**Prayer**

Prayer is central to one's faith journey. In its simplest terms, prayer is you and God talking about what you and God are doing in the world. Unfortunately, most prayer is rote and perfunctory. Think about our most common prayers, the ones we teach our children: "God is great. God is good and we thank him for this food….. or…… Now I lay me down to sleep and pray the Lord my soul to keep". As we mature into adults, even these prayers go by the wayside. Prayer is often limited to worship or great times of need. There is a common quote: "There are no atheists in a foxhole." This sums up the extent of prayer for most people. Prayer is confined to times of personal and national suffering. For this reason, most people experience faith superficially.

God wants nothing more than to be in relationship with us. Communication is the most important element of a deep and lasting relationship. Jesus constantly prayed (Mark 1:35). When he felt "stressed out", he retreated to the hills to pray. Before making any important decisions, he prayed. In both good times and bad, he prayed. If Jesus, filled with the divine, felt it necessary to be in constant communion with God, we should also. How would you feel if your children never called you, never sought your advice, never came to you for comfort and reassurance?

It is in prayer that we feel God's presence as an intense personal encounter. It removes the focus from us and turns it to God. It provides us with an opportunity to hear God's voice. Contemplative prayer is opening our heart and soul to God so that we can experience God’s presence. Many people think that this type of experience is reserved for mystics or people living a monastic life, but God intended all of us to be contemplatives. It is during these times of solitude that we receive God's character. It is an integral mechanism for God to transform us. Richard Foster puts it this way in his book, Celebration of Discipline, "In prayer, real prayer, we begin to think God's thoughts after him, to desire the things that he desires, to love the things he loves, and to will the things he wills. Progressively, we are taught to see things from his perspective."

In prayer we can release our worries and concerns to God so that we may acquire the peace of mind that only God can provide. Prayer enables us with God’s quiet strength, which allows us to tackle the difficult challenges inherent in our busy lives. It gives us the opportunity to seek God's guidance in matters small and large. It is particularly valuable in discerning God’s will for us prior to making important decisions. Every person encounters major decisions throughout life. Should I marry this person? Should I buy this house? Should I have children? How many? What career should I choose? What should I do with my ailing parents? The Christian disciple has many resources to help with this decision-making. Answers can be found through scripture. You can approach your pastor or other respected religious leaders for their perspective. You can ask for the advice of faithful friends. Finally, you can take it to God in prayer. Often God will give you an inner conviction as to how you should proceed.

Prayer helps us resist temptations. Most of us feel we do a pretty good job of avoiding temptation, but usually we are interpreting “temptation” as cheating, stealing, murder and adultery. The reality, however, is that every day we act upon impulses that are contrary to God's will. We scream at people in traffic. We fail to patiently listen because we are in a hurry. We "hem and haw" and make faces while waiting in line at the register (or is that just me). We brush off our children because we are in the middle of another task. The list goes on and on. Prayer allows us the opportunity to ask God for God’s help in relinquishing our behavior whenever it conflicts with God’s will or way.

Prayer gives us the opportunity to petition God on our behalf or on the behalf of others. This is referred to as "prayers of supplication" (also intercessory, interventional, or petitionary). It is the type of prayer that is most familiar, a reflection of our self-centered nature. It is not wrong to approach God in this fashion. God certainly wants to be with us in our times of suffering, pain, and need. Prayer also provides us with the opportunity to thank God for all God has already given us (prayers of Thanksgiving). We have been given tremendous gifts. This fills us with an overwhelming sense of abundance and gives us great joy. We therefore express our gratitude to God.

How should I pray? You are not alone in asking this question. It helps to understand that prayer is not a natural behavior. This is obvious if you have ever been involved in a small group at church or a large family dinner. There is a striking lack of volunteers when the question is asked, "Who would like to open with prayer?" or "Who would like to say grace?" Even Jesus’ disciples, who would have prayed in the Jewish tradition, felt uncertain about prayer. In the sixth chapter of Matthew, Jesus teaches them the Lord's Prayer:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come, your will be done on earth

as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our

debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but

deliver us from the evil one.

The prayer starts with an acknowledgment of God's sacred holiness, a recognition that God alone is sovereign. We next affirm God's plan to bring God’s heavenly kingdom into this world. As disciples, we appreciate the fact that if this is to happen, we must be the mechanism for change. We are the people to bring God’s joy, peace, love, compassion, and forgiveness into the world. Within this context, prayer becomes more than just words. It becomes a way of living our life. We next ask God for God’s help in meeting our daily needs. Notice that Jesus uses the words "daily bread". He does not say, " Give us our seafood buffet and desert table." He does not say, " Give us a Mercedes." He does not say, " Give us a summer house on the beach." We should keep this in mind when praying to God. What we need and what we want are often vastly different. Next, we seek God's forgiveness for our sins (debts, trespasses). It would be great if he stopped there, but Jesus adds, "as we forgive our debtors". Now we're in trouble. How many of us really want God to forgive us as much as we forgive others. What we really want is for God to forgive us more than we forgive others, but Jesus doesn't let us get away with that. Right after the Lord's Prayer He continues his teaching on forgiveness by saying, "For if you forgive others when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your father will not forgive your sins." Every one of us should think of whom we need to forgive when we say this prayer. Finally, we ask God for help in our daily struggles. This extends beyond cheating, lying, stealing and other such amoral behavior. We are really asking for help in our struggle to live our daily life in a Christ-like manner.

While the Lord's Prayer is a good model, God mostly wants us to talk with God about the real issues in our life. There is often a disparity between what we think we ought to pray for (world peace etc.) and what is really on our mind (Will I get a raise? Should we put the dog down? Why are the children fighting? etc.). First and foremost, God wants you to pray about what really matters to you. If you are praying and your mind keeps wandering to something else, then maybe that something else is what you need to bring to God. Dallas Willard puts it this way, "Prayer simply dies from efforts to pray about "good things" that honestly don't matter to us. The way to get meaningful prayer for those good things is to start by praying for what we are truly interested in. The circles of our interests will inevitably grow in the largeness of God's love... Many people have found prayer impossible because they thought they should only pray for wonderful but remote needs they actually had little or no interest in or even knowledge of." C.S. Lewis states it this way, "We must lay before God what is in us, not what ought to be in us."

The following provides a few simple guidelines as a good way to start routine prayer:

1. You need a time and place. "Very early in the morning while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went off to a solitary place where he prayed" (Mark 1:35). Pick a time when you are at your best. Choosing a setting of great beauty is good if available. Jesus often chose a setting of peaceful and tranquil beauty. Surely one can pray anywhere, but true intimacy with God is best achieved when we rid ourselves of life's distractions.

2. Begin slowly; 10-15 minutes is a good start.

3. Place yourself in a calm state of mind. Take a few deep breaths and allow yourself to slow down.

4. Find a position, posture or movement that helps you connect with God's presence. Sometimes rhythmic movement such as walking, pacing, or rocking slowly will quiet the mind and help with focusing. Others prefer to kneel with hands folded or sit still with palms open.

5. Ask for God's presence. It may help to repeat a word or phrase such as "Jesus" or "Heavenly Father (or Mother, or Creator)". Sacred music, pictures, or paintings may help.

6. Keep it sincere and simple. There is no need for grandiose language. God already knows what's in your heart.

7. Another way to approach prayer is with the ACTS model (like the Lord's Prayer). A-adoration C-confession T-thanksgiving S-supplication (to ask for earnestly and humbly).

8. Including intercessory prayer is a way to expand your circle of concern beyond yourself.

9. Some people are more comfortable using set words from biblical prayers, Psalms, prayer books, and hymnals. This is perfectly acceptable presuming the words reflect the concerns within your heart and mind.

8. Allow ample time in prayer for God to speak to you. Prayer is not an opportunity for you to perform a monologue.

No discussion of prayer would be complete without addressing the question of "unanswered prayer". The perceived absence of an answer to prayer is one of the most common reasons people lose faith. Often prayer is ineffectual because we are not tuned into God's will and way. There is the joke about a woman who remains in her house despite a flood warning. The local sheriff pulls up in his car and warns her that she must come with him to evacuate. She tells the sheriff, "I don't need to go with you. God will save me." Sure enough, water runs into the valley, and surges into her first floor. Out of necessity, she moves up to the second floor. Pretty soon she sees a boat come by and her neighbor yells over to her, "You must hop in the boat so that we can escape." She replies, "There is no need for that because God will save me." The boat moves on and the water level rises further. Soon she is standing on top of her roof. A helicopter flies over and a national guardsman bellows down to her through a megaphone, "We will lower a ladder and come down to get you so that you can be moved to safety." But the woman refuses yelling up, "Go away! God will save me." The water level continues to rise, drowning the woman and now she is up in heaven before God. She asks God, "Where were you God? I am a faithful woman. I asked for your help, but you let me drown." God responds, "What do you mean I let you drown? First, I sent you a car. Then I sent you a boat. Then I sent you a helicopter. You just weren't listening." Yes, God works in mysterious ways and God’s way is not necessarily what we expect. Notice the phrasing in the passage from John 15:7, "If you abide in me and my words in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you." "Abide in me" (also translated "reside in me") is what the Apostle Paul is referring to when he says that we should " live in Christ". Living in Christ reflects a conscious union with God whereupon we extend God’s compassion and love to others. The closer we get to this ultimate state, the more likely our desires will reflect God's will. Our actions then bring God's presence into the world in miraculous ways. We should emulate Jesus. He did not establish his own agenda and then ask God to bless it. He sought his God’s will and allowed that to direct his actions.

We also pray for God's guidance and perseverance in studying God’s word. A television transmission can be sent over the airwaves, but if we do not tune into the right frequency, it will not show up on our screen. Does this mean that the message doesn't exist? No, it means we must work on dialing into the right frequency. Similarly, God's word does not change. It is constant and always present for us to receive, but we must work at tuning into the enduring truths revealed through scripture.

The next thing to remember is that our time is not God's time. Have you ever taken a child on a long trip? 15 minutes into the trip, the child starts asking, "Are we there yet?" Sometimes we are that child. Remember, God responds to us from the perspective of eternity. We only see the events of today. God's ultimate plan shall prevail, but it is only unveiled through the fullness of time. In his book God Has a Dream, Desmond Tutu talks about Nelson Mandela. Nelson Mandela spent 27 years in prison. He entered prison as an angry ill-tempered rebel, understandable within the context of apartheid. Was he imprisoned unjustly? Most would say "yes". Did many pray for his release? Undoubtedly. But he was not released. God used his imprisonment to transform him into a spiritual and moral giant. Without this long-suffering detention, he never would have developed into the great political and ethical leader that was necessary to lead his nation after apartheid. Without Nelson Mandela's spiritual transformation, there would be no Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. The healing and reconciliation between former enemies would never have occurred. Yes, sometimes we must grow in one area or another before we are ready to accept what God has to give. Sometimes we must grow spiritually before we are able to see God’s plans for us.

Too often we pray with the perception that God will press a magic button and make everything okay. We begin to think of God as a cosmic Santa Claus. With enough prayer, we expect that God will grant us our wish list, especially if our requests appear selfless. We see God as a divine vending machine. If we insert enough prayers into the vending machine, we’ll get what we want. In Living the Questions, a multimedia instruction series, Jack Spong, Episcopalian Bishop of Newark, New Jersey, exposes the inconsistencies with this theology. He relates a personal story about his wife who was diagnosed with cancer. The doctors gave her two years to live. As a well-known figure throughout New Jersey, he and his wife received thousands of prayers, a gift of love that was truly appreciated. His wife ultimately survived six years, not two. Many who had prayed viewed this as an answer to their prayers, but Jack disagrees. After all, what about the other people who had cancer but were not renowned public figures, those who did not have prayers on their behalf. Would God really let them die sooner? Would a compassionate God intervene in one case and a not the other based upon the number of prayers God received? Surely a compassionate, loving God feels equally sorrowful over each and every person's misfortune. You might then ask, "What is the point of petitionary (asking for oneself) or intercessory (asking for another) prayer if God doesn't directly intercede based on the request? And how do you explain those who have experienced miraculous healing after prayer?" My Aunt Evelyn developed a grapefruit-sized mass on her hip. She and her congregation prayed as she prepared for surgery. Two days before surgery she went to the surgeon and he diligently marked the area of excision, yet on the day of surgery he could no longer find the mass. It disappeared without explanation. Was this the miraculous intervention of God? I suppose it could be, but why her and not other, equally pious individuals with similar conditions? As a physician, I have watched hundreds of people, many from my congregation, die from advanced cancer despite prayers for miraculous intervention. I have seen wonderful, loving mothers and fathers of young children die. Fundamentalists might say that our prayers for these people were not bold enough, or that we lacked faith. But I know that is not the case. Others might say that God needed them for a reason that we are unable to understand from our limited perspective. Really? More important than raising their children? I doubt it. If God directly intervenes in response to prayer, altering the physical world as we know it, that is certainly the exception and not the rule. God is not a Mr. Fixit that we pay in prayers. So what is the role of prayer in times of tribulation? The role of prayer, or meditation, is to intimately connect with God's spirit, God’s essence. Know that God feels our pain. Know that God is always present for us. Connecting with God’s presence through prayer enables us with strength to face our challenges. God provides us with reassuring peace that calms us during difficult times. Through the prayers of others and their support, we know that we are not alone and that we are loved.

Bringing a wish list to God in prayer fails to recognize the fact that we are the primary instruments that God uses to intervene in the world. A perceived failure attributed to God might better be attributed to humans. We all must be willing to take ownership and responsibility for fulfilling God's plan in the world. Theologian Jack Reimer put it this way (as reproduced in "When Bad Things Happen to Good People", Harold S. Kushner):

We cannot merely pray to You, Oh God, to end war;

For we know that you have made the world in a way

That man must find his own path to peace

Within himself and with his neighbor.

We cannot merely pray to You, Oh God, to end starvation;

For you have already given us the resources

With which to feed the entire world

If we would only use them wisely.

We cannot merely pray to You, Oh God,

To root out prejudice,

For you have already given us eyes

With which to see the good in all men

If we would only use them rightly.

We cannot merely pray to You, Oh God, to end despair,

For you have already given us the power

To clear away slums and to give hope

If we would only use our power justly.

We cannot merely pray to You, Oh God, to end disease,

For you have already given us great minds with which

To search out cures and healing,

If we would only use them constructively.

Therefore, we pray to You instead, Oh God,

For strength, determination, and willpower,

To do instead of just to pray,

To become instead of merely to wish.

The vagaries of life defy explanation. You affectionately hug your daughter and pray for her safe travel as she heads back to college, and then an officer calls and informs you that a drunk driver has killed her. A new mother is ecstatic over her newborn and then a breast lump is found on her postpartum visit. Despite the prayers of her congregation, the cancer leads to her death. Chronic pain fails to remit despite daily prayers. In times like this, allow yourself the honesty of expressing anger and pain. Hear the anguish of the prophet Jeremiah, "Oh Lord, you deceived me, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long." (Jeremiah 20:7-8) But never let yourself forget that God is ultimately sovereign over everything and can be trusted. Life is capricious, but God is not. God has not abandoned you in dark times. God understands your grief and feels the ache in your heart. God entered the suffering of humanity through Jesus and will enter into your suffering through prayer. God will give you strength and peace to endure the darkness. God will transform the pain into hope. Reveal your vulnerability to other people of faith and they will restore you. Like Job, trust that there is a good and loving God despite apparent evidence to the contrary. Trust that God’s plan for humanity will unfold over “the fullness of time.”

The Apostle Paul asked God to remove the "thorn in his side" three times, and God did not remove it. We don't know what this "thorn" was that Paul mentions, or why God failed to remove it. It certainly was not his lack of faith. Paul was a man of great faith. I like to keep this in mind when it seems like my own prayers are not answered. In my mid-30s, I started to develop a chronic pain syndrome in the parasacral region (literally a "pain in the butt"). The pain stopped me from pursuing many activities such as golf, tennis, bicycling, hiking, and landscaping. There is not a day that I don't ask God for healing. Although my pain is now tolerable, I am still significantly limited. As a result of my physical limitations, I turned my attention to more church-related ministries. I developed a Christian resource/café center. I increased my teaching in the adult education department of my church. My son and I started a mentoring program for youth in an immigrant, Hispanic neighborhood in Philadelphia. It is apparent that God was able to use my gifts more appropriately. Through my pain, I transformed into a person who is less self-centered, a person more able to focus on God’s agenda. Perhaps the answer to my prayers was to receive what I needed, not what I wanted. As God told Paul, “…my power is made perfect in weakness.”

Prayer is a distinctly personal and unique experience for each one of us. It will look different for everyone. My wife arises early each day, takes walks, and meditates. I wake up late, and I'm no good for anyone, not even God, until I get my first cup of coffee. I often talk to God in the car (so much for the quite place free of distractions). I’m retired now but I used to stop in the middle of office hours to say a quick prayer if I had just seen a patient who was suffering or if the patient told me about a family member who was suffering. I often spend leisure time reading religious or spiritual books and frequently stop to pray or meditate upon the material. I almost always pray before falling asleep. That's what works for me. Another person might find a dark empty room or light a candle or play soft music as they try to connect with God. Others will seek a place of natural beauty and converse with God as they sit on a bench or take a walk. All of us should prayerfully reflect when we read scripture. There is no right or wrong style of praying but you must believe that prayer can and does make a difference, not because God jumps into action like Mr. Fixit, but through the strength, peace, love, and compassion we acquire when intimately connected with God. We can then bring this into the lives of others, becoming the answer to their prayers. Set aside time to pray or meditate and have the faithfulness to make prayer a habit. You must have the humility to accept our ignorance of God's ways yet remain open to the tremendous possibilities of discovery that are available through prayer. At first you may not feel a spiritual connection, but over time you will. God's presence will envelope you and you will begin to hear the small voice of God. You will begin to realize that a very special and precious relationship has begun.