

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

WEEK 5: MATURITY IN PRAYER

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

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- Have you ever wondered how to grow in Christ? What is the believer's role in his or her own sanctification?
- How can we move from simply wanting to grow to actually seeing real spiritual growth in a way that honors God and avoids self-reliance? What examples can we follow in growing in godliness?
- This multi-week course will look at the biblical call for believers to work out their salvation with fear and trembling, while wholly leaning on God's strength as he powerfully works within us!
- God calls us to pursue holiness, train up our children, grow in spiritual wisdom, knowledge and understanding, and be transformed by the renewing of our minds. So, this course will look practically at the training we do as we trust in the Lord with all of our heart!
- We will discover through personal testimony, biblical foundations, and historical accounts how to get the spiritual workout we need to walk worthy. No discipline is easy, so we will also talk about where the pitfalls and hurdles are that keep us from running the race well.
- Class Schedule:
 - April 26: Introduction and Maturity in Godliness
 - May 3: Discipline of Bible Intake
 - May 10: Discipline of the Mind
 - May 17: Discipline of Time and Money
 - May 24: No Class, Memorial Day Weekend
 - **May 31: Discipline of Prayer**
 - June 7: Discipline of Service
 - June 14: Discipline of Perseverance
 - June 21: Discipline of Worship
 - June 28: Discipline of Evangelism
- One of my goals is to tie this topic in with our recent sermon series in Matt. 26.
- Pastor Todd has explained this at length; I'll touch on it to set the stage a little later

INTRODUCTION TO PRAYER

"Teach me that if I do not live a life that satisfies thee, I shall not live a life that will satisfy myself." - Arthur Bennet¹

¹ The Valley of Vision, Happiness, Arthur Bennet, Banner of Truth

- The roadmap of where we're going:
 - Watch ► Awareness
 - Trust ► Dependence
 - Delight ► Communion
 - Pray ► Engagement
 - Commit ► Alignment
 - Rest ► Stability
 - Wait ► Endurance
- High level review of the New Testament commands related to prayer
- Layer 1 - Continuous connection to God:
 - "Pray without ceasing" - 1 Thessalonians 5:17
 - "Continue steadfastly in prayer" - Colossians 4:2
 - "Be constant in prayer" - Romans 12:12
 - "Praying at all times in the Spirit" - Ephesians 6:18
 - "Ask,... seek,... knock,..." - Matthew 7:7-8; Luke 11:9-10
 - "Men ought always to pray and not lose heart" - Luke 18:1
- Layer 2 - Guarded spiritual awareness:
 - "Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation." - Matthew 26:41; Mark 14:38
 - "Pray that you may not enter into temptation." - Luke 22:40, 46
 - "Keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints." - Ephesians 6:18
 - "Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving." - Colossians 4:2
 - "Praying in the Holy Spirit." - Jude 20
- Layer 3 - Heart alignment with God
 - "Ask in faith, with no doubting." - James 1:5-6
 - "Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it." - Mark 11:24
 - "Whenever you stand praying, forgive." - Mark 11:25
 - "Pray for one another." - James 5:16
 - "Pray for those who persecute you." - Matthew 5:44
 - "In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." - Philippians 4:6
 - "In everything give thanks." - 1 Thessalonians 5:18
 - "I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling." - 1 Timothy 2:8
 - "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace." - Hebrews 4:16
- These layers show us that prayer is not an end in itself
- Prayer is not an empty gesture
- **Read John 14:13 & John 16:24**
 - God's glory + our joy = purpose
 - "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him" — John Piper²

² Everywhere John Piper's name appears in the world (See *Desiring God* for full explanation)

- *Core Thread: Prayer is coming to God ► delighting in Him ► finding satisfaction and happiness in fellowship with Him*

BIBLICAL GUARDRAILS

- Based on the previous section, we can confidently assert that God distinguishes between acceptable and unacceptable prayer
 - Proverbs 15:8 - sacrifices of the wicked vs. prayer of the upright
 - Genesis 4: 1-16; Hebrews 11:4 - Cain vs. Abel, a case study
- Prayer (like Abel's) must be:
 - In faith
 - Aligned with God
 - Rooted in His Word

What it isn't:

- Not a way to convince or cajole God
- Not self-centered or mechanical
- Not a way to get what you want
- Not a routine or checklist
- Not detached from faith or holiness

What it is:

- Dependence on God
 - Alignment with God's will and character
 - Participation in God's purposes
 - A relationship, not a ritual
 - Delight in God
 - A way to be in alignment with what He wants to do
- *Key Idea: Prayer that exalts our independence leans toward idolatry. Prayer that exalts God-dependence is a delight to Him*

Area 1 - The Warning (Pattern of Failure)

“To be prayerless is to be without God, without Christ, without grace, without hope, and without heaven. It is to be in the road to hell.” - JC Ryle³

- Matthew 26:40–41: “Watch and pray...”
- Gethsemane contrast:
 - Disciples slept ► fled under pressure
 - Christ prayed ► stood under pressure
- Prayer neglected ► spiritual decline
- Awareness dulls ► backsliding begins
- Temptation increases ► inconsistency exposed
- Collapse follows ► private failure becomes public

“Can we really believe that people are praying against sin night and day when we see them plunging into it? Can we suppose they pray against the world when they are entirely absorbed and taken up with its pursuits? Can we think they really ask God for grace to serve Him when they do not show the slightest desire to serve Him or speak to Him at all?” - JC Ryle⁴

“Sin, consciously indulged, or duty, knowingly neglected, makes supplication an offense to God.” - George Mueller⁵

“You may be very sure men fall in private long before they fall in public. They are backsliders on their knees long before they backslide openly in the eyes of the world. Like Peter, they first disregard the Lord's warning to watch and pray. And then, like Peter, their strength is gone, and in the hour of temptation they deny their Lord.” - JC Ryle⁶

- *Key Idea: Prayer prepares us before the moment of testing. We fall in private long before we fall in public*

Area 2 - The Motivation (God's Delight)

- God delights in being God; in His own worth and excellency!
 - These include:

³ A Call to Prayer, JC Ryle

⁴ A Call to Prayer, JC Ryle

⁵ George Müller, quoted in A. T. Pierson, *George Müller of Bristol*

⁶ A Call to Prayer, JC Ryle

- Delight in His Son,
 - His Creation,
 - His Fame,
 - In doing good to all who hope in Him, etc.⁷
- God also delights in the prayers of His people!
 - Logic flow: If God so delights in the excellencies of Himself - and rightly so - then His people do well of delight in the excellencies of God too!
 - Alternate logic flow: If God's people spend time delighting in our own sufficiency, our own abilities, our own independence, then we are nothing more than self-worshipping idolaters (e.g. Cain & the self-righteous Pharisee [Gen. 4 & Luke 18, respectively]).
- Authentic prayer expresses dependence ► glorifies God
- Authentic prayer denies self-dependence ► glorifies God
 - Psalm 43:4 — God is our exceeding joy
- Prayer also advances God's purposes ► glorifies God
 - 2 Thessalonians 3:1 - spreading the Word of God
 - Romans 10:13–17 - hearing the Word of God unto faith
- *Key Idea: Prayer is where we delight in God and participate in His mission*

Area 3 - The Practical Model (George Müller)⁸

“He turned from doubtful devices and questionable methods to the relief of pleading with God...He used argument in prayer, and at this time he piles up 11 reasons why God should and would send help.”
- AT Pierson⁹

- Personal habits of a man who accomplished great things through prayer
- Begin with the soul “happy in the Lord”
- Live in a spirit of prayer
- Prayer is dependence, not self-effort
 - Note that self-dependence is contrary to the nature of prayer
 - It refuses to willingly yield to God's help and purposes
- Faith expects and receives
- *Key Idea: Prayer is a lifestyle of continual dependence on God.*

⁷ The Pleasures of God, John Piper, Crossway

⁸ George Muller of Bristol, AT Pierson, Kregal

⁹ George Muller of Bristol, AT Pierson, Kregal

Area 4 - A Helpful Process (Psalm 37)

- Read Psalm 37
- Motivation often fades - but Biblical processes provide structure
- Scripture gives us many processes to follow when motivation wanes
 - The nature of a process is that it gives a framework to lean on when our emotions or motivation run contrary to our theology
 - Structure is greater than motivation
- Trust ► Delight ► Commit ► Rest ► Wait
 - God delights in the prayers of those who are willing to participate in His mission by waiting on Him to do what He's already said he wants to accomplish
- *Key Idea: Turn Scripture into prayer and trust its processes in the waiting*

Area 5 - Starting Prayer When You Feel Dry

- Starting Point (Practical entry on the difficult days)
- Use your senses:
 - Touch
 - Taste
 - Smell
 - Sound
 - Sight
- Notice it ► Turn to God ► Express it ► Delight in God because of what you noticed
- *Key Idea: Don't overcomplicate it; begin where you are.*

Area 6 - Testing our Prayer (Faith + Alignment)

“Yet again, all prayer prevails only as it is offered in faith; and the answer to such prayer can be recognized and received only on the plane of faith... expecting the blessing, and being ready to receive it in God's way and time and form, and not our own.” - George Muller¹⁰

- Prayer must be:
 - In faith
 - Aligned with God's character
 - Aligned with what He's already said He will do

“The extraordinary significance of prayer for the spread of God's fame will not be felt until we see clearly how everything hangs on the triumph of the word of the Lord. Prayer is the power that wields the

¹⁰ George Müller, quoted in A. T. Pierson, *George Müller of Bristol*

weapon of the word, but the word itself is the weapon by which the nations will be brought to faith and obedience.”¹¹

- Scriptural self-counsel:
 - Am I trusting God?
 - Is fretting proof of trusting God (Ps. 37)?
 - Do I want what God wants?
 - Is asking so we can spend it on our own lusts what God wants (James 4:3)?
 - Am I actively believing Him in this moment?
 - Am I cycling in and out of active belief (Mark 9:23-24)?
- *Key Idea: Faith aligns itself with Scripture*

Area 7 - Methods of Prayer (Holy Argument)

“This method of holy argument, ordering our cause before God as an advocate would plead before a judge, is not only almost a lost art, but to many it actually seems almost puerile.” - AT Pierson¹²

- Holy Argument
 - Plead God’s Word, promises, and character
 - Not to convince God—but to strengthen faith
 - Not to justify our own position before Him

“Of course God does not need to be convinced. No arguments can make any plainer to Him the claims of trusting souls to His intervention, claims based upon His own word, confirmed by His truth, and yet it will be inquired of and argued with that is His way of blessing. He loves to have us set out before Him our cause and His own purposes. He delights in the well-ordered plea where argument is piled upon argument.” - AT Pierson¹³

- Examples:
 - Abraham (Genesis 18)
 - Moses (Exodus 32–34)
 - Elijah (1 Kings 18)
 - Canaanite woman (Matthew 15)¹⁴

“See how the Lord Jesus Christ commended the persistent argument of the woman of Canaan, who with wit of importunity actually turned his own objection into reason.” - AT Pierson

- Centurion (Matthew 8)

¹¹ The Pleasures of God, John Piper, Crossway

¹² George Muller of Bristol, AT Pierson, Kregal

¹³ George Muller of Bristol, AT Pierson, Kregal

¹⁴ George Muller of Bristol, AT Pierson, Kregal

“Like the Centurion of Capernaum, whom our Lord promised to go heal his servant and he argued against him, we are to argue our case with God, not indeed to convince him, but to convince ourselves... In proving to him that by his own word and oath and character he has bound himself to interpose, we demonstrate to our own faith that he has given us the right to ask and claim that which he will answer our plea because he cannot deny himself. ” - AT Pierson¹⁵

- *Key Idea: Faith reasons from what God has said and aligns us with His purposes*

HINDRANCES AND HELP TO THIS DISCIPLINE

“Now what is the cause of most backslidings? I believe, as a general rule, one of the chief causes is neglect of private prayer... that backsliding generally first begins with a neglect of private prayer.” - JC Ryle¹⁶

- Hindrances:
 - Neglect of prayer leads to spiritual decline
 - Sin dulls awareness and weakens prayer (Matt 26)
 - Mechanical prayer lacks faith and alignment (Luke 18:11-12)
- Help:
 - Pray Scripture back to God
 - Remember who God is (reverence)
 - Remember who you are (dependence)
 - Stay rooted in faith and repentance

“There are only two rules that you have to keep in mind when you're in prayer, two things that should drive and govern and control your prayer life with the Almighty. The first thing you are to remember in prayer is who it is that you're talking to, because nothing will condition your prayer life more deeply than remembering that you are in a conversation with God, the sovereign creator and ruler of the universe. Second, you are to remember who you are. You are not God. You are a creature, so prayer is not a conversation between peers. It is not a fireside chat among equals. This is the creature speaking to his sovereign creator.” — R.C. Sproul¹⁷

BIBLICAL CASE STUDIES

- Let's take everything we've covered up to this point and test it against two Scriptural case studies
- Daniel 9: 1-19¹⁸
- Key Characteristics:¹⁹
 - Prayer is generated by the Word of God (v. 2)
 - Prayer is grounded in the will of God

¹⁵ George Muller of Bristol, AT Pierson, Kregal

¹⁶ A Call to Prayer, JC Ryle

¹⁷ Taken from personal notes, original source unknown

¹⁸ New American Standard Bible, 1995, Lockman Foundation

¹⁹ Elements of True Prayer, John MacArthur, Grace to You

- Prayer is expressed in passionate involvement with what matters to God (v. 3)
 - Prayer is marked by self denial (v. 4)
 - Prayer identifies with God's people (v. 5-14 [count the pronouns])
 - ~40 corporate identifying pronouns
 - ~4
 - ~10:1 ratio in favor of corporate identifying pronouns
 - Prayer is strengthened in confession (v. 3, 20)
 - Prayer is dependent on God's character
 - Prayer is consummated in God's glory
- Matt. 6:7-14²⁰
 - Key Characteristics:
 - Prayer is primarily an act of worship to God (v. 9)
 - Prayer is grounded in the will of God (v. 10)
 - Prayer is expressed in passionate involvement with what matters to God (v. 10, 13)
 - Prayer is marked by self denial (v.10)
 - Prayer is marked by dependency on God (v. 11, 13)
 - Prayer is strengthened in confession (v.12)
 - Prayer identifies with God's people (v. 12 [count the pronouns])
 - ~9 corporate identifying pronouns
 - 0
 - ~100% in favor of corporate identifying pronouns

COMMON PROBLEMS (REINFORCEMENT)

- Treating prayer as duty
 - Lack of direction
 - Expecting quick results
 - Inconsistency
- *Key Idea: The Biblical Case Studies show us how to overcome these common problems*

WHY WE NEED TO DISCIPLINE OURSELVES IN THIS WAY

- Without prayer ► we drift
 - Without prayer ► we fall
 - Prayer aligns us with what God already says He wants to accomplish
- *Key Idea: Prayer prepares us to stand when life pressures and temptations would overtake us*

²⁰ New American Standard Bible, 1995, Lockman Foundation

BIBLICAL MOTIVATIONS TO (PRAY, READ, THINK)

- God delights in the prayers of His people (Prov. 15:8)
- Prayer advances the spread of God's Word (2 Thess. 3:1)
- Faith is strengthened through engagement with God (Mark 9:24)
- God is glorified when we are satisfied in Him (Piper)

- *Key Idea: Using these models can lead to a much more satisfying and productive prayer life*

FRUIT AND OUTCOME OF THIS DISCIPLINE

- Stability under pressure
- Increased faith and confidence in God
- Alignment with God's will
- Joy in God Himself (Psalm 43:4 - "God my exceeding joy")
- Deeper communion with God
- A life marked by dependence on God
- Confidence rooted in His Word
- Endurance through trials
- A growing delight in God
- A deeper, more consistent prayer life

- *Key Idea: Prayer is not something we do to get things from God...It is how we come to know Him, delight in Him, and walk with Him.*

WHERE WE'VE BEEN - MASTER SYNTHESIS

- Awareness ► Watchfulness against temptation
 - Dependence ► Prayer rejecting self-sufficiency
 - Communion ► Prayer as delighting in God
 - Engagement ► Active participation with God
 - Alignment ► Bringing ourselves under His will
 - Stability ► Standing firm under pressure
 - Endurance ► Continuing faithfully while waiting
- "Teach me that if I do not live a life that satisfies thee, I shall not live a life that will satisfy myself." - Arthur Bennet²¹

²¹ The Valley of Vision, Happiness, Arthur Bennet, Banner of Truth