

“The Basic Ingredients of Prayer”

Matthew 6:5-18 (NRSV)

This week, we continue our six-week series on prayer: A life of Prayer. Today, we consider some of the essentials in our prayers and our prayer life.

The basics?

Sermon series are planned well in advance. Weekly themes are drafted and reviewed. Scripture passages are selected. Usually, these background studies end up pretty close to what I originally envisioned they would be. But this series on prayer is different. Perhaps it is because prayer is so personal. Perhaps prayer simply resists overanalysis. Perhaps God is working hard on me, pointing me in directions I would never have headed on my own. Whatever the reason, today’s study is a case in point.

When I began work on this study, I was going to take the Lord’s Prayer as a model for our own prayers and then look at some other models or patterns of prayer, such as ACTS (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication). Such models are helpful, but as I read and re-read Jesus’ warnings about hypocrisy and “empty phrases,” I came to focus on a deeper meaning of “basic ingredients.” What must be basic to all prayer and why?

Building a trusting relationship

Today’s passage is taken from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has retreated from the crowds and has gathered his disciples around him. In the very center of this long block of teaching, Jesus turns to the subject of prayer. But before teaching his disciples to pray, Jesus warns them about the basics. They are not to be hypocrites. They are not to pray so that everyone can see what good “pray-ers” they are. When they fast, they ought not look like they are fasting! They are not to pile up a bunch of empty phrases in their prayers. In all this, Jesus is pushing his disciples toward prayer that is grounded in sincerity and honesty, humility, and forgiveness – these are the basic ingredients of prayer that is grounded in true faith! Why?

In the Bible, trust is a good synonym for faith. When we say that we have faith in Jesus Christ, we mean that we trust Jesus – completely and utterly. Now, all of us are experienced at building trusting relationships with others, or at least trying to. We know that building trust is not easy. It takes time. We risk trusting a person in small matters so that we might come to trust them in large matters. We know that trust is fragile. Trust takes a long time to build but it can disintegrate in a moment of betrayal. We know that trust must be cherished and protected. And . . . we know that hypocrisy and empty talk are not the way to build trust!

“The cross is God’s truth about us, and therefore it is the only power which can make us truthful.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer



John Calvin

‘going to work’

My God, Father and Savior, since you have commanded us to work in order to meet our needs, sanctify our labor that it may bring nourishment to our souls as well as to our bodies. Make us constantly aware that our efforts are worthless unless guided by your light and by your hand. Make us faithful to the particular tasks for which you have bestowed upon us the necessary gifts, taking from us any envy or jealousy at the vocations of others.

Give us a good heart to supply the needs of the poor, saving us from any desire to exalt ourselves over those who receive our bounty. And if you should call us into greater poverty than we humanly desire, save us from any spirit of defiance or resentment, but rather let us graciously and humbly receive the bounty of others. Above all, may every temporal grace be matched by spiritual grace, that in both body and soul we may live to your glory.

John Calvin (1509-1564) was one the great Protestant reformers. This prayer is from a collection of everyday prayers Calvin wrote for the people of Geneva, Switzerland. These prayers reflect his conviction that our spiritual faith must be matched by our practical application.

Prayer is conversation with God; conversation that is to be grounded upon trust. So, just as we strive to be sincere and forthright with those we trust, there can be no hypocrisy or deceit in our prayers to God. The psalmists are sometimes incredibly angry with God and they don't hesitate to voice their anger. Of course they don't hesitate—they trust God!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) was a German Lutheran pastor who vehemently opposed the Nazis from 1933 until his execution. In 1943 he was implicated in a plot to assassinate Hitler. Bonhoeffer was jailed by the Nazis and later hung.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer
'condemned to death'

O Lord God,
Great is the misery that has come upon me.
My cares overwhelm me: I am at a loss.
O God, comfort and help me.
Give me strength to bear what you send,
And do not let fear rule over me.
As a loving Father, take care of my loved ones,
My wife, and children.

O merciful God,
Forgive all the sins I have committed
Against you and against my fellow men.
I put my trust in your grace,
And commit my life wholly into your hands.
Do with me as is best for you,
For that will be best for me too.
Whether I live or die, I am with you,
And you are with me.
Lord, I wait for your salvation
And for your kingdom.

Indeed, with God, this is all much easier than it is with any other person we might seek to know and trust. My wife knows me well; we trust each other as much as two people can. But she can't read my mind (though I wonder at times!). But God our Father knows what we need before we ask him (v. 8). God's Spirit lifts to God our deepest prayers, so deep that we can't even find the words (Romans 8:26-27).

Prayers built upon trust

It is in the context of this deep, abiding trust in God that Jesus' teaches his disciples the Lord's Prayer. He points them toward God's kingdom and teaches them to rely completely upon God, even for the bread they eat. The disciples are to trust in God's forgiveness, even as they forgive others. That's how a man, condemned by the Nazis, a modern-day disciple, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, could pray, "I put my trust in your grace and commit my life wholly in your hands."

Whether we are praising God or thanking him. Whether we are confessing or asking. Whether we come to God with a peaceful heart or an angry one. In all this, we trust that God loves us and hears us and answers us. The basic ingredients of prayer are the ingredients that build trust between two persons: honesty, sincerity, caring, thanking, appreciating, loving, serving...add to this list yourself. And in the end, pray with a trusting heart. Amen.

Daily Bible Readings

(A selection of prayers from the Old and New Testaments)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday	Jeremiah 17:7-8	"Blessed are those who trust in the Lord"
Tuesday	Genesis 22	Abraham trusts God so much that he is willing to do the unthinkable!
Wednesday	Romans 4	This can be a little difficult to understand, but Paul is saying that Abraham's trust in God (his faith/ his belief in God) is what made him right with God (Abraham's righteousness)
Thursday	Psalms 115	"Trust in the LORD"
Friday	Micah 7:18-20	"Who is a God like you?" The LORD is faithful and trustworthy. He is compassionate and will cast away our sins.