



Let Us Pray

Colossians 4:2-4

Colossians 4:2-4 ²*Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.* ³*And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains.* ⁴*Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.*

The largest radio receiver on earth is in New Mexico. Pilots call it "the mushroom patch." Its real name is the "**VLA**" - **Very Large Array**. It is a series of huge satellite disks on thirty-eight miles of railways that together mimic a single telescope the size of Washington, D.C.

Astronomers come from all over the world to analyze the optical images composed from the radio signals it receives from space. Why is such a giant apparatus needed? Because the radio waves, often emitted from sources millions of light years away, are very faint. The total energy of all radio waves ever recorded barely equals the force of a single snowflake hitting the ground.[1]

I was thinking about that and a contrast. What great lengths people will go to searching for a faint message from space -- when God has spoken a message so clearly through His Son and His Word!

But God not only has spoken clearly and powerfully to us through Christ and the Scriptures, He also has a VLE, a **Very Large EAR** continuously open to us. He will hear every prayer of His children, even when our prayers are weaker than a snowflake. That's why, of all the Disciplines of Spiritual growth, prayer is perhaps the most important.

In Jan, our theme is Spiritual Growth. Our theme is *1 Timothy 4:7 Have nothing to do with godless*

myths and old wives' tales; rather, train (discipline) yourself to be godly. (NIV)

In a week or so you will get a SG Commitment Card, like this. I hope you will seriously consider making a commitment for 2009.

I. PRAYER IS EXPECTED

You cannot reach any other conclusion from the Bible except that pray is expected by God from God's people. It's everywhere. Yes, those who have been brought under the authority of Christ and the Bible, know that the will of God is for us to pray. But we also believe that His will is good.

Jesus Expects Us to Pray

Don't think of prayer as an impersonal requirement. Realize that it is a Person, the Lord Jesus Christ, with all authority and with all love, who expects us to pray. These excerpts from His words show that He Himself expects us to pray:

Matthew 6:5, "*And when you pray. . .*"

Matthew 6:6, "*But when you pray. . . .*"

Matthew 6:7, "*And when you pray. . . .*"

Matthew 6:9, "*This, then, is how you should pray: . . .*"

Luke 11:9, "*So I say to you: Ask . . . ; seek . . . ; knock.*"

Luke 18:1, "*Then Jesus told his disciples . . . they should always pray.*"

Suppose Jesus appeared to you personally, much as He did to the Apostle John on the Isle of Patmos in Revelation 1, and said that He expected you to pray. Wouldn't you become more faithful in prayer, knowing specifically that Jesus expected that of you? Well, the words of Jesus quoted above are as much His will for you as if He spoke your name and said them to you face to face.

God's Word Makes It Clear

In addition to the words of Jesus, the unmistakable expectation of God from the rest of the New Testament is that we pray.

Colossians 4:2, "*Devote yourselves to prayer.*" Everyone is devoted to something. Most of us are devoted to many things. When you make something a priority, when you will sacrifice for it, when you will give time to it, you know you are devoted to it. God expects Christians to be devoted to prayer.

1 Thessalonians 5:17, "*Pray continually.*" While "*Devote yourselves to prayer*" emphasizes prayer as an activity, "*Pray continually*" reminds us that prayer is also a relationship. Prayer is in one sense an expression of a Christian's unbroken relationship with the Father.

These two are especially significant because they are direct commands. This means too little time, too many responsibilities, too many kids, too much work, too little desire, too little experience, etc., do not exempt us from the expectation to pray. God expects every Christian to be devoted to prayer and to pray without ceasing.

A praying man as well as reformer of the church, Martin Luther expressed God's expectation of prayer this way: "As it is the business of tailors to make clothes and of cobblers to mend shoes, so it is the business of Christians to pray."

But prayer is not just an expectation of God, it is also a **royal invitation**. As the writer of **Hebrews 4:16** tells us, "*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*".

We can be "prayer pessimists" and see the expectation to pray merely as an obligation, OR we view the command to pray as an opportunity to receive *the mercy and grace of God*.

- When I travel, My wife, Nina, expects me to call her. But that expectation is an *expectation of love*. She wants me to call because she wants to hear from me.
- When our children travel, we likewise expect them to call when they get there. Because we love them and care about their safety.

God's expectation that we pray is like that. His command to pray is a command of love and concern. He desires to communicate with us and to bless us.

This we know—Jesus prayed. Luke tells us, "*But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed*" (**Luke 5:16**). If Jesus needed to pray, how much more do we need to pray? Prayer is expected of us

because we need it. We will not be like Jesus without it.

II. THE PROBLEM

Why, then, do so many believers confess that they do not pray as they should?

1. Sometimes the problem is primarily a lack of discipline.

Their prayer is never planned; time is never allotted just for praying. While lip service is given to the priority of prayer, in reality it always seems to get crowded out by things more urgent.

2. Sometimes we do not pray because we doubt that anything will actually happen if we pray.

Of course, we don't admit this publicly. But if we felt certain of visible results within sixty seconds of every prayer, there would be holes in the knees of every pair of Christian-owned pants in the world!

Obviously the Bible never promises this, even though God does promise to answer prayer. Many prayers are answered in ways that cannot be seen instantly. Many prayers are answered in ways different from what we asked. For a variety of reasons, after we open our eyes we do not always see tangible evidence of our prayers. When we are not vigilant, this tempts us to doubt the power of God through prayer.

Another reason many Christians pray so little is because they haven't learned about prayer.

III. PRAYER IS LEARNED

Prayer is learned. We are not born knowing how to pray well. We all can pray *some* - just like no one needs to teach a newborn baby to cry. But crying for basic needs is minimal communication, and we must soon grow beyond that infancy and learn to talk. The same is true of prayer. The fact that prayer is learned should give us hope. That means that it's okay to start the Christian life without any knowledge or experience of prayer. No matter how weak or strong your prayer life is right now, *you can learn to grow even stronger*.

We must say with the disciples in **Luke 11:1**, "*Lord, teach us to pray.*"

HOW?

1. By Praying

If you've ever learned a foreign language you know that you learn it best when you actually have to speak it. The same is true with the "foreign language" of prayer. There are many good resources for learning how to pray, but the best way to learn how to pray *is to pray*.

The Holy Spirit teaches praying people how to pray better. That's one of the applications of **John 16:13** where Jesus said, *"But when he, the Spirit of truth,, comes, he will guide you into all truth."* Just as a plane is guided more easily when it's airborne than when it's on the ground with its engines off, so the Holy Spirit guides us in prayer better when we are airborne in prayer than when we are not.

2. By Meditating on Scripture

Meditation is the missing link between Bible reading and prayer. This is one of the most compelling concepts on prayer I've ever learned. The two are often disjointed when they should be united.

We read the Bible, close it, and then try to shift gears into prayer. But many times it seems as if the gears between the two won't mesh. In fact, after some forward progress in our time in the Word, shifting to prayer sometimes is like suddenly moving back into neutral or even reverse.

But meditating on Scripture helps us to move even closer to God in those moments.

The process works like this: After the input of a passage of Scripture, meditation allows us to take what God has said to us and think deeply on it, digest it, and then speak to God about it in meaningful prayer. As a result, we pray about what we've encountered in the Bible, now personalized through meditation. And not only do we have something substantial to say in prayer, and the confidence that we are praying God's thoughts to Him, but we transition smoothly into prayer with a passion for what we're praying about. Then as we move on with our prayer, we don't jerk and lurch along because we already have some spiritual momentum.

At least two scriptures plainly teach this by example. David prayed in **Psalm 5:1**, *"Give ear to my words, O Lord, consider my sighing."* The Hebrew word rendered as "sighing" may also be translated "meditation." In **5:1** he has been

meditating and now he asks the Lord to give ear to it and to consider it.

In fact, this same word is used with that meaning in another passage, **Psalm 19:14**. Here we find one of the best-known statements about Scripture written anywhere, beginning with the famous words of **verse 7**, *"The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul."* This section continues through **verse 11** and then David prays in **verse 14** as a result of these words and his meditation.

"May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer."

Notice that both verses are prayers and both refer to other "words" spoken in prayer. Yet in each case meditation was a catalyst that catapulted David from the truth of God into talking with God.

THE PURITANS

Those who seem to have known this secret best were the English Puritans who lived from 1550 to 1700.

One of the Puritan preacher-writers was Thomas Manton. In a message on Genesis 24:63, he points directly to meditation as the link between Bible intake and prayer. He wrote,

Meditation is a middle sort of duty between the word and prayer, and hath respect to both. The word feedeth meditation, and meditation feedeth prayer. These duties must always go hand in hand; meditation must follow hearing and precede (more) prayer. To hear and not to meditate is unfruitful. We may hear and hear, but it is like putting a thing into a bag with holes. . . . What we take in by the word we digest by meditation and let out by prayer. . . . Men are barren, dry, and sapless in their prayers for want of exercising themselves in holy thoughts.'

A modern British writer, Peter Toon, in his book *From Mind to Heart*, summarizes the teaching of the Puritans on these things:

To read the Bible and not to meditate was seen as an unfruitful exercise: better to read one chapter and meditate afterward than to read several chapters and not to meditate. . . . The three duties of reading Scripture, meditation, and prayer belonged together, and though each could be done occasionally on its own, as formal duties to God they were best done together.

How do we learn to pray? How do we learn to pray like David, the Puritans? We learn to pray by meditating on Scripture, for meditation is the missing link between Bible intake and prayer.

3. By Praying with Others

The disciples learned to pray not only by hearing Jesus teach about prayer, but also by being with Him when He prayed. Let's not forget that the words "*Lord, teach us to pray*" didn't just come as a random idea. This request followed a time when the disciples accompanied Jesus in prayer (Luke 11:1). In a similar way, we can learn to pray by praying with other people who can model true prayer for us.

There are always other believers who can teach us much by praying with them. But we pray with them to learn principles of prayer, not phrases for prayer. One Christian may give biblical reasons to the Lord why a prayer should be answered. Another might show us how to pray through passages of Scripture. By praying with a faithful intercessor we might learn how to pray for missions. Praying regularly with others can be one of the most enriching adventures of your Christian life.

(Most of the great movements of God can be traced to a small group of people He called together to begin praying.)

IV. PRAYER IS ANSWERED

I love how David addresses the Lord in **Psalm 65:2**: "*O you who hear prayer.*"

Perhaps no principle of prayer is more taken for granted than this one—that prayer is answered.

Try to read this promise of Jesus as though it were for the first time: "*Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened*" (Matthew 7:7-8).

To God may not answer prayer, *when* we would like him to, or *in the way* we expected, but God always answers prayer.

There are some obvious exceptions.

- Are we asking for things that are outside the will of God or would not glorify Him?
- Are we praying with selfish motives?
- Are we failing to deal with the kind of blatant sin that causes God to put all our prayers on hold?

Yet in all this, let's not forget: Prayer IS answered.

God doesn't mock us with His promises to answer prayer. C. H. Spurgeon said,

I cannot imagine any one of you tantalizing your child by exciting in him a desire that you did not intend to gratify. It is a very ungenerous thing to offer alms to the poor, and then when they hold out their hand for it, to mock their poverty with a denial. It is a cruel addition to the miseries of the sick if they were taken to the hospital and there left to die untended and uncared for. Where God leads you to pray, He means you to receive."

By the scriptures about prayer and by His Spirit, God does lead us to pray. He does not lead us to pray in order to frustrate us by slamming Heaven's door in our face. Let's discipline ourselves to pray and to learn about prayer so that we may be more like Jesus in experiencing the joy of answered prayer.

APPLICATION

Since prayer is EXPECTED, will you pray? I challenge you with this directly because I think we need to make some conscious decisions about our prayer life. It's time for *general intentions* about prayer to become specific plans.

One pastor who agrees writes the following:

If you want to take a four-week vacation, you don't just get up one summer morning and say, "Hey, let's go today!" You won't have anything ready. You won't know where to go. Nothing has been planned.

But that is how many of us treat prayer. We get up day after day and realize that significant times of prayer should be a part of our life, but nothing's ever ready. We don't know where to go. Nothing has been planned. No time. No place. No procedure.

For the purpose of Godliness, will you pray? Today? Will you plan to pray tomorrow? The days after that?

Since prayer is LEARNED, will you learn to pray? Will you learn to pray by linking your Bible reading to prayer via meditation? Will you begin to pray with others?

Since prayer is ANSWERED, will you persistently pray? Remember that the words *ask, seek, and knock* in Matthew 7:7-8 in the original language of the text are in the *present, continuous tense*. That means we often must pray persistently before the answers come.

Let's pause and get our bearings. Why this appeal to pray? Remember, it's "*for the purpose of*

godliness." Where there is Godliness there is prayerfulness.

Would you be like Christ? Then do as He did—discipline yourself to be a person of prayer.

NOTES:

[1] From a January 1990 program, "Infinite Voyage," broadcast on WTTW, the public television station in Chicago.