

A MAN OF PRAYER

Mark 1:29-39 Text vs. 35 *“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.”*

Prayer is a powerful way for you to connect with God. Seeking His guidance should be the main part of your spiritual journey. So, it should be important for you to understand how to pray effectively. But there may be some reasons why you don't. You may think you don't have the time to pray. Or you may not know *how* to pray.

Well, first, you *do* have the time to pray! According to a *Statista report*, last year adults in the United States spent a total of 5.2 billion minutes a day on *Facebook*. How much time do *you* spend on social networks? Well, another study showed an average Internet user spends 68 hours *per month* on the Internet. That's about 2 hours and 6 minutes *a day*. So, *there you are!* You *do* have the time to pray. As someone put it, *“One of the great uses of Twitter and Facebook will be to prove at the Last Day, that prayerlessness was not from lack of time.”*

Or maybe you don't think prayer is important. Prayer *is* important! While Jesus was on Earth, He spent a lot of time in prayer with His Father. That's obvious. In our lesson today, when *“Jesus got up, He left the house and went off to a solitary place where He prayed.”* Hebrews 5:7 tells of the intense prayer life Jesus had during His days on Earth. And because of His obedience to God, His prayers *were* heard. They *were* important. You may think prayer doesn't make any difference. But before you believe that, remember, the distance between victory and defeat is only *one small step*.

Think of that staggering defeat Israel had when they went to fight against a little city called Ai. Joshua had just brought down the walls of the mighty fortress at Jericho by following God's strange plan for that battle. God told Joshua to have his armed men march around the city once each day for six days. The priests were to carry the ark, blowing trumpets. But the soldiers? They were to keep silent! Then, on the seventh day, they marched around the walls of Jericho seven times, and at Joshua's command, the men gave a great shout. And the walls came tumbling down! The Israelite army rushed in and conquered Jericho.

Joshua was full of confidence after that. But the battle against little Ai shows the sad truth of reality. In a fallen world, you can be riding high on the cloud of great success and in the very next moment, find yourself in a valley of failure and despair. One moment you're like Joshua standing victorious on the fallen wall of Jericho. The next, you're like Elijah hiding in a cave complaining to God: *“I am the only one left. And now they're trying to kill me, too”* (1 Kings 19:10) After the battle of Jericho, the man Achan had stolen an ingot of gold, a quantity of silver, and a "beautiful Babylonian garment" from Jericho. That was against Joshua's order. *“All the silver, and gold, and vessels of brass and iron, are consecrated unto the Lord. They shall come into the treasury of the Lord.”* (Joshua 6:19) What happened then was the Israelites were punished by God by failing in their first attempt to capture Ai. Bold and careless, Joshua was *soundly* defeated because He had left God out of his plans.

How often we're like that. A workaholic mentality. An activity-oriented lifestyle. A desire to get things done and be successful! Those often make one tend to rush off without taking time to draw near to the Lord and receive His wisdom. It's the little Ai's that will always defeat you. There's a love poem in the Old Testament in the second chapter of the Song of Solomon, verse 15 which says, *“Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes, that ruin the vineyards, our vineyards that are in bloom.* The little foxes represent the little problems that can damage a relationship. Catching foxes in the vineyards was a symbol of that couple's love and fruitfulness. They needed to protect their relationship from the little problems that could harm them. It's the little faults of character, and unpunished sins, that can eventually overpower you.

Satan is so clever. He's always trying to trip you up. You're his prime target. Satan doesn't want you to be successful. So, it's no wonder the apostle Paul warned about this. *“Put on the full armor of God, so that you can stand against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood. But against the ruler. Against the authorities. Against the cosmic powers of this darkness. Against evil spiritual forces in the heavens. For this reason, take up the full armor of God so that you may be able to resist in the evil day. And having prepared everything, take your stand. Stand with truth like a belt around your waist. Righteousness, like armor on your chest. And your feet sandaled with readiness for the gospel of peace. In every situation, take up the shield of faith with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.”* (Eph. 6:11-16)

But some may still not believe prayer is effective. Or they're not worthy of God's love and forgiveness. Some may feel they don't need to pray because they're already living the good life. Some may not pray because they believe God won't hear them or answer their prayers. Others may lack the spiritual discipline to do it. Does any of this sound familiar to you? If it does, you should know prayer *does* make a difference! Prayer is *“not for getting your will done in heaven. Prayer is for getting God's will done on earth.”* But prayer's *not* magic! It's not just presenting a shopping list to God. Remember the first line of the prayer the Lord taught His disciples? He said, when you pray say, *“Our Father who art in heaven.”* And here you are, on earth, praying to God in heaven. Well, you can be assured He wants to bless you. To use you. To guide you. And provide for you. Perhaps *“you have not, because you have asked not.”* And because prayer is a personal choice, everyone has their own reasons for praying, or *not* praying.

Here are some ideas that may help you have a prayer life. Find a quiet place. A peaceful spot that inspires you spiritually. A church. Standing on the beach looking out over the water. A quiet space in your home where you can be alone. It may help if you're in a place where you can focus on spiritual things. The surroundings remind you of your spiritual connection with God. Always prepare to pray. Try having a regular time to pray. It doesn't matter when. It can be difficult to find time for prayer during busy times. One way to deal with that is to make prayer a part of your daily routine.

Pray as soon as you wake up in the morning. *Dear God, thank you for this new day. Please guide me, and help me to be a blessing to others. Give me the strength and wisdom to face any challenges that come my way. Help me to be patient and kind, and to show love to everyone I meet. Amen.*

Or right before you go to sleep. *Dear God, thank you for this day. Please forgive me for any mistakes I made. And help me to do better tomorrow. Please watch over me and my loved ones as we sleep. And keep us safe from harm. Help me to wake up refreshed and ready to face a new day. Amen.*

And certainly, before every meal. *Dear God, thank you for this food. Bless the hands that prepared it. Bless it to our use, and us to your service. And make us ever mindful of the needs of others. Through Christ our Lord I pray. Amen.*

Now, wasn't that easy? Many people pray when they're emotional. When they're sad. When they're scared. Or when they're happy. Some people make it their goal to be in a state of prayer all the time. They're aware of their spiritual connection to heaven throughout the day. Prayer is a way of life for them! And prayer can happen when you're sitting, kneeling, or lying down. Your hands may be clasped. Or held up. And pray in whatever way feels right to you. You can speak out loud. You can be quiet, thinking. But always pray with a purpose. Know what, and about whom, you are praying for. Knowing why, and for whom you are praying will make the experience more meaningful. Beyond that, there's no "right" or "wrong" way to pray. Just say what's on your heart. Let the peace of God flow through you. Prayer's not just *asking* for things. It's about *listening to God* as you seek His guidance and wisdom. Express your gratitude and thankfulness for all the blessings He has given you. And when you pray, approach God with humility and sincerity. Trust His wisdom and guidance. Be honest with Him about your struggles. Your doubts. Be patient. And be persistent in your prayers. God will answer them in His own time.

In the Bible, Hannah was one of the two wives of Elkanah who prayed for a child. She was barren and deeply tormented. So, she prayed and asked God for a child. Her faith and persistence were rewarded. She conceived and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, meaning "heard by God." That miraculous birth was a direct answer to her fervent prayers. And Solomon. The son of King David was famous for his wisdom and made a request to God for wisdom. It was a remarkable testament to his character. Solomon had gone to offer a sacrifice to the Lord at Gibeon, a high mountain 2.5 mile north of Jerusalem where the Tabernacle of God stood during the early years of David and Solomon. Solomon offered a thousand burnt offerings to the Lord there at Gibeon. And *"the LORD appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream and said, "Ask for whatever you want Me to give you."* (1 Kings 3:5) Instead of asking for riches, power, or long life, Solomon humbly requested of God wisdom, to govern the people of Israel justly and wisely. *"The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. ¹¹ So God said to him, "Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, ¹² I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be."* (1 Kings 3:10-12) And then there's King Hezekiah of Judah. He faced grave illness and was near the brink of death when the prophet Isaiah delivered a somber message to him from God. His time on earth was ending. In the face of that dire pronouncement, Hezekiah turned to God in fervent prayer. And God added an additional 15 years to Hezekiah's life. A direct response to Hezekiah's prayer! (2 Kings 20:1-10) Those extra years let Hezekiah accomplish significant reforms and accomplishments in Judah. Then, Jonah prayed from the belly of a whale. From the darkest depths of his disobedience and despair he prayed to God, which serves as a powerful reminder of God's willingness to hear and respond to sincere repentance and appeals wherever you are. It demonstrates that even in the direst of circumstances, God's mercy can overcome and bring a change of heart and renewed obedience to His will. But, when God, in His mercy responded to Moses' prayer, and decided not to destroy the Israelites after the people had sinned with the golden calf at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 32) it became a powerful testament to the effect of *intercessory prayer*. Moses *stood in the gap* for the Israelites, pleading with God not to destroy them.

When you pray a prayer for God's help, mercy, and forgiveness on behalf of others who are cut off from God's presence, you're *"standing in the gap."* There are many examples of *standing in the gap* throughout history. Esther *stood in the gap* when she approached the king to save her people from impending destruction. Abraham *stood in the gap* for Sodom. Stephen and Paul *stood in the gap* when they prayed for the salvation of their persecutors. Those people *stood in the gap* for others. And in modern times, *standing in the gap* can mean volunteering at a local food bank. Donating to a charity. Simply being there for a friend in need. It can mean advocating for social justice. Speaking out against injustice. Fighting for the rights of overlooked communities. Or, whatever it takes. *Standing in the gap* is about being willing to step up and fill a need. Speak about an issue, when no one else will.

It's a Biblical concept that can be applied to modern life in so many ways. In the Bible, when Jesus taught His disciples how to pray, He emphasized the importance of praying that God's will be done. That daily needs be met. Pray for forgiveness and protection from evil. But prayer is not just about *asking* for things. It's about *listening to God*. Prayer is seeking guidance and wisdom *from* God. And when you pray, express your gratitude. Be thankful for all the blessings in your life. When you pray, approach God with humility and sincerity. Be honest with Him. Tell him about your struggles. Your doubts. Your fears. Be patient. But be persistent. God *will* answer your prayers - *in His own time*. His answer may be, *Yes*. Or *Not now*. *Wait a little longer*. But be patient! The answer will come. Trust God with all your heart, with all your mind, and with all your strength.

And now, let us pray. *Dear God, we thank you for the gift of prayer. Help us to approach You with humility and sincerity, and to trust in Your wisdom and guidance. We pray You will help us grow in our faith and become more like Your Son, our Lord, and Savior Jesus Christ; in whose name we pray. Amen.*