

## Scripture

'And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.' (Eph.6:18 NIV)

### 1<sup>st</sup>, a pattern of life

The disciples famously asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. In answer Jesus gave them a pattern for prayer and so we tend to go straight to that as our point of reference. However, I think we miss out on something important and life changing for our prayer life when we do it.

Imagine a child going to a parent, 'teach me how to pray' and the parent replies (mechanically) 'step 1, look up the prayer Jesus taught; step 2, read it; step 3 learn it; step 4 ,say it everyday.'<sup>i</sup>

On obstacles to prayer Pastor Tyler Staton comments,

One of the most frustrating aspects of scripture is that it rarely reads like Ikea instructions. If God would just lay it out, step-be-step, then I'd do it.'<sup>ii</sup>

Personally, I'm glad the Lord does not do that. Why? Because we miss the intent in Jesus' answer to the disciples.

**The disciples were not simply asking for a pattern of prayer, they were asking how to have a relationship with God the Father in a similar way to the one Jesus had.**

What else have we have missed? The pattern Jesus gives is first a pattern of life. His pattern explains the intended relationship that sits as foundational to the instructional pattern that Moses had taught the people. That pattern was existent before Jesus voiced it here; what they were missing was relational understanding.

They had witnessed his pattern of life, sometimes disappearing off early in the morning, sometimes later in the day having personal time with Father God. But they'd observed more than that, for Jesus seemed to be in almost constant conversation as he went about doing the things of God every day; the story telling, acts of mercy, and personal introductions to the Father.

That's what they really wanted to know and copy; teach us how to have those personal conversations with God, because what you are showing us is beyond anything we've been taught or experienced.

'It is not what you know but who you know' is a true saying here, for it is the starting point for our prayer life.

## **Prayer is natural and personal**

Consider for a moment a newborn Christian. For them, they have had an encounter with God through his Spirit, and they react by talking about it, about him, about how they experience things differently and talking with God. At that moment, no-one has sat them down and started going through patterns or rules of prayer.

In fact, I think the opposite can be true; that when we start suggesting to them that they must follow a specific pattern or a rule for praying we dampen their zeal and turn what is natural into a chore.

Again, I am glad the Lord does not give Ikea-like instructions. I think that would be a sure-fire way to make prayer into a chore.

Prayer is conversation with the Lord and is natural; it is how we are wired.

The first obstacle to a meaningful prayer life is not busyness but bias.

We think we need to have a certain amount of knowledge, we worry we won't do it right and it can make us anxious. Tyler Staton advises this anxiousness is perhaps because prayer 'uncover fears we can ignore as long as we don't engage deeply.'<sup>iii</sup>

As strange as it may seem for me to say, **if you are struggling with your prayer life you are probably over-thinking it.**

### **So, what are we to think?**

Start by having intentional conversations with the Lord; notice things back to him, include him in the internal thoughts, tell him what you're thinking and ask him what he thinks.

What we are doing is being mindful of the Lord's presence in the everyday and being mindful he has a vested interest. He desires healthy relationship with his people.

Hear Paul again on prayer life,

'And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.' (Eph.6:18 NIV)

Likewise, Peter,

'Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming.'

(1Pet.1:13 NIV)

Both apostles tell us to be mindful. Mindful to the Lord's presence and to what is going on around us.

Prayer is being connected to the Lord and to his creation in a mindful way.

### **Making space**

Having started by being intentional and informal in pray as part of our thought process in the everyday, we must take notice that Jesus also made space where he could be more reflective and undisturbed from the daily tasks.

As I said earlier, the disciples had noticed this when they asked their question.

What was Jesus doing? He was keeping his personal, spiritual connection with the Father. To remember his love and grace and to remember it on behalf of the people.

As we make space for the Lord we can reflect with him on such questions as,

- What is the spiritual reality behind what is going on in our lives, our community, our country and the world?
- What is the spiritual reality of God's presence in the World?
- What is his hope and promise to the world?

I advise have a bible to hand, for it is God's living Word, past, present and future. It is likely that the Lord will cause us to remember something already said or examples previously lived.

### **Communal**

Prayer is not an individual effort; as already observed it is conversation – dialogue between person and the Lord. When we have a bible to hand, we invite a great cloud of witnesses (See Heb.12:1) to join the conversation and inform us.

Even then, the expectation of Jesus' church is that we pray together. Both Paul and Peter were writing to groups of Christians. The Church in Ephesus, for example, was not one congregation, but many groups across the city, with various relational and leadership overlaps.

Jesus spent time praying with his disciples as a collective. And sometimes that was in a small group, such as just before the time of his arrest, it was again for the same purpose.

### **2<sup>nd</sup> and now some patterns that can help us connect**

The pattern Jesus taught was **cross-shaped**; relationship with the Lord, followed by relationships with others (as are the ten commandments). Jesus' command to love is

the core decision from which we obey him. It is impossible to fully obey the Lord, as the Pharisees were sharply reminded, without our relationship being driven by love from and for the Lord. It is from that love we learn to love and bear with others.

In a similar way we can also use 'ACTS': Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving & Supplication (or Supply). A mindful time of **adoration**, even in difficult circumstances, is given as an act of love toward the Lord. This begins to reset us in our relationship with him too and naturally leads to a time of **confession**, for we become aware of our own shortcomings. That gives way to a time of **thanks**, again as a natural progression as we thank him for his forgiveness, his grace and his faithfulness.

The final progression into **supplication**, or making of requests - for blessings, healings, His kingdom on Earth is again natural movement because in making thanks we begin to note how **he supplies** us (the Lord is my provider e.g., Ps.65:9-13 / Ps.145:16 / Philippians 4:19).

A different pattern is to use **psalms, hymns and worship songs**, whether sung or read. They represent the prayers of the writers and so we join in with them and are led into our own thoughts and conversation with the Lord. (Just remember that some are poetically/imaginatively written and do not treat them all as literal, but pictorial)

## Blessing

May your relationship in the Lord 'grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.' (2Pet.3:18 NIV)

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<sup>i</sup> I think there is a danger when we only teach children a pattern of prayer that it becomes a chore and rule without the relational connection that God also desires. Our vision of God is affected by our understanding of prayer. If prayer is a moral code or a set of rules, we understand God to be unreachable, a far-off judge who waits to be convinced that we are following his rules before he decides if we are worthy of him.

<sup>ii</sup> Tyler Staton, *Praying Like Monks, Living Like Fools* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 2022) p.12.

<sup>iii</sup> Staton, p.14.