

3.9.25 Lent: Slowing Down— Making Space for What Counts: PRAYER

Matthew 6:5-13 NRSVUE

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

“Pray, then, in this way: Our Father in heaven, may your name be revered as holy. May your kingdom come. May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.”

This is the word of God for the people of God, thanks be to God.

Will you join me in a time of prayer?

Lord, we come before You today, seeking Your presence, Your guidance, and Your wisdom. As we enter this season of Lent, may You help us slow down, make space, and lean into the practices that draw us closer to You. Specifically today, may we learn what it means to pray, why we should pray, and how we can develop a deeper relationship with You through this wondrous, transformative discipline. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Friends, what a joy it is to be together both online and in-person as we begin this season of Lent.

As we embark on this journey together, our 6 week series will focus on “Slowing Down—Making Space for What Counts.”

And one of the primary ways we make space for God during Lent—
and well really all year long—
is through the power and gift of spiritual disciplines.

Now, when we hear the phrase “spiritual disciplines,”
It might sound a bit formal, a bit serious, and perhaps even heavy laden,
but in reality, these are simply practices
to help us connect with God more deeply.

They’re not meant to be a burden, but a means of grace—
Which basically means **ways** we open ourselves to God’s love
and presence in our lives.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement,
referred to these practices as “Means of Grace”—methodical ways
to experience God’s love, hence the name Methodists!

He believed these spiritual disciplines reveal and connect us
to God's love, will, presence, and power in profound ways.

Practices like prayer, service, worship, simplicity, acts of mercy & justice,
and so many more—**each** can

~help us tune our hearts and lives to God's frequency.

~to help reveal God’s purpose, hope and dream for us,

~to help lead us thru all the ups & downs of life in this crazy world.

And today, we’re going to talk about one of those disciplines that is
foundational to our relationship with God—**prayer**.

When I say the word "prayer," what comes to your mind?

[Pause for responses]

You all named words and sentences of action, of thoughts, of feelings,
Of spaces and places, of time.

Indeed for some, prayer might be formal, kneeling in a quiet space,
or a time when you’re asking God for something.

Others might think of prayers of gratitude or offering words of thanks
Either alone, around a meal, or at church.

Prayer can take many shapes & forms,
& that's what's so beautiful about it. Prayer is a deeply personal thing.
It's not a one-size-fits-all action, thought, movement, practice.

Prayer is a way of being.

It's not just something we do when we need something;
prayer is a way we engage with God throughout our lives.

Prayer is as unique as we are, and the beautiful thing is that
God invites us into it with all of who we are.

So, we're gonna talk about prayer today: Why we pray; How we pray;
And why it matters so much in our walk with God...

So much that we're challenged to be disciplined, methodical,
Purposeful in our prayer life.

First we pray because it's **Expected!**

It's clear throughout scripture that *God expects us to pray.*

Now, for some this might sound a little strange at first.

We might think that God doesn't need us to pray because, well,
It's God—right? And God knows everything—
all seeing, all knowing and omnipotent! Right?

Jesus said it this morning—

“Your Father knows what you need before you ask!”

But I think about it this way:

Whenever Rich or I go away for a few days leaving the other one home,
like when I attended a 5 day conference in Houston last month,
we **expect** a call from each other.

Rich expected me to call when I landed in Houston,
and I called him once I settled into my hotel room.
And it's not because he's checking up on me,
but because he wants to hear from me.

He loves me, and he enjoys that regular connection...
that check-in to see how the day's been going,
that the plane was on schedule, and how I was feeling.

And you know what, it's the same for me!

I love that Rich wants to chat even when we're miles and miles apart.

Well, in the same way, God wants to hear from us.

Prayer is a command of love, a way to stay connected
with the One who loves us most.

Jesus says today in Matthew 6, "And when you pray..."

Notice it's not "if" you pray, but "when."

It's an expectation from Jesus.

In fact he says it 4 times, "When you pray," in this morning's passage

Jesus assumes that prayer will be a part of our lives,

Of our loving relationship together that includes regular check-ins!

In Luke 18:1, Jesus shares a parable about the need to pray **always**
and not lose heart.

Prayer is something God expects because the Lord desires communication
with us...desires connection & relationship...

and wants to bless us through it.

Just like in any good, healthy, loving relationship, regular communication
keeps the bond strong, and prayer is a key part of that.

Indeed the New Testament consistently encourages us to pray.

Powerful letters of wisdom, advice and instruction

to the newly forming church, like from Colossians 4:2 says,

"Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving."

To be devoted means to give something your full attention and energy.

Paul is urging us to make prayer a priority.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:17, we hear again, "Pray continually."

Now sometimes that may sound impossible,

but what it means is to develop a constant attitude of prayer.

It's not always about long, drawn-out prayers, but rather living with an awareness of God's presence in every moment of our lives.

We know in the Gospels that Jesus often withdrew to pray.

Friends, if Jesus needed to pray, how much more do we?

Prayer is expected of us, not because God is demanding it, but because **we need it**.

~We need it to align our hearts with God's heart,

~We need it to deepen our relationship with the Lord, **AND**

~We need prayer to grow in love for others.

Prayer expands our lives as we express hope for the needs of others,

For situations and events, and for the world...indeed for all of creation.

As Jesus said a few verses later in Mt 5:44,

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

Prayer helps us grow in love for others...even when its hard.

James 5:16 “Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.

The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.”

Oh my friends, there is such power and hope in prayer...

prayer connects, builds and strengthens relationships....

ALL relationships...with God, with others, and with creation.

So knowing all this...why Don't We Pray?

Why do we struggle with this spiritual discipline?

If prayer is expected and so beneficial, why do so many of us struggle to make it a consistent part of our lives? I think there are a few reasons:

One is a **Lack of Discipline**. Sometimes, we just don't make time for it.

Life gets busy, right? And prayer gets pushed to the back burner.

We're not good at slowing down...

we're not good at making space for what truly counts.

Or maybe we're struggling with **Doubt**.

We might wonder if anything is actually happening when we pray.
God doesn't always answer immediately, & sometimes,
answers come in ways we don't expect or want to hear...
or choose to ignore.

It can also be about a **Feeling of Distance**. Maybe we don't sense
God's nearness, so we don't feel motivated to pray
or we may not trust that God really cares about us.

I think our prayer life suffers when we don't **Recognize the Need for it**.
Far too easily we forget how much we need God
and how much **others** need our prayers.

Or we trust and rely only on our own selves and not God's power
and might and strength that is unleashed through this powerful
means of grace.

Finally I know that way too many people hold the insecurity
of not knowing **How to Pray**.

Sometimes we just don't know where to start
or how to pray the "right way", fearing we, will "mess up" somehow,
or look foolish.

But friends we know prayer is expected of us
and we also know from today's passage that prayer is learned!

In Luke's version of this teaching, we discover that the Lord's Prayer
was given after Jesus' disciples point blank asked Him,
"Lord, teach us to pray."

They were recognizing and naming something important,
that Prayer is a learned skill.

Friends, when you're starting out in a new discipline, of any kind,
Be it playing an instrument, or learning your ABC's like my grandkids,
it takes practice.

Prayer is no different. We can learn to pray
~by meditating on Scripture (the Psalms are wonderful for this),
~we can learn by praying with others,
~by simply spending time sitting in God's presence,
or by studying a book on prayer.

Prayer can be practiced in silence, thru corporate worship, in written form,
through music, or while walking along the beach or in the woods.

Some of you know every morning I make a cup of tea and begin the day
With prayer, scripture, a devotional reading, and journaling.

That's 4 disciplines working in unison that connect me to my Lord...
The first of many check-ins with God throughout my day.

And just last week one devotion gave a great insight on prayer,
The spiritual author is Kathy Coffey who writes:

“Prayer is larger than any formula,
holding an amazing range of possibilities.

The God who creates unique fingerprints, snowflakes,
and over a million kinds of insects must love variety.

Relishes all the different voices of God's children,
no matter how stumbling they may sound.

Furthermore, God starts the conversation of prayer coming to us
in a myriad of ways tailored specifically to each individual.

Some may find God more in events, like liturgy or healthcare;
Others may find God in people or inspired places,
or nature is saturated with God's affection,
or in nurturing things like flowers, stained glass, hot coffee or tea.

Our human response in prayer is sensitivity to God's initiative,
alertness to God's activity.

Praying with the eye of the soul is simply responding to God's grace
in our lives, moment by moment.

Honestly the only way to fail at prayer is to not show up.”

This powerfully articulates what Jesus and Paul meant
when they expect us to pray always...to pray continually.

The challenge this Lent for all of us—
is slowing down & making space for what really matters.

For we who have begun our journey to the cross of Jesus,
Its about making time to be in a closer relationship with Christ.
And PRAYER can help us do this!

Friends, try setting aside a specific time each day to pray.
Choose a place where you won't be distracted.
Even if it's just 5 minutes, make that time a sacred check-in.

Remember, prayer doesn't have to be formal;
or a flowery, long-winded drawn out "perfect" prayer.

Dorothy Day said,
"Since when are words the only acceptable form of prayer?"
Prayer is more than words; it's a response to God's grace in our lives,
whether that's through music, nature, art, relationships, work, play,
or even a simple "thank you" as you go about your day.

Remember that Prayer is larger than any formula...
The God who creates unique fingerprints, snowflakes,
and over a million kinds of insects absolutely loves variety.

God delights in the diversity of ways we pray—
so don't worry if your prayers don't sound like someone else's.
God loves *your* voice.
God loves however you uniquely choose to check-in.

As we begin this Lenten season,
let's commit to making space for prayer in our lives each and every day.

Prayer is not a burden, but a means of grace—
an invitation from our loving God to communicate,
to grow closer with our Lord,
and to align our hearts with the power & presence of the Holy Spirit.

SLOW DOWN for what truly counts—PRAYER.

And when you pray, know that you will deepen your connection with God,
And when you pray, trust that you will bless others,
And when you pray, just be yourself...God loves checking in!

May it be so! Amen and Amen.