



PRAYER

Week 1 – May 7-13

- **Passage: Psalm 34**
- **Memory Verse:** *“Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!”* (Psalm 34:8, ESV)
- **Big Idea**
 - How does prayer engage and shape the desires of our hearts?
 - How would you summarize the main idea of the sermon this week?
- **Applying God’s Word in Community**
 - The summer often provides more opportunities for rest (vacation, play, etc.). How can cultivating a rhythm of daily prayer contribute to that rest?
 - What are obstacles to receiving the soul rest God offers through prayer?
 - Do you have a rhythm of daily prayer? What would help you begin to cultivate and sustain one this summer?
 - Do you need to find someone to *show* you how to pray? Who could you ask? Is there someone in your life you need to *show* how to pray?
 - Boasting in the Lord (Psalm 34:2) is a “counter-habit” that uproots pride, complaint and grumbling. What’s something you can boast in the Lord this week?
- **Prayer**
 - A (Adoration) - What’s something great about God from this passage?
 - C (Confession) - What’s something that prompts us to ask for God’s forgiveness?
 - T (Thanksgiving) - What are some things we are thankful for?
 - S (Supplication) - What is something we can ask God to help us with?
- **Questions for Kids:** Spend time asking the kids in your life these simple questions as you eat, take a walk, do bath times, etc.
 - Q: What is prayer? A: Talking to and listening to God.
 - Q: How should we approach God? A: As children approach a father.
 - Q: Who/what can we be praying for today?
 - The best way to teach kids to pray is to let them watch and listen to your prayers. Spend time praying together as a family, adoring God, confessing to him, giving thanks for his kindness, and letting him know where you need help.
- **Going Deeper** - Questions to engage Pastor John’s article “Prayer Is Like a Muscle”
 - How would you approach prayer differently if you thought of prayer “fitness” more like physical fitness?
 - Are there any areas where you might be reluctant to make yourself low in prayer?
 - Pray and ask God to grow your patience and endurance in prayer (Psalm 27:13-14).

Prayer is Like a Muscle

If we pastors are honest, we'd probably confess with some chagrin that we like it when we see people physically affected by our preaching. We're encouraged when people sit at attention during the sermon. We enjoy the rumors that people come "because the teaching is strong." But if we're honest still, most of us don't have those experiences as often as we'd like.

But what I have been surprised to find is that as a pastor, some of the most regular fruit has come from regularly teaching people how to pray. And so, for many of us, while our preaching doesn't bring standing-room-only crowds, my bet is that you'll always have more than enough people willing to learn to pray and grow.

That was a surprising discovery. But there was another discovery that wasn't as surprising: praying is hard and, by consequence, teaching people to pray is hard. Prayer is a bit like a muscle.

I remember sitting with a graduate student, talking about prayer. He was a new Christian. He didn't know how exactly to pray, but he was eager. I told him prayer doesn't come once we learn a technique or a few steps, it comes like a runner's endurance. Prayer is like a muscle.

His confidence was high and he half-ignored my remark. The next time we met, he came with the confession that he didn't take my advice seriously about prayer being like a muscle because he had the ability to study for several hours at a time and had remarkable focus. Prayer seemed like something he could easily handle. But he confessed that prayer was hard. He had a difficult time keeping up.

People who have learned to pray and have had a simple, daily but faithful prayer life, whether for 10 years or for 50, will tell you it's like being a marathon runner. You run with a growing freedom and joy the *more* you run.

My graduate school friend was surprised at how hard prayer was because he assumed he was using the same mechanism to pray that he was using to study. Certainly, there's an intellectual side to prayer and if you have a small attention span, prayer will be a deeper and different struggle. But there's something of the soul that's used in prayer and communion that doesn't get tapped and exercised in intellectual endeavors. And for many of us modern people, it doesn't get stirred much at all during our lives. Even though as Christians, we recognize our need to pray and, in fact, our love and desire compels us to, we often feel like a wet match trying to strike a flame.

To put it differently, imagine someone who had spent his entire 20's living entirely for himself. He left home without much regard for his family, went after relationships as a means for pleasure, rather than for friendships or companionship, used co-workers as rungs on a ladder and, suddenly, he falls in love. He feels as if he can sacrifice anything for this person. The problem is, love and sacrifice don't happen on a whim. People fall in love, but they don't often fall into sacrificial love. That takes work. The person who spends their life being self-indulgent in relationships will find it impossible to be sacrificial in a snap.

So it is with prayer. There's an inner part of us that's exercised and strengthened, stretched and shaped when we pray. And for most of us, that part lies dormant for long seasons of our lives. Listening is hard, but knowing how to listen *in prayer* is harder. We don't know how to be silent. The clutter and voices of everyday life fill up the void quickly. Fears and shame strangle our solitude. I wrote down a prayer one time in my journal: "Father, I wish my communion with you would distract me from my worries

rather than my worries distracting me from you." I wonder if you can resonate with that prayer.

Much of what God is doing in us is slow, quiet work. It isn't normally radical progress. It can be frustrating when we ask for God's help or God's presence and we overlook his provision, we overlook his answer, because we don't know how to see. While God's work is generally down outside of our notice, prayer exposes what God is doing or at least shapes us into people who know how to be patient with *how* God works. Prayer keeps us in step with what he's doing.

But it takes particular eyes and particular ears to sense that only a praying life builds up in us. In John 2, Jesus' first miracle was to turn water into wine at a wedding where there was as good in the wedding planning. This was his first "sign" – his calling card – and no one knew he preformed the miracle except where John puts this little parenthetical statement: "though the servants who had drawn the water knew" (John 2:9). And isn't it interesting that the next big exposé was in John 4, where the first person that Jesus shows his identity to was a moral outcast, the Samaritan woman.

The first sign and first disclosure of his identity are shown to forgettable servants and a needy sinner. And throughout the gospels we find Jesus resisting the powerful and the pompous and going to the outcast and the humble. Is it not the "teacher of Israel" Nicodemus who missed what Jesus was doing, evening though *he was looking* ? If we want to see and experience what God does in us and around us, which is quiet and subtle, we must make ourselves low. And prayer is the regular practice and rhythm of lowering ourselves to better views of his work.

And, of course, that's the strange irony, that prayer is the strengthening of an inner muscle that does nothing more than boast in weakness. It provides ears to hear, knowing we do not listen well, and eyes to see, knowing we are blind to much of what we ought to see.