. Obviously we should always show reverence for God. But we must also remember that we are speaking to a friend, to One who is concerned with our struggles and eager to help with our needs (1 Peter 5:6-7). We need to think about that when we pray. Meaningful prayers are those which flow from our hearts.

FIND A METHOD THAT WORKS

- A. In the Bible we find people praying in many places and positions.
 - 1. Jesus went to a garden and fell on His face (Matthew 26:39). Daniel opened his windows toward Jerusalem and got on his knees (Daniel 6:10). Solomon stood before the altar and spread his hands toward heaven (1 Kings 8:22).
 - 2. The point is, there is not one prescribed place or position in which we are to pray.

- B. What matters is that each one finds a place and position that works for them.
 1. I heard about a preacher from the last century who would go into his study each morning, face the wall in a corner of his office and kneel and pray for lengthy periods of time. He did this so often that, over the years, the wallpaper on that spot of the wall had become discolored.
 2. While I was impressed with his dedication, his method would not work at all for me. I can't sit still that long. You are far more likely to catch me muttering my prayers out loud as I run the track at the high school or pace around this empty building. This is what works for me.
 3. The important thing is to find a place and position that works for you.

INCLUDE MANY THINGS

- A. It's easy to get out of balance with our prayers and begin to treat them like a trip to Santa Claus' knee.
 1. We pile up all of our requests and read off our list to God.
 2. God wants us to ask Him for things (Matthew 7:7, Philippians 4:6).
 3. But this is only one aspect of prayer. Our prayers should include more.
- B. I've found this little memory device helpful - A.C.T.S.
 1. I use it as sort of an outline for my prayers.
 - a. The "A" stands for adoration and reflects the need to praise God when we pray to Him (Nehemiah 1:5).
 - b. The "C" stands for confession and reminds us to confess our sins before God and seek His forgiveness (I John 1:9).
 - c. The "T" stands for thanksgiving and reminds us that our prayers should include words of gratitude for God's blessings (Philippians 4:6).
 - d. The "S" stands for supplication and would include all of the requests God has asked us to bring to Him (Philippians 4:6).
 2. If we find that prayers are out of balance or we're struggling to find things to say to God, this outline is a great starting point. It can serve as a framework around which we can build well-rounded prayers. Use it to keep a list each day/week of things you want to remember in your prayers. Add to it as you go about your day. Then, when it comes time to talk to God, refer to your list.
 3. Developing a meaningful habit will require that we include many things in our prayers, not just our requests.

BE SPECIFIC

- A. One of the things we do that robs prayer of its meaning is we pray in meaningless generalities.
 1. For example:
 - a. We pray for God to heal all of the sick, without a single person in mind when we say those words.
 - b. We ask God to forgive our sins, yet we have no sin in mind when we speak those words.
 - c. We thank God for all our blessings, but we don't have a single blessing in mind when we say it.
 - d. We ask God to strengthen us, without any thought of how I need to be strengthened.
 2. Again, we are often just muttering the word, getting through the ritual, rather than talking to God.
- B. If prayer is to be a meaningful habit, then we have to say meaningful things.
 1. One way to break out of the habit of praying in generalities and strive to pray very specific prayers.
 - a. Don't just ask God to heal the sick. Call their names. Make a request.
 - b. Don't just thank God for your blessing. Do what the old song says, "name them one by one."
 - c. Don't just ask God to forgive your sins. Spell it out: When I lost my temper and said all those hurtful things to my wife, that was wrong. It was sinful. Please forgive me."
 - d. Don't just ask for strength. Tell God what you need. Please strengthen me to take control of my temper and stop doing things that hurt the people I love.
 2. You have to make a conscience effort to do this. Sometimes I have to go back and correct myself ("I mean this...").
 3. But there is a wonderful benefit that comes with praying specific prayers. It is much easier to identify God's answers. As we ask for specific things and see God respond, our faith in prayer is strengthened. This encourages us to pray all the more!
 4. If this habit is to be meaningful, then we must say things that are meaningful.

BE ACCOUNTABLE

- A. The hardest thing about dumping a bad habit and developing a new habit is the beginning – getting started.
 1. Once the new habit is firmly rooted, we do well. But getting it "rooted" in our lives is the tough part.
 2. Satan does not want us to be close to God. He will do everything he can to impede our efforts to building a meaningful habit of prayer.
- B. One of the best ways to turn back his efforts is to ask for help.
 1. Find another devoted disciple who will help you pray.
 2. Give them permission to ask about your prayer life. Tell them you want them to encourage. Maybe they can send you an email or text message each day to remind you to pray. Perhaps they can ask after services, "How's your prayer life."
 3. These are the kinds of things we are supposed to do for each other (I Thessalonians 5:14, Hebrews 10:24). Don't waste this great spiritual resource as you build a meaningful habit. Don't let another year pass with this distance between you and God because there is no communication. Find a brother or sister to hold you accountable.

CONCLUSION:

Of course, to be able to communicate with God I must first make sure that I have removed that barrier of sin that keeps me away from Him. Jesus died to remove this barrier. His blood can cleanse us from our sin so we can have a relationship with God. Have you been washed in His blood? Have you confessed your faith in Him and obeyed His command to be baptized for the remission of your sins?