

Alpha 4: Why and How Do I Pray?

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This morning we continue dealing with core questions about the Christian Faith. These are the questions asked each week in our Alpha class. Due to spring break I will now be one week ahead the class on the questions. But this will give the participants a little longer to think about the topic. Today we look at the question “Why and How Do I Pray?”

Luke 5:15-16

Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. ¹⁶But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

When you hear the word “prayer” how do you respond? Some are intimidated by the thought of prayer: “I have no clue how to pray.” Others are fearful: “What if I pray and God asks me to do something I don’t want to do—like go to Africa as a missionary?” Others are ashamed: “I know I should pray more.”

Others are joyful: “Prayer means time with God—enjoying being together with him.”

Prayer is essential in our relationship with God. Karl Barth said, “To be a Christian and to pray are one and the same thing.” What breathing and eating and drinking are to our bodies, prayer is to our soul. Prayer opens us to receive all that God has for us. Catherine Marshall described prayer as an adventure. Unfortunately many people find prayer to be a burden.

Prayer is an open conversation with God. Prayer is not giving God advice about how he ought to run the universe. Prayer is not giving God a list of things I need for him to do today. Prayer is connecting with God; communing with him; enjoying his presence.

Our prayer life with God develops much like any relationship. When you desire to have a relationship with someone you spend time with that person. You start out with chit-chat. After awhile, you risk opening up to that person. You are rather guarded at first. You want to see if the other person is trustworthy. Can they keep confidences? You wonder what they will

think of you when they know the truth. Will they continue to be your friend if they know some of your struggles? Over time as the trust grows you may discover a friend with whom you can share anything and everything.

The same process occurs in our relationship with God. We often start praying at the level of chit-chat. “God is great. God is good. Let us thank him for our food. Amen.” That is a good place to start—with simple sentence prayers. The important thing is to start talking with him. Then progress to tell him about your day as you would a spouse or friend. Then risk opening up to God. Tell him how you feel about your life and yourself. Tell him about the dark corners of your soul. Ask his forgiveness and his help to overcome those things in your life. Over time God becomes our very best friend. He knows all about us, even before we tell him anything. Yet he loves us and accepts us just as we are.

Prayer is not just talking to God. It is also listening to God. Have you ever had a friend who does all the talking? They never ask questions about your life and they never listen to you. After awhile you realize the friendship is totally one-sided and not going any where. This person is only interested in themselves. Is our relationship with God one-sided? We do all the talking. Do we stop and ask God a question about what he is doing in our world and in our lives. “God, what are you up to today? What’s on your heart and mind? How can I join you in what is important to you?” Do we sit in silence and listen to see if he speaks in that still, small voice? Are you too afraid of God to be quiet and listen?

Children typically don’t have deep conversations with their parents. They talk about school, activities, schedules and the need for money. Very seldom do children say to their parents: “Tell me about yourself? What is going on in your life?” Sometimes as adults we realize that we don’t really know our parents. We did not find a way to have deep personal conversations with them. There is so much about our parents that we really don’t know.

Sometimes it is because we are just too busy to ask. We love them. We know they love us. But we just don't know them at a deep level.

The same superficiality can occur in our relationship with God. He loves us and we love him. We get stuck at the level of asking for things. We ask him to bless our schedules and goals. We don't know what is on his heart, because we don't spend time with him. We are too busy to sit down and talk with God. It is fine to ask God for things, just like it is fine for children to ask things from their parents. Jesus said, "You have not, because you asked not." We need to ask God for the things we need; the things we desire and the things we dream about. He wants us to ask. However we are missing out on so much of the experience of prayer if our prayers only focus on asking for stuff. The primary purpose of prayer is not about getting things from God. It is about connecting with God.

What about unanswered prayer? This is one of the most difficult areas for all of us. Jesus said: "If you have faith the size of a grain of mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, "Move," and it will move!" I've prayed with people and together I think we had faith at least the size of a grain of mustard seed and the mountains of problems in their lives did not budge. In fact sometimes, after we prayed the problems got worse. Jesus said, "Whatever you ask in my name believing you will receive." I've prayed and believed and did not receive what I asked for. Some people leave the church and their faith after these experiences. They asked God to heal their child and the child dies. They are disillusioned about prayer and God. How can they trust God? He did not answer their prayer.

I've also seen God answer prayers in amazing ways. I wish that happened to all my prayers. But I have prayed for things and I did not get what I asked for. How do we handle that? A place to begin is to examine how we interpret these promises of Jesus about prayer. In his teaching, Jesus frequently uses hyperbole. He makes a sweeping statement in order to shake us up and get our attention. When Jesus says, "Tell this mountain to move and it will

move,” he is speaking figuratively. He is not encouraging us to use prayer to rearrange geography. Can you imagine the Chamber of Commerce of Lubbock deciding it would be nice if we did not have to drive all the way to Ruidoso to ski? Wouldn't it be nice if we had a few mountains on the horizon south of Lubbock? So they get a group of preachers together and say, “Pray for the Sierra Blanca mountain to be moved to Lubbock!” I don't think that is what Jesus had in mind. I think Jesus was using hyperbole to break us out of puny prayers. Jesus is calling us to pray big—to be bold in our prayers. Pray for God to do great things. Some of you have begun to do that in response to our Impossible Dreams focus. You are stepping out of your comfort zones and asking God to do bold things through you. You are praying mountain-moving prayers like: “God, eliminate malaria in the world and use our Nothing But Nets to help.” “God, eliminate homelessness and poverty housing in Lubbock and use me to make a difference.” God can do more than we can dream or imagine. He is just waiting for us to ask and to make ourselves available. Of course, this is no magic formula. Just because we ask for something big and bold in faith, we may not always get the results we want.

We often see athletes huddled together praying before a football game. Players from the opposing teams are also praying. Each is asking for a little divine assistance to win the game. There are Christians on both teams. Only one team will win. God answered that team's prayer. The other team will lose. Why didn't God answer their prayer?

We ask things in prayer which seem good to us, however we don't see the whole picture. We don't see things the way God sees them. Not every prayer is answered the way we want it to be. Let me share some things I've believe about prayer. God hears every prayer. Sometimes God chooses to work a miracle. I've seen some prayers for healing answered with what I would consider a miracle. Medically there was no hope and a tumor disappears—no explanation. Those miracles are very rare. Miracles are by definition rare,

but they do happen. When I pray for healing, I ask God for a miracle. But I also pray that God will choose the course of healing that he knows is best for this person. It might be surgery or medicine. It might be extended time with family beyond what the doctors predicted. It might be sufficient grace to get through a very difficult and painful illness. It might be the final healing of death itself. If you need prayers of healing for yourself or a loved one, I encourage you to come to our Healing Prayer ministry on Thursday evening.

I've also learned that some of the most pivotal experiences of my life came through tragedy and pain and loss. I prayed for God to let them pass by, but he made walk through them. He used those experiences to increase my trust in him. He used those experiences to enable me to depend upon him rather than my own resources. He used them to break my pride and self-sufficiency. I experience his love, his grace, his power and his peace. I discover that God is not interested in alleviating my pain. He wants to use it to shape and mold me into the image of Christ.

Prayer is about connecting with God and opening ourselves to him. It is not about getting my way. Leslie Weatherhead, a British pastor, said: "My prayer life moved from 'give me' to 'make me' to 'show me' to 'use me.'"

How do we pray? Let me suggest a variety of ways to pray and you choose the ones you think will be helpful to you.

Try different postures in prayer. In the Bible, persons frequently kneel or bow to pray. The Bible was written in a time when there were many kings and queens. It was a matter of respect to bow or kneel when in the presence of royalty. It helps us to get in touch with the reality that we are in the presence of the King of kings when we bow or kneel. The Bible also refers to persons lying prostrate during prayer—face down on the ground. This is a position of total surrender and vulnerability to God. I've stretched out on my face flat on the ground when I felt really wounded or lost and cried out to God. Sometimes I like to pray with my

palms up in a position of willingness to receive whatever God wants to give me. Sometime I lift my hands up as a way to praise to him. Let the position of your body aid you in your prayers.

What about a place to pray? You can pray anywhere. God is everywhere. Find a place that works for you. Some people like to go outside. They pray during a walk. Others pray in their car. Some pray on the treadmill. Some go to the prayer room. We have some folks who come up every morning to pray in our prayer room. Make a prayer closet or space at home. It helps to have a place free of distractions for some private time with God.

What do I say when I pray? There is no special vocabulary required. Just talk to God. You already have enough words to talk with God. You do not have to learn a bunch of flowery words. God is interested in what is on your heart. Express that to him in your own words. Some find it helpful to put a chair in front of them and visualize Jesus sitting in the chair. They talk to him friend to friend. Don't worry that you will offend God by using the wrong words. He just wants to hear from you.

Some people find it helpful to write their prayers or keep a pray journal. Sometimes thoughts are jumbled in our heads and we cannot express them. When we start to write out our prayers things come into focus. Also, it is good to keep these written prayers and look back at them and see how many have been answered over time.

Pray through the Psalms. Make those prayers your prayers. They will help expand the things you pray for. You will learn new ways of expressing praise and thanks to God. The honesty of emotions shared, like anger and doubt, will help you to express the full range of emotions. I've also found it helpful to read books of prayers such as the Book of Common Prayer. Reading the prayers of others helps to stimulate new ways to pray. It helps get me out of the rut of praying for the same old things in the same old ways.

Pray silently and pray out loud. I like to do both. Sometimes I just sit in the presence of God with no words at all. Just enjoy being with him.

If you want to try something radical in prayer, listen to this: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Pray for that person who sabotages you at work. Pray for that person who puts you down at school. Pray for that person who is a thorn in your side. See what happens to you and to the other person when you pray for your enemies.

There is no right or wrong way to pray. Prayer is talking with God and listening. Prayer is how we connect with God. Let's pray!