What is Prayer and Why Do We Pray?

A mini-study

Let us start with two questions:

1. What is prayer to you?

2. Why do you pray?

Either write down your answers to these questions or at least take the time to voice your answers to yourself.

I. What is prayer?

Think about your prayer life. Is your prayer talking **to** God or is it talking **with** God?

Also, what is the purpose of you praying?

For myself, as I grew up as a Christian, the model for prayer was what I saw in a public prayer. When people are praying in public, obviously they talk. If they stop talking, then the prayer is over. So, to me, prayer is talking to God, or at least that is how I viewed it for many years.

But there are two problems with this.

1. Communication is a lot more than words. and

2. Communication, by its very definition is two-way.

Romans 8:26 In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will.

Think about that moment when you communicated your deepest desires and feelings to someone who you deeply love. It might be that look you exchanged with your spouse when the two of you first realized you are in love with each other. That look said it all. Words simply do not express our most profound feelings. Prayer is not just talking. Prayer is feeling. Prayer is receiving a message. The Holy Spirit helps is to express those deepest feelings to God. And this is a two-way street. He also communicates God’s deep desire for us. Sometimes in our prayer we need to stop talking. We need to “be still and know that I Am God.” (Psalms 46:10).

There is a spiritual discipline that most of us have not developed, and I will add myself to the list of novices in this area. It is meditation. Prayer may be talking, but it is also meditation. Meditation is not just for our Hindu friends. We need to take it back for use in Christian prayer. David meditated, not by saying a mantra, but by contemplating God’s glory. In Psalm 119:27 he tells us that “I will meditate on your wonders.” In Psalm 77:9, Asaph tells us, “I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds.” This cannot be done while talking. In Psalm 48:9 the Sons of Korah tell us that, “Within your temple, O God, we meditate on your unfailing love.” Prayer that God seeks from us includes meditation.

What is prayer? It is a lot of things. To break it down to just one of them is a mistake, but one of those things prayer involves is communicating on the deepest possible level our feelings and desires to God and God doing the same with us. Let us consider prayer, not just as talking, but as feeling and meditating. Let us consider the role the Holy Spirit plays in this and let us consider being trained to be still—to stop talking and to meditate on God—on his wonders, on his works and on his unfailing love.

II. Why do we pray?

If we have a more complete understanding of what prayer is, then we will have a greater understanding of why we (hopefully) pray. Of course, one reason we pray is that we are commanded to pray. But consider your most valued relationships. If these relationships are truly valued, then surely you do not communicate with those you love because you “have” to. In fact, if you have to, then that is not love.

Here are three much better reasons for you to consider as to why we pray. Our purposes in prayer include:

1. To give glory to God.

2. To align our heart with God’s will.

3. To influence God and be influenced by him through relationship.

Probably the best go-to place, both for how to pray and why to pray is found in Luke 11:1-4 and Matthew 6:9-13. Here the disciples, who have been praying their whole lives, realize that Jesus is the master prayer. Therefore, in humility, they ask him how to pray. In his response to them, we can see all three of the points above.

First, Jesus begins his model prayer by giving glory to God. All honor and praise belong to God and to God alone. My personal favorite example of this in the Scripture comes, not surprisingly, from the mouth of the second greatest prayer of all time—David. It is in 1 Chronicles 29:10-20. “Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor” By this time, David is consulting his thesaurus, as he is running out of words. But he is not running out of reasons to give Glory to God. First and foremost, the reason we pray is to give glory to the God who created us—to the God of all comfort, love, power and dominion who deserves our eternal praise and who sits in glory in heaven, amen!

Second, we pray so that our hearts and desires can become aligned with God’s will for our own lives and for the world as a whole. Jesus says in his model prayer, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Does this mean that God’s will is not always done? I thought that God was totally sovereign. In fact, God’s will is not always done because there are creatures who have free will, whose wills very often do not align with the will of Him who created them. In prayer, we seek to align our desires with those of our Father in heaven. We offer ourselves in submission. We pray for things, but we expect God to give us those things only if it is according to his will, right? In 1 John 5:14-15 we are told that anything we ask that is in accord with his will we will receive. For this reason, as we pray, we are trying to align our will with his will.

The third reason we pray goes back to the first part of this lesson. The greatest purpose of prayer is to give glory to God. In prayer we align our free wills with God’s will. Both true, but in the end, prayer is two-way communication. In prayer, God presents his deepest desire for us—his will for our lives and for the whole world. But in prayer, we also lay bare our deepest desires to God. It is surely one of the greatest mysteries that the Creator of the Universe wants to be influenced by puny little us. In prayer, we move the universe. Well, it is not exactly us moving the universe, but it is us moving God who then moves the universe. In his model prayer, in Matthew 6:11 Jesus prayed that God “give us our daily bread.” In prayer, we present our requests before the most powerful person in the universe, knowing that if it is according to his will, that he will make it happen. “By prayer and petition, with thanksgiving” we “present our requests to God.” (Philippians 4:6) Our prayer moves the universe, and this is one reason we pray, because when we ask, we receive. But let us remember a few things about this.

1. First, let us give glory to God.

2. Second, let us first do our very best to align our desires with God’s will.

3. Third, let us remember that our presentation to God of our desires will be greatly helped by the Holy Spirit, who speaks for us in groans that words cannot express. Let us sometimes stop talking, meditate, communicate and let us “be still and know that I am God.”

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12/6/17