



Foundations of a Healthy Church

Prayer¹

Questions for Discussion

- Why is prayer foundational to the health of any local church?
- What are some challenges that prevent churches from faithfulness in this area?
- What comes to mind when you think of a “praying” church? What patterns would you expect to see?

Biblical Foundations for Prayer

- **Question:** How would you define prayer?
- **Definition:** Simply, prayer is talking to God. This “talking” can take many forms as we see in Scripture, including direct dialogue, song, or in writing.
 - In Romans 8, it even includes unspoken thought, including thoughts that are difficult to put into words.
 - However, most commonly, prayer is talking.
 - Prayer can be done anytime, anywhere, and by anyone.
 - Prayer stems from our being created in the image of God. God communicates to us, and we are supposed to communicate with him. Prayer is this communication channel to the God of the universe who created us to know, worship, and relate to him.
- **Scriptural Principles Regarding Prayer**
 - **Question:** What things come to mind regarding prayer from Scripture?
 - **Question:** What are some areas of confusion or potential mistakes we can make surrounding prayer?
 - Prayer is expected and commanded.
 - **Matthew 6:9-13** *Pray then like this: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. ¹⁰Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹Give us this day our daily bread, ¹²and forgive us our debts,*

¹ Portions of this lesson are adapted from material found in chapter 8 of the fourth edition of *9 Marks of a Healthy Church* by Mark Dever.

as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

- **Hebrews 4:16** *Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*
- **1 Thessalonians 5:16-18** *Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*
- **1 John 5:14-15** *And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.*
- Prayer is trinitarian, with requests asked of the Father, by the Son, in the Spirit.
 - **John 14:13** *Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.*
 - **1 Timothy 2:5** *For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus...*
 - **Romans 8:26** *Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.*
 - **Romans 8:15** *For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!"*
 - While the regular pattern is prayer directed to the Father in the name of the Son in the Spirit, Scripture also supports prayers made to each member of the trinity:
 - We call upon Christ for salvation; see Romans 10:9-13, 1 Corinthians 1:2
 - We see people call out to Jesus directly for healing (Matthew 8:2-3)
 - We see the Spirit directly address in some of Paul's prayers for the churches (2 Corinthians 13:14)
- Prayer actually makes a difference.
 - **Caution:** God is not obliged to answer all of our prayers. Because God works all things together for our good and His glory, he answers prayer according to His plans and purposes.
 - However, over and over again in Scripture, God weaves the prayers of his people into his sovereign plan.
 - **1 John 5:14-15** *And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.*

- God sometimes *withholds* good things because we don't come to him in prayer. Similarly, God sometimes only acts in response to the prayers of His people.
 - **James 4:2** ...*You do not have because you do not ask God.*
 - **Matthew 7:11** *If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!*
- Prayer should be persistently and done in faith.
 - **Mark 11:24** *Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.*
 - See the parable of the persistent widow in **Luke 18:1-8**.
 - **Luke 11:9** *And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.*
 - **James 1:6** *But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.*
- Prayer should be done in humility and reverence.
 - **2 Chronicles 7:14** *If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.*
- Prayer should be done with God-honoring motives.
 - **James 4:3** *You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.*
- Prayer can be done individually and corporately.
 - We are exhorted to private prayer in Matthew 6:5-8.
 - We see examples of corporate prayer in Exodus 2:23, Judges 3:9, Judges 4:3, and in many of the Psalms.
- **The Content of Prayer**
 - **Question:** What are some things that we are supposed to pray for?
 - Prayer is not treating God like a vending machine; he is not obliged to answer our prayers in the way we expect.
 - As we saw above, God answers prayer according to His will. Thus, our prayers should align with God's will as revealed in Scripture.
 - **1 John 5:14-15** *And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.*
 - In Jesus's model prayer, we see various elements to guide our prayers.
 - **Matthew 6:9-13** Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. ¹⁰ Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is

in heaven. ¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread, ¹² and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

- Adoration – Praising God for His character and attributes.
 - Confession – Acknowledging our sin, and asking God to forgive by the blood of Christ.
 - **Note:** Our eternal state in Christ is secure. Confession of sin helps us to keep “short accounts” and maintain our sense of dependency upon God.
 - Thanksgiving – Thanking God for who he is, what he’s done, and what is doing in our lives, the church, and the world.
 - Supplication – Asking God for things, both for ourselves, and for others.
- These elements can be remembered using the acronym, “ACTS”.
 - **Adoration**
 - **Psalm 104:1-4** *Bless the Lord, O my soul! O Lord my God, you are very great! You are clothed with splendor and majesty, ²covering yourself with light as with a garment, stretching out the heavens like a tent. ³He lays the beams of his chambers on the waters; he makes the clouds his chariot; he rides on the wings of the wind; ⁴he makes his messengers winds, is ministers a flaming fire.*
 - **Confession**
 - **James 5:16** *Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.*
 - **Thanksgiving**
 - **Colossians 4:2** *Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.*
 - **Isaiah 12:4-5** *Give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the peoples, proclaim that his name is exalted.*
 - **Colossians 2:6-7** *Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.*
 - **Supplication/Petitions**
 - For needs & provision.
 - **Philippians 4:6-7** *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*
 - For spirit-filled wants that align with God’s character.

- See the prayer of Hannah for a child, **1 Samuel 9-28**.
- David prayed that God would relent on punishment brought upon his child borne to Bathsheba, **2 Samuel 12:16**.
- Moses prays for God to relent in destroying the Israelites in response to their idolatry, **Exodus 32:11-14**.
- The more we abide in Christ, the more we learn to ask for things that please the Lord and align with His will.
 - **Psalm 37:4** *Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.*
 - **John 15:7** *If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.*
- For Spiritual protection.
 - **Ephesians 6:17-18** *And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints.*
 - **Matthew 26:41** *Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."*
- For the needs and Spiritual condition of others.
 - **1 Timothy 2:1-3** *First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, ²for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. ³This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior...*
 - **Ephesians 3:14-19** ¹⁴*For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*
- For wisdom/revelation.
 - **Jeremiah 33:3** *Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known.*
 - **James 1:5** *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.*
- For the advance of the gospel.

- **Colossians 4:3-4** ...*Pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison— ⁴that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.*
- **Question:** What are some other things we are called to pray for?

Prayer in the Church

- Given the importance of prayer, the reality that God uses prayer to affect His kingdom purposes, and the value of prayer for our own spiritual development, prayer is a critical discipline in the life of the church.
- Additionally, while personal prayer is important, praying together is a consistent pattern we see in Scripture.
 - Acts 1:14, Acts 1:24, Acts 2:42, etc.
 - The church is the environment in which we can share requests that inform our personal prayer lives and in which we can come together to seek the Lord.
- In the church, prayer can take different forms; sometimes, prayer is led by one individual and the congregation prays along silently. Other times, prayers are offered by different people in the congregation. There is no prescribed pattern (except that it should be done decently and in order).
- Below are a few guiding principles for leading prayer in the local church.²
 - *Our public prayer life together as a church should grow out of our individual prayer lives.*
 - *Some of our practices in prayer will vary over time.*
 - *Some specific words can be especially helpful in leading a church well in prayer.* (For example, “we” instead of “I”, concluding with “amen”, etc. that assist in leading others when we pray).
 - *Different kinds of public prayers help us as a local church.* Some churches may have long, spontaneous prayers by a pastor or another member. Others may have various short, planned prayers, as in some church’s written liturgies.
 - *Prayers should not be done with a hypocritical or self-aggrandizing spirit.* (See Matthew 6:5-8).
- To facilitate the prayer life in the church, it is helpful to:
 - set aside focused times for gathering prayer requests and praying
 - use tools like the membership directory
 - to collect and distribute prayer requests to encourage consistency
 - **Question:** What other ways can the church help facilitate prayer?

² Dever, Mark. 2021. [*Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*](#). Fourth Edition. 9Marks: Building Healthy Churches. Wheaton, IL: Crossway.

Convicting Questions

- If every one of the prayers you prayed last week was answered, how many people would be saved?
- If every one of your prayers you prayed last week was answered, how much would you have grown spiritually?
- Is it possible you've not received blessing from God because you haven't asked for it? What is holding you back?
- If you believe prayer is important, what change will you make this week to reflect that?

"Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Hebrews 4:16