

The Stewardship of Prayer in the Fulfilling of the Great Commission

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Introduction

Before moving overseas, I was asked (rightly) by my candidate consultant about my personal Bible study and prayer life. She wanted to be sure I had a good foundation before walking through the challenge of setting up life in a new environment. These “boxes” of accountability were easy for me to check off, as I was a disciplined 25-year-old.

Every day, I got up early, “did” my quiet time and then moved on with my day – often forgetting about the things I had prayed for in my quiet time. I had been taught that daily time in prayer and the Word was essential to growth, and I made this a priority. This was a good habit to form early in my faith walk, and I am thankful for the patterns of faithfulness and discipline He was developing in me. But I had so much to learn about what it was to walk with, *to abide in*, Christ. In God’s providence, He chose to use these times I had set aside to read the Word and pray, the vulnerability of living in a new culture, and the patience of local sisters to deepen my understanding of what it meant to walk with Him.

Unexpected Lessons on Prayer

We learned everything about what it was to be an adult in a context different from our home culture. Going straight from college to seminary and then moving overseas, my husband and I had always been students in America. We bought our first washing machine, our first car, and our first oven in another country. We learned how to navigate banks, public transport, utility companies, hospitals, church politics, and the changes that come with parenthood in our new environment. The newness and challenges of my physical surroundings were just a foretaste of the deeper lessons I had in front of me.

Through His Word, my own experiences, and the lives of local sisters, the Lord taught me that time with Him is not something “to do” but something to *have* and to *enjoy*. While setting aside this time was important and allowed me to grow in many ways, I often placed too much focus on the discipline and too little on the One who wanted to teach me. As I walked with Muslim background sisters living in difficult familial and socio-economic circumstances, I learned that they often did not have a quiet house, a nice couch, and a hot cup of coffee made by a loving husband to surround their daily time with the Lord. Instead, they learned the Word, bit by bit, in weekly meetings and meditated on what they had learned throughout the week. As they focused on small bits of Scripture, it transformed their view of the world, their faith, and how they viewed prayer in the work of the Great Commission. Time with God was an *integral part* of their lives, something they *depended on*, regardless of the surrounding circumstances.

One local sister was especially instrumental in teaching me to abide. After months of trying to find a way to share the gospel with a friend who talked way too much, I asked this sister for advice on what to do. God used her simple answer to teach me a great deal about the relationship between prayer and how He works in fulfilling the Great Commission. My believing friend told me I needed to pray for God to close the mouth of my unbelieving friend so that I could share the truth with her. It was that simple. I prayed,

and God almost literally closed my friend's mouth and opened the door for the gospel. And my understanding of the role of prayer in the work I was doing began to shift.

Through this lesson, He began to develop in me a passion for giving things to Him in prayer and trusting Him for the results because of the work of Christ on my behalf (Heb 4:9-10, 4:14-16). He began to show me that my efforts "to do" my time with Him every day often had more in common with the religious practices of those around me than I had ever imagined. In my well-meaning discipline, I had sometimes missed the gift of truly resting in Him. Our omnipresent God goes with us wherever we go, so why would we ever want to lean on our own self-sufficiency after "doing" our time with Him in the morning (Matt 28:20)? When we enter His presence in prayer, He gives us the opportunity to lay our burdens at His feet and trust that He is at work – always for His own glory and for our good (1 Peter 5:7).

Many days, after dropping the kids off at school, I drove across our city to visit with friends so I could share more of the hope of Christ with them. And as I drove, I often prayed, "God, I have nothing to offer You today. I cannot do this. I am tired. I do not know how I can teach anyone anything about You today. I need You to show up. Because I just cannot do this on my own." And that's exactly when God showed up – in my weakness. The days I surrendered everything to Him, even my own efforts, are the days my friends were most attracted to the gospel. That should not be surprising because it is what the Bible teaches, and I had read it many times (2 Cor 12:9-10). But, I needed my Good Shepherd to continue patiently teaching me.

In my moments of desperation, I learned a simple truth in a new and refreshing way: *because of the work of Christ, I can rest in Him*. The author of Hebrews tells us that, when we trust in Jesus, we enter true and lasting rest from our works (e.g., 4:10). Jesus, our Great High Priest, is Himself our rest, and He can sympathize with all our weaknesses. Because of this, we can go with confidence to the throne of grace, and He will help us (e.g., 4:14-16).

This truth shook my understanding of the role of prayer in the work of the Great Commission: because of the finished work of Christ, I can approach God's throne with confidence. It changed the way I saw my own time with the Lord, and the boundaries of when, where, and about which things I prayed began to disappear. I found myself depending on Him more for the small things of life and giving Him thanks for each provision.

When it came to the monumental task ahead of us as cross-cultural workers, I found myself leaning into the biblical promises that He would go with me and that He was the only One able to bring any fruit from my labors (Matt 28:20; 1 Cor 3:6-7). As I prayerfully submitted these things to Him, I learned what real rest truly is; and this gave me more energy for the task ahead because I understood that our work was supported by the power and authority of the God who was able to raise the dead. In my prayers, He got the glory. In this rest, I began to see prayer less as a simple command to be obeyed and more as a stewardship to be enjoyed.

Prayer as a Gift for the Christian Believer

While other faith traditions often understand prayer as something that is memorized, repeated, and "done" out of duty, for Jesus-followers, prayer is a gift and a holy responsibility that has been given to the priesthood of believers spread across the earth. It is never something merely to be "done" or checked off a "to-do" list. It is an opportunity to approach the God of the universe who has brought wayward sheep into His fold, to honor Him with praises, to cast our burdens on Him, and to trust Him with the future. Jon Bloom, in his devotional passage on Matt 7:7-11, comments, "God does not want us to relate to him as a mere subject relates to a king, or as a mere sheep relates to its shepherd. Fundamentally, he wants us to relate to him as a child relates to a loving, generous father who loves to give good gifts when

his children ask him.”¹ He is, indeed, our generous Father, and this should shape the way we view prayer.

He has given us His Word and has shown us how to pray based on its precepts. His Word teaches that He is an approachable God who hears and responds to the prayers of His people (Heb 4:16, 1 Pet 3:12, 1 John 5:14-15). He wants believers to align their hearts with His, pray in faith and according to His Word, and know that He hears them as they trust in Him as their Good Father (Matt 7:11).

Though God wants us to depend on Him, human nature is to seek self-sufficiency and self-glory. Jesus understood the human struggle to “perform” prayers rather than offer them simply to the God who hears. He told His followers to pray simply and in private – in an intimate place where only their Father would see them because, He told them, there was no need to use excess words in their prayers. Their Father already knew all their needs (Matt 6:5-8).

Our Good Father has seen us in our weakest and most vulnerable moments, yet He wants us to approach Him in prayer for ourselves and for others. In fact, He chooses to use our prayers as part of His plan to bring about His will. He could accomplish anything He wanted without our prayers, but He has gifted us with the opportunity to be part of His work. He is honored when we go to Him in dependence and ask Him to do what only He can accomplish.

Old Testament Precedent for Prayer

This opportunity and ability to go to God on behalf of others is a special gift to Christian believers, but as with all of Jesus’ teachings, the groundwork is found in the Old Testament.

¹ Jon Bloom, “We Call Him ‘Father,’ The Privilege of Christian Prayer,” *desiringGod*, 1 January 2023, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/we-call-him-father>.

Everything Jesus taught was rooted in what the Israelites had been given centuries before. When the Jews sought to kill Him because He claimed to be God's Son, He told them that, if they had believed Moses, they would have believed Him (John 5:18, 45-47). There is one God, and He has always been the same – before and after Jesus' incarnation (John 1:1; Eph 4:6, Col 1:16-17, 1 Tim 2:5). God's character is constant and His desire for people to trust solely in Him for all good things has never changed.

Examples of intercessory prayer are prevalent not only in the New Testament but also in the Old Testament. Abraham, knowing the character of God and out of concern for Lot, interceded on behalf of the people of Sodom (Gen 18:22-33). Moses asked God to show His mercy to the Israelites (Exod 32:11-14; 30-32). As they continued in disobedience, he prayed that God would forgive the Israelites for the glory of His name among the nations (Num 14:10-20). Solomon prayed on behalf of the Gentiles who sought God. He asked God to hear their prayer for the glory of His name so that all people on the earth might know Him (2 Chr 6:32-33). Daniel prayed on behalf of the Israelites, appealing to the character of God, His covenant, and His steadfast love (Dan 9:4, 9, 16-19). While examples of intercessory prayer, rooted in an appeal to the character of God, are found throughout the Old Testament, we also see the promise of a coming priest who will rule and reign forever (1 Sam 2:35, Ps 110:4).

New Testament Example - Our Great High Priest and the Two Greatest Commands

The author of Hebrews asserts that this promised One is the Perfect High Priest, who will live forever to intercede for His people (e.g., 7:23-25). Jesus' qualification as the Great High Priest came through His fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets (Matt 5:17, Heb 14:15). Though He never strayed from the Law, He summed up the Law with two commandments: love God, and love others (Matt 22:36-40). Loving others was demonstrated by a "new"

command: that His followers should love one another as He had loved them (John 13:34-35). And, to love Him is to obey Him (John 14:15).

Jesus taught His disciples to pray for His kingdom to come (Matt 6:10). The kingdom of God is His reign over the people He has redeemed. This prayer for God's kingdom to come is a prayer filled with sacrifice and love. Jesus' disciples follow His example as they are God's instruments in proclaiming the good news so others might be brought into this kingdom. The prayer that His kingdom come is simultaneously a prayer of supplication for the salvation of lost people and a prayer of commitment on the part of the believer because Jesus-followers are the primary means for the spread of the gospel.

The High Priestly Prayer in John 17 demonstrates the love of Christ both for His Father and for His followers as we see His sacrificial, gospel-centered prayer for the sanctification and protection of His followers (present and future), to the glory of the Father. He offered these prayers knowing that the only way they would come to pass was His walking through the betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion we read about in the following chapters.

Intercessory prayer is an act of obedience and trust in God, but it is also an act of love and sacrifice toward other people, including our enemies (Luke 6:28). Prayer for others is a simple act of love – toward them and toward God as we obey His command. Jesus told his disciples that, in showing this love to others, they were imitating the Father (Luke 6:35-36). In the work of the Great Commission, prayers for the salvation of others are a sacrifice of time *and* a commitment to be a part of sharing the good news of our Great High Priest with them in a way they can understand. In the words of Susan Lafferty, “[Prayer] puts words to our submission. And reveals our dependence on the Lord as we take in His Word and live out His Truth.”²

² Susan Lafferty, “Spiritual Formation: Essential Disciplines,” *Great Commission Baptist Journal of Missions*, Vol. 3 No. 1, Spring 2024, <https://serials.atla.com/gcbjm/article/view/3449/4639>.

Prayer and the Priesthood of Believers

While Jesus is the Great High Priest, His followers are a “royal priesthood” called by God so they might proclaim His glory to others (1 Pet 2:9). The royal priesthood of the New Testament believer means that we can approach God directly, but it also reminds us of the Old Testament priests who represented man before God. Because the way between God and man has now been opened, Jesus-followers are able and responsible to carry the needs of others before the Father. Jesus-followers do not have to depend on another person (priest) to approach God. Instead, they can directly approach His throne and intercede on behalf of those in need.

W.A. Criswell says, “Intercession must not be limited to prayers of concern for the salvation of the unredeemed. The believer-priest has the *responsibility* to pray for ‘all saints’ (Eph 6:18), ‘for all that are in authority’ (1 Tim 2:2), for those who are sick (Jas 5:16), and, indeed, ‘for all men’ (1 Tim 2:1).”³ In other words, Christians carry the responsibility of interceding both for the salvation of the lost and for the well-being of those in the church. Again, Criswell says, “If the believer-priest is to rightly assume the responsibility of the New Testament priesthood, he must with a holy intensity become concerned for others. Anything else or anything less is to prostitute the office of the priesthood.”⁴ He goes on to quote Samuel’s view that his ceasing to pray for others would have been a sin against the Lord (1 Sam 12:23).⁵ The priesthood of the believer gives us access to God in a way that was not possible before, but this access brings with it a stewardship of prayer on behalf of others.

³ J. Gerald Harris, *Pardoned to be Priests* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1988), 145.

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Jesus' Example of Prayer as Love, Sacrifice, and an Instrument in Fulfilling the Great Commission

When Jesus' disciples asked Him to teach them to pray, He responded with an example that showed the honor of God's name and the coming of His kingdom as the basis upon which other petitions should be made (Luke 11:1-14). Later in Luke, we read that He came "to seek and save the lost" (e.g., Luke 19:10). John tells us that He told His followers to ask for anything in His name and He would grant it (e.g., 14:14). When we look at Jesus' model prayer and understand the purpose for which He came, this promise in John comes with a special understanding of the stewardship of prayer for the Jesus-follower.

As Jesus demonstrated in the 40-day fast at the beginning of His ministry, all power would come from God alone (Acts 1:8). His disciples intercede, but He is One who answers – so that the Father might be glorified in the Son (John 14:13). Accordingly, when His disciples lacked the ability to drive a demon out of a boy, Jesus told them that "this kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer" (Mark 9:29).

When He taught His disciples to pray, He told them to not be like the hypocrites, looking to be seen by others but to pray to the Father and to seek His reward only (Matt 6:5-6). The Gentiles, He said, used many words and empty phrases because they wanted to be heard, but He told them not to be like this because their Father knew their needs before they even asked (Matthew 6:7-8). In His lovingkindness, He gave them an example of what prayer should look like. In a short, easy-to-memorize example, He taught them to pray for the honor of God's name, the coming of His kingdom, His will to be accomplished, their daily sustenance, forgiving hearts, and protection from temptation (Matthew 6:9-14). Commenting on its simplicity

and depth, Al Mohler said, “The Lord’s Prayer takes less than twenty seconds to read aloud, but it takes a lifetime to learn.”⁶

Jesus not only gave them a perfect framework for prayer in His model prayer, but He also left His followers with a more intimate view of His own prayer for them in the High Priestly Prayer. In John 17, He bore His heart to the Father as He interceded on behalf of those who followed Him in that day and for those who would follow Him in the future. The Messiah not only knew His people before they were conceived, but He knew them fully, in all their sin and rebellion, and chose to pray for their salvation and for the unity of the Church (John 17:20-21).

At the end of His life, knowing that He would be betrayed and denied by people in His inner circle and that those with Him during a time of inner turmoil did not grasp the gravity of the situation, Jesus prayed. Filled with anguish about the suffering and death He knew were coming and knowing that His death and resurrection were necessary for His followers to have eternal life, He prayed to His Father that there might be another way (Matthew 26:30-27:2, 27:11-56, Galatians 3:13, Hebrews 12:2). As Jesus prayed, He demonstrated His love for God and His love for others. He prayed for His Father’s will to be done because He knew that drinking of this bitter cup was the only way the people He loved could be saved and the Father He loved would be glorified (Matt 26:36-46). He did this because His heart and prayers were centered on the prayer He taught His disciples – that God’s will be done and His kingdom come on earth as in heaven.

Prayer in the Early Church

Following Jesus’ example, the early church also knew prayer was an essential part of loving God, loving others, and seeking to see the kingdom of God advance across the earth. The apostles prayed for God to provide the right

⁶ R. Albert Mohler, *The Prayer that Turns the World Upside Down: The Lord’s Prayer as a Manifesto for Revolution* (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 2018), xvii.

replacement for Judas (Acts 1:23-26). After the promised Holy Spirit came, the people of God “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). God used this example of abiding in the Vine to inspire awe in onlookers and bring new people every day into the coming kingdom (Acts 2:47).

Peter’s prayer for Dorcas and her subsequent healing resulted in the spreading of the fame of the Lord and many people coming to follow Him (Acts 9:40-42). Through Cornelius’ prayer and vision and through his own prayers, Peter was able to interpret the good news that the gospel was also for the Gentiles (Acts 10:5-6, 19-20, 33-34; 11:2-18). And when they heard, they believed (Acts 10:45-48). The church was together and praying as Peter was miraculously released from prison (Acts 12:5-11). While the church at Antioch was praying and fasting, God revealed to them that Barnabas and Saul should be sent out as missionaries (Acts 13:1-3).

The Epistles are also filled with examples of how integral prayer was in the life of the early Church. In Romans, we read that, when we do not know what to pray, the Spirit Himself intercedes on our behalf (Rom 8:26). Paul later tells us that prayer is meant to engage both our intellect *and* our hearts (1 Cor 14:15). He tells the Ephesian church to pray “at all times . . . making supplication for all the saints” (Eph 6:18). We read about believers praying for one another, for their perseverance, for their effectiveness in sharing the gospel, for their spiritual understanding, and for their healing (Col 1:3, 9; 4:3, 1 Thess 3:10, 2 Thess 1:11, Phlm 6, Heb 13:8, Jas 5:14, 16). When Paul argues that the Jews unsuccessfully sought to be made right with God through their own works, he prayed for their salvation, based on the work of Christ alone (Rom 9:30-10:4).

Application

Take a moment, *right now*, to think about what this means for your life and the way you approach the gift and responsibility of prayer. Think about how these truths affect the way you communicate with others about how they can

pray for you. Think about how they might affect the value you place on time in intercessory prayer for believers and for the lost. Think about how they might affect your dependence on the Father as the true Hero of our story and the only One who can give fruit.

I would like to simply challenge you to pray. Ask Him to show you your own weakness and dependence on Him. If He reveals something in your life or way of thinking that needs to be confessed, take time to confess your sin and remember the hope of the gospel. Rest there and praise Him for His goodness and grace. Give these things to Him, and trust in His strength. Ask Him to show up in your weakness and do amazing things that show His strength to the watching world.

If you need a few hours or a day (or more) to spend with Him and let Him recalibrate your thinking, set that time aside right now. You will not regret it.

After you have heard from Him, share what He has shown you with someone else – a friend, a spouse, a team leader. Perhaps, He might be teaching you something that will edify others as we work together to see people from every tribe, people, and language come together in this beautiful and royal priesthood of believers spread across the globe.

Conclusion

As Jesus taught us, prayer does not need to be complicated. He is pleased when it is simple and to the point. God uses our prayers in the fulfillment of the Great Commission as He shows up in our weakness, closes the mouths of those who need to hear, opens prison doors, and opens our hearts to those around us who still need to hear the hope of the gospel. As we look to the examples of prayer in the Old and New Testaments, we see that, like God's character, His heart for prayer has never changed. He loves to hear and respond to the prayers of His people because this is a key part of abiding in Him.

As we pray in biblically informed ways for ourselves and others, He teaches and molds us into His likeness, calibrating our hearts to His. And as we align our hearts with His and submit our requests to Him, we see fruit come not by our efforts or strength but from Him, who is the true Vine.

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