

Moving from Membership to Discipleship: Prayer
Philippians 4:4-7
January 22, 2012

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Today is the second week in our six-part series on the six disciplines of the Christian life. Today we want to focus on prayer. We are going to examine prayer using the classic five w's of journalism – who, what, when, where, and why. Who should pray. What is prayer. When should you pray. Where you should pray. And why you should pray.

Before we start, let's understand something. God is serious about prayer. God is very serious about prayer. I did a quick study and found that the Bible devotes 423 verses to the subject of prayer. How does that compare to some other Bible topics? Faith is mentioned in 231 verses, love in 280 verses, and hope in 121 verses.

Is God serious about prayer? You better believe it. And if God paid that much attention to prayer when he inspired the prophets and apostles to write his inerrant Holy Scripture, then I think it's only proper for us to spend this time investigating prayer as it concerns the Christian's life.

The first w is who. Who should pray? Who should turn to God in prayer? Everyone needs to turn to God in prayer. God wants conversation from all of his children – those inside the church and those outside the church. Listen once again to today's Old Testament reading: *Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon* (Is 55:6-7). God wants to hear from all of his children.

Our second w is a bit more of a challenge. What is prayer? Many people misunderstand the concept of prayer. You don't have to look too hard to find people who will tell you that God will give you anything you want if you ask often enough or in just the right way.

At least once a week I get an e-mail that goes something like this: pray the following prayer ten times and then forward this e-mail to ten friends and God will give you whatever you ask. Friends, that is garbage. Our God is not a vending machine god. You can't just put in the right amount and type of prayer and have silly wishes granted. Prayer is about changing you – not changing God. God does not change. God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

Now, having said that, does God answer prayers? Yes. Most of you have probably heard that God answers all prayers in one of three ways; yes, no, or wait. Let me give

you a different way of looking at God's answers to our prayers. God answers all prayers by either giving us what we ask for or by giving us something better.

You see, God answers prayers in the same way he does everything else – according to his will – his will not our will. When God answers our prayers with what we ask, it's because we are praying in, and according to, his will. When our prayers don't receive the answer we were looking for, it's because we want something less than what God has in mind for us. And, like any good parent, God will not give his children something that isn't good for them.

That's why I said that prayer is about changing us not changing God. When we see our prayers answered, we can be sure that our prayers are in line with God's will. As we watch which prayers are answered, we can begin to see what our prayers should be about. And as we change our prayer life to fit God's plan, we can easily see that our prayers are changing us not God.

Of course, the ultimate answer to 'what is prayer' is that prayer is conversation with the three most important people in our lives – our Father, our Savior, and our Comforter. I don't care what age you are, prayer is crawling up on the lap of the person who created the universe and addressing him as abba – daddy.

Prayer is about going personally to the one who cared more about you than he cared about himself and saying "thank you for life." Prayer is the privilege of petitioning the Spirit of God for strength to bear up under the troubles of this world and strength to lead a God-pleasing life and knowing that your prayer will be answered.

Our next question is when should we pray. Different people pray at different times. Some people pray in the morning, or at mealtime, or at night. Some people pray when they're in trouble and others when they are thankful. Some people only pray in church. And, sadly, some people hardly pray at all.

So when is the right time to pray? Paul gave some very good advice to the church at Thessalonica on the matter of when to pray. He writes: *Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus* (1 Thess 5:16-18).

Pray continually or to say it another way, pray without ceasing. What does that mean? Does that mean that we spend every waking moment on our knees? Does that mean that we have no time for anything but prayer? No. That kind of extremism goes against other Biblical mandates for us to be productive people.

Praying continually means that an untold number of things spark in us a reason to pray. I'll give you an example. Whenever Suzanne and I pass and auto accident on the road, Suzanne says, "Lord, be with them." Nothing fancy. Nothing wordy. Just a quick prayer that God would watch over the people involved. Will God hear and answer that quick four-word prayer? Absolutely. Martin Luther said the shorter the prayer the better.

The fourth w might almost seem like a no-brainer and in one way it is. Where should we pray? Well, I just said that we should always be in prayer, so, it only makes sense that we should pray wherever we are – right? However, the fact that we should pray wherever we are begs the question, “do we pray wherever we are?” Or are there times and places where we would just as soon not pray – at the office, in school, in a restaurant?

I mean, we don’t mind praying here in church, but right out in the open where everyone can see? Yes, right out in the open – but with respect and decorum, not making a public spectacle ourselves. Public prayer is a witness to our faith. And it is important for the lost to see us witness to our faith. Remember the words of Jesus: “*Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven*” (Mt 10:32-33).

The last w is why. Why should we pray? There are two ways to approach this question. First, we should pray because, in Scripture, God tells us to pray. Over and over the Bible tells us who should pray, when to pray, and where to pray. As we read the Bible, we see that Jesus set the example for us. Jesus prayed in private and in public. Jesus prayed before healing people. He prayed to give thanks, like at the Last Super, and he prayed when times were grim, like when he was on the cross.

Have you ever considered this? When Jesus died, the curtain in the temple that separated the holy place from the holy of holies, was split from top to bottom. That splitting represented the fact that no longer did the people need the high priest to intercede between them and God. Jesus made the ultimate intercession and now we are free to approach the Throne of God. Jesus’ death gave us direct prayer access to the Father. And we should exercise that freedom regularly.

The other side of why we should pray comes in the form of what we should be praying for. The list of reasons to pray is as inexhaustible as the list of human sins and calamities. We need to be praying for ourselves, for others, for church workers, for missionaries, for the sick, the lonely, the shut-in, the dying, the lost, for our enemies. There is no end to the list of things we should be bringing to God’s throne. If given just a little thought, no one should ever say, “I don’t know what to pray for.”

But, of course, the most important thing to pray for is that God’s will be done. That’s the third petition of the Lord’s Prayer. Listen to how Martin Luther defines what “Thy will be done” means. “The good and gracious will of God is done indeed without our prayer; but we pray in this petition that it may be done among us also.” That means we earnestly desire for God’s will, not our will, to be done in our lives.

Luther also describes what it looks like when God’s will is done in our lives. He writes, “When God breaks and hinders every evil counsel and will which would not let us hallow God’s name nor let his kingdom come, such as the will of the devil, the world, and our flesh; but strengthen and preserves us steadfast in his Word and faith unto our end.”

Why should we pray? We should pray to praise God, to confess to God, to thank God, and to show our dependence on God. That's right – our dependence. As Americans we like to think of ourselves as rugged individualists, but that not true. We are completely dependent on God and when we pray we acknowledge that dependence. Prayer helps us see who we are and who God is and to keep that relationship in proper perspective. Prayer admits that God is God and we are not.

This sermon, and the one before it, were more Law than Gospel. That's only because I'm very interested in getting everyone here at Prince of Peace on the same page as far as our Christian walk goes. To do that, I must explain what the Bible describes as a proper Christian walk. But I don't want anyone to get the idea that Christianity is just a bunch of do's and don'ts.

Last week I told you that the Bible is God's love letter to you. And that statement is as true as God's love for you is true. You have the Bible because God loves you with a love that has no end.

This week I'm telling you that God loves you so much he wants to hear from you. He wants to hear from you as much as you parents want to hear from your children, as much as any lover wants to hear from his beloved. God wants to hear your joys and your sorrows, your thanks and your petitions, your love for him and your love for your neighbor. And he wants to hear from you for one reason and one reason only. God loves you dearly.

Please bow your heads and let's go to the Lord in prayer. Dear Father, Daddy, we are here to thank you for the love which you shower on us without end. Lord, we confess the weakness of our prayer lives and we ask a measure of your Holy Spirit to fill our lives with your presence so we may be always mindful of you and turn to you in every circumstance of life. We pray this in and through the name of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.