

Prayer

DAVE BAST

If you were asked to name some common Christian spiritual practices, there is a good chance prayer is one of the first things that would come to mind, along with things like reading the Bible, tithing, and worship. Prayer is an important and valuable discipline for our spiritual growth and our relationship with God; and yet, many Christians are hesitant to pray or admit they are not sure if they are praying right. So, let's examine scripture to better understand the spiritual discipline of prayer, and learn how we can cultivate this practice in our daily lives. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, we are in the middle of a series...actually, a second series...looking at various spiritual disciplines, and perhaps this is a great year to do that, many of us, through 2020; it is a year that we will never forget, but one thing it has done, it has given us more alone time, and time, perhaps, to devote to cultivating a deeper relationship with God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and we have been saying that these disciplines...these are practices...habits, really...habits of the heart, habits of mind. Things that we do regularly and intentionally so that they form part of the rhythm of our lives. So, we have looked at sabbath, we have looked at keeping our commitments, we are going to be looking at things like worship and confession and other such things; but on this program, we want to turn to something that you mentioned in the introduction already, Dave; and that is probably the most common, most recognizable of all Christian practices or disciplines: Prayer.

DAVE BAST

Right; and in an earlier series also devoted to the spiritual disciplines, we talked about prayer a little bit in connection with the practice of fasting; but today, we want to revisit this. Prayer is probably, if not *the* most important, certainly one of the top two or three, of all the spiritual disciplines we could undertake and cultivate; and to help us look at this whole subject in a more general way, we have a special guest with us in the studio today. She is Emily Vanden Heuvel, and she is on the staff, actually, of ReFrame Ministries, which is the organization that sponsors *Groundwork*, along with a number of other programs and websites. Emily is the coordinator for prayer ministries for ReFrame Ministries. So, welcome, Emily.

Emily

VANDEN HEUVEL

Thank you; glad to be here.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Good to have you with us, Emily; and just talk a little bit about prayer. In this segment, we want to talk about prayer and scripture, but the theologian, Howard Thurman, made an interesting observation once. He said that the only thing in the Bible that the disciples ever ask Jesus to teach them is how to pray. That is kind of interesting.

Emily

VANDEN HEUVEL

Yes; prayer is not a complicated activity at all; it is simply a conversation with God. It is a way that we talk to God and we listen to God. Tim Keller writes that as a gift of the Spirit, prayer becomes the continuation of a conversation that God has started; and so, it is our response to talk to God, and that is what it is; it is not complicated at all.

DAVE BAST

It seems like all of us know how to talk, but talking to God kind of raises that to another level; but I liked what you said about conversation and listening, because in addition to talking, we need to listen; and in fact, maybe begin by recognizing that God is the one who initiates the conversation.

Emily

VANDEN HEUVEL

Yes, he does; and we see that in scripture right at the very beginning; and so, we read right in the book of Genesis in Chapter 3, where Adam and Eve are walking and talking with God in the cool of the evening; and God starts this conversation; and what is interesting is, through this telling of Adam and Eve and their relationship with God, we don't ever get to read the...or hear about...the conversations they have until they sin. In Genesis 3:8 that first conversation occurs, and God reaches out to Adam and Eve after they have sinned and after they have disobeyed, and he offers them grace.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is an interesting observation. I hadn't thought about that. We don't know what they talked about until the subject got a little grim because of their sin; but one of the things I think that brings up, Emily: If prayer is truly a conversation started by God, perhaps one of the reasons more people don't pray today is because they aren't listening. They don't realize they are being addressed all the time, in some way, by God; and so, naturally they don't reply.

DAVE BAST

That initial question that you referred to, Emily: Adam, where are you? He wasn't asking for Adam's GPS coordinates, as if he didn't know where Adam was hiding. It was an invitation, wasn't it, to Adam to respond—to speak back to God—to come back into this relationship that had been broken by sin.

Emily

VANDEN HEUVEL

Right; and I think often we struggle with feeling unworthy to talk to our Creator; and God will reach out to us and say, "Where are you?" And it is responding to God out of obedience and responding to God with a heart that is receptive and receiving of that grace and that love; and we see that all through scripture, that same model, and it continues on with the Prophets, where God continues to reach out to his people despite their sin and disobedience. For example, in Jeremiah 29, a very popular verse is Jeremiah 29:11, that many of us are familiar with:

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord... (12 and 13 say): "Then you will call on me and come to me and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."

The people of God at that point are in great distress because they are exiled away in Babylon. They are away from all that is familiar. For seventy years, they are disconnected from what they feel is God's love and God's grace; and then God continues to reach out to them and build that relationship.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Which is so key, because I think we said a minute ago that maybe one of the reasons people don't pray is that they aren't listening. They don't realize there is a God who is already talking to them; and probably a lot of people think, particularly sometimes people outside of the Church...maybe even people in the Church...are a

little afraid of what God might say, because, you know, what is God going to say? He is going to tell me I am a terrible sinner; he is going to judge me; he is going to thunder at me like some, you know, Zeus from Mount Olympus; and yet, God in scripture, again and again when he comes to people in their sin, he speaks gently, he speaks graciously like he did to Adam and Eve, like he did through Jeremiah to his exiled people. Yes, they are being punished, but God's part of the conversation kind of always begins and ends with grace, doesn't it?

DAVE BAST

You know, what was interesting, Emily, when you read that verse from Jeremiah...what jumped out at me was: If you seek me. So, we have already seen that God is a seeking God. He takes the first step, we saw that in Genesis 3, but we need to reciprocate, I think, don't we? Do we really want to talk to God? Do we...as Scott pointed out, maybe we are feeling some guilt or feeling some distance, and there has to be this sort of mutual desire...well, certainly it is there on God's part. It made me think of Psalm 42: ^(verse 1) As the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. Do we really long for God and want to talk to him?

Emily

VANDEN HEUVEL

And I think that part of that spiritual discipline is reaching out to God when we don't want to, when we are either ashamed or afraid or we feel unworthy or we just don't have the desire; and it is that constant, daily task of reaching out to God and listening.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is a discipline, even in human relationships, even in marriage. People in marriage sometimes don't ever talk any more...they stop talking. Sometimes you see people out at restaurants, a couple sitting in a restaurant, and they don't speak the whole evening. Even in a marriage, where you are living in the same house with somebody, you need to cultivate the practice of conversation, and it certainly is the same with God.

Well, we have seen that scripture demonstrates a rich tradition of prayer, it also points out the importance of prayer; but we will look a little bit more at why we pray, and we will consider that in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and today we are also joined by Pastor Emily Vanden Heuvel; and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are talking about the spiritual discipline of prayer.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Emily, we were just looking in the first segment a little bit about the history of prayer, and one thing we pointed out was that prayer is, at its heart, a conversation; and as you pointed out, too, from the beginning, in Genesis already, it is a conversation that God initiates, and then we respond. So, that is a little bit about the *what* of prayer, but in this part of the program, we want to talk about, you know, *why* we pray.

Emily

VANDEN HEUVEL

Well, there are lots of reasons why we pray. I think initially, primarily it is out of thanksgiving. It is out of a thankful heart that we come to the Lord; and I think of the scripture passage, Philippians 4:4-7. It says: Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God; ⁷and the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ.

So, prayer then, is the utter and total dependence on God, and out of that is our response of a thankful heart.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and I think it is important to recognize that prayer isn't just asking God for stuff. Yes, we present our petitions...we present our needs...our requests, Paul says...but we do it rejoicing in the presence of God, the fact that the Lord is near to us, in fact, he is within us, and we do it with thanksgiving, too. So, remember to say thank you!

Emily

VANDEN HEUVEL

Right; and it is this text of pray continually; and often we can get into this habit of just praying before a meal or praying before bed, but the challenge of can you go through your whole day and continue to pray and praise God? So, praising him for beautiful sunshine, praising him for food to eat, praising him for safe travels as you go to and from to even the grocery store.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In the first part of the program, we said maybe one of the reasons people don't pray more is they aren't listening more; and maybe one of the reasons we don't give thanks more is we don't realize that everything we have is a gift from God. You know, in our lives, if you give somebody a good present, or even sometimes I have had it...maybe you all have had it, Dave and Emily...you know, you go to a wedding, you buy a nice present, and you never get a thank-you card; and some weeks later it is like, you know, something is not right there. That is rude! They should say thank you. We are going to think about that a little bit more in a conversation we are going to have about worship in another program in this series, but it is just fitting to do what Paul says, which is rejoice always.

DAVE BAST

Of course, the psalms are filled with this sort of feeling and expression of praise and thanks. I think, for example, of Psalm 66, where the psalmist actually wants to tell other people about how good God has been and how he has answered his prayer: ¹⁷I cried out to him with my mouth; his praise was on my tongue. ¹⁸If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; ¹⁹but God has surely listened and has heard my prayer. ²⁰Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me!

Sin can interrupt that conversation with God, can't it? Does that mean if we sin at all we are kind of done for, or it destroys prayer or the possibility of prayer?

Emily

VANDEN HEUVEL

Well, I think that when our sin is overwhelming, that is when we cry out to God more, and that is why prayer is such an incredible gift from God. Despite the weight of our sin or how ashamed we feel or how guilty we may feel, it is that activity of reaching out to God and asking him to forgive our sins and knowing that he has forgiven our sins; and while living in a way, our shame and our guilt can prevent us from doing a lot of things, but it is when we confess our sin to God and we give him all of the dirty little things in our heart that there is some freedom there to pray to God with confidence and know that he listens.

DAVE BAST

You know, though, it is not always that easy...

Emily

VANDEN HEUVEL

Yes.

DAVE BAST

I am going to just speak from personal experience. I know there have been mornings in my devotional time when I didn't want to pray at all; in fact, I didn't pray because I was too embarrassed about maybe something I had done the day before; and you have to kind of get past that and go back again and do that; as you say,

just confess and be open before God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

One of the things that we haven't really talked about...and this is not really so much the why of prayer, which is kind of what we are talking about in this part of the program...and yet, something that happens is, you know, we have probably...maybe it is a bumper sticker slogan...prayer changes us. Our being honest with God opens us up to God's grace; but it has also been kind of a truism for a long time that when you pray regularly for God's will, that kind of has a shaping effect on you, right? Maybe you start to desire the things God desires more. The writer, Lauren Winner, said in the act of praying, sometimes it is *our* feelings that change, which I think is kind of interesting.

DAVE BAST

Talk a little bit, Emily, about the example of Jesus, the way Jesus modeled prayer for us, and can we sort of adopt that ourselves, or learn from that?

Emily

VANDEN HEUVEL

Well, yes; Jesus is this perfect example of what prayer looks like and sounds like; and so, through the gospels, we read lots of examples; and so, Jesus modeled it himself after his baptism that we read in Luke, and he was praying and heaven opened up; and then it talks about how Jesus would go to a quiet place. In the Gospel of Mark, it talks about how early in the morning while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, went off to a solitary place where he prayed. Then there is another example of when he was feeding the five thousand, and in the Gospel of Mark again, it says he went up to a mountainside to pray; and then in Luke again, it says Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed. In the Garden of Gethsemane, and on the cross, we see all of these examples about how Jesus would connect with his Father and pray to his Father, and what a great model that is for us to continue to connect with God in all situations.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is interesting, because every time Jesus disappeared and the disciples didn't know where he was, when they found him, he was praying. I mean, like every time they found him and he was praying; but here is the other thing that is interesting, Emily and Dave, when they found him, they essentially said: What are you doing praying? We've got stuff to do! You know, people are looking for you, as though the prayer wasn't important; but Jesus knew all that other stuff he had to do with the preaching, the healing, telling parables, it was all fueled by prayer; and yet, the disciples often sort of regarded it as something he shouldn't be wasting his time with because folks are looking for you! What are you doing here praying? So, right; the example of Jesus...hopefully that soaked in eventually for the disciples. It's like, every time Jesus had five seconds to spare, he prayed. I guess that tells us a little something about what it means to be a follower.

DAVE BAST

And pretty clearly, he is not confessing his sins...

SCOTT HOEZEE

No, no!

DAVE BAST

With all that time devoted to prayer. So, there is something deeper here for us, I think. It is the nurturing of the whole relationship. I mean, Jesus was the one person who lived in perfect consciousness of his oneness with the Father, and it was prayer that enabled that even to deepen and to be experienced.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But we still often wonder: How should I pray? Is there a wrong way to pray? Well, we will think about that as we close out the program in just a minute.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee.
Emily

VANDEN HEUVEL

And I am Emily Vanden Heuvel.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We are talking about prayer as a continuing, ongoing conversation with God. It is a discipline. We have to motivate ourselves to do it regularly, to kind of keep our prayer muscles in tone. Emily, sometimes people wonder: Is there a wrong way to pray? Do I dishonor God? Should I be afraid to pray? What should we think about that?
Emily

VANDEN HEUVEL

Yes; with my work with ReFrame, I get a lot of e-mails and requests, and people asking me: Am I doing this the right way? Does God listen to my prayers? So, people are really asking about: Am I asking God the right way? I think of this verse from Hebrews Chapter 4:16 that says:

Let us 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.

So, that is the reminder and the promise that we can approach God's throne with confidence. I am thinking back through what we have talked about already, and God has invited us in. He has given us his grace. He listens to us, and he promises to listen to us.

DAVE BAST

Yes; there is probably only one wrong way to pray based on scripture, and that is to pray like the Pharisees. Jesus said: They are really praying to show off. They are not praying to God, they are praying for the benefit of their audience; and so, don't do that. But as long as we are sincere in our desire to speak with God, I don't think there is a wrong way or a wrong thing to say. As we see from the psalms, you can bring anything to God; your feelings, your anger, your guilt, whatever.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, we have looked at quite often, particularly in the year 2020—the pandemic year—we often looked at lament. So, Emily, it is interesting that you get inquiries about am I praying wrong. Boy, very few of us would dare pray the way some of the psalmists did, where they really kind of yell at God...they kind of let God have it: What is wrong with you, God? Why have you gone off duty? As Dave said, if it is on your heart, God can take it. It is not a wrong way to pray. Right; the only time Jesus says there is a wrong way to pray is what Dave just said, if you are being a showoff.

DAVE BAST

But Emily, tell us a little something, or share what kind of practical advice you would give to someone who says: I just don't know what to say...I just...the words don't come for me.
Emily

VANDEN HEUVEL

That can be difficult when we think about praying to the Creator and the Sustainer of the universe and how overwhelming that can be, especially when we are feeling small. I look at the Lord's Prayer, that prayer that Jesus taught us, and using that as a form. I will read here from Matthew Chapter 6:9-13. It says:

“Then, this is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed by your name, ¹⁰your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹Give us today our daily bread. ¹²And forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors. ¹³And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.’”
So, we look at different types of prayer. Quite often they will contain things...confession, praise, intercession or that is praying for other people, thanksgiving...we can also be asking for things. A prayer can have all of those elements, or prayer could just have one of those elements.

SCOTT HOEZEE

ReFrame Ministries has an e-book on how do I pray. People have probably heard this, but if you would just unpack, Emily, the ACTS...the A-C-T-S model that we sometimes recommend to people.
Emily

VANDEN HEUVEL

Yes; acronyms are an easy way to remember things. So, for me personally this particular prayer practice is one I have used often when I don't know what to say or how to say, and it is the acronym A-C-T-S, and it is: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. Supplication is another word for asking God to meet our needs.

DAVE BAST

Interesting too, you refer to the Lord's Prayer. Way back at the beginning of the program, we made reference to the disciples coming to Jesus, saying: Lord, teach us how to pray the way John taught his disciples. That is from Luke 11, and right after that, Jesus gives them the Lord's Prayer in Luke's gospel. So, this is a direct response to Jesus' followers who want to know how to pray more effectively or more appropriately; and Jesus says in effect: Well, start with God...just think about God; give him praise: Hallowed be your name; God, may your nature be known—your goodness, your grace...and then go on to yourself and your needs, both physical and spiritual.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And of course, we pray that prayer...the Lord's Prayer. We pray it literally word for word. Many Christians have long, long, long had it memorized; we have it on wall hangings; and that is appropriate, but as you just said, Dave, and Emily, you too, contained in that is also the pattern of prayer. It is not just those words are magic. It is the pattern; that ACTS is in there—the adoration, the confession, the thanksgiving, the supplication—it is all in there, everything from the glory of God to our daily bread to our being forgiven and forgiving others. So, it is not just a prayer to recite by rote, it is a pattern to model our own praying after.

DAVE BAST

And if you could say one thing, Emily, to encourage people to pray, what would it be?
Emily

VANDEN HEUVEL

It would be just to do it, and to simply communicate to God what is in your heart, and to not be ashamed of speaking, not just the things that are painful, but also the things that bring joy and bring happiness, but to have a conversation with God about all the ups and the downs and the joys and the sorrows.

DAVE BAST

There is a wonderful verse toward the end of the book of James that says: Chapter 5:16^b The prayer of a righteous person (and remember we are righteous in Christ, not necessarily in ourselves) is powerful and effective. And maybe the greatest effect...the greatest power it can have...is in changing us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; thanks be to God for that gift. Well, thank you, Emily, for joining us. It was good to have you.
Emily

VANDEN HEUVEL

Happy to be here, too.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast and Scott Hoezee, and our guest today was Emily Vanden Heuvel. We hope you will join us again next time as we study the scriptures to better understand the spiritual discipline of reconciliation.

Connect with us at groundworkonline.com, our website, to share what *Groundwork* means to you, and make suggestions for what you would like to hear discussed on *Groundwork*.

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