



Prayer

Lenten Study

Day 1

Read: 2 Samuel 6:12-16

Introduction to Prayer

Serving as an online missionary for Global Media Outreach gives me the opportunity every day to be in contact with people all over the world who want to grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ. Often their question is: “How can I pray more effectively?” Because of the limitations of email communications—many are reaching me on their cell phone—and language problems, I try to keep my answer as brief and simple as possible. Fortunately, I don’t need to do that with you; we have the forty days of Lent to explore the depths of effective prayer.

We will look at each of the five facets of prayer (Adoration/Praise, Thanksgiving, Confession, Intercession, and Petition) for eight days at a time.

It is logical to begin with adoration or praise because it is considered to be the highest form of prayer. Why? Because, through it, we express our love of God, allowing love to flow through us in an uninhibited way, just as David was doing in our reading for today. Adoration is abandonment to God, recognizing our utter dependence on Him. It has, or should have, a cleansing effect on us.

“David...danced before the Lord with all his might” (v.14). This is an example of the ultimate in adoration: the magnificent story of the great king praising the Great King. We, in our day, can likewise abandon ourselves to the love of God as we praise Him in worship, music, and silent prayer.

R&D What do you believe is your most effective way of praising God?

Prayer: All praise, honor, and glory are Yours, Most Gracious God.

Day 2

Read: Psalm 103

The Problem of Words

As we consider prayers of adoration, the problem for many is our inability to find what we believe are adequate words of praise. One of the blessings of praying in the Spirit is that it allows those who have had that experience to praise God without fumbling for words. But there are other alternatives, as we will see in this study.

Many of the psalms provide us wonderful words of praise. Psalm 103 not only rings forth with glorious words, but focuses on the reasons for our praise. It repeats words of praise—“Praise the Lord, O my soul”—and then begins to list the many reason why God is worthy of our adoration. The psalmist (believed to have been King David) reminds us of all that God does for us: forgives our sins, heals our diseases, crowns us with love and compassion, renews our youth, and provides justice for the oppressed. Our praise of God within us magnifies as we contemplate all He does for us.

The psalmist then calls us to remember our history, a history shaped by this God we praise. He has made known His ways to Moses, He has forgiven the straying ways of His people, He knows them to be but dust, and yet He loves those who honor and obey Him. He then takes us into the heavenly realms where angels praise the Lord.

Having a hard time finding words of praise? What can be better than reciting Psalm 103 and rejoicing in this God who loves us? And there are other psalms we can use as well.

R&D Show your love of God by reading a psalm of praise.

Prayer: Praise the Lord, O my soul.

Day 3

Read: Colossians 3:15-17

Hymns and Spiritual Songs

In additions to psalms, hymns and spiritual songs can also aid us in praising God. In Old Testament times, psalms were sung. Early Christians had access to the Old Testament and freely drew from it because they did not have the New Testament and Christian books to study. Stories and teachings about Christ were memorized and passed down from person to person. Ultimately these teachings were set to music, and music became an important part of Christian worship.

Today we have a wealth of hymns, contemporary praise music, and Christian poems. These provide us with the words we seek in praise of God. We can sing them or we can quietly read them meditatively, just as we might a psalm. They give words to our feelings as we abandon ourselves to the love of God.

Paul is encouraging the Colossians to be conscious of Christ's love for them as they teach and instruct one another, and to reflect that love by praising God in song.

There is no quality to my singing; I seem to be tone deaf and have a hard time carrying a tune. I'm the kind of singer others at worship services turn to glance at, wondering who is murdering the hymn! Yet it was in the midst of a praise song in a Christian coffee house many years ago that I first experienced knowing that I am living in the eternal presence of God. Now, in my later years, almost any meaningful hymn can bring me to tears. No handicap seems capable of preventing us from adoring God in song.

R&D What have been your experiences of praising God in hymns and spiritual songs?

Prayer: May the word of Christ dwell in me richly as I sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in my heart.

Day 4

Read: Psalm 95:1-7

Worship as Praise

Worship itself is, of course, a primary form of praise. We adore God, in a sense, just by being at services of worship. In our worship, we sing hymns of praise, recite psalms and prayers, and praise God with our bodies as we sit, stand, and kneel. We share in rich fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ. We make our tithe offering to God. We learn about God's purposes for our lives through Scripture and sermon.

The theme of the psalm that is our reading for today is “An Invitation to Worship God.” It calls us to sing for joy, to come before the Lord with thanksgiving and extol Him with music and song, and to bow down before Him, to kneel before the Lord our Maker. These are words of worship that reflect adoration and praise.

Not only is worship itself an act of praise, but consider all that goes into the planning of our worship services. From the preparation for the church with flowers to the rehearsing of the Scripture lessons to be read, to the choice and practice of the hymns to be sung, to the sermon to be given...many people show their praise of God that the worship may be its most meaningful to the congregation. All of this is, or should be, encompassed within the prayer of adoration.

Having said all of this, I often find myself falling short of the ideal I have set forth above. Having some responsibilities in connection with the service causes me to be focusing on what needs to be done rather than being lost in the wonder of God’s love. Fortunately, at some point I find myself being drawn into the spirit of the worship itself and find my praise of God.

R&D To what extent do you find worship an adequate expression of your praise of God? What could make it more so?

Prayer: Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord.

Day 5

Read: Psalm 63:1-8

Contemplative Praise

Contemplation is a means of silent praise. There is the story of the priest who noticed a man who regularly came into the church, went up to the altar, and knelt before the crucifix. He would just kneel there and stare at the cross for considerable periods of time. Finally, the priest’s curiosity got the better of him and he asked the man what he was doing. The response: “I just look at him and he just looks at me.” Oneness with God through contemplation is a gift many people cherish as a means of adoring God.

In our psalm—also attributed to David—we have another example of contemplative praise. David was in the Desert of Judah at the time. He is able to draw a parallel between human thirst and his thirst for the presence of God. Like the man in our example above, he sees God in His sanctuary and beholds His power and glory. He contemplates God in the watches of the night. With singing lips David shows forth his praise.

Contemplation, according to many writers on the subject, is a higher form of prayer. The theory is that we Christians begin with vocal prayer with the stress on words read, memorized, or expressed spontaneously. Later, we move toward mental or meditative prayer. Ultimately, we discover contemplation. This may be the progression in the lives of monastics, but is not what we find in the average Christian lay person.

Regardless, contemplation is a powerful means of prayer for many and is an effective way to show our adoration of God.

R&D What has been your experience of contemplative prayer?

Prayer: Because Your love is better than life, my lips will glorify You, O Lord.

Day 6

Read: Psalm 146

Antidote for Spiritual Dryness

Praise can be a wonderful antidote for spiritual dryness. No matter how serious we are about our faith, most of us go through periods of spiritual drought from time to time. Our prayers seem to bounce off the ceiling. Nothing seems to be going right and we wonder where God is. Mainly we are feeling sorry for ourselves and are wrapped up in our own self-centeredness.

One of the best remedies I have found for that situation is to get off quietly by myself and read one of the great hymns of praise in the psalms. Psalms 146-150 are ideal for this, as we can see from the one we read today. Just reading the words of praise brings melody to my heart, but the words also remind me of who God is and why I love Him so much. He is so awesome and I am so insignificant, yet I am made in His image and He loves me personally.

As I type these words, the siren of an emergency vehicle comes to my ears. I automatically turn in that direction and make a sign of the cross. It is a way of lifting a prayer in the direction of that need. But my doing that simple thing is only a tiny token of caring for another. Compare that with the great love of God who knows the depth of need represented by that siren and knows the significance of the cross on which His Son died for us!

That is the God for the love of whom I can be uplifted and sense a renewal of spirit when I am able to put aside my petty problems for a few moments and praise Him through the reading of a psalm.

R&D What have you found helpful in dealing with times of spiritual dryness?

Prayer: Praise the Lord, O my soul. I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.

Day 7

Read: Psalm 134; 1 Timothy 2:8

Use of the Body in Praise

Earlier in this series there was mention of using our bodies in worship as a part of our acts of praise and adoration. There the reference was to sitting, standing, and kneeling during a worship service. Our readings for today have to do with lifting our hands in worship, a less common use of the body in prayer, but not an inappropriate one.

Two amusing memories come to me in connection with the raising of hands in prayer. One was of a dentist friend who found himself in a church that was experiencing charismatic renewal. "The way these people raise their hands you'd think we were at a football game with touchdowns being scored rather than a worship service where things should be decent and in order!" The other was being in a sedate, dignified worship service where the choir was singing a hymn in which the refrain repeatedly said something about raising hands in praise of God; and I had the feeling the choir director would have fainted if anyone did it!

Over a period of many years my wife and I conducted prayer workshops around the nation and beyond. One of the strongest conclusions we reached from those experiences was that there is great variety in the ways in which God works in individual lives. Our spiritualities seem almost as special to ourselves as our fingerprints. That taught us a great lesson: let people worship in the way that is most meaningful to them. Some people like to cross themselves at appropriate places in the service, others open their hands to receive God's love when blessings are extended. All of these are instances of using one's body in prayer.

If a person caught up in the praise of God in the midst of a hymn or any other aspect of worship feels led to lift his or her hands, we should want it to happen. That is what unconscious abandonment to the love of God would mean in that person's life...and that is what praise is all about.

R&D *Do you sometimes feel moved to raise your hands in praise of God? Why or why not?*

Prayer: *Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and praise the Lord.*

Day 8

Read: Romans 12:1-2

The Prayer of Oblation

The ultimate in praise is the prayer of oblation. Oblation is the offering of ourselves—our lives and our labors—in union with Christ for the purposes of God. The greatest act of praise is putting ourselves on the altar of God.

Sacrifice for sin was big in the Old Testament. Animals were sacrificed according to God's law, cut in pieces and placed on the altar. But even in the Old Testament, God made it clear that obedience from the heart was more important (1 Samuel 15:22; Psalm 40:6; Amos 5:21-24). God wants us to offer ourselves, not animals, as living sacrifices. That means laying aside our own desires and following Him. God wants us to put all our energy and all our resources at His command, trusting Him to guide us each step of the way. Doing that is an act of praise that is the epitome of spiritual worship, holy and pleasing to God. It is the ultimate of prayer in action.

This sacrificial act is carried a step further in the second verse of our reading. We are not to conform to the pattern of this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Not only are we to lay ourselves before God as living sacrifices, but we are to be growing in our relationship with Christ. It is only in that way that we can combat the temptations of the world around us and be open to the Holy Spirit's work of renewing, reeducating, and redirecting our minds.

We have said that praise/adoration is the highest form of prayer and we have looked at a number of ways in which we can praise God. Laying our lives before the Lord is the ultimate in prayer.

R&D *To what extent do you believe you have made yourself available as a living sacrifice to God? What more might you need to do?*

Prayer: *And we here offer and present unto You, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies to be a reasonable, holy and living sacrifice unto You.*

Day 9

Read: 1 Chronicles 16:7-18

Thanksgiving

The prayer of thanksgiving reflects an attitude of living in appreciation for what God has done and is doing to for us, and expressing that "attitude of gratitude" in prayer. How do we look at life: are we thanksgiving people? Our appreciation for God's love of us and, as a result, a positive attitude about life will be reflected in the amount of thankfulness we express in prayer.

King David gives us a beautiful prayer of thanksgiving in our reading for today. Four elements of thanksgiving are reflected in this prayer (if read through verses 19-36): (1) remembering what God has done, (2) telling others about it, (3) showing God's glory to others, and (4) offering gifts in appreciation.

It is important to focus on the remembering side of thanksgiving. Our faith is built as we remember all that God has done for us. Our "remembering" is refreshed by our prayers of thanksgiving.

One other point. Many people confuse adoration and thanksgiving. As one person put it, "I start off trying to praise God, but immediately I'm thanking Him instead!" The distinction is this: in adoration, we praise God for who He is; in thanksgiving, we thank Him for what He does.

R&D To what extent are you a "thanksgiving person"? Explain.

Prayer: Give thanks to the Lord, call on His name; make known among the nations all He has done.

Day 10

Read: 1 Corinthians 1:4-9

The Importance of Thanksgiving

It is extremely important to live thankful lives. Our children and those who look up to us for guidance and direction in their lives need to see the attitude of gratitude in us. That's why Paul, in our reading for today, begins by expressing his gratitude for the Corinthians and for evidence of God's grace in their lives. He was going to have to deal with some issues about them that concerned him, and he needed to lay a foundation of love for them before doing so. He needed for them to see him as a thanksgiving person and not as a grouch if he was going to be effective in communicating with them. It is a good model for each of us.

Someone has observed that, in corporate worship as well as in individual prayer, we have a tendency to concentrate more on petition and intercession—praying about problems—than on thanksgiving. Perhaps we need to find ways to make thanksgiving a more normal part of our prayer life. As Christians, we want to be good examples to the people around us. As we increase our sensitivity, through prayer, to all we have to be thankful for, an attitude of gratitude will grow. There will be a quality of joy in our lives that might not otherwise be seen.

Furthermore, giving thanks to God takes the focus away from ourselves and sends it in the direction it needs to go. In the busyness of life, it is too easy to be wrapped up in our own problems. The more our focus is inward, the tighter our little lives become. Just as psalms of praise can free us from self-centeredness, so can taking the time to thank God for all He has done and is doing for us. It gets things in perspective.

R&D Take a little time to list all of the things you are thankful for. Let God know how much you appreciate Him.

Prayer: I always thank God for you because of His grace given to you in Jesus Christ.

Day 11

Read: Philemon 4-7

The Specifics

What, specifically, do we have to be thankful for? Everyone's list will differ, but most of us can be grateful for our family, our friends, health, our work, life itself, food, shelter, clothing (the necessities of life that we can so easily take for granted), the nation in which we are privileged to live, peace, freedom, etc.

Years ago my wife and I were feeling a need to pray the prayer of thanksgiving in depth. We went out onto the front porch of our house where we could sit in rocking chairs, relax, and think about all that God had done for us. We started naming the things for which we were thankful. When we had reached about item 24, it was gratitude to God for a woman in Colorado (perhaps 3,000 miles from where we were praying). At that point, the phone rang. It was a call from that very woman! It was, for us, a clear authentication of the prayer of thanksgiving.

Paul, in writing Philemon, begins by being specific. He thanks his friend for the love and care he is showing to others. The Colossian church met in his home. Paul has a favor to ask of Philemon, that he will treat with kindness one of his slaves whom Paul has befriended. But Paul wants to lay a sound foundation for his request, and he does it by a bond wrapped in thanksgiving.

Note one other thing. In verse 6 Paul says, "I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ." Was this Paul's way of telling us that, as we share with others what Christ means to us, we will come to a fuller understanding of what this life in Christ is all about? As we do, we have even more cause for thanksgiving.

R&D What is the thing for which you are most thankful to God? Tell Him about it.

Prayer: I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers.

Day 12

Read: Psalm 100

Psalms of Thanksgiving

Just as we have psalms of praise, we also have psalms and other biblical passages filled with thanksgiving. When we want an alternative to thanking God for the specifics for which we are grateful, it can be refreshing to read prayers of thanksgiving from the Bible.

Psalm 100 is a classic example. It is an invitation to enter into God's presence because His faithfulness extends to our generation and beyond. "Enter his gates with thanksgiving" we are told in verse 4. Why? "For the Lord is good and his love endures forever" (v.5). Psalm 107 provides us with a similar theme, opening with these same verses and then recounting many instances in which God met needs of our spiritual forefathers down through the ages. These beautiful psalms enlarge our vision of thankfulness, moving us far beyond the specific acts of God that bring joy to our lives and reminding us of all that He has done many generations ago.

On the other hand, we have other biblical examples of thanksgiving. The apostle Paul, for instance, begins some of his letters with words of thanksgiving concerning those to whom he was writing. "I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:4). "We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you"

(Colossians 1:3). In 1 Thessalonians 5:18, Paul writes: “Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Jesus Christ.”

Prayers of thanksgiving can come from our hearts in remembering what God has done for us today and in what He has done throughout the ages.

R&D Reflect on a person or group of people in the Bible who had good reason to thank God for what He did for them.

Prayer: Whoever is wise, let him heed these things and consider the great love of the Lord.

Day 13

Read: Romans 15:1-6

Thankful Reactions

Reactions are perhaps the best test of whether we are, or are becoming, thanksgiving people. In a sense, we cannot control our reactions. They are sort of on automatic pilot and spring forth immediately as we face particular situations. We find our tongue saying things that our mind hasn’t had time to process. It could be said that reactions reflect who we really are.

If our reactions to the vicissitudes of life are negative, defensive, colored with prejudices, etc. it is not likely that we are developing an attitude of gratitude. If, on the other hand, we tend to respond positively to the situations life brings us, we can believe that the prayer of thanksgiving lives in our heart.

In our reading, Paul was teaching about the kind of people God wants us to be. We are to please others, build them up. We are to glorify God and be sources of hope and encouragement to others. The knowledge of Scripture affects our attitude toward the present and the future. The more we know about how God wants us to live, the better we will be able to reflect His love in our lives.

God can change us from within so that we reflect the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). He can develop in us an attitude of gratitude. From these characteristics deep within ourselves, we can find that our reactions change. We begin to see things more clearly from God’s point of view. Our automatic responses will become those of thanksgiving people.

R&D Give a frank appraisal of your reactions. Is there work to be done? Will you do it?

Prayer: May the God who gives you endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of thankfulness so that you may glorify God.

Day 14

Read: Psalm 41

Thanksgiving and Health

There is clearly a connection between thanksgiving and physical, emotional, and spiritual health. In general terms, thanksgiving people tend to be healthy people, while people who are bitter and resentful often cope with a variety of illnesses. God wants us to be healthy. That does not mean we should become thanksgiving people for the selfish purpose of good health but because God wants us fit for His service.

Psalm 41 is a prayer for mercy when feeling sick or abandoned. It recognizes that God cares for the weak, poor, and needy. David, in verse 5, cries out to the Lord for mercy and heal-

ing. He is conscious of his sin against God and he is surrounded by those who wish him ill. David knows that good health is dependent on the Lord's favor. He ends by praising the Lord for God's goodness toward him.

In 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, the apostle Paul asks, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. Therefore, honor God with your body." One way in which we honor God with our body is to do our best to keep it healthy for the work God has for us to do. Our inner attitude is key to physical, emotional, and spiritual health. If that is an attitude of gratitude and we are thanksgiving people, we are best equipped to serve.

R&D What parallels have you seen in your own life between thanksgiving and health?

Prayer: Blessed is he who has regard for the weak; the Lord delivers him in times of trouble.

Day 15

Read: Luke 18:9-12

No Pretending

The prayer of thanksgiving is not pretending that we are thankful. Above all, God wants honesty in prayer, as we see from our reading today. As we grow in our relationship with Christ, we develop sensitivity to God's bountiful goodness and His all-encompassing grace. We grow in a heart-felt knowledge of His providence in our lives, and genuine gratitude springs forth. But, we don't fake it. Wherein we are in pain, grief, and misery on behalf on ourselves and others, we lay those things, too, at the feet of God, but not in some false cover of thanksgiving.

The Pharisee in our reading thanked God in prayer, but in a totally dishonest attitude...one of superiority over his fellow man. He wasn't truly thanking God; he was bragging about what an outstanding person he thought he was. He must have thought God grades on a sliding scale and would chalk up high marks for his fasting and tithing!

On the other hand, the tax collector was not thanking God in prayer; he was confessing his sinfulness. Yet, in seeking mercy from God, he had the attitude of thanksgiving because he foresaw God's forgiveness. Jesus notes that he is the one who went home justified.

Again, honesty with God is the key. When our world is falling apart around us, we don't put on a false front and pray a sarcastic prayer of thanksgiving. Such times call for prayer more like that of the tax collector; our thanksgiving is encased within the hope of relief for which we pray.

R&D How do you pray when things are going badly in your life?

Prayer: God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Day 16

Read: Matthew 25:31-46

A Thankful Life

Finally, we show forth our attitude of gratitude by the way we live. A Mother Teresa story illustrates the point. An American housewife asked her about her ministry to the dying in Calcutta, India. "That is such a wonderful and far-reaching ministry," the homemaker said. "How can I have an effective ministry back in Peoria, Illinois?" Mother Teresa's answer: "Just smile a

lot.” Let the love of God flow through you, reflecting the thankfulness on your life to the benefit of all who come into contact with you.

Our reading for today goes somewhat further, of course, but the principle is still the same. Notice that those in the parable who so generously shared with others did so unselfconsciously. It was so much a part of their nature that they did it without realizing what they were doing. That is thankfulness in action.

So, in addition to our prayers of thanksgiving, we can put feet on those prayers. That can mean calling or visiting a loved one, a person for whom we are especially thankful. It could mean writing a letter to someone for whom you are grateful, someone who has beneficially affected your life. Or, just because you are thankful to God for all He does for you, it might be time to make an anonymous gift toward a needy cause. And, of course, you could just smile a lot!

R&D What are some of the ways that you show forth the prayer of thanksgiving in your life?

Prayer: Whatever you do for the least of these, you do for Me.

Day 17

Read: Matthew 3:1-12

The Nature of Confession

The prayer of confession is admitting our sins and asking God to forgive us.

We need to be transparent before God (open to conviction of sin) and honest in acknowledging our sin and seeking repentance from it. The world today would prefer to justify sin in psychological terms or at least to call it by more socially acceptable names. If we are to take our relationship with God seriously, however, we need to call sin what it is and truly be repentant for it rather than making excuses for ourselves. We also need to recognize that our sins are often in the nature of omissions (things we should have done but didn't) rather than commissions (specifically sinful acts).

In our reading for today, John the Baptist lays the issue clearly on the line, calling people to repentance. People came to him in great numbers confessing their sins and being baptized.

John's mood shifts dramatically when he sees the religious leaders of the day coming his way (vv.7-10). He saw them as being legalistic and hypocritical, following the letter of the Jewish law but ignoring its true intent. There was no hope for them unless they completely changed their ways.

John baptized with water for repentance, but points the way toward Jesus who would come in power and truth. Furthermore, John calls the people to produce fruit in keeping with repentance (v.8). This means that God looks beyond our words and religious activities to see if our actions support what we say. God judges our words by the actions that accompany them. True confession and repentance go much further than just being sorry for something we have done.

R&D How serious a part of your life does confession and repentance have? Explain.

Prayer: Produce in me, O Lord, fruit in keeping with repentance.

Day 18

Read: Matthew 4:12-17

Opportunities to Confess

Jesus has been baptized by John, the Holy Spirit has fallen upon him, he has then been tested by Satan in the wilderness, and now finds that John is in prison. It is time for his ministry to begin, and it does so by Christ immediately calling for repentance. The background prophecy of people living in darkness seeing a great light (Isaiah 9:1-2) is fitting to the call for repentance. We are to turn from the darkness of our self-centeredness by confession and repentance, and turn our lives over to Christ's direction and control.

There are a number of ways in which we can confess our sins. The General Confession is a regular part of corporate worship in many churches. Some people find it more helpful to confess before another person and do so with their spiritual mentor, prayer partner, or in their prayer group. Oral confession before a priest is meaningful to many. But informal and regular confession directly to God is open to us all the time.

Some people who have daily quiet time include confession in their prayers as they start the day. Others, who conclude the day with prayer, have the opportunity to review the day gone by and note personal failings that need to be confessed. And, of course, we can confess at any time! It is a good practice to keep short accounts with God, confessing to Him immediately when we realize we have sinned.

R&D *What is your practice of confessing and seeking God's forgiveness?*

Prayer: *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.*

Day 19

Read: Nehemiah 1:1-11

Steps to Confession

Nehemiah's prayer is a comprehensive and heart-felt one, but it is also significant because he includes his confession on behalf of his fellow Israelites and himself. He will be chosen by God (through the action of King Artaxerxes) to remedy the situation about which he prays. It is hard not to believe that Nehemiah's self-identification with the sins of his people was key to his being chosen for this awesome task. A person who takes confession seriously can perhaps identify with the failures of those with whom he is an integral part.

Our primary focus for today, however, is on the ideal steps to be taken in the process of the prayer of confession. They are:

- A. Sensitivity. This involves living a life that is conscious of our obligations to God and others.
- B. Self-examination. We are to look within ourselves to discover our sins, the ways in which we have failed God and others.
- C. Confession. We admit those sins and our responsibility in them.
- D. Seeking Forgiveness. We ask God to forgive us.
- E. Making Restitution. Sometimes God will require some act on our part to show the sincerity of our confession and to bring needed reconciliation. This could involve, for instance, apologizing to the person we have offended.
- F. Accepting God's Forgiveness. The act of confession is not complete until we have acknowledged within ourselves God's release of us from the sin. Too many people

continue to carry the burden of their sins long after God has forgiven them. This is not the way God wants us to live.

R&D *Which of the above steps may you have failed to realize as a part of your regular confession?*

Prayer: *O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant of love with those who love Him and obey His commands, may Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open to hear my prayer.*

Day 20

Read: Matthew 5:3-11

Self-examination

There are a number of methods of self-examination that can be helpful aids in the act of confession. The reading of the Beatitudes gives us some ideal, positive traits against which we can compare our conduct to see if we have sinned. When we say and do things that contrast with the Beatitudes—like being prideful, merciless, insulting, etc.—we need to take a hard look at ourselves.

The Ten Commandments provide us with another set of standards to compare ourselves against. What “other gods” might I be worshiping? What images am I building or worshiping? In what ways have I taken the Lord’s name in vain? Have I kept the Sabbath day holy? Am I honoring my father and mother? Have I committed “murder” in my heart by harsh feelings (and perhaps harsh remarks) about others? Have I committed adultery in my heart by improper sexual thought or actions? In what ways have I stolen from someone else by greed or carelessness? Have I borne false witness against someone? Have I coveted what someone else has?

As a practical matter, in the rush of everyday life, few of us will take the time to go through such lists. We probably don’t need to except on special occasions such as Lent. If we are growing in our relationship with the Lord, we usually know when we have sinned. It’s primarily a matter of taking a little bit of time each day to think about what is going on in our life and where we are going astray. Again, God likes for us to keep short accounts with Him. We need to clean up our messes as we go along; that way we remain closer to Him.

R&D *In the past, have you used a formal method of self-examination such as those suggested? Was it worthwhile?*

Prayer: *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*

Day 21

Read: Psalm 51

Psalms of Penitence

As was true with prayers of praise and thanksgiving, there are also psalms of confession. The one we read for today is a classic. It is King David’s prayer of repentance following his adultery with Bathsheba, compounded by his having her husband Uriah killed in battle so he could have her for himself. To make it clear what he had done—and the depth of his sin—God confronted David through the prophet Nathan (a passage we will look at later in this series, 2 Samuel 12:1-7a).

The *Life Application Bible* says this about Psalm 51: “The psalm expresses one the clearest examples of repentance in all of Scripture. Countless broken sinners have found in these words an exquisite expression of their deeply felt need for God’s mercy and forgiveness. David’s confession has helped people examine excuses, half-hearted repentance, and lack of sorrow over sin that can keep them from experiencing pardon. David’s words also demonstrate the place of hope within confession.” This psalm is ideal when we have reached a point at which our guilt is affecting our relationship with God.

In addition to all of the positive attributes of this psalm as a prayer of confession, reflect on the familiar portions of it that touch our hearts in our day: “Against you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight” (v.4a); “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (v.10); “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise” (v.15); and “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” See also Psalm 32:5 and 34:18, which are also helpful ways to lead into a prayer of confession.

R&D Do you find it helpful to use words of Scripture as a part of your prayers of confession? Explain.

Prayer: The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

Day 22

Read: 1 John 1:5-9

Assurance of Forgiveness

Picture a person running after the garbage truck to get his garbage back! That is an illustration of us if we can’t accept God’s forgiveness and let go of our sins.

Too often people fail to accept God’s forgiveness. They think they’ve done something so bad, how could God forgive them? Answer: Look at King David. Who could have done anything worse than he did? Yet, following his confession and repentance he came to be someone referred to as a man after God’s own heart (Acts 13:22).

As our reading today makes clear: if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and purify us for all unrighteousness (v.9). Confession is meant to free us from guilt and renew our relationship with Christ. It should ease our conscience and lighten our cares. God *wants* to forgive us. He’s not keeping score.

As Psalm 103:12 tells us, “As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.” East and west can never meet. This is a symbolic picture of the nature of God’s forgiveness. He not only grants us pardon, He doesn’t even remember the wrong we did! It is senseless to dredge up the ugly past because God has wiped the record clean. If we can fully accept the nature of God’s forgiveness, we can become even more forgiving people, as He wants us to be.

R&D What old, confessed sin do you need to accept as having been pardoned by God so you can get on with your life?

Prayer: For as high as the heavens are from the earth, so great is His love for those who fear Him.

Day 23

Read: 2 Samuel 12:1-7

Sensitivity vs. Scrupulosity

As mentioned previously, sensitivity to sin is the first step in the prayer of confession. Whereas an attitude of penitence is essential to a life of wholeness as a person and as a Christian, sensitivity to sin is essential to penitence. The saints thought themselves to be the greatest sinners because of their acute sensitivity to sin. God calls us to grow in a consciousness of our obligations to Him and to others, and that growth should lead to an ever-increasing knowledge of the many ways in which we fall short of those obligations.

Despite the depth of King David's sins, he seems either to have been unaware of the seriousness of them or perhaps was justifying them on the basis of his position in life. The Lord used Nathan to awaken a totally insensitive David.

Scrupulosity, on the other hand, is carrying sensitivity to the extreme; it is seeing sin in every temptation and shortcoming we experience. Temptation itself is not a sin; sin comes from consciously exposing ourselves to temptation, indulging in it or yielding to it. Shortcomings such as failing to achieve a worthy goal also are not, in themselves, sin. Those failures can result from lack of stamina, mental or emotional inadequacies, or the free will of others that have nothing to do with sin on our part. We can't control our universe; only God can do that. In the process of self-examination, we should not lose touch with reality and fall victim to scrupulosity.

R&D How do you maintain a balance between sensitivity and scrupulosity? Explain.

Prayer: Help me to see clearly, Dear Lord, that I may maintain balance on my way.

Day 24

Read: Matthew 6:5-15

Forgiving Others

In considering the prayer of confession and the forgiveness God grants us, we need also to touch on the importance of forgiving others. As Christians, we should not be people who hold grudges. We should be quick to forgive. We are taught, in the Lord's Prayer, that we are forgiven our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

In the verses that follow the Lord's Prayer (vv.14-15), Jesus comes back to the issue of forgiveness, dealing with why it is so important. If we don't forgive others, we are denying our common ground as sinners in need of God's forgiveness. Our forgiveness is not a direct result of our having forgiven others, but is based on our understanding what forgiveness really means.

We are to be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, because of what God, in Christ, did for us (Ephesians 4:32). *Do we need to be reminded that Christ died for our sins?* God forgives us solely out of His great mercy. As we come to understand His mercy, we should want to be like Him. Being receivers of forgiveness, we should want to pass it on to others.

Christ was willing even to forgive those who crucified him (Luke 23:34). We, on the other hand, make ourselves our own god if we refuse to forgive others.

R&D Is there anyone you have failed to forgive? Isn't now the time to do something about that?

Prayer: Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Day 25

Read: Romans 12:9-13

The Nature of Intercession

The prayer of intercession is praying for others. It is not something we do alone but is a cooperative act of praying with Christ, the Great Intercessor (Romans 8:34).

Intercession is meaningless unless we really care about the person or persons for whom we are praying. Paul gives us a good lesson in what sincere love is all about. Being devoted to one another in brotherly love (v.10) goes much further than having the person in high regard or being polite in our relationship with them. Real love requires concentration and effort. We are to share with others in their time of need (v.13). This includes encouraging them when times are hard, and rejoicing with them when things go well. It means sacrifice of our time when we need to be spending time with them. It also means the sacrifice of our time in prayer for those we love.

Paul tells us to honor one another above ourselves (v.10). That does not mean to honor others for our own selfish purposes as we might honor our boss in order to get a better job. We are to honor others because they have been created in the image of God. We are to love them because God loves them and wants us to love them with His love.

When Paul then tells us to practice hospitality, he is calling us to be sensitive to the needs of those we are to love. If we are going to pray effectively for them, we will want to know them and what is going on in their lives. The foundation of intercession is love.

R&D How seriously have you made the connection between intercession and love? Explain.

Prayer: Lord, help me to be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, and faithful in prayer.

Day 26

Read: 2 Peter 1:3-11

The Steps to Intercession

In our reading for today, Peter gives us a set of steps to grow in our relationship with God. Likewise, if we want to be effective in our intercessory prayers, there are also steps to take:

- A. Be sensitive. In our last study, we saw that God expects us to love and care for others. As we grow in our relationship with God, we should be growing increasingly sensitive to the needs of others. If we don't have a number of people we are praying for, it may well be that we are insensitive.
- B. Be confident. People need more than our sympathy, they need help. We should be confident that God wants to help, and will.
- C. Be specific. We should be up-to-date concerning a person's needs, and should seek the Lord's guidance concerning that person or situation so we can pray in accordance with the guidance we receive.
- D. Be thankful. As we pray, we should be grateful to God that He cares and for what He will do in the situation or in the life of the person from whom we pray.
- E. Be persistent, yet trustful. We should be willing to pray for as long as God keeps the person on our heart, but—when we sense God's release—we should also be willing to relinquish the person into God's hands, trusting Him for results.

R&D How do these steps compare with how you go about your intercessory prayers?

Prayer: *Lord, You have given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge and love of Jesus Christ.*

Day 27

Read: Proverbs 27:23

Prayer Lists

We can't pray for a number of people without having a prayer list or lists. As the Proverb indicates, it is the only way to keep up with the condition of our flock. Some lists don't need to be written down; praying for our immediate family would be an example of that. Other lists need to be in writing or we forget, from time to time, people we intend to be praying for.

It is assumed that you have a personal concern for everyone on your list. We shouldn't lay upon ourselves obligations to pray for people and situations with which we have no real contact or natural interest. There are always enough people who truly need our support to fill our list!

In any event, we shouldn't let our list get so long that it is unmanageable. By keeping it relatively small, it is easier to keep up with the status of the people and concerns being prayed for. This reduces the chance of intercessions becoming unduly burdensome, which can lead to sloppy prayer practices like putting your hand on the list and saying, "Lord, You know these people's needs; please take care of them!" Wisdom needs to be used in keeping the prayer list manageable.

Think of the people on your list as people God is looking to you to care for by way of your faithful prayers.

R&D Reflect on your intercessory prayer list or lists. What guidelines do you use in determining whom to include?

Prayer: *Lord, help me to know the condition of those for whom I pray; may I give careful attention to them.*

Day 28

Read: Galatians 6:2

Keeping Lists Manageable

"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you fulfill the law of Christ." It's what this matter of intercessory prayer is all about, is it not? The problem is that there are only so many burdens we can effectively carry. Therefore, as drastic as these might seem, here are some guidelines for keeping your prayer list or lists manageable:

- A. Limit the number of people you will pray for daily. Each time a new concern is added to your list, drop one off. Of course, it is always best to pray about the person or situation you are getting ready to drop; maybe the Lord will prompt you to drop someone else instead.
- B. Set a time limit for each person or situation to be prayed for when you make the entry on your list.
- C. Divide your prayer list by categories. Pray for certain people daily but others weekly. Those to be prayed for weekly can be divided so that you have a different group each day of the week.

- D. Stay as current as possible about the status of people being prayed for so that you know when they can be dropped from your list, or when the nature of your prayer for them should change. Our prayers are more effective the more we understand the needs of those for whom we pray.
- E. As objectively as possible, review your prayer list from time to time, seeking God's guidance about whom to leave on or take off your list.
- F. Before taking a person or situation off your list, it is helpful to note the result of your prayers to the extent you can ascertain results.

R&D *Which, if any, of the above guidelines do you believe will be helpful to you in the future?*

Prayer: *Lord, make us ever mindful of the needs of others.*

Day 29

Read: 1 John 5:13-15

The Mystery of God's Response

The way in which God answers our intercessory prayers is often a mystery. We pray for the physical healing of someone who is seriously ill, yet the person dies. We pray for peace in a country, and violence seems to increase there. We have to remind ourselves, from time to time, that if everything we prayed for happened just the way we wanted it to, that might not be the best result from God's point of view nor would it allow room for faith.

What we should want is God's will concerning the situation for which we pray. The emphasis in our reading for today is on God's will, not ours. In our prayers, we are not demanding that God do or not do a certain thing. Rather, we are lifting to Him our concern and seeking His will in connection with it. If we align our prayers with His will, we can expect Him to hear our prayers and to respond to them.

There is a caution here, however. We don't want to get in the habit of mentioning a person or situation and then praying, "God, please do whatever Your will is in this matter." That is lackadaisical praying. Instead, we should diligently seek God's will concerning the situation and then pray fervently in accordance with the guidance we get, leaving the results to God.

R&D *How diligent are you in praying for matters that weigh especially heavily on your heart and mind?*

Prayer: *Lord God, You take my prayers seriously. Help me to be more serious about them.*

Day 30

Read: Matthew 6:16-18

Fasting

The self-sacrifice of fasting is an important part of the spiritual life of many people. Going without food in order to be closer to God is difficult, but it has many rewards. It shatters our comfortable, convenient, busy lives; but it helps us get serious about our relationship with God. It gives us time to pray, teaches us self-discipline, helps us get in perspective what is really important and what is not, and gives us a fresh appreciation for life in Christ and all the blessings that go with it.

When Jesus spoke of fasting in our reading for today, he is giving some guidelines against hypocrisy. He commended acts of self-sacrifice done “decently and in order.” He wanted people to adopt spiritual disciplines for the right reason and not as a self-righteous attempt at piety. The Pharisees were seeking praise by showing off how religious they were in fasting; Jesus will have none of that! The nature of fasting is that it is centered in a relationship with God and that is a one-on-One relationship that has no room for public display.

Fasting—in and of itself—is a spiritual discipline that can help us mature as Christians; but, it has a special place when done as a part of our intercessions. When on behalf of someone in need or some situation that could have dire consequences, fasting is a special measure of devotion. That is showing how serious we are about the matter for which we pray and can bring us closer to the will of God for that person or situation. Years ago, when I was at a crisis point in my ministry, I was humbled to find that a friend had been in fasting and prayer for me at that very time. And I got the guidance I needed.

R&D What has been your experience in fasting? If it has not been a spiritual discipline for you, is it something you would be interested in trying?

Prayer: Lord, teach me those disciplines that will bring me closer to You.

Day 31

Read: Matthew 8:1-3; James 5:13-16

Laying on of Hands

Jesus and the apostles often healed by touch. In our readings for today, Jesus heals a leper by laying his hand on him and James goes further in recommending the anointing of oil to heal the sick. These methods of intercession have their place in our day as well. Thus, as the opportunity presents itself to lay hands on the person for whom our intercessory prayers are offered, we should avail ourselves of it.

In our congregation—and in many others—a prayer team is available during and after the worship services to pray for those in need, including anointing them with holy oil. Sometimes it is appropriate to lay hands on a person at their particular area of need, such as placing your hands on the back of someone with back pain and praying specifically for healing at that spot. If we are convinced that the Holy Spirit lives in us and works through us, we can believe that his power can come through our hands and into the body of the person for whom we pray.

I had the privilege recently of doing a teaching for our parish on spiritual gifts for ministry (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4). Participants in the class had an opportunity to find their spiritual gifts and were encouraged to put them to use. Earlier this week I got an email from a friend, incapacitated by illness, who raved about the member of our congregation who came by to pray healing prayers, with the laying on of hands. “She’s really got a gift,” he said. She was one of the people who had attended the spiritual gifts session and found her healing gift. It’s amazing how God can use us, if we just give Him a chance.

R&D What has been your experience of praying for, or being prayed for, with laying on of hands?

Prayer: Lord, help us to find...and use for the benefit of others...the spiritual gifts You have given us.

Day 32

Read: 1 Timothy 2:1-6

Expand Your Horizon

In our look at intercessory prayer, let us remember not to be too “local” in our concerns. Christians are citizens of the world. As has become increasingly clear in our day, what people do in one part of the world can have a profound effect—for good or evil—on people in other parts of the world. Our prayer concerns should reach beyond our family and friends, beyond our community and nation, to touch the hunger, fear, injustice, and deprivation wherever they may be.

Paul is telling Timothy that, although God is all-powerful and all-knowing, He has chosen to let us help Him change the world through our prayers. Paul’s conviction that we are to pray for everyone is based on his belief that God’s invitation to salvation is open to all. God loves everyone (John 3:16). He loves us individually and knows us intimately (Psalm 139:13-18). It pleases God (v.3) for us to show our love for the world by our prayers.

So, this is a call to expand our prayer horizon. There is the famous prayer of Jabez (1 Chronicles 4:10) in which this person—remembered only for his prayer—asks God to “enlarge my territory.” He wanted God to give him a greater vision of what He would have him do. As we think about how God might use us in prayer for people around the world, we might likewise ask that our horizon be expanded. Perhaps each day, we might pray for a particular set of people or circumstances other than those of immediate interest to us (missionaries throughout the world, peace in the Middle East, etc.). In that way, God might be able to use us in ways we have never imagined.

R&D In what ways might God expand your prayer horizon?

Prayer: Lord, increase my prayer territory that I may be of greater use to You as a prayer warrior.

Day 33

Read: Psalm 27:1-8

Our Prayers for Ourselves

The final facet of prayer, and the one that tends to get bad press, is petition. Petition is prayer for ourselves, for our own needs. Because it is our prayer, it should be about *us*: simple, direct, honest and unashamed of our reliance on God. People have a tendency to think it is selfish to pray for ourselves. In fact, what God wants more than anything else is to be in relationship with us.

We can only have a healthy relationship if we are willing to be honest about how we feel, and if God knows we are looking to Him for help. Psalm 27 is a plea by King David. He acknowledges that God is his light and his stronghold. This establishes the trust relationship he has with God. He then goes on to pour out his heart about his situation.

David had an ongoing relationship with God; he was regularly in communication with the Lord. When troubles came his way, he was already in contact with God. It should be so with us as well. That is our guideline; it is shortsighted to wait until we are in trouble to ask God’s help.

Verse 8 tells us, “My heart has heard you say, ‘Come and talk with me.’ And my heart responds, ‘Lord, I am coming.’” God’s door is open to us all the time. Do we think we can handle our issues ourselves? Why try that, when God wants us to come to Him?

R&D How much time do you spend, one-on-One, with God?

Prayer: Lord, my heart responds, “I am coming.”

Day 34

Read: Numbers 11:10-17

Communication with God

Have we become a nation of complainers? It seems to me sometimes that people in our day think they have a right to complain about everything. Some colleges provide “safe zones” in which the students will be free of hearing voices that might challenge their opinions. Otherwise the institutions say they are faced with incessant complaints and demonstrations from the students. One law school even granted students time off from class to grieve an election that went against their desires. Would you hire an attorney whose feelings were that delicate and unchallenged? We are reminded of the people Moses had brought out of Egypt in Numbers 11. Were they grateful for their freedom? No, they whined about everything!

Things don’t always go the way we want them to. Life is a challenge. What good does it do to complain on the one hand or hide from the truth on the other? The attitude of the Israelites was a source of constant irritation to God as they found fault with everything He did for them. In Numbers 14:11, God asks, “How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they fail to believe in me, in spite of all the miraculous signs I have performed among them?”

As Christians, we have an alternative. We can go to God with our problems. That is what Moses did in our reading for today. Yes, he does begin his prayer with questions, but he is looking to the Lord rather than engaging in useless complaints. God answers the prayer of Moses. The Israelites directed their complaints to Moses and to each other. Moses took his complaint to God. Moses gave God a chance to do something about the problems he faced, and God did.

R&D How often do your grouse about matters you are dealing with rather than taking them to the Lord?

Prayer: Lord, help me to remember that You are always here for me when I am in difficulty and would otherwise complain.

Day 35

Read: Matthew 6:25-33

God’s Purpose

Our “first prayer” for ourselves should be that we know God’s purpose for our life, that we may be His person and do His will. Like complaining, worry can be a drag on our life and lead us away from the direction God wants us to go. Worry can endanger our health, consume our thoughts, render us ineffective in our work and our life, negatively affect our attitude and actions toward others, and reduce our ability to trust God. It’s all right to be concerned; concern can move us toward action. Worry, on the other hand, tends to paralyze us.

What does it mean, then, to want God's purpose for our life? The problem is that we begin at the wrong starting point: ourselves. We ask self-centered questions like: what do I want to do with my life, what are my goals, ambitions, and ideas about the future? By focusing on ourselves we will never know God's purpose for us. The result, as expressed by Thoreau, is "Most men live lives of quiet desperation." We were made for God, and life is about letting God use us for His purposes.

We are to seek first His kingdom and His righteousness (v.33). We are to turn to God for His thoughts, not ours. We want to know His desires for us, to have His character as our pattern for living, and to serve and obey Him in everything. So, as we think about our prayers for ourselves, we need to ask ourselves what is really important to us. People, possessions, goals, and other desires can compete for our attention and bring worry upon us. They can take first place in our life instead of God. Only the relationship with God makes life complete.

R&D *What do you believe to be God's purpose for your life?*

Prayer: *Lord, help me to first seek Your kingdom and Your righteousness, knowing all else that follows will be in accordance with Your will.*

Day 36

Read: Psalm 139:1-16

Honesty in Prayer

Our "second prayer" for ourselves should be to express to God how we feel. "Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you" (Psalm 55:22). God knows what is going on in our lives, what burdens we carry, but He wants us to verbalize them and to be forthright in doing so. He can sustain us if we are willing to be honest with Him.

Our reading for today lays bare who we are in relation to God. He searches us and knows us (v.1). And this is an all-seeking, all-knowing, all-powerful, and everywhere present God. He is with us, and His greatest gift is letting us know Him. We can't fool Him; He can see through anything we might want to hide or any excuses we want to make. The old saying that honesty is the best policy is especially true in our relationship with God.

Scripture is filled with pleas from God that His people would call to him for help. "To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, 'Here am I; here am I'" (Isaiah 65:1b). In a study done by Marcia Lebharr, she quotes a friend who wrote: "There is nothing spiritual about pretending things are okay when they're not. Some of us work so hard to find the silver lining that we don't really let ourselves look at the cloud. That kind of positive thinking—out of touch with the reality and depth of pain in our world—can actually cut us off from experiencing God in our lives. Pretending to be somewhere we're not, to have more faith than we do, doesn't help. If anything, it distances us from God because it doesn't let him into our heart of hearts."

R&D *How "real" are you in your prayer relationship with God? Explain.*

Prayer: *I praise You, Lord, because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*

Day 37

Read: Luke 18:1-8

Persistence

Our “third prayer” for ourselves should be for our needs. “Ask and it will be given you, seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you” Matthew (7:7). We are to *ask* unashamedly. And we are to persevere. If we don’t get what we ask for, we *seek*. We search for God’s hand in supplying our needs; what is He saying about them? Finally, we *knock*. Again, perseverance is indicated. How much do we really need what we are praying for? God will take our prayers seriously if we are serious about them.

Jesus tells his disciples that they should always pray and not give up, by giving them what we call the Parable of the Persistent Widow. Persistence in prayer does not require endless repetition or exceedingly long prayer sessions. Always praying means keeping our prayer requests continually before God as we remain in contact with Him day by day, believing Him for the answer. If we live by faith, we have the faith to persevere. We know that we don’t always get the answers we want as quickly as we want them; there may be good reasons for God’s delays. But we do know that, if we persist in prayer, we grow in our relationship with God.

I’m sure you have your own stories about persisting in prayer. When we sold our house a couple of years ago, we had our own ideas about how much it should sell for and how quickly it should sell. Neither seemed to work out the way we wanted, despite our persevering prayer. The seriousness of making that sale kept us in close contact with God, even as the situation stretched over months. It was only in the long run—looking back over the sale of the house and how it happened—that we were able to see God’s timing and His purpose.

R&D Reflect on your story of persisting in prayer.

Prayer: Lord, what I want I may want it now; but thank You for teaching me to trust You for what is best for me.

Day 38

Read: 1 John 3:16-24

God’s Will

Our “final prayer” for ourselves is for our wants. “We receive from him anything we ask because we obey his commands and do what pleases him” (v.22). What do we really want consistent with God’s purposes for us? Some people refuse to pray for their wants because they think that is selfish. Yet, when our prayers reflect our reliance on God for His grace and providence, that is not selfishness but evidence of our obedience. God told us to ask, and He wants us to be dependent on Him.

As we touched on while looking at intercessory prayer, the key is being in God’s will. Here are some guidelines for seeking God’s will: (1) *Ask God*. If we believe that the Holy Spirit of God dwells within us to guide us, then we seek that inner guidance in prayer. The inner nudge may come in the form of a feeling (a heart-thumping, euphoric sensation or a hot, searing conviction) or an idea. (2) *Rely on God’s Resources: Scripture, Tradition, and Reason*. What does the Bible say about the matter? What does the Church teach concerning it? Using common sense (from God’s point of view, not the world’s way of reasoning), how would Jesus decide the matter? (3) *Confirmation*. Sometimes an event (“the opening of doors” or the closing of them),

something someone says, or relying on a mature Christian friend for advice and counsel can provide the assurance we need.

When we have a particular want—whether something we seek to possess or a decision that will affect ourselves and perhaps others—it is always best to try to be in God’s will. Frankly, even with the above guidelines, it is sometimes hard to know for sure what God would have us do; but the key is to do our best to seek God’s will, because we are in His will when we do so.

R&D *How much of your personal prayer life has focused on trying to be in God’s will?*

Prayer: *Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in my life and in my life of prayer.*

Day 39

Read: Galatians 6:1-5

Allowing Others

A humbling, yet important, part of petition is allowing other people to pray for us. If we believe in prayer and believe in what we are asking God to do in our lives, we should seek the prayers of others. “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (v.2). That *law of Christ* is, “A new command I give you: Love one another” (John 13:34). God wants us to be dependent on Him, but He also wants us to be both supportive of and dependent on one another. “A burden shared is a burden halved.” Mutuality of concern is inherent in the Christian faith.

No Christian should think he or she is without the need of help from others. Nor is any of us excused from helping others when we can. I have had occasion over the years to teach on the gifts of the Holy Spirit that all Christians have and should be exercising for the benefit of others (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4). Most Christians, when they learn what gifts they have, are eager to put them into practice; yet some are reluctant to *receive* from others the gifts they have. Whether it’s pride or false modesty, it’s still wrong. God wants us sharing—giving *and* receiving—what He has given us for the benefit of one another.

Specifically with regard to prayer, we not only pray for others and for ourselves, but we should let other know when we need their prayers. One real frustration many of us have is finding that a loved one has been ill and didn’t let us know about it. On the other hand, I once heard this story. A man’s friend had been quite ill, and the man said to him, “I am saying your prayers for you.” What he meant was that, not only was he praying for his friend but he knew his friend to be too ill to be praying his usual prayers. That’s bearing another’s burden in a very special way!

R&D *Are you hesitant to ask others to pray for you when you need their prayers? If so, are you willing to do a little self-examination to determine why you won’t let others share your burdens?*

Prayer: *Lord, when I’m in need, I want all the prayers I can get.*

Day 40

Read: 1 Samuel 1:1-11, 20

Petition as Adoration

Finally, petition, regarded as the lowest facet of prayer, can be a form of praise or adoration, the highest facet of prayer, if it reflects an attitude of utter dependence on God. We Chris-

tians have an accessible God. Because of what Jesus Christ did on our behalf, we can have living, loving communication with God all day long, any day of the week. When we pray about what is going on in our lives, we are availing ourselves of that fantastic accessibility. By this absolute trust in God, we are showing our praise and adoration of Him.

Our reading is a poignant illustration of this. Although greatly loved by her husband, Hannah felt incomplete because she could not bear him a child. The matter was made worse by Elkanah's other wife, Peninnah, who ridiculed her for her barrenness. In desperation, Hannah goes to the Lord with her problem. It is difficult to pray in faith when everything seems to be working against us. But Hannah laid herself before the Lord in fervent prayer, pledging to give her son to the Lord if He would bless her with child. It was an act of utter dependence on God, and it bore results. Her son Samuel became the great judge, prophet, and priest of the Lord.

And so we close our 40-day Lenten study of prayer. We have had an opportunity to look at each of the five facets of prayer and to consider various aspects of each. As we move into the Easter Season, may we be able to put into practice anything new and helpful that we have learned over these days. May God continue to bless your life of prayer.

R&D *What have you found most helpful in this study of prayer?*

Prayer: *Lord, teach us to pray.*

by Harry C. Griffith

Copyright © 2018 by the Bible Reading Fellowship
PO Box 380, Winter Park, FL 32790

This study is reprinted from *The Journey*, a publication of the Bible Reading Fellowship. For more information about our publications, please visit our website www.biblereading.org.