

I struggle with prayer.

Now at first that may sound strange for the pastor to admit, after all I'm supposed to have a direct line to God; but the truth is I struggle with prayer.

Now let me clarify that a little bit. I try to practice what Paul said about praying without ceasing. I pray throughout the day as thoughts and ideas and concerns come before me. When I am out running I pray for people that I pass along the way; when someone tells me of a need I pray for the need; and when I feel a prompting in my spirit to remember a person or situation that needs prayer I pray.

I know how to pray, I've read the books, I pray; but still I struggle with prayer.

It seems that some of the things I pray for never happen. I pray for people to be healed and they are not. I pray for situations to be resolved and they continue down the same path. I pray for direction in my life and feel at times that I have no direction.

I believe in prayer, and in the power of prayer to effect change in the lives of those for whom I pray; and the power of prayer to change my life as well; but I struggle with prayer.

I struggle with answering questions about prayer. People are always asking me questions about prayer: Why doesn't God answer my prayer? How do I pray in this situation? How long do I need to pray to get an answer? Can God really answer my prayer?

Try answering all those questions in a way that not only satisfies the questioner; but most importantly remains faithful to God's word. Try answering those questions and you will understand why I struggle with prayer.

Something tells me that I am not alone in my struggles with prayer. I imagine that many of you have questions about prayer since some of you have actually asked me these questions.

What I can tell you today is that while I may not have all the answers on prayer, I still pray. I pray because I have seen God answer prayer- in my own life and in the life of others. I pray because I know the God to whom I pray and he has promised to hear my prayers. I pray because in many circumstances I am the one who is changed.

My guess is that while many of you struggle with prayer much like me, you still pray. You pray for many of the same reasons I pray. And if we are honest; sometimes we pray just because we want God to know that in spite of all the questions with which we struggle we still believe in prayer. We just struggle to understand it all.

We are not alone in that struggle. All you need to do is take a quick look at scripture to see that people have always struggled with God in prayer. And the struggle is at times shockingly honest. They express their fears, their doubts, their anger and it is all there in living color. One thing I like about the Bible is that nothing is candy-coated! These are real people with real struggles who honestly and openly struggle with God in prayer. In that way, they are a lot like us.

One group of people who struggled with prayer was Jesus disciples. This group, who washed out of Torah-school by age 12 or before, was not the best of the best when it came to knowing or practicing the things of God in Jewish society. I wonder if that isn't why Jesus chose them; they were still hungry to learn and Jesus didn't need to spend too much time de-programming them when it came to things like prayer.

As a matter of fact on one occasion the disciples asked Jesus; whom they had seen praying often, "Teach us to pray." (Luke 11:1) I think that request came out of the way that they watched Jesus communicate with his heavenly father. It wasn't anything rehearsed, it wasn't flowery and poetic; it was just open and honest communication with a friend.

Jesus spent three years teaching the disciples to pray. And when those three years came down to the end you could say they failed the final exam. When Jesus asked them to pray with him in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-45) they did what many of us do when we try to pray- they fell asleep.

Now to their credit, after the resurrection something happened to their prayer lives that can only be described as miraculous. Suddenly these novice, sleepy prayers took on a new passion and power in their prayers that shook the world.

I think it is important to hear the struggles of Jesus disciples. Because if these men who spent three years with Jesus had highs and lows in prayer; then we can at least take comfort in knowing that prayer in our lives will have its struggles but also its victories.

So, why should we pray? If prayer is so difficult and the results often leave us with more questions than answers, why should we pray?

I think Jesus answers one very important part of that question in a lesson he taught the disciples which is found in Luke 18:1-8.

This passage is often referred to as the parable of the persistent widow. Many refer to this passage when we question God about how long we should pray for or about something.

Persistence in prayer is certainly one of those things we struggle with; how long do we pray for God to do something, why does it seem like God never answers, will God ever answer my prayer?

Mark Batterson, in his book on prayer entitled *The Circle Maker*, refers to persistence in prayer as praying ALAT (As Long As it Takes) prayers. The persistent widow certainly had the staying power necessary to move the unjust judge- and in this microwave world where we want things as rapidly as possible- the persistent widow teaches us that the answer to prayer is not always instant.

Sometimes it is a matter of waiting on God's timing, sometimes it is a matter on refining our prayers and sometimes it is a matter of learning what God wants to teach us about our will and God's will. But that is a topic we will explore sometime next year when we do a full series on prayer.

What I want you to see in this parable is the character of God; because it is in understanding the character of God that we find answers to the question, Why should I pray?

Many people read this parable and think that God is *like* the unjust judge- needing to be pestered unendingly in hopes that he will see us and hear our case. It was true in Jesus day that a judge could be bought (I've never heard of that in this day and age), but in this case the plaintiff is a widow who would not have the means to do so. Her only recourse is to follow the judge all over town pestering him.

When the judge realizes the only way to get this widow off his back is to rule in her favor that is what he does. He does what is right but not out of compassion for the woman or out of justice for her cause; but to save his own life.

Jesus parable was meant to teach us that God is *not like* the unjust judge. God is instead compassionate, just and always willing to listening. As we persist in prayer- and that means learning to pray in God's will, learning to pray for what God wants in his own time and learning to pray for clarity in our own heart- God not only has the power to act but he wants to act to bring glory to God through you! (1 John 5:14-15)

One of the things I wanted to do with this message is make certain that we don't walk out of here without taking a moment to give you some instruction for prayer (One thing I hear all the time is, I don't know how to pray.) and actually take time to allow you to pray.

As I stated earlier, Jesus disciples wanted to learn how to pray and so they asked Jesus. The answer to that question is what we know today as the Lord's Prayer. It is one of many patterns that people use to organize their prayers and help them focus on how they need to be in communication with God. (Remember that communication/prayer is a two way street. It is not just us talking and God listening; but more of us listening as God speaks.)

Instead of just reciting the Lord's Prayer I want to challenge you to use the prayers categories to lead your prayer into becoming a living prayer that reminds you of God's priorities for Jesus followers.

Our Father... Do you hear that, God is your Father and you are his child. As we enter prayer we do so knowing that God loves us and wants us to be in love with him.

Hallowed be your name... We begin our prayers in that relationship and honoring God by worshiping him.

Then there are three simple movements:

Learning what God wants... Thy kingdom come... If we love God, then we want what God wants. And what God wants is for his will to be done on earth.

Learning to think of other's needs... Give us this day our daily bread...

Learning to put action to our prayers... I love what Scot McKnight says, Prayer does not stop with the "Amen." It rises to its feet and walks off, with our built-up yearning turned into action.

Sometimes we learn to just do things even when we don't fully comprehend them, believing that in time we will more fully understand. I think that is true of prayer. And knowing who God is enables us to just lay it all on the line- the fears, the questions, the heart-break, the joy, the blessings; in spite of never actually fully comprehending how prayer works.

Actually, I don't think this side of heaven we will fully comprehend the power of prayer- the mountains that we have moved, the hearts that have been changed, the lives that have been rescued. Prayer is simply learning to converse day by day, moment by moment, with the God who loves us and calls us his children.

Let's pray. I'm just going to lead us through these parts of the Lord Prayer and I ask you to silently offer your own prayers this morning.

Our Father, who art in heaven,

Hallowed be thy Name.

Thy Kingdom come.

Thy will be done on earth,

As it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses,

As we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation,

But deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom,

And the power, and the glory,

Forever.

Amen.

The greatest tragedy in life is the prayers that go unanswered because they go unasked. Mark Batterson