**Prayer**

**Prodigal Message 16**

**Weekly Scripture memory verse:**

**Ephesians1:16,17** I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you **may know him better.**

*Ginny and I were vacationing with friends in the summer of 2013 when we got a call from our daughter in law about some disturbing news about some things she had just discovered about our prodigal son. We had had bad news before, but this was different. The stakes were higher. We had hoped, like most prodigal parents in such a circumstance, that the responsibilities of marriage would allow the needed maturity to blossom and for old ways to fade into a bad dream. That seemed to be the case for a while, but this phone call shattered that hopeful perception. The conversation brought us back to the reality of life and death issues and the possibility that if it continued, my son would not only bring havoc on his life but the lives of others that we loved. We were learning that as our journey continued with our prodigal the stakes always get higher over time, not less. Before marriage, my son’s mistakes and bad decisions affected him primarily, but now he had a wife whom we adored. This was even before a child was brought into the picture. My wife and I were forced to come to the conclusion that because the stakes were so high and also because we had no human way of turning this around, we would turn to something we had never done well in the 36 years of an otherwise wonderful Christian based marriage. We would pray together. We felt as though we had no other choice but to turn wholeheartedly to God through prayer.*

**The Necessity and Goal of Prayer**

I am certain that our story resonates with many. But once we agreed on the necessity, other questions began to abound. What are we seeking in prayer. In his book on prayer, Keller points out the experientially prayer is described in two forms. One is “Communion” centered” r and the other is “Kingdom” centered. We seek “Communion” with Him to experience God’s love and have oneness with Him. We seek His peace and rest. On the other hand we sometimes wrestle with God without a clear sense of His presence. We seek His will and a desire for us to conform to His purpose for us and for His “Kingdom” to be fulfilled and for our needs to be met.

In summary prayer is both conversation and encounter. It is both awe and intimacy as well as struggle and reality. The full scope of these experiences will not happen every time we pray but should be a major part of our prayer life over time. JI Packer and Caroly Nysrom’s book on prayer has a subtitle that sums it up well. “Finding our Way through Duty to Delight”. The topic is vast. A comprehensive study is beyond our scope, but we will explore some key concepts that will hopefully help us in our prayer journey.

**What is Prayer?**

Keller helps us define prayer in his book, *Prayer.* He describes prayer as a ***personal, communicative response to the knowledge of God****.* I am particular aligned with this definition as The Prodigal’s ministry’s chief aim for every participant is to have a more accurate view and greater knowledge of God. The more we grasp the truth about God’s love, goodness, power, faithfulness, justice, mercy, and grace, the more heartfelt, sincere and meaningful is our response to God through prayer. Knowledge of God is gained through the Scriptures with such wisdom guided by the Holy Spirit and sharpened by community.

Therefore, Keller’s definition is not only accurate, it is profound, as our prayer life is determined and defined by our knowledge of God. Furthermore, prayer itself enhances our understanding of and love of God as we deepen our relationship with Him through this sacred communication. With this definition in mind, we begin to understand the different stages of our prayer life…as it correlates to a progressive deeper understanding of God. The more accurate our view of God and the more certain we are of God, the more confident we are about the effectiveness of our prayers and the need for them and the heartfelt desire to spend time with the God we love and who loves us.

Calvin pointed out that if left to our own accord, we will all fashion a God that fits our own needs and minimizes our shortcomings. Our belief in Jesus Christ allows His Spirit to dwell within us and guides us through Scripture to Truth. With this truth firmly in mind, through prayer, we begin fall in love with Him and abide in Him. A real relationship develops and we begin to obey him gladly, rather than begrudgingly. Such heartfelt, humble, and loving Prayer fulfills what should be our ultimate purpose of bringing Him glory and enjoying Him.

Communication can and should be a dynamic experience that can lead to knowing and being fully known, and this can happen, as crazy as it sounds, with God through prayer. JI Packer in *Knowing God* expands further about our interaction with God

*Knowing God is a matter of personal dealing…Knowing God is more than knowing about him; it is a matter of dealing with him as he opens up to you, and being dealt with by him…Friends…open their hearts to each other by what they say or do…We must not lose sight of the fact that knowing God is an emotional relationship, as well as an intellectual one and volitional one, and could not indeed be a deep relationship between persons if it were not so.*

The Bible from start to finish is about God’s pursuit of a love relationship with us i.e.…Intimacy. Building relationships is heavily dependent on good communication. The better and more honest the communication, the greater the trust developed. Communication is not only about expressing your viewpoint but also listening intently and purposefully. The Bible refers to this often as meditating. Meditation can not be underemphasized but Biblical meditation must be fully understood and we will delve into this more fully later in the section below titled “intellectual mysticism”

If we want to build a relationship, it takes time. Tozer states this clearly and succinctly.

*“The man who would truly know God must give time to Him.”*

**Jesus Christ is our Mediator**

Direct communication with God is through Grace provided by Jesus Christ. Matthew 27:50-52 states, “And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.”

We gain greater insight into the significance of the torn curtain in the book of Hebrews.

Before Christ, only once per year could a chosen High Priest enter the Holy of Holies where God resided to make a sacrifice for the people. However, Christ, with his own blood entered the Most Holy Place once for all time and secured our redemption and access to God forever.

Heb 9:24 *He did not enter into a holy place made with human hands, which was only a copy of the true one in heaven. He entered into heaven itself to appear now before God on our behalf.*

Heb. 6: 18b-20 *Therefore, we who have fled to him for refuge can have great confidence as we hold to the hope that lies before us. The hope is a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls. It leads us through the curtain into God’s inner sanctuary. Jesus has already gone in there for us. He has become our eternal High Priest in the order of Melchizedek.*

These verses clearly point out that our faith in Jesus Christ allows us also to be seen as righteous before God and to go freely past the curtain to God himself. That is why we should pray in Jesus name, and feel free to do so anytime.

**How Best Should We Communicate With God?**

The answer is simple. We communicate with “words” and God’s Word is paramount in our conversation. However Keller elaborates on the importance of this concept. He explains the eastern religions claim an impersonal God and as such, love is not at the root of those religions. Also if God was uni-personal, then he would not love until he created others to love. That would make him more power than love. However the importance of the Trinity is revealed here in that in John 14-17 Jesus describes his life in the Godhead before he came to earth. The eternal Trinity therefore allows God to be defined by love as Jesus describes. These verses also say God gave Jesus ***words*** before creation. It is therefore important to know that God speaks to us through ***words,*** and specifically he speaks to us through his ***living Word***.

 Keller goes on to point out that we only know how to communicate to God by first learning it in the Bible. We learn how to pray by learning our vocabulary from the Bible. All language is learned, just as in our childhood, so this should come as no surprise. If we want to communicate to God, we must be familiar with and “tethered” to the Bible. Martin Luther was adamant that we must not get beyond God’s word in the Bible or we will not know who we are conversing with. “we must first hear the Word, then through the power of the Holy Spirit, respond to that word”

Eugene Peterson also emphasizes that the starting point of prayer is in the immersion of God’s Word. Keller rightly states that if God is not the starting point, then our own perceived emotional needs become the drivers and the sole focus of our prayers. Without prayers that answer the God of the Bible, we will only be talking to ourselves says Peterson. He goes on to say,

*Left to ourselves we will pray to some god 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 that he speaks to us. There is a difference between praying to an unknown God whom we hope to discover in our praying, and praying to a known God, revealed through Israel and Jesus Christ, who speaks our language. In the first we indulge our appetite in religious fulfillment; in the second we practice obedient faith. The first is a lot more fun, the second, a lot more important. What is essential in prayer is not that we learn to express ourselves but that we learn to answer God.*

***When we get direction from God and from our community as they process it with us, it must be consistent with God’s word, or it is NOT from God. Our prayers must always be “tethered “ to the truth of God’s Word.***

 Tim Keller

**The Lord’s Prayer**

 Historical legends of the faith like Augustine, Luther and Calvin, to name a few have prioritized the Lord’s prayer as our template and model for prayer. Matt. 6:9-13. This model should be studied as a template.

***“Our Father Who Art in Heaven”***

 Calvin points out that to call God “Father” is to pray in Jesus name, as it is His sacrifice that allows us to be adopted as sons. This address allows us to start our prayers be by preparing our hearts to trust in God’s fatherly love.

***“Hallowed be Thy Name”***

Luther states that God is Holy and that can’t be changed so this section reminds us that we bear God’s name and we should act Holy and bring him honor. It is a prayer for God to be glorified among the nations and for us to glorify Him.

***“Thy Kingdom Come”***

Augustine points out that the cause of every human problem is refusing to let God rule our lives. Calvin believed God’s Kingdom rules in our lives through the Spirit which convicts and guides us and through God’s Word, which does the same. He calls this a “Lordship petition”

***“Thy Will Be Done”***

 Unless we know God fully and believe He is our Father, we will never plead in prayer for His Will to be done. We must trust God and allow His will to be done and be confident He knows best or we will never experience peace.

***“Give us This Day our Daily Bread”***

Augustine emphasizes that our “daily bread”, once we know fully and trust God, is our necessities and not our luxurious desires. (See Prov. 30:7-9) interestingly Luther sees social ramifications of “us” and believes this should remind us to pray for ALL people and those less fortunate and for social justice.

***“Forgive us our Debts as We forgive our Debtors”***

This reminds us to tend our relationships. Luther points out that here our pride is tested. If we have a problem with repentance, if confession does not make us more confident and bring us more joy, then we do not understand our salvation by grace. He goes on to point out a telling truth. If we cannot forgive then we should see the hypocrisy of seeking forgiveness for our own sins.

***“Lead Us Not into Temptation”***

Temptation will occur and such struggles with it, if successful, will sharpen and grow us. However to consider sin and enter into it is a sin,

***“Deliver Us From Evil”***

Ephesians reminds us that our battle is in the heavenly realms and here we pray for God to protect us from Satan himself.

***“For Thine is the Kingdom and the Glory and the Power Forever, Amen”***

Our hearts in with praise, adoration and thanks as it should.

At the end of the day, there is not right or wrong way to pray. As you can see from the above masters, a true belief in Jesus Christ and our heart condition is critical. The Holy Spirit guides us and provides what is best for us.

**Praying for our Prodigals and those who love Prodigals**

I believe Paul serves as the perfect example to us as we think about how to pray in the Prodigal chaos. Paul prayed for the lost and he prayed for believers in persecution and believers spreading the gospel to non-believers…ie, Prodigals. So how did Paul pray? We gain great insight in his letter to the Ephesians.

 *For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God’s people, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers . I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.*

Ephesians 1:15-19

It is noteworthy to realize that in none of Paul’s writings in his prayers for his friends, does he pray for their circumstances to change. It is important to remind us from the outset of this discussion that such a petition would not be wrong as Jesus’ example in the Lords prayer, he urges us to pray for our daily bread and for God to deliver us from evil. However, Paul prayed as much as anyone for his friends and the church and what he prayed for most was for them “**to know Him better**.” Keller points out that Paul, in praying for our “eyes to be enlightened” with a particular truth, he means to have it penetrate and grip us so deeply that it changes the whole person. He is praying for the knowledge of our mind to penetrate our heart. Paul wants us to have a “more vivid sense of the reality of God’s presence and of shared life with him.”

 The Prodigal ministry emphasizes what I believe and Paul believes that every ministry, mentor, evangelist and disciple should emphasize. The emphasis and priority in every part of our endeavor should be to know God more fully. To make God more real and relevant and relational. This is much more important than changing our circumstances. As Keller points out, without a sense of God’s reality then good circumstances can lead to overconfidence and spiritual indifference. On the other hand a lack of truth about God can lead, in bad circumstances, to despair and anger at God because you would not truly embrace the love God has and the hope and comfort it gives. Therefore, knowing God better should be the primary goal of our study of God’s word and in our prayer life, for such truth is the only thing that will allow us to face life well in any and all circumstances.

 For newcomers to our ministry, their success lies in making this critical paradigm shift. When they first come, the overwhelming majority are focused on changing their circumstances, finding our ways for the Prodigals to beat addiction, rebellious behavior, or save their marriage and get their spouse to “change”. However, they must realize they have no control over that. If they realize that this ministry and their current circumstance is providing an opportunity to know God better then their heart is changed and they are are transformed, which is best for them and what God has desired all along. Prayer is critical in this process.

As we think about all we have learned about prayer in this lesson, how do we best pray for our prodigals? We can clearly pray for our Prodigals specifically by asking them to avoid certain friends or certain temptations. We can pray for them to meet certain people who might guide them and encourage them to avoid the pitfalls of life. However, I have found that the more I know God, His goodness, and His love for my prodigal, the more that I know that His will is best. He knows ALL things and I don't. My prayer for my prodigal is much more simple. ***“Lord, whatever it takes…for them to know you better.”***

**Intelligent Mysticism/ Intelligent Emotion**

**Romans 8:15,16** Keller, in his book on prayer describes a crisis point in he and his wife’s lives in 1999 that caused them to begin to pray together and surprisingly unroofed his own discovery on prayer. He started with going back to his seminary theological roots and looking at the fundamental writers in regard to what they had to say about prayer. What he found was enlightening, changed his prayer life, and secondarily changed and continues to change the lives of so many that listen to his teaching in his messages and books.

A centerpiece of his discovery was in teaching through Romans.

“*The spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him, we cry, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit himself testifies with our Spirit that we are God’s children.*” He states that in his detailed studies that most modern Biblical commentators agreed that these verses describe, as one scholar put it, “a religious experience that is ineffable” or simply indescribable and unable to be put into words. Thomas Schreiner adds, that we must not “underemphasize the emotional ground”, of experience. “Some may veer away from this idea because of its subjectivity, but the abuse of the subjective in some circles cannot exclude the “mystical” and emotional dimensions of Christian experience.”

Keller goes on to state that his research pointed him back to the writers he had read in seminary like Luther, Calvin, Augustine, Edwards, and the 17th century theologian John Owen. He states that these authors gave no choice between “truth’ or “Spirit”, between doctrine and experience. He stated that a sermon by Owen in particular first gave due diligence to laying the doctrinal foundation of Christian salvation. However, he followed that by urging his listeners to “get an *experience* of the power of the gospel…in and upon your own heart, or all our profession is an expiring thing.” **The heart experience of the gospel’s power can happen only through prayer—both publicly in corporate worship and privately in meditation.**

Keller goes on to say that in his journey he decided to read no new books on prayer but to go back to historical texts of Christian theology. He quotes most notably at one point John Murray.

“It is necessary for us to recognize that there is *an intelligent mysticism* in the life of faith…of living union and communion with the exalted and ever present Redeemer…He communes with his people and his people commune with him in conscious reciprocal love…the life of true faith cannot be that of cold metallic assent. It must have the passion and warmth of love and communion because communion with God is the crown and apex of true religion. “

In furthering his point, Murray goes on to quote Peter’s first epistle; “though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.” Keller points out that what convicted him was that Peter was not speaking to the religiously mature or elite but to all believers. Peter was assuming that being filled with joy in prayer was normal! Keller was convicted as am I in this writing.

Intelligent mysticism implies that an encounter with God not only deal with the affections of the mind but the convictions of the mind. We are not called to choose between truth and doctrine verses spiritual power and experience. They go together. Keller sums this thought up as follows. “They go together. **I was not being called to leave behind my theology and launch out to look for “something more”, for experience. Rather I was meant to ask the Holy Spirit to help me experience my theology.”**

***Examples of “Intelligent Mysticism” or” Encounters with God”…PRAYER!***

The Bible is God’s living Word and all prayer should be tethered to it. Through Scripture, we can hear God speaking to us and we should respond in prayer. Keller says we should not call this simply a response. Through the Word and the Spirit prayer becomes answering God, *a full conversation*! Such a conversation can lead to “encounter with God”. Below are two examples meant to encourage and give hope.

***Jonathan Edwards***

*“I had then at other times, the greatest delight in the holy scriptures, of any book whatsoever.Oftentimes in reading it, every word seemed to touch my heart. I felt a harmony between something in my heart, and those sweet and powerful words. I seemed often to see so much light exhibited by every sentence, and such a refreshing food communicated that I could not get along in reading; often dwelling long on one sentence, to see the wonders contained in it; and yet almost every sentence seemed to be full of wonders.”*

 *“…I had a view that for me was extraordinary, of the glory of the Son of God, as Mediator between God and man, and his wonderful, great, full, pure, sweet grace and love, and meek and gentle condescension…The person of Christ appeared ineffably excellent with an excellency great enough to swallow up all thought and conception…which continued as near as I can judge, about an hour; which kept me the greater part of the time in a flood of tears, and weeping aloud. I felt an ardency of soul to be, what I know not otherwise how to express, emptied, and annihilated; to lie in the dust, and to be full of Christ alone; to love him with a holy and pure love; to trust in him; to live upon him; to serve him and follow him; and to be perfectly sanctified and made pure. “*

 **Jesus, Me, and a Tree (a personal experience)**

These are excerpts of a journal I wrote in relation to memorizing Hebrews 12:1-13 in a tree while bowhunting in Kansas over a 12 hour day in the fall of 2013.

*… Somewhere during the day, I began to move from pure scripture memorization, to hearing God speak truth to me through my repetitions.*

*The truths I relate are not new. I have heard these truths since I was a youth in my hometown church. However, the difference was the way God took the scales off of my eyes and ears this day to let me see these truths more clearly than I had ever experienced.* ***That day it moved from theory to certainty, and that shift of perspective makes all the difference.*** *I began to see the depth and quantity of truth packed in these verses as if I had unlocked a secret door. A door that led to the Holy Spirit deep within my soul who began to communicate, convict, encourage and enlighten. I need to emphasize that it was a very good place.*

 *I don’t have the words to describe it, yet all I can say was that I was in His presence.I began to realize that I owe it ALL to him and it began to overwhelm me. The only response was simple, profound worship. No music, just telling Jesus he overwhelms me. As tears began to stream down my face, I realized for the first time in such tangible clarity and realty, the only one that has been with me for every second of every breath of every day; the only one that has heard my every heartbeat, and has seen every tear and every joy and every smile, and seen every terrible dark sin is Jesus. I felt like I saw Jesus for who He really was for the first time in my life. I felt His love as if I could touch Him and feel Him.*

*…****I had never fully realized to the extent I did that day just how well Jesus knows me and loves me. It just became so personal, like falling in love for the first time.***

 Let us not misunderstand these examples. These prayer “encounters” are not ends in themselves. They develop the relationship with God that He desires and we need so desperately. Out intelligent and reasonable faith becomes real, and builds Trust in Him. That trustful relationship is the only way we can sustain living out our purpose of faithful obedience to the King.

***Tim Keller’s summary on Prayer***

“*Prayer is the only entryway into genuine self knowledge. It is also the main way we experience deep change- the reordering of our loves. Prayer is how God gives us so many of the unimaginable things he has for us. Indeed, prayer makes it safe for God to give us many of the things we most desire. It is the way we know God, the way we finally treat God as God. Prayer is simply the key to everything we need to do and be in life.*

*We must learn to pray. We have to. “*