



PRAYER



a practice guidebook

“[The Apostle Paul] believes that highest good is communion or fellowship with God. A rich, vibrant, consoling, hard-won prayer life is the one good that makes it possible to receive all other kinds of good rightly and beneficially. He does not see prayer as merely a way to get things from God but as a way to get more of God Himself. To fail to pray, then is to not merely break some religious rule—it is a failure to treat God as God. It is a sin against His glory.”

Tim Keller, Prayer

Teaching on prayer for most of us brings up in our spirits a deadly mix of guilt and dread. We know we’re supposed to do it. We understand the place of prominence prayer holds within our theological framework. We’ve spent years hearing about it, working at it on and off, and yet we don’t feel like we do it very well. In fact, most of us feel like downright failures when it comes to prayer. And that, of course, does not endear the topic to our hearts.

And yet, Jesus seemed to have a completely different view of prayer. He seemed to long for time away to be spent with the Father. When things got busy, He retreated to prayer. When He was experiencing success in ministry, He spent time in prayer. Before major decisions He could always be found seeking the Father. And when His life was threatened and His ministry challenged, He always retreated to prayer. His connection with the Father was far from duty—it was life for Him.

The problem for many of us is that prayer has become far too complicated. Prayer could simply be defined as “a conversation with God” and it’s really a “junk drawer” kind of term for all aspects of our relationship with the Father. For Jesus, it was evident that He viewed His connection with the Father as a vital relationship that He intentionally engaged. Our goal is to do the same.

That’s the goal we’ll have the short teaching series, as well as this booklet you hold in your hands (or on your phone). (You can find the teachings at www.yorkalliance.org/sermons) The ideal way to engage these truths is within a small community who can journey with you. You’ll find that this practice guide, while engaged individually, will be best utilized by an individual in community. Therefore, while there are certainly individual

parts of this practice, you are also encouraged to engage them with your Discipleship Partner(s) as well as your Community Group.

The specific exercises in this booklet will stretch over the next five weeks and will tie directly to the teachings from Sunday morning. We believe that it is impossible to gain the life of Jesus without practicing the lifestyle of Jesus; and that lifestyle was certainly one of prayer. We also believe that real change doesn’t simply happen through more knowledge, but through practices and habits, in community, under the power and direction of the Holy Spirit. That’s the heart of this guidebook.

I have tried to cite specific ideas and quotations where appropriate. Beyond those citations, these exercises have been developed in reliance on several sources: Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God by Tim Keller, A Praying Life by Paul Miller, Prayer by Richard Foster, Hearing God by Dallas Willard, Journey with Jesus by Larry Warner, and the “Prayer” section of www.practicingtheway.org.

The weeks will be laid out as follows:

- Week One: The Lord’s Prayer
- Week Two: Contemplative Prayer
- Week Three: Intercessory Prayer
- Week Four: Listening Prayer
- Week Five: Prayer of Examen

As you engage these exercises, let me give you a few encouragements at the front end. First, expect your mind to wander and for distractions to come when you try to really press into the discipline of prayer. Our human/sinful nature doesn’t engage prayer easily, and the enemy of our souls prefers that you and I never learn to pray. So push through the distractions, develop simple tools to combat them, and keep going. Secondly, remember that prayer, like any relationship, will take time and require discipline. My relationship with Amanda is far sweeter today than it was during those early years of “young love,” and that’s come from both many years spent together as well as the discipline of date nights, intentional conversations, working through hard things, and truly knowing one another. Our relationship with God through prayer is the same. Completing this guidebook doesn’t mean you’ve arrived—it only means that you’ve started.

Week One: The Lord's Prayer

"[The Lord's Prayer] is the prayer most used and least understood. People think they are asking God for something. They are not—they are offering God something. . . the Lord's Prayer is not a prayer to God to do something we want done. It is more nearly God's prayer to us, to help Him do what He wants done. . . He wanted that entire prayer answered before we prayed it. . . The Lord's Prayer is not intercession. It is enlistment."

Frank Laubach

The disciples watched Jesus do some remarkable things. They saw Him walk on water. Heal the sick and cast out demons. Preach some pretty incredible sermons. He turned water to wine. He fed thousands with a little boy's lunch. And yet, having experienced all of that, we never see them asking Jesus to show them how to do any of them. The one such request that they made was simply this: "Lord, teach us to pray." (Luke 11:1) What was it about Jesus' prayer life that motivated the request? And what can we learn from His answer? He didn't give them a liturgy to follow or a prayer to recite (necessarily, although there's value in that practice), but a template to follow when they prayed.

During this first week, our goal is simply to connect with the Father both within community as well as personally. You are encouraged to use the model below at least at morning and evening each day this week, and if possible, at some point in the midday. It might take you two minutes, and if you deeply engage it, it could take you two hours. However, don't set the bar too high—the goal is to get into the rhythm of regular prayer, not to become a mature prayer warrior in a week! Two or three minutes is a great starting point a few times each day, along with a time of prayer with your Community Group, family, Discipleship Partner, or some kind of prayer group. Use the following model:

1. Begin by putting away phones and other distractions and getting into a comfortable but alert position. Invite the Holy Spirit to come and awaken your heart to His work in and through you as you pray.
2. Pray through the Lord's Prayer phrase by phrase...
"Our Father..."

- Think about the idea of God as your Father. Recognize His loving intentions toward you. Picture Him and make eye contact.

"In heaven..."

- Pray into the fact that God is all around you. Imagine Him as close as the air you're breathing in and out of your lungs.

"Hallowed be Your Name..."

- Take time to worship. Consider the greatness and majesty of God. Maybe sing a chorus or list some of His attributes.

"Your Kingdom come and Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven..."

- Ask for God's will to be done in your neighborhood, in York, in our nation, in the world around us. Pray specifically. Also, pray specifically about areas in your own life that you are wrestling with control over. Pray: "Your will be done in _____ area."

"Give us each day our daily bread..."

- Pray for specific needs and wants within your community. When you are with your group, it's a great time to pray for one another. Also, consider using the front of the Prayer Connection.

"Forgive us our sins, as we also have forgiven those who sin against us..."

- Spend some time quiet asking God to reveal areas where you need to be forgiven, and those whom you need to forgive as well.

"Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil."

- Pray specifically against temptation and trouble in your life, or in the life of your community. Pray against the bad things and pray for the flow of God's blessing into your life and community.

3. Thank God for hearing you and consider journaling any specific thoughts that came to your mind as you prayed.

Questions for Community:

- How does this practice feel to you? Why do you think that is?
- How do you normally pray? Does this model feel freeing or restricting to you? Why is that?
- Have you been able to pray at various times throughout the day? What has that experience been like? What stands in the way?
- What's one area in which you are hoping to grow in prayer over the next few weeks?

Week Two: Contemplative Prayer

“I still think the prayer without words is the best—if one can really achieve it. But I now see that in trying to make it my daily bread I was counting on a greater mental and spiritual strength than I really have. To pray successfully without words one needs to be ‘at the top of one’s form.’”

C.S. Lewis, Letters to Malcolm

“The whole reason we pray is to be united into the vision and contemplation of Him to whom we pray.”

Juliana of Norwich

Prayer isn’t first about saying specific words, or even hearing specific things: It’s first and foremost about being in an active relationship with a Person. Real relationship includes lots of different forms and habits of communication, and those forms and habits change and develop over time. Sometimes this means talking. Sometimes it means not saying anything and just sharing times of silence. Sometimes it means sharing things of beauty and inspiration. Relationships in which one person does all of the talking, doesn’t listen, and refuses to allow silence often don’t go very deep. The same is true for prayer.

Like the Lord’s Prayer last week, there is both an individual and communal dynamic to contemplative prayer. It’s vital for us to learn to “be with Jesus” and commune with Him in silence and contemplation on our own. However, it’s equally vital that we learn to pray in common with one another, allowing the Spirit in us to encourage one another, teach and affirm one another, benefit from one another’s relationship with God, and bring our spiritual journeys into relationship with each other.

Consider the following exercises. For the individual exercises, choose one of your times of prayer throughout the day to practice contemplation. For the corporate exercise, set aside 15-20 minutes (at least) to engage these exercises as a community. Both will follow the same general outline, laid out by Richard Foster, of readying our hearts, recollecting our spirits, quieting our soul, and waiting on the Spirit.

Individual Times

1. Prepare your heart in love for God the Father (worship music, reading a psalm, etc.) and by developing a purity of heart that is focused on Jesus alone. Rid yourself of any other distractions.
2. Center your heart on Jesus. It often helps to picture Him as present in the room with you. Focus your heart on Him. Repeat words such as “Love” or “Grace” to help center your heart.
3. As you eliminate all other distractions, cultivate a deep heart silence before Jesus. Don’t allow distractions back in—if they start to creep into your mind, go back to your centering word. Focus on Him and listen to Him.
4. Once your heart is silent before Him, simply wait for Him. Listen for His voice. Enjoy His presence. Be aware of your emotional reactions to the presence of His Spirit with you.

Corporate Times

1. You will follow a similar pattern as above. Someone should gently and with sensitivity lead the group through this process.
2. As you come to silence before Jesus, ask Him to give you His heart for those in your community. Listen to His words of love and grace to them.
3. When you have spent some time together experiencing His Spirit among you, debrief the experience with one another.
4. Even during the discussion time, seek to listen to the person speaking and to the Spirit of God at the same time. When He prompts you, speak words of affirmation and encouragement to those in your group. *In the rare instance that you sense something difficult or something that seems negative, set up a time to speak to that person in private.* However, most of the time you will hear words of affirmation and encouragement.

Questions for Community:

- How did this form of prayer feel to you? Why is that?
- Do you experience God more fully and closely in private prayer or in community? Why do you think that is?
- Does this form of prayer change or challenge the way that you understand prayer? How so?
- What is the biggest barrier to contemplation in your life?

Week Three: Intercessory Prayer

“If we truly love people, we will desire for them far more than it is within our power to give them, and this will lead us to prayer. Intercession is a way of loving others. Intercessory prayer is selfless prayer, even self-giving prayer. In the ongoing work of the kingdom of God, nothing is more important than intercessory prayer. People today desperately need the help that we can give them... if we will learn to pray on their behalf.”

Richard Foster, Prayer

Intercession can get confusing. Some see intercession as a process of giving our desires, wishes, and sympathies to God. Others see it as bringing our requests to a divine genie in the hopes that he will grant our wishes... as long as we follow the right formula. Rather, intercession is all about a longing and a desperation to see God radically move in our own lives and in the lives of those around us. It's quite literally grounded in the Lord's Prayer: we join Jesus in praying that “God's will would be done” in the lives and circumstances of those we love “on earth as it is in heaven.” This is the heart of intercessory prayer.

Paul Miller, as part of regularly teaching and speaking on prayer, asks groups if they keep their calendars electronically. Then, with those hands remaining up, he asks how many keep a paper calendar of some kind. By that time, nearly 100% of the hands are up. Then he asks how many have an electronic or written prayer system. Rarely do more than 5% of the hands go up. Miller rightly observes: “We don't write down our prayer requests because we don't take prayer seriously. We don't think it works.” Ouch. And for most of us, we're guilty as charged.

Miller's response is to create and utilize prayer cards. Using the following steps, adapted from Miller's book “A Praying Life,” create a set of prayer cards and begin to use them during one of your daily prayer times.

1. Get a stack of notecards. You can start with as many as you like, but between 15-30 is a good number for regular prayer.
2. Determine people and/or circumstances where you desire to see God radically move. Consider: family members, close friends, those who aren't yet followers of Jesus, people in suffering and difficulty, a card

for your Community Group, a card for missionaries and ministries, personal repentance cards, and “big dreams” that you have for your own life or for those around you.

3. Individual cards: If you are praying for someone individually (family member, friend, co-worker, someone in difficulty, etc.), write their name at the top of the card. Begin to pray for a Scripture that summarizes your heart/God's heart for that person. (Use a concordance or Google to find verses!) Add that Scripture (writing it out will help you to pray it), as well as words or phrases that represent the way that you're praying for that person. Add the month/year to the bottom of the card so you know when you created it. Continue to add individual cards.
4. Group cards: This is when you're praying in the same way for everyone in a group, or when you're just praying one thing for each person in a group. If you're making a Community Group card, list all of their names and maybe a verse at the top you're praying for them, or short words/phrases beside each one. This also works well for missionaries, church leadership, neighbors, co-workers, etc.
5. Circumstance cards: Title the card with a phrase that represents the situation to you. It could be an area of repentance, a big dream you have, or something that's happening in the country or the world. Scriptures are key for these prayers—ask God to give you specific Scriptures to pray over these areas.
6. That's it! Now, once a day, pull out the cards, and spend 5-10 seconds on each card praying for the people/circumstances represented. Some will take a bit more time, but you don't need to spend *minutes* on each one. Mostly the cards will stay the same week to week, but when you sense a different way to pray, add that to the card.

Questions for Community

- On a scale of 1-10, how strong are you at intercessory prayer? Why do you answer that way?
- Have you ever really “contended” with God in prayer? What did that look like in your life?
- Do you track your prayer as closely as you track your schedule? Your budget? Why or why not?

Week Four: Listening Prayer

“If you find yourself in a position where you can honestly say, ‘God has never spoken to me,’ then you well might ask, ‘Why should God speak to me? What am I doing in life that would make speaking to me a reasonable thing for him to do?’ Perhaps we do not hear the voice because we do not expect to hear it. Then again, perhaps we do not expect it because we know that we fully intend to run our own lives on our own and have never seriously considered anything else. The voice of God would therefore be an unwelcome intrusion into our plans.”

Dallas Willard, Hearing God

Prayer is all about our relationship and life with the Father. Listening prayer is about learning to actually hear the voice of God by giving the Spirit access to our imaginations and intellect, which were created and given by God and for our relationship with Him.

Throughout the gospels, we see Jesus living in constant communion with the Father and listening to His voice. However, there are only a few times where the Father audibly speaks to Jesus. Most of the time Jesus hears that voice inaudibly and internally. That can be a challenge for many of us because the internal voice of God can start to blend with our own thoughts and emotions, and it can be hard for us to distinguish the voice of God. It takes practice.

However, this is the kind of practice that can be joyful and fun! We need to remember that the beginning and end of our relationship with God is that He is good and loving toward us. We don't need to be afraid of getting it wrong or need to fear hearing His voice. We can instead imagine crawling up on our Daddy's lap and listening to what He has to say.

Like many of these practices, this one can be both individual and communal. The individual practices create a solid foundation, but the communal practices give real time feedback as we learn to discern the voice of God and distinguish that Voice from our own. Therefore, you're encouraged to practice the individual exercise at least two or three times during the week, and then consider engaging the communal exercise with your Community Group, family, or other small community.

Individual Times

1. Ask Jesus to silence all of the other voices in the rooms so that you can only hear the voice of the Father. Specifically ask Him to silence the voice of the enemy, demonic voices, and your own distracted thoughts that come into your mind.
2. Begin with forgiveness. Ask God if there is anything that you don't feel forgiven for, or that is anyone that you need to forgive.
3. Ask God to bring to mind anything that He wants to address. Consider: Areas that God wants to correct in how you think about yourself, thoughts that He want to replace, and areas He wants to speak into. Ask follow-up questions: *What do You want me to know about this? Is there anything else?*
4. If you aren't hearing anything specific, ask if there is a Scripture that He wants to bring to mind.
5. Don't feel pressure to hear something specific. This may just be a great time for you to rest in the love of the Father.

Corporate Times

1. Bring someone to the center of the room. You are going to listen on behalf of that person, asking God to encourage them.
2. Ask Jesus to silence all of the other voices in the room so that you can only hear the voice of the Father.
3. Ask the Father to give you a word, picture, Scripture, or song for that person. Take turns sharing what you've heard.
4. Ask the person if those things make sense to them and if they are able to receive them.
5. Ask follow-up questions. Use this is as a time for all of you to learn to hear and discern the voice of the Father.

Questions for Community:

- How did this form of prayer feel to you? Why is that?
- What would you love to experience as you engage listening prayer, either personally or corporately?
- Are there areas of fear in your life as it relates to listening prayer? Why do you think that is?
- Is it hard for you to engage God supernaturally? Does listening for the voice of God seem strange or normal to you? Why?

Week Five: The Prayer of Examen

“As you continue holding your soul deep in your inward parts, you will discover that God has a magnetic attracting quality! Your God is like a magnet! The Lord naturally draws you more and more toward Himself. Your soul, once it begins to turn inward, is brought under this... law of central tendency. It... gradually falls toward its proper center, which is God. The soul needs no other force to draw it than the weight of love.”

Madame Guyon

Richard Foster remarks about how strange it is that the Prayer of Examen has fallen out of popularity so dramatically in an age of obsessive introspection. While we might spend hours poring over self-help books and “five steps to a new...” something or other, we often fail to spend the time to sort through our lives before the presence of the Father. And we are immeasurably weaker for it.

The classical prayer of Examen has two parts: a prayer of *consciousness* and a prayer of *conscience*. The prayer of *consciousness* could be playfully termed “rummaging through the day looking for God.” The idea is to bring to mind times that you’ve experienced or maybe missed the presence of God throughout your day. The prayer of *conscience* is a journey with God to search our hearts to the depths. In the words of the psalmist: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” (Psalm 139:23-24)

Both play a role in gaining perspective on how we are engaged, or failing to be engaged, in the presence and power of God in the world around us. This can be a very brief meditation and prayer time that happens multiple times throughout the day, or it can be a longer time every several days or even once a week. Many have found that an evening Examen is an excellent practice to stay connected to the Lord throughout the day and to end each day with a sense of closure.

1. Begin by intentionally asking God to help you sort through the events of the day. Ask for the light of Jesus to shine brightly in your memory that you would see the day as He sees it.

2. Replay the day in your mind. Notice where God has been active. Name the moments where you felt, even if it was brief, the presence of grace in your life.
3. Name the strongest emotion that you felt today. This is less about what *happened* and more about what you *felt*. Recognize when you were moved strongly. Give a name to that particular feeling: joy, depression, anger, delight, shame, contentment, hope, doubt, etc.
4. Now ask God to show you the depth of your heart through the day today. This is journey *with* Him, not alone! On our own we will either justify sin (Isaiah 5:20) or wallow in despair. But with God alongside, we can be both honest and protected. Confess sin before Him. Don’t make excuses or justifications but simply bring your sin before Him. Allow Him to speak to those situations and to prepare you to respond differently should you encounter them again.
5. Finally, bring the events, emotions, and even the evils of the day before the Father. Rejoice in the joys and victories of the day and mourn the brokenness and the failures. Consider journaling a brief prayer that both recognizes the reality of today and offers your hope and prayer for tomorrow. Bring these all to Jesus with honesty and freedom.

Questions for Community

- How has your view of prayer changed over the course of the last five weeks?
- What have you taken away from these practices that you believe will be lasting in your spiritual journey? Why is that?
- In what ways have you experienced prayer as a vehicle for relationship with God? How is that like other relationships?
- When did you most notice God’s presence with you this week?

Final note: If you have journeyed through the entire practice guide, you will likely have added multiple prayer practices throughout the weeks. Consider a morning rhythm that includes Scripture reading, contemplation, listening and the Lord’s Prayer; a midday rhythm that includes intercession with prayer cards and the Lord’s Prayer; and an evening rhythm that includes the Prayer of Examen and the Lord’s Prayer. This isn’t the only way to do it, but it’s one that has worked well for many.

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