

most important conversations of our lives
Prayer



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by Andy George

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Andy George



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Prayer - Most Important Conversations of Our Lives

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Chapter One

- WHEN YOU PRAY -

As soon as the clock strikes midnight on December 31, it is a new year. But does that mean there is a new you? Is everything with your life, family, friends and job fresh and new?

There are 525,600 minutes in a year. If you averaged eight hours of sleep a night, you would spend 175,200 minutes a year sleeping. This still leaves 350,400 minutes to work, play and do whatever else you need to do.

What would happen if you set aside 30 minutes a day for God? It is so easy to use the excuse that we do not have time to spend with God. But, even if you took 30 minutes a day for God (10,950 minutes in a year), that would still leave 339,450 minutes a year to do everything else you need and want to do.

So, what are you going to do with all of those minutes?

The Power of Prayer

Why is prayer so powerful? The power of my prayer is not linked to how good or holy I am. Its power is not determined by whether I checked off all of the boxes on

my To Do list this week. Max Lucado said, “Our prayers may be awkward. Our attempts may be feeble. But since the power of prayer is in the one who hears it...” clearly prayer’s power lies in the God who hears it and not in the one who utters it.

19th century prayer warrior, E.M. Bounds said, “Prayer should not be regarded as a duty which must be performed, but rather as a privilege to be enjoyed, a rare delight that is always revealing some new beauty.”

What Does Prayer Change?

If God answered every one of your prayers right at this moment, would it change the world or only change your world? Would you see change in your school or workplace? Would your marriage be different? Would the world be different? Too many times our prayers end up being a long list of things we want to accomplish instead of prayers that would truly impact people around us.

In Matthew 6:1-8, Jesus starts, **“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets...”**

To look at this verse in a modern day perspective, imagine you gave backpacks and school supplies to some children at a local school. As you handed them over, you immediately started shouting, “Hey, everybody, stop what you are doing. I want you to notice how good of a person I am because I’m giving to these needy kids.” Or, what if the moment you dropped a gift in the church offering, you

stood up and proclaimed, "I know the rest of you might be giving, but look at what *I'm* giving. Look at *this*. I am so holy." How awkward would that be?

It sounds ridiculous to us, but this is what was happening during the time period in this passage. People were giving, but then boasting, "Look at how wonderful we are giving to the needy." Scripture says that if you are pursuing praise and recognition, then you have already received your reward here on earth. If you are after the applause of man and you get it, that is the only reward you will receive.

But, there is a greater reward waiting for believers that is not here on this earth. The Lord tells you to be careful of your righteousness as you give. Give to honor Him, not so that other people see you.

Prayer is mentioned three times in this passage. Prayer is not just an "if" or "when you have time." The phrase "when you pray" is an assumption that you will be praying.

"...that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words.”

God is not impressed with how fancy your words are. He is not up in heaven thinking, “If he just knew the Greek word for fellowship I would answer his prayers.”

God is also not saying, “Wow, all of heaven, stop. Andy is praying. Listen to the words he uses to pray. Aren’t they awesome?” God is not impressed with my prayers. Sometimes the most powerful prayer you can ever pray is, “Lord, help me.” “Lord, save me,” or, “God, I need you right now.” God is not influenced by eloquent words.

The Bible says that the Gentiles would pray on and on and while repeating the same things. Do not just pray empty words. **“Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”**

What is Prayer?

Sometimes it seems as though our prayers go nowhere. What happens when we pray and God doesn’t answer? Do you ever wonder, “God, why aren’t you hearing my prayer?” Why does it seem like God will answer one prayer but stays silent on another? What exactly is prayer?

Prayer is the main communication line between man and God. It is the main avenue God has established for us to speak to him, give him our urges, our needs, our wants, our desires, our pain - all of our “stuff.”

Prayer is not just hurling empty words up into the sky, although at times it may feel that way. Prayer is an act and not just something we can do IF we find the time.

Satan loves to keep us from praying. I’ve heard it said that

if the Devil cannot make you bad, he will make you busy. When our time goes, all of a sudden we start using that as an excuse. “Well, I don’t have time for this. I don’t have time to pray. I don’t have time to spend with God.”

I am often asked, “Why do we need to pray? If God already knows tomorrow and God already knows my prayers before I pray them, then is prayer necessary?”

The reality is God does know everything. God already knows tomorrow and He already knows what is going to happen in the future. God is omniscient. He knows all things. So if God knows all things, then why does He still tell us to pray?

One of the main reasons we are to pray is because prayer changes the one who is praying. God knows my tomorrow and God is the I Am, the Almighty, all-powerful, all-knowing and all-present God, but I am *not*. Prayer not only allows me to share my heart with God, but it also empowers and grows my spirit when I pray. As I pray, I am not just praying feeble words that are bouncing off the ceiling. Prayer is making an impact.

I think one of the biggest challenges and one of the most common questions I’ve been asked about prayer over the last two decades of ministry is, “When I pray and I give something to God, why do I still feel like I’m carrying it?”

Do you ever have that happen? You pray and lay it all before God, but then the next day you feel like the burden is still there. You read verses where Jesus says, “Come to me, all you who are weary and broken, and I’ll give you rest. Put all your cares and all your anxieties on me because I care for you.” You may sit there and think, “God, I’m doing that, but why am I still carrying it?”

One of the most powerful things about praying is that it puts us in the right position. You acknowledge that you are not God and you are not the one who can answer prayer, but you are the one who is supposed to pray. Your humility is key. There's a humility side of prayer where we humbly go before God and humbly put our requests before Him and meet us where we are.

As we pray, the Holy Spirit that is inside of every believer will reveal God to us more and more. It reveals God's character. It reveals His nature and who He is. And, it starts to reveal the will He has for us.

If we stop praying, we run the risk of the Holy Spirit no longer revealing God to us. If the Holy Spirit isn't telling us who God is, then the world will define God for us. The world has plenty of opinions about who God is, what He should be and how God should act. The world also has plenty of doubts and questions about God. If we eliminate prayer out of our lives, the world's opinion of God starts to take over.

The God Who Hears Us

“God, do you really hear every prayer I pray?”

1 John 5:14 states, **“And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will...”**

Don't you wish that verse said *if we ask anything...* period...that He hears us? This is where the power is. The confidence is in His will. A lot of people like to skip over this line in the verse. Yes, God hears us, but He answers prayer according to *His* will, not my will. **“And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.”**

How often have we used phrases like, “God, *if you really* love me, please let my team win,” all the way to the most serious of things of like, “God, *if you really love me*, please heal my husband.”

Then what happens if God doesn’t do the thing you asked for? Does this mean He doesn’t love you? What happens if God has a different plan? See, we all have our plans. Everybody has a plan of what we think should happen. People who need a new job have a plan. People who have health issues have a plan. People who have relationship issues have a plan.

Whether you believe in God or not, at some point everybody has uttered these words, to some degree, “God, if you really love me, then [this].” Satan loves to start playing with our minds when our prayers are not answered like we had hoped. “God, I thought you loved me, but you didn’t [do this].” We can really truly mess ourselves up and dealing with a lot of unneeded pain, anxiety and worry.

So what happens when God answers some prayers and not others? In 1 John 5, the Bible says, “**according to his will he hears us.**” God answers according to His will. Sometimes we don’t want to hear that because it seems like a pat Sunday School answer. We cannot always understand His plan, but throughout the Bible you see God’s will at play to save a fallen and broken mankind.

God has a plan, but so do you. What would happen if, instead of sticking to our own personal plans, we started to submit ourselves to God’s plan? What would happen if we started to allow the Holy Spirit inside of us to pray God’s will? “Not my will but God’s will.”

Pray without Ceasing

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast to what is good. Abstain from every kind of evil.” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-22)

What does it mean to pray without ceasing? Does it mean that you bow your head all day long and pray and never do anything else? No, that's not what it means at all. Prayer is a spiritual act. The Lord has put His Holy Spirit inside of every believer who has ever accepted Christ as Savior.

Here is one of the most beautiful things about the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the comforter and counselor; He convicts us of sin and draws us to God. But do you realize that the Holy Spirit inside of you is also the only thing that knows both the heart and mind of God as well as the mind and heart of you? The Holy Spirit is your supernatural, spiritual connection between you and God.

As believers, we should strive to be tuned in to what the Spirit is doing in us and what He is saying in us. You cannot turn off the Holy Spirit Monday through Saturday and then turn Him on again Sunday morning. You do not turn the Holy Spirit on again just because you are facing problems and suddenly want God. There should be something happening inside of our spirit on a regular basis.

It takes time to get to the point of spiritual maturity where you can pray without ceasing. In Romans 8:26-27, Scripture tells us the Spirit will pray things we don't even know we need to pray for. Our spirit can consistently go to God before us.

Why Do My Prayers Go Unanswered?

So, why does it seem some prayers get answered and some do not? This is one of those tough ones where we wonder, “God, I’ve been praying for something, and somebody else is praying for that same thing for themselves. God, you answered them but you didn’t answer me. Why?”

Or “God, I’m sitting here holding the hand of a loved one who is sick, and I’m praying for them with everything I have in me. In the room next door somebody else is praying for their loved one, and their loved one is being released and going home, and mine is still sitting here. God, why do you love them more than you love me?”

How often have you thought, “God, I’m praying. I’m seeking you. I’m asking you. So are these other people. So why is it that you seem to be answering them and not me?”

The first thing you need to understand is that God answers prayers in several different ways. Sometimes God answer to your prayer is “**No.**”

“God, I want this.”

“No.”

“But, God, I really want this.”

“Nope.”

“God, please, I want this.”

“No. You’re driving the Honda Civic. You’re not getting the Range Rover. No. The answer is no.”

Sometimes God’s answer is “**Yes, but you’re going to have to wait.**” Waiting is tough. Sometimes in the waiting, we lose sight of the fact that God truly loves us.

There are things I have been praying for as long as I can remember that God hasn’t answered yet. Does it mean I

should stop praying or does it mean I should keep bringing it before God?

Sometimes God's answer is, **"Yes, but it's not what you expected."** We don't like that one either. At times when we pray, we are expecting God to answer in a particular way. When God answers our prayer, but it looks different from our expectation we complain, "God, I thought you loved me. I wanted it this way."

Sometimes God's answer is, **"Yes and more."** Sometimes God answers and says, "Oh, that's all you wanted? Here, let me give you more." We humans really like it when God answers that way! We're praying for favor and a new job, and God answers with a big raise, a big bonus and a new company car. We tend to think, "Yes, the Lord loves me!" But you have a neighbor who's praying too, and God hasn't given him a job yet. Does that mean God loves you more than them?

Praying for Others

Early in my ministry, one of the biggest struggles I had was praying for other people. It wasn't that I didn't want to pray for people, but I felt so inadequate. If I was at the hospital with someone, I always hesitated and thought, "Because I'm a pastor these people think their prayer is going to get answered just because I pray it."

I had a very real fear! "God, I'm going to pray for this person. What if you don't answer my prayer? Now I look bad, God, and now you look bad." Yet the person I came to visit is thinking, "I want you to pray for me because you probably hear from God." So you pray. "What happens if God doesn't answer?"

To be quite honest, there was a season where I didn't

enjoy praying for people, not because I didn't love but because I felt so responsible. "If I pray and God doesn't answer, then I've failed them."

Maybe you've never felt quite that way, but I am sure there have been times you've felt inadequate in your prayers. The Enemy would love to say, "Why are you praying? Do you think God knows you? Do you really think God cares about that? God has so much to worry about." I often used to think that, "God, you have so much to worry about. This world is going crazy. There's so much pain and sorrow. My prayer doesn't even matter."

Isn't it amazing how cunningly the Enemy goes after the very system God set up for us to talk to Him? The Enemy would love to get you to stop praying.

Let me tell you what helped me and truly set me free from these lies years ago. I am at the point now where I love praying for people. The fear is gone. I hope this will help you as well.

I stopped worrying about praying for others the day I realized there were two roles when it comes to praying. There is my role and there is God's role. It really is a completely freeing experience when you understand there are two roles at stake. My role is simply to pray. Scripture says to lay hands on one another, pray for and share requests with each other. That's my part.

I also have to understand that the other part of the equation is God's part. It is up to God to answer, not me. It's up to God to heal. I can't heal you. I can't set your soul free. I can't cause your loved one to come to know Jesus, and neither can you. That's not my job. What I can do is stand there with you and we can agree together in prayer.

One of the first things we discussed in this chapter is that the power of my prayer lies in the One who hears it. Once I truly understood that, it released me to be able to freely say, "I will pray." I will pray for anything, anybody, anytime because it's God's will and His power that answers prayer. It's not me.

Fasting and Prayer

Prayer and fasting stretches a believer's heart and gives power to, not only who you are, but also to the Spirit inside of you.

Matthew 6 continues, **"And when you fast..."** Meaning, fasting is expected at some point in a believer's life. **"...do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."**

Fasting is similar to prayer. If you fast, you shouldn't walk around saying, "Man, I'm so hungry. I've been fasting for the Lord."

Fasting is powerful. It sounds simple, but it is often harder than it sounds. Fasting is simply eliminating something from your life and replacing it with more of Jesus instead.

For example, if you are fasting lunch, you shouldn't just go to the gym and work out. That's a good thing to do if you want to lose weight and get healthy. But if you are fasting, you should skip lunch and replace the time you would normally spend eating lunch with time with Jesus. If

you are fasting social media, the time you would normally spend on social media you give over to Jesus. If you are fasting sugar, when you have the urge to have sugar you spend time with God instead.

You don't just eliminate something. That's called a diet. When you eliminate something and replace it with Jesus, that is fasting. There's something powerful that happens when we eliminate something out of our lives for the sole purpose of spending more time with Jesus. I encourage you to find something in your life to fast. If you've never done it before, try it just for a day. Just pick one thing, take that one thing out of your life and replace it with Jesus and see what starts to happen and develop.

Chapter Two

- THE LORD'S PRAYER -

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr was a man whose leadership, courage and perseverance continues to inspire us as a nation. He still inspires us to reject dehumanizing sins like racism and sexism and embrace a way of life that's more reflective of the kingdom of God.

I recently came across a part of Dr. King's sermon that had a pretty powerful line about the power of prayer. He said, "Although prayer is native to man, there is the danger that he will misuse it." (or simply not use it at all.) "Although it is a natural outpouring of his spirit, there is the danger that he will use it in an unnatural way."

One of the greatest things Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. did for us as a nation was to encourage us to pray for loving change in our country. There is still so much change needed in our nation. Part of this change will come through remembering the biblical message of prayer, of freedom, of peace, of hope, of unity and of oneness.

We Already Have the Manual

Why do we focus so much on what the world says we need to change and who we need to be, when God has already laid it out in Scripture? One of the greatest joys we have as followers of Jesus is that God has already given us the manual for peace, hope and love. He has already given the instructions to fight against things like racism and sexism and the myriad of other things that are happening in the world around us.

God has also given us the manual to combat fear, yet there is a prevalent state of fear in our world. Things may look good on the surface, but at any moment if we allow it, fear will absolutely win. In Hawaii in January 2018, somebody accidentally hit the wrong button, and an early-morning emergency alert from the Hawaii Emergency Management Agency was sent out to cellphones across the state warning of an incoming ballistic missile attack. Of course, this set off widespread panic and terror before it was revoked 38 minutes later.

God said in Scripture that He did not give you and me a spirit of fear. Instead, He gave us power and a sound mind. *So, are you using that power?* Are you allowing the God of the universe to speak in you and through you through the power of prayer?

The Lord's Prayer

Prayer occupied a really important place in the life, ministry and teachings of Jesus. He would frequently pray in public. He would also pray in private. He would often go away and spend the night by Himself, spending time in God's presence. Prayer was the subject of many

of conversations Jesus had with His disciples. Jesus gave the disciples, and ultimately us, a model of prayer in “The Lord’s Prayer.”

The Lord’s Prayer is probably one of the most well-known, most quoted, and possibly even most misunderstood, prayers in Scripture. Jesus gave us this model to talk through and pray through with Him and His Father. So, is the Lord’s Prayer supposed to be the only actual prayer we pray?

Charles Spurgeon, the famous English preacher and theologian, wrote out the Lord’s Prayer and added his own notes next to it. I feel his explanation puts perspective around what exactly the Lord’s Prayer is supposed to be.

“Our Father in heaven’	I am a child away from home.
‘Your name be honored as holy’	I am a worshiper.
‘Your kingdom come’	I am a subject.
‘Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’	I am a servant.
‘Give us today our daily bread’	I am a beggar.
‘And forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors’	I am a sinner.
‘And do not bring us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one’	I am a sinner in danger of being a still greater sinner.”

Spurgeon's last line really impacts me, "I am a sinner in danger of being a still greater sinner." We are sinners saved by grace, but we are always still in danger of being an even greater sinner, and we need the Lord's help.

In *The Divine Conspiracy*, author Dallas Willard paraphrases the Lord's Prayer in his own language, "Dear Father always near us, may your name be treasured and loved, may your rule be completed in us, may your will be done here on earth in just the way it is done in heaven. Give us today the things we need today, and forgive us our sins and impositions on you as we are forgiving all who in any way offend us. Please don't put us through trials, but deliver us from everything bad. Because you are the one in charge, and you have all the power, and the glory too is all yours—forever. Which is just the way we want it!"

Transforming Prayer

Luke 11:1 says, **"Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.'"** I'm convinced that as the disciples saw Jesus' prayer life and saw how Jesus would go away and pray, they also noticed how He came back from prayer. There was power, there was vision, there was direction and there was a compelling nature that was driving Him toward the will of the Father.

The disciples realized that when Jesus prayed, things happened. When He went away to pray and came back, things were different. In this passage of Scripture the disciples could have asked Jesus anything, instead they said, "Teach us to pray. There's something about how you pray that maybe we don't have."

What about us? When we go away to pray, do we come back noticeably different? Is there a new power to our lives? Is there a direction and a will that we didn't have before? I am convinced that lives would be transformed if you and I truly understood that prayer is not just a bunch of words hurled to the sky in hopes that God answers us. There is something powerful when we pray.

Aren't you glad that the power of your prayers do not solely rest on how good you are at praying? The power of prayer doesn't rest on how eloquent you are, how much you know about prayer or how many different words you can use. The God we pray to is what truly matters.

Too often we use prayer simply as a way to give God our big list of desires. Sometimes we only use prayer when we are in trouble or just before an exam or a big project. If we are not careful, prayer becomes something like, "God, you do what you do, I'll do what I do, and if I need you I'll call on you." In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus lays out something different for us. He lays out the ingredients to a powerful prayer life.

Jesus responds to His disciples in Matthew 6:9-13,

"Pray then like this:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

Breaking Down the Lord's Prayer

The Lord's Prayer is broken down evenly into six petitions. The first three petitions acknowledge who God is and what He does. The next three petitions invite God into our everyday life, wants and desires.

"Our Father in heaven," is teaching us who to pray to and that we are praying to our Father.

"Hallowed be your name," is telling us we are to worship a holy and righteous God.

"Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," is a reminder that we are to pray for God's plan in our lives and in the world, not our own plan.

"Give us today our daily bread," encourages us to ask God to provide for today.

"Forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors," reminds us to not only confess our sins before God and ask God to forgive us but to also forgive others who have done wrong to us.

The conclusion of the Lord's Prayer, "And lead us not into temptation" is a plea for help. It's also a prayer for victory. It's not merely asking, "Help me, Lord. I'm struggling." It's saying, "Help me and give me victory," or, "Help me and don't allow me to fall into the trap like before, but let me have victory over all of the schemes of the Enemy."

Six Petitions of the Lord's Prayer

1. The holiness of God.

The first two petitions in the Lord's Prayer deal with God's holiness. I'm convinced if we can grab hold of what Jesus is telling us to pray and how to pray, you and I can

have a truly different kind of prayer life.

“Your kingdom come,” requests that God’s kingdom be established on the earth. The holiness of God sets up His kingdom.

Religion vs Relationship

Isn’t it amazing? Jesus doesn’t start off teaching us to approach God in prayer with some overwhelming, long and impressive title. He doesn’t say, “Pray to the Great I Am. Pray to the God Almighty, the Creator of the universe.” He says, “Our Father.” How incredible is it that you and I have access to the God of the universe who allows us to call him “Father”? Prayer is not about a list of rules we have to follow to get God to pay attention to us. That’s religion. We can have a *relationship* with God!

Last week, I went out to lunch with three other guys. At the restaurant, one of the guys asked the 20-something young man behind the counter, “Hey, where do you go to church?” Then he pointed at me and said, “This is Andy. He’s the pastor of Crossroads, one of the greatest churches in the Triangle.”

You could tell it made the young man uncomfortable. He wasn’t making eye contact and offered, “Well, I don’t go to church. I’m not religious.” So, my friend responded, “It’s not religion; it’s a relationship.” The young man pushed back, “Well, me and the big guy upstairs...we have our own understanding with each other,” and then hurried us out the door as quickly as he could.

This scene has been playing in my mind over and over again. How many people do we come in contact with who have a similar religious mindset? Maybe it is from the way they were raised or taught in a previous church that God

is a religious-type God. Perhaps they believe that, "If I'm good enough and work hard and follow all of the rules, God will notice me." They labor under this unattainable goal when the truth is we have a God whom Jesus says we can call, "Our Father."

God's Holiness

Every one of us is invited to have a personal relationship with this God of the universe. But there is also a reverence that goes with it. "Hallowed be your name." Holiness. We serve not just a God who invites us into relationship, but we serve a God who's holy. We serve a God who is righteous. We serve a God who longs for our worship.

In 1 Peter 1:15 it says, "**...but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct...**" It truly means ALL of your conduct. If we serve a holy God, He is also calling us to be holy in all of our conduct. "**...since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'**"

This gives us a clear direction for our prayers. There needs to be worship and acknowledgment of who God really is. The power of God. The righteousness of God. He's calling us to a new, different standard of living. It is easy to say that sin, the world and temptation are the issues when the real issue is holiness.

The issue is that you and I should focus more on our own holiness before God. It's a humble thing to say, "I am imperfect, worshiping a perfect God, yet He is calling me to a higher standard." He calls us forward to righteousness.

The beginning of the Lord's Prayer has nothing to do with what we "want" and everything to do with God. It teaches us to put God in the right perspective.

When you take your eyes off of your own trials and circumstances and put them on God first, it is amazing how different those circumstances look. You can keep God at arm's reach looking at your problems while telling Him, "Yeah, God. I'll get to you in a minute as soon as I figure this out..." But God is saying, "Hey, how about you just look at me and let me figure it out *with* you?" It's a whole different perspective. Prayer sets us up to have the right perspective, not only about God but about ourselves as well.

The Second Petition

2. The kingdom of God.

"Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." By praying this part of the prayer, "Your kingdom come," we are inviting the kingdom of God into our everyday, our every circumstance and our every want.

What does that mean? It means we are inviting God's righteousness, His holiness, peace, wholeness, favor, grace, mercy and His forgiveness into our everyday lives. Not just when we need it and not just because we have our backs against the wall. By saying, "Lord, your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven," we are saying, "God, I want your kingdom and all of your benefits right now."

I don't need to wait until the day I stand in eternity to be at peace, and neither do you. You don't have to wait to have healing. You can have it now. I don't have to wait to be whole. Jesus can make you whole and He can make you new *today*. That's what this is saying. "God, I invite your kingdom and opportunities. I want *your* will, not *my* will, be done in my every circumstance, in my everyday."

“On earth as it is in heaven” is also key part. This prayer isn't talking about God's kingdom as though it is a faraway kingdom in a faraway time. “On earth,” means that it is right now. Maybe you long for peace, or love, or perhaps you struggle with forgiveness and protection and wholeness. You are invited to have that today. You don't have to work so hard and follow all of the rules or jump through hoops just to get God to notice you. He noticed you when you were in your mother's womb. He knew you before you even knew yourself, and He has your days ahead of you.

As you notice, we still have not given God any requests. This may be a whole different way of how you are used to thinking about praying. First we acknowledge and worship God. We invite His will. “God, give me a different perspective.” I am convinced that if we change our perspective before we even lay out our requests, the way we pray is also going to be totally different.

The Third Petition

3. The provision of God.

“Give us this day our daily bread...” In other words, “God, give me what I need for today.”

I love the statement, “Faith for tomorrow gives me power for today.” The reason I have faith for tomorrow is that I know God is already in my tomorrow. Power doesn't come through how many good choices I made today that *hopefully* sets me up for something good tomorrow. No, what gives me power in my circumstances today, is knowing that not only does God *know* my tomorrow but God is already *in* my tomorrow.

That's a whole different concept. We often hear that God knows the future. He is past, present and future. This means He is already in my future and knows my next steps. So, if God is already in your tomorrow, you don't need to worry about tomorrow! You can simply focus on today.

But our enemy, Satan, loves to rob us of the joy of today by making us worry about tomorrow. Think about how many things you have missed, opportunities to love more, to forgive, and spend time with family or to truly be at peace. How many opportunities have we missed because we are consumed about a tomorrow that might never be?

Missing the Moment

A few years ago, my daughter Kennedy and I were out driving. Off to the side of the road a man was walking with his young daughter. It was a neat scene; they were walking down the road hand in hand and swinging their hands together. I remember thinking of what a sweet father/daughter time they were having.

When they got to the intersection, instead of waiting for the light and the crosswalk sign, the man walked across the road. Suddenly all of the cars that were turning, had to stop to avoid hitting the man and his little girl. One particular driver got pretty perturbed that this man was with his daughter walking in front of him and beeped the horn. Before they even got safely to the other side of the road, the man turned back and was dragging his daughter toward the car while screaming his head off at the driver.

I could hear the foul language he was using three cars behind. I looked over at Kennedy who had a horrified and confused look on her face. The little girl was trying

to pull her dad across the street. He was yelling and trying to get over to the car. The other car was stopped in the middle of the intersection with the driver yelling out the window. That image is burned in my mind. Here was a guy who was completely missing the moment with his daughter, fighting with somebody he didn't even know over something that didn't even matter.

How many times in my own life do I miss what God is showing me or where He is trying to take me, because I am so wrapped up in something that doesn't even matter? While God and I are walking hand in hand, how many times have I stopped and dug in my heels to fight or go after something that ultimately does not matter? How often have I missed out on where God wanted me to go?

Instead, we should pray, "God, give me today what I need." In Matthew 6:25 and 34, Jesus says,

"Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? [...] Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself."

Essentially, Jesus is telling us, "Listen. I'm here with you right now. I'm already in your tomorrow. Don't be anxious about it. Don't miss what I'm trying to show you today because you are too worried about tomorrow."

The Fourth Petition

4. The forgiveness of God.

"...and forgive us our debts..." We are really good at asking for that, but how many of us are good at the next

part? **"...as we also have forgiven our debtors."** What a reminder that there is freedom directly tied to our ability to forgive other people. There is freedom from what we are going through that is directly tied with our willingness to forgive others.

How Many Times Must I Forgive?

Maybe you've wrestled with the same question Peter in the Scripture wrestled with in Matthew 18. Peter asked Jesus, **"Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?"** In other words, "Jesus, how many times do I have to keep forgiving the same person? How many times is he going to do something I know is against me and I have to then forgive him? How many times do I really need to forgive?"

Peter continues, "I'm going to throw out a number, Jesus. Let's see how this number lands. How about seven?" Now this is a good attempt from Peter; he is trying to be spiritual. Seven is known as "the perfect number, a spiritual wholeness number. He thought he had Jesus in a loophole.

The rabbis of that time taught and passed down that you only had to forgive somebody three times. After a third time, a rabbi would tell you that you no longer needed to forgive them. So Peter, knowing what the rabbinic law was for forgiveness, probably thought he was being very generous with his answer. I imagine him saying in his mind, "Okay, the rabbis taught us we only need to forgive three times. I'm going to seven. How holy am I, Jesus?"

Check out Jesus' response, **"I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times."** What this actually means is 70 times 7. It's 490 times. It's a hyperbole.

Basically, Jesus is saying, "Stop counting. Don't count. You forgive someone as long as he needs forgiveness," because true forgiveness keeps no record. That doesn't mean you have to put yourself in bad situations. It doesn't mean you have to forgive and reenter into an unhealthy position. It simply means that you have to forgive.

If you ever feel you don't need to forgive somebody because of whatever they did, guess what? Jesus did not need to forgive you either. Your sins against Jesus are greater than anything you can do to repay Him, yet Jesus forgave you. He forgave me. So whenever we feel, "Maybe I just don't want to forgive that person. Maybe I want to hang on to bitterness," we still need to forgive. There is no freedom in unforgiveness.

The Fifth Petition

5. The deliverance of God.

"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." This is not just a prayer of deliverance. It is a prayer of victory. This is not just a prayer saying, "God, keep me away from the fiery darts and away from all trials and tribulations. Just put me in a special bubble in your hand and never let me face anything difficult." No, Jesus is saying, "There are going to be troubles. There are going to be trials. There is going to be tribulation, but I'm with you, and you can have victory over that. You can have victory over every temptation that comes your way."

1 Corinthians 10:13 states that, **"No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability..."**

A lot of people misquote this verse. They say things like, "God will never give me anything in my life I cannot handle." That's not actually true; this verse is speaking about temptation. If God allows temptation in your life, He also gives you a way out of it, **"...but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."**

In other words, how you respond to temptation is a choice. Being captive to temptation is not an issue of, "The Devil made me do it." It is not, "My siblings made me do it. My spouse drove me to so much anger..." If you are giving in to temptation, it is because you chose to allow your mind, or your heart or your actions to go there. But, there can be victory in it! When we submit to Him in prayer, God not only forgives us of giving into temptation, but He will also provide us victory for the next time we face that temptation.

There are temptations that come our way constantly, and the Enemy of your soul is really good at knowing what your temptations are. So for us to be able to say, "God, there's victory in knowing I can overcome everything that comes my way because you're good," is extremely powerful and freeing. Did you notice that verse says, "God is faithful"? It does not say that you will overcome temptation because of *your* faithfulness, or because of your goodness or your power. It is because of God's faithfulness.

The Blueprints for Prayer

Jesus has given us the format and instructions for prayer though the Lord's Prayer.

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

The challenge to myself and to us as we read that Lord's Prayer is that we know it is the ingredients of a prayer Jesus has set up for us.

The next time you pray, I encourage you to model what Jesus has shown us. Before you even utter a word of your requests, spend time acknowledging who God is. By worshiping Him first, you are making sure God is in the right position. Once you do that, then God welcomes your petitions and requests. In fact, He has asked for them in Scripture. There are countless times when Jesus asked you to give Him your burdens, your concerns and your fears.

There is freedom in knowing that you are forgiven and no longer have to live in guilt or shame. Your freedom is also hinged on how well you forgive others. Spend time with God acknowledging that you are broken and fallen but are a new creation in Christ. Ask Him to give you victory over everything you are going to face today and tomorrow, and walk in freedom!

Chapter Three

- PERSISTENCE -

Are you a believer because of the prayers of a loved one for you?

One of my fondest childhood memories is of spending the night my grandma's house. She lived in a very small apartment, so I slept in her living room. Her bedroom was right off the living room and I remember often being woken up at night to the sound of my grandmother passionately praying for her kids and her grandkids. She prayed for each one of us by name, praying that each one would come to know Jesus and that each one would be safe and healthy.

This beautiful memory is etched in my mind. I believe a lot of who and where I am today was because of my praying grandmother.

I also know that, at times, we get frustrated with our prayers because we don't feel like they are getting answered. Sometimes it feels like we are praying and praying and praying, and nothing happens. The easy slide is to give up on praying and think, "Well, if God didn't

answer my prayer by now, then maybe He's just not going to answer my prayer.”

Yet, you and I have an amazing opportunity to communicate to the God of the universe. We have the opportunity to go before God, put God in the right position in our lives and in our circumstances.

I believe that prayer is real, effective and that it is powerful. Prayer acknowledges God's holiness. It acknowledges our humanity and our humbleness. It allows us to come before God and to ask Him for the needs in our lives that we are hoping to be met.

God, Am I Bothering You?

I think a lot of people probably wonder, “God, are you bothered by my prayers? Are you annoyed with me constantly coming before you?” Theologian D.L. Moody said, “Some people think God does not like to be troubled with our constant coming and asking. The way to trouble God is not to come at all.”

Let me encourage you. We serve a God who truly welcomes our prayers. He welcomes us to come and spend time with Him. God is not annoyed by you. He is not annoyed with you going to Him over the same thing constantly. God is not troubled or annoyed by your consistent, persistent prayer. God is not bothered by the fact that you come and ask Him for the same thing every day. God is not bothered by that at all. What really troubles God is when you do not pray at all.

Persistence in Prayer

In Luke, chapter 18, Jesus shares a parable that speaks volumes about persistence in prayer.

¹And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. ²He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. ³And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’ ⁴For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.’” ⁶And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge says. ⁷And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? ⁸I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?”

(Luke 18:1-8, ESV)

In this parable, we do not know much about the judge and we do not know much about the widow. We know the judge did not fear God and that he did not respect man. We know he was unrighteous and, honestly, did not care about the widow and was unwilling, at first, to help her at all.

God is not the judge in this story. Sometimes people read this parable and assume that we are the widow and God is the judge; if we keep begging, we will wear down God and He will give us what we want. God is not an unrighteous judge.

Jesus is making a point in this parable, “Listen. If this earthly, human, unrighteous, unfair, cruel man was willing to give the widow what she wanted because she kept bothering him, how much more do you think a righteous, holy, and loving God will respond to you?” That is the good news of this parable. God is not some unjust God who is saying, “Stop praying over that same thing. I’m so tired of hearing your voice.” God is not that way.

If an unrighteous, uncaring judge helped the woman because she was persistent in asking, how much more will a God of justice be willing to answer you? How much more does God love you and care about your circumstances?

There are two parts of prayer, our part and God’s part. Our part is to pray. God’s part is to answer. As long as we keep coming before God, it gives God that opportunity to answer. The Enemy would love nothing more than to silence your prayer and to place doubts in your mind, “Stop praying. Why would you bother praying?”

An Adversary

Do not overlook the adversary in this parable. The widow tells the judge that she has an adversary who is causing her problems. You and I have an Adversary too. There is a very real Enemy of your soul that is actively trying to pull you away from your relationship with God.

Sometimes we believers tend to forget that there is a target on our backs. There's a very real Devil, and he's really good at what he does.

“Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.” (1 Peter 5:8, ESV)

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10, ESV)

It helps to know who the Enemy is and in order to win the battle, you have to know where the real battle is happening. The real battle is not you against the person next to you. The real battle is not you against your boss. It's not you against your children. It's not you against the neighbor. It's not you against the coworker that you run the other way when you see them walking toward you in the hallway. Our Enemy is a spiritual Adversary.

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

(Ephesians 6:10-12, ESV)

These verses tell us we need to remember that the Devil is a very real enemy. To be victorious, we need to know who the actual Enemy is and where the battle needs to rage. When facing a spiritual battle, the only way you can

fight successfully is spiritually.

So, who is our Enemy? Lucifer was an angel who was cast out of heaven in all his glory and all his might. He deceived a third of the angels who were cast out with him. He was called the angel of light and full of beauty, yet he's so deceptive and able to masquerade himself in all situations and in all circumstances.

The Enemy is not going to walk up to you in all his demonic garb and say, "Look at me. I'm the Devil, and I'm going to trick you at 4:00 this afternoon." He's sly. He lies. He steals. He masquerades. When you are struggling in a situation, stop and ask yourself, "Where is this battle? Is the battle just with me and my own personal issues? Or is the battle something spiritual happening that I can only fight spiritually?" Recognize who the Enemy is and combat him spiritually.

This is why prayer is so powerful. It takes something you cannot handle physically and places it in the spiritual realm. We cannot fight spiritual battles physically. This is also why worship is so important and powerful. Worship is a spiritual act. Prayer is a spiritual act. Recognize that you enter into the amazing spiritual realm through worship and prayer. You get to speak to the God of the universe, who knows and cares for you.

Childlike Persistency

This widow in this story was persistent. She did not give up. She kept coming before the judge day and night until she got what she wanted. When I read this, my mind immediately goes back to when my kids were toddlers. I remember my kids tugging on me and repeating, "Dad. Dad. Dad. Dad. Dad." If you've been around little ones,

I'm sure this is familiar. "Dad. Dad. Dad. Dad. Dad."

They keep tugging and saying your name until you finally give in and ask, "What do you want?" When I think of the persistent widow going before the unrighteous judge, I also have the image of me going before God, my Father, like a little child asking, "God. God. God. God." The beautiful thing about God is that He doesn't get impatient with us and snap, "What do you want? Don't you know I'm busy with this country and all of their problems and I could not care less about your job?"

I am so grateful God doesn't respond that way. God cares about you and your circumstance. He loves you where you are. He loves everything about you, which means He cares about everything you're going through.

Whispered Doubts

The Enemy of our souls is really good at whispering doubts in our mind. "Why bother God with that? It's so small. Do you think God really cares about that prayer? Do you think God cares about what you're going through when He has all the rest of the planet to worry about?"

The Enemy would love to simply steal your voice. His goal is to silence your ability to go before the God of the universe in prayer and derail your ability to fight spiritually. The Enemy continues to whisper, "Why bother?" This is where persistence is so key. Don't give up.

Have you given up on your prayers? When there has been no answer, it is tempting to give up. You've given up on praying for that loved one. You've given up praying for that answer. You've given up praying for that miracle. You've given up praying for the final result. You've just given up or you may be really close to giving up because

you have been praying for years and years and years. You may have even been praying for decades over something and you still haven't gotten an answer, so the Enemy is constantly in your mind saying, "What's the point? Just give up on that prayer."

But how do you know whether that next prayer won't be the time and place God meets you? What if you give up just one prayer short of the answer?

Just One Prayer Away

Most people know that I am a huge football fan. There was an incredible playoff game between the New Orleans Saints and Minnesota Vikings on January 14, 2018 that reminded me of the importance of not giving up. Now I'm not a big Vikings or Saints fan, necessarily, but I will cheer for anybody who is going to beat the Patriots. Whoever can beat them is my new team, because my team (the Buffalo Bills) is probably golfing somewhere in the Bahamas at this point in the season.

After four quarters of play with seconds remaining, the Saints were ahead and the Vikings needed a last minute touchdown. The Vikings got the ball, drove down the field and, with time ticking down, the quarterback Case Keenum threw a 61-yard pass to Stefon Diggs for a run and touchdown. The Vikings won 29-24.

When they interviewed Keenum after the game, he described the final seconds. The play of the game was actually called "heaven." As in, "We need to pray to heaven right now for a touchdown." In the huddle, Keenum looked at his receivers and said, "I'm just going to throw it to whoever is open and let's just see what happens." They could have given up and admitted defeat.

But instead, they had this play.

I had almost turned the game off before this point. I am terrible about thinking I know what is going to happen, and then turning a game off before it is over. Then the next morning when people are saying, "That was the greatest game of the year," I'm thinking, "I missed it." Thankfully, I did not turn this game off and can still recall the reaction of the Vikings players. Their hands were on their heads like, "This actually worked. We just won. We are now going to the conference championship game. We just won this game."

How often is that win, that touchdown, that answer to prayer, just one play away? How many times have we given up just before the final play or when the answer was coming, when that miracle could be there or when that response could be yes? Think of the times you have shared your testimony or have invited people to church. Have you gotten frustrated or given up? "Well, they haven't responded yet, so I might as well stop inviting them to church," or "They haven't responded yet, so I am just going to stop telling them about Jesus."

How do you know that the next time you ask isn't when they will say yes? How do you know when the next invitation to know Jesus isn't the time in their life when they are ready to say yes? In our own personal life, how do we know that the next persistent prayer won't be the time when God looks to us and says, "You know what? It's in my plan and will, and here's the answer." How often have we given up? Not just on things spiritual, but how about on life? How about on yourself or on your hopes and dreams, your marriage or your kids?

We try and try and try and try and get no response, so we give up. God is reminding us, “Don’t give up.”

In Isaiah 41:10 it says, “...**fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed...**” In other words, don’t give up. “...**for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.**” God is with you. He will uphold you. He will strengthen you.

God does not get tired of you, nor does He get tired of hearing you. I believe God welcomes every opportunity He gets with us. This God who can sustain us is the God who holds us.

Why Be Persistent in Prayer?

Persistence is for our sake; it’s not for God’s sake. You do not need to keep going to God because He does not see you. God sees you. You don’t need to be persistent in prayer thinking, “I’m going to keep going to God until I wear God out.” God is never going to get worn out.

So who is the persistence for? It’s for you and me. Persistence grows me spiritually. Persistence requires patience and patience must be learned. We want our prayers answered, and we want them answered now. Yet, spiritual growth requires patience. It requires perseverance. It requires strength on our part. It stretches and grows us. It requires us to have faith. It demands spiritual growth. It demands fervidness. It demands the beauty of prayer on our part. All of these attributes of persistence are there to shape and grow us. Persistence is for our benefit, not for God’s sake.

Maybe you are praying for something. Maybe you have a truly great need. Don’t give up on it. Having a need is

something we all have in common with the widow in the parable. The reason the widow went before the judge was because she had an adversary she could not handle by herself. Her circumstances or a situation was something that required help. She needed the judge to intervene to solve her problem.

The reality of life is that you too will have problems. Sometimes we have seasons in life in which we feel really good, and sometimes we have seasons where we feel it is one trouble after another after another after another.

Take Heart

One of my favorite verses is John 16:33:

“I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

I am so glad Jesus finishes this verse. Aren't you glad Jesus didn't say, "In this world you will have troubles. Hey, let's go eat"? Period. Good luck, everybody.

Can you imagine the look on the disciples' faces if that had been the case? "Great. We just left everything to follow you, and now we are going to have troubles?" But, catch the rest of this verse. "But take heart...." Yes, you have problems. Yes, you have troubles. Yes, there are things in your life that maybe you don't understand. Take heart.

The verse is not implying that you take heart because *you* are strong and can handle it. "Take heart" is hinged on the last part of the verse, "...I have overcome the world." Jesus is already in your troubles tomorrow. Meaning, Jesus already knows. He's already there.

The wonderful thing about serving a Jesus who rose from the grave is that we already have victory in Jesus. Do not lose heart because Jesus has overcome the world. He is alive. He's not in a grave. He overcame sin and death. I love these reminders.

First Corinthians 15:56 says, **“The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the Law.”** If the verse ended here, we would all be in big, big trouble. Thankfully, verse 57 gives us hope, **“But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”**

In Deuteronomy 20:4 the Bible states, **“...for the LORD your God is he who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies, to give you the victory.”** You do not have to fight alone. You do not have to go through your troubles by yourself. You do not have to go through your sorrow or be persistent all alone. You have a God who is willing to fight for you. At times that requires us to stand still and see what God can do. Sometimes that requires us to take action and allow God to work through us. But, no matter what, there is a God who is victorious who fights for you.

The Common Problem

We *all* have one big common problem we are unable to solve by ourselves, and that is the problem of sin and death. It is the common problem for all of us. The widow in the parable had a problem she could not solve by herself. You and I have a big problem we cannot solve by ourselves.

“But thanks be to God.” John 3:16-17 are very familiar verses to most people, but take a moment to actually see and feel what it is saying, **“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him**

should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world..."

God didn't send Jesus to condemn you. God didn't send Jesus to beat you up.

"...but in order that the world might be saved through him." This promise applies to me and it applies to you.

"For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45, ESV)

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9)

There is a huge common issue that we cannot solve ourselves, so God solved it for us by sending Jesus. He sent Jesus not only to save us, but to also give us victory.

This beautiful free gift of salvation is based on God's grace, not on your works. It is not based on how good you are, how much you know or how much you have. You can't pay for it. You can't earn it. All you can do is receive it. The common problem is sin and death, but God provided a solution through Jesus.

If you are still wrestling with the common problem of all mankind? If you have never accepted Jesus into your life, today is a great opportunity to acknowledge that He solved this problem for you, with passion, love and jealousy for you. Jesus gave his life for you so you do not have to live with guilt and sin and shame. You can be free.

Isn't it wonderful to know that Jesus came to rescue us from our sin? Not only did He save us, but He gave us a way to communicate to Him through prayer. He provided

a means to lay down the burdens you were never meant to carry alone. Prayer works and God is a miracle-working, wonderful, loving God.

Chapter Four

- HAVE MERCY -

If we are honest, most of us have had times when we have walked away from praying thinking, “Did you even hear that? God, were you listening at all?”

If you are struggling with feeling like you don’t even know if God is hearing you, I have good news for you. He hears you. He created you, He came and died for you and He loves you. Why would He do all of that and then just ignore you? No matter how you *feel*, God is not ignoring you.

One of the dangers in our spiritual life is when we live off of somebody else’s experience with God and never experience God for ourselves. Sure, I could tell you my stories about prayer and worship and we could hear other people’s stories, but there is nothing quite like experiencing God for yourself. The beauty of prayer is that it is real and personal.

Prayer is that avenue that allows us to speak to the Creator of the universe. Just think about that concept for a moment. When we pray and worship, we are praying

and worshipping to the God who created everything just by speaking it. Imagine what He can do in *your* life. Imagine what He can do when you let go and lay down your burdens and our cares before Him.

Imagine what the God of the universe thinks when He looks at your situation. Sometimes we tend to think He cannot handle our situations, yet He's the God who created everything. M.E. Andross said it this way, "There is no activity in life so important as that of prayer. Every other activity depends upon prayer for its best efficiency." True prayer is not just a mental exercise. True prayer is not just a vocal performance. It's far deeper than that.

True prayer goes beyond the words. It is not an exercise or just something we do. It is more than an action. It is a personal transaction you can have with the Creator of the universe. It is something just for you. God speaks to you differently than He might speak to me and God may respond to you differently than He responds to me. That is the beauty of prayer.

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

Jesus told a parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9-14.

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers...'"

The prayer the Pharisee is saying is not necessarily a bad prayer at this point. I would hope you and I could humbly say the same thing, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men. I thank you that I am not an extortioner. I thank you that I am just. I thank you that I am not a liar. ” You could say all of these things and it would be fine.

The problem is that the Pharisee takes his prayer to a very dark place in his heart, not just in words. In this parable, the Pharisee was actually pointing to the tax collector who was in the same room praying where he was praying, “God, thank you that you have made me and that I am not like other people. I am trying my best and doing the best I can, and at least I’m not like *him*.”

To put this in context, imagine doing something similar next Sunday morning at church. It would be as if you stood up and prayed, “God, thank you for everything you have done in my life and for who I am. Thank you most of all that I am not like *this man* right here.” Imagine if you were pointing and calling people out by name.

It would be a very uncomfortable worship service if that happened. This is what Jesus is getting across. The Pharisee pointed out the tax collector and said, “I’m not like this guy right here.” He goes on. **“I fast twice a week; I give tithes on all that I get.”** Neither of those are bad things; it is good to tithe and to fast. But, then it says, **“But the tax collector, standing far off...”** Watch the stark difference, **“...would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’”**

That terminology *beat his breast* doesn’t mean he hit it once. It refers to somebody who is consistently hitting his chest. He knew he was consistently needing mercy, “God,

I need your grace and your mercy.” It’s not a one-and-done deal nor a matter of asking, “God, give me mercy. All right, I’m good,” and then you head on out. Needing God’s grace and mercy is an everyday occurrence.

Jesus went on to say, **“I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”**

This passage of Scripture relates back to the previous chapter which points to the kingdom of God and of a kingdom inheritance. It addresses the question of, “Who is actually worthy enough to enter the kingdom of heaven?”

The good news is that the kingdom of God is not solely based on one’s religious duties. It is not based on your personal holiness factor and your piety. It is not based on your works or on how much you have or do not have. It is based on something much greater than that. It begs the question, “What do I have to do to inherit eternal life? What do I have to do in *my* life?”

The main point of this passage is really humble reverence. It reminds us to allow our pride and lack of heartfelt reverence to fall away when we go before God.

A Tale of Two People Groups

The parable in Chapter 18 looks at two very different people groups and allows a glimpse of the heartbeat of God. It reveals what He values in who we are and what we bring before Him.

The Pharisees were the religious elites. They were business-men and the religious leaders at the time. They were known for their extreme piety and righteousness.

The Pharisees elevated oral tradition over top of the written Word of God. Whatever the Pharisees spoke was as if God Himself was speaking.

Therefore, to their fault, their religious reliance was based on traditions. It was based on works and on their own set of righteous standards. It was based on who they were. The Pharisees were very religious, self-righteous, proud and judgmental. They sought after the applause of other men rather than God and they were merciless.

You can imagine why Jesus often spoke against the Pharisees. He called them a brood of vipers. In Matthew 23:27, He said, **“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness.”** Jesus often spoke harshly against the Pharisees because they valued their religious activities and their works over relationship.

On the other side was the tax collector. Even today no one particularly likes paying taxes. In the New Testament, tax collectors were not viewed favorably at all. Tax money was paid to the Roman government. If people didn’t pay their taxes they were jailed or killed.

The tax collectors in the New Testament were Jewish men who worked for hire for the Romans. They were seen as traitors of their own people. They were very wealthy because they would often steal and skim off the top. Zacchaeus from the book of Luke is a good example of what the tax collectors were like in the New Testament.

The Pharisees hated tax collectors. They saw them as traitors to the temple and as traitors of their own people. However, this parable is made all the more powerful in the

fact that Jesus paints a reviled tax collector as the one being humble, justified, exalted and being shown mercy.

What Can We Learn from the Pharisees and Tax Collector?

1. God does not measure our righteousness by our level of religiosity.

Who is righteous, and what is righteousness? Righteousness in its simplest term is to be right before God. However, that presents a quandary because in Romans 3:10, it says, **“No one is righteous. Not one person.”**

We have a God who is calling us to this righteous way of living, yet at the same time the Scripture says nobody is righteous at all. Isaiah 64:6 says, **“We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.”** So, even on your best day, when you did everything right, you still don’t measure up.

Think about a day when you went home at the end of the day and thought to yourself, “That was a good day.” You did well at work. You treated others kindly. You put other people before yourself. Rush hour traffic didn’t bother you at all. You didn’t think anything bad that day about another coworker. You got home and helped your spouse run the house. You helped your kids. You did everything right.

Yet, the Bible would say you still fall short. You could say, “Well, then why bother? Why even try?” But you are missing the point, because the *try* falls on what Jesus did for us. You find righteousness in the ability Jesus had to come for us in our place. Even though none of us are

righteous and all of us are going to fall short, there was *one* who was righteous.

Because there was One who didn't fall short, we can absolutely pursue righteousness. It's not something we put aside; it means we strive to be pure. We strive to be blameless. We strive to be holy before God. We must never think that our righteousness is because of our works. Too often we equate being righteous and right before God with how hard we are working and how good of a person we are.

Let me tell you something, our works do not justify us, but God does. Unless God is the author, we will never possess righteousness. It's not something we can toss aside and say, "Well, I can never get there, so why bother?" God is still calling us to a life that is holy and to a life that is pure. He is still calling us to have a heart after His. The best way we can do that is when we eliminate who we think we are, get our works out of the equation and really pursue Him.

This is why prayer life is so important. Your prayer life and connection with Him is so critical, because it is in those moments that God is shaping you. It is in those moments God is purifying your heart and looking deep into your soul to call out those things you need to deal with.

2. God honors those who approach Him with humility.

How does the Pharisee's prayer strike you? What do you feel when you imagine the Pharisee going up to the front, and most likely, in a loud, authoritative voice speaking to God, versus the tax collector who won't even lift his head up to heaven?

The location and posture of the tax collector speaks of an intense sense of unworthiness and humility. It makes me stop and wonder, "God, what are you trying to teach me in this?" In Scripture, God gives us two main commandments, to love God and love people. All of the other commandments hinge on that.

But have you ever asked the question, "God, what do you really want from me? What am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to live my life before You?" Thankfully, He answered this in one of my favorite passages of Scripture, Micah 6:8.

**"He has told you, O man, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you?
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?"**

What would your life be like if wherever you went you showed justice and kindness to people? God also expects you to walk humbly with Him. Humility is a crazy important scriptural concept. Consider how fleeting life truly is. James 4:14 asks, **"What is your life?"** (What is it about you?) **"For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes."**

Psalm 144:4 says, **"Man is like a breath; his days are like a passing shadow."** Time on this earth is so fragile and so short. We can live it with pride and ego, attempting to get our way, or we can live it with a humble relationship with God, doing justice, loving mercy. James 4:6 says, **"But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'"**

“For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God?” (Galatians 1:10, ESV). Do you spend your life seeking the approval of the people around you? Are you focusing your attention on trying to impress other people or are you trying to impress God? **“Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.”** You have to ask yourself the question, “Who am I really trying to impress?”

There’s a rule called the *18/40/60* rule. It says when you are 18 years old you worry about what everyone is thinking about you. When you’re 40 you don’t care what *anybody* thinks about you, and when you are 60 you realize nobody has been thinking about you at all.

We can go through life so concerned about what everybody else is thinking about us, then discover no one was thinking about us at all. We waste so much energy trying to please man instead of trying to please God. Moody said, “He who kneels the most stands the best.”

3. God is pleased when we cry out for mercy.

Remember this little statement: *form versus essence*. Do you realize God is not impressed with how you pray? God is not impressed with how many words you use. He’s not impressed with how you look. He’s not impressed with your education. He is not impressed with how smart you are, and He really does not care if you know the Greek or Hebrew word for prayer.

What He really cares about is the essence of your prayer. That essence is what you feel deep down inside. It is a heart that is open before God. Sometimes we get stuck on thinking we don’t know how to pray or don’t know how to use big, eloquent words. We worry that we aren’t

praying with the words we are “supposed” to use. I took four years of Hebrew, and God does not care. When I learned Hebrew He didn’t suddenly say, “Oh! Hey, now I’m going to listen.”

The Pharisee in the parable has the proper form. He is wearing the pharisaical garb and looking sharp. He is a highly respected businessman in the community. Everybody knows him. They know all about him. Yet God could not care less. On the flip side is the tax collector who is despised, and in some eyes, a criminal of some sort, stealing and skimming profits. But the tax collector will not even lift his eyes to heaven. He stands at a distance because he doesn’t even feel worthy.

Jesus answers his own parable. Which one do you think left the temple justified? Was it the Pharisee who thought he had it all together and knew how to pray eloquently or was it the tax collector in the back of the room, eyes low, beating his chest and saying, “I’m a sinner. God, forgive me. I need your mercy”?

Sometimes the greatest prayer anyone could ever pray is a prayer for mercy. It’s a prayer that says, “God, I know my righteousness falls short, but because of your grace, because You can make me alive, I have life.” Ephesians 2:1-3 is a beautiful passage of Scripture which this summarizes perfectly. **“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins...”** I love that he speaks past tense, by the way. You *were* dead.

“...in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom

we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”

We were just like everybody else. We were lost. We were alone. We were sinful. Then we are given the hope of verse 4. **“But God...”** I love those two words. In fact, I try to think of those two words in every circumstance we go through.

As you think over your own circumstances today, you might be tempted to put a period at the end of that sentence. But don't stop, because the next sentence starts, **“But God...”**

“I got this report. I have this struggle. I have this health issue. I have this financial issue. I have this relational issue. I have this personal issue, *but God.*” I am thankful for those two words, because I too was once lost. I was a mess. My life was out of control. My story didn't end with that sentence, and neither does yours. Your story does not have to end with whatever it is you are facing now. The ending of your story should start with the two words *but God.*

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—” (Ephesians 2:4-5, ESV)

Ravi Zacharias said, “Jesus does not offer to make bad people good but to make dead people alive.” That is the gospel message. The good news is that Jesus didn't come just to make you good. He came to make you alive. Being good does not mean you are saved. Just being good does

not mean you have eternal life. Being good could simply mean you have good morals and good ethics. While that is great, there's more to the story than that. It's about being alive. It's about *truly* being alive through Christ.