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**Core Seminar**

**Meeting with God**

**Class 4: Meeting with God through Prayer**

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**Quick Recap of where we’ve been**

In Week 1, we considered two assumptions:

*First*, that it’s possible to meet with God; and

*Second,* that meeting with God is something that we should do, even on a daily basis.

In Weeks 2 and 3, we considered *how* we meet with God through Biblical intake: that is, hearing, reading, studying, memorizing and meditating on the Word of God.

We also considered the importance of quiet time in meeting with God. And it’s so important that we’ve reprinted its definition on this week’s outline.

**Introduction**

As we turn to prayer, I wonder whether you’ve ever met anyone famous? Living in Washington, DC gives many of us opportunities to see famous politicians even walking around the Hill. Some of us even work for some of these famous politicians. I like following politics. I find both Democrats and Republicans intriguing. But it’s not just because they’re famous; it’s because they’re also powerful. They can get things done. If I could only get a few moments of their time to share with them some of my ideas.

Graeme Goldsworthy, an Anglican from Australia who is renown for his OT teaching, wrote: *“It is implicit in our nature to want to speak to someone more powerful than we are.”* This is not necessarily scriptural, but it’s an observation about the human condition that resonates in most of our hearts. I would suggest that it’s one of the reasons we go to the Lord in prayer. He is the almighty God, the one who created the universe from nothing. He is far above us and worthy for us to talk with him, simply because who he is. But how do we talk to him? How do we have access to him? This morning’s class is on prayer; what it is, why we should pray and how we should do it. Let’s open up this time, appropriately, by going to God and asking Him to give us understanding this morning.

**Prayer**

I don’t know about you, but I’ve never much cared for worldly “self-improvement” books. They’re usually man-centered and tend to leave the reader thinking that if I do this particular thing in this particular way then I’ll feel better about myself or be a better person or be successful. That is exactly the way we do *not* want to think about our quiet times. Meeting with God is not formulaic, at least in the sense that if you do it for a certain amount of time or read a certain passage you will be guaranteed good communication with the Lord. With that in mind, let us turn to some foundational things about prayer that hopefully will help us know the Lord better; in turn, knowing the Lord better hopefully will drive us to Him in prayer. This is what we’ve been considering the first three weeks in this class: in knowing a great God, we should be drawn deeper into communing with Him.

Consider *this* definition of prayer: *“Prayer is the Spirit-given, Word-saturated response, through communication, to dwelling on God.”* By “response” we mean the outflow of the meditations we’ve taken from the Word. God has already spoken to us through His Word and so we speak to him in response to that. Perhaps a more simple definition is the one offered by Wayne Gruden in his book, *Systematic Theology*: *prayer is personnel communication with God*. We put the word “communication” in the definition to accentuate that prayer is our means of communicating with God. It is speaking to God.

What might this response to God look like in words? Well, consider the acronym ACTS. It’s one of the best ways I’ve seen to understand and remember how we should respond.

***A – Adoration***

***C – Confession***

***T – Thanksgiving***

***S – Supplication*** (petitioning or asking the Lord for things to give him glory)

The Davidic Psalms are loaded with prayers of Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. Perhaps no one other than Jesus Christ himself could pray like David. And perhaps no one other than our Lord knew God better or loved God more.

Let’s turn to Psalm 51. This is one of the great prayers of confession in the Bible. David had just committed a series of heinous sins. So overcome by sin, he at first was reluctant to repent. When repentance came, however, David, in vs 1, cried out to God to: *“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions.”* Notice how David weaves into his prayers his knowledge of God’s promises and attributes. And note how he confidently approaches God and trusts in the promise of redemption in vs. 10: *“Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.”* We should all strive to be more Christ like -- we must never forget that He is our perfect example.

**QUESTIONS**

QUESTION: Can anyone tell me a difference between the prayer of praise and the prayer of thanksgiving that we hear on Sunday mornings?

***Prayer: a Trinitarian framework (Goldsworthy)***

The first important thing to take away from the class today is that the God of the Bible -- our God -- is one God in three persons and that this fact has massive implications for praying.

He is a relational God. And not because of anything we added. He wasn’t desperate for relationships when He created us. *It’s God’s attribute to be a* ***relational*** *and* ***communicative*** *God.* He was in perfect communion with Himself in the three persons of the Godhead before we appeared on the scene. There was perfect unity and love within the Godhead. We know this because Jesus, when he prayed to His father just before his betrayal, said this in John 17:24: *“Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.”* Here we see not only that the Father loved the Son, but also that there was unity between the Father and the Son and the Father had given the Son his glory. The Holy Spirit was also in unity within the Godhead before the foundations of the earth (Hebrew 9:14). We also see that in the unity of three persons of the Trinity, God created the world. *“Let us make man in our image, after our likeness* (Genesis 1:26).”

We must be people who are Biblical in our understanding of spiritual disciplines; and to do that, we must be Biblical in our understanding of God. Too often we speak about God without much thought of the Trinity. But when we think about God in three persons and in prayer, we should understand the distinct roles of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Basis of all Prayer: The Sonship of Jesus

On what basis do we, a wretched and sinful people, come to a holy God in prayer? He is perfect and we deserve his wrath. So how is it that we can come to Him? The answer is found in the person of Jesus Christ, the son of God. This has been the thread running through this class. In all our talk of meeting with God, we must understand that it is always through a mediator. This mediator is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The Son of God is the basis of all prayer.

**Hebrews 4:14-16** is the most explicit text on this. *“Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”*

When are we in a time of need? Always.

I want to give you today three reasons to have confidence that we can draw near to God:

1. Jesus is our **high priest**
2. The **acceptance** Jesus has with the Father is the **acceptance** we now have in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21). This is the essence of justification by faith alone.
3. If God hears the **prayers** of Jesus, He will also hear our **prayers** through Jesus (John 11:41-42 – *“I knew that you always hear me…”*).
   1. Jesus consistently intercedes for us (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25).
   2. This is why he tells us to pray in his name (John 14:13 – *“Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.”*).

The Source of all Prayer: The Fatherhood of God

Jesus teaches his disciples to pray this way: *“Our Father who art in heaven…”* The typical pattern of prayer in the NT is to pray to the Father. This is not to say that if you pray to Jesus or the Holy Spirit that your prayers will go unanswered. It is to say, however, that the typical pattern of prayer laid out in the New Testament is to pray to the Father.

The first thing that we should understand is that if we have put our faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins and recognize that it is through Christ that we have access to God, then God is our Father. Praise God for that. We are His children. Through Christ we have been adopted into the family of God. I don’t know what kind of Father you have, but scripture teaches us that our heavenly Father is always good and always gives good gifts to His children.

**Let’s see what Jesus says about this in Luke 11:11-13 --.**

*“Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”*

As a parent it hard to believe that anyone can love my children more than I do. But God does. He loves us more than anyone on earth. What a wonderful God we serve!

**James 1:17**

*“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.”*

If we have any good thing here on this earth, scripture tells us that it has come from the Father, through the Son.

Even more than material blessings is the granting of the Holy Spirit to lead and guide us into the truth of God.

The Enabling of all Prayer: The Power of the Holy Spirit

Recognize this: We cannot come to God in prayer outside of faith in Christ.

1. The first way that the Holy Spirit empowers us to pray is by drawing us to a **saving** **faith** in Christ.
   1. **John 3:5-6** – *“Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”*
   2. **John 16:7-11** – *“Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.”*
2. The second way that the Holy Spirit empowers us to pray is this: He **assures** us of our adoption in Christ

* 1. **Romans 8:16** – *“The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God…”*
  2. **Ephesians 1:13-14** – *“And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession--to the praise of his glory.”*

1. Lastly, the Holy Spirit **intercedes** for us before the Father
   1. **Romans 8:26-27** – *“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”*

We can take great courage in the fact that we have access to God the Father through the mediation of God the Son; and that God the Holy Spirit draws us to faith in Christ, assures us that we are truly adopted into the family of God, and helps us pray when we do not know how.

**Galatians 4:6** is a good summary of the Trinitarian framework of prayer. *“And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’”*

The Holy Spirit puts a cry in our heart. Prayer can be thought of as our crying out to God. Thus, we see here that prayer is Spirit-given.

**QUESTIONS**

**THE WORD OF GOD AND PRAYER**

Let me ask you a question that I hope will flesh out an important truth: “Why isn’t prayer alone enough to sustain our fellowship with God?” Put differently, why do we need to spend so much time in the word when we can just pray?

**(WAIT FOR ANSWERS)**

Exhausting God’s unique and authoritative revelation in His word is the first action of Biblical spirituality. Other components must come in its wake. This is because God’s word is objective while the other disciplines, including prayer, are relatively subjective. We need to be grounded in the objective word of God before we can know how to pray. If we neglect God’s word, we’ll tend to hear what we want to hear, not necessarily what God wants us to hear.

Last week, we discussed how reading passages of scripture, and especially being familiar with the entirety of scripture, guards us against taking verses out of context and employing them to our sinful ends. In the same way, being grounded in God’s word guards us against using prayer only to hear what we want to hear. So let me summarize. The Word of God is primary in prayer because, without it, we don’t know how to pray properly.

Goldsworthy puts it well. *“If prayer is not addressed to God in terms of what is real, it is a fantasy. The prior word of God is established from the outset as the ground for any human understanding of reality.”*

It’s taking this realistic and humble view that should drive us to rely on God’s word as we pray.

Thinking about the ACTS model:

1. ADORATION. How do we know how to Adore God, except to know His attributes, which have been revealed through scripture? We can adore God because he has made himself known to us.
2. CONFESSION. How can we know how to Confess to God, unless we see, through scripture, the ways we fall short of God’s standard. If we are going to figure it out on our own, we’re going to orient it around ourselves in some way, by either being too legalistic or too light in our definition of holiness.
3. THANKSGIVING. How are we to properly Thank God if we don’t appreciate that everything we have comes from him? We know this through our Word?
4. SUPPLICATION. And how are we to know to ask/supplicate God if not for him teaching us how we are to be? We want our prayers of supplication, in particular, to be instructed by God’s Word…because it’s in these prayers that we’re recognizing something good that God has declared that we do not have…or that is not yet accomplished, and appealing to him for that.

***First – Being grounded in God’s word in prayer makes us God-centered***

It points us to the glory of God which, in turn, diverts us from being “me-centered” in prayer. We want our prayers to be “God-centered.” We want to pray for things that will bring God glory, not just make our individual lives easier. If God hasn’t been answering your prayers like you’d expect, you should camp out right here and consider the following questions: What is your motivation in prayer? Is it the glory of the Lord, or your own personal ambition? Honest answers to those questions may be convicting and insightful.

***Second – Being grounded in God’s word helps us to pray according to His will***

If our prayers are to be answered, we must pray according to God’s will, and we cannot know God’s will apart from His word.

**In all of this, Jesus is our Example**

Notice his example. He would get away by himself and pray. Remember the account of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane before going to the cross. What was he doing there? According to Luke 22:44, he was praying so passionately that *“his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.”*

**It is through God’s word that we will learn the heart, desires, and priorities of God, in addition to his attributes and qualities. In sanctification, we are becoming more like God; so this should be the driver of our prayer. We should be looking to God’s word for direction in the things we should be praying about.**

Let’s break this down a bit for the sake of practicality. We’ve had a lot of theory. Let’s talk about practice.

Five categories of prayer and how scripture instructs us:

1. For yourself: physical needs.
   1. Praying for your work.
   2. God cares about these things! “Give us this day, our daily bread.”
   3. But in this we’re instructed to not worry about what comes tomorrow. The birds are well fed and the flowers are well clothed, and God says we’re worth more than they are!
2. For yourself: spiritual needs.
   1. Grow in my boldness to share the gospel.
   2. Follow on prayer to an earlier one I had to love my nonchristian friends. Praise God, I now have more nonchristian friends than I’ve ever had, and I can legitimately say that I love them!
   3. But I often care too much about what they think of me, such that I’m not willing to risk the relational capital I have with them to share the gospel.
   4. I need to grow in boldness, because I’m instructed through scripture to not be ashamed of the gospel. “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes…”
3. For others: the church.
   1. What do you pray for people you don’t know? Find scripture and pray it over them.
   2. Directory: Nika Ankou. She’s been a member since last September. I don’t know her very well. But I read John 4 yesterday where many people received Jesus with joy and then spread the word about him. My prayer for Nika: that she would be reminded of her joy in Christ and be motivated to celebrate the work he’s done in her life, sharing him with others.
4. For others: your family.
   1. Knowing needs more intimately. Can intercede with more awareness.
5. For God’s work in the world.
   1. His will be done…on earth as it is in heaven.

Ultimately, one of the things we want to do in prayer is use what we learn about God through His word to shape the things that our heart cares about. Remember the verse: Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. One of your most valuable treasures is your time; if you are spending time going to God in response to what you’ve learned about Him through the scriptures, your heart is going to be shaped to value those same things that He does. And you’re going to see him answer those prayers in amazing ways.

I prayed for years and years that the Lord would connect my head and my heart. I understood the gospel from an intellectual perspective, but I could tell that my heart was not burning with passion in the way that I thought that it should. So I asked God to help me in this. And for a long time. And he orchestrated events in my life such that my problem was that, while I had relied on Jesus to justify me, I was not relying on Jesus to sanctify me. I was trying to impress God with my righteous living instead of constantly relying on Jesus to be my intercessor. When I finally realized that I didn’t have to measure up to God, but instead simply needed to rely on what Jesus had already provided, my heart swelled with praise and worship for God because I was responding to the love he had given me, instead of trying to earn it, which is impossible.

***Praying scripture***

One great way to pray is to pray scripture. Don Carson, in his book on the prayers of Paul (*A Call to Spiritual Reformation*), wrote, *“Just as God’s Word must reform our theology, our ethics, and our practices, so also must it reform our praying.”* Let the scripture guide our praying. There are countless prayers in scripture that would be very good things for us to pray. For example:

**Philippians 1:9-11**

*“And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.”*

Do you know how to confess your sins to God? Let’s revisit Psalm 51:

**Psalm 51:1-4**

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight…”*

I want to suggest two practical ways for using the scriptures to pray:

1. **Read through one psalm in the morning before you start your quiet time.** Use that psalm to get you going. This practice helps focus your heart on the attributes of God found in the Psalms. Not only is it just a good idea to begin your day by praising God, but also it provides a natural transition into your biblical intake.
2. **Pray through the church directory by praying Scripture for other members.**

We encourage members of this church to be praying for one another. We even encourage you to pray systematically through the church directory. This will mean that you will pray for people that you have not met, and you will not know of specifics ways they could use prayer, but you can pray Scripture for them. Pray that they would be filled with the fruits of the Spirit from Galatians 5 or pray that they would not be conformed to this world, but that they would be transformed by the renewal of their mind from Romans 12.

The scriptures are the very thoughts and words of God. When we pray God’s thoughts after Him, we can trust that He will not only hear but answer those prayers. We needn’t have questions about whether we’re praying God’s will if we’re praying scripture because scripture speaks the will of God. The scriptures will keep our prayers from being too general and too stale.

Praying God’s word will help us to pray what John Piper calls *“big, sweeping but not insipid prayers.”* There is something weak about praying, *“God, bless the missionaries.”* There’s no thought in that. We don’t know what the blessing is. We don’t know who the missionaries are. But, that doesn’t mean we can’t pray really big prayers for all the missionaries or all the saints. “Big general prayers become powerful when they are filled up with concrete, radical Biblical goals for the people we are praying for.” “Father, hallowed be your name…thy will be done on earth as in heaven” is a big, sweeping prayer but it also powerful because it asks for two specific things: that in all the world God’s name would be regarded as precious, and that hearts would be changed to do God’s will with the same zeal and purity that the angels have in heaven.

Ephesians 6:18 says, *“With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit…for all the saints.”* All the saints! Incredible! How? Pray the promises of God for these saints. God will hear your prayers. Ephesians 3:20 says, *“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us…”*

**QUESTIONS**

**Practicalities**

1. ***What do you do when you feel like your prayers are going nowhere?*** Have you ever felt like that? Like you just weren’t getting through? Your prayers were falling short? Take heart that we have a great high priest. The reality that Jesus is our mediator and that the Holy Spirit stands interceding for the sons of God should give us great hope to go to God in faith that He does hear our prayers. Don’t rely on your emotions. Trust the truth of the Word of God.
2. ***Do you ever get overwhelmed in prayer?*** Every week we have a host of things in the world to pray for: our family, our church, our lost friends, the leaders God has placed over us in this country. What about the tribes across the world who have never heard the gospel? Try turning on the news and watching the increasing violence and instability around the world. This can be overwhelming. But we should take heart that we worship a great God who knows all and is all powerful. Take heart that He *“is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us…” (Eph. 3:20).”*

**QUESTIONS**

Let’s close in Prayer.