

Trellis: Prayer Practice

The prayer practice is perhaps the most basic and fundamental of them all. A child can wade in it's waters. You can drown an elephant in those same waters... we will never find the bottom.

It's helpful to embrace the simplicity of prayer. "Keep it simple, Keep it up" (Pete Greig). "The only rule of prayer is to show up" (Roland Rolheiser). Or, as we've said over the years at the Vineyard: "Prayer is like pizza. Some are better than others, but it's all good!" The fact is, if you're sincere you can't do it wrong. **So, deep breath, this isn't about "getting it right" this is more about "getting it going."**

We will use Pete Greig's excellent book "How to Pray" as our guide.

Pete Greig

Our journey is going to be paced around an easy, four-step rhythm: P.R.A.Y.—Pause, Rejoice, Ask, Yield. I'm not a big fan of acronyms—they smack of science textbooks and overeager sermons—but this particular one just works, because it's simple, sensible, and sneakily profound. Try not to take its four steps as hard-and-fast rules—rungs on a ladder to some seventh heaven. They are more like dance steps: fluid, interactive, and open to creative interpretation. Give P.R.A.Y. a chance and it'll lend your prayer life a light structure and an easy flow, whether you're on your own or praying in a group.

Pause

Focus is hard to come by. It's possible that in our age of explosive technological growth we are more distracted than we've ever been. As screens become more ubiquitous and advertisements become increasingly engaging and personalized, the surrounding world is clearly shouting for our attention. Demanding it.

Attention is limited. We've only got so much of it to give and every marketer wants their slice. Jesus found it necessary to step away from the crowds to find silence and solitude. His methods may seem extreme. He'd slip away in the evening, or get up before the sun. He'd climb mountains or get to some deserted place to make it easier for him to give his Father his undivided attention.

Luke 5:16 "...he **often** withdrew to deserted places and prayed.

David Brooks writes **“Treat attention as an on/off switch, not a dimmer”** (How to Know a Person). This is a simple but profound insight. It is rare (but incredibly affirming) to find yourself in a conversation where the other person is fully engaged in your dialogue. No phone, no open laptop, no glancing at the TV screen over your shoulder to check on headlines or scores. They’re focused intently and exclusively on you and the moment you’re sharing. It’s magical.

Should this be so rare? So exceptional?

As our attention is ruthlessly fought for, it’s possible that we’ve moved it to a dimmer switch. 20% for my phone/device. 40% to my internal dialogue/insecurities. 10% to monitor my environment. The remaining can be allocated for the current conversation.

Brooks goes on to say:

“The problem is that the average person speaks at the rate of about 120 to 150 words a minute, which is not nearly enough data to occupy the brain of the person being spoken to. If you are socially anxious, you probably have so many thoughts about yourself dancing around in your head, they threaten to hijack your attention from whatever the person in front of you is saying. The solution as a listener is to treat attention as all or nothing. If you’re here in this conversation, you’re going to stop doing anything else and just pay attention to this. You’re going to apply what some experts call the SLANT method: sit up, lean forward, ask questions, nod your head, track the speaker. Listen with your eyes. That’s paying attention 100 percent.”

If attention must be paid... then we likely owe a tremendous debt.

This phenomenon is nothing less than tragic—all the more as we consider its implications on prayer. If Jesus had to take extraordinary measures to guard his focus in prayer, how much more so for us—with our fleeting attention and deep insecurities, all in an age of profound digital distraction?

Henri Nouwen: *Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life.*

To PAUSE is to take deliberate steps to eliminate distractions and sharpen our focus. Jesus’ instructions for this were mercifully simple:

Matthew 6:6 (NLT): 6 But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

Pete Greig: *“Be still, and know that I am God.” The Latin for being still here is vacate—the very word we use to describe vacating a place or taking a vacation. In other words, God is inviting us to take a holiday, to be leisurely or free, because this is the context in which his presence is known. Perhaps we might paraphrase this verse: “Why don’t you take a vacation from being god and let me be God instead for a change?”*

Discussion

Pete Greig

But here is the great and inescapable truth—taught in Scripture, modeled by Christ, and advocated without exception by all the heroes of our faith: You cannot grow in prayer without some measure of effort and discomfort, self-discipline and self-denial. Just as you cannot get physically fit without regular exercise and a healthy diet, so your spiritual growth will be determined, to a very significant extent, by the prayer exercises you choose (or do not choose) to establish and sustain.

- Do you find it difficult to be still (most people do!)? What have you tried that did/didn't work well?
- Jesus said "go into your prayer closet." Do you have a prayer closet? Do you have any ideas about what might work well as your prayer closet? Discuss.
- The Bible never tells us to close our eyes or fold our hands. Why do you think those things are so common?
- What physical posture(s) help you stay focused? Have any been especially helpful along the way? Discuss.
- Experts have described the slant method for attentiveness: *sit up, lean forward, ask questions, nod your head, track the speaker*. Do you think this might have any utility for our prayer times? Why/why not?
- Many have attested to a simple formula for building spiritual habits: Place & Time. Set apart a specific place for your prayer, and a set a regular time to do this. What is (or could be) your Place & Time?

Pray for one another.

Rejoice

Annie Dillard:

Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? . . . It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.

Barbara Ehrenreich

What's the point of a divinity you can fit on a thumb drive, on a bumper sticker, or within a human skull? The God of the cosmos must surely be bigger than our capacity to understand!

The Christian concept of prayer is that anyone of us, at anytime of our choosing, can garner an audience with the King of Glory. And, incredibly, he'll be listening! Intently. Simply because we had a thought, or said a word in his direction. That's wild!

How then are we supposed to approach this? If there is some sort of divine protocol for entering the throne room of the Most High, we don't have it... and, let's face it, our guesses based on the movies we've watched probably aren't correct. How do we approach the throne? Fortunately we are given some pretty good hints.

Psalm 95:1–7a (NIV):

*1 Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord;
let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.
2 Let us come before him with thanksgiving
and extol him with music and song.
3 For the Lord is the great God,
the great King above all gods.
4 In his hand are the depths of the earth,
and the mountain peaks belong to him.
5 The sea is his, for he made it,
and his hands formed the dry land.
6 Come, let us bow down in worship,
let us kneel before the Lord our Maker;
7 for he is our God
and we are the people of his pasture,
the flock under his care.*

Hebrews 4:16 (NIV):

16 Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Come with rejoicing. Come with confidence. Come with awe and wonder. Come with your best (though still incomplete) awareness of his glory.

Remember, prayer is like pizza—some of it's better than others, but it's all good! If you're sincere in your prayer, you can't do it wrong. That said, the above model is helpful. Come rejoicing! As the Psalms direct, sing, kneel, dance, shout, lift your head and hands to the King.

The most common objection to this approach is that we fear it will be insincere. Consider carefully how Pete Greig addresses that concern:

If adoration fails to erupt spontaneously when I first approach God in prayer, I take hold of my soul quite firmly and make it wake up! I love the way George MacDonald puts it in his Diary of an Old Soul, "He who would be born again indeed, / Must wake his soul unnumbered times a day, / And urge himself to life with holy greed." [15] This is precisely what King David does in Psalm 103: "Praise the LORD, my soul," he says,

commanding his sluggish soul to wake up and worship. “All my inmost being, praise his holy name” (verse 1).

This is an act of the will. Instead of waiting to worship until I feel like it (which could be a very long wait indeed), I begin to thank God for all the evidence of his love in my life—often speaking out loud—until my feelings fall into line with the facts. Sometimes this can seem a bit fake at first, but that’s okay. And occasionally I continue to feel tired, sad, or lethargic, and that’s okay too. If I only said “I love you” to my wife when I was overwhelmed with passion, I wouldn’t tell her often enough! And actually, my love for her may well be more honest—less fake—in the cold light of an ordinary day than it is during the hormonal surge of an emotional moment.

The writer of Hebrews urges us to “offer to God a sacrifice of praise.” What could be more sacrificial than praising him when we don’t feel like it? It’s relatively easy to worship when we’re singing stirring songs with the saints on Sunday morning, but not so easy on a miserable Monday morning before work. I suspect that unemotional worship—the kind that feels a bit forced and fake—is precious to God precisely because it is so costly to us.

Let’s be honest: does God’s worthiness of our praise change based on our mood? Of course not! We are to bring a sacrifice of praise regardless. It’s not less sincere if our mood doesn’t match our words/actions... if anything, it’s more.

Discussion

- Can you share about a time when your praise to the Lord was overflowing?
- Do you ever feel like rejoicing the Lord is “fake” because of how you’re feeling at time? What are some things we could do to help us overcome this?
- Together, make a list of physical expressions of praise that you can think of from scripture. (i.e., sing, kneel, etc)
 - Which things on this list come most naturally to you? Which make you the most uncomfortable?
 - What on this list is most rare in your expression of worship? How might you address this?
 - Are there some things that you do when you’re in a group, but not alone in worship? Vice versa? Why might that be?
- Choose 1 or 2 things on that list that you are going to emphasize in the coming week. How will you make room for this expression of praise? Share with the group.

Take a few minutes to pray as a group and offer praise to the Lord. Split up and pray for one another to faithfully bring a sacrifice of praise to the Lord, regardless of mood or circumstances.

Ask

Archbishop William Temple:

“When I pray, coincidences happen; when I stop praying, the coincidences stop happening.”

Requests seem like an intuitive way to pray. He’s God, we’re not... we bring our needs to him. That is right and good! That said, it’s in bringing requests that we are most often accosted by doubts/fears/questions.

- Why ask when God already knows what I need?
- Is it ok to ask? Is it selfish?
- Aren’t God’s plans already set?
- Does asking change anything?

Consider Pete Greig’s especially helpful perspective on this:

You may remember the story of a blind beggar called Bartimaeus, who cried out to Jesus for help in the city of Jericho. The crowds tried to shut him up, but he refused to be silenced. Hearing the commotion, Jesus asked him a surprising question: “What do you want me to do for you?”

I can imagine Bartimaeus letting out a little gasp of exasperation: Wasn’t his need obvious? Hadn’t it been obvious to every man, woman, and child who ever passed him by? “Lord,” he said, “I want to see.” And so Jesus healed him. People often ask why we need to pray. Doesn’t the Lord already know our needs? Can’t he be trusted to do the right thing regardless? Why on earth do we have to ask?

The story of Bartimaeus reveals that it’s not enough to sit silently in the crowd wishing for a miracle. “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus inquires. He asks us to ask, invites us to articulate our specific needs. “Whether we like it or not,” says the great Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon, asking is the rule of the kingdom. . . .

Jehovah says to his own Son, “Ask of me and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance. . . .” If the royal and divine Son of God cannot be exempted from the rule of asking that he may have, you and I cannot expect the rule to be relaxed in our favor. . . . If you may have everything by asking, and nothing without asking, I beg you to see how absolutely vital prayer is.

God asks us to ask for at least three reasons. **First, because the act of asking is relational in a way that mere wishing is not.** Jesus is always more interested in friendship than in dispensing blessings to faceless souls. When a hemorrhaging woman touched his cloak, he stopped to identify and speak with her. It wasn’t enough to answer her prayer anonymously. Immediately after this, he raised a twelve-year-old girl from the dead, and once again, his primary concern was pastoral: “Give her something to eat.” If Bartimaeus had been healed in the crowd by the mere vapor of Christ’s passing, he would never have met Jesus, and we would never have come to learn from his beautiful story.

The second reason that asking is necessary is that it is vulnerable. To make a request is to admit to some area of personal need. It extends trust toward the person asked. This may be a minor act of faith—trusting a shopkeeper to supply a pound of potatoes—or it can be very costly—asking someone to marry you or asking a doctor to cure your disease. In all its forms, asking is an expression of faith, a way of opening our hearts to believe and our hands to receive from another person.

Third, asking is intentional. It involves the activation of our wills. We are not automatons: mindless bots preprogrammed and powerless to resist the Creator's genetic coding. God respects us too much to ride roughshod over our free wills, and he loves us too much to force us to do his bidding. He comes where he is welcomed and waits to answer until he is called.

We ask because he has asked us to ask. Our prayers are powerful! They impact reality and move the heart of God.

Karl Barth

"To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world."

Blaise Pascal

God has instituted prayer so as to confer upon his creatures the dignity of being causes.

Skye Jethani

*"We are not merely passive set pieces in a prearranged cosmic drama, but we are active participants with God in the writing, directing, design, and action that unfolds. Prayer, therefore, is much more than asking God for this or that outcome. It is drawing into communion with him and there taking up our privileged role as his people. In prayer, we are invited to join him in directing the course of **his** world."*

Discussion

Read and Discuss Luke 11:5-10

- What is Jesus teaching in this parable?
- Do you ever feel like it's wrong/selfish to ask?
- Is there something that you've been asking of God for long time? Discuss. Why is it hard to keep asking? Should you persist? How can we join you in that prayer?

Pete Greig

From the first day of creation to the last chapter of Revelation, Scripture describes God breaking in, invading space and time, interrupting and disrupting the laws of nature.

When sick people came to Jesus, they received more than counseling and a glow of inner peace. They were actually, objectively, physically healed!

Often prayers for healing and salvation are ‘long-haul’ prayers, and can therefore seem selfish and/or pointless. Share with each other 1 or 2 of your ‘long-haul’ prayers, then encourage and pray for one another. Lord, let your Kingdom come!

Yield

As we covered last week, our prayers move the heart of God. This is true! That said, the primary objective of prayer isn't to shape him, it is to shape us. We think of prayer as mostly words from our minds, when in fact it's much more the movements of our soul. Prayer isn't about transferring information (words) from the mind of one being to another (from us to God). But it's way more than that! It is, instead, presence and power to mold us into the image of our King. Consider the following excerpt from James K.A. Smith's outstanding (but difficult!) book, "You Are What You Love."

James K.A. Smith

In ways that are more “modern” than biblical, we have been taught to assume that human beings are fundamentally thinking things. We view our bodies as (at best!) extraneous, temporary vehicles for trucking around “minds,” which is where all the real action takes place. In other words, we imagine human beings as giant bobblehead dolls: with humungous heads and itty-bitty, unimportant bodies. “You are what you think” is a motto that reduces human beings to brains-on-a-stick. Such an intellectualist model of the human person—one that reduces us to mere intellect—assumes that learning (and hence discipleship) is primarily a matter of depositing ideas and beliefs into mind-containers.

*So we assume that a **disciple** is a learner who is acquiring more information about God—**sanctification by information transfer**. If “you are what you think,” then filling your thinking organ with Bible verses should translate into Christlike character, right? If “you are what you think,” then changing what you think should change who you are, right?*

Have you ever found that new knowledge and information don't seem to translate into a new way of life? Ever had the experience of hearing an incredibly illuminating and informative sermon on a Sunday, waking up Monday morning with new resolve and conviction to be different, and already failing by Tuesday night? You are hungry for knowledge; you thirstily drink up biblical ideas; you long to be Christlike; yet all of that knowledge doesn't seem to translate into a way of life.

It seems we can't think our way to holiness. Why is that? Is it because you forgot something? Is there some other piece of knowledge you still need to acquire? Is it because you're not thinking hard enough? What if it's because you aren't just a thinking thing?

Mark 12:29–30 (NLT):

Jesus replied, “The most important commandment is this: ‘Listen, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. 30 And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.’

If we think of loving God as just a work of our minds, then we’re missing a LOT! And if, by extension, we imagine prayer to be just a work of our brains—the mere piling up of words—words that are intellectually coherent and theologically accurate, then we’re missing a lot.

Prayer is an action of our hearts, our souls, our minds & our strength (or our bodies)

What if God sees a conversation with you as much more than you reciting facts about him? To be clear, God cares what you think, and you shouldn’t hesitate to share freely and openly with him. But, much of the power of prayer is that in so doing we are placing our whole selves into the hands of the Potter—inviting him to shape and mold us however he sees fit.

Pete Greig: If petition is prayer at its simplest, and intercession is prayer at its most powerful, contemplation is prayer at its deepest and most personally transformational.

Part and parcel to asking for God’s intervention, is a submission to his will and way above our own. As always, Jesus is our example in this: Luke 22:42 (CSB): 42 “Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me—nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.”

To yield literally means ‘to give way’—in our prayers we pour out our hearts to the Lord, all the while submitting our hearts to him to be shaped and transformed however he sees fit.

In prayer we are often eager to ‘hear back’ from the Lord. And rightfully so, the scriptures present prayer as a dialogue not a monologue. That said, we are far better positioned to hear his voice when we are fully yielded to him. Certainly God can speak to wake us up, to stir us to action, or to warn us that we’re not yielded to him. Let’s not take any of that off the table. But perhaps it’s reasonable to expect that God is more inclined to speak to us if we are yielded to him in such a way that we are prepared to accept whatever he may say, and to obey whatever direction he may give!

Discussion

1 Chronicles 29:11–13 (CSB):

11 Yours, Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the splendor and the majesty, for everything in the heavens and on earth belongs to you. Yours, Lord, is the kingdom & you are exalted as head over all. 12 Riches and honor come from you, and you are the ruler of everything. Power and might are in your hand, and it is in your hand to make great and to give strength to all. 13 Now therefore, our God, we give you thanks and praise your glorious name.

- Why do you suppose this prayer is often added to the end of the Lord’s Prayer?
- How might the above prayer position us to yield to God?
- Can you think about something you are often tempted to hold back from God when you pray? Would you share this with the group (be brave!)?

Pray as a group for a collective surrender and yielding to God’s will for this group. Split up to pray the same for each individual.