

# Staying Centered in God through Prayer

Closer: Developing Life with God  
March 19, 2017 – Brad Bailey

Luke 5:15-16

*"...the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed."*

Matthew 6:5-6

*"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."*

- God wants to have \_\_\_\_\_ with you.
- Personal time with God our Father involves time in which we \_\_\_\_\_ from other focuses.
- Personal time with God involves joining God's \_\_\_\_\_ of true Life and Love through prayer

## Prayer involves...

P \_\_\_\_\_ (Recognizing the reality of who God is.)

*"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name."* - Matthew 6:9

*"Ascribe to the Lord, the glory due his name."* – Psalm 29:2

A personal moment:

R \_\_\_\_\_ (Restoring alignment with God's heart and will.)

*"... your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."* – Matthew 6:10

*"Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."* – Matthew 6:12

A personal moment:

A \_\_\_\_\_ (Bringing your needs to God as the ultimate provider of all good and grace.)

*"Give us today our daily bread."* – Matthew 6:11

Proverbs 30:8: "Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread."

Personal moment:

Yield (Waiting on what the Spirit of God may communicate to your spirit.)

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Intro

We are in the season often referred to as Lent...which culminates in engaging the greatest act of love in all eternity... an act of love for you. That is the sacrifice and suffering of Christ.

**Why? To make** a way for you and I to have unending life and love with God.

It is the life which Jesus showed us how to enter.

Jesus entered our current state of life... and lived in an **ongoing connection...a life centered in the life and love of God the Father.**

Luke, who was a doctor in his times, gives this account...

**Luke 5:15-16 (NIV)**

“...the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.”

On one level, we might identify with Jesus being overwhelmed and wanting to get away.

News was spreading. Crowds are coming. It's a **picture of the affirmation** that we so typically long for.

**We want the affirmation of the crowds.**

We can believe that if only others would **affirm** that we **fit in...**that we are **valuable...significant.**

In many regards, it's a **picture of success.**

> **But Jesus knows...we can't find ourselves in others.**

So Jesus “**often withdrew to lonely places**”... a place to be alone.

What do you feel when you read those words?

There is a natural tendency to want to **get away from aloneness...** Maybe not by getting out into a crowd...but **away from ourselves...**so we **go to our devices... daydreams.**

But Jesus goes somewhere else... he “withdrew to lonely places **and prayed.**”

**Jesus knew that we don't find ourselves in others...nor simply within ourselves.**

**The pain of being alone is not resolved by crowds or cocoons (of our own imagination)...but in connection with God.**

His **disciples begin to see...** that **his strength** was **in his connection.**

Jesus **drew away and took intentional time** to **connect with the Father in heaven.**

He was never rooted only in this realm.

And so they ask... **“Lord, teach us to pray”**...and as part of his response...I want to hear his words in Matthew 6 again...where he responded...

**Matthew 6:5-6 (NIV)**

"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

I return to these words...because they speak of some very fundamental truths ...

First, you should realize that...

**1. God wants to have personal time with you.**

**Why would the creator** of the universe **want to have personal time** with you?

Because he is your Father.

Jesus says, “pray to your Father, who is unseen.”

You need to get away from just playing your life out to others...by taking time with the true source of all life and love.

The Creator of everything...is **your ultimate Father.**

We need to let that sink in.

(Many of us recall watching the Star Wars films ...and the ultimate moment when Luke Skywalker discovers that Darth Vader is his father. We see the enormity of taking that in. How much more is actually at hand when you discover that the creator of the universe is your Father?

The Creator of everything **is the ultimate source of your existence.**

The Creator of everything **loves you.**

The Creator of everything **believes in you.**

Jesus belonged to the Father. And he declares that is who you ultimately belong to.

We also can recognize that...

**2. Personal time with God our Father involves time in which we disengage from other focuses.**

**Jesus describes how the religious leaders were focused on the affirmation of others.**

We can all become so **focused on others**... on those who **have no more perspective than we have**...no more position out of which to tell us who we ultimately are.

Social acceptance may seem a better deal to strike—the awards are immediate, but that’s all the reward you will get. If you want to impress people...that’s what you will get.

As Jesus says, those who choose the affirmation of others most, will have **“received their reward in full”**... you won’t gain the rewards of life and love that God alone can offer.

If we want to learn how to have personal life with God...we will decide to pray TO GOD... not to other people..

So Jesus says...Close door... settle down...dial down... and dial in.

Most of us have experienced the **initial challenge** of sitting... and silence...of feeling an awkward silence that we want to escape.

We will find that the **challenge is the process of dialing down and dialing in itself.**

**Our false self ... wants attention...** it wants to find attention and affirmation ... and may want to focus on things to do...people to impress... ideas that proudly hold...they all come forward to fill the silence. [1]

So we shouldn't be surprised that it can be hard to be still and quiet.

So much of life is stirred up... it can be like trying to see yourself in stirred up water... there is no clear reflection...until the water settles and then we can see ourselves more clearly.

It is in such silence that we can become more connected to the life of God...and the love of God.

The underlying transition is that of **coming into God's orbit**...in which God is the center...and my will is drawn into His will. And the third thing we can recognize is that...

### **3. Personal time with God involves joining God's orbit of true Life and Love through prayer**

The bible reveals how our central problem claiming we should be the center of life... but we are not. So we end up more distant from the true center... blocking the way.

**As Flannery O'Connor, a famous Southern writer wrote:**

*" Dear God, I cannot love Thee the way I want to. You are the slim crescent of a moon that I see and my self is the earth's shadow that keeps me from seeing all the moon . . . what I am afraid of, dear God, is that my self shadow will grow so large that it blocks the whole moon, and that I will judge myself by the shadow that is nothing. I do not know You God because I am in the way."*

So Jesus teaches us how the **essence of prayer** is the process of **bringing ourselves into alignment with God.**

I want to refresh ourselves in the **4 main elements that can form our prayer with God... given in the form of an acrostic.** Let me be clear that I'm **not suggesting this as any type of formula.** It is **simply a way to think of the parts and process...**especially if you're getting started or re-started in a regular pattern of prayer. It's really **a pattern for relationship... drawn in part from the themes of Christ's example of prayer.**

**Prayer involves...**

The first element that is essential for connecting with God...is

#### **1. Praise (Recognizing the reality of who God is.)**

**Praise refers to every way in which we might acknowledge the truth of God's goodness and greatness.**

**Have you ever had someone talk to you...without any regard for who you are?**

If I came up to you and called you by the wrong name... and then began talking about you in ways that clearly didn't recognize who you were... would it help connection or block connection?

It doesn't create connection...in fact it accentuates disconnection.

**Intimacy begins with the recognition of another as other...as distinct from ourselves...and honoring that difference.**

So it is with our ultimate Creator and Father.

**Jesus begins..**

*“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.” - Matthew 6:9*

**Jesus declared that indeed we were created to know God as our Father... those who were created bearing His image...to share life as partners in this created world. We left the household (as Jesus described in the parable of the Prodigal Son)...and have chosen to be separated from life with Him. This is what Christ came to restore...to reconcile us by bearing our sin...our separation. So if we receive Christ...his life...his death on our behalf...and his life now lived in us... we are restored as children of God...and with God as our Father.**

There is something so powerful in those words “Our Father.”

We do well to **pause long enough** when we pray to **appreciate the right to say, “Our Father.”** It's not something you have earned. It is something Jesus has earned for you. [4]

**“in heaven”... He is not limited the way our earthly fathers are. He reigns in the eternal greatness...transcends all the powers of this created world.**

**“Hallowed be your name”...your name is holy.**

Referring to one's name...means referring to one's nature...one's essence... (reflected a bit in the way we might say someone “made a name for themselves”).

**> He is declaring that the nature of God is holy...which means set apart...distinct.**

**“Ascribe to the Lord, the glory due his name.” – Psalm 29:2** (cf. Psalm 96:8, 1 Chronicles 16:29)

**Stop and recognize the extent of all that is good...powerful...beautiful... merciful.** [3]

**Every other element of relating to God flows from the realization of who He is.**

Our recognition of Him, and who He is in relationship to our lives allows the flow of our relationship, putting into perspective all that may follow in our prayer.

**About half of the words in this prayer** are devoted to **who God is**; the other half is focused on our needs. **That's a good ratio to keep in mind** as we pray for God's glory and our good.

***Our Father is in heaven. This is where prayer must begin.***

This is the **hardest and easiest** element of prayer.

**It's the hardest** because most of us have a **hard time getting out of our own orbit**... breaking out of our own gravitational pull. We tend to relate to ourselves as the center... the subject... and God as the object...the one which we direct...and control...with our words and our wills.

It takes effort to break out of our gravitational pull. And that is where the power of praise and thanksgiving serves us well.

**When the rocket needs fuel to lift off**...the recognition of all that is good will serve us well ... and **gratitude for that goodness will serve us well.**

And that is **why it is also easy once we start**...because there is **so much to acknowledge when we choose to.**

There is **no limit here.** To reflect upon God's **goodness**...His **mercy**...His **justice**... all that he declares to be good and right...it changes us.

Let's take a moment **Let's take a personal moment to consider the reality of who God is.**

**A personal moment:**

- Identify a provision or gift in life ...and the goodness of God in it.
  - Identify any way in which you recognize God as different from yourself...and acknowledge that.
  - Identify any aspect of God's goodness (beauty, justice, etc)... and acknowledge that.
- (About one minute given for personal reflection...for which all are encourage to write whatever comes to them. This is given at each of the personal moments that follow each element of prayer.)

After recognizing who God is, we naturally come to the second element that can form our prayer.

**2. Restore (Restoring alignment with God's heart and will.)**

**Having recognized God** and who He is to be in our lives, it is **natural to admit** where our relationship is **out of alignment.**

We are self-willed...operating as if we are the center of the universe...

So **restoring alignment with God begins with acknowledging that it is His will that is central... sovereign.**

As Jesus said,

***"...your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."* – Matthew 6:10**

In such words we begin by daring to embrace what he wants.

Now we know we have not always honored that... we have acted in self-serving ways... thought self-indulgent thoughts. SO Jesus also tells us to confess this.

**In his example of prayer...Jesus includes:**

*“Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” – Matthew 6:12*

Confession is an opportunity to come out from the "hiddenness" where shame alienates us from God.

**Prayer is always a meeting of mercy for anyone who will be honest.**

**1 John 1:9 (NIV)**

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

The Father knows our struggles. **His desire is for our agreement**, placing ourselves **"on the same side"** of the struggle. Only in such open agreement can His relationship empower us. [4]

*Let's take a moment...and another personal moment and ask ourselves...*

**A personal moment:**

What are you most aware of in your life (thoughts, heart, behavior), that is not in alignment with God's heart and will?

After we've recognized who God is and we have aligned ourselves with his will through the restoration process we can then ask...

**3. Ask (Bringing your needs to God as the ultimate provider of all good and grace.)**

Having established our relationship, we can begin to bring our desires to God.

It's been noted that **we often** can **relate to God** as a **cosmic vending machine**.

We can think of prayer as just bringing God our list of needs.

That tendency will prove futile and frustrating... for as we have noted... prayer is not about pulling God into our gravitational pull...but of coming around His gravitational pull...for He is at the center... and He is the one whose glory ...goodness is what we need.

**But if we have acknowledged who He is... in Praise...and acknowledged our position of humility... then seeking our needs** is not just acceptable...it's **exactly what He desires**.

In fact...we are **fundamentally dependent on God for life**...and **acknowledging that** is a way of **honoring Him**. Such dependency is quite different from the nature of **demanding**. **Demanding something presumes we deserve it**. **Dependency presumes only our need**. That is what we hear in what Christ gives us in his words...

*“Give us today our daily bread.” – Matthew 6:11*

**Notice that this trust in God is for each day.** In the first century, bread had to be made on a daily basis. They couldn't just buy a couple loaves and put them in the freezer. Like manna that comes once a day, it shaped life as rooted in a daily dependency. Today we live with refrigeration...and bank accounts...and so many ways in which we think we have provided for ourselves...and if we come up short at any time...THEN we might consider having needs we tell God about. But in truth...it's an illusion... every source of need is ultimately from God.

We do well to consider the wisdom of Proverbs, when the writer says...

**Proverbs 30:8:** "Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread."

**The point of the prayer is not for us to get what we want, but to receive what we need.**

If we embrace our dependency... then asking God for our needs is EXACTLY what He desires.

**Personal moment: What is something you actually are in need of right now?**

The final core element of prayer we could refer to as:

**4. Yield (Waiting on what the Spirit of God may communicate to your spirit.)**

While a yielded posture underlies all parts of our prayer, it is the more specific element of **listening** that is to be included here. In the same way that a yellow "yield" sign on the road indicates that we are to give the right of way, so we are to **stop and give the right of way to God**...to whatever He may desire to impart.

That is the **fourth part** that helps **spell the word "PRAY"**...and that little **acrostic might be helpful** as you approach coming to God.

We are going to focus on listening to God in **our next gathering in two weeks.**

**CLOSING:**

**Final thought...**

There is a part of us that will naturally fear prayer... fear facing ourselves.

We want to **cling to our life.** But the truth is that our **self-absorbed lives... our personal kingdoms...** will only shrivel and our souls will **only suffocate and die.**

To pray is to connect to the eternal kingdom... where we **discover the paradox...**that when we **accept being smaller...** we **actually become bigger.**

**Notes:**

1. Brennen Manning describes the nature of silence and stillness. (From Brennan Manning, "Abba's Child", p. 55-56)

Silence is not simply the absence of noise or the shutdown of communication with the outside world, but rather a process of coming to stillness. Silent solitude forges true speech. I'm



not speaking of physical isolation; solitude here means being alone with the Alone, experiencing the transcendent Other and growing in awareness of one's identity as the beloved. It is impossible to know another person intimately without spending time together. Silence makes this solitude a reality.

It has been said, "Silence is solitude practiced in action." It is much like the story of the harried executive who went to the desert father and complained about his frustration in prayer, his flawed virtue, and his failed relationships. The hermit listened closely to his visitor's rehearsal of the struggle and disappointments in trying to lead a Christian life. He then went into the dark recesses of his cave and came out with a basin and a pitcher of water.

"Now watch the water as I pour it into the basin," he said. The water splashed on the bottom and against the sides of the container. It was agitated and turbulent. At first the stirred-up water swirled around the inside of the basin; then it gradually began to settle, until finally the small fast ripples evolved into larger swells that oscillated back and forth. Eventually, the surface became so smooth that the visitor could see his face reflected in the placid water. "That is the way it is when you live constantly in the midst of others," said the hermit. "You do not see yourself as you really are because of all the confusion and disturbance. You fail to recognize the divine presence in your life and the consciousness of your belovedness slowly fades."

It takes time for the water to settle. Coming to interior stillness requires waiting. Any attempt to hasten the process only stirs up the water anew.

Guilt feelings may arise immediately. The shadow self insinuates that you are selfish, wasting time, and evading the responsibilities of family, career, ministry, and community. You can ill afford this idle luxury. Theologian Edward Schillebeeckx responded: "In a revealed religion, silence with God has a value in itself and for its own sake, just because God is God. Failure to recognize the value of mere being with God, as the beloved, without doing anything, is to gouge the heart out of Christianity."

Silent solitude makes true speech possible and personal. If I am not in touch with my own belovedness, then I cannot touch the sacredness of others. If I am estranged from myself I am likewise a stranger to others. Experience has taught me that I connect best with others when I connect with the core of myself. When I allow God to liberate me from unhealthy dependence on people, I listen more attentively, love more unselfishly, and am more compassionate and playful. I take myself less seriously become aware that the breath of the Father is on my face and that my countenance is bright with laughter in the midst of an adventure I thoroughly enjoy

2. Don Carson says, "When believers pray 'Our Father in heaven,' they cannot but be hushed and humbled."

3. We see this way of initially acknowledging the greatness of God in the Psalms. They are an inspired journal of prayer...many by David... the King of Israel. And he regularly begins with declaring to himself the greatness of God. It's turning knowledge of God into acknowledgment. Listen to his prayers....

Psalm 8:1-6, 9 (NLT)

O LORD, our Lord, your majestic name fills the earth! Your glory is higher than the heavens.<sup>2</sup>

You have taught children and infants to tell of your strength, silencing your enemies and all who oppose you.<sup>3</sup> When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers—the moon and the stars you set in place—<sup>4</sup> what are people that you should think about them, mere mortals that you should care for them?<sup>5</sup> Yet you made them only a little lower than God and crowned them

with glory and honor. <sup>6</sup> You gave them charge of everything you made, putting all things under their authority... <sup>9</sup> O LORD, our Lord, your majestic name fills the earth!

He considers not just His power but also His character.

Psalm 63:3: "Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, my lips shall praise You."

4. Again we see such a "restoration" in the Psalmist,

Psalm 139:23-24:

"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

# Staying Centered in God through Prayer

Closer: Developing Life with God

March 19-25, 2017

## Home Church Study

1. When Jesus lived in our current state of life... he modeled a life centered in the life and love of God the Father. Read Luke 5:15-16.

"...the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed."

What might this teach us about prayer?

2. Read Matthew 6:5-6

"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Describe the central choice Jesus is emphasizing. What are the differences that he notes?

3. It was noted that "many of us have experienced the initial challenge of feeling an awkward silence that we want to escape. Our false self wants attention and affirmation ... and may want to focus on things to do...people to impress... ideas that we proudly hold...coming forward to fill the silence. So we shouldn't be surprised that it can be hard to be still and quiet. So much of life is stirred up... it can be like trying to see yourself in stirred up water... there is no clear reflection...until the water settles and then we can see ourselves more clearly."

How does this speak to you experience?

4. Jesus teaches us how the essence of prayer is the process of bringing ourselves into alignment with God. The following provides a simple acrostic that can capture four main elements in our life of prayer.

**P**raise (Recognizing the reality of who God is.)

**R**estore (Restoring alignment with God's heart and will.)

**A**sk (Bringing your needs to God as the ultimate provider of all good and grace.)

**Y**ield (Waiting on what the Spirit of God may communicate to your spirit.)

"Praise" refers to every way in which we might acknowledge the truth of God's goodness and greatness.

We notice Jesus begins his example of prayer,

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name." (Matthew 6:9)

Why is this a critical element to begin with?

5. It was suggested that this may be the hardest and easiest element of prayer. Discuss why that may be true.

6. In regards to "asking" God for what we need, it was noted that "we are fundamentally dependent on God for life...and acknowledging that is a way of honoring God. Such dependency is quite different from

the nature of demanding. Demanding something presumes we deserve it. Dependency presumes only our need. That is what we hear in what Christ gives us in his words...“Give us today our daily bread.” (Matthew 6:11)

How might this be helpful?