

“WHY PRAY?”
by Rom A. Pegram (1/5/20)

In 1952, on the campus of Princeton University, a professor by the name of Albert Einstein was asked this very important question by a doctoral student: The student asked, “What in the world is left for us to do original research on? If we want to do an *original* dissertation, what can we do?” Professor Einstein thought for a moment and replied in this way: “Find out about prayer. Somebody must find out about prayer.” That was 1952.

Fast forward to Duke University Medical Center in 2002. Cardiologist Dr. Mitch Krucoff is conducting experiments on heart patients. And he’s asking the question: “Is there a measurable, incremental benefit to prayer?” So he puts together a global study and in an interview with Discovery Channel, Krucoff states: “We saw impressive reductions in all of the negative outcomes of heart patients. The bad outcomes were measured in the study. What we looked for routinely in cardiology trails were outcomes such as death, a heart attack, or lungs filling with water (congestive heart failure), in patients who are treated in the course of these problems.” He goes on. “In the group randomly assigned prayer therapy, there was a 50% reduction in all complications and a 100% reduction in major complications.”

Then there was Dr. Elizabeth Targ (Pacific College of Medicine, SFO) who worked with AIDS patients. She did a prayer study on seriously ill patients and found similar results. Her response? “I was shocked. In a way, it was like witnessing a miracle. There is no way to understand this from my experience, from my basic understanding of science.”

Chuck Colson, a prominent Christian observer regarding culture, responded to these studies, saying: “Such studies have plenty of critics. But the new research has left many scratching their heads. Is prayer something that could be put under a microscope and examined? Probably not,” he said. “One thing is for sure; prayer works and prayer is real.” Then Colson went on clarify something: “Answered prayer requires a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. It’s a mysterious and unexplainable gift that God gives to those who come to him....”

Today, we’re starting the New Year off with ... PRAYER. But, I’m not going to try and give you a scientific definition of prayer. The Bible talks a lot about prayer, so we’re going to see if—in faith—we can’t pull together some truths about prayer that will help us with this discipline in our lives. Let’s begin with Colossians 4:2: “Devote yourselves to prayer with an alert mind and a thankful heart.”

So, what is prayer? Some have said ‘we must live in a spirit of prayer’—to pray when we walk, to pray when we lie down or rise up, living out prayer in our lives. But how do we do this? Paul tells us here in Colossians: *Devote yourselves*. But to what?

Here’s my simple definition of prayer today (fill in this blank): PRAYER IS COMMUNICATING WITH GOD. Those three words are a bit heavy though. Why? Because prayer’s one of those things a lot of people have questions about. And throughout this series, I’m going to try and answer some of the most common questions about prayer. Let’s go back to God’s word, shall we?

In the middle of his discourse known as ‘The Sermon on the Mount’ Jesus begins to talk about *the mystery of prayer*. He begins with ... “When you pray....” Jesus didn’t say ‘If you pray’! He assumes if you’re a follower of his, this is what you’ll be about. *You will pray*. Listen (Matt. 6:5-13, NLT)...

“When you pray, don’t be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get. ⁶ But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

⁷ “When you pray, don’t babble on and on as people of other religions do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. ⁸ Don’t be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him! ⁹ Pray like this:

Our Father in heaven,
 may your name be kept holy.
¹⁰ May your Kingdom come soon.
 May your will be done on earth,
 as it is in heaven.
¹¹ Give us today the food we need,
¹² and forgive us our sins,
 as we have forgiven those who sin against us.
¹³ And don’t let us yield to temptation,
 but rescue us from the evil one.

It’s been said ... *the person who’s learned to pray has learned the greatest secret of a holy and happy life*. And Jesus knew that, too. So, let’s take a look, today, at *why we pray*. And I want to answer this question by looking at *what happens when we pray*. Folks, here’s what happens: We...

Prove that God exists. *Prayer is an activity that says “I believe in God!”* Think about it; *prayer is one of the last things in our culture that’s still legitimate when it comes to the faith*—it’s recognized, admired, etc. Now, there’re arguments about things like ... prayer in school, etc., but what do you naturally assume about a person when you see them praying before a test? *They believe in God; there is a God...* You’re out to eat and you see someone praying over their meal. What do you think? *There’s someone who believes in God!* You assume that, if you see ‘em praying—especially in a public setting.

90% of Americans believe God exists. Did you know that? And 50% of those say they pray on a regular basis. Why would they all do that? Because ... *God exists*.

Prayer, fundamentally, is an act of faith. It’s not something you can put under a microscope and study. Prayer’s about faith. And those without a faith in God cannot believe in prayer. *You need a life of faith in order for prayer to be possible*. People have told me ... they don’t believe in God. And yet, when tragedy strikes, who’s the first to shoot a prayer toward heaven? Have you noticed that? *There’s something inside us that*

cries out for the eternal ... when the temporal is in turmoil... What's the old saying? "There are no atheists in a fox hole!" When you're out there and under pressure, taking enemy fire, whether you think there's someone up there or not, you're going to give it a shot!

Deep inside us, we all really do believe there's something more to life than just what we can see, don't we? Prayer in our lives proves to ourselves and others that God exists. Jesus himself reminds us: it's an expected occurrence in our life—not the exception, but the rule. Hear from Jesus again about the act of prayer (Matt. 6:5): "When you pray, don't be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get."

To understand what Jesus is saying here, you have to understand the context. In Jesus' day, there were people—*religious people*—who just loved to get the attention of others by praying out loud and publicly! They'd stand on street corners and announce their very eloquent prayers. This was public, for all to see and hear. They wanted others to think they were very pious & upright. But what did Jesus say about them? He called them 'hypocrites'—those who 'wear a mask' (literal meaning). They're actors—just play-acting, like actors on stage who pretend to be something they're not. And Jesus said ... *that's not prayer at all!*

So, prayer isn't about showing off, or flowery language; it's not about impressing people with your words. *It's about a connection with God.* It's when you say, 'God, I'm coming to seek you; I'm coming to know you; I'm praying because I believe you exist and you want to make a difference in my life.'

Then God does something amazing in return. If you pray honestly and authentically, 'God, I want to know you,' *God can be known.* The prophet Jeremiah says (Jer. 29:12-14a): "In those days when you pray, I will listen. ¹³ If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me. ¹⁴ I will be found by you,' says the LORD." God says *he can be found!* That's what prayer's about. Einstein once said, "God's not playing dice with the universe." Or, you could say, God's not playing 'hide and seek' with the universe. God wants you to find him & *we can know God exists!* Then, we...

Reconnect with Our Heavenly Father. As you write that down, I want to give you a theological lesson on prayer...

A good theology of prayer has to begin with Jesus on the cross—his death & resurrection. Very soon, we'll be into the season of Lent—a 40-day period between Ash Wednesday and Easter. One of the reasons Lent is so important for Christians is because of this: If it were not for Jesus' cross, death & resurrection, *you and I would not be able to connect with God at all!*

You see, before Jesus came, there was God 'out there somewhere'—a presumption. But you couldn't really know God personally. Yes, God made himself known through the Old Testament prophets, and the Law. But a personal connection with God was just not possible. Then came Jesus...

Jesus changed everything because he came as 100% God (divine), who took up 100% human form; he brought the two together. *Jesus brought God and humanity together ... for the first time.* It's like, while Jesus was on the cross, doing the will of his heavenly Father, he had one hand reaching up to God ... and the other reaching out to us. *Jesus is our connection to God*—only possible because of him. And it continues...

Notice the word 're-connect' in your notes. Prayer is not our *initial* connection with God. Our initial connection with God comes through a personal faith in Jesus Christ—turning our lives over to Christ. But in order for us to maintain that relationship, we have to constantly re-connect with God; that's where prayer comes in. *Prayer re-connects us with our Heavenly Father.* That's why Jesus assumes those who follow him ... will pray. It's the way we stay connected to God. So, giving our lives to Christ—becoming a follower of his through faith is the first connection; then praying maintains that relationship...

It's a bit like marriage. You say your vows before God and company; then after the wedding—*the commitment*, you keep talking (or you should)! Prayer is re-connecting—staying connected to the Source of our life—God, after the initial connection...

And, according to Jesus, we're not supposed to 'make a show out of it,' but pray in a quiet place, in a respectful way. How often do we pray this way? Daily. V. 6 also raises one of the most often asked questions about prayer: "If God already sees everything, knows our needs/our secrets, why do we have to pray in the first place?" Let's move on to that, shall we? Because in prayer, we also...

Admit Our Dependence on God. When we pray, we prove God exists, we re-connect with our Heavenly Father, and ... *we admit our dependence on God!* Prayer is an admission that ... *we can't do this thing called life alone!* Vv. 7-8 tell us: "When you pray, don't babble on and on as people of other religions do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. ⁸ Don't be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him!" And there's that issue again, so *why pray?*

In order to answer that, we're going to need to understand the purpose of prayer. *Prayer, folks, is not for God's sake.* We're not praying for God's sake. *We're asking and praying for OUR sake!* Prayer was not invented for God. Prayer was invented for US—*not to change God, but to change US!*

Yes, God already knows what you need, but God will not move in your life until you open the door (*prayer*) and allow him to move. Prayer's a catalyst that opens the door for God to move in YOUR life. As devotional writer Charles Allen once said (Matt. 7:7), "Prayer is not a means by which I seek to control God. Prayer is a means of putting myself in a position where God can control me." So, how does that work? Here it is. When we pray, we...

Yield Our Will to God's Will. As you admit your dependence on God, you begin to yield your will to God's will. *The ultimate action of prayer is for you to adjust your will to God's will!*

Many of you are familiar with the Lord's Prayer. Just to remind you, it goes something like this: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done (What?), on earth as it is in heaven." What Jesus is saying here is ... *here is a manner of praying.* There's nothing magical about the specific words to the Lord's Prayer. But you need to be praying in this manner—in this Spirit. And today, it's important for us to look at the third petition in the Lord's Prayer: *Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven...*

Philosopher Aldous Huxley once said: "The third petition of the Lord's prayer is repeated daily by millions who have not the slightest intention of letting anyone's will be done but their own." But, is that right?

Today, as we begin this new series on prayer, I'd like Trinity UMC to be the exception. So, as I close today, let me ask this question: *What do you need to yield to God's will today?* What've you been holding back? What is it that you alone have to control—not even allowing God into the equation? I've got a feeling you already know the answer. (Use back of Connection Card ['Next Step'] and I'll pray for you to be able to yield, to let go, in this "New Year—for my eyes only...)

Corrie Ten Boom (Holocaust survivor) once asked of prayer: "Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tire?" Which one do you allow? Do you wait for tragedy to strike, then go to your knees and cry out to God? Or do you let God guide every day by yielding your will to his? Folks, even Jesus—in the garden—taught this. How did he pray (Matt. 26:39b)? "My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine." There it is... So, is prayer your steering wheel ... or your spare tire? Think about that ... and this conversation will continue next week...