

Prayer 8 — Prayer and Strategy

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Introduction (Connection):

Hey again!

I'm super grateful to the worship team who came out and made that time of worship happen; my prayer is that it stirred up your affections for Jesus.

I was reading this morning in Colossians 2 and thought it well sums up the state of my mind and heart when Paul says...

"For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you... and for all who have not seen me face to face, that your hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding in the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ..."¹

I miss you guys, I want to be with you all, and I hope you're encouraged this morning.

The remainder of this time is specifically geared towards the older students and adults; you can send the younger kids off to play if you haven't already or give them ice cream for breakfast.

¹ Paraphrase of Colossians 2:1-2, ESV

We emailed a link to a webpage that has content for you to show your younger children which I'd recommend you parents show your kids after this time is done here.

Tension:

Today's message is basically part two of last week's message on prayer and War from Ephesians 6, and we're going to go really deep today on the concept that prayer is war this week and next week.

So instead of turning to a passage, I want you to grab a notebook and a pen. I don't really have a specific passage I want to walk you through today which is super rare, but the topic covers a wide range of passages.

But first, let me explain why we're sticking to the topic of prayer this week instead of moving to a passage on fear or anxiety in light of everything going on.

Philippians 4 is a passage you've probably heard quoted several times this past week...

*v. 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. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."*²

Prayer kills anxiety and fear... prayer is how we find the peace that guards our hearts and minds in Christ.

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Php 4:6-7.

So if anything, we're studying something more important than talking about fear itself, we're studying the silver bullet that 100% of the time puts fear to death.

I also want to stick to talking about prayer because most of you have more time for it now than ever before... unless you homeschool your kids... then absolutely nothing has changed.

So last week, we talked about how the occupation of a Christian is war, and we looked at where Paul in Ephesians 6 commands us to suit up in God's armor and pray.

We found out that prayer is the act of war itself, war against evil principalities and powers and authorities in the spiritual world.

What is the most important thing to have when you go to war? **Strategy**

If you have no thought-out plan for how you're going to overcome the enemy you fight against, then you will lose the war.

Napoleon, the well known military leader, personally held to 115 different principles in his strategy for war, which is likely what led to his success in the French Revolution.³

The Confederate general Nathan Bedford Forrest had only one strategy: **"Get there first with the most men."**⁴

That might explain why the civil war went the way it did.

³ Ronald E. Goodman, "Strategy and Tactics, Military" (article, Scholastic, no date), available online at <https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/articles/teaching-content/strategy-and-tactics-military/> [accessed online March 19, 2020].

⁴ Ibid.

Military leaders develop their strategies around what the objective is, the offensive, the surprise, security, unity of command, economy of force, mass, and maneuver.⁵

Can you imagine going into a war with no strategy?

We'd have no clear direction as to what we're trying to accomplish, no understanding of the assets we have the war arsenal, there'd be failed communication among ranking officials, and no clue where you need to be when you need to be there.

It's the same as attempting to build a skyscraper with no blueprints and no clue if you can even afford it.

Going to prayer without a strategy is the same idea.

We're in the middle of it, not really sure what we're trying to see happen, we can't seem to get our head and heart in alignment, and then when we finally get into prayer a little bit we start to think about everything you have to do that day and who you need to get back to, what you forgot to do yesterday, how you're going to make up for it today... and then you've made no headway in prayer.

If prayer is war, why haven't we worked hard to develop a strategy for it as if the cosmic war depended on it?

We must have strategies to keep our minds and hearts engaged in the right and appropriate things, with a clear prayer objective, and an understanding of what weapons we have in the arsenal of God's great grace.

⁵ Ibid.

Exposition:

So that's what today is going to be... we're going to develop a strategy for prayer together, one that I've been implementing and have seen my prayer life grow.

So first, we have to understand that a strategy takes into account two main things: the Rules for War and the Tactics for War.

We're first going to look at some **Rules for Prayer** this week and then next week we'll look at some tactics.

We've already covered a few rules for prayer so far in this series, rules like we really need to acknowledge God's grace in Christ every time we pray, which is what "in Jesus' name" ultimately means.

We already talked about the rule of a prayer identity, that the chief identity we carry into the throne room of God to ask him things is the identity of a daughter or a son of God, since we've been adopted.

We also talked about the rule of praying according to God's promises since he's already said yes to them in Christ.

We're going to add a few more rules today to prayer, which actually come from John Calvin's *Institutes*, but I've adapted them to our context a bit.

Here's...

Rule #1: Always Approach in Awe

This goes all the way back to week one of this sermon series, prayer is the act of seeking nearness to God, prayer is proximity.

You get to have a personal audience and conversation with God... like, you know, the God who topples nations and conquers armies with a word, the God whose robe is light.

Prayer is drawing near to that God.

Pay attention to what I'm about to say: **There is nothing worse than to be devoid of awe when you pray.**

If we have no reverence or fear of God when we pray, then we're approaching the Almighty God of the universe with the same demeanor we'd approach a neighbor down the street.

We don't fear punishment, but we don't want to grieve him because we love him and have tasted and seen how beautiful he really is.

Prayer requires awe... and the cool thing is, it also produces awe as well.

But how do we do this every time? I mean, sometimes I wake up in the morning and I'm hardly even able to process through how many scoops of coffee grounds I'm putting in the filter... how can I be sure to have perfect awe every time I pray?

Ask for it... seriously. It is as simple as that.

Ask God for a glimpse of his glory that would inspire awe in you... remember how Moses asked that of God?

It is the greatest request!

Always approach in Awe

Rule #2: Have a humble head and heart

Friends... you and I are utterly dependent upon God for every thing... every good and perfect gift comes from his hand.

Therefore, you and I need, as Calvin puts it, a “sense of need that excludes all unreality.”⁶ {repeat}

Until we fully acknowledge the chaos within us that the Bible calls sin, we live in what Calvin calls “unreality.”⁷

That unreality is that we’re self-sufficient, that we can take care of ourselves, that we are enough.

Francis Spufford calls us as humans “agents of entropy.”⁸

We tend to break things... promises, commitments, relationships, hearts...

We have to be ever ready to recognize and repent of our own faults and flaws and weaknesses with ruthless honesty and specificity.

If you’ve ever been to any counseling you’d know that the only character flaws that can really destroy you are the ones you won’t admit.⁹

This means when we pray, we don’t have to try to put our best face on or our best cloths on or bring our A game, nor should we try to hide anything.

⁶ Tim Keller, *Prayer; Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2014), 99.

⁷ Tim Keller, *Prayer; Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*, 100.

⁸ Francis Spufford quoted in McNeill, *Calvin: Institutes*, 3.20.15., 872, quoted in Tim Keller, *Prayer; Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2014), 100.

⁹ Tim Keller, *Prayer; Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*, 100.

This is why confession and repentance are crucial to prayer.

Prayer requires humility, and like before, prayer also produces humility as well.

Prayer both requires and empowers the abandonment of self-justification, blame shifting, self-pity, and spiritual pride.

Tim Keller says it this way.

"To the degree you can shed the 'unreality' of self-sufficiency, to that degree your prayer life will become richer and deeper."¹⁰

I mean, do you realize how amazing it is that you and I can go before the Holy and Almighty God and say, "I'm a sinful man, here's what I've done," and he still loves us the same?

That's forgiveness. That's freedom.

We must remain humble when we pray.

Rule #3: Await yet Anticipate

First, you and I ought to have a willingness to wait on the Lord, to surrender everything to his timing, to hand over the reigns, trust his heart even when you can't understand his hand.

Trust in him even when things aren't going like you want them to.

Jesus held this rule himself as well, right?

We must be willing to say with him, "Not my will, but yours be done."

¹⁰ Tim Keller, *Prayer; Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*, 101.

We must be willing to say, "Here's what I think I need, but you know best."

We must leave all of our needs and desires in his hands in prayer.

That's where we can find trust rest because then we're realizing we're no longer responsible for what we need and want; we're leaving it all on God!

And yet, at the very same time we're awaiting... we're anticipating as well.

We are to pray with anticipation, with expectation, with confidence and hope.

Sure, be humble, but pray with confidence that your prayer will be answered.

Why? If God is all sovereign and doesn't change his mind, then why pray?

Because God invites us to pray with fervor and confidence and promises to answer our prayers because he is good and he's our loving heavenly Father.

So pray with anticipation and expectation... expect God to keep his promises!

Also, pray because God often waits to give a blessing until you have prayed for it.

Why would he do that?

Keller goes on to give a pretty solid answer...

"Good things that we do not ask for will usually be interpreted by our hearts as the fruit of our own wisdom and diligence. Gifts from God that are not acknowledged as such are deadly to the soul, because they thicken

the illusion of self-sufficiency that leads to overconfidence and sets us up for failure.”¹¹

James 4:2 even says, “we have not because we ask not.”

So Ask! Anticipate! Expect!

And where his answer is not what you want or thought you needed, use prayer to wait on the Lord and surrender to his good plan.

And here’s...

Rule #4: Have a Rule Against Rules

I want to be careful here... God doesn’t reject your prayers that don’t fit perfectly into these rules for prayer.

No one apart from Jesus has ever prayed perfectly or with the level of righteousness that was due.

This is where grace comes rushing in.

Rules in prayer don’t make your prayers worthy to be heard.

Nothing we formulate or do can qualify us for access to God. Only grace can do that.

These rules are simply meant to align our prayers with who God is, the God of free grace.

So these are the rules for prayer:

1) Always Approach in Awe

¹¹ Tim Keller, *Prayer; Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*, 102.

- 2) **Have a Humble Head and Heart**
- 3) **Await Yet Anticipate**
- 4) **Have a Rule Against Rules**

Application/Challenge:

In light of these four rules for prayer, I want to land this for us using an illustration that I think will prove helpful.

Often I'll read articles and books and hear speakers talk about the power of prayer...

They'll shout, "There's power in prayer!"

We like to believe that we have the ability and strength to accomplish great things, so we start to believe that the power of prayer lies inside of the prayer itself.

We human beings like to take credit for things that we didn't accomplish or create ourselves.

If a beggar asks a king for some bread and the king gives it, does the beggar walk away bragging, "Well I asked him!"

No, he walks away humbled by the gift and grateful to the king and tells his friends what all the King did.

But these rules and God's grace blow that notion up entirely.

Think of it this way: when you flick on a light switch, the light bulbs turn on and illuminate the room, right?

Does that switch provide the power for the bulbs?

No — that comes from the electricity.

The switch has no power in itself, but rather it connects the bulbs to the power source when flipped.

In the same way, our prayers have no power in themselves; these rules for prayer have no power in themselves, but when we pray, we're connecting our lives to the infinite power of God's grace.

So it isn't that the power lies in your prayer, it is that the power lies in the God who hears your prayers because of his grace, and the reason why you haven't seen God move in power in your life...

...in clearing up and guiding your conscience,

...in giving victory over habitual sin,

...in re-ordering the loves of your heart,

...in tearing down your idols,

...in helping you love everyone around you,

...in stirring up your affections for God and passion for his mission to seek and save the lost...

...is likely because you've placed the power of prayer in your ability to pray... but it all depends on God.

Nothing we formulate makes prayers more or less powerful.

What I'm talking about today is just learning how to work the switch well.

Conclusion (Cast Vision):

Why don't you try these rules out this week as you go to pray together.

Always Approach in Awe

Have a Humble Head and Heart

Await Yet Anticipate

Have a Rule Against Rules

Let's pray. [Pray]

Benediction Prayer: Numbers 6:24-26

“May the Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.”

Please give me a call if you need anything at all. I can't wait to see you again soon. Love you.