

## The Discipleship Project-Summer 2017

### Series 2: Developing Spiritual Disciplines

*A series by Seth Simmons*

**Series Big Idea:** Because we have been called into covenant, we have the privilege of deepening our relationship with Jesus Christ through spiritual disciplines.

### Lesson 2.1: The Privilege of Prayer

**Lesson Big Idea:** Because we have been called into covenant, we should exercise our privilege of regular communication with God.

#### FOUNDATION

**Scripture Focus:** Luke 11:1–4 (PPT)

It was late and all of the kids were asleep. Suddenly they heard someone banging on the door.

“Not again,” he sighed.

“What is it?” his wife asked as she squinted her eyes to see in the dark.

“It’s midnight, and our neighbor will not stop waking up the house! This is the third time he has come over here tonight,” he said in frustration.

His wife softly touched him on the arm, “Maybe you should just give him what he needs, so we could all get some sleep.”

“You’re right,” he acknowledged, “then maybe he will just leave us alone. Will you help me get some bread for him? He has a friend visiting, but he is out of food and out of his mind!”

Hospitality in the first century was culturally important. Hospitality demonstrated love, loyalty, and support to another. So when Jesus told His hearers the story about a man bothering his neighbor in order to get bread for a traveler, they immediately understood the gravity of the situation. But it was the persistency of the needy neighbor that Jesus truly wanted to focus on: “I say to you, though he will not rise and give to him because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will rise and give him as many as he needs” (Luke 11:8, NKJV).

Jesus used this story to illustrate to His disciples and to us the importance of persistently seeking God in prayer: “So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened” (Luke 11:9–10, NKJV).

We first discover that regardless of how much we may teach, read, or talk about prayer, it is the act of persistent prayer that draws people closer to God and allows His children to receive His promises. Indeed, it is a privilege to exercise regular communication with God.

## FRAME

**As children of God, we have the favor of the Father.** (PPT) (PDG) The opening words of the Lord’s Prayer, “Our Father,” underscore this relationship. (See Luke 11:2). Similarly, Jesus emphasized the relational aspects of prayer in Luke 11:11–13. By doing so, He assures us that “God hears us and is already favorably disposed toward us, even more than a good human parent toward his or her child” (David deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods & Ministry Formation*).

We do not have a God who is far removed from us—**He is close to us because of the Cross**. The Cross testifies of the mercy and grace of Jesus Christ. In the most painful moment in human history, Jesus willingly subjected Himself to rejection by taking on our sin. Though we were far from Him—being His enemies—He sacrificed Himself in order for us to be reconciled. What more could God have done to show that He longs to be close and have daily communion with us?

- **How does knowing that we have the favor of God change our approach in prayer?**

**Through the new birth, we have been adopted by our Father.** (PPT) (PDG) When we come to Him in prayer, it is not in a spirit of fear: “For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, ‘Abba, Father’” (Romans 8:15, NKJV). (PPT) We have done nothing to deserve, achieve, or earn His favor in the first place. There has never been a moment in our lives when we have been good enough to earn a portion of God’s love. It is only by the Cross and His Spirit that we have the hope of reconciliation and adoption into His family. Once we are a part of the family of God, we know He will never turn His back on us, never walk away, never reject us, never forsake us. As the prodigal son discovered, no matter what you have done, it will always bring God great joy to be your Father.

- **How do you think your prayer life would change if you viewed it in the context of your redemptive status as an adopted child of God?**

**It is important that we know we are loved by our Father.** “Prayer is in an expression of a Christian’s unbroken relationship with the Father” (Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*). God does not harbor bitterness or hold grudges. God is not exasperated with our failures. He has not regretted saving us. He is not looking for ways to show us how much we have hurt Him.

Instead, **He helps us in our weaknesses as any loving father would**. He is patient, He is kind, and He does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; He bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Through prayer we experience the unconditional love of our heavenly Father: “The Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit

Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered” (Romans 8:26, NKJV). **(PPT) The love of the Father is found in the intimacy of Spirit-led prayer. (PPT) (PDG)**

There is an old hymn that captures this intimacy beautifully. May it remind us of the privilege of prayer that we have as the children of God:

What a Friend we have in Jesus,  
All our sins and griefs to bear!  
What a privilege to carry  
Everything to God in prayer!  
O what peace we often forfeit,  
O what needless pain we bear,  
All because we do not carry  
Everything to God in prayer.  
(Joseph M. Scriven, What a Friend We Have in Jesus)

- **How does the unconditional love of the Father change the way you approach Him in prayer?**
- **How has the Spirit ministered to you and through you in your weaknesses?**

**A curious child is always eager to learn.** “A child of God,” Donald S. Whitney explains, “gradually learns to pray in the same way that a growing child learns to talk. To pray as expected, to pray as a maturing Christian, and to pray effectively, we must say with the disciples in Luke 11:1, ‘Lord, teach us to pray’” (*Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*).

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus modeled a prayer so powerful and appealing that the disciples wanted to learn from Him. His prayers were a stark contrast to the pompous prayers they had heard religious leaders pray. Instead, there was an intimacy to His communication with God. Jesus would model “the need to keep ourselves close to the heart of God and refreshed by God’s presence” (*An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods & Ministry Formation*).

**A childlike faith and curiosity sets us free to explore the depths of prayer and our relationship with Christ,** which can be an empowering experience. Richard Foster shares his experience, “It was liberating to me to understand that prayer involved a learning process. I was set free to question, to experiment, even to fail, for I knew I was learning” (*Celebration of Discipline*).

**A willingness to learn, however, requires humility.** (PPT) (PDG) As with any spiritual discipline, we must be willing to follow the example of mature elders in our church community in order to grow. One way to grow in prayer is to find an elder with a prayer life that you admire and ask that elder to teach you. We learn to pray through

godly examples in our church community, through personal experience, by the guidance of the Spirit, through the teaching of the Word, and through admitting that we have a lot to learn. Once we humbly accept that we can learn to pray, we will be like eager children seeking the guidance of Christ, His Word, and His body.

- **What could we learn from the development of a child about our own developmental growth in prayer?**
- **If you were teaching a new believer to pray, what would you teach first? Explain.**

**Children have vivid imaginations.** In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul shared this incredible promise of God, “Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us” (Ephesians 3:20, NKJV). (PPT) God has promised to do more than we can ask or think! So, just how imaginative are your questions and thoughts when you pray?

**Consider the poetic prayers of the psalmist and how imaginative they were:** “Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me, and Your right hand shall hold me. . . . For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother’s womb. I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvelous are Your works” (Psalm 139:7–10, 13–14, NKJV). (PPT) Long before our modern understanding of the cosmos, the earth, and the formation of a child in the womb, the psalmist was using his imagination to explore the creative genius of his Creator through prayer.

**If our prayers are small and lack creativity, it may be because we have a small view of the brilliance and majesty of our Creator.** (PPT) (PDG) “Imagination often opens the door to faith” (*Celebration of Discipline*). As we begin to imagine more about the limitless possibilities found in Jesus Christ, our faith will begin to see how the impossible can become possible. “For with God all things are possible” (Mark 10:27, NKJV). (PPT)

- **How do you think a vivid imagination could aid you in your prayers?**
- **If you could imagine one prayer being answered today, what would it be?**

**Children have been known to make bold requests.** The Lord’s Prayer is full of directives: “Your will be done . . . give us . . . forgive us . . . lead us . . . deliver us” (Matthew 6:9–13, NKJV). When Jesus taught the disciples to pray, He taught them to pray with confidence. A child with godly parents is confident he or she will receive needed provision and protection. There is no doubt in the requests that are made. In the same way, there should be no doubt in the miraculous provision and protection of our heavenly Father.

As we read the Acts narrative, we see this confidence in the prayers of the apostles. Their prayers were “often the form of a direct, authoritative command: ‘Walk,’ ‘Be well,’ ‘Stand up.’ . . . when praying for others there was evidently no room for indecisive, tentative, half-hoping ‘If it be thy will’ prayers” (*Celebration of Discipline*).

This confidence comes from knowing the power of the name of Jesus Christ and being filled with His Spirit. When Peter addressed the Sanhedrin in Acts, for example, Luke noted that Peter was “filled with the Holy Spirit,” and that he proclaimed, “there is no name [Jesus Christ] under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:8, 12, NKJV). (PPT) The religious leaders marveled at their boldness, but also noted that they had been with Jesus. Spending time with Jesus makes us bold!

Further, “**Bold prayers honor God, and God honors bold prayers**” (Mark Batterson, *Circle Maker*). If our prayers are only limited to prayers we can answer through hard work or discipline, then we may need to expand our prayer life. When we make bold requests that only God can answer, it reveals our faith in Him and opens up the opportunity for God to demonstrate the miraculous.

- **How would your prayers change if you had no doubt in the provision and protection of God?**
- **What bold requests should you be making?**
- **How will these requests honor God?**

It is somewhat comical at times when a young child is trying to get the attention of his or her parent and the parent may not be paying attention. The child will repeatedly call out to the parent until finally Mom or Dad will turn around in exasperation and say, “What is it, child?” This persistence is actually a sign of a healthy relationship with the parent because the child knows the need will be met if he or she can simply get the attention of the parent.

In the same way, **persistent prayer is a sign of faith (PPT) (PDG)** because we know that if we persist we will receive an answer and get the attention of our Father. Jesus encouraged the disciples to “ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened” (Luke 11:9–10, NKJV). (PPT) There is a progressive element to this instruction based upon faith in God. He will answer. We must simply keep seeking until an answer is found.

Our elders often referred to this as “praying through” or “praying until” something happens. When we are not receiving an answer, we first reconsider our prayer to make sure we are not asking “amiss.” (See James 4:3.) Otherwise, we press forward in faith with a determination to receive an answer to our unanswered prayer. We pray with the understanding that God hears us and responds; so if there is no answer, there is a reason. Prayer works.

- **Are there any prayers you have stopped praying even though you still need**

**an answer? Explain.**

- **Why is it difficult at times to continue praying and waiting for an answer?**

## **FINISH**

Pastor Bill Hybels shares a story about an advertising executive who attended his church. This executive had just become a Christian, and he said to his pastor, “I just can’t make time to pray with God.” Pastor Hybels replied, “Well, here’s what I’ve learned. I’ve always been able to make time for what I value, and I value my meeting time with God.”

Many months later Pastor Hybels met with him again, and the man was noticeably different. His countenance had changed. He and his wife invited Pastor Hybels over to their house, and the man showed him a rocking chair he had purchased. The executive said, “I bought this rocking chair and put it on my back porch, pastor. I started getting up about a half hour earlier each day before work. I sit in the chair. I have a cup of coffee. I read God’s Word and ask Him to speak to me. Then I meditate on it, reflect on it, and apply it to my life. I write some thoughts down in a journal, and I pray. I pray that I will be more aware of His presence in my life.”

Pastor Hybels asked him, “How is that going for you?” The executive’s wife quickly chimed in, “I’ll tell you how it’s going. He’s a changed guy! What happens to him when he sits in that chair has changed him. He is more centered. He is a gentler and more caring man to our children. He hears the voice of God!”

He had fashioned a meeting time with God, every day, and God spoke to him. He eventually gave up his job in advertising, took a pay cut, and began working for the church as a result of those prayers. Later on in life, he relocated to help start a church in Colorado, all because of the time he spent with God, every morning, in that chair.

His whole life changed in that chair.

So let me ask today: Where is your chair? Where do you meet with God? Where do you reflect on His Word and open yourself to His power on a daily basis?

As we mentioned in the introduction, we may teach, read, and talk about prayer, but it is the act of persistent prayer that ultimately draws us closer to God. This is the privilege of our relationship with God—continual communication with our heavenly Father.