

Lake Cities Community Church
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Series: Mission Impossible
Pastor Craig Schill

“What is Prayer?”

A pastor and a taxi cab driver from New York both died and were waiting in line at the Pearly gates to get into heaven. “Who are you?” Peter asked the cab driver. “I am Joe Cohen, a New York Cabbie for 20 years.” St. Peter checked his records and nodded approvingly. He said, “Take this silk robe, harp and golden staff and enter into your reward.” Pleased, the cab driver entered into heaven. Next, Peter asked the pastor, “Who are you?” “I am Joseph Snow, pastor of First Baptist church for the past 43 years.” Peter checked his records, frowned slightly and gave Pastor Snow a cotton robe, a plastic recorder and a wood staff. “Welcome to heaven, enter into your reward.” Pastor Snow said, “I don’t mean to appear ungrateful - but the taxi cab driver got a silk robe, a harp and a gold staff. How can this be?” Peter said, “The eternal rewards formula is tricky, but the difference is that while you preached people slept, and while he drove, people prayed!”

Last week we talked about the motivation for prayer. Our goal today is to seek a definition of prayer – to answer the question, “What is prayer?” It is an important question for us to ask but I do not feel it is a difficult question. It is pretty straight-forward. Now if we asked, “What is worship?” or “What is the Trinity?” – those are thorny questions. But prayer is fairly easy to understand. I believe I can define prayer in five words: “Prayer is talking to God.” If you want to express yourself to God – you *talk to him*, and if find yourself talking to God, you are by definition, praying. Prayer is talking to God. I would be surprised if I received much argument on that point. A mother was tucking her five-year old into bed

and usually the mom prayed for her, but tonight the little girl wanted to pray. She began to pray softly, and then got softer still until only her lips were moving. When the girl said, “amen.” The mom said, “That was nice, dear, but I didn’t hear a word you said.” “That’s OK, said the girl, I wasn’t talking to you.” That little girl understood that “Prayer is talking to God.”

The difficulty in understanding biblical prayer is not in its basic definition but in determining *what types of prayers* are pleasing to God, and what type are not. If you think about a soccer field – we want to know what type of prayers in bounds and what types of prayer are out of bounds. So we can avoid one and encourage the other. That is what we are going to attempt to do this morning.

Prayer can be both Formal and Informal

Let me give you an example as we begin. In England in 1715 there was a serious church fight going on concerning prayer. One group of people argued that the only type of prayers that were appropriate were formal, written prayers, that had been screened by the church for correct doctrine. The other side argued for what they called “free prayer” – spontaneous, informal expressions to God from the heart. The official-prayer side argued, “How could you dare come into God’s presence so casually, with only what is on the tip of your tongue? You might speak blasphemy and provoke God’s anger!” The free-prayer people argued just as strongly saying, “Your old formal prayers have led to a cold, distant church that is out of touch with the society. God cares about the heart!”

Do you see? Both would have agreed with our definition that prayer is “talking to God” – but they disagreed on what *kinds of prayers* are in or out-of-bounds. The book, “A

Guide to Prayer” by Isaac Watts, was written in response to this fight. Watts shows from the Bible that both formal and free prayers are biblical and pleasing to God – and that the only problem was the ungracious hearts of the arguing people.

And so let’s begin by agreeing that biblical prayer can be either formal or informal. In the Bible we have both formal prayers, such as carefully written prayers in the Psalms, as well as more spontaneous expressions of praise or petitions.

For most of us – it is the formal prayers we are unfamiliar with. Philip Yancey said in his book on prayer, “The church I grew up in considered written prayers downright unspiritual. How could a prayer be sincere and heartfelt if someone read it from a piece of paper?” If you have kind of felt this way I would encourage you to explore the blessing of formal prayers. If you do you will be in good company. C.S. Lewis used formal prayers in his devotional life - from the Book of Common Prayer - stating that he felt they helped him to not be so focused on self, but to enter into deeper matters of the faith.

The book of Book of Common Prayer was first published in 1549, and it contains many wonderful prayers for many different topics. Here is a prayer that helps us pray for the musicians of the church:

“O God, whom saints and angels delight to worship in heaven: Be ever present with your servants (Tyler, Jenny and Jin) who seek through art and music to perfect the praises offered by your people on earth; and grant to them even now glimpses of your beauty, and make them worthy at length to behold it unveiled for evermore; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.” What a beautiful and theologically grounded prayer.

Now if you grew up in the Roman Catholic or Episcopal tradition, you might be very familiar and comfortable with formal prayers and struggle with informal prayers. Let’s look

at one example in Scripture when Nehemiah goes before the King to ask for permission to return to rebuild Jerusalem. "[Neh. 2:4a](#) "What would you request?" asked the King. So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said to the king..." [Neh. 2:4b-5](#). Nehemiah didn't have time to pull out the Book of Common Prayer. He had to pray in the moment. Many of our prayers are informal expressions to God just like that - praying for the regular events and happenings in a day. Praying for an auto accident you pass by. Praying for wisdom as you take a test in school. Richard Foster says of this type of prayer, "Healthy prayer necessitates frequent expressions of the common, earthy, run-of-the-mill variety... To be spiritually fit to scale the Himalayas of the spirit, we need regular exercise in the hills and valleys of ordinary life." Both formal and informal prayers are biblical and profitable ways of talking to God.

Pray in humility and not pride

Turn now with me to Luke chapter 18. Whether your prayers are formal or informal in nature – Jesus teaches that prayers that are in-bounds and acceptable to God are humble and not prideful: [Luke 18:10](#) "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. [Luke 18:11](#) "The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. [Luke 18:12](#) 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' [Luke 18:13](#) "But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' [Luke 18:14](#) "I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

There is a temptation, especially for church leaders, to use prayer as a chance to highlight their obedience to Christ and show off their theological vocabulary. You have probably heard people pray, and it sounded like they were praying for your benefit and not to God at all! Maybe that is why the most common posture of prayer is that of kneeling – as a physical reminder that our prayers are to be humble and not prideful. It is hard to be prideful on your knees.

Prayer should be honest and not fake

A related point about prayer is that it should be honest and not fake. Jesus said in Matthew [Matt. 6:5](#) “When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. A hypocrite is someone who pretends to be something they are not, often so as to impress other people. God desires honest prayer (like the tax collector) – as is seen so often in the Psalms where David and others express their frustration, anger and despair just as honestly as they do their praise and adoration.

Prayer should not be ritualistic but frequent.

The next lesson is that biblical prayer is frequent but not ritualistic. We are to pray often, but not to have it become religious chanting. Jesus taught in the book of Matthew: “And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. Jesus warns that He does not approve of praying words over and over as if those words had power in and of themselves.

Prayer has no power in and of itself – the power is not in the kind of words, of length of words – the power is in God to whom the words are directed.

We are not to pray ritualistically, but we are to pray frequently. Paul tells the church, “Pray without ceasing.” (1 Thess 5:17). Luke described the church as, “continually devoting themselves to prayer” (Acts 1:14). So repeating words as meaningless ritual is out-of-bounds, but praying frequently is pleasing to God. What is the difference? I believe it has to do with having a relationship with God. When you have a relationship with someone you talk with them, and when you love someone, you talk a lot. Our daughter Taylor and Alex Hentschel were good friends from age three, and it was very hard on Taylor when Alex moved to New Jersey a year ago. But I can see how much they love each other because they spend literally hours on the phone talking with one another! Samuel Coleridge said, “He prayeth well, who loveth well.” Juliana of Norwich the 15th century mystic prayed, “The Trinity, O my love! When will you come to me?” We pray frequently not out of meaningless repetition but because we have a real relationship with God.

Review

Let’s review. biblical prayer can be expressed through either formal or informal expressions biblical prayer is humble and not prideful, it is real and not fake, it is frequent but not ritualistic. Our final aspect of prayer is that biblical prayer is offered in faith and not unbelief.

Pray in faith and not unbelief

So our final question is, “Do you believe God answers prayer? When I was at Phoenix Seminary, Dr. Darryl Delouuse said, “The problem you will have in your churches is that your people do not believe in prayer. They don’t believe God answers prayer.” Do you pray with faith?” Do you believe James when he says: **“You do not have because you do not ask.” James 4:2.** Likewise Jesus said to his disciples **“Therefore, I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you.” Mark 11:24** Jesus puts forward faith in prayer as a key aspect to the answering of our prayers. James said

I believe the health and wealth theology movement has confused us on this point. We don’t use faith to command God to act in a certain way, and even though we believe, we do not always ask according to God’s will – but still we must pray believing that God can and does works through prayer.

Application

I have five points of application for us this morning. First, If you do not have a Book of Common prayer, I encourage you to purchase one. Second, try kneeling this week in prayer as a way to express humility. Third, as an expression of your faith in God, I want to encourage you to take the prayer card in the bulletin, jot down a prayer, and put it in the offering plate. Upon the completion of the service as you exit you will take another person’s prayer and commit to praying for that this week. Fourth, commit this week to praying for our church-wide prayer focus, which is for God to lead us to a more permanent facility –

and if it is His will the building that is opening up in May. Let's join in corporate prayer for regarding this issue.

In conclusion: fifth – remember this week not to FAIL in prayer, but to be heroes in prayer. You fail in prayer when your prayers are:

Faithless, and

Arrogant. Designed to

Impress others and are

Long -winded with meaningless repetition.

Instead be heroes in prayer.

Believe that God answers the prayers. Pray with...

Humility. Pray....

Everyday. Pray because of your

Relationships with God whether you use

Official prayers or pray

Spontaneously.