

June 1, 2008

Acts 4:23-31 / Matthew 26:36-44 / I Thessalonians 5:16-18 / Luke 6:12-16  
 Luke (#21) - The Development of a Prayerful Spirit

No one can truly understand Jesus unless they understand above all else that Jesus was, from first to last, a man of prayer.

In fact, as one saint has rightly pointed out: *“Our Lord’s first public act of ministry at His baptism was prayer. ‘As He prayed, we are told, ‘the heavens were opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him like a dove.’ And His last act of public ministry, before giving up His life for our sins, was prayer. ‘Father,’ He said, ‘forgive them for they know no what they do,’ and moments later, ‘Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit.’ His last act before dying was to pray.”*

And we could also add that in between those opening and closing prayers He lived a life characterized by frequent times of extended prayer — lengthy periods spent alone in prayer (as we see in today’s text).

But even more than that we could say He was such a man of prayer—it was such a priority for him—that His whole being was characterized by a spirit of prayerfulness or a prayerful countenance whereby He was habitually interacting with, dwelling upon, enjoying rich spiritual communion with His Father in heaven. God, we could say, “was always on His mind.”

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And **LISTEN**: His life of prayer did not end when His earthly ministry ended, for both Romans 8:34 and Hebrews 7:25 tells us that Christ, even now, is interceding or praying for us. *“He is able to save completely,”* says Hebrews 7:25, *“those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them.”*

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And that’s what I’d like to focus on today. Not so much the lives and personalities of the twelve disciples, or why Jesus chose them out of all the many others He had to choose from.

Nor do I want to speak solely on, *“Bathing the Major Decisions or Turning Points of our Lives in Prayer”* (as I had originally intended). We tend to do that reflexively. When we come to the major decisions of life we tend to understand the need to bring them before God in prayer.

No, what I'd rather speak about today is how we might (like Jesus) develop that inner spiritual posture of prayerfulness that not only causes us to kneel and pray at certain times throughout the day, but causes us to be focused on God, or the things of God — all the time.

And that's not just an unrealistic pipe dream! Paul tells the Corinthians believers (in II Cor. 10:5) that one of the goals of the Christian life is to, ***“Bring every thought into subjection to Christ,”*** or as some versions translate it, ***“Take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ.”*** It's part of the discipline of prayerfulness — keeping Jesus, and His will for our lives at the center of all we say, do and think.

**Why?** Because it's hard for the Christian to sin when their thoughts are habitually and prayerfully focused on Jesus! We receive strength for the day and strength to resist temptation when our eyes of faith are locked on Him, His death for us, and His great love for His grace covered children.

It changes our whole perspective on everything when in our hearts, or in our minds eye we assume an inner spiritual posture of coming into the presence of the Lord Jesus, and kneeling, or raising our hands, or standing before Him — eyes closed — and basking in the light and the glory of His face smiling down upon His redeemed ones.

**That's what I want to speak about today:** How to make our lives one continual uninterrupted prayer to God. Not simply praying for specific intervals throughout the day (15 minutes here or ½ hour there, important as those times are), but taking it a step further and disciplining ourselves to be in a spirit of prayer all the time — developing an attitude of habitual prayerfulness that seeks never to leave behind the consciousness of His presence.

***“We are always in the presence of God,”*** said Teresa of Avilla, ***“yet it seems that those who pray are in His presence in a very different sense.”***

Prayer, if you haven't already discovered it, is your primary lifeline to God. So much so that John Bunyan, who wrote the classic book “Pilgrim's Progress” could say: ***“If you are not a praying person, you are not a Christian.”*** Calvin said (and I'll paraphrase slightly): ***“The principle fruit produced by grace is faith, and the principle fruit produced by faith is prayer.”***

Richard Hooker said: ***“Prayer is the first thing wherewith the righteous life begins, and the last thing whereby it ends.”*** Richard Baxter wrote: ***“Prayer is the breath of the new creature.”*** | ***“It is...the soul's life-blood,”*** said George Hebert.

You see, you can DO WITHOUT many “things” in the spiritual life and still maintain a genuine, ongoing relationship with God, but prayer is not one of them! Bunyan is right: It is not possible for a non-praying person to have a relationship with God, or be a Christian.

How can he say that? Paul gives us the answer in Romans 8:15. There he tells us that when someone receives the Holy Spirit, or the Spirit of Adoption, it causes their hearts to cry out, **“Abba Father.”** That is, we find ourselves inwardly desiring and earnestly yearning for intimacy with God — an intimacy which finds its outlet, expression or fulfillment in prayer!

So, with that in mind let’s consider how one goes about **“Developing a Prayerful Spirit.”** And **FIRST** lest anyone hear me wrongly, let me say from the very start that it’s an unrealistic pipedream for those who have not yet been converted. No one can develop a prayerful spirit apart from receiving the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit does not come to indwell us until the time of our new birth—spawning by His presence a divinely-imparted desire for intimacy with God which drives the new believer to prayer.

Likewise, to have a prayerful spirit one must be at peace with God, and we come to have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, says the Apostle Paul.

The unconverted soul may desire to know God, or know about God, but only the regenerate soul, indwelt and made new by the Holy Spirit, is moved by a newly and divinely-implanted impulse to cry out for intimate, ongoing, unbroken fellowship with the heavenly Father in prayer — something one must have if they are ever to develop a prayerful spirit.

You must have Christ, and with Christ the indwelling presence of His Holy Spirit, or you will never be able to do the things I am about to admonish you to do. Trying to develop a life of prayer becomes an exhausting battle to the person whose nature is still disinclined to God because of sin.

**“Prayer,”** as Baxter rightly noted, ***“is the breath of the new creature.”*** ***It’s the life-blood of the converted soul!*** Unconverted people are moved by an emptiness inside to seek the One in whose image they have been created, but, as David M’Intyre states, it only ***“awakes to power in the consciousness of redemption.”***

Thus I admonish all here: If you’ve sought to develop a prayer life, but you find yourself lacking both the willpower and often the desire or follow-through, you may want to ask yourself if you have really and truly come to experience the Second Birth, received the gift of the Holy Spirit, who implants in us the desire to pray.

Which brings us to our **SECOND** point. If you have truly been converted, and still struggle to develop a life of prayer, it is helpful to remember that developing the disciplines of prayer doesn't come naturally to us. The desire to pray, yes. The Holy Spirit implants that desire in our hearts when He comes to dwell in us in regeneration. But the knowledge of how to pray, or how to remain in prayer habitually—or to pray all night long (like Jesus in this passage) — no — that is something that even the regenerate heart must learn how to do!

Robert Brown put it well when he said: *“Prayer for many is like a foreign land. When we go there, we go as tourists. Like most tourists, we feel uncomfortable and out of place. Like most tourists, we therefore move on before too long and go somewhere else.”*

He's right, even with regard to many true believers. I distinctly remember the struggle I had learning to pray when I was first converted, because I had lived without prayer being a part of my life for 23 years (except for such typical pre-conversion prayers as *“Lord, don't let me get caught by the police,” “Help me get this job,” “Make my girlfriend like me again,” “Help me do well on this test,”* etc—prayers even the worst of unbelievers pray!) No, when it came to true prayer it was indeed a foreign land to me — it was unfamiliar territory.

As a result of being truly converted, I found myself wanting to pray, because God had indeed implanted in my heart the Spirit of Adoption which made my heart cry “Abba, Father.” But I didn't know how to pray, or how to hold my hands, or whether to kneel, or what the right thing to say or the wrong thing to say was when addressing God. And did I need to have a “prayer closet,” as some said, or could I pray anywhere? I honestly didn't know!

Plus, the only “praying” I ever heard growing up was my mother praying nightly before dinner, or the pastor, dressed in his robe, praying from the pulpit and using a special prayer language — formal, flowery, practiced language, peppered here and there with Thee's and Thou's, and “we beseech Thee,” and other words no one ever used except when praying!

Not only that, I was converted while being trained to go on the mission field with a bunch of other missionary trainees most of whom had grown up in solid evangelical churches, had been Christians for as long as they could remember, and even prayed together out loud — which totally freaked me out!

I had a hard enough time simply learning how to pray at all, and here were all these other mature missionary trainees asking me to join them in a circle praying out loud! (You could have asked me to break into the building next door, or steal a car, and I would have been less nervous doing

those things (because they were familiar to me) — but praying out loud in front of other people — it scared the wits out of me!

And the worst part is they went around the circle in order, so you couldn't get out of it! The person three people away would pray, then two people away, then the person right beside you, and you knew you had to pray next! There was no escaping it!

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And it was so embarrassing, because I'd listen to all of them pray these beautiful, flowing, earnest, spontaneous prayers, and then it came to me and I'd — stumble over my words / mix up the person's of the Trinity / and ask for things I'd never dream of asking for now. I even voiced a few heretical statements, which they kindly ignored and overlooked knowing I was a novice at this praying out loud thing.

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But my point is this: Like all true Spirit-born believers I was a person who wanted to pray / whom the Spirit of God was prompting to pray / but I didn't know how to pray / where to pray / what position to pray in / or what words to use when I did prayed. Could I speak normal words or did I need to throw a few King James words into the mix ?

I'm serious folks! I had lived a life of sin, and done so many things wrong for so many years, that I wanted to do things right now that I was a Christian.

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And I'll tell you: It took weeks, even months, to get to the point where the foreign land of prayer began to feel like my homeland! I had lived in the kingdom of darkness so long that the kingdom of light was a whole new strange place to me.

It took months of venturing into its unfamiliar terrain, and walking around its uncharted territory, and making many wrong turn, and occasionally getting lost before I became familiar enough with it, and comfortable enough in it, that I no longer felt like a tourist who was "out of place and needed to move on to somewhere else."

And it didn't just take time! It took numerous "travel guides" (or books on prayer) / time to work though the often conflicting advice of many well-meaning Christians / and the stab in the dark attempts of personal trial and error, before I truly felt at home praying.

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In fact, that was one of the biggest lessons I learned: *That to truly pray one needs to stop focusing on how to do it right! Because when you are focused on your technique, instead*

*of God, you're really not praying! You're focusing on you, or your performance in prayer, and not on God through prayer, which means you're not really praying, or communicating intimately with God, you're auditioning in front of God!!*

And that's not what He wants! He wants us to engage in true prayer, and true prayer is simply, honestly, and transparently — pouring out the content of your heart to Him. It's moving beyond technique altogether, speaking to God as with a friend, and getting so caught up in God and lost in God that you forget about yourself altogether!

As Francis de Sales once wrote: *"He who prays fervently knows not whether he prays or not, for he is not thinking of the prayer he makes, but of God, to whom he makes it."*

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That, I believe, is the only way to explain how Jesus "spent all night in prayer." Because in such deep times of prayer, time becomes a non-factor! You don't even notice it going by! It's not a labor; it's not a marathon; it's not something you do to set a new "Guinness Book of World Records" for the longest time spent in prayer to prove your earnestness to God!

No! The purpose is to get so caught up in the pleasure and delight of praying and spending time with your God that you don't even notice the hours ticking away, and actually wish the night would never end!

My pastor in the Dominican Republic used to jokingly say, but half-seriously say: *"If you can't get to sleep, don't count sheep — PRAY! Because if you do only one of two things will happen: You'll find your time of prayer so uplifting and so euphoric that you won't want to go to sleep, or Satan will put you to sleep, since the last thing he would ever want is for you to pray."*

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Which brings us to our **THIRD** point — If you struggle to pray, it's not unusual, because not only is it a foreign land for new believers, it's a land of strength and renewal and grace and hope and all good things — which means it's the last place Satan wants you to go. Satan will do anything he can to keep you from prayer. Many of you will not know what it is to do spiritual warfare until you become serious about praying, or seek to return to a disciplined prayer life after having let it slide for some time.

Richard Sibbes put it well when he said: *"When we go to God by prayer, the devil knows we go to fetch strength against him, and therefore he opposes us all he can."* He's right — Satan will do everything he can to keep us from praying.

He'll make you unable to focus / fill your mind with distracting thoughts / disturbing thoughts / or sinful thoughts that make you feel unworthy to pray. He'll make you feel tired / cause you to fall asleep / and then tell you your not spiritual enough or to much of a hypocrite and therefore it's useless for you to pray! "God" (Satan will chide) "will not listen to the prayers of hypocrites."

He's not called, "*the accuser of the brethren*," in Revelation 12:10 for nothing! And since He can't get God to condemn us for our sins (if we are in Christ Jesus), he aims at getting us to condemn ourselves! Because he knows that the person who feels condemned finds it nearly impossible to pray — which is exactly what he wants!

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And at such times it's helpful to remember the advice of two great giants of prayer: Martin Luther and Sir Thomas More. Luther said: "*The best way to drive away the devil, if he will not yield to texts of Scripture, is to jeer and belittle him for he cannot endure scorn.*"

And Sir Thomas More said the same: "*The devil — that proud spirit — cannot endure to be mocked.*"

Which means you don't listen to his accusations, you tell him where to go! You tell him he's a defeated foe whose time to roam about freely is limited. You tell him he's merely a dog on God's leash, a puppet dangling on strings God controls, an impotent pawn in the hands of the Sovereign potentate, whose most vehement attacks on God's people are merely turned around and used by God to further His redemptive purposes for His people!

You tell him he's a twit who needs to leave you alone, and command him in the name of Jesus to be gone from you, because his power over you has been broken by your Savior, who loves you and sovereignly watches over your every step.

You tell him "*there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,*" and to get his miserable carcass out of the way!

"Resist the devil and he will flee from you," says James. And the way you resist him is by refusing to give him the time of day. Refusing to listen to his accusations. Refusing to let him keep you from entering into the presence of the God who loves you in prayer.

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And **LAST** – In summary we develop a prayerful spirit in two ways — through specific, scheduled, daily or frequent times of focused prayer (segments of time set aside in the morning, or at noon,

or at night) when you go to a quiet place, shut out the noise and clamor of the world, and spend time pouring out your heart to God—speaking to Him as a man speaks with His friend, or interceding for the needs of others. Yet that does not fulfill the imperatives of I Thess. 5:18 which tells us to *“pray continually,”* or *“pray without ceasing”* (as some versions put it), or Ephesians 6:18 which tells us to *“pray at all times in the Spirit.”* BOTH are necessary to the development of a prayerful spirit.

Simply praying for 15-20 minutes in the morning, or at noon or at night, will not do it! In fact, that not the Scriptural ideal. The Scriptural ideal is not to pray and then leave our time of praying behind until the next prayer time.

It's to pray in that focused, orderly, set or scheduled way, and then **LEAVE THAT FORM OF PRAYING** and switch to a less focused, more informal form of praying while you go about your daily duties!

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Andrew Bonar expressed in his diary what many Christians have found to be the case: *“I see,”* he says, *“that unless I keep up short prayers every day throughout the whole day at intervals, I lose the spirit of prayer.”*

I found that very thing to be true when I first started praying: I would spend ½ hour, or an hour praying, then stop praying to do my daily duties. And when I would go back to praying, it was often difficult, because I would “lose,” as he says, the spirit of prayer and have to work to get back into the spirit of praying.

That continued until my brother suggested I read a classic little book on prayer called “The Practice of the Presence of God,” by a 17<sup>th</sup> century monk named Brother Lawrence, who instructed people on how to prayerfully remain in the presence of God even while they did their daily duties—in his case washing pots and pans in the monastery’s kitchen. How to focus on God, and praise Him, and keep our thoughts centered on Him even while doing other things.

A man named Hewitson once offered similar advice: *“In our mutual social interactions and conversations—amidst all the busiest scenes of life—we may be moving to and fro on the rapid wing of prayer, of mental prayer that lays the whole burden of the heart on a single sigh... Prayer will be fatiguing to flesh and blood if uttered aloud and sustained long. Oral prayer, and prayer mentally ordered in words (though not uttered aloud), no believer can engage in without ceasing. But there is an undercurrent of prayer that may*

*run continually under the stream of our thoughts, and never weary us. Such prayer is the silent breathing of the Spirit of God, who dwells in our hearts. It is the temper and habit of the spiritual mind. It is the pulse of our life which is hidden with Christ in God."*

Andrew Murray, another giant of prayer, put it this way: *"Pray at all times? Who can do this? How can we do it when we are surrounded by the cares of life? Does it refer to continual acts of prayer, in which we are to persevere until we receive an answer, or to the spirit of prayerfulness that should animate us all day?"* (Or to use Hewitson's words, does it refer to "Ordered prayer uttered aloud and sustained long," or "the hidden undercurrent of prayer which runs continually under the stream of our thoughts and never wearies us"?)

The answer, as Murray wisely points out, is that, *"It includes BOTH... We have to spend special times of prayer in private, and we are also to walk all day in God's presence with our focus on heavenly things. Without set times of prayer, the spirit of prayer will be dull. Without continual prayerfulness, the set times of prayer will not be effective."*

That, my friends, is how we move beyond simply praying, or saying our prayers, to truly developing a prayerful spirit:

*We determine to become people of prayer, who take every thought and make it captive to Christ! We determine never leave the presence of God! We keep up short prayers throughout the whole day at intervals and then in between them, "move to and fro on an undercurrent of prayer that runs continually under the stream of our thoughts even amidst all the busiest scenes of life."*

We must "make our lives a prayer to God," by developing a spirit of habitual prayerfulness.