

Lesson 9

Phone a Friend

Introduction

On August 16, 1999, the world-renowned game show “*Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*” aired for the first time in the United States. This game show was formatted one host offering an onslaught of multiple choice questions of increasing difficulty to a single contestant. Each question was worth more prize money as the contestant went on. In the high-stakes game, a single wrong answer could risk losing a significant portion of the prize money. In a pinch, the contestant could activate one of three different “lifelines,” which provided a special advantage in a pinch. Of these lifelines, one of the options given was the option to phone a friend, or call on someone else for help in answering a tough question.

Just like *Millionaire*, our journey through life is full of difficult questions and sometimes we just don’t have all the answers. Still, it can be hard to use that lifeline and “phone a friend,” when we *feel like* we might have the right answer. We have to remember what’s on the line though—our meaning, our purpose, and the destination of our lives. These are high stakes. A feeling isn’t sufficient in matters like these. We need to seek higher help.

All our educated guesses on life’s big questions can end up in abject failure. Most people have experienced this first hand. Admitting the need to call on someone with more wisdom, more knowledge and more perspective can be the difference between making it home or losing it all. That’s why Christians need to take advantage of the direct line that we have to God in prayer. Christians have the promise from God that their prayers will be heard. In the scriptures we see God acknowledging prayer and responding to the requests, intercessions and praise of the faithful time and time again.

Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer...

Romans 12.2

For discussion:

1. What is prayer?
2. What has been your experience with prayer?
3. What are the benefits of prayer?

What do you mean by “Prayer Life?”

Pray without ceasing...

1 Thessalonians 5.17

A strong prayer life is often put forward as a goal to work toward. Preachers often deliver this goal from the pulpit as a call to deeper devotion for a congregation. “Strengthen your prayer life,” says the preacher. Often times we think of prayer as being correlated to a specific posture (head bowed, hands folded), a certain set of words (Dear heavenly father... In Christ’s name...) or even a certain setting (like a church building). Yet, the apostle admonished the Thessalonians to be in ceaseless prayer. It would be very difficult, nigh impossible, to heed this admonition unless one lived his or her entire life with a bowed head and closed eyes.

While none of those postures, phrases or settings above are bad, if we think of prayer as a rote set of phrases, a certain posture and a certain location, then we may be taking too narrow a view. In fact, we may be choking our prayer life by thinking about our prayer as only an act of the body and brain rather than of the spirit—prayer is a lifestyle. Of course, we can live it out with our head bowed and in a church building... but there are many other places and ways we can live it out as well.

The ideal prayer life is an unbroken conversation with God that spans every setting of life. In this lifestyle, the believer never asks God to leave the room. He is invited into every inner thought and pondering. Through the avenue of prayer, Christians can send every question, every plan, every fear, every defeat and every victory heavenward. A strong prayer life is an open acknowledgment of the presence of God and an active sharing of life with God.

For discussion:

1. What does a “strong prayer life” look like in your opinion?
2. What does it mean to pray without ceasing?
3. How does prayer change someone’s life?

How NOT to Pray

Prayer is not a Show

And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward

Matthew 6.5

Jesus was pretty bold about what not to do with our prayer lives. As he is teaching his disciples in Matthew 6, Jesus leads with a negative example of the current religious leaders who made their prayers a public display. Lacking heart, the idea behind the prayer was to please a crowd and present oneself as “holy” and “righteous.”

Jesus starkly condemns this type of prayer. While he doesn’t condemn public prayer or collective prayer, he does condemn political prayer. Prayer is not an appeal to the people for approval, but a communication upward to God.

There are No Magic Words

And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words.

Matthew 6.7

Jesus also taught that praying with “empty phrases” is totally ineffectual. The Gentiles of the day would chant to their gods or recite certain phrases, but they were little more than cultural adornments. If we aren’t careful our prayers may find themselves afflicted with the same sort of vanity.

For example, the phrase “In Christ’s Name.” Christ’s name is not merely the punctuation of a prayer, it is a declaration of his lordship. When we pray, we do so because we believe in the power of Christ to connect us to Heaven. For our own sake, it would benefit us to pay mind to the words we say in prayer, that they don’t become “empty.” This way, we can feel and access the full effect of prayer.

Intentions Matter in Prayer

You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions

James 4.3

James, the brother of Jesus also had a stark admonition for believers who prayed wrongly. This time, the rebuke was about the intent of the pray-er. What is the proper motivation for prayer? It is a sincere desire for connection with God and trust that he will work in our lives.

For discussion:

1. What is the purpose of public prayer?
2. What are some bad habits we develop with our prayer life?
3. What is the proper motivation for prayer?

Jesus Prayed with His Disciples

Pray then like this:

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil

Matthew 6.9-13

We know Jesus wants us to pray out loud and in groups at times, because he did it himself with his disciples. In fact, coming to God on a “conference call” is a great way to kill two birds with one stone. We not only deep our relationship with the Father, we also tighten our fellowship. Jesus gives us a guide to public prayer in Matthew 6, also referred to as the “model prayer.”

This prayer addresses God with respect and love, as a heavenly Father. Jesus gives reverence to his name. He prays for God’s will to be revealed and to be done. He also prays for providence and deliverance. Jesus’ model prayer when recited aloud would take a total of around fifteen seconds. It is not flowery, nor does it require a great theological education to recite or to grasp. It’s simple and heartfelt. Jesus teaches us that the length and the phraseology doesn’t matter as long as the prayer itself is grounded in truth, pouring out from love and is appropriate for the group.

For discussion:

1. Why did Jesus teach his disciples to “pray like this?”
2. What are the benefits of praying together?

The Purpose of Prayer

...for the Father knows your need before you ask.

Matthew 6.8b

casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.

1 Peter 5.7

Prayer isn't to "make God aware" of the things that we ask of him or share with him. Of course, he is already very aware of all the goings on of the created order. Prayer cannot help God come to a fuller understanding of our needs. Prayer adds nothing to God, since he is already complete. Prayer, then, is not for God—it is for us. Prayer is for our benefit. When we pray, we are exercising a certain devotion to God that can't be achieved any other way.

The Christian's journey is in many ways an ongoing conversation between believers and the Creator. If bible study and meditation on spiritual truth is the way a believer listens to God, then prayer is our side of the conversation. We benefit from this ongoing back-and-forth because we learn to lean on God and we learn to trust him with every care.

For discussion:

1. If God already knows everything about us, why would we need to pray?
2. Why would God command, advise and encourage us to pray to him?

Prayer for today—Lord, give us strength to increase our reliance on you in this journey of life in our prayer life.