

Training Session 4: The Foundation: A Model for Prayer

Objective

Help you hear God speak to you through His word and learn to pray

Key Text

Matthew 6:9-13

We're in a series looking at the pillars that help us build a solid foundation for our lives. Whether we identify as Christians or not, we're all building a life and this series is designed to help us identify the pillars of a foundation that will withstand the storms of life. This week we'll focus on the pillar of prayer. Prayer is an essential pillar for a strong foundation to life because it is the way we communicate with God. Just as you will have no relationship with your spouse if you don't communicate with them, you also will have no relationship with God without prayer.

Therefore, we're going to develop a model for prayer. In this training Session, we're not going to learn *the* way to pray, but instead we're going to learn *a* way to pray that helps you hear God speak to you through His word, helps you chew on it throughout the day, and finally helps you respond in love. Prayer, in its simplest terms, is a conversation with God, which is far less about getting it right or wrong and far more about developing intimacy with your Father. Any conversation with your Dad, well, any *good* conversation, involves both listening and speaking, so we're going to learn how to do both. If this model for prayer isn't helping you grow in intimacy with your Father, then by all means use another model for prayer.

Christian Meditation

The model for prayer we're going to explore in our training session blends together what we often think of as Bible reading and prayer with one key link: Christian meditation. If you want to grow spiritually, then learning to pray meditatively is one of the best ways to do so. Prayer, and specifically meditative prayer, is one of the best ways to deal with doubts and intellectual objections to the faith because it brings you into a conversation, a relationship, with a living God who begins to work on those doubts. Moreover, meditative prayer centers you and stills your soul in a noisy world. It takes you beyond mere intellectual knowledge about God and takes you into an intimate, transformative knowledge of God. Even demons know intellectual facts about God (James 2: 19); yet, knowledge of God is far different, for it stems from an experience of His presence that touches and changes you, drawing you into a personal relationship with God.

J.I. Packer, in his helpful book *Knowing God*, summarizes this well: "How can we turn our knowledge about God into knowledge of God? The rule for doing this is demanding but simple. It is that we turn each truth that we learn about God into a matter for meditation before God, leading to prayer and praise to God." Packer says that meditation is "a lost art today," and Christians have suffered from their lack of it. Some followers of Jesus speak of a

“quiet time,” and in doing so they are typically referring to a Bible study and prayer. But Packer sees meditation as the indispensable ingredient that transforms a “quiet time” into an encounter with God.

So, what is meditation? “Meditation is the activity of calling to mind, and thinking over, and dwelling on, and applying to oneself, the various things that one knows about the works and ways and purposes and promises of God. It is an activity of holy thought, consciously performed in the presence of God, under the eye of God, by the help of God, as a means of communion with God.” Our approach to calling things to mind, thinking over them, dwelling on them, and then applying them (i.e. meditating) begins with listening to God speak to you through His word.

Step 1 of Christian Meditation: Open the Bible!

Christian meditation that begins with listening to God speak to you through the Bible is a very different approach to meditation. Buddhist meditation seeks to clear the mind by removing everything from your mind; Christian meditation, on the other hand, seeks to fill the mind with Christ and His word. Ps. 119:5 says, “I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways.” Precepts are God’s truth that are expressed to us in the Bible and we are encouraged here to meditate, to ponder, to turn these over in our mind. In fact, God says, “Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds” (Dt. 11:18). Meditate on that! God himself commands us to fix His words (expressed most clearly in the Bible) in our mind. This is Christian meditation, plain and simple. There is nothing new age about it--these words out of Deuteronomy are ancient!

There is a good chance, however, that to be able to practice the kind of Christian meditation that will warm the heart and cause the soul to dance, you’re going to need to ditch your old notions of Bible study and prayer. Instead, think about your dog with a bone. Eugene Peterson encourages us to do so in his helpful book on Christian meditation, or what he calls spiritual reading. *“Years ago I owned a dog who had fondness for large bones...He gnawed on the bone, turned it over and around, licked it, worried it. Sometimes we could hear a low rumble or a growl, what in a cat would be a purr. He was obviously enjoying himself and in no hurry.*

Imagine my further delight in coming upon a phrase one day while reading Isaiah in which I found the poet-prophet observing something similar to what I had enjoyed so much in my dog, except that his animal was a lion instead of a dog: “As a lion or young lion growls over his prey...” Growls is the word that caught my attention. What my dog did over his precious bone..., Isaiah’s lion did to his prey. The nugget of my delight was noticing the Hebrew word here translated as “growl” (hagah), but usually translated as “meditate” as in the Psalm 1 phrase describing the blessed man or woman whose “delight is in the law of the Lord, on which he meditates day and night”...When Isaiah’s lion and my dog meditated, they chewed and swallowed, using teeth and tongue, stomach and intestines; Isaiah’s lion meditating his prey and my dog meditating his bone. There is a certain kind of writing that invites this kind of reading, soft purrs and low growls as we taste and savor, anticipate and take in the sweet and spicy, mouth-watering and soul energizing morsel words...I am interested in cultivating this kind of reading, the only kind of reading that is congruent with what is written in our Holy Scriptures...

This is the kind of Bible reading we’re after, like a dog with a bone. Peterson describes the feel of what we’re after. Now, how do we get there?

Step 2: Get out your pen!

Why are we encouraging you to pray, meditatively, with your pen? To maintain focus. Try sitting in a chair with your eyes closed and watch how quickly your mind wanders to other things. On the other hand, try writing a letter and watch how focused your mind is. Some days you may not have time to write out what God is saying to you (and that is fine!), but when you do, try it and watch the impact it has on your prayer life. Moreover, it will allow you to go back over the years and see a record of God's faithfulness!

So how do we go about meditating with pen in hand? The approach that has influenced me the most was first handed down to me by one of my mentors, Dick Kaufmann, who taught me to pray meditatively using the Scriptures. He simply passed down to me what another famous mentor, Martin Luther, passed down to one of his mentees, who happened to be his barber. In 1535, Martin Luther's barber, Peter Beskendorf, asked him how to pray and Luther responded with advice that he called, "*A Simple Way to Pray.*" Martin Luther encouraged his mentee to "warm the heart up" through meditation.

Using Luther's ideas, we're going to learn to warm our hearts to God's love through meditative prayer by reading a chapter of the Old Testament and a chapter of the New Testament every day. As we read through the Bible together, we're going to learn to pray with our pen using the acronym A.C.T.S.

Adoration:

- Lord, what are You showing me through your word for which I can praise You?
- What attributes of Your character are you revealing to me as you speak your word to me in this Scripture passage?

Imagine that you are in a marriage and the only thing that you ever do is present your spouse with a "To Do List." Every morning, as soon as you are awake enough to speak, you sip your coffee (1st things 1st!) and slide your To Do List across the table as you say, "Please get on this. And hurry!" This way of praying is fraught with problems, not least of which is that it involves only one thing: YOU TALKING! What do you call a friend who talks all the time and never asks you a single question about yourself? A nuisance, not a friend.

On the other hand, the beauty of the A.C.T.S. model for prayer is that it helps you regularly cultivate the components that are necessary for any healthy relationship. It begins with listening as God explains His goodness, His glory, and His love through His word, which naturally leads us to compliment Him, praise Him, and encourage Him.

I almost always begin my prayers with what we're labeling adoration for a number of reasons. To begin with, a God-ward focus helps me take my eyes off of myself and put them onto God, which is a really good thing. Humans have a way of living self-absorbed lives, which is one reason that it is so helpful to have a God-ward orientation to our prayer lives. As we praise God, we're lifted up and out of our small stories and transported into a much bigger story, God's story! Moreover, I've often found that my anxieties and fears and insecurities melt away in the presence of an unshakeable God who is infinitely joyful and absolutely sovereign.

Finally, beginning with adoration helps me listen to God as *He* tells me who *He* is. If God is God, then he gets to define himself, but if we're honest, all of us are guilty of creating a god fashioned in our image, not his. Adoration helps put a stop to this by allowing God to share with us through His word who He is. Think about it, maybe there is a reason the most frequent command in the Bible is some variation of, "Praise God!" It stands to reason that the thing God told us to do the most (praise Him!) should be front and center in our our prayer lives. So it is no surprise that Jesus taught his disciples to begin with adoration when said, "This, then, is how you should pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven, *hallowed be thy name...*" (Mt. 6:9). Start here, with hallowing and adoring God, in most of your prayers.

Confession:

- What does your word require of me and how have I fallen short?
- What wrong behaviors, harmful emotions, or false attitudes result in me when I forget that You are like _____ or have done _____?

If you have been married for any length of time, you will know the importance of three words, "I am sorry." No marriage will make it without those words. They are words of life. They are words of humility. They are words that acknowledge the reality of the human condition, which is that we all have tragically bent hearts. I'm sorry (or confession) begins to straighten things back out again, not to mention leavening the lump of our lives with something that we all desperately need: humility! Not surprisingly, Jesus featured confession prominently in his model prayer to the disciples when he said, "*Forgive us our debts...*" (Mt. 6:12).

Thanksgiving:

- How is Jesus the ultimate answer for my sin and/or longings?
- Think about the life of Jesus in the gospels and give thanks for specific ways that He was successful in areas that you just confessed.

You may have used or heard of the acronym A.C.T.S. in which the thanksgiving section centered more on being thankful for God's blessings in your life (health, provision, family, etc.). All of those blessings are good things and it is right and fitting to thank God for them, but don't stop with the gifts. Trace the sunbeam all the way to the sun, as C.S. Lewis says. Gospel-thanksgiving, as opposed to simply thanksgiving, takes you to the Son, and it is the lynchpin of learning to pray in a gospel-centered way that will help keep you from reading the Bible as a list of rules and see it more as a love story with a hero who sacrificially gives up all to rescue and restore His bride. You see, the Gospel is the good news of Jesus (not simply the blessings that Jesus provides), and as we begin to see and celebrate the author and perfecter of our story, our heart is often strangely warmed and supernaturally strengthened. Gospel thanksgiving is designed to help us "put on Christ," (Rom. 13:14), reminding ourselves again and again that in Him we have all that we need (2 Pet. 1:3; Eph. 1:3)! Now, finally, in light of having all that need in Christ, we can ask God to supply our need, which is what we'll call supplication.

Supplication:

- Jesus, here are my needs (or supplications). My family and friends? My church? My city? The world? What we just thanked You for—make it so in us!

God is, fundamentally, a loving Father who loves to give us good gifts, not scorpions or snakes or things that will harm us (Luke 11). I once heard Tim Keller say something on prayer that has deeply shaped my prayer life, which is that “God will either give us what we ask or give us what we would have asked if we knew everything he knows.” I love that. God is a loving Father who knows everything there is to know and He will only do what is best for us. If what we are asking for is ultimately for our good and his glory, then he will give it to us; if not, then he will give us what we would have asked for if we knew everything he knew. So ask, and ask boldly, knowing that our loving Father will graciously decline to give us the scorpions we *want* and freely pour out the supplies we *need* to love and value Him, ourselves, and others.

Movement Prayer Journal

As part of the Movement Mentoring process, you will receive a Movement Prayer Journal that will help you work out this model of prayer over the next year. Relax, you can’t mess up prayer. It is simply spending time with your Father who really likes you! This journal is intended to give you a way to hear all of your Father’s heart (in the whole Bible) and meditate on His love in such a way that helps you love and value Him and people.

What if I can’t stand journaling (or don’t have time!)?

Then don’t do it! We’ll still love you and so will God. Try it, at least, before you determine that you can’t pray with your pen because this model, for most people, a different way to practice Christian meditation and it has been very fruitful for many, many Christians. Yet, if you try it and either don’t like it or just don’t have time, then the most important thing is regularly listening to God speak to you through His word, which is why we’re giving you a Bible Reading Schedule. You may decide that responding to God verbally using the A.C.T.S. model (or any other model) leads to a greater intimacy with your heavenly Father or it may be some combination. That is perfectly fine!

Movement Bible Reading (MBR) Schedule

Many of us have tried to read through the entire Bible in a year and gotten bogged down in Leviticus. Or we miss a day and feel like we have way too many chapters to catch up on and scrap the whole thing because we get so far behind. The Movement Bible Reading Schedule is intended to be read with grace. If you miss a day, don’t worry about it. It’ll be there next year. Jump back in and trust that God still loves you (because of Jesus!) and will speak to you, even if you miss a chapter or two!

The MBR Schedule encouraged you to read one chapter of the New Testament and one chapter of the Old Testament every weekday (Monday-Friday) and a Psalm on Saturday. By doing so, you will read the entire New Testament every year and the entire Old Testament every three years. And top it off, you get to rest on Sunday and let your pastor bring the word to you in your local church!

Step 3 (Final Step): Take it with you

After you have written and spoken to God, it is now time to go into your day (assuming you are doing this first thing). Take one truth with you and metaphorically, “tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them to your foreheads” (Dt. 11:18). This may mean trying to memorize one verse or pondering it throughout the day or even turning on a worship song with a similar

theme. Regardless of how you decide to chew on the word that God gave you, may you “taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps. 34:8) all day long!

Discussion Questions

1. What did you find most helpful from the training session on prayer?
2. Using Tim Keller’s metaphor of sailing to evaluate your prayer life, describe whether you are sailing, rowing, drifting, or sinking when it comes to prayer and discuss why.
3. How do you feel about learning to meditate on God’s word and respond to His voice through praying with your pen in the Movement Prayer Journal?
4. Notice that the model for meditative prayer hinges on gospel--thanksgiving. How is gospel-thanksgiving different from traditional thanksgiving, and why is this so important for meditative prayer.
5. Historically, what has been your greatest struggle in your prayer life? What has been the most rewarding?

Love Does

In an effort to be doers of the word and just hearers, we’re going to practice prayer. We’ll talk about this in our training session.

Individual Study and Group Discussion Questions

1. What are the three main struggles you have experienced in your prayer life?
2. PRACTICE: Read Psalm 23. As a group, pick one or two verses that you would like to use for meditative prayer. Go through and pray each section together (adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication).