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LESSON ONE

WHY IS PRAYER SO HARD?

Or, “How do I pray when my own prayers put me to sleep?”



This lesson is much better if you teach the first half of the lesson yourself. To do this, first watch the video to see the Trainer’s interactions with the group. Copy his approach by having the group do the five-minute prayer time and ask the questions yourself. Do this only for Points 1 and 2. You can then play the video for Points 3 and 4. Tell them to wait to open their A Praying Life manuals until you’ve finished the brainstorming at the beginning of Point 1.




I. GROUP PRAYER ASSIGNMENT: Pray quietly in your seats.

Give them a full five minutes, but don’t announce that it will be five minutes. Don’t tell them you are going to discuss this assignment or tell them the purpose of the assignment ahead of time. That spoils the effect. Don’t do any teaching on prayer prior to this five-minute prayer time. It will feel a little awkward, but don’t worry about that.

GROUP DISCUSSION:

This is the Main Question. Stay on it for 5-10 minutes.

 **Q. For some of you, that might have been a positive time, but for most Christians, prayer is hard. I want to focus on the negative, even though it might have been positive for some of you. What was hard for you about that prayer time?**

Additional Follow-Up Questions.

- Q. How long was that? How long did it seem?*
- Q. Who wondered how long this was going to go on?*
- Q. What was hard about it?*
- Q. How many people's minds wandered?*
- Q. What did it wander to? [List what they say.]*
- Q. Who felt guilty they couldn't pray well?*


RESPONSES FROM A CHURCH IN RICHMOND TO:

“What was your prayer time like?”

- I thought a lot about myself.
- I prayed for a while and then daydreamed.
- It felt like forever.
- Hard to stay focused.
- Are we done yet?
- Overwhelming.
- No physical voice responding.
- Hard to be still.
- Feels futile...it may not happen.
- I don't want to pray for what I really want.

- Hard to be silent.
- Fell asleep.
- How do I distinguish my thoughts from God's?
- If I haven't prayed, catching up is overwhelming.
- I feel like a failure.
- Feels like a chore.
- Do I need to say things in the right order?

GROUP DISCUSSION (CONT.):

 **Q. Let's expand our question by examining problems with prayer in general. What is hard for you about prayer in general, or having a prayer life, or any aspect of prayer?**

RESPONSES FROM OTHER CHURCHES ANSWERING THE SAME QUESTION. (You are not alone!)

CHURCH IN WILLIAMSBURG:

- Mind floats. Is that praying?
- How do you connect with a Spirit?
- Can I pray for what I want? How do I know if it's God's will?
- Requires faith.
- Why pray when you can work?
- Feels like I'm praying to a spiritual being who doesn't want to talk with me.
- Active-oriented culture. Hard to slow down.
- Hard to concentrate, to stay focused. The day's to-do list pops up as soon as I slow down.
- He knows it already. Why bore God? Sounds like nagging.
- I like to have a conversation, but I don't hear a voice. It's like I'm talking to myself. How is he listening? So hard to concentrate.

- Prayer is boring.
- It uncovers our hearts. I don't want to be uncovered.
- I feel too guilty to stop.
- Overwhelming. So much to pray for.
- Prayers aren't answered. My prayers must be wrong. He's not listening to me. Is he there?

CHURCH IN PHILADELPHIA:


- Takes time.
- Feels like one-way—I'm doing all the talking.
- Hard to concentrate. I'm in the middle of praying, and I go off.
- We're used to being entertained. Prayer isn't entertainment.
- Evil forces/barriers. Satan uses all these things against us.
- Asking. We're used to doing.
- Seems like it should come naturally. It doesn't.
- Don't do it often enough.

CHURCH IN CHICAGO:

- We try to make it academic, something we'll be graded on. We think, "I didn't do it right."
- I'm preoccupied with my petitions, not with God's.
- My mind is crowded. Where do I put prayer?
- Spiritual warfare: fantasies, mind wandering.
- You aren't engaged with anything. How do you dialogue with someone you can't see or hear?
- Doesn't seem natural, therefore I don't think it is real.
- "I have to do it," therefore I feel guilty.

"There is a dichotomy between our experience of sonship and our belief in sonship."

II. OUR EXPERIENCE OF SONSHIP

 **Q. Define sonship. What does sonship mean to you personally?**

2 COR. 6:18 “I WILL BE A FATHER TO YOU,
AND YOU WILL BE MY SONS AND DAUGHTERS,
SAYS THE LORD ALMIGHTY.”

You visit a “Prayer Therapist” to help you with your relationship with God. The therapist says to you:

Q. Tell me about your relationship with your heavenly Father.

They answer in glowing terms of their sonship, describing the access they have to God.

Q. But what is it like on a day-to-day basis?

Go back and review the chart, paraphrasing their comments as to what prayer is really like. “It is boring to be with my Father.” “I don’t know if he is listening,” etc.

Q. Let’s say you had a great relationship with your earthly dad, but you had these kinds of frustrations communicating with him. What would you call that kind of relationship?

Dysfunctional.

Summary:

III. FIVE THINGS THAT DEFINE GOOD PRAYER

1. Prayer is like nibbling on a feast at your Father's table.

REV. 3:20 "HERE I AM. I STAND AT THE DOOR AND KNOCK. IF ANYONE HEARS MY VOICE AND OPENS THE DOOR, I WILL COME IN AND EAT WITH HIM AND HE WITH ME."

After a big family dinner, we put the dishes aside and enjoy the conversation. That is what good prayer feels like.

2. Prayer is primary to relationship.

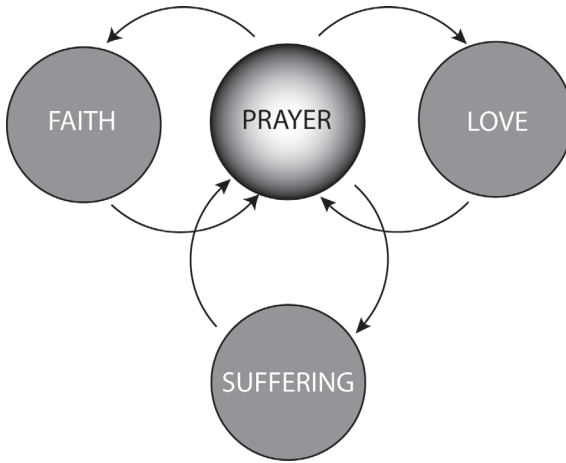
- *Prayer is being with a person. It is being with the Father. As I reflect on that time after dinner, I don't think about "communication" or "words"; I think about my kids and my wife, etc. I don't think about the activity (talking) but rather the people at the table.*
- *Prayer is not just a conversation, but fellowship with a divine person.*

3. Prayer is connected with every other part of the Christian life.

For example, prayer affects love:

- *The more I pray for my kids, the more I love them, the more I am able to concentrate on the key needs in their lives.*
- *The more I love my kids, the more I pray for them. My prayers are crucial in their lives.*

PRAYER IS INTERCONNECTED



4. Prayer is a story.

“Through prayer we enter into and learn to see the story that our Father is weaving.”

5. Prayer is an adventure/journey.

- *Feels like growing up.*
- *Like learning how to love your husband or your wife or your kids.*
- *What does that mean? Slow, but steady. Not spectacular, but one of the most important things you do. Not any one thing that makes it happen, but hundreds of little things.*

IV. THREE CAUTIONS

CAUTION #1: When God begins to give you a rich prayer life—be careful how you talk about it.

- *If you talk too much about what God is doing in your life, it chokes off that prayer life.*
- *In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has a whole section on being quiet about spirituality in your life. Matt. 6:5-8.*
- *Henri Nouwen compares a rich prayer life to a cozy cabin with a big fire on the hearth on a freezing winter night. But if you talk about your prayer life, it is like leaving the front door wide open. If you use your relationship with God to make yourself look bigger spiritually, it chokes off that relationship. God is a person. He is sensitive to any form of pride.*
- *The point of prayer is you begin to do things by being quieter. You speak less to people and more to God. Don't turn inner works of God into a show.*
- *To be sure, prayer stories can encourage people and help them. Share those stories. God didn't give them to you to sit on. But be careful that you're not using them to boast.*

CAUTION #2: We will learn a system in prayer in a later session, but use systems with caution.

- *[Write out ACTS on flip chart.] For example: ACTS—adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication—is a shorthand for prayer that has helped many people. But we don't sit down with our wives or husbands and adore them for five minutes, then switch to confession, thank them, and then move to supplication and ask them to take out the trash. Relationships don't work that way.*
- *You can't manufacture communion with God.*

- *Systems are good and helpful, but you can find yourself preoccupied with them and miss the relationship.*

CAUTION #3: Learning to pray is very possible, but it is not easy. It takes time and aids to learn.

- *You have to be patient with yourself, give yourself time, and get help.*
- *Prayer that is this intentional in life may feel awkward at first. It may not feel automatic or natural.*
- *We all use tools to help us in life. There are tools that can help us do life through prayer. The feeling of it being natural will come later.*
- *Much like learning to drive, it may not feel natural at first, but with time and helpful tools it can become second nature.*
- *Don't judge yourself too harshly. Be patient with yourself.*

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Jesus taught his disciples to pray because they came to him and said, “Teach us to pray.” You can’t learn how to pray unless you have a sense of your inability to pray. Lesson 1 is focused on being aware of our inability so we can say with the disciples, “Teach us to pray.”

Additional Reflections



Honest prayer also feels like a dire need for help, or like loving someone with all your heart, or like being grateful to someone who does you great good, or like a fear of offending someone whose opinion matters very much, or like hoping that someone will come through on what he promised. In prayer, you'll express the full range of human feeling and desire – directed towards God. Be careful of making prayer pietistic, as if it were a “religious” activity or “spiritual” feelings.



Instead of A.C.T.S., I like to use 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18. This guides my relationship with God using active verbs. **REJOICE ALWAYS.** Joy is the emotion of delight in a person, because of who that person is. **PRAY CONTINUALLY.** We ask for the help we need and want. This has two aspects. We need God's mercy for our sins and struggles. We need His aid amid life's hardships and pressures. **GIVE THANKS IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES.** “Thank you” is how we respond to a gift, to what a person does that helps and blesses us. In a nutshell, these three aspects of prayer focus on who God is, what I need, and what God does. (If you look at it carefully, it covers the same ground as A.C.T.S., but comes out Adoration, then Confession & Supplication, and then Thanksgiving!) Those three verbs summarize all 150 Psalms, so 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 operates like a hot link to the Psalms. There's where your life and what you are facing come alive in honest relationship with God.

—DAVID POWLISON