

Prayer

A Six Week Plan



Confessions of a Failed Prayer Warrior

As a pastor, I have preached and taught hundreds of times on the subject of prayer. I know all about its importance. I understand the vital need for it. I realize that prayer is the most important thing we do.

I know all about prayer. The problem is I don't always practice what I preach. I read somewhere that the average pastor spends no more than three minutes a day in prayer. Many days, I am that average pastor. As much as I talk about prayer, I often still neglect it. I can talk the talk, but I fail to walk the walk.

Why don't I? For the same reasons as everyone else. I get busy. I get distracted. I get bored. Other people tell of the mystical joys of prayer--I fall asleep. Other people write of their closeness to God—my prayers seem to hit the ceiling. When it comes to prayer, I can be a real hypocrite.

I think part of our (by that I mean *my*) problem with prayer is that we have heard much of prayer, but have never actually learned to do it. Prayer is not a subject to be studied but a skill to be learned. When Jesus' disciples asked Him "Teach us to pray", they did not have in mind "Teach us about prayer." Every believer understands something about the meaning of prayer. It isn't the meaning of prayer we have problems with—it's the practice. The disciples lived in a day when rabbis didn't just teach on prayer. They *trained* their disciples to pray. Every rabbi had a set of particular actions that he required of his disciples on prayer. Some had their disciples pray two times a day, others three. Some had their disciples kneel, others stood. Some raised their hands; others put them across their chest. All of them gave their disciples specific prayers to pray.

This has been the case for most of history. Catholics cross themselves, genuflect, and kneel as church-sanctioned methods of prayer. Charismatics raise their hands and speak in tongues as methods of prayer. Most Protestant groups have stayed away from requiring such practices because we do not want to become rigid or legalistic. In doing so, we have often turned prayer into an intellectual exercise rather than a life skill.

We do have our rituals. We practice prayers before meals, prayers at the beginning of meetings, and so forth, without thinking of what we are doing. Our prayers resemble all our other prayers.

Eventually the form becomes more important than the actions. Then we think that the form *itself* is what God requires. If we don't say it right, God will not hear us. If we don't have a prayer before we eat, we might get food poisoning!

I'm not suggesting that we do away with these invocations and blessings—far from it! We need these rituals. They help remind us of God's presence in all life. I merely suggest that the practice of prayer is more than this. Prayer is a *skill*. We learn prayer by doing, not studying.

How does a person learn to play a musical instrument? By practicing basic techniques. Sometimes, the practicing seems boring and unfruitful. We are often tempted to quit. But if we continue to practice, eventually we will get better.

The same thing is true of prayer. Effective prayer requires that we practice it on a regular basis every day, and that we learn skills and techniques of prayer that will help us become deeper Christians.

It is possible to backslide in prayer, just as it is possible to backslide in dieting and exercise. (I know I have, many times). That is why we need accountability and coaching from others. But eventually, we get better.

Martin Luther once famously said that his responsibilities were so great and the demands on his time were so severe, that he could not help but spend at least four hours a day in prayer. Not only do we not do this—we don't even understand it! How can praying gain us time, instead of losing it.

The goal of this study is to help us all (including myself) gain or regain the skills necessary to become effective warriors in prayers. It will require working on it daily. It cannot be accomplished on a single hour once a week, but it has to be practiced on a daily, regular basis.

So where do we begin? First, we need to acknowledge the basic understandings of prayer that the Bible teaches, and that most of us understand.

The Basics

1. *Prayer is talking with God. Not to Him, necessarily, but with Him.* In effective prayer, there is as much listening as talking. Prayer is not about getting answers, but having a greater communion with our Lord and Creator.
2. *Prayer does not depend on when, how or where we pray.* We may pray anywhere and at any time.
3. *Prayer rituals help us to focus our attention on God as we pray.* It is best to have an undistracted, regular time in a quiet place to pray. It is also best to have a plan before we pray, so that we can get to business.
4. *Effective prayer involves faith.* When we ask, we should sincerely believe that God will answer. If God is God, then He *will* answer. It is therefore important to understand something of the nature of God before we pray.
5. *Effective prayer involves repentance and humility.* We don't demand answers from God. He gives answers. Some pastors and churches teach "sure-fire" methods of getting what we want from God. For example, if we say a few "Hail Marys" or pray using certain words as we pray, then God is obligated to bend to our will. This is ridiculous on the face of it. God is in control, so we cannot be assured what we want, even if we ask.
6. *To God, the words we use don't matter nearly as much as the condition of our heart.*
7. *We pray in Jesus' name.* This does not refer to a ritualistic mouthing of the name of Jesus. It is not the sound of the name, but understanding that our access to the Father comes through Jesus' blood. We are sinners, and God is not obligated to hear sinners. But Jesus bought our access to the Father through His suffering and death. When we approach God in humility for our sins and gratitude for His salvation, then we are praying in Jesus' name—that is, by his authority.
8. *Prayer is not a force or a substance.* We sometimes assume if we get more people praying, then God must hear us more. Or if we pray longer and more emotional prayers, He will give us what we want. Prayer is not a commodity that accumulates by the number of people and times we pray. He says where two or more agree it shall be done. He does not say wherever five or more agree it will be done more. He says ask, and keep on asking. He does not say that if we spend two days asking, He might change his mind.
9. Nevertheless, *God want us to work hard at prayer.* Why? I don't know. He just commands it. The act of prayer (and fasting) puts passion in our prayers and helps us attune ourselves to hear His voice. We pray and keep on praying, ask and keep on asking, not to change God's mind, but to change our own. God will not bring an answer until we fully grasp the question. As long as some part of us still thinks we are capable of bringing about change by ourselves, we are not ready to receive the answers of prayer.
10. *Public and private prayers are both necessary.* Prayers should not be for show. (see Matthew 6) Praying out loud or praying eloquently does not affect the answer to our prayers. Nevertheless, Jesus encourages us to pray *together*. In Matthew 18: 20 He says "Whenever two or more of you agree, it will be done for you in heaven" He is talking about shared prayers. Group prayer keeps us focused. If we do not have the humility to pray for our own sins in public (James 5:16), then we do not have the humility to actually admit them before the Living God, who is capable of judging us far more severely than our peers.

Nothing I have said here is new. Anyone who has sat in churches for any length of time has probably heard most of this. It is not just Biblical; it is also common sense.

But this is not the end of our knowledge of prayer. It is the beginning. It is the *practice* that gives us the skills to be an effective prayer warrior.

The Parts of Prayer

There are many ways to describe the aspects of prayer. However, there seems to be (in my estimation) five aspects of effective prayer.

Praise—the introduction of ourselves to God by focusing our attention on who He is. In praise, we remind ourselves of the majesty, love and greatness of the personage we serve.

Thanksgiving—the attitude of gratitude for what God has done for us. In thanksgiving, we review our lives and see God's grace and generosity.

Confession—this is a reality check before God. We admit to God who we really are. Confession has two parts to it. First and mainly, we confess the things we have done wrong. He already knows them, but confession is our admission to these things before an almighty God. Our confession of sin clears our line of communications with God from all obstructions. Second, we confess to God what He has done in us. We declare to God His faithfulness in forgiving us.

Petition—this is the least important part of prayer, yet it takes up most of our time. God already knows what we need, and what we are going to ask for. He gives us our answers before we ask. Nevertheless God wants us to reveal our concerns before Him, not only for ourselves, but for the whole world.

Listening—this is by far the most neglected aspect of prayer. We need to take time in the presence of God to do nothing and to think nothing, but to let God speak to us. Prayer is a two-way street. We cannot be effective at it if we have only one lane, from us to Him. We have to have two lanes, listening as well as sending.

Prayer enhancements. In addition to these basic parts of prayer, there are advanced techniques to be used on special occasions, to help focus our attention on God. These enhancements include

Seasons of prayer

Fasting

Group prayer

Special positions in prayer.

These enhancements allow us greater concentration which allows us to better hear His voice.

Getting Down to Business

In order to receive what I hope you will from these exercises, you will need

- A Bible
- A Notebook
- A group of people with whom you can share and who will hold you accountable.

This group needs to be people with whom you can be open and honest. We must not be judgmental, but neither should we mind our own business. We all fail all the time, and need mutual accountability. Nothing ruins a friendship group more than passing judgment on each other.

Your notebook will be filled in week by week. The pattern for the first week will be repeated for each upcoming week. It is up to you whether you want to make a page for each day or whether you just fill in a page a week. I recommend using the notebook daily to write down what you learn from God, but that is up to you.

Week 1—The Week of Praise

On the first page of your notebook, write:

Week 1

Then below it, write the number of days you do these exercises, and the amount of time you spend doing them. I recommend setting a goal of doing the exercises at least four days a week. As you go on, you will probably want to increase this.

This first week, I want you concentrate on the aspect of prayer called *praise*.

Praise is the aspect of prayer in which we celebrate who God is—his divine attributes. Praise is a vital part of all prayer, because it attunes us to hear His voice. Remember, the purpose of praise is not to be original or clever. It is to *tune our heart to God's heart*. When we play a guitar, the first thing we must do is to get tuned and warmed up before we can make any music. If our strings do not make the right noise, we cannot make the right music. If our fingers are not limber, we cannot hit the frets. Praise is taking time to get in tune, so we can truly enjoy our time with God.

Since prayer is talking to God, talking to Him should be like talking to anyone else—right? Wrong! When we talk to another human, we communicate through material means. Prayer is communication through spiritual means. We do not see Him or hear Him with our eyes or ears. Instead, we have to develop a spiritual sensitivity to His voice. He is beyond our knowledge, and always will be until we see Him face to face in heaven. Until then, He can always talk to us. To talk to Him in a meaningful way requires concentration and discipline.

In one sense it is not hard to talk to him. We talk to him constantly through the day. But if our goal is a closer communion to Him, we must work at becoming aware of His power and presence in our lives. Praise helps us to do that.

Praise is a little like astronomy. Anyone can look up at the night sky and appreciate its beauty. But there is so much more to see than we can grasp with the casual eye. A telescope focuses our attention on Him, so that we can see Him more closely, appreciating His glory.

Once we come to an appreciation of Who God is, it is easier for us to believe that He can help us with our problems. Our faith and joy increases as we learn to focus our attention on Him.

Find a time and place you can be alone to pray and do nothing but pray. Most people find this time in the morning and/or evening. There is evidence in the Bible that the old saints did it in the morning and the evening. In my opinion, the time of day is not nearly as important as the fact that we do it.

Some people say they combine their prayer time with some other activity—driving, showering, etc. While this is better than nothing, it is not ideal. Nor is it best to do it in the presence of others. There are always distractions when we are otherwise engaged or in the presence of others. In the company of others we will always worry that people will think we are strange! So if at all possible we should get alone—even if it is for only five or ten minutes. Most people suggest that ten to twenty minutes is required to get us entirely focused upon anything.

Get in a comfortably reverent position. Sitting in a chair is good, but it may not be all we want or need to do to recognize our Lord. Other possibilities are standing, as we would if we were in the army and a superior officer came in the room, kneeling, as before a King, lying prone on the ground, raising hands high in the gesture of welcoming, folding, hands, or holding our hand palms up, as if expecting to receive. None of these gestures is required, but all of them help us to think about Him.

Begin with praise. Try this as an experiment. This first week, make it a point to ask for NOTHING in your quiet prayer time. Don't express thankfulness or confession, either. Make these first few days about praise and only praise. You can and will confess and ask all through the day, but give the first quiet times to praise.

How do we praise? Everyone has their own methods. Here are a few.

- *Singing*. You may be tone deaf. God doesn't care. The act of singing is an act of sustained praise. If you play a musical instrument, this can also be a form of singing, if you rehearse the words in your mind as you do.
- *Reading*. Another technique that many have found effective is to read aloud from the Psalms, some other passages, like Isaiah 40-66, or from a hymnbook. If we don't know how to praise with our own words, we can always use the words of others.
- *Listing*. Make a list of the attributes of God, as you understand them. Then read them aloud to yourself. In this way, you are reminding yourself of who He is and what He has done.

- *Be creative.* If you have some creative skill, this can be used to turn your hearts to God's. Such skills would include writing, drawing, etc.

Week 1 Notebook

How many days will you commit to a quiet time with God?

List of qualities of God that make God worth praising.

Notes on Praise Psalms¹

¹ Praise Psalms include 9,16,18,19,21,27,30,33,40,41,45-65,66,68,72,78, 90,91,100,103,117, 132,134,135,138,139,145-150

Coming Together

When you gather together in a group, share the following questions.

How difficult was it for you to find a quiet place and time to spend with God?

Did you find addressing God in praise difficult or easy? Why?

What methods of praise did you find most suitable to your personality?

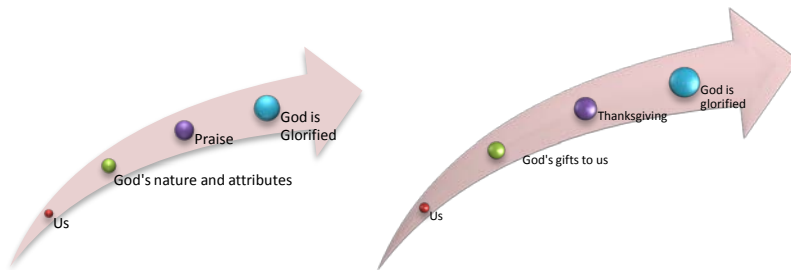
Did you notice any changes in your life as a result of this exercise?

What would you like to improve in the way you prayed this week?

Week 2: The Week of Thanksgiving

This week, we are going to continue our exercise in praise, but now we are going to add another element to our worship—Thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving is very similar to praise. However, it is different in that it focuses on the *creation* in order to honor the *creator*. Praise is a meditation on the attributes of God. Thanksgiving is meditation on the works of God in our lives.



Praise is glorifying God for *who He is*.

Thanksgiving is glorifying God for *what He has done*.

Why keep these two separate? Because of the difficulty we have in recognizing God's presence as we pray. When we first begin to pray, it is difficult to keep our minds on Him. Thinking about things other than God will often lead us away from thinking about Him. Before we count our blessings, we should know Who has blessed us.

Thanksgiving teaches us an important lesson. It reminds us that we serve a good and bountiful God. We give thanks for all things before we ask God for anything. By doing this we are declaring our faith in Romans 8:28 *"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."*

One of the great temptations in life is doubt. Sometimes we doubt God's existence. More often we doubt God's goodness. We see all the difficulties in this world, and wonder how a God who loves us can allow us to suffer as we do. This attitude leads us to grumbling, complaints, worry, and depression. In the midst of this Paul reminds us *"In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God concerning you."* (1 Thess 5:18.)

When we learn to thank God in all things, we replace grumbling with blessing, complaints with gratitude, worry with wonder, and depression with joy. We learn the true beauty of the world God made for us, and the blessing of the life He prepared for us.

Some people have very little in this world and enjoy it much. Other people have much and enjoy it little. The latter are never satisfied with what they are given. They are always looking for more. It only takes an attitude adjustment to turn a king into a pauper, or a pauper to a king. We have a choice to believe whether our life is heaven or hell on earth. Paul understood this when he wrote in 2 Cor 11:24-31

Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

Even so, he wrote in 2 Cor 12:9-10 *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me."*

Paul could have justifiably made a case that his life was not worth living, and that God had been cruel to him. Instead, he chose to believe that all his sufferings were signs of God's favor, not of His wrath.

We, too have a choice of stories to believe. We either see our lives as tragedy or comedy. This is what we do when we give thanks. We affirm that our life is good, and that God is good.

Week 2 Notebook

This week, as last week, on as many days as you can (at least four), get into a quiet, isolated place for at least ten minutes. Begin your quiet time with praise, in any or all of the methods you did last week. Your praise may be as long or as short as you like; Just so it is long enough for your concentration to be tuned to the love and goodness of God.

Like last week during your quiet time *do not pray for anything*. This is important. You can pray for your concerns through the day, and you will be praying for needs in the coming weeks. But for now, we want to work on our attitudes towards God and the world in general. This is the main purpose of prayer—communication and communion with our Lord and Creator.

Here is a list in sequence of exercises for week 2.

Day 1

Phil 1:3-8

Make a list of the loved ones in your life and thank God for them.

Day 2

Psalm 136

Remember two or three times that God has helped you in the past and thank Him for it

Day 3

Psalm 107: 1-7

Think of two or three special blessings in your life right now and thank God for them.

Day 4

1 Thessalonians 5:18

Think of one or two trials in your life. Thank God for the blessings that came out of it.

Day 5

Ps 30

Think about one or two of your biggest failures in life, and what you have learned from it.

Day 6

Romans 8:28-38

Think of two of your biggest current challenges and/or failures in your life and thank God for them, taking a moment to reflect on the blessings that have or will come out of your circumstances.

Coming Together

Did thanking God change your perspective on life this week?

Was it difficult to thank God for things that seem negative in your life?

How can we express thankfulness to God throughout the day?

Week 3: The Week of Confession

“Confession” literally means “To speak with.” Confession is when we openly affirm with God what He already knows.

God knows our sins. We cannot hide them from his gaze. God does not need us to tell Him our sins. We are the ones who need to admit them.

There are both negative and *positive* confessions.

Negatively, we confess our sins to God. Num 5:5-7, Ps 38:17-18, James 5:16, 1 John 1:8-9

Confession of sin is important because:

- It keeps us humble and reminds us of the true nature of our relationship with Him. We are not able to be good by ourselves. We constantly need His help and forgiveness.
- It keeps us from being judgmental. If we are not perfect ourselves, how can we be judgmental of others?
- It cleanses us of our sins. 1 John 1:9 reminds us that confession leads to cleansing. If we hold fast to God’s grace, then God forgives us, regardless of whether we confess a specific sin or not. We cannot possibly know all the sins we have committed in ignorance or carelessness. But confessing those sins opens them up for self-examination. We bring them out into the open, so that we can know that the blood of Jesus can cleanse them.

There are some rules about how to practice confession.

Confession must be specific. It does no good to say “Lord, I am a sinner,” if we will not confess to Him what we have actually done. It would be like going into a police station and confessing you have committed a crime, and then not telling the police what it was. It does no good, unless it includes an acknowledgement of what sins you have actually committed.

Confession should be followed by an affirmation of forgiveness. Catholics practice confession to the priest, who offers them absolution. We do not usually confess to priests because we believe that our absolution has already been given on the Cross of Christ. Instead, we simply acknowledge that forgiveness. 1 John 1:9 is a promise that God will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Specific sin should be confessed only once, unless we do it again.

Public sins should be publicly confessed. Private sins should be privately confessed. If we have committed a sin against someone, we should confess it to them as well as to God.

Temptations are not sins. We do not confess what we felt like doing unless we have done it, said it, or intended to do it. Being tempted is not a sin. Pray for deliverance from temptation, but forgiveness for sins.

Positively, we affirm what God has done for us. Rom 10: 9-10. Phil 2:10-11 Heb 13:15-16

Positive confession is affirming what we believe that God has done for us. Romans 10:9-10 tells us that speaking aloud our confession of Him as Lord is a necessary part of our redemption. There is a solid reason for this. The process of verbal affirmation solidifies our thoughts and feelings. If we confess, “I am angry,” then we actually feel angrier. If we confess “I love you,” then we become more loving. Eventually, we will become what we.

There are conditions, of course. First, we must sincerely believe it to be the truth. Doubt is always present in us, but it does not rule us. We make a choice whether or not we will yield to fear and doubt, or live in faith. That choice is made through what we affirm, or confess. Nevertheless, we must confess what we intellectually and emotionally believe to be the truth. We do not wait to confess until we have no doubt. Doubt is why we confess, to silence the other voices in our heart.

Second, we must do it regularly. All doubt does not disappear each time we confess, and it will usually come back after we confess. The constant repetition of confession will over time produce long standing results.

There are many places where we can find confessions. The creeds, such as the Apostle’s creed is good. So are many hymns, such as “And Can it Be,” “Amazing Grace,” or “a Mighty Fortress is our God.” Many Bible verses may be used as positive confessions such as Psalm 23, Philippians 1:6, 4:13, 4:19, 2 Corinthians 5:17. Galatians 2:20, Ephesians 6:13-18, or 2 Timothy 1:7. Or you can use a list of your own personal affirmations—things that you need to remember that God has done for you. Your list does not have to be poetic or clever. It just has to be real

This Week

Begin each quiet time the same way you began last week—with praise and thanksgiving. It is important that we keep up this discipline and add to it.

Then spend some time in confession. Here is an exercise that has been used in the church for hundreds of years. The first day, write a list of specific sins you need to confess to God. (Make sure that no one else can see it!) These sins should be specific. We do not confess, for example a general grumpy attitude, but specific times we have snapped at people who did not deserve it. We do not confess general lust, but times we have looked too long at a strange woman.

After we have made our list, write across the bottom of the page 1 John 1:9 *If we confess our sin, He is faithful and just to forgive our sin, and to cleanse us of all unrighteousness.* That is the positive affirmation of God's power to deliver us from our guilt and our weakness. Then turn the page and do not look at them again until tomorrow.

The next day, go back to the same list, and read it over. If there are any we have repeated, put a check by them. If there are any sins we had not thought about yesterday, add them as well. Most of the sins we will think of are things we have done before. We will begin to stop repeating the same sins over and over. As we do, God will bring to mind other sins to work on, to replace the others. In time we will experience even the freedom from the temptation of certain sins, as the Holy Spirit cleanses us.

Along with negative confession, practice positive confession as well. Each day, pick one of the positive confessions described above and speak them to yourself aloud. (If that is not possible, try writing them or repeating them to yourself quietly.) Repeat this confession for the entire week. In time, that confession will also take root in your heart.

Up until this time, we have not been concentrating on reading the Bible, except as a means of praise and thanksgiving. Now, it is important to spend time in reading the Word of God, especially the Psalms, Proverbs, and letters of Paul. We cannot know what God wants us to confess until we see it written in His Word.

Sins

My sin	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6

Affirmations

My Affirmation	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6

Verses to Claim

Getting Together

Did you find the confession of specific sins easy or hard?

Did the process of confession make you more sensitive to your sins?

What positive affirmations helped you the most this week?

Week 4: The Week of Petition

“Petition” is what has occupied most of our time in prayer. Petition means asking God for our needs and for the needs of others.

The basics of prayer, mentioned earlier, cover some of the general rules of petition. God is in charge, we are not. We are encouraged to ask for anything, but the answers are up to Him. We cannot force His hand by special techniques or formulas, but He wants us to ask and keep on asking. Faith makes a difference in prayer. All these rules should be obvious to anyone who has ever attempted to have a prayer life.

There are some aspects of petition, though which are not quite so obvious. Much of this is found in the Lord’s Prayer, Matthew 6: 9-13.

The Lord’s Prayer begins “*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name.*” We recognize that God is our loving Father, and that He is holy and sovereign. It is more important to God that we spend time with Him than it is that we ask Him for anything. God knows our thoughts and our needs. He waits for us to vocalize them, but He does not care about our eloquence or fluency. A stammering, inarticulate prayer is just as powerful as the prayer of a master speaker. What matters is the relationship we have with God when we pray. That is why we need to get attuned *before* we pray.

The Petitions of the Lord’s Prayer follow a particular order.

“*Thy Kingdom Come.*” Pray for His coming Kingdom. Petition not just about our needs, or the even the needs of our friends and relatives. To pray “Thy kingdom come” is to join in God’s battle against darkness. *Before* we pray for anything else, we need to remember that the needs of the world are greater than our little circle. There are lost, hurting, hungry, and suffering people all over the world, who are trapped in the dominion of Satan’s kingdom. The main reason God has left us on earth is for us to be the instruments of their liberation.

“*Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven.*” Many people begin their prayers by saying, “Lord, if it be Thy will...” *This is not necessary, and may even be hindrance to an effective life of prayer.* God already know His will, and will accomplish it whether or not we pray. We do not need to look far to see many things around us that are not in God’s will—sickness, suffering, and even death. God is asking us to remember that His will is more important than our will, and that what we should be praying about is for heaven to come to earth.

Before we pray for ourselves we should lift up the needs of others. We pray for God’s will to be accomplished in the lives of others, even if it means God’s will is delayed in our own lives. We should pray “God, let Your Will come in my neighbor’s life” before we ask that it come in our own.

“*Give us this day, our daily bread.*” God wants us to pray for our own needs, but in its proper time—after we have prayed for others. When we do pray for ourselves, we should boldly state what we want and need.

A key to understanding how God wants us to pray for ourselves is to notice the word “daily.” Most of us desire regularity, predictability and security. This is not what God wants for us. A safe, predictable life does not force us to our knees for God’s help. If we always knew what was going to happen in the future, we would not need to ask Him for guidance. If we could handle what was coming, we would not need to ask Him for help. If we were prepared to face future concerns, we would not need to rely on him. God wants us to seek safety, not in careful planning or worldly security, but in our faith in Him. He is our refuge for the future. Anything else that appears to guarantee us safety forever eventually becomes an idol.

“Take no thought for tomorrow,” Jesus said in Matthew 6:34 “Today has enough troubles of its own.” We pray for strength, protection, supply, and happiness *now*, and we leave tomorrow to God.

“*Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*” We have already covered confession last week. There is one additional aspect of forgiveness and cleansing that Jesus reveals so us here. *They are conditioned on our willingness to forgive others.* If we are not willing to let go of the debts that others owe us, God will not let go our own. If we cannot forgive, then prayer for assistance in forgiveness needs to be on the top of our list.

“*Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from The Evil One.*” In Greek, the last word of this statement is actually “The Evil One,” or the Devil. Temptation is inevitable, but sin is not. We can resist. We need to recognize that there is an Evil One who wants us to sin. We need to pray not only for deliverance from temptation but also for deliverance from the Devil.

Week 4 Notebook

First follow the disciplines we began in weeks 1, 2 and 3. Turn to the next page of your notebook. On it, you will eventually make four prayer lists—with a new one added each day.

Day 1

Pray for the Kingdom. Make a list of missions and missionaries that you want to remember in prayer. Ask God to show you the ones He wants you to include. God may show you some global issues that He wants you to remember. Be sure to include in this list prayers for other churches, denominations, and ministries that work across denominational lines. Pray for each one and put a check beside it.

Day 2

Make a list of people you know who need the will of God to come in their lives. This can include people who are sick, shut-ins, church leaders, and people who need Christ. Remember though, it is not our place to judge anybody, or for us to tell God precisely how He should work in a person's life, but simply to show concern and to make that concern known before God. Pray for each one and put a check beside it.

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Day 3

Make a list of needs and wants of your family and yourself. Don't be stingy here, ask for anything! Write these down, and whenever those needs are met, make a note of the date and time of that answer. Just keep in mind, though that God is most interested in our daily concerns, not about our anxieties for the future. Anxiety is more of a problem than what we are anxious about, and it needs to be confessed as a lack of faith. Those things we are anxious about should be placed in God's hands. Phil 4:5-6 *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

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Day 4

Make a list of those temptations that are the strongest in your life. Everyone has different "besetting sins"—weaknesses that make us the most vulnerable to attack. Some are tempted by lust, others by greed, others by doubt and fear, and so on. Make a list beginning with the strongest to the weakest. Pray for each one and put a check beside it.

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Each day, go back to that list. Note any prayers you can specifically say have been answered. Those, which are not yet answered, should be taken back to God, until we see results, or until God tells us not to pray for them.

Getting Together

Have you experienced any answered prayers this week?

Which of the four lists was harder to make?

Which of the four lists was easiest?

What have you learned about petition this week?

Week 5: The Week of Listening

This is the most neglected aspect of prayer. It is hard for all of us to listen to God. That is why we need to work so hard on it. But the greatest prayer warriors all attest that listening is more important than speaking. As we grow in our faith and our knowledge of Him we will spend more time listening to Him than anything else.

Listening to God confuses beginning prayer warriors. How do we know we are hearing Him? How do we know that what we think He is saying is not merely our imagination?

Listening to God requires three things—discipline, calmness, and faith.

God speaks to us primarily in two ways—through the Word of God, and the Spirit of God. If we are to hear God, we must discipline ourselves to constantly seek the Word of God. The Word of God to us is the Bible.

One thing we can know about God is that He will never contradict the truth that He has already said. Our God is a God of consistency and order. That is why we need to make a constant, lifetime study of the Bible. The Bible is a record of what He said to the people of God in the past. Nothing that God says to us today will contradict what He has said in the past.

One of the names for the Bible is the “canon” of Scripture. “Canon” means a plumb line, a weight on a string used to test whether a building is truly perpendicular. The words of the Bible give us a measure of whether or not we have heard correctly.

As we begin to listen, it is vitally important that we read the whole Bible in a systematic fashion. If we only read portions of it, who knows what we might be missing.

We need to have humility while we read. There are many things in the Bible that a casual reader may not comprehend. That is why commentaries and other Bible helps are so important. Those who know the Bible can help us interpret it correctly.

Throughout church history, whenever God wanted to change His people’s direction, he usually did it through someone reading the Bible, and discovering something they had missed. When the church of the Middle Ages was going in the wrong direction, God showed Martin Luther a single verse in Romans “The just shall live by faith.” This revelation from the Scriptures changed the course of world history.

God may not change history through what He shows you in the Bible, but He will certainly change your life and direction.

The other way God speaks to us is through the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God is present in every believer. He is still speaking to us today.

To hear the voice of God, we must learn to be calm. Psalm 131 says *I have calmed and quieted my soul*. Until we learn to be calm, we cannot hear that still small voice.

How do we get calm? First of all, we need to turn off the noise and distractions. We are not likely to hear God’s voice over the television or radio noise. We have to get alone in a quiet place. If you are still trying to have devotions between commercials or driving down the road, you will probably miss much of what God is saying. So try to calm your mind. Lay aside your outward distractions, and concentrate on that “still small voice” within.

There are many techniques to do this. One is to take a single verse each day, repeat it to yourself, over and over until you have memorized it. Concentrating on one verse or phrase can help you focus on Him.

God still speaks to people audibly, as well as through dreams, visions, and signs. But as it has been since the beginning of time, this kind of spiritual direction is extremely rare. Some people go through an entire lifetime without having such an experience. The way God usually speaks is through impressions in the mind. We feel His voice more than hear it. This is where faith comes in. We learn to trust the inner voice of the Father.

Here’s a rule of thumb on divine impressions. If we feel that God is telling us to do something that involves no risk or inconvenience, then we should do it, and do it immediately. What have we to lose? But if God is telling us to do something that is life-changing, we should seek careful confirmation before we act upon it. That confirmation should come from circumstances, other believers, the Bible, as well as the inner voice of the heart. If God wants us to move in a certain direction, He will make it abundantly clear before we go.

All of us can hear from God, but only if we listen. Set aside some time every day to listen for His voice.

Things I have heard from God this Week

Week 6: Enhanced Prayer Strategies

One of the paradoxes of prayer is this—God promises to hear us immediately when we pray, and answer. We do not have to beg or plead with God. It is His joy to talk with us.

Nevertheless, the Bible also tells us on occasion that one-time prayers are not enough. There are times when God encourages, even commands for us to pray long and hard, using extraordinary means.

Here are some of the place we are commanded to pray long and hard.

Matt 7:7 Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

In Greek, the tense of these words is *imperfect*, which means that it is not to be done once, but many times—ask and keep on asking. Seek and keep on seeking. Knock and keep on knocking.

In the parable of the Unjust Judge, (Luke 18:2-8), Jesus compares God to a judge who must be pestered into hearing us.

In the parable of the Friend at Midnight, (Luke 11:5-8) Jesus compares God to a sleeping friend, who must be awakened.

The pleading and the begging is not for God's sake but for ours. God is not hard of hearing. Rather, we are passionless and double-minded when it comes to our prayers. Only desperation can bring us to the place God wants us to be when we pray.

There are numerous examples of extraordinary prayer efforts in the Bible.

James 5:13-18 Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

This passage shows us three example of extraordinary prayer. First, he tells us to call for the elders to anoint the sick with oil. Then, he tells us to confess our faults to each other before we pray. Finally, he gives us the example of Elijah, who prayed and kept praying earnestly.

In Daniel 10: 1-12, Daniel prayed and fasted for three weeks for God to release his people from captivity. At the end of three weeks the archangel Michael arrived with the message that God was going to move. He also said that he was delayed by resistance by the King of Persia.

In Matt 17:14-21, Jesus' disciples encountered a demon that they could not cast out. After rebuking them for their lack of faith, Jesus adds (in some manuscripts) "this kind does not come out but by prayer and fasting."

In Matthew 18:18-19, Jesus says *whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.*

True prayer requires a sincere heart, and that can only come through a purification of our will and desires. This purification is the job of the Holy Spirit, but it is also our responsibility as well. James tells us to humble ourselves before the Lord, and He will lift us up. This humility comes from learning to be beggars before God.

Humbling ourselves before God is a way of helping us to realize our true position before God. We do not approach God as equals, but as beggars. It is as necessary to remember this as it is to remember His strength and power. God's delay in granting what we wish is often because we have not yet learned who we truly are before Him.

Enhanced prayer techniques are a means increasing our understanding of humility before God.

Here are some of the techniques.

Bodily Position. As children, we were told to bow our heads when we pray and fold our hands but we were never told why. The bowing of the head and the folding of hands are two ways we display our humility before God. They are not the only ways, of course. Kneeling or lying prone before the Lord may also be a means of displaying our humility for some. For others standing and lifting our hands and face to heaven may mean the same thing.

How do we know whether to stand, kneel or prostrate ourselves before God, or whether or not to lift our hands? Simply ask yourself the question—If you were given audience before the Emperor of the World, how would you express your humility to such a person? That is how we should present ourselves before God.

Seasons of prayer. When we are faced with unusual difficulties, we ought to make unusual prayers. Rather than relying upon our own time and skills to solve the problem, we should rely upon God. This may be the time to spend an evening, afternoon, day, or week in prayer.

Prayer and work are not mutually exclusive. We do not have to choose between praying or working. We can do both, especially if we stretch our season of prayer over a longer period of time. Our work never interferes with our prayer, but our leisure does. It may be necessary to give up some of our leisure for prayer, but never our work.

Organized prayer in groups. When a group of God's people face a problem together, whether a church, Sunday School class, or other organization, the proper response is to pray together about it. If we suffer together, we should seek God's guidance together.

There are several reasons for this. Often the fault in the church does not lie in one person, but in the way we act together. If one person seeks God's wisdom alone, that is good, but it doesn't fix the problem that lies between two people. Prayer together gives us the opportunity to hear God's voice together. If we are seeking God's will for our personal needs, other people can help us to discern God's will more clearly.

In group prayer, bigger is not necessarily better. Prayers do not collect like rainwater in a barrel. Ten people praying for something is not necessarily better than two praying for the same thing. It is better to have a few people join you in prayer who are sincere about it, than to have many join our prayers and approach them casually.

Fasting. Until recent times, fasting was practiced by Christians of all kinds on a regular basis. The seasons of Lent and Advent were fasts. Often a special day of the week was reserved for fasting, like Sundays or Fridays. Fasting was practiced as a method of humbling ourselves before God.

There is no rule for fasting except what the faster imposes. A fast may be partial or complete. It may be simply refraining from tasty foods and worldly amusements. Some people fast by drinking only liquids for a period of time. Others practice a total fast, for days or weeks, going without calories altogether. Still others will briefly go without water as well. Fasting can be one meal or one month of meals. It is entirely up to us.

What does fasting accomplish? Many people have seen health benefits in fasting for most people, but the health benefits are not the reason Christians fast. Fasting is a way of humbling ourselves before God and listening to His voice. Our initial reaction to fasting is hunger. But after we get through the hunger, there is a sense of joy and accomplishment in realizing that food and fun are not our masters. We can live simply, if we rely upon God. God calls us to fast to learn our proper place in the world.

Fasting is not to be used lightly. It is not to be done to show off before people. (Matthew 6)

It is to be used to gain more time for prayer. It is to be used to free up money for giving to the poor. It is to be used to break the power of sin, especially gluttony and greed, in our lives.

Anyone can fast up to a point. We can all practice partial fasting. But a person who has never fasted may want to start off by skipping a meal or two, or giving up breads, meat, or sweets. As we see the results of these sacrifices in our lives, we can become bolder in our fasting, and may be able to go without for long periods of the time.

Positions in prayer, prolonged prayer, group prayer and fasting are called prayer *enhancements* because they are not necessary or required for a fully developed prayer life. They are however a tremendous help in developing a lifestyle that leads us to a better, more lasting relationship to God.

Week 6

Continue to maintain the prayer routine you have developed in weeks 1-5, but add some other aspects to it.

1. Experiment with different positions in prayer. If you usually sit, try kneeling, or visa-versa. If you usually keep your head down, try looking up. You will find that each different position will add richness and meaning to the elements of prayer.
2. For one day this week, try fasting. If you can't do it for one day, try one meal. If you can't manage a meal, try cutting out certain foods. The key to fasting is not just to go without food, but to replace the food with additional times of prayer. Write in your prayer journal the effects of fasting and prayer.
3. Pick one problem in your life or one of your loved one's lives and make it a matter of prevailing prayer. Here's a tip—don't pray "Lord please, please, please, please," and then when you receive an answer pray "Thank you." Lay it before the Lord and thank God for the answer that He has already sent to you. You are claiming by faith God's answer, so rejoice in what He is going to do