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**Core Seminar**

**Meeting with God**

**Class 5: Prayer: Purpose, Pitfalls, & Practicalities**

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Good morning, and welcome to week 5 of the Meeting with God core seminar.

Last week, we talked about prayer as part of our daily quiet time with the Lord. As you’ll see on the front page of your handout, we understand a quiet time to be the part of your day that you specifically set aside for the worship of God, for the reading of the Word of God, and for fellowship with God. We do this so that we would know Him more, know ourselves in light of Him, and know the world according to His perspective. And as we go to God in His word for these reasons – to worship and fellowship with God – our Spirit-given response is prayer to God. Prayer is the Spirit-given, Word-saturated response to meeting with God.

This response includes praise to God as we come to know Him more as He truly is. A right response includes confession to God as we begin to know ourselves in light of who He is.

This knowing of God and ourselves is and should be sobering, because we are great sinners. Scripture makes it clear that we cannot have access to God, we cannot meet with Him, and we cannot have a relationship with God *on our own*. But God, in His great mercy, sent His son Jesus to live a perfect life in our place, to die on a cross for our sins, and to receive the punishment we deserve. He then rose from the dead, showing both that God accepted His sacrifice on our behalf, and that death itself was defeated. It is only through Him that we can come to God at all. In all of our seeking to meet with God, we must remember that all Biblical spirituality comes through our mediator, Jesus Christ.

As we begin to understand our world according to God’s perspective, our response to Him also includes thanksgiving and *supplications*. And supplication, by the way, simply means requests we make known to God. But if praise and adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication are all part of what prayer is, what is its purpose? In scripture, we see at least three purposes in prayer, with the first purpose being primary.

The first purpose of prayer is to Glorify God.

**What does it mean for God to be glorified?**

**Revelation 21:23** talks about God’s glory in the new heavens providing the light for the city in which there is no night – as Puritan Thomas Watson puts it, God’s glory is the “sparkling of the Deity.”[[1]](#footnote-1) It’s brilliance of his own divine essence. And by his grace, he gives us a view of his glory in revelation to us in creation, in his word, and in the Word made flesh, Jesus. We then glorify God by rightly recognizing who he is and ascribing him honor and reverence. We glorify him by bringing ourselves to him in worship and all that’s contained in it. Prayer is one way we glorify him.

God gives us prayer to make much of Himself. This is why we see Jesus saying in **John 14:13-14**,

*“Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.”*

So, we see three ideas at work here. First, Jesus instructs us to pray in His *name*. Second, He *will* do it. Prayers will be answered. We can have confidence because our prayers, in the name of the Son, will be answered. Third, we pray in His name and our prayers are answered so that the Father will be *glorified*. And He will be glorified in the Son because it is the Son who intercedes for us and through whom we have access to the Father.

We also see Jesus saying in **John 15:7-8**,

*“If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples*.”

Notice that Jesus speaks of our prayer to Him being contingent upon 1) our abiding in Him – trusting in Christ by faith such that we live in Him – prayer is for believers – and 2) His words living in us. This is why we understand prayer to be a *Word-saturated* response to meeting with God. We abide in Jesus as His words abide in us. And if this is the case, we may ask of Him and it will be done. Abiding in the words of Jesus helps us to pray according to God’s will. And when we pray according to God’s will, the Lord is pleased to answer those prayers and glorifies Himself when He does so.

So, we are *given* prayer by God in order for Him to glorify *Himself* through it. This is the first and most primary purpose for prayer.

As we will see at the top of page two on your handouts, another purpose of prayer is **to make God known in the world by our bearing the fruit of the gospel**. Jesus says in John 15:16,

“*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.”*

Notice the “that” in this verse. He says that He chose you to bear fruit so that you will get answers to prayer. Prayer is an *instrument* for the purpose of fruit-bearing.

God made *us* to make *Him* known in the world by bearing the fruit of the gospel. We do this by showing love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control from **Galatians 5:22-23**. The means God uses are our abiding in Him and our prayer. This allows the world to see that it is not us who are doing the work alone, but Him through us.

One other note here: understanding that the point of John 15:16 is bearing fruit that abides keeps us from the way that the prosperity gospel twists this and other passages. We see clearly here that the “whatever you ask in my name” is *not* money, or fame, or any other material thing. What we are asking for is for God to bear fruit in our lives; this is what He freely gives.

So, God has purposed that prayer glorify Him and that it would make Him known by bearing much fruit in the Gospel as we depend on Him fully.

Let’s take a look now at a third purpose for prayer which is to have access to our great Commander while we are in a time of war.

When you wake up in the morning, do you think you are in a war? We know what war is intellectually. We hear about it every day on the news. We read books about World War I and World War II. War involves sacrifice and suffering and death. War is a serious business. People’s lives are on the line. In the spiritual war we fight, human souls are at stake. This is often difficult for us to comprehend in an affluent context such as ours.

Scripture clearly speaks about life in terms of spiritual warfare.

At the end of Paul’s life, he said in 2 Timothy 4:7 (just read verse 7) –

*“****6****For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come.****7I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.******8****Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.”*

Two chapters earlier, in 2 Timothy 2:3-4, Paul exhorts Timothy to

*“Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him.”*

It is a daily fight for us, to not be entangled in the things of the world and to aim to please Christ, our commanding officer.

Next, we have an enemy: Satan

1 Peter 5:8 says,

*Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.*

Satan seeks to devour us. He is discussed throughout the scripture as our adversary. In Mark 4:15, Jesus says that Satan comes and steals the seed of the Word away in some hearts. Satan is real, and his attacks against God’s people are fierce. We cannot defend ourselves on our own. (reference, *2 Corinthians 11:14*)

In wartime, people are not simply concerned with themselves. If you’re a soldier and all you do is go into the battle concerned for your own safety, you are not going to help win the war, and you might cost someone else their life. There is no place for selfishness in war. Now, let’s translate that analogy to prayer. What or whom do you pray for most?

As you can see at the bottom of page two on your handouts, there is a time and place to pray for yourself, but we must be praying for others.

A heart *not* turned towards praying for others is a heart that is *not* focused on the gospel. It is the mark of a Christian to be concerned with the lives of others. We learn this directly from scripture.

From Jesus, we learn that Christians are to **Love other Christians**. Jesus says in John 13:34-35,

*“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”*

**Christians are also to Love your neighbor**. Matthew 22:37-39 says,

*“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”*

Paul charges the Ephesians to pray for all the saints, in Ephesians 6:18, he says,

*“To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints…”*

Let’s look at one other passage and think about this picture. John Piper has provided a vivid illustration based on Ephesians 6:10-20. The image is to think about prayer as a wartime walkie-talkie, used to call up the commander and get your battle commands or to radio for help for a fellow soldier who’s in trouble. This is compared to the way we often think of prayer – as a domestic intercom intended to bring you another cushion for the couch or another drink while you watch your favorite show on TV. The image is powerful, isn’t it? How we view God and ourselves matters. Let’s see what Ephesians 6 has to say about prayer.

*“****10****Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.****11****Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.****12****For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.****13****Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.****14****Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness,****15****and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace.****16****In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one;****17****and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God,****18****praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints,****19****and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel,****20****for which I am an ambassador* *in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.”* Ephesians 6:10-20

There are three major points here

We see in verse 11 that we are fighting the devil.

We see in verse 12 that as Christians, we do not fight with weapons that shed anyone’s blood. We fight with spiritual weapons, which, as 2 Corinthians 10:4 says,

*“have divine power to destroy strongholds.”*

Finally in verse 17, we see that we take the sword of the Spirit – the Word of God, which is our main weapon – ***while*** praying at all times. We do not have one without the other.

By God’s grace, prayer grants to us this access to our Supreme Commander for our good and His glory.

So, for us, prayer has a threefold purpose of glorifying God, bearing fruit in our lives and the lives of others, and granting us access to our commander in time of war.

Questions so far?

[How do you see helping you spiritually in your daily lives?]

**Pitfalls in meeting with God**

There are many things that can really keep us from meeting with God. These things can be real hindrances to know the Lord more. What are some of these pitfalls? In other words, why do we not spend more time in the Word and prayer? How can we be aware of them and prepare for them? We’ve already talked about the excuse of being busy. Let’s take a look at three others this morning. We’re starting on page three of your handouts with **Dependence on our emotions**.

***Being Dependent on Our Emotions***

There is a kind of spirituality popular today that is grounded more in our feelings and emotions than in the Word of God and the gospel. Sometimes this is explicit, and sometimes very implicit. This is a hindrance to spending daily time in the Word. We might not wake up every morning wanting to go read the Bible. We just might not feel like it. But if we let feelings like this drive us away from God’s word, they will harden our hearts. Our passions and emotions are not always bad, but we have to know how step outside of ourselves and recognize when our emotions are controlling our view of God and His Word. We want to desire to know Jesus. We should want our emotions stirred up to go to God in His word. These are good emotions. But we must know when they are not helping us.

What **do I do when I hit a dry patch and I don’t seem to be getting anything out of the Word?**

First of all, remember: this is normal. Everyone experiences this at some point.

Don’t rely on your feelings. Acknowledge them, but refuse to be ruled by them.

Continue reading the Bible. This is why we call it a “discipline.” Keep reading, whether you think you are getting a lot out of it or not.

Don’t be afraid to change up your pattern. Change the structure of your time in the Word and prayer, or go to a passage that you know has motivated you in the past to meet with God.

Next question: **What do I do when my mind wanders?**

Give yourself a few minutes to think about whatever is on your mind. Write it down. Then, put the list aside and focus on your quiet time.

We have to discipline our minds.

Remember that wandering minds are a *problem*, not a *sin*.

In prayer, structure your prayer times.

Next, **what do I do when I feel like my prayers are going unanswered?**

Remember that prayer is not about you. Prayer is rooted in God.

As we discussed last week, knowing and meditating on the nature of our triune God motivates us to rely on and pray to Him.

Consider God’s nature and attributes – read and pray through the Psalms!

What do you do when you don’t feel like praying or reading the Bible?

A helpful acronym to think through is IOUS. These are verses in the bible we can go to and then pray though when we don’t feel like reading God’s word or praying.

Incline - Psalm 119:36

***36****Incline my heart to your testimonies,  
    and not to selfish gain!*

Open - Psalm 119:18

***18****Open my eyes, that I may behold  
    wondrous things out of your law.*

Unite - Psalm 86:11

***11****Teach me your way, O Lord,  
    that I may walk in your truth;  
    unite my heart to fear your name.*

Satisfy - Psalm 90:14

***14****Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,  
    that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.*

One last note on our emotions. Dry patches in our spiritual life may also be a result of unrepentant sin in our lives. You may have committed a particular sin this week that has you feeling very guilty and unworthy to go to God. You may think that God doesn’t want you to go to Him right now because we are especially dirty or sinful. This is what we call being more reliant on our feelings than on the hope and life-giving truth of God’s word. The truth is that, **if you are justified by Christ through faith, you are never more or less worthy to go to God**. He has paid for all our sins, past, present and future. In and of ourselves, we are *never* worthy to go to God. But through Christ our mediator, we need never lack confidence. We should not be reliant on our emotions to tell us when to go to God. Rather, we should be reliant on the finished work of Christ such that we know we have access to the throne of grace. So when we sin, the best thing to do is to go back immediately to the Lord in confession and repentance.

***Legalism***

Another pitfall to be aware of is legalism. In *The Cross-Centered Life,* C.J. Mahaney defines legalism as

“seeking to achieve *forgiveness* from God and *acceptance* by God through obedience.”

Why is this relevant when talking about meeting with God on a daily basis in His word? Because one of the tendencies of our flesh is to earn our way into God’s favor by doing things we think will please him. We try to earn God’s forgiveness and approval through personal performance.

This pitfall manifests itself in both explicit and implicit ways. Explicitly, it might actually look like someone believing that baptism or giving money or speaking in tongues earns salvation. We can easily see how these things undermine the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone. But, what about implicitly? We may subtly be legalistic in the way we think.

Do you ever find yourself in sin, then wait before you go to God in confession before you’ve spent a considerable amount of time in the Bible? Or, maybe you catch yourself thinking that your life is going pretty well right now because you’ve had your quiet time for 30 days straight? These are subtle signs of legalism, which undermines the gospel. When we think we earn God’s favor or access to God by the things we do, it is the same as saying that Jesus’ atoning work on the cross for our sins was insufficient. It is saying that there is something else that must be done. We don’t ultimately go to God in His word or in prayer because it will please Him, though it certainly does. We go to God because He is worthy, not because it makes us right with Him or earns His favor. He is worthy to be worshiped. He is worthy to be known. It’s about God. Not us.

Mahaney helpfully clarifies the two terms justification and sanctification to help us understand how the disciplines of Bible reading and prayer fit into our spiritual lives. He says that **justification** is being *declared* righteous by God. It is your position before God. It is Christ’s objective work for us, apart from ourselves. It is immediate and complete upon conversion. **Sanctification**, on the other hand, is being *made* righteous, being conformed into the image of Christ. It is our practice. It is Christ’s subjective work within us. It is a process.

When we combine or confuse justification and sanctification, legalism is often the result. We may start thinking that our practice or work will justify us before God. Make no mistake – we will not find justification before God through Bible reading or prayer or scripture memory. Similarly, you will not be condemned because you didn’t to do your quiet time this morning. Those things are good for us, but they will not justify us! They cannot make us right before God. When we begin to understand this, we are freed to go to God, not to earn his blessing and favor but simply to enjoy Him.

So, we should be very aware of the pitfall of legalism. It undermines the gospel.

***Laziness***

The final common pitfall to meeting with God that we are going to cover today is laziness. Laziness can be a huge obstacle to meeting with God. If you find yourself consistently watching more TV sitcoms, spending more time on social media or playing more video games than you do reading your Bible, you need to take a close look at your habits. If your meal-planning is more detailed than your Bible reading plan, you may want to rethink your priorities.

Jesus went to great lengths to draw us to Himself. He is the greatest being in the universe, and He is worthy for us to go to daily. Why would we not go to Him? He is the life giver. He is our sustainer. He is our very present help in times of trouble. He is our hope and joy even when we are not in trouble.

**The Underlying Issue at the Heart of laziness and all other Pitfalls:** Lack of desire for God. Our sinful flesh tempts us into believing that we don’t need to meet with God. We begin to believe that we can be good enough on our own, and we forget what Jesus said earlier in John 15:5 –

*“apart from me, you can do nothing.”*

These pitfalls can trip us up as we seek to follow Christ in spending time meeting with God. As we know God and ourselves more, we will know our own tendencies better, and by God’s grace, we can grow in these disciplines.

Next week we’ll be hearing from different members of the Capitol Hill Baptist Church on the ways they meet with God through biblical intake and prayer. As we conclude the more structured part of the class today, let’s think through a few questions together about how we can change our habits to be more Christlike.

**Practical questions for the class to think about and jot notes on handout**

1. What is one thing you can do to grow in your intake of God’s word?

*Bible intake = hearing/reading/studying/memorizing/meditating*

1. What time of the day can you commit to spending time in God’s word?
2. What kind of plan will you make to structure your time in God’s word?
   1. Daily Bible reading plan?
   2. Read through the Bible in a year?
   3. Study through a book of the Bible?
   4. A psalm/proverb a day?
3. How will you seek to apply God’s word each day?
4. How will you structure your prayer time?

1. Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1692/2019), 7). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)