

# Training Pray

Ephesians 6:18-20 January 17, 2024

**Ephesians 6:18-20 - <sup>18</sup>Pray at all times in the Spirit with every prayer and request, and stay alert with all perseverance and intercession for all the saints. <sup>19</sup>Pray also for me, that the message may be given to me when I open my mouth to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel. <sup>20</sup>For this I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I might be bold enough to speak about it as I should.**

The average Christian feels like they don't quite have prayer figured out. Most of us have moments where we're not sure we're doing it properly - like seeing some of those machines at the gym and wondering how they work. We try our best but suspect we used the wrong muscles altogether.

Books on prayer mean well, but some slice more than they assist. I see quotes like, "A [person] who does not spend much time in prayer cannot properly be called a follower of Jesus Christ."<sup>1</sup>

Martyn Lloyd-Jones was a man who God dramatically used in the 20th century. He personally witnessed the Welsh Revival of 1904. He wrote definitive books on preaching and revival, Romans and Ephesians. But when it came to preaching about prayer he sounded like many of us:

"God knows at this point I find myself more hesitant than I've ever been in a pulpit or ever can be in a pulpit. To pray **in** the Holy Spirit. How much do we know about this?...Would that I knew more."<sup>2</sup>

If you, like me and like Dr. Lloyd-Jones, feel like you come up short in your prayer life, be encouraged. Tonight God offers us comfort. The Bible meets us right where we are and gives us what we need. You see, it's not a *secret* to God that we struggle in prayer. And why shouldn't we? It is a *heavenly* activity! How could we be masters of it without God's assistance and revelation?

In Romans 8, Paul says, "we do not know what to pray for as we should." The disciples themselves approached Jesus and said, "We don't know how to pray. Can You teach us?"

The Bible is crowded with instructions, examples, encouragements, and opportunities about how to pray. Our text tonight is specifically geared to help us - to set us on a path of prayer from this day forward. By the end, I hope we see that for the Christian, prayer is our tradecraft. It is a major purpose and enterprise in the function of our faith and it is ours to enjoy.

## **Ephesians 6:18a - <sup>18</sup>Pray at all times...**

The U.S. Marine Corps' motto is *Always Faithful*. Our Coast Guard's motto is *Always Ready*. Paul would say the Christian's is *Always Praying*.

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<sup>1</sup> R.A. Torrey *How To Pray*

<sup>2</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones *Praying In The Spirit (Ephesians 6:18)*

Perhaps this is one reason why we're intimidated by prayer. We hear these phrases - pray at all times, pray without ceasing. We hear stories or read books by *other* Christians who seem to have broken through to 'true' prayer with deep spiritual power. And I suppose some have. But Paul assumes that *all* of us can pray in all times and circumstances. Every one of us has the same access.

What does "prayer" even mean? If it's *this* important - this essential to the Christian life - we should make sure we know what it is. Is it a posture? Is it an experience? What does it require?

At the most basic level, prayer means to "address a Deity." Talking to God.<sup>3</sup> That's it. What do we talk about? Anything you'd like. The Bible shows us many *types* of prayer. Look to the Psalms and you'll see a huge variety of conversations people had with the Lord.

Paul says, "pray at all times." The last verses were full of battle imagery. The Bible shows the importance of praying *before* the battle. David was a good example of that. We see God's people praying *during* the battle. Joshua did. There is prayer *after* the battle. The apostles, having faced serious spiritual warfare, gathered to pray after a scuffle with spiritual foes in Acts 4.

The Bible shows us prayer in caves and dungeons, in houses and mountains, in the wilderness and in palaces, in the church and in courts, in joy and in crisis. There is no time, place, or circumstance where prayer isn't a benefit to us. The Scriptures present it almost like spiritual breathing - happening all the time, naturally, in every situation.

So *how* do we do it *right*? Paul gives us the key when he says:

### **Ephesians 6:18a - <sup>18</sup>Pray at all times in the Spirit...**

It's not about formulas or quotas. It's not about systems or a certain level of emotions. What God wants is for us to pray *in the Spirit*. What does that mean?

Well, we remember what Paul has already told us about the Spirit in this letter: That the Holy Spirit was given to us as a down payment of what God has promised and that He seals us into those promises. That the Holy Spirit fills us and dwells in us.

When I was in college I had a great relationship with one of my roommates. We lived together for a couple of years and got to know each other pretty well. We talked with each other throughout the day. We did things together, laughed together, were open with each other. It would've been strange if we only spoke to each other at set times or with memorized dialogue.

But my first year I had a *different* roommate. We did not get along. We very rarely spoke with each other. There was no cooperation or openness. It was more like we lived *next* to each other in the same room, with invisible partitions between us.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gotquestions.org/what-is-prayer.html>

When we have a healthy relationship with God the Holy Spirit, when we acknowledge Him and agree with Him and give affection to Him, He is able to develop our prayer lives. It's what He wants to do. Our prayer lives grow as He fills us and strengthens us and teaches us.

In Romans 8, where Paul said we really don't know how to pray, here's the rest of what he wrote:

**Romans 8:26 - <sup>26</sup>In the same way the Spirit also helps us in our weakness, because we do not know what to pray for as we should, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with inexpressible groanings.**

We *already* have a conversation running in our minds. Praying in the Spirit means we remember that He is *with* us and *in* us and we bring Him into the conversation. As we do, we're reminded about what is true and what our perspective on life *should* be and what has been promised by God, which then shapes our thoughts and prayers. We become aligned with the Spirit.

**Ephesians 6:18a - <sup>8</sup>Pray at all times in the Spirit with every prayer and request...**

Paul separates out prayer and requests (or your version may say supplication). That doesn't mean that asking God for things *isn't* prayer. He's just highlighting the fact that there are *many* types of prayer. There are prayers of praise or thanksgiving or asking God for things or confessing to God or crying out to God or lamenting before God. There are all sorts of conversations we can have with the Lord. And, you know what? He wants to hear all of them. Every prayer. Every request.

We don't have to be shy or pretend we aren't thinking what we're thinking. *The Lord already knows!* Now, *if* we are in right relationship with the Holy Spirit, our prayers are going to be shaped according to *God's* truth and *His* purposes. But we should never hesitate to converse with the Lord and to bring requests to Him. James, at one point says, "You have not because you ask not." But he also says sometimes we ask and don't receive because our motives and desires aren't aligned with the heart of God.<sup>4</sup> As we walk with the Lord and grow in spiritual maturity, as we deepen our personal friendship with God, our thought lives and prayer lives become more conformed to Him.

With that said, I would encourage all of us to remind ourselves that not every prayer should be a request. If *all* of our prayers are just asking God to do things for us, then our relationship with Him is not as healthy as it should be. There are a *lot* of other things to focus on in prayer. For example:

**Ephesians 6:18b - and stay alert with all perseverance and intercession for all the saints.**

Here we see that a major part of our prayer life should be focused on *other* Christians. It's fine to pray for yourself. But so much of Ephesians has been about our unity in the Body - how we're all connected and integral to each other's spiritual lives and how *good* that is. And so, each Christian has a duty to be in prayer for *other* Christians.

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<sup>4</sup>James 4:2

“Stay alert” means “be on guard,” and “watch with concern.”<sup>5</sup> It can also mean “linger.”<sup>6</sup> *Linger* in prayer for other Christians. We *intercede* for one another, meaning we take on the heart and mission of God. The Holy Spirit intercedes for each of us and now we join that same work as agents of God’s grace in the lives of others.

We want to be Spirit-filled Christians. One way for us to be Spirit-filled is to *pray* for other Christians. Intercede for them. And to *persevere* as we do.

I’m sure some of you here have been praying for certain people in your lives for years, maybe for decades. The same prayer again and again. I tend to want to give up. I’m afraid of becoming the kid in the back seat saying “Are we there yet?” over and over to God. But that’s not how the Lord sees it. Jesus taught to keep on asking, keep on knocking. Paul tells us to persevere.

Now, there *are* times when God tells His people to stop praying about certain things. He did that to Paul in 2 Corinthians 12. At one point in Exodus, the Lord said to Moses, “Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to break camp.”<sup>7</sup> There *are* times to stop praying about a specific situation and do something else. But, meanwhile, don’t be shy to keep petitioning, keep interceding.

By the way: We’re to pray *for* the saints, not *to* the saints. Those believers who have gone before us into heaven cannot hear you - they aren’t omnipresent. They are not a go-between for you. There is *One* Mediator between God and man and that is Christ Jesus. We approach the throne of grace directly and boldly because God the Father has granted *us* that access.

**Ephesians 6:19 - <sup>19</sup>Pray also for me, that the message may be given to me when I open my mouth to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel.**

There’s so much to love about this verse. First, even though these Ephesians were novices, even though some of them were *barely* out of paganism, even though none of them were apostles or knew much at all about the Word of God, Paul *wanted* their prayers.

You’re a brand new Christian? Your prayer is just as legitimate as Paul’s prayer. Your prayers matter.

Paul practice what he preached. He’s talking about unity, about the value of prayer, and we see earlier in the book he prays for them. Now he says, “How about you pray for me?” He wasn’t too proud to ask for prayer. He knew he *needed* it. *Paul the Apostle!* A man who spoke to Jesus face-to-face. Author of the New Testament. Miracle-worker, church planter, who walked the streets of heaven then returned to tell us about it. *That* guy says, “I need your prayer so that I won’t be too afraid to do what God has called me to do. Your prayers clear obstacles for me.”

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<sup>5</sup> *The Dictionary Of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament), A Concise Dictionary Of The Words In The Greek Testament And The Hebrew Bible*

<sup>6</sup> *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary Of Old And New Testament Words*

<sup>7</sup> Exodus 14:15

And that reveals another beautiful thing from this verse. Paul was the *smartest* guy in the room. Paul was the most spiritual guy in the room. The mysteries of God were revealed to *him*. And yet, he did not rely on his *intellect* as he served God. He relied on the Spirit, working *through* his mind and experience and everything else, but it was the Spirit working in him. Paul asked that they pray he would be able to serve God with *boldness*.

Paul talked about Christians being *bold* a lot. It doesn't mean loud or cocky. It means uninhibited - to speak frankly, without fear of reprisal.<sup>8</sup> Paul *knew* there would be reprisals - he was shackled as he wrote those words, potentially facing death. But he asked his friends to pray that he would experience a *heavenly* freedom of speech.

Now, Paul was in real trouble. But that did not change his mission or determination. The Lord had stood in his cell and said, "Have courage, Paul. It's necessary for you to testify about Me in Rome."<sup>9</sup> And so, in this case, Paul did not ask his friends to pray that he would be released from prison.

At *other* times, Paul *did* ask people to pray for his deliverance. In Romans 15, he outright says, "Please pray that I would be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea." In Philippians, Paul talks about their prayers leading to his salvation - not spiritually but physically. But Paul filtered his circumstances through the revelation of God and the leading of the Holy Spirit. And so, he said, "Ok, today, *this* is what I need you to pray for."

We should never be shy to ask for prayer, but God help us to be mature enough to recognize *what* we should ask for. To know that, we need to be in tune with the Spirit, in harmony with the Word.

**Ephesians 6:20 - <sup>20</sup>For this I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I might be bold enough to speak about it as I should.**

Ambassador in chains is a bit of an oxymoron. Rome did not recognize his authority, nor his King. Scholars tell us Paul used a pun here, no doubt smiling as he wrote or dictated this portion of the letter with a heavy chain attached to his wrist and a Roman guard on the other end.

One commentary notes, "*The term 'chain' signifies among other things the (golden) adornment(s) worn around the neck and wrists by...high ranking men. On festive occasions ambassadors wear such chains in order to reveal the riches, power, and dignity of the government they represent. Because Paul serves Christ crucified, he considers the painful iron prison chains as most appropriate insignia for the representation of his Lord.*"<sup>10</sup>

And so, we see Paul *had* a great boldness and a very spiritual understanding of his situation. But he also recognized that, though the spirit is willing, the flesh is weak. He knew he would be tempted to retreat, to shrink from his mission. And so he said, "Pray that I might be the way I *should* be."

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<sup>8</sup> Klyne Snodgrass *Ephesians*

<sup>9</sup> Acts 23:11

<sup>10</sup> Markus Barth *Ephesians 4-6: Introduction, Translation, And Commentary*

How *should* we be in our Christian life? We should be confident in our Lord and vigorous in our callings.<sup>11</sup> Faithful to our King. Trusting Him. Communing and communicating with Him. About His business. Conducting ourselves as ambassadors of the God of heaven and earth.

What an amazing reminder of God's tender grace. He *keeps* sending emissaries to His enemies to offer them peace, to offer them forgiveness, to offer them life everlasting. Rome mocked God. They attacked His children. Their whole empire was an affront to the Lord. And how did God respond? He sent people like Paul over and over to their centurions and their governors and their emperors with the Good News of the Gospel.

Paul gave the Ephesians instruction on prayer and then asks them to get right to it. He did not condemn them for not being *masters* of prayer. He invited them to enjoy it, grow in it, and wield it. To recognize how essential it is, but also revealing what a powerful, accessible gift it is.

We should be encouraged that prayer is ours to enjoy, grow in, and wield. I'm not against books on prayer. I've read some wonderful ones. I'm not necessarily opposed to trying one of the methods that encourage prayer like A.C.T.S. But you don't *need* those things to pray. God is your Father and Friend. He wants to hear *all* your prayers and then develop your prayer life as you cooperate with the Holy Spirit. So, *anything* that makes you think you can't do *real* prayer right here, right now, isn't Biblical.

At the same time, we should be fine with the fact that not *every* time of prayer will be dramatically spiritual. Martin Lloyd-Jones said there were *two* times in his long life of faith where he experienced an unusual work of the Spirit in a prayer meeting - and they were both when he was a young boy.

Even in the Bible we see most times of prayer that were what we might call *normal*. Nothing unusual or particularly fantastic happened. Only rarely did the room shake at a prayer meeting. Only once was Peter in a trance as he prayed.

Otherwise, God's people are just shown praying normally. Praying for themselves. Praying for one another. Praying that God's will would be done. Giving Him thanks and praise for His goodness and power. Confessing their sin and calling on His promises. *These* prayers are every day but that does not make them unimportant. They are *all-important*. They are ours to make use of at all times, in all places, in all circumstances, for all the world, and especially other Christians. The Bible's teaching on prayer is: *Do it!* As you walk with God, He will teach you to do it "better." But we need not hesitate. Instead, *gravitate* to it, gravitate toward the Lord by speaking with Him all the time.

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<sup>11</sup> R.W. Dale *The Epistle To The Ephesians: Its Doctrine And Ethics*