

Discipleship 101: There Is Too Prayer In Schools!
By Jason Huff
Ephesians 6:10-20, Matthew 6:5-15, James 5:13-18

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

Almost every spring, somewhere around the country, a valedictorian is stopped from praying at a public event. It makes news as people weigh in on whether we're headed toward a godless society. I appreciate the concern – I too want a country where we are free to pray. Yet I wonder if we aren't missing the big picture. Can prayer happen anywhere regardless of what "the rules" are? Have we lost the core of what prayer is all about? How are disciples of Jesus supposed to pray? I believe that once we understand the intention and nature of prayer, we will not only think of it differently, we will practice it diligently.

So what is prayer? All sorts of religions practice something they call prayer too, so what's the biblical perspective? In the Old Testament, prayer is so important that there are over a dozen words in Hebrew that can be translated as "to pray." Each has its own nuances, but almost all of them have the concept of earnest request, particularly on the part of someone else. The people of God prayed for themselves and for others as a regular part of life.

The prayer life of the Israelites was different from all the surrounding countries in the Ancient Near East. Scholars noted that, in Hebrew prayer, there is no attempt to get God's attention through debasing the self or through vain flattery – we do not have to tell God what we think He wants to hear in order to be heard. Most of the Psalms that tell of God's might and goodness and grace have no petition at all, only praise! That's uncommon to say the least.

Also unlike other religions, God never created a system of rote prayers. The Bible doesn't record for us prayers that had to be said at sacrifices or the synagogue. In fact, the Lord's Prayer is the only prayer we are told to pray specifically – and Jesus doesn't say that "this is *what* you should pray" but that "this is *how* you should pray." Jesus taught us a format of prayer rather than a word-for-word formula. The recorded prayers of the Bible are spontaneous moments of great joy and sorrow. They too show us a pattern for prayer, but God is interested in relationship with us...He wants us to speak to Him personally. He wants *our* words.

That's because prayer builds an authentic bond between us and God. As one author put it, the prayers of the Bible have "a childlike simplicity, sincerity and confidence." God gives us the permission to call Him Father. As His children, we can come into His presence at any time. We don't need formality when we talk to God; we're His children. Instead, we need honesty and integrity, where we humbly confess our sins and celebrate His mercy that washes us clean. When we do so, we can be assured that God knows us and hears us. As Hebrews 4:14-16 tells us, Jesus is our great high priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses. Because He has gone before us, the author of Hebrews says, "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

Let's dive into what the passages we heard this morning teach us. First: righteous prayer moves us into right relationship with God. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus first teaches us to address God as Father – we are His children under His authority and protection. Then we ask that God's name be "hallowed." That literally means that we want God's name to be sanctified, to be set apart and kept holy and sacred. In biblical thought, your name represented who you are in reality. In contemporary terms, this means that we want everyone to revere the LORD as the one true God. The Lord's Prayer then sets God's will as important over everything else. The rest of the prayer acknowledges our need of God in everything – in His providing for our physical needs, in His forgiveness, in His deliverance against the wickedness of the world.

Praying the Lord's Prayer is humbling. It shows our utter dependence on God, how so little depends on what we can accomplish ourselves. We don't ask for help but for deliverance. We don't rely on ourselves to earn our living; we ask for daily bread, knowing that a strong back or a good job by which we gain our needs are God's blessings. The only thing that depends on us in the Lord's Prayer is our forgiveness. Forgiveness itself is a call not to hold on to our anger and fear and resentment but to let it go, putting it in God's hands and giving it to Him to sort out.

The thing is, when the Lord's Prayer is not something we just say from memory but something we put into practice...from that humbled position...we emulate Jesus, who washed His disciples' feet. The creator and savior of the world humbled Himself unto death in order to obey His Father. If we are willing to be humbled and obedient through our prayers, we are in the right place to accomplish what God wants to do through us.

Speaking of which, here's the second truth in these passages: the prayers of the righteous are effective. James uses Elijah as an example – he prayed and rains didn't come for three and a half years. He prayed again, and it rained. James is confident: confess your sins, pray, and you will be well. Paul believes we can stand against the devil's schemes. When we wear the armor of God – truth, righteousness, faith – and persevere in prayer, we have victory over the world.

Why do we doubt the power of prayer today when we see its effectiveness throughout the Bible? I think it's because we pray less out of childlike faith and more because we think, "it can't hurt." But righteous, effective prayer gives glory to the One who makes it effective – God. "It can't hurt" prayers are ones where, if things turn out OK, the answer is just as likely to be seen as chance as it to be seen as God's intervention. Jesus and the disciples never prayed "can't hurt" prayers. They prayed with righteous authority, and they received decisive answers from God that displayed His divine mercy and power. The righteous person prays with total trust.

In the same manner, the righteous person prays in line with the will of God. That doesn't mean that there's some magical or mystical connection where God speaks directly to the righteous. It's that the righteous pray focused on what God desires for us. When James talks about prayer for the sick, he isn't just concerned about their physical well-being; he wants to make certain that they are forgiven, that they are whole spiritually. In our passage from Ephesians, Paul says he is in chains. He is locked up and suffering. My first thought would have been for them to pray that Paul would be set free. Yet he doesn't ask for them to pray for his release. He can preach the gospel anywhere! He asks the Ephesians to pray for boldness so he will declare the gospel fearlessly. If we are concerned about why our prayers do not seem to have an effect, perhaps we should make sure we are asking for what is truly best according to God's design and purposes – because when His will is carried out, no matter the immediate outcome, it is best for all those who are faithful to Him.

As disciples committed to following our Savior's steps, now that we understand prayer a bit better, how should we practice it? I've got a new memory device for you. Last week we talked about the 3Ms of getting closer to God through Scripture, right? Can you remember them? *Measured portions, meditation, and memorization*. For the spiritual discipline of prayer, I want you to remember the 4 Bs...*be alone, be vigilant, be specific, and be others-minded*.

The first B, "*be alone*," sounds funny to us. Not only do we tend to find solitude in our lives disturbing, but many of us think of prayer as a group activity, something we do in church or after a Bible study. I think that's OK biblically. But throughout the New Testament, the vast majority of Jesus' prayer time is spent alone. Jesus regularly went off by Himself to pray. Then there are Jesus' own words. He looks at those who pray in public so they might be recognized as religious and says, "Don't be like them." Jesus says that prayer the Father rewards is prayer done in secret when nobody's watching and nobody knows.

Private prayer has to do with the person you are before God alone, the person you are when nobody's looking. This isn't about saying grace over a meal when nobody's looking or the occasional sentence prayer when you're in immediate need. This is about taking regular time out of your everyday schedule specifically to be alone with God. Not in front of the TV, not when you're driving, not when you have nothing better to do, but carving out sacred time. We should be praying all the time – Paul says we should pray on all occasions, continually – so being in conversation with Him often throughout the day in short bursts is a good thing. But it's no substitute for time set aside to genuinely encounter God in prayer.

This is hard to do. Many of us work long days, and when it's all done, we don't pray, we crash. It took me a long time to realize just how important this daily time is. It's taken me three years here at the church to make it a regular part of my day, to not get into thinking that I've got so much to do on God's behalf that it can wait. It can't wait. Conversation with our Lord and friend sets the tone for everything else that happens in our lives. What's more, when we spend time alone in prayer regularly, it shapes us and molds us into godly people. The more time we spend with God, the less time we spend talking, the more we spend listening, and the more we become like Him.

Moving on to the second B: *be specific*. In James today, he doesn't tell us to confess that we are sinners; he tells us to confess our sins to God and to one another. Ephesians today told us to pray with all kinds of prayers and requests. When Paul asks for prayer, he doesn't just say, "pray for me." He specifically requests prayer for boldness and fearlessness. And while the Lord's Prayer is a pattern prayer, even then it doesn't say, "Give us what we need." It says "give us today our daily bread." It's specific as to time – today – and it's specific as to what – food.

But why do we pray specifically? If God knows what we need before we ask it and knows what we will ask for, does it matter? Or maybe we think we're asking too much when we ask specifically. But as I study prayer, I see us told to pray with confidence. Specifics don't tell God *how* we want something done – how to provide our daily bread – but *what* it is that we need.

I think of it like this...virtually every day after school, I have a conversation with Jackson our eight-year-old that goes something like this...“How was your day at school today?” “Good!” “What did you learn today?” “Stuff.” You can tell I'm not getting very far. So I go deeper. “What special subject did you have today – music or art or P.E.?” “What lesson did you learn in math today?” “What friends did you play with at recess?” Some of the answers I already know from the papers the teacher sends home. But I want to know the specifics because it's in the details that Jackson really opens up about his day. We learn things that he would have never shared if we didn't get specific, and as that happens, he thinks more deeply about them too. They build our relationship.

While God knows what we need, He still wants us to talk to Him about it specifically. Why? Not for knowledge's sake. For relationship's sake. That we might realize that He is a God who listens to us, who bends His ear to hear. If we ask for specifics, then when He answers our prayers specifically, we won't think it was coincidence. We will see God's glory and we will enjoy the realization that He is actively engaged in our lives.

B number 3: *be vigilant*. James described the effective prayer of Elijah as “earnest.” Paul says, “*always* keep on praying for *all* the saints.” He admonishes us to pray “in the Spirit,” continually aligning ourselves in prayer with God's will. Jesus taught in Luke 18 not to lose heart in prayer. He said that if even a godless judge would give justice to a widow who pestered him, how much more God, the righteous judge, will see that justice is done when His children come to Him often in prayer.

Again, vigilance might seem contradictory to us. Does God need reminders? Do we literally change God's mind by “bothering” him? Jesus taught that we aren't heard just because we say many words. So why shouldn't we say a prayer once and be done with it? I believe there are many reasons God asks us to be vigilant in prayer. Prayer isn't meant to make God into Santa Claus; it isn't a magic formula for getting what we desire. When we pray and don't receive an immediate answer, instead of thinking God doesn't care, perhaps we need to rethink what we are asking. Vigilance makes us consider whether what we are praying for is in our will or God's will. Perhaps we are asking for something inappropriate – or perhaps God's timing or purpose is greater than what we understand. When God answers our diligent prayers, we realize that the answer didn't come from some power within ourselves but due to the gracious mercy of God who knows best when and how and where to answer our requests.

But perhaps one of the most important reasons for diligent prayer is the relationship that's built between us and those we pray for. If I pray for Joe down the street with cancer and he's immediately healed, that's fantastic! God receives the glory. And yet if I really don't know Joe, he probably won't be in mind again. But if Joe doesn't receive immediate healing and I keep praying for him, my heart for him will become larger. I'll likely start praying for more than just physical healing but for his family, his children, his faith and spiritual health. Through regular, diligent prayer, Joe becomes important to me like he is important to God. God's plan isn't necessarily changed as to what's best for Joe, but my heart is different towards him. Through our prayer for others, God winds up molding and transforming and sanctifying us.

And that leads right into to the fourth and final B: *be others-minded in prayer*. Scripture doesn't show any problem with us praying for ourselves. The Lord's Prayer tells us to address God with our needs on a physical and spiritual level. And yet what's interesting about the Lord's Prayer is that it's not an immediately personal prayer. It's not "give *me* this day" or "deliver *me* from evil." It's "give *us*," "forgive *us*," "lead *us*," "deliver *us*." James and Ephesians tell us to keep on praying for one another. God's intent is for prayer to keep us others-focused. God knows that prayer sews Himself and the people we pray for into our hearts.

My one encouragement in this area is this: don't wait. Often we say something like, "I'll pray for you," and then life happens and we forget. If someone asks you for prayer, pray right then, with them, about what is on their hearts. I find that praying once with someone else works far better as a reminder than a scribble on a piece of paper or a mental note. Don't worry that you have all the right words to say. Just pray briefly and passionately about the issue at hand. You know, in my own life, there's nothing better than when someone tells me that they've been praying for me and I know they mean it. I feel supported and lifted up. Paul regularly told the churches how he was praying for them. Do it for others so they might experience that gift too.

I started a few minutes ago talking about the whole controversy of prayer in school. You know, I'm not worried about it. Because where prayer really matters, one-on-one between us and God – open, honest communion with Him – nobody can stop us. Not a school, not a business, not a government. Nothing can stop us from praying to the God who has saved us from our sins. If we are believers, nothing can stop us from approaching the throne of grace with confidence that God will pour out His mercy and grace on us. Nothing's stopping us – so let's make it a habit starting today.