

Membership Class

November 8, 2015

## **Attention to God's Word & Persistence in Prayer**

(Word Count: aim for 3000-3100 total)

*Open with prayer*

### **Introduction to this lecture**

Over the last few weeks we've looked at the background of our denomination, the Reformed Presbyterian Church, and our particular church. We've also looked at the most important practical commitments we make as church members: to attend weekly worship. This week we're going to look at two private practices that are incredibly important for anyone who wants to live as a Christian. We commit to these in our Covenant, Question 5: "To the end that you may grow in the Christian life, do you promise that you will diligently read the Bible, [and] engage in private prayer ...?" We're going to look at the "why" and the "how" of private prayer and Bible reading, practices we sometimes call "devotions."

Christians have devotional habits that are all over the place. Most of us need more regular habits of reading and prayer than we have right now. Before we look at these practices separately, I want to give you four basic things to do in order to develop a habit of devotions.

First: *carve out time* to read and pray. Early in the day works better for 80% of people, but pick a time. "If you fail to plan, you plan to fail." For me that means setting the alarm early, otherwise prayer and Bible reading don't happen. Carve out time and make it happen: give something else up if you have to. Go to bed a little earlier; watch a bit less TV.

Second: *carve out space* for devotions. Indoors or outdoors, find a private place for Bible reading and prayer. Jesus speaks of praying "in your closet" in Matthew 6. A closet is fine, if there's room for you and you have enough light to read by!

Third: get *accountable to someone*. It could be a spouse, or your parents, or a friend. Have someone in your life who cares that you read and pray, and ask them to check on you from time to time. Preferably someone who already has these habits (not your friend who is also struggling).

Fourth: *avoid distractions, especially electronics*. Electronics are direct competition with devotions for our attention. I (Pastor Howe) leave my phone in my room when I get up; otherwise I'll be too tempted to check email, Google something, look at Facebook, etc. I got a watch so I can check the time and steep my tea without a phone in the room. Kill the temptation.

*2 minutes for questions.*

### **Attention to God's Word**

One of the things we see in life is that there are no magic tricks to growing and improving in anything. Advertisements promise "Six-pack Abs in Six Minutes a Day" or "5 Brilliant Strategies to Make Your Business Take Off!" but they're always false. The trick in life is that there is no trick. Real improvement is always a matter of doing the basics: the things everyone knows to do, but not many people actually do. The saying, "the best do the basics better," is exactly right.

For Christians, reading the Bible and praying daily are the basics. If you do them, you are going to grow stronger in Christ (not perfect, but stronger). If you don't, you're going to be vulnerable when times of testing come. No athlete prepares for a game or meet by lounging on the couch eating Doritos. An athlete prepares by running, lifting weights, and eating right. Private attention to the Bible and private prayer are our training. Sometimes they will be pleasurable in themselves, sometimes not. But they will *always* strengthen us in faith and obedience to our Lord, and prepare us for the attacks of the enemy as we walk the path to Heaven. But doing the basics is hard! So let's talk about the *why* of Bible reading (for now), and then talk about the *how*.

The Apostle Paul says in a letter to Pastor Timothy that not only is the Bible God's very word ("breathed out by God"), but it is *useful* (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Let's explore that. "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." Listen to the words Paul stacks up. Scripture is profitable for *teaching*: for conveying truth. For *reproof*: fighting against false teaching (and there's lots of false teaching out there!). For *correction*: for gently setting errors straight in people who are wrong, but not wicked. For *training in righteousness*: helping us see the practical impact of the truth on our lives. Why? so "that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work." This refers first to elders, but it is for every other Christian too: we are all called to teach, reprove, correct, and train ourselves and others.

Not only is the word of God useful and life-giving, it is a "means of grace" (*Larger Catechism* questions 154-157). It is one of the ways that God gives to us the blessings of Christ: "The Spirit of God maketh the reading ... of the Word, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing and humbling sinners; of driving them them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ; of conforming them to his image, and subduing them to his will; of strengthening them against temptations and corruptions; of building them up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation." (55)

Why is the Bible so powerful? It is God who is speaking, not just men. God, not just Moses, Isaiah, David, John, and Paul, wrote the Bible. The primary way God speaks to his people is through words he has already spoken. Do you want to hear God's word to you? Read the Bible — a lot. His Spirit will take words that you have heard or read, and apply them to your life. This won't mainly happen *while* you are reading. Instead, you will be pondering some question: what do I do? what do I say? what will happen to me? And the Spirit will speak to you with the words of Scripture. "Think over what I say," Paul says to Timothy, "for the Lord will give you understanding in everything," (2 Timothy 2:7). And Jesus promises that "the Helper, the Holy Spirit, ... he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you," (John 14:26).

American culture is full of people who are “spiritual” in one way or another. But we have the tools for real spirituality. Private reading of Scripture is our primary occasion for meditation. It is different from Hindu or Buddhist meditation, because we are not clearing the mind but walking and talking with the Spirit of God within the “house” of the mind.

Now let’s talk about *how* to be a daily Bible reader. In addition to what we discussed earlier (time, space, accountability, no electronics), there are a couple of things to do in order to start this habit. Step One: get a Bible! If you don’t have one, talk to me and I’ll give you one. People debate what the best English translation is, but most major translations are good ones. I feel that the English Standard Version (which we use in our pews), the King James and New King James Versions, the New American Standard Bible, and the New International Version are all excellent translations. Pick one and read it. Read it in French, Swahili, or another language — whatever is most comfortable for you. You may want to get one with tools like maps, cross-references, or study notes. But the most important question is, do you have a Bible? Audio Bibles are great too. If you prefer that, find a non-annoying recording and listen to the Bible on your phone or CD player.

Step Two: make a plan — or use someone else’s plan! I *do not* recommend the “random page” method of reading. At *least* take a book and read it straight through before picking another. The “read through the Bible in a year” plan is at least two centuries old, and it’s a good one. Here are two excellent plans. First, Robert Murray M’Cheyne’s plan. With that you read the Old Testament once, the New Testament and the Psalms twice.

(<http://www.mcheyne.info/calendar.pdf>) Second, the Discipleship Journal Bible Reading Plan. This one takes you through the Bible once a year, and it can easily be converted to two years or four years if that’s too much. It’s 25 readings per month, which leaves you some “catch-up days” if you miss sometimes. (<http://tinyurl.com/o5lr7pp>) If you do start one of these plans, don’t panic if you mess up the plan! Unless you’re very disciplined, you’re going to miss days: I have a hard time with this myself. Let this be your motto: “Forgetting what lies behind and straining toward what lies ahead, I press on,” (Philippians 3:13-14). Every day you read your Bible, you win. The goal is not perfection but progress. If you miss a day

or a week or a month, pick up your Bible and keep going. God is speaking: listen to *him* and forget about yourself and your performance for awhile.

Last practical note: some people read very short passages and meditate on them for a long time. I think that unless you've read through the Bible many times over a period of years, you should read for distance, not depth. Scripture interprets scripture, so the more of the Bible you've read, the better you'll understand what you've read. For most people, I suggest at least a chapter a day, up to five or even more (if you have time, and if the chapters aren't psalm 119).

To wrap up the discussion of Scripture reading, let's just recall *why* we read the Bible. Jesus said, "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is they that bear witness of me," (John 5:39). Jesus saying is that the Bible is *about* Jesus Christ. It is a letter from God about his son. All through its pages we meet him. If you believe this, you will give attention to the Bible. You will set aside time for it. You will give it full attention. You will be humble as you read. You will let your life be directed by the word of Christ.

*5 minutes for questions*

### **Persistence in Prayer**

Prayer is the basic discipline of the Christian life. When we come together, we come together to pray. When we are on our own, we still pray. Jesus gave us a model for prayer which was itself a prayer which we should pray: "Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation," (Luke 11:2-4).

The Lord's Prayer teaches us how to pray. In comparison with the prayers of observant Jews in his day, Jesus' prayer is short, simply, and plainly spoken. It is also bold, going so far as to call the Creator "Father"! Jesus could, of course, call God his Father. But through Jesus we also address God as Father — since through faith in Christ we are united to him and adopted as God's children" "but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by

whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ (Romans 8:15). When we come to God in prayer, we come confidently, as children do to a Father they know loves them. This is why we *are able* to pray. Let’s talk about why we should want to pray.

First, *prayer is action*. It is our primary way of getting anything done. “You do not have, because you do not ask,” says James (James 4:2). If you say you want something but won’t take the trouble to pray for it, either you do not want it, or you do not believe in God’s power to give you what you want. We tend to be practical atheists: we don’t bother to pray for our needs; we just go after them. Your prayer habits reveal your beliefs: whether you trust God or are hard-hearted, uncaring for those around you.

Second, very simply, *God answers prayer*. He never promises to answer wishes or thoughts — he’s not the Sky Fairy (I’m pretty tired of hearing that someone’s thoughts are with me when I’m having a hard time: what good does that do?). Do you believe that God answers prayer? “Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours,” (Mark 11:24). This is not a blank check: James warns against those who “ask wrongly, to spend it on [their] passions,” (James 4:3). But it is an assurance: our God really does hear his children’s voice, and will supply them all they ask in order to glorify him and enjoy him.

Now, we should be clear: there are reasons God *won’t* answer a prayer — even a prayer for a very good thing. If we are in unrepentant sin, we should not expect God to answer us: “If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened,” (Psalm 66:18). If we refuse to forgive others, Jesus says, we will not be forgiven (Matthew 6:12, 14-15; Mark 11:25). Peter warns husbands that if they are harsh or bitter toward their wives, their prayers will be hindered (1 Peter 3:7; see also Colossians 3:19). Praying with sinful motives will hinder our prayers. Don’t think God will give us anything which makes us less dependent on him: he knows that we need *him* more than anything else.

As you pray, focus on God’s glory and his kingdom; pray for what will make these things greater, and be confident that you will receive them (or something even better). The Lord’s prayer puts first things first: “Our Father ... hallowed by thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done ...”. Elsewhere Jesus says, “Do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we

eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ... But *seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness*, and all these things will be added to you,” (Matthew 6:31, 33).

In his fiery little letter, James, the brother of Jesus ends with a wonderful note on prayer: Elijah was “just a guy,” as Francis Chan put it. “Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit,” (James 5:17-18; see 1 Kings 17:1; 18:41-46). Elijah brought about great events through prayer, and in prayer he was an ordinary believer in God, like us.

When it comes to prayer, go big or go home. Jesus tells his disciples that the gift of the Spirit and the privilege of prayer are their two great blessings for the time between times, the time between Jesus’ ascension to Heaven and his return. That is where we are right now. The Spirit is at work in powerful ways all over the world, and all around us. He is teaching sinners of their need for God’s grace, changing hearts so that people believe in Christ, and overturning the lies of the Devil. Pray in the light of these great things: pray big prayers.

How shall we pray? Carve out time, carve out a place, read Scripture. As you develop a prayer life, make a list and pray through it. Pray *for people*: your church, your friends, your family, people beyond your everyday circle. Too many people? Pray for some of them each day (number them 1-2-3, 1-2-3, etc. and pray for the 1’s today, the 2’s tomorrow, and so on). Pray *everyday*: establish this habit as early as you can and as firmly as you can. Pray *physically*. Normally, praying on your knees with your lips moving focuses you in a way that relaxing and praying with your mind doesn’t. Pray *with others* (in prayer meeting, family worship, church), but also pray *by yourself*.

The Lord’s Prayer is a glorious prayer prayed “as is;” it is also a perfect model for the content of our personal prayers. We pray that God would glorify himself through the salvation of many. We pray that Jesus would return soon. We pray that we and others would obey God as we ought. We pray for provision for our needs. We pray for forgiveness, and promise to forgive others when they sin against us. We pray for help resisting temptation. I

(Pastor Howe) preached a series on the Lord's Prayer in 2013, available on SermonAudio.com: a great place to start exploring the riches of the prayer.

Pray for the sick, the troubled, the sinful, the persecuted. Pray that the gospel and the church may triumph in the dark places of the world and in our city. Pray that we would be unified, not just in this congregation, but throughout Christ's one church. Pray for our city, that God would be kind to it, that it would have peace, that it would know salvation.

Remember as you pray that your right to pray came at a tremendous cost. It is not something all mankind has, and it is not something we won for ourselves. "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you," Jesus said (John 15:16). The reason we can pray is that when Jesus was on the cross, the Father turned his face away from the Son. "Jesus cried with a loud voice ... 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (Mark 15:34). Because of that mysterious, terrible moment, when God was cut off from God, the veil between God and man is torn forevermore, and we can enter in the name of our resurrected high priest, and God will *hear us*. Let's not neglect the gift we have been given.

*5 minutes for questions.*