

HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF PRAYER.**MATTHEW 6:5-13**

Sometimes the most unlikely people have powerful prayer lives. Leo Tolstoy, the great Russian author, told a fictional story about three monks who lived on an island. They had a simple prayer life. They would approach God with this prayer, "We are three. You are three. Have mercy on us. Amen." Surprisingly, sometimes miracles happened when they prayed this simple prayer. The local bishop, however, upon hearing about these three monks, decided they'd profit greatly from his guidance on how to pray to God properly. So, he went to their small island. After instructing the three monks, the bishop set sail for the mainland, feeling pleased he could enlighten the souls of these simple men. Suddenly, off the stern of his ship, he saw a huge ball of light skimming across the ocean. It got closer and closer until he could see that it was the three monks running on top of the water. Once on board the ship, they said to the bishop, "We are so sorry, but we have already forgotten some of your teaching on prayer. Would you please instruct us again?" The bishop shook his head and replied meekly, "Forget everything I have taught you. Continue to pray in your old way." The point of Tolstoy's story? Sometimes the most unlikely people have powerful prayer lives. Or, sometimes the most unlikely people are far closer to God than it seems.

This is my final message of three on the theme "You're Too Busy Not To Pray." The number one reason followers of Jesus give for not praying much or at all is the busyness of our lives. But the logic behind that "reason" fails miserably. The truth is that the busier we are in life, the more we need God's presence and power if we're going to live healthy spiritual lives. And prayer is the best way to get and keep both God's presence and His power. Therefore, the busier you are the more you need to pray! Quite literally, every follower of Jesus is just too busy not to pray!

There are three reasons why I've brought these message on prayer to you. One, it's personal. I need to grow my own prayer life. Two, prayer is an integral part of being a disciple of Jesus. It's an essential aspect of our KRBC picture of a disciple captured in the acrostic word ROPES. You and I grow as disciples of Jesus when we invest in relationships. That's the R. Disciples are all about obeying Jesus' teaching. That's the O. Because Jesus' mission was to seek and to save those who are spiritually lost, we care deeply about evangelism. That's the E. And we are a people who are given to meditating upon and applying Scripture to our lives because it's God's Word. That's the S. But the middle letter – P – stands for prayer. We are also all about learning how to communicate with God more and better.

Here's the third reason I've been preaching on prayer. KRBC has begun the process of selecting a new pastor to replace me sometime next year. I invite you to saturate that process with your prayers. Pray for Jeff Lashley and the other members of the Pastoral Search Team. Pray for wisdom, endurance, and unity for them. Pray for your new pastor wherever that individual is serving at the moment. Pray that God will be all over, all through, and all in that very important decision and in this time of transition.

Christian, if you and I are ever going to get and stay spiritually healthy, we are going to have to learn how to get the most out of prayer. I believe Jesus Himself provided some very basic, practical teaching on prayer in several places in the Gospels. I want to look at one of those passages today. How can you get the most out of prayer? At least four truths jump out at me from Jesus words. Here's the first one.

PRAY REGULARLY.

Please notice the very first phrase. Jesus said, “When you pray....” (Mt. 6:5 NLT) In the next verse, “But when you pray....” (Mt. 6:6 NLT) Again, in the next verse, “When you pray...” (Mt. 6:7 NLT) Not if you pray, when you pray. Jesus assumed something right there concerning His followers. His followers – His disciples – will pray. Do you know one way you can discover your true priorities in life? If you find time to do something regardless of how busy you are, it's a priority. If you truly believe accessing God's presence and God's power is important for your life, you will make time for prayer. No ifs, ands, or buts. You'll pray regularly. Oh, you might have to get really creative. You might practice prayer in different ways, different places, and different times. But you will pray and pray regularly. Prayer will become and remain an important part of your life.

Let me warn you to avoid two extremes, however, when it comes to making prayer a regular habit in your life. First, don't make prayer into a legalistic demand. You might be a highly organized, extremely efficient person. If you find ultimate joy in life by making lists and crossing off each task when accomplished, you will be tempted by this extreme. You might hear today's message and say, “OK, Lord, tomorrow I will get up at 4 am and pray non-stop for two hours. And I will do that 7 days a week for 365 days a year for the rest of my life.” No, you won't. You might do it one day, one week, or maybe even one month if you're incredibly strong-willed. But you'll end exhausting yourself and you'll quit. And because you now feel like a spiritual failure, it might be a long time before you pray again. That approach to prayer is like the idiot who wants to get into shape physically, so he decides to take up running. But he wants instant results. Instead of starting out with a ½ mile or 1 mile jog, he attempts to run five miles the very first day! You already know what happens, right? After the third mile, he falls over and dies! If he does survive, he gives up running at all. Don't take that kind of approach to prayer. You'll fail and get discouraged. Start small and build from there. If you don't have a prayer life at all yet, start out at five minutes a day. After a month or so, increase it to ten minutes and then increase it incrementally as you go along.

Pray regularly. I believe “regularly” is something different than “daily.” I know many well-meaning, godly pastors and Bible teachers stress that a one-on-one prayer time with God should literally happen every single day. Maybe, but I think right there is an example of how a great habit – praying regularly – can become a legalistic demand. And the danger escalates if you start to believe praying seven days a week makes you holier and better than someone who prays five days a week! I like one suggestion I heard years ago now. In general, most doctors will tell you that if you engage in

vigorous exercise three or four times a week for about 30 minutes, you can get and stay reasonably fit aerobically. In other words, you don't have to work out two hours a day to be physically fit! Using that as an analogy, why not try establishing a time of prayer three or four times a week for say 15-30 minutes. Speaking personally, I've carved out for myself a one-to-one prayer time with God about four times a week for 45-60 minutes each time. You may be shocked and disappointed to learn I don't have a three-hour prayer session with God seven days a week, but so be it. But I do pray regularly. It's an habitual part of my life. So, don't allow the devil to make prayer into some kind of impossible, legalistic demand. Instead, make a plan that works for you. But however, or whenever it happens, pray regularly.

Now, here's the other extreme to avoid. Don't assume praying regularly will come naturally either. Now, some of us here today are the more relaxed, "go with the flow," let life just happen to us types. You're champions of spontaneity. Anything that seems remotely like a habit or smacks of self-discipline is to be avoided. You're suspicious of structure and plans because they seem so restrictive and deadening to your spirit. To press a previous analogy, this is like a person who believes physical fitness just happens to you. You can still be a couch potato all day long. You can still eat unlimited Twinkies. No, you can't! We all know that's foolish, right? Likewise, you and I will only get into and stay in shape spiritually if we become intentional about developing a healthy spiritual life. It won't just happen. The Holy Spirit will help you, by all means, but He won't do it for you. The truth is you will need a plan, a strategy, a structure and you will need to practice some good, old-fashioned self-discipline. How can you get the most out of prayer? Pray regularly. Jesus pointed to another important truth.

PRAY PRIVATELY.

I find that truth in what Jesus said in our passage today, "But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you." (Mt. 6:6 NLT) Now, Jesus is not condemning or dismissing public prayer – like in our worship service or our Tuesday evening prayer meeting. That's not Jesus' point at all. This is His point. Prayer is not a spectator sport. The spiritual leaders in Jesus' day – the Pharisees – loved to pray publicly and they did it with great flourish so they could be admired by other people. That's why Jesus called them hypocrites. "Don't be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get." (Mt. 6:5 NLT) Prayer is simply learning how to talk to God and listen to Him. It's not a way to impress other people with how spiritual you are. When we pray our focus should always be on God alone. Not its potential effect on others. Not on how good or holy it might sound.

Here's another reason our prayers should have a private dimension. A growing and developing relationship with God requires private encounters with God. Let's imagine a married couple who just love to have friends over for meals, for conversation, or for recreation. They are just the most hospitable folk you can imagine. And, sure, being

hospitable and out-going toward others is healthy and can enrich a marriage relationship. But every married couple must still carve out some significant one-to-one time together to develop their own relationship. It's the same with our relationship with God. It's wonderful to be with God's people for worship, for church school classes, or in triads. But none of those are meant to be a substitute for your own personal, private time with your Heavenly Father. You need to start, keep, and zealously protect those private encounters with God. Those encounters are, in fact, a form or kind of prayer.

Here's yet another reason to pray privately. It makes it easier to minimize distractions. Don't try to fight off distractions. Instead minimize or eliminate them. Get away from the TV or the radio. Leave your "dumb" phone in the other room or silence it. You're heard about distracted driving, right? How about distracted praying! If they don't want you texting while you're driving, you don't have to text while you're spending time with God either. You don't have to check your social media feeds. Find a quiet place and time where you can be alone with God and pray without interruption. Just like a married couple might have a favorite restaurant where they go on special occasions or a family has a favorite vacation spot rich with many happy memories of times spent together, so we can create private, special places where we meet with God. On summer mornings weather permitting, I love to have a private time with the Lord in the morning out on the deck behind our home. It's a quiet, beautiful, and peaceful place. Somehow being out there with the blue sky, trees, grass, and flowers all around me draws me into and prompts me to have a conversation with my Heavenly Father. How can you get the most out of prayer? Pray regularly. Pray privately. Here's another important truth.

PRAY SINCERELY.

I believe that's what Jesus was getting at when He said here, "When you pray, don't babble on and on as the Gentiles do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again." (Mt. 6:7 NLT) Jesus was implying there are good prayers and bad prayers. Effective prayers and ineffective prayers. Godly prayers and ungodly prayers. Even followers of Jesus can pray bad prayers, ineffective prayers, or ungodly prayers. Let's learn instead how to pray good prayers.

Let's think of a few contrasts between bad and good prayers. Bad prayers are selfish. These are the kinds of prayers that never get much beyond, "God, get me out of this mess. God, I'm in deep trouble. Help me out. God, I need more money, more things, more success." Good prayers recognize God is a Person to whom I can relate. Of course, we can ask God to help us at any time for any reason, but good prayers also find other reasons to talk to and with God. Good prayers see it as a way to get to know this Person – a Person who happens to be God – because He is worth knowing even if He gave you nothing. Bad prayers want to use God. Good prayers want to know God.

Bad prayers assume God is impressed with style. If we pray long prayers, God is impressed. If we pray flowery, elegant prayers, God is even more impressed. If we pray emotional prayers, God is more apt to answer them. Good prayers know God is only

ever impressed by the sincerity of our prayers. God doesn't need to be "battered up" in order to give us something He would not otherwise give us. He wants to hear what's in our hearts – simply, straightforwardly, and sincerely. Bad prayers treat God like a stranger we need to impress. Good prayers treat God as our Heavenly Father who already knows our needs and has promised to meet them. As Jesus said right here, "Your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him!" (Mt. 6:8 NLT)

Bad prayers are thoughtless and robotic. Jesus said, "Don't babble on and on as the Gentiles do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again." (Mt. 6:8 NLT) Good prayers are thoughtful and real. It's easy to drift into what I call "a prayer rut." Have you ever found yourself using the same expressions when you pray, the same stock phrases, or the same cliches over and over again? That's happened to me often. My prayers can become robotic. One way I've found to bring some freshness to my prayer life is to work the words of a Bible passage I've just been reading that day into my prayer. Or sometimes we can tolerate kind of mindless prayers. Here's one I'm guilty of. "Lord, please be with me today." Isn't that a silly prayer if you think about it? The Bible tells me God promises to be with His children all the time and in every situation. It's impossible for God not to be with me! It would be better to pray I become more aware or conscious of God's presence with me each day. How can you get the most out of prayer? Pray regularly. Pray privately. Pray sincerely. Here's a final truth to consider together.

PRAY PROPERLY.

I know that might sound a bit strange, but let me explain. In our Scripture passage today, Jesus gave us a model or a pattern to guide us in our actual prayers. We call it the Lord's Prayer and it's right there in v. 9-13. Notice what Jesus prays for and in what order because it has significance for how you and I should talk to God. The first three statements are all about God and His glory. The second three statements have to do with our needs and concerns. I see an implication right there. Proper prayer starts with God and ends with us. It's a model that's important to observe. When God is given His proper place – whether it's in our lives or in our prayers – then everything else falls into its proper place. When you pray, start with God and end with yourself.

Walk with me through the Lord's Prayer here. "Our Father in heaven" When you pray, start with God and recognizing who He is. Worship Him. Acknowledge Him. Praise Him. Remember He wants you to know and relate to Him as your Father – someone who cannot love you any more than He already loves you today. "May your name be kept holy." Focus on His majesty, His sovereignty, His goodness, His absolute integrity, His bigness. Focus on His unlimited ability not your inability. "May your Kingdom come soon. May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven." When you pray, remind yourself that you exist to fulfill God's agenda. He doesn't exist to fulfill your agenda. Don't approach God as if He is some kind of divine vending machine where you punch a button and get what you want. Put His will first in every area of your life – your money, your job, your marriage, your family, your relationships.

Having started with God, by all means, bring your requests about yourself before His throne of grace boldly. “Give us today the food we need.” You can come before Him with confidence. Lay out all your needs before Him. “And forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us.” Nothing short circuits our connection with God more quickly than sin and nothing disrupts our relationship with Him more than unforgiveness towards others – bitterness and resentment we hold on and refuse to release. Confess your sins regularly. Receive forgiveness and extend it to those who hurt you. “And don’t let us yield to temptation, but rescue us from the evil one.” You and I have enemies who want to destroy us. One is our own sinful nature. Another is the devil. Ask God to protect you from the devil and from yourself. Ask and receive victory over temptation and the devil’s strategies against you.

Following Jesus well is more than learning a set of beliefs. It’s an everyday experience – a walk through life with a dynamic God who wants to communicate with us. Not every Christian follows Jesus well or faithfully. One reason – really, it’s just an excuse – is busyness. Don’t let being busy prevent you from following Jesus faithfully and well. There’s a kind of busyness in this life which is really what the Bible identifies as being “worldly.” We can get focused upon and preoccupied by this world’s news, this world’s gossip, this world’s agenda, this world’s values, and this world’s activities. The very best way to keep this world from overrunning and dominating our lives is to carve out unhurried, uninterrupted time to be with God. To get to know anybody – be it a spouse, a child, a friend – you have to reject the excuse of busyness and spend time with that person. It’s the same with God. How can you get the most out of prayer? Pray regularly. Pray privately. Pray sincerely. Pray properly.

D.L. Moody was a shoe salesman who became one of the greatest evangelists the world has ever known. God used Him in incredible ways in the 1800s. On one occasion, he visited a small church in Great Britain. When he got up to speak in the morning service, Moody said he faced the coldest, most apathetic congregation he’d ever seen. He was glad when the service was over. He dreaded going back to speak again that evening, but his presence had been advertised and he kept his word to be there. That evening, however, was a totally different experience! As he preached the message God put on his heart, he noticed a little spiritual warmth in the crowd. Then, a little more. Finally, God’s Spirit began to move and a revival broke out. Although he was scheduled to preach elsewhere the next night, he promised to return in a few days so that he could be a part of what God was doing.

When he returned to the church, Moody learned what had really happened on that unusual Sunday. There was an elderly woman in the congregation who could no longer attend church, but spent her days in a wheelchair. When she’d first read about Moody and his gifts as an evangelist, she began to pray that he would one day come to visit her little church. When a relative came home from church that Sunday morning and told her the speaker had been none other than D.L. Moody from America and he would speak there again that evening, she went into action. She skipped lunch, went into her

bedroom, and prayed all afternoon. She asked God to send His Spirit down upon that congregation and fill that church with a repentant, receptive heart toward Jesus. Moody realized what happened that remarkable Sunday evening wasn't his doing. It was the Holy Spirit partnering with a little, old lady in her wheelchair who understood the power of prayer. The result was a powerful spiritual awakening in that congregation and many lives were changed for eternity.

Sometimes the most unlikely people have powerful prayer lives. They've somehow and somewhere learned how to get the most out of prayer. So, you're busy, right? Well, you're too busy not to pray!