

Sermon notes

Rich Lusk

8-9-09

"Prayer"

The "vision" sermons I preached lately have not flowed together as a series very much because I have been in and out of the pulpit. However, the sermons are easy to find on the website because they all have one word titles (which is unusual for me).

The first part of the sermon on prayer was heavily influenced by Darrell Johnson. I have dealt with several of these issues related to prayer in more depth in a short sermon series I preached back in 2006.

Here are quotes and notes to help fill out the content of the sermon.

The vindication in view in Lk. 18:1-8 is probably 70 AD when the church was vindicated against unbelieving Israel. The coming of the Son of Man in view is his coming in judgment on the apostate and obsolete old covenant order. But for us, the passage can be stretched to ultimately include the final coming of Jesus when the church (= the widow) is vindicated against all her enemies, all disorder, and all that oppresses her.

The question (Will the Son of Man find faith on earth?) has reference to the faithfulness of God's people in the tumultuous window of 30-70 AD, when many who initially embraced the gospel would fall away (cf. Galatians, Hebrews, etc.). It should not give us a pessimistic long term eschatology.

Bonhoeffer makes the point in his *Letters and Papers from Prison* that many of our problems (wasted time, temptations we surrender to, laziness or lethargy in our work, lack of focus and discipline in our thoughts or in our interaction with others, etc.) frequently have their root in our neglect of prayer. Prayerlessness is the mother of a multitude of other sins – which, of course means that habitual prayer gives birth to numerous other virtues.

Isaiah 62:6-7 tell us to give God no rest and to not keep silent until he has brought his righteousness into the world by bringing peace (shalom!) to his people. This is a good background text for Luke 18:1ff.

Obviously, God doesn't always give us what we pray for, but we should see that as a blessing. Consider the multitude of ridiculous, foolish, short-sighted and (worst of all!) well-meaning but ultimately unwise prayers God must hear every day.

If God *always* gave us what we asked for, only a fool would open his mouth in prayer. No sane Christian would risk taking over the government of the universe from the One who made it. (See the movie "Bruce Almighty" for more on this!) Give God thanks for unanswered prayers. Give God praise for saying 'No'. Give God glory for not allowing you to become an ungrateful spoiled brat.

As I said, the Psalms are a much more elaborate set of prayer models than Jesus gave his disciples. The Lord's Prayer the grand summarizing prayer that caps off all the other prayers in the Bible. But we should still look at those other prayers for guidance as we seek to unpack the meaning of the Lord's Prayer.

Calvin described the Psalter as containing the whole anatomy of soul; in other words, the Psalms will take us places in our own hearts we would never otherwise go. What an anatomy book is to the body the Psalter is to the soul. The Psalter is a mirror for our souls; just as a mirror shows the movements of our bodies, so the Psalter traces the movements of the soul towards God.

Darrell Johnson appropriately points out that the Lord's Prayer is a pattern for changing the world in less than 60 words. See his fine little book *57 Words that Change the World*.

As I said in the sermon, I want us to be a church that practices the diverse kinds of prayer we find in Scripture: short bursts of prayer throughout the day and long, planned periods of prayer at set times; prayers offered by men, women, and children; scripted prayers and spontaneous prayers; prayers offered in variety of postures; prayers times that include silence and meditation; corporate, public prayers, and private prayers; prayers in the morning and evening, and throughout the day; etc.

I want to revisit Luke 18 since in the sermon I botched up a lot of what I wanted to say about the widow's prayer for vindication/justice/righteousness (all these words overlap in Greek and Hebrew and cannot be really separated out).

It is especially important to consider the OT background to pleas for justice. This is not a prayer for personal revenge. It is a prayer for God's kingdom to come in all its fullness. The psalmist frequently cries to God for justice (e.g., Ps. 7). The psalmist prays that God would answer him in righteousness (e.g., Ps. 143). The psalmist prays for judgment against adversaries (Ps. 109, 139, etc.)

Justice/righteousness/vindication all have a covenantal context in the Scriptures. For God to act in righteousness means God keeps his promises. This is sometimes called "restorative justice," e.g., God acts to set things right, to make things what they should be for his people. In other words, righteousness brings in shalom. The widow's prayer for justice points to the church crying out to God to come and fulfill his promises to us. We do not yet see everything he has promises, so we have to wait, pray, and work (cf. Heb. 2).

Vindication/justice/righteousness is a way of describing "the way things really oughta be" for the people of God. This is what the widow is praying for (the widow = the church in the parable). She is asking to be rescued from an adversary. As a widow, her ultimate adversary is death. But since death is the last enemy to be defeated (1 Cor. 15), the widow is really asking for cosmic reconciliation and shalom, the final realization of God's kingdom on earth (cf. Eph. 1:9-11; Col. 1:15-20; etc.).

If the widow obviously represents the people of God who cry out for God's justice (and therefore God's kingdom) to come, then obviously one lesson is that we should pray "thy kingdom come" day and night. The fact that Jesus uses a widow reminds us that we are weak and vulnerable on our own. God must get justice for us. We cannot make justice happen ourselves.

God grants personal justice (= justification) the moment we cry to him for mercy, as the following parable shows in 18:9-14. Both parables at the beginning of Luke 18 have to do with vindication – one with personal vindication, the other with cosmic vindication. We get personal vindication now, but even after we are personally justified, we know that our lives are not yet perfected. We know that the world is still a mess. We know things still need to be set right. We still sin and we still suffer. We still people in power abusing their authority and taking advantage of the weak. So we must pray for God's justice and righteousness to come in an even fuller sense. We must pray and keep on praying until all is right with the world – for that is what God promised through the prophets! We must pray until sin, Satan, and death have met their final defeat.

Persevering in prayer is how we articulate our faith in an ongoing way in God's promises. If we give up praying for justice it is because we have given up on God. To walk by faith means to keep praying until God has fulfilled his word.

When I preached on the gospel a few weeks ago I explained that we cannot reduce the gospel to merely individual salvation. The gospel promises and effects much more. It is ultimately about the new creation – the renewal and glorification of all things in Christ. In the same way, our prayers for justice have to go beyond simply praying for our personal forgiveness and well-being. We have to pray as a royal priesthood on behalf of the whole creation, asking God to set the world to rights. Pray for God to restore and transform the world; pray for God's promises (the promised "happy ending" to history!) to come true.

In this way, we see prayer and mission dovetail. We work and pray for the same thing: the fullness of God's kingdom. We work and pray for God's liberating justice to break into this broken world, to transform the earth, to create a culture of life and love and generosity and peace.

[Note: The best discussion of God's righteousness is found in N. T. Wright's Anchor Bible commentary on Romans. See also
<http://www.hornes.org/theologia/rich-lusk/justification-ecclesial-cosmic-and-divine>.

It should be obvious from Lk. 18:9-14 that when we talk about justice in the Bible, we are not talking about God giving people what they deserve. We are talking God keeping his covenant promises to those who look to him in faith. The tax collector went home justified/vindicated because he looked to God for mercy. He

got justice – he got declared righteous – when he admitted he did not deserve it! He was restored to a right relation with God.

The widow's prayer is similar, only she does not get justice that very day. But the justice she is praying is more comprehensive in scope. The common thread of vindication/justice links these two parables, but it is obvious there is a twofold already/not yet dimension to God's justice.]

Luke 18 shows us Barth got it right when he said, "To fold one's hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world." Prayer is warfare. Prayer is how we fight against all that is wrong with the world. Prayer is how we obtain justice and get vindication. Through our prayers God begins to put the world back in order. Therefore, let us pound the doors of heaven. Let us bombard God with our prayers until his justice comes. Let's not just take our hurts and frustrations to him in prayer, but the pain and suffering and disorder of the world around us. Let us keep on praying till out just judge has made all right. Let us pray with passion and earnestness. This kind of kingdom prayer, this kind of missional prayer to the Father through the Son by the Spirit is a prayer we know will be answered.

More on Luke 18:1-8 (<http://peace.mennolink.org/articles/leossermon2.html>):

There's a Biblical story which can serve as a model for uniting prayer and social justice. It's Jesus' parable of the unjust judge and the persistent widow. I like the title given to the parable by one New Testament scholar: You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down. (1) Before we try to interpret the parable, there's already an interpretation in the first verse of Luke 18. Luke interprets the parable as an admonition to "pray always without losing heart." Many scholars view these verses surrounding the parable as Luke's editorial comments. In other words, Luke adds his own interpretation of Jesus' parable to the text. If the parable is about persistent prayer, as Luke presents it, the key to its interpretation is found in the action of the widow, who endlessly pleads with the judge. On the surface, there appears to be a problem with this interpretation. Is the parable presenting prayer as wearing down an unwilling God with our nagging prayers? If we believe in persistent prayer, is it because we have a God who is

hesitant or reluctant to answer our prayers? Do we have to beat our knuckles bloody on heaven's door before God will answer?

Another possible interpretation of the parable comes from the historical context of Luke's gospel. The church is under stress and Christians are not receiving justice. Luke uses Jesus' parable to encourage Christians not to give up in the midst of injustices, but to continue to pray until the empire of God comes. Verses 7-8 at the conclusion of the parable point to God's nature in the midst of the saints who cry out for justice. God is presented as one who hears the Christians' cries for justice and doesn't delay in answering their prayers. Understood in this way the key figure in the parable is the judge. But, the judge serves as a counter example, an antitype. God is not like the unjust judge. Luke's gospel directly points to the unjust judge as the key character of the parable. After the parable Jesus says, "Listen to what the unjust judge says..." We would probably like Jesus to have said, "Don't listen to what the unjust judge says."

Nevertheless, if we interpret the parable from the statements following the parable, then God is not like the corrupt judge needing to be badgered and nagged to death in order to get justice. The parable becomes a "how-much-more" argument. If this unjust judge, who doesn't care about God or anyone else, reluctantly hears the widow's cry for justice, how much more will God hear our cries for justice.

From each of these perspectives the parable can be about persistent prayer in the midst of injustices, praying for justice, or about God who is not reluctant to hear our prayers. So, with these several approaches to interpreting the parable, which do we choose? Or can we interpret the parable from a combination of these perspectives? I believe we can interpret the parable in a way that will address the need for a wedding together of spirituality and politics, prayer and justice.

The parable itself, excluding what appears to be Luke's commentary, deals with a widow who seeks justice. The other character in the story is a corrupt judge. Judges were Israel's magistrates appointed to try the cases of people in an expedient and just manner, according to the law.

Inconsistent with his role, the judge is described as neither fearing God nor respecting people. In honor-shame societies of the ancient Mediterranean world these descriptions mark the judge as shameless, without honor, an "outlaw judge" (2) Being a judge in the city may indicate that he was among the urban elite, a "cityfied fat cat."

In the Biblical world widows, along with orphans and foreigners, were among the most vulnerable in society. Widows were an easy target for exploitation. In patriarchal societies women were highly dependent upon

men for their well being. A woman's place in society was defined by the household of father or husband. A woman not contained within the bounded roles of daughter or wife was a threat to the social order. A widow without family support was in a precarious social and economic position. There was no welfare system, no Social Security benefits, no Medicaid, no economic safety net. Many widows ended up impoverished. Therefore, the laws of Israel placed a high priority on the protection of widows. God is depicted in the Psalms as "the Protector of the widow" (Psalm 68:5).

The widow in the parable kept coming to the judge and saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent." The parable reflects the situation of widows in ancient times. In the Dead Sea Scrolls there's record of a widow named Babatha who was persistent in protecting the legal rights of her household. Several of Babatha's records document her legal battle against two appointed guardians of her son for control of her deceased husband's land. As with Babatha, the parable implies the widow in Jesus' parable was claiming her right to obtain support from her late husband's estate. For a while the judge refused to act on her case. We may wonder why. Some have speculated that the judge shared class interests with the widow's opponents. The judge may even have been accepting bribes from the widow's adversaries quietly behind the scenes and stalling the widow's case because she could not offer a bribe.

This widow was bold in her insistence upon justice. Women were normally represented by men in the courts. So, her very appearance before the judge would have been a shameless breach of etiquette. She didn't ask for a court date to face her opponents. She appealed directly to the judge in the public arena in a most embarrassing manner. The widow broke gender and social barriers in her pursuit of justice. This was no frail, timid lady....

Her approach was active and aggressive. But, we shouldn't confuse her action with the stereotype of the nagging female. She knows the law. This was an act of legal tenacity. The widow was calling the judge to accountability. In the domain where only men's voices are heard the voice of one woman relentlessly cried out for justice. Her public perseverance disturbed this judge. Maybe those who heard her started to raise questions about what was really going on "behind the scenes." So persistent were the widow's cries that the judge finally gave in and granted her justice. It wasn't because he suddenly feared God or gained a new respect for human beings. The judge acted for his own convenience.

The widow simply "beat him up" with her tenacious request. The text uses a boxing term. It literally means "to give a black eye." The widow's persistent cry for justice was her KO punch that flattened the judge on the canvas. The irony is that one of the weakest members of society was victorious over one of society's strongest. This widow embodies a new vision of the world where victims claim their rights and seek justice---often in an unsettling manner.

To interpret the parable at face value we'd have to say that it's a story about seeking social justice with persistence. If we come at the parable from its introductory interpretation, we would have to say it's a parable about persistent prayer. If we add Luke's concluding comments on the parable, we might even say the parable is about God granting justice to those who continue to cry out. I believe this parable can be model for uniting prayer with social justice through a politics of prayer.

This parable encourages us to be persistent in our prayer for justice. Too often we become so focused on ourselves we forget the world around us. We become so pessimistic about our society we give up praying about broader social issues. We no longer believe in the blindfolded lady who holds the scales of justice in balance. Our legal system has taken off the blindfold and judges people based upon their skin color and has allowed the scales of justice to become imbalanced with the coins of the wealthy. We have given up a political system that robs benefits from widows in order to give tax breaks to the rich and middle class. Injustice seems so ingrained in the structures of our society, change seems hopeless. When it comes to changing an unjust society, it feels like the most weak and vulnerable don't have a prayer. So, we ask ourselves, "What good does it do to pray about social issues anyway? We can't change those who have no respect for God or others." So, because of the injustice and disorder in our world, we give up and tighten the circle of our prayers to include only ourselves, our family, our friends, our church....

When we pray the Lord's prayer aren't we calling upon God to bring about a change in our world order---"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as in heaven"? The empire of God is a social reality. In the model prayer of Jesus we pray God will reign not only within our personal lives, but also in the social, political, legal, and economic spheres of life.

To unite prayer and justice, as the parable of the widow and the unjust judge has done, is to raise our voices to the heavens for those who have no bread, for those who live in cardboard houses, for orphans crammed in institutions, for people of color who are treated differently when they

walk into a store, for the weak and vulnerable in our society. Pray. Pray. And continue to pray. This doesn't mean prayer is a substitute for action. Hands folded in prayer need feet ready to walk. Folded hands and walking feet joined together are empowered by their union.

If we truly believe in the power of prayer, then let us wed together our prayers and our social concerns.... When we lay in our beds at night and pray our young children will be safe in this dangerous world, pray also for an end to the violence in our schools, a change in our social attitudes toward gratuitous violence on television and in the movies, and that we would stop glorifying war as a solution to our international problems.

When we put on our little children's socks as they get ready to run off to school, say a prayer for those children who can't afford simple necessities like socks and underwear. When we sit down with a cup of coffee to read the bible and pray, pray that the workers who picked the coffee beans get a fair and just wage.... When we pray for our congregation and its ministry, remember to pray for those Christians who are persecuted for their faith throughout the world. Broadening our prayer will stretch the walls of our hearts.

But, what if after we have prayed and the next day we still see people of color treated unjustly? What if farmers are still losing farms and school teachers are not given their due respect and honor? What if we still have the poor with us always? Remember the widow's dogged pursuit for justice. Pray, pray, and pray some more. Work, work, and work some more. Bang at the door of justice. And don't give up. Don't give up!

Churchill once gave a famous commencement address. This huge man stood up to give his speech and simply repeated one idea three times. "Do not give up. Do not ever give up. Never give up!" Jesus is telling us, "Don't ever give up!" In spite of the odds against us. When peace doesn't come. When justice seems to delay. Don't give up. The union of prayer and justice is the vision of a people who batter at the doors of justice until there's an answer. Remember the poor, weak widow and don't give up! Even when it seems like heaven is deaf. Even when it seems like we're trying to blow down a huge stone wall with only a bunch of trumpets and shouting. Don't give up! Keep on praying. Keep on working. Keep on keeping on until the empire of God raises its flag.

Remember, God hears our cries for justice. The parable tells us that though the judge may have put off hearing the widow's cry for justice, how much more will God hear and respond to our prayers. We don't have a God who has to be nagged and forced into hearing us. The ear and heart of God are open to our prayers for justice, peace, equity, and a new world.

Still, we're to persist in our prayers. Maybe it takes perpetual prayer to break through the unseen force fields that block our prayers. Only through tenacious prayer may we be able effect the personal, psychic, or social forces that can bring about change. Walter Wink, writing on political prayer says, "History belongs to the intercessors, who believe the future into being." (3) Let us continue to pray until God's future, a world of justice and peace, comes into being.

Let's pray for peace and justice to flow down like an ever flowing stream. Peace and justice dwell in the heart of God. God longs for a world where justice reigns and peace dwells. God deeply desires a home for the orphan, rights for the oppressed, justice for the widow. God longs for order in our disordered world, peace in our violent society, hope in hopeless situations. We don't have to twist God's arm or nag God in order to convince God that our world is in need of justice and peace. Maybe we are the ones who truly need convincing. Maybe we need to persist in prayer so we can hear or own prayers and act upon them as God's instruments, fulfilling God's desires....

God does hear our persistent cries for justice, even though in the pile of days it seems long in coming. But, until that day when the gavel of God finally strikes, we will not give up, but we will persist in praying and working for God's justice and peace to reign upon the earth as in heaven.

An example of prayer at work
(<http://www.eastwestreport.org/articles/ew12215.html>):

The Lord's Prayer with Feet

The modern rap on the Lord's Prayer, indeed on prayer in general, is that it's passive. It can be, but it need not be. What we can say with confidence is that the Lord's Prayer can have feet. In 1989-91, we witnessed the televised spectacle of the collapse of Communism--from Prague to Warsaw to Bucharest to Moscow to Alma Aty. What stunning times those were, and not least for the role played by the Lord's Prayer in public protest. In Prague hundreds of thousands knelt in Wenceslas Square and prayed the Lord's Prayer in unison. Within days a Communist regime fell.

Thy Kingdom Come

And on Christmas Eve, 1989, in Timisoara, Romania, Baptist Pastor Peter Degulescu spoke to some 200,000 of his countrymen from the city's opera house balcony. This was the same vantage point Communist dictator

Nikolai Ceausescu had used to address crowds on annual visits to the city. But on this occasion the story was radically different. Pastor Degulescu, who had been summoned by the crowd, declared, "For almost 45 years we have been told there is no God [but] I want to speak to you in the name of this God." For several minutes thousands upon thousands in the square below chanted, "There is a God. There is a God." Then Degulescu led the citizens of Timisoara in the Lord's Prayer. No one had told people to kneel, but all did. That Christmas Eve the people prayed, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." And the next day, Christmas, Ceausescu's hated regime collapsed and one of the twentieth century's most evil rulers paid with his life for his crimes. Romanian Emil Bartos remembers more than once in those heady days mass recitations of the "Our Father." "It is interesting," he notes, "that the entire country knew how to pray the Lord's Prayer, although [Romania] was called an atheist country." Karl Barth once said, "To fold one's hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world."...

We must remember that God does not love me alone: He is not only my Father, but Father of us all....We modern people have become so egotistical, so in love with ourselves that we don't even think about praying for everyone. Each one lives by himself and for himself. This self-absorption is the greatest evil in the world. Everything comes from that. By that sin the first angel fell. It is the mother of all other sins. But that's not the way it was. And it's not the way it should be, or the way it will be in the Kingdom of God.

May the Lord forgive us for those many times when our prayers on our knees have not been our prayers on our feet.

Keep in mind the two broad categories of petitionary prayer I mentioned in the sermon. There are "maintenance" prayers for "temporal" blessings, such as health, daily bread/prosperity, etc. There are also "front line" prayers for "Spiritual" blessings (or, really, the Spirit himself). These are prayers for growth in grace and fruit for ourselves and others, communion with God, success in evangelism, care for the poor and the overthrow of injustice, etc. Admittedly, the lines between these two types of prayer are not always sharp. (For example, political concerns could go in either category, depending on the situation.) The Lord's Prayer includes both, and there is no sense that the prayer Jesus gave us is supposed to be broken up into "secular" and "Spiritual" concerns. We do not have secular lives/identities that are separable from our Spiritual identity. The Lord's

Prayer shows us that all prayer requests are ultimately integrated into God's kingdom.

Nevertheless, there is something of a hierarchy in terms of what we pray for, and this comes out in Luke 11, when Jesus ultimately says the gift God wants to give us in response to prayer is the Holy Spirit.

St. Anselm:

God does not delay to hear our prayers, because he has no mind to give; but that, by enlarging our desires, he may give us the more largely.

Augustine:

If God seems slow in responding, it is because He is preparing a better gift. He will not deny us. God withholds what you are not yet ready for. He wants you to have a lively desire for His greatest gifts. All of which is to say, pray always and do not lose heart.

Martin Luther on prayer:

Finally, mark this, that you must always speak the Amen firmly. Never doubt that God in his mercy will surely hear you and say "yes" to your prayers. Never think that you are kneeling or standing alone, rather think that the whole of Christendome, all devout Christians, are standing there beside you and your are standing among them in a common, united petition which God cannot disdain. Do not leave your prayer without having said or thought, "Very well. God has heard my prayer; this I know as a certainty and a truth." That is what Amen means.

William Temple

When I pray, coincidences happen.

Calvin on why we need to pray (it's how we dig up buried treasure):

We clearly see how destitute of all good things man is, and how he lacks all aids to salvation. Therefore if he seeks resources to aid him in his need,

he must go outside himself and get them elsewhere...

Whatever we need and whatever we lack is in God and in our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom the Father willed all the fullness of his bounty to abide...so that we may all draw from it as from an overflowing spring, it remains for us to seek in Him, and in prayers ask of him, what we have learned to be in him...we dig up by prayer the treasures that were pointed out by the Lord's Gospel, and which our faith has gazed upon.

Phillips Brooks:

Prayer is not conquering God's reluctance, but taking hold of God's willingness.

John Bunyan:

The best prayers have often more groans than words.

A.W. Tozer:

I am reminded that one old saint was asked, "Which is the more important: reading God's Word or praying?" To which he replied, "Which is more important to a bird: the right wing or the left?"

Eugene Peterson:

Those people who pray know what most around them either don't know or choose to ignore: centering life in the insatiable demands of the ego is the sure path to doom . . .They know that life confined to the self is a prison, a joy-killing, neurosis-producing, disease-fomenting prison.

Richard Foster:

One day a friend of mine was walking through a shopping mall with his two-year-old son. The child was in a particularly cantankerous mood, fussing and fuming. The frustrated father tried everything to quiet his son but nothing seemed to help.

The child simply would not obey. Then, under some special inspiration, the father scooped up his son and, holding him close to his chest, began singing an impromptu love song. None of the words rhymed. He sang

off key. And yet, as best he could, the father began sharing his heart. "I love you," he sang. "I'm so glad you're my boy. You make me happy. I like the way you laugh." On they went from one store to the next.

Quietly, the father continued singing off key and making up words that did not rhyme. The child relaxed and became still, listening to this strange and wonderful song. Finally, they finished shopping and went to the car. As the father opened the door and prepared to buckle his son into the car seat, the child lifted his head and said simply, "Sing it to me again, Daddy! Sing it to me again!"

Prayer is a little like that. With simplicity of heart we allow ourselves to be gathered up into the arms of the Father and let Him sing His love song over us.

Alexander Whyte:

...if prayer is anything at all it is everything. And that is exactly what the whole Word of God says about prayer; it is everything, absolutely everything.

David Stendl-Rast:

We must distinguish prayer from prayers. Saying prayers is one activity among others. But prayer is an attitude of the heart that can transform every activity. We cannot say prayers at all times, but we ought to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17). That means we ought to keep our heart open for the meaning of life. Gratefulness does this, moment by moment. Gratefulness is, therefore, prayerfulness.

John Stott:

Prayer is not a convenient device for imposing our will upon God, or for bending his will to ours, but the prescribed way of subordinating our will to his. It is by prayer that we seek God's will, embrace it and align ourselves with it. Every true prayer is a variation on the theme, "Your will be done." Our Master taught us to say this in the pattern prayer he gave us, and added the supreme example of it in Gethsemane.

David Mathis summarizing John Piper:

John's Gospel includes 3 key passages on prayer—all 3 from the words of Jesus in chapters 14 through 16.

First, in 14:13-14, Jesus teaches that prayer is for the glory of His Father. God gives whatever we ask—provided it accords with the pursuit of his glory.

Second, in 15:7-16, Jesus teaches that prayer is for our fruit-bearing. Prayer is a wartime walkie-talkie for advancing God's global mission, not a domestic intercom for calling in personal comforts.

Third, in 16:23-24, Jesus teaches that prayer is for our joy being full. God wants us to be happy, and he means to do it through our prayers.

Yes, prayer is a duty—the way eating and drinking and breathing are duties. But prayer also is a means of grace and a great gift from God.

Zechariah 13:8-9 gives us an additional lesson: God can put his people through the fires of suffering to awaken their appetite for prayer. May we not become so dulled by prosperity that our hearts become too weak to sense our profound need for prayer. And when suffering comes, may it prompt us to turn to God in prayer, rather than turn away in unbelief.

Peter Leithart:

There are no tricks to prayer. The crucial thing is not the method we use or the pattern we follow. The crucial thing is confidence in the God to whom we pray.

Who is that God? He is the eternal God. For us, what's done is done and what's done cannot be undone. We are bound to time, and feel sometimes as if we're chained in time.

God is not like that.

He forgives past sins and treats us in the present and future as if they never happened. He triumphs over sin, and even uses it to bring in His glorious kingdom of righteousness. We can't see beyond the horizon of death, but for God, death is entirely reversible.

Who is the God we pray to? He is the unchanging God. We flit here and there, starting one project and abandoning another, faithful one day and faithless the next.

God is not like that. He has a purpose, and He pursues that purpose until He finishes it. This doesn't mean He's predictable. Because He is alive, He surprises us, but every surprise reveals more of His unwavering faithfulness.

When you pray, remember that you're praying to the eternal and changeless God who raised Jesus from the dead by the power of the Spirit.

Remember that you pray to the faithful God who will do all He has promised. Remember that, and cast all your cares on Him.

C.S. Lewis:

It is no use to ask God with factitious earnestness for A when our whole mind is in reality filled with B. We must lay before him what is in us, not what ought to be in us.

Charles Williams:

Prayer, like everything else, was meant for a means of joy; but, in our knowledge of the good as evil, we have to recover it so, and it is not an easy thing. Prayer is thought of as a means to an end, but the end itself is sometimes only the means to the means, as with all love.

J.B. Lightfoot:

It is not in the moving of the lips, but in the elevation of the heart to God, that the essence of prayer consists. Thus amidst the commonest duties and recreations of life it is still possible to be engaged in prayer.

Corrie ten Boom:

Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tire?

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones:

You will find [in church history] this same holy boldness, this argumentation, this reasoning, this putting the case to God, pleading his own promises. Oh, that is the whole secret of prayer, I sometimes think. Thomas Goodwin uses a wonderful term. He says, "Sue him for it! Sue him for it!" Do not leave him alone. Pester him, as it were, with his own promise. Quote the Scripture to him. And, you know, God delights to hear us doing it, as a father likes to see this element in his own child who has obviously been listening to what his father has been saying....

We all tend to prescribe the answers to our prayers. We think that God can come in only one way. But Scripture teaches us that God sometimes

answers our prayers by allowing things to become much worse before they become better. He may sometimes do the opposite of what we anticipate.... Yet it is a fundamental principle in the life and walk of faith that we must always be prepared for the unexpected when we are dealing with God.

Tom Wright:

Different Kinds of Prayer

There are, broadly, three types of prayer. One launches off messages to distant divinities, like a sailor sending messages off in a bottle hoping someone will receive them.

Another tries to get in touch with the immanent spirit of the world all around, or possibly within oneself. The third brings together the sense of awe at the transcendence of the God who made the world, with the sense of intimacy that this same God wants to be in personal touch with his human creatures.

This third sense is what we find in the Psalms and elsewhere in the Jewish scriptures; and it is this that comes to full expression (from the Christian point of view, of course) in and through Jesus. For the Christian, prayer is simultaneously the adoration and wonder of contemplating, and thanking, God the creator and redeemer, and the awareness of an intimate and loving relationship bubbling up from within, which shapes the character and the content of prayer so that it reaches out to embrace the suffering world – and all kinds of particular needs and problems within it – and finds that it embodies the presence and healing love of Jesus himself as it does so.

Yes, I pray – to this God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I pray for all sorts of things, but especially for the great issues our world is faced with just now, and for those who make difficult decisions that affect the lives of millions; and for many individuals, near and far, who need God's help, protection and love.

I also pray, of course, for the churches for which I am responsible, and those who worship and work in them. And I pray for forgiveness for my many faults and failings, for strength to resist the power of evil at every level, for provision for my needs, and for wisdom in the many tasks to which I am called.

I also pray, by the way, for those who read what I have written, that anything I have said that is less than helpful may be taken away from

people's attention and that anything I have said that is useful and helpful may stick in their minds, not as from me but as a gift from God.

Andrew Murray:

In your prayer, beware above everything of limiting God, not only by unbelief but by fancying that you know what He can do. Expect unexpected things, *above all that we ask or think*. Each time you intercede, be quiet first and worship God in His glory. Think of what He can do...and expect great things.

Eugene H. Peterson:

Prayer is as much outer as inner. It is the most practical thing anyone can do. It is not mystical escape, it is historical engagement. Prayer participates in God's action. God gathers our cries and our praises, our petitions and intercessions, and uses them. The prayers that ascend to God now descend to earth. God uses our prayers in his work. "Prayer," wrote Pascal, "is God's way of providing man with the dignity of causality."....

Prayer is access to an environment in which God is the pivotal center of action. All other persons, events, or circumstances are third parties. Existence is illuminated in direct relationship to God himself. Neither bane nor blessing distracts from this center. Persons who pray are not misled by demons of size, influence, importance, or power. They turn their backs on the gaudy pantheons of Canaan and Assyria, Greece and Rome, and give themselves to the personal intensities that become awe before God and in intimacy with God. And they change the world.

Charles Spurgeon:

. . . there must be prayer, much prayer, constant prayer, vehement prayer, the kind of prayer which will not take a denial, like Luther's prayer, which he called the bombarding of heaven; that is to say, the planting of a cannon at heaven's gates to blow them open, for after this fashion fervent men prevail in prayer; they will not come from the mercy-seat until they can cry with Luther, "Vici," "I have conquered, I have gained the blessing for which I strove." "The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force."

May we offer such violent, God-constraining, heaven-compelling prayers, and the Lord will not permit us to seek His face in vain!....

Prayer pulls the rope below and the great bell rings above in the ears of God. Some scarcely stir the bell, for they pray so languidly. Others give but an occasional pluck at the rope. But he who wins with heaven is the man who grasps the rope boldly and pulls continuously, with all his might.

From an excellent article entitled "Prayer Is Social Action" (<http://www.urbana.org/articles/prayer-is-social-action>):

In Revelation 4:1-8:6, John describes a God-given vision of mankind's history. It is filled with images of God and celestial beings interacting with each other and with mankind. In these verses, the Lamb of God opens seven seals, each affecting the history of the world. By the end of chapter 7, all of heaven is singing and worshipping God, wondering what will happen next in this unleashing of human history.

At the beginning of chapter 8, however, they all fall silent. Seven angels with seven trumpets stand before God, ready to announce the unfolding fate of the world. But they must wait as an eighth angel offers God incense and all the prayers of the saints - prayers for justice, vindication, and victory. Nothing can happen until these prayers reach the nostrils of God. "What happens next happens because people prayed," Wink says. "The message is clear: History belongs to the intercessors, who believe the future into being. . . God works with us and for us, to make and keep human life humane. And what God does depends on the intercessions of those who care enough to try to shape a future more humane than the present."

The apostle Paul emphasized, "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms," (Ephesians 6:12). In this struggle, prayer is the decisive weapon, and it is often aggressive and violent. Karl Barth said, "To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world." The structures and forces of injustice, oppression, and war are so overwhelming, all our efforts to help the poor and needy will fall flat - unless we first invite God into the fray. Until we achieve victory in prayer, engaging the outer world is hopeless.

I'm not saying that prayer is all that is necessary to change the world. For too long, too many evangelical Christians believed prayer is a substitute for action, dumping on God the responsibility for doing what he already commanded us to do throughout Scripture. But neither is social action a substitute for prayer....

Prayer Changes the World There are at least three ways that God honors our prayers to change the world.

Prayer breaks through the false dominion of the enemy.

In Mark 9, as Jesus prepared to exorcise an evil spirit, he said, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but by prayer." If this holds true for the demonization of individuals, does it not also hold true for the spiritual oppression of societies?

Satan's main goal is to keep God from being glorified on earth. He hates God, and he hates human beings, who are made in God's image. Through culture, television, drugs, and even some religious practices, Satan and his minions influence the hearts and minds of people worldwide.

In Latin America, West Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, people are deeply afraid of these spirits and look for ways to protect themselves through amulets, elaborate rituals and festivals, or witch doctors. Not surprisingly, these protections can be very expensive, contributing to the poverty and oppression of the poor.

In addition, by affecting what you believe, Satan can influence what happens to you. In Hinduism, for example, the idea of fate imprisons millions of people in spiritual and economic poverty. Fate determines the caste you are born into. If you are born into a poor caste, you probably will not try to better your life by becoming an attorney or an accountant. Fate cannot be overcome.

That's a Satanic stronghold, a deception that keeps people in bondage and impoverished, and keeps them from progressing. The New Testament calls this an act of war, a spiritual war in which spiritual weapons can help liberate people groups, cities, and nations from the powers of darkness. That is why united prayer is so important for the breaking of this demonic bondage.

In Mark 3:27, Jesus said, "No one can enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can rob his house." Satan is not going to let go of individuals or a people group without a fight, and he must be dealt with before people can overcome that dominion. Paul said the god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers. So you've got to remove that resistance, that false dominion

from a society if you want to see economic or spiritual transformation. Holistic transformation will not happen without united prayer.

Prayer changes us and leads us to act.

"Social action without prayer is soulless; but prayer without action lacks integrity," Wink says. As we pray for social change, the Holy Spirit begins to transform us, and we find ourselves getting involved in social ministries. It's as if God returns our prayers as a kind of divine command to become the answer to our prayers.

In 1992, after the Los Angeles riots surrounding the Rodney King verdict, 40 pastors in Fresno, Calif., starting meeting once a month to pray for the hurting people of their city. Soon they started praying with laypeople and Christian civic leaders from the tops of city buildings overlooking the urban landscape. They met in a different location each month, including city hall, the rescue mission, the county jail , high schools, the school district office, the International Trade Center, and Fresno Pacific College. As all these Christians "got out of their churches and into the community," they saw, understood, and began responding to its needs, says Jim Westgate, a professor at Mennonite Brethren Bible Seminary in Fresno.

Today more than 6,000 evangelical Christians are involved in Fresno's inner-city ministries.

Through Christ's redemption, human stewardship over the earth is being restored. And through prayer, we as his redeemed people reassert our God-given dominion over the world, ruling and reigning with Christ.

Through believing prayer, we open the door for God's intervention in our troubled world, and open ourselves up to become part of God's answer to that world of need.

Prayer leads to spiritual transformation.

God cares whether people are hungry or sick, whether they have clean water - about all the things they have to contend with. For that reason, World Vision is committed to transforming communities and infusing them with the values and qualities of the kingdom of God: love, civic responsibility, caring for one another, economic development. But more than that, we work for the spiritual transformation of these communities. We know that apart from a change in people's hearts, there will be no outward change. Unless people move toward the kingdom of God and become citizens of that kingdom, espousing its values, we will see little change in their outward lives.

This kind of change is not possible apart from conversion - people coming to faith in Jesus Christ. So evangelism is extremely important. And prayer must go hand in hand with sharing the good news.

United prayer weakens and pushes back the spiritual darkness blinding countries, towns, and individuals, enabling them to hear and see the good news of Jesus Christ. United prayer opens hearts to a new way of living, and when hearts are changed, so are the communities in which people live.

History Belongs to Intercessors

According to Scripture, intercessory prayer is the key to fulfilling God's gracious purpose for the peoples of the earth. In Psalm 2, God said, "Ask of me and I will make the nations your inheritance and the ends of the earth your possession." Through Ezekiel, God said he looks for someone to "stand in the gap" before him. And through Isaiah, the Lord said he posts watchmen on Jerusalem's walls who will "never be silent day or night," giving themselves and the Lord no rest "till he establishes Jerusalem and makes her the praise of the earth."

We live in an age when people often pray small prayers and have limited expectations of God. Perhaps they believe he does not really care about the world's suffering. Perhaps they doubt his willingness to interfere in our temporal injustices. Maybe some people even believe him impotent. But I believe history belongs to the intercessors, those willing to believe that God is bigger than our suffering, those willing to believe that his power is more than able to answer to the world's needs, those willing to confront him with their God-given vision of a society full of justice, health, and love.

[Read the whole article!!]

C. S. Lewis:

Well, let's now at any rate come clean. Prayer is irksome. An excuse to omit it is never unwelcome. When it is over, this casts a feeling of relief and holiday over the rest of the day. We are reluctant to begin. We are delighted to begin. While we are at prayer, but not whole we are reading a novel or solving a crossword puzzle, any trifle is enough to distract us. And we know that we are not alone in this.

John R.W. Stott:

Prayer is not a convenient device for imposing our will upon God, or for bending his will to ours, but the prescribed way of subordinating our will to his. It is by prayer that we seek God's will, embrace it and align

ourselves with it. Every true prayer is a variation on the theme, "Your will be done." Our Master taught us to say this in the pattern prayer he gave us, and added the supreme example of it in Gethsemane.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer on prayer and community:

A Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses. I can no longer condemn or hate a brother for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble he causes me. His face, that hitherto may have been strange and intolerable to me, is transformed in intercession into the countenance of a brother for whom Christ died, the face of a forgiven sinner. This is a happy discovery for the Christian who begins to pray for others. There is no dislike, no personal tension, no estrangement that cannot be overcome by intercession as far as our side of it is concerned. Intercessory prayer is the purifying bath into which the individual and the fellowship must enter every day. The struggle we undergo with our brother in intercession may be a hard one, but that struggle has the promise that it will gain its goal.

How does this happen? Intercession means no more than to bring our brother into the presence of God, to see him under the cross of Jesus as a poor human being and sinner in need of grace. Then everything in him that repels us fall away; we see him in all his destitution and need. His need and his sin become so heavy and oppressive that we feel them as our own, and we can do nothing else but pray: Lord, do Thou, Thou alone, deal with him according to Thy severity and Thy goodness. To make intercession means to grant our brother the same right that we have received, namely, to stand before Christ and share in his mercy.

This makes it clear that intercession is also a daily service we owe to God and our brother. He who denies his neighbor the service of praying for him denies him the service of a Christian. It is clear, furthermore; that intercession is not general and vague but concrete: a matter of definite persons and definite difficulties and therefore of definite petitions. The more definite my intercession becomes, the more promising it is."

Finally, we can also no longer escape the realization that the ministry of intercession requires time of every Christian, but most of all the pastor who has the responsibility of a whole congregation. Intercession alone, if it is thoroughly done, would consume the entire time of daily meditation.

So pursued, it will become evident that intercession is a gift of God's grace for every Christian community and for every Christian. Because intercession is such an incalculably great gift of God, we should accept it joyfully. The very time we give to intercession will turn out to be a daily source of new joy in God and in the Christian community."

Since meditation on the Scriptures, prayer, and intercession are a service we owe and because the grace of God is found in this service, we should train ourselves to set apart a regular hour for it, as we do for every other service we perform. This is not 'legalism'; it is orderliness and fidelity. For most people the early morning will prove to be the best time. We have a right to this time, even prior to the claims of other people, and we may insist upon having it as a completely undisturbed quiet time despite all external difficulties. For pastors it is an indispensable duty and their whole ministry will depend upon it. Who can really be faithful in great things if he has not learned to be faithful in the things of daily life?"

John R.W. Stott:

True Christian prayer is always a preoccupation with God and his glory.

David Wells:

Prayer is in essence rebellion—rebellion against the world and its fallenness, the absolute and undying refusal to accept as normal what is pervasively abnormal. Prayer is the refusal of every agenda, every scheme, every interpretation that is at odds with the norm as originally established by God.

Billy Graham:

In our modern age we have learned to harness the power of the mighty Niagara and turn its force to beneficial use. We have learned to hold steam captive in boilers and release its tremendous energy to turn our machines and pull our trains. We have learned to contain gasoline vapors in a cylinder and explode them at the appointed second to move our automobiles and trucks along our highways. We have even discovered the secret of releasing energy in the atom, which is capable of lighting cities, operating great industries, or destroying entire cities and civilizations.

But very few of us have learned how to fully develop the power of prayer. Effectual prayer is offered in faith....If our prayers are aimless, meaningless, and mingled with doubt, they will be unanswered. Prayer is more than a wish turned heavenward: it is the voice of faith directed Godward.

We are to pray not only for our own needs but for the needs of others. We are to pray in times of adversity, lest we become faithless and unbelieving. We are to pray in times of prosperity, lest we become boastful and proud. We are to pray in times of danger, lest we become fearful and doubting. We need to pray in times of security, lest we become careless and self-sufficient.

Prayer...[is not] spiritual magic. It's not like pressing an electric button and expecting an immediate response. We can't manipulate God or dictate to Him.

Let us never forget that prayer is not just asking God for things. It's far bigger and better than that. At its deepest level, prayer is fellowship with God: enjoying His company, waiting upon His will, thanking Him for His mercies, committing our lives to Him, talking to Him about other people as well as ourselves, and listening in the silence for what He has to say to us.

This is what makes prayer so real and precious a thing, especially in times of stress and strain. When we come to the end of ourselves, we come to the beginning of God.

P.T. Forsyth:

To common sense the fact that God knows all we need, and wills us all good, the fact of His infinite Fatherhood, is a reason for not praying. Why ask what He is more than willing to give? But to Christian faith and to spiritual reason it is just the other way. Asking is polar co-operation. Jesus turned the fact to a use exactly the contrary of its deistic sense. He made the all-knowing Fatherhood the ground of true prayer. We do not ask as beggars but as children. Petition is not mere receptivity, nor is it mere pressure; it is filial reciprocity. Love loves to be told what it knows already. Every lover knows that. It wants to be asked for what it longs to give. And that is the principle of prayer to the all-knowing Love.

D.L. Moody was once staying with a Scottish friend in London. Here is B. B. Warfield recounting their discussion over prayer:

A young man had come to speak to Mr. Moody about spiritual things. He was in difficulty about a number of points, among the rest about prayer and natural laws. 'What is prayer?' he said, 'I can't tell what you mean by it!' They were in the hall of a large London house. Before Moody could answer, a child's voice was heard singing on the stairs. It was that of a little girl of nine or ten, the daughter of their host. She came running down the stairs and paused as she saw strangers in the hall. 'Come here, Jenny,' her father said, 'and tell this gentleman "What is prayer."' Jenny did not know what had been going on, but she quite understood that she was now called upon to say her Catechism. So she drew herself up, and folded her hands in front of her, like a good little girl who was going to 'say her questions,' and she said in her clear childish voice: 'Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins and thankful acknowledgement of his mercies.' 'Ah! That's the Catechism!' Moody said, 'thank God for that Catechism.'"

John Knox's excellent and beautiful definition of prayer: "earnest and familiar talking with God." Thomas a Kempis speaks simply of "conversation with God."

Martin Luther's friend, Veit Dietrich, wrote to Melanchthon from the Diet of Augsburg where he was assisting Luther:

Not a day passes but he reserves three hours at least for prayer out of the portion of the day which is most suitable for work. One day I had the privilege of overhearing him pray. Great God! what a spirit, what a faith in his words! He prays with all the devotion of a man before God, but with all the confidence of a child speaking to his father. 'I know,' said he, 'that Thou art our good God and our Father; that is why I am persuaded that Thou wilt exterminate those who persecute Thy children. If Thou does not do it, the danger is to Thee as much as to us. This cause is Thine; what we have done, we could not have done otherwise. It is for Thee, merciful Father to protect us.' When I heard him from a distance praying these words with a clear voice, my heart burned with joy within me, because I was hearing him speak to God with altogether as much fervour as liberty; above all he supported himself so firmly upon the promises in the Psalms, that he seemed fully assured that nothing he asked could fail to be accomplished.

Luther said of the reformation, "Prayer must do the deed," and he obviously practiced what he preached!

Luther wrote a small book (or long letter) on prayer to his barber, who had asked him about the subject (<http://www.blc.net.my/wp-content/uploads/2008/10/a-simple-way-to-pray-luther.pdf>). Luther wrote:

This in short is the way I use the Lord's Prayer when I pray it. To this day I suckle at the Lord's Prayer like a child, and as an old man eat and drink from it and never get my fill. It is the very best prayer, even better than the Psalter, which is so very dear to me. It is surely evident that a real master composed and taught it. What a great pity that the prayer of such a master is prattled and chattered so irreverently all over the world!

Tim Chester:

Much of the devotional literature on prayer is focused on those things which help us to pray - posture, exercises, liturgies, habits. But, while they may be helpful, none of them is necessary. The focus of the Bible is instead on Christ and his sufficiency. There is nothing we can do to make our prayers more effective before God. Any such notions are a return to paganism - it is to suppose that we can manipulate or placate God. As Ronald Dunn puts it, the floor of the throne room is sprinkled, 'not with the sweat of my good works, but with the of his sacrifice'. The 'posture' that the Bible commends is a humble and contrite heart.

This is the big and fundamental truth that you need to bear in mind as you read what follows.

I've done a quick bit of research on the posture of people when praying in the Bible. In our context it is usual to pray sitting down. Often people end up semi-recumbent in easy chairs. It seems to me to do little for the energy of our praying. I had a suspicion that standing up was a more common posture for prayer in the Bible and wondered whether we should encourage this more as a way of energetically engaging with God and wrestling with him in prayer.

What I found was this.

1. The Bible does not seem to show much interest in posture when praying. What matters is the mediation of Christ. Back to my quote above.
2. Standing is a more common posture than sitting. Kneeling or bowing face to the ground is also a common posture. I think these postures might

help us as we pray - perhaps standing for public prayer and kneeling for private or small group prayer.

3. Lifting up hands in prayer is also common. As it happens, I was reading a history of British art last night and there was an illustration from the fourth century of Christians praying - all with their hands lifted up. I think I might encourage people to raise their hands when they pray. I've noticed in the past that I gesticulate when praying just as much as I do when preaching.

Here are some of the relevant verses:

Kneeling to Pray

1 Kings 8:54: When Solomon had finished all these prayers and supplications to the Lord, he rose from before the altar of the Lord, where he had been kneeling with his hands spread out toward heaven

Daniel 6:10: Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.

Luke 22:41-42: He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, 'Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.'

Acts 21:5: All the disciples and their wives and children accompanied us out of the city, and there on the beach we knelt to pray.

Acts 9:40: Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the woman, he said, 'Tabitha, get up.' She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up.

Standing to Pray

1 Kings 8:22-24: Then Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in front of the whole assembly of Israel, spread out his hands toward heaven and said: 'O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth below ...'

1 Samuel 1:25-27: Then they slaughtered the bull, and they brought the child to Eli. And she said, 'Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the Lord. For this child I prayed, and the Lord has granted me my petition that I made to him.'

Mark 11:25: And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.'

Lifting Up Hands in Prayer

1 Kings 8:22-24: Then Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in front of the whole assembly of Israel, spread out his hands toward heaven and said: 'O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth below ...'

1 Kings 8:54: When Solomon had finished all these prayers and supplications to the Lord, he rose from before the altar of the Lord, where he had been kneeling with his hands spread out toward heaven

1 Timothy 2:8: I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing.

Sitting to Pray

2 Samuel 7:18: Then King David went in and sat before the Lord, and he said: 'Who am I, O Sovereign Lord, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far?'

Bowing, Face to the Ground, to Pray

Exodus 4:31: And when they heard that the Lord was concerned about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshiped.

2 Chronicles 20:18: Jehoshaphat bowed with his face to the ground, and all the people of Judah and Jerusalem fell down in worship before the Lord.

Matthew 26:39: Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.' (see also Mark 14:35)

Tim Keller:

If right now you are in a situation where you are being asked to wait, or you are in a situation where it seems like God is turning down your prayers, you are lacking some information. Jesus will always give you what you would have prayed for if you knew everything He knows.

Al Mohler:

People who cannot maintain mental attention cannot know the intimacy of prayer, and God does not maintain a Facebook page. Our ability to focus attention is not just about the mind, for it is also a reflection of the soul. Our Christian discipleship demands that we give attention to our attention.

David deSilva:

Praying is not about getting God to give us what we want; it is about learning to want what God wants to give."

P.T. Forsyth:

The worst sin is prayerlessness. Overt sin, or crime, or the glaring inconsistencies which often surprise us in Christian people are the effect of this or its punishment. We are left by God for lack of seeking Him. The history of the saints shows often that their lapses were the fruit and nemesis of slackness or neglect in prayer. Their life, at seasons, also tended to become inhuman by their spiritual solitude. . . . Only living prayer keeps loneliness humane.

Tim Chester:

Sometimes we pray because we are feeling holy and sometimes we pray because we are feeling desperate. I suspect it's the desperate prayers that God hears.

In other words, when we depend in our prayers on our holiness we start to sound like the Pharisee in the parable Jesus tells in Luke 18. The core model for prayer is that of a child petitioning his or her father. Our prayers are not heard because of anything intrinsic in us other than a belief that we desperately need God every moment and that he hears us when we cry to him in our desperation.

John Piper:

Whatever you ask . . ." God will do. We all wonder how extensive that *whatever* is. If we make it absolute, we deny that the glory of God is the aim of prayer. Why is that? Because we can all think of prayers that do *not* glorify God. If God answered them, he would not be glorified. He would be discredited and dishonored. For example: "God, please, make me more important than yourself." "God, please wipe the Jewish people off the planet—or black people, or white people." Choose your hatred, and ask God to support you in it. "God, please make pornography a godly thing to look at once a week." "God, blind the IRS to all the times I have lied on my tax returns." "God please put my competitor out of business." When Jesus says, "Whatever you ask . . ." the *whatever* is qualified by the end of the verse: "that the Father may be glorified in the Son." Prayer exists, like everything else to show that God is supremely glorious.

Therefore, any prayer that does not imply "Hallowed be thy name" as the main desire has no claim on this verse.

John Calvin:

We clearly see how destitute of all good things man is, and how he lacks all aids to salvation. Therefore if he seeks resources to aid him in his need, he must go outside himself and get them elsewhere...

"Whatever we need and whatever we lack is in God and in our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom the Father willed all the fullness of his bounty to abide...so that we may all draw from it as from an overflowing spring, it remains for us to seek in Him, and in prayers ask of him, what we have learned to be in him...we dig up by prayer the treasures that were pointed out by the Lord's Gospel, and which our faith has gazed upon."

Matthew Henry:

We prevail with men by impudence because they are displeased with it, but with God because he is pleased with it.

I'm not sure where I got this, but it's good:

A story has been told about Luther sitting at his table at mealtime, and Luther's dog was also there. Luther's dog was almost always there. The dog's name was Topol. The kindest translation of that name would be "rascal." As the dog was there, Dr. Luther was eating and Topol was very carefully watching him eat his meat, and the dog was hoping for a morsel from Luther's hand. Luther said, "Ah, if I could only pray the way that dog looks at meat. All his thoughts are on that morsel. He thinks, wishes, and hopes about nothing else. But my heart fails because it cannot hold to prayer without wandering."

Tertullian:

We are a body knit together as such by a common religious profession, by unity of discipline, and by the bond of a common hope. We meet together as an assembly and congregation, that, offering up prayer to God as with united force, we may wrestle with Him in our supplications. This violence God delights in. We pray, too, for the emperors, for

their ministers and for all in authority, for the welfare of the world, for the prevalence of peace, for the delay of the final consummation."

William Gurnall:

Prayer must be the key of the morning, and the lock of the night. We show not ourselves Christians, if we do not open our eyes with prayer when we rise, and shut them again with the same key we lie down at night. Pray as often as you please besides.

Eugene Peterson:

Prayer and spirituality feature participation, the complex participation of God and the human, his will and our wills. We do not abandon ourselves to the stream of grace and drown in the ocean of love, losing identity. We do not pull the strings that activate God's operations in our lives, subjecting God to our assertive identity. We neither manipulate God (active voice) nor are manipulated by God (passive voice). We are involved in the action and participate in its results but do not control or define it (middle voice). Prayer takes place in the middle voice.

Calvin:

In the verb 'to call upon,' there is a synecdoche, for it embraces generally the whole worship of God. But religion is here properly designated by that which forms its principal part. For God prefers this service of piety and faith to all sacrifices... Yea, this is the spiritual worship of God which faith produces. This is particularly worthy of notice, because Satan contrives nothing with greater care than to adulterate, with every possible corruption, the pure invocation of God, or to draw us away from the only God to the invocation of creatures. Even from the beginning of the world he has not ceased to move this stone, that miserable men might weary themselves in vain..."

Luther on the Psalms:

Hence also it comes to pass that the Psalter is the Book of all the Saints; and every one, whatsoever his case may be, find therein Psalms and words which suit his case so perfectly, that they might seem to have been set down solely for his sake, in such sort that anything better he can

neither make for himself, nor discover, nor desire. One good effect of which, moreover, is that if a man take pleasure in the words here set forth and find them suit his case, he is assured he is in the communion of the saints, and that all the saints fared just as he fares, for they and he sing all one song together, particularly if he can utter them before God even as they did, which must be done in faith, for an ungodly man relishes them not ...

Tim Keller's essay, 'Prayer and the Gospel':

Principles

One of the most basic things that the gospel does is change prayer from mere petition to *fellowship* and the praise of his glory. Galatians 4:6-7 teaches us that when we believe the gospel, we not only become God's children legally, but we receive the Spirit in order to experience our sonship. The Spirit leads us to call out passionately to God as our tender and loving Father. *The Spirit calls out 'Abba'* (4:7). In the very next verse Paul refers to this experience as "knowing God" (4:8). We do not just know and believe that God is holy and loving, but we actually experience contact with his holiness and his love in personal communion with him. No one had a deeper insight into the gospel and prayer than Jonathan Edwards. Edwards concluded the most essential difference between a Christian and a moralist is that a Christian obeys God out of the sheer delight in who he is. The gospel means that we are not obeying God to get anything but to give him pleasure because we see his worth and beauty. Therefore, the Christian is able to draw power out of contemplation of God. Without the gospel, this is impossible. We can only come and ask for things- petition. Without the gospel, we may conceive of a holy God who is intimidating and who can be approached with petitions if we are very good. Or we may conceive of a God who is mainly loving and regards all positively. To approach the first "God" is fearsome; to approach the second is no big deal. Thus without the gospel, there is no possibility of passion and delight to praise and approach God.

Pathologies

There are two fairly common distortions of prayer that arise from a lack of orientation to the gospel in our prayer lives. We touched on them above. Here is a more practical description.

1. On the one hand, our prayer can have "light without heat."

There can be long lists of things that we pray for, and long lists of Bible verses we read, and long lists of things we thank him for. Yet there is no fire. Why? If we lose focus on the glory of God in the gospel as the solution to all our problems, then we devolve into a set of "grocery list" prayers, made rather desperately. When we are done, we only feel more anxious than before. The presence of God is not sensed because God is really just being used – he is not being worshipped.

Instead, we should always remember that the first thing we need is a new perspective on our needs and problems. We should always intertwine with repentance over our unbelief and indifference to God's grace. On the one hand, we must "pray into" ourselves that the thing we are asking for is not our Savior or God or glory! But, (on the other hand) after we repent and refine our desire, we should "pray into" ourselves that God is our Father and wants to give us good things, so we can ask in confidence. Also, intertwined with our petitions should be praise and marveling that we are able to approach God, and be welcomed in Christ. This is gospel-centered prayer, rather than anxious petitioning. Our desires are always idolatrous to some degree, and when we pray without dealing with that first, we find our prayers only make us more anxious. Instead, we should always say, in effect, "Lord, let me see your glory as I haven't before, let me be so ravished with your grace that worry and self-pity and anger and indifference melt away!" Then, when we turn to ask God for admission to grad school or healing of an illness, those issues will be put in proper perspective. We will say, "Lord, I ask for this because I think it will glorify you – so help me get it, or support me without it." If the overall focus of the prayer is on God's glory and the gospel, our individual petitions will be made with great peace and confidence.

2. On the other hand, our prayer can have "heat without light."

Unlike the "light without heat" prayer, focused on anxious personal petitions, there is a kind of prayer which is its direct opposite – "heat without light." This is prayer with lots of "fire" and emotion. It focuses on boldly claiming things in Jesus' name. A lot of military and conflict imagery is usually used. Often the prayers themselves are said (either in your head or out loud) in a very unnatural, dramatic kind of voice and language.

Now, if (as stated above) prayer focuses on the gospel and glory of God, and if by the Spirit's help, that glory becomes real to us as we contemplate it, there will be passion, and maybe strong and dramatic emotion. But "heat without light" prayer always begins with a lot of drama and feeling

automatically. I think that many people who pray like that are actually reacting against the very limp kind of prayer meetings that result from anxious personal petition. But they respond by simply trying to directly inject emotion and drama into prayer.

This kind of prayer is also not gospel-centered. Just as the anxious-petitioning is often legalistic and fails to base itself on God's grace, so the bold-claiming is sometimes legalistic and fails to base itself on God's grace. There is a sense that "if I pray long and without any doubts at all then God will surely hear me." Many people believe that they must suppress all psychological doubts and work up tremendous confidence if they are to get answered.

In addition, often personal problems are treated abstractly. People may say: "Lord, I ask you to come against the strongholds of worry in my life." Or "Lord, I claim the victory over bitterness," instead of realizing that it is faith in the gospel that will heal our worry and bitterness. Ironically, this is the same thing that the "anxious petitioner" does. There is no understanding of how to "bathe" the needs and petitions in contemplating the glory of God in the gospel until the perspective on the very petition is combined with joyful yet profound repentance, e.g. "Lord, I am experiencing such fear – but you are the stronghold of my life. Magnify your name in my sight. Let your love and glory ravish me till my fear subsides. You said you will never forsake me, and it is sheer unbelief that brings me to deny it. Forgive and heal me."

So, ironically, we see that "heat without light" prayer and "light without heat" prayer both stem from the same root. They come from works-righteousness, a conviction that we can earn God's favor, and a loss of orientation with respect to our free justification and adoption.

Practice

How can we very practically move toward a gospel-centered prayer life that aims primarily at knowing God? *Meditation and communion.*

This essential discipline is meditation on the truth. Meditation is a "crossing" of two other disciplines: Bible study and prayer. Meditation is both yet it is not just moving one to another – it is a blending of them. Most of us first study our Bible, and then move to the prayer list, but the prayer is detached from the Bible you just studied. But meditation is praying the truth (just studied) deep into your soul till it catches "*fire*." By "*fire*" we mean – until it makes all sorts of personal connections – with YOU personally, so it shapes the thinking, it moves the

feelings, and it changes the actions. Meditation is working out the truth personally.

The closest analogy to meditating on the truth is the way a person eagerly reads a love letter. You tear it open and you weigh every word. You never simply say, "I know that" but "what does this mean? What did he or she really mean by that?" You aren't reading it quickly just for information – you want to know what lies deep in the clauses and phrases. And more important, you want the letter to sink in and form you.

Augustine saw meditation, "the soul's ascent into God," as having three parts: *retentio*, *contemplatio*, *dilectio*.

First, *retentio* means the distillation of the truths of Scripture and holding them centrally in the mind. This means study and concentration on a passage of scripture to simply understand it, so you see its thrust.

"Retentio" is thus learning what a passage says. The many books on Bible study and interpretation can help us here.

Second, *contemplatio*, means "gazing at God through this truth." It is to pose and answer questions such as:

- *what does this tell me about God; what does it reveal about him?*
- *how can I praise him for and through this?*
- *how can I humble myself before him for and through this?*
- *if he is really like this, what difference does this particular truth make to how I live today?*
- *what wrong behavior, harmful emotions, false attitudes result in me when I forget he is like this?*
- *how would my neighborhood, my family, my church, my friends be different if they saw it deeply?*
- *does my life demonstrate that I am remembering and acting out of this?*
- *Lord, what are you trying to tell me about you, and why do you want me to know it now, today?*

Above all, the purpose of *contemplatio* is to move from a kind of objective analytical view of things to a personal dealing with God as he is. It is to deal with God directly, to stretch every nerve to turn this "knowing about" into knowing – to move from knowing a fact about him to actually "seeing" him with the heart – to adore, to marvel, to rest in, or to be troubled by, to be humbled by him. It is one thing to study a piece of music and another to play it. It is one thing to work on a diamond, cutting and polishing it; it is another to stand back and let it take your breath away.

Third, *dilectio* means delighting and relishing the God you are looking at. You begin to actually praise and confess and aspire toward him on the

basis of the digested and meditated truth. If you have moved from learning to personal meditation, then, depending on your spiritual sharpness, the circumstances of your life at that time, and God's sovereign Spirit, you begin to experience him.

Sometimes it is mild, sometimes strong, and sometimes you are very dry. But whenever you are meditating ("contemplatio") and you suddenly find new ideas coming to you and flowing in, then write them down and move to direct praising and confessing and delighting. That is (as Luther would say) the "Holy Spirit preaching to you."

Anonymous:

Courage is fear that has said its prayers

Augustine:

If God seems slow in responding, it is because He is preparing a better gift. He will not deny us. God withholds what you are not yet ready for. He wants you to have a lively desire for His greatest gifts. All of which is to say, pray always and do not lose heart.

Seven encouragements to prayer from John Bradford's "Meditation on Prayer"

1. Our need (do you not have need of what God alone can give you? do not your children, your loved ones, your church, your friends, your country?) Hebrews 4:16: "...grace to help in time of need."
2. God's commandments. Pray without ceasing. Pray and do not give up. Etc. In the keeping of God's commandments there is a great reward!
3. God's goodness. If the mercy of the Lord is over all his works, if he provides for the lilies and the birds, will he not richly supply the needs of those who call upon him, those for whom he did not spare his own Son...?
4. The promise of God. How many and how extraordinary the promises are that God has made to prayer. Ask and you will receive. Whatever you ask in my name it shall be given to you. Call upon me and I will answer and show you great and mighty things that you know not. If you, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will God give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him. And on and on.
5. Examples of how God was rich toward those who called upon him. How many examples there are in the Bible (Abraham; Moses; Hannah; David; Jeremiah; Paul; etc.) and how many since.

6. The benefits that prayer has brought them in the past. Any Christian who has lived the Christian life for any length of time knows the power and virtue and blessing and reality of prayer. His faithfulness to your prayers before is a powerful reason to come confidently to him again.
7. The prayers of Scripture themselves which show them true prayer and the right way of prayer, and encourage them by this demonstration of how right and good and necessary such praying is for anyone who believes to be true what a Christian does.

Tod Bolsinger:

Prayer that changes things is prayer that changes us

Tim Keller prayer articles:

<http://download.redemer.com/pdf/newsletter/RedeemerNewsletter-2006-01.pdf>
<http://www.redemer2.com/webuploads/RedeemerNewsletter-2006-06.pdf>
<http://download.redemer.com/pdf/newsletter/RedeemerNewsletter-2006-03.pdf>
<http://download.redemer.com/pdf/newsletter/RedeemerNewsletter-2006-06.pdf>

Anonymous:

I only pray when I am in trouble. But I am in trouble all the time, and so I pray all the time.

Tim Keller on praying the Psalms:

Praying the Psalms

1. "**The Psalms teach us to pray through imitation and response...**Real prayer is always an answer to God's revelation. The Psalms are BOTH prayer and revelations about God♦the perfect ideal soil for learning prayer.
2. **The Psalms take us deep into our own hearts** 1000 times faster than we would ever go if left to ourselves...Religious/moral people tend to want to deny the rawness and reality of their own feelings, especially the darkness of them...The secular world has almost made an idol of emotional self-expression...But the Psalmists neither 'stuff' their feelings nor 'ventilate' them. They *pray* them—they take them into the presence of God until they change or understand them.

3. **Most importantly, the Psalms force us to deal with God as He is, not as we wish he was.** 'Left to ourselves, we will pray to some god who speaks what we like hearing, or to the part of God we manage to understand. But what is critical is that we speak to the God who speaks to us, and to everything He speaks to us...the Psalms train us in that conversation.' (quote from Eugene Peterson's Answering God)'"

Additional Note: The Imprecatory Psalms can be confusing with their cries for vengeance upon Israel's or the psalmist's enemies. "Basically, realize that calls for justice are absolutely right, and remind us how important God's holiness and justice are. But secondly, recognize that the Psalmists did not have the justice of God completely satisfied in Christ. Thus we pray for our enemies, not wish them ill. Yet we as Christians can pray these Psalms as longings for social justice and hatred against the 'power and principalities' behind the world."

Richard Foster on those who pray in Christ:

The Father's heart is open wide and you are welcome to come in.

[It's not just that the heavenly temple has been opened, as I talked about in the sermon. It's that the Father has opened his heart for us and to us.]

Jonathan Edwards, from his great sermon, 'Blessed Struggle':

God doesn't seem to be listening to my prayers. Does he not want to bless me?

God, when he has a design of bestowing the blessing on persons in answer to prayer, he stirs 'em up to be earnest in prayer, and oftentimes seemingly opposes them, and resists them, instead of hearkening to them, for the trial of their constancy and performance in prayer....

Men by seeking the blessing don't get the blessing by their own strength...nor do they purchase the blessing.... But yet God has wisely determined to bestow the blessing in this way; for if men might obtain the blessing without seeking, and it were all one whether men sought or no, everyone would entirely give himself up seeking it. There would be no restraint to any corruption; there would be no use of prudence; there would be no endeavor, no exercise of any faculties in the case....

God requires men to seek, and constantly to seek, because hereby they will be prepared to prize the blessing, to acknowledge it received of him, and to praise him for it....

Thus, for instance, when God seems to turn a deaf ear, and makes no answer to their cries for mercy, it tends to bring persons to reflect on themselves, and consider how they have offended and provoked him, thus to refuse to answer; how just to take notice of what is in their hearts, how poor their prayers, how little to be depended on. And again, when things laid in the way make it difficult and hard to be gone through, it tends to bring persons to find their own weakness, find their own strength of corruption, and how much it is against this constant self-denial. When persons come to have occasion violently to resist corruption, then they will find the strength of resolution. But by their having those things that are most contrary to corruption, they will find God's blessing.

By God's deferring long to bestow his blessing, they learn by more and more experience, how far 'tis out of their reach, how impossible they should obtain it; and are led more and more to consider their dependence on God for it, and to consider their unworthiness of it.

And so when God exercises them with frowns of providence to teach them that, instead of deserving the mercy they seek, they deserve nothing but frowns of displeasure, they learn that their prayers and cries deserve no gracious regard at all....

So God causes it sometimes to grow darker and darker. Sometimes it must be as dark as midnight, before persons will despair in themselves. And oftentimes the issue of all these things, is to bring persons to God's feet.... These were only trials whether you would be steadfast in seeking. It was no sign at all that God never intended his blessing.....

The more God hides his face, the darker things seem to appear to you, the more likely you will obtain it; because you will so much the more answer the character of one that is violent for the kingdom of heaven. Those that meet with peculiar and extraordinary difficulty and opposition scarcely ever fail, if they hold out.