**Prayer**

**Prodigal Message #16**[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Memory verse of the week:**

**Ephesians 1:16–17 ESV: “I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him.”**

*In the summer of 2013, my wife, Ginny, and I were vacationing with some friends when we got a call from our daughter-in-law. She relayed some disturbing news about what she had just discovered about her husband—our prodigal son.*

*We had received bad news before, but this time was different; the stakes were higher now. Like most prodigal parents in such circumstances, we had hoped that the responsibilities of marriage would help our son mature, allowing his old ways to fade away like a distant memory or a bad dream. While this seemed to be the case for a while, that call from our daughter-in-law shattered our hopes. It brought us back to the life and death realities at stake in our son’s life. It was a brutal reminder of the possibility that if our son continued along such a path, his actions would not only wreak havoc on his own life but also on the lives of many others that we loved.*

*As our prodigal journey continued, Ginny and I learned that the stakes always got higher—not lower—over time. Before he got married, our son’s mistakes and poor decisions primarily affected him, but now that he had a wife—whom we adored—the consequences of his behavior now directly affected her as well. And this was even before our son and his wife brought a child into this world!*

*There was now too much on the line. Ginny and I had no earthly way of turning this situation around by our own power. We were at the end of ourselves; we were desperate and had no recourse, except for one thing—the very thing that was always available but often overlooked—****prayer****. So, though it saddens me to say that it took this much us for to come to such a point, Ginny and I turned to something that we had never done well in our 36 years of marriage: we committed to* ***pray together***.

**Introduction: What is prayer?**

How does prayer work? Can I change God’s mind? Can I affect God’s will through prayer? Why doesn’t He answer my prayers? Are there limits to my prayers? Questions such as these challenge many people. So, in this lesson, we will explore the important subject of prayer in greater detail.

Simply put, prayer is communication with God. From start to finish, the Bible tells the story of God’s pursuit of an intimate, loving relationship with humankind. Healthy, consistent communication is essential for the building and maintenance of relationships. The more honest and sincere the communication, the greater the trust—and, ultimately, the relational intimacy—that is developed. Effective communication consists of both listening intentionally and expressing one’s own thoughts and feelings. The building of a healthy relationship also takes *time*—the more time we spend communicating with someone, the more deeply we know, understand, and trust them. Thus,“the man who would truly know God must give time to Him.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Timothy Keller helpfully describes prayer as a “*personal, communicative response to the knowledge of God*.”[[3]](#footnote-3) This definition works well, as one of the chief aims of the Prodigal Ministry is that every participant would grow to have a deeper and more accurate view of God. The more we grasp the truth about God’s love, goodness, power, faithfulness, justice, mercy, and grace, the more heartfelt, sincere, meaningful, and effective are our responses to God through prayer. And we gain such knowledge of God through the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit’s guidance, and the wisdom gained in community.

“Without immersion in God’s words, our prayer may not be merely limited and shallow but also untethered from reality. We may be responding not to the real God but to what we wish God and life to be like.”

– Tim Keller[[4]](#footnote-4)

So, our knowledge of God determines the health of our prayer life. And conversely, prayer itself enhances our understanding and love of God as such sacred communication deepens our relationship with Him. Thus, we see a pattern: knowledge of God improves one’s prayers, which, in turn, improves one’s knowledge of God, and so on as we continually grow closer and closer to the Lord. As we grow more certain of God, His works, and His ways, we realize more fully our true need for prayer, we more deeply desire to spend time with our beloved God, and we become more confident in the effectiveness of our prayers.

Prayer is both conversation *and* encounter with God, both awe *and* intimacy, reality *and* struggle.[[5]](#footnote-5) Thus, communication should be a dynamic experience that leads to knowing and being fully known. And, as crazy it may sound, such mutual knowledge and acceptance can happen with God through prayer. J. I. Packer expands further on our interactions with God, saying,

“[K]nowing 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 as he takes knowledge of you. … To get to know [God], you have to commit yourself to his company and interests, and be ready to identify yourself with his concerns. … [W]e must not lose sight of the fact that knowing God is an emotional relationship, as well as an intellectual and volitional one, and could not indeed be a deep relation between persons were it not so.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Prayer is also an opportunity to …

* Listen to and know God (Jeremiah 33:3)
* Worship God (Psalm 100:1–5)
  + By telling Him directly that we love Him
  + With sincerity in spirit and in truth (John 4:24)
* Align with God’s will—and conform to His purposes—for our lives
* Participate in what God is doing in the world (1 Chronicles 16:8–12)
* Submit our requests to God (Matthew 7:7; James 5:13–16)
* Fulfill our ultimate purpose of bringing glory to God (Revelation 4:11).

Though we will not experience the full range of prayer’s effects and benefits in every instance that we pray, we should certainly strive toward that end.

**How do we have access to prayer?**

Direct communication with God is possible because of the grace that God gives to all those who have faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Through His life, death, resurrection, and ascension, Christ became the mediator between God and redeemed humankind (Ephesians 2:13–18; Hebrews 8–10). Before Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, God required Old Testament Israel to provide sacrifices in order to atone for their various sins. On the Day of Atonement, the Jewish high priest would present specific sacrifices, purify the tabernacle (or the temple) of the Lord, and enter the Most Holy Place so “that atonement may be made for the people of Israel once in the year because of all their sins” (Leviticus 16:34; Hebrews 9:7).

But everything changed with Jesus Christ.

* **Hebrews 8:1–2**: “We have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man.”
* **Hebrews 9:11–12**: “But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.”
* **Hebrews 9:15**: “Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance.”
* **Hebrews 9:24, 26b**: “For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. … he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.”
* **Hebrews 10:12, 14**: “But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God … For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.”

By the grace of God, our faith in Christ Jesus grants us a righteous standing before God (Romans 5:1–2). Furthermore, the Holy Spirit connects us to Christ—as members of His body (1 Corinthians 12:12–13)—and grants us access to the Father through Christ’s work as our mediator (Ephesians 2:18). As a result, we can by means of prayer—at any time and in any place—boldly “draw near to the throne of grace” (Hebrews 4:16; see also Romans 5:1–2; 8:27).

**How do we pray?**

Quite simply, we pray to God by using **words**—whether spoken or unspoken. Our knowledge of which “words” to use comes from Scripture—God’s *living* Word—which we must remain tethered to. In other words, we can effectively communicate with God by learning His “vocabulary.” Unfortunately, Paul was spot on when he said that we often “do not know what to pray for as we ought” (Romans 8:26). Thankfully, however, “the [Holy] Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (8:27). With that said, we can develop our prayer ability through time, practice, and familiarity with God’s Word.

“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 … 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 in Jesus Christ, who speaks our language. In the first we indulge our appetite in religious fulfillment; in the second we practice obedient faith. … What is essential in prayer is not that we learn to express ourselves, but that we learn to answer God.”

– Eugene Peterson[[7]](#footnote-7)

Though honest, heartfelt crying out to the Lord is never wrong, guidelines can be useful in helping us to pray more effectively. Let’s look at a few prayer models as examples:

The Lord’s Prayer Model

Historical legends of the faith, such as Augustine of Hippo, Martin Luther, and John Calvin, have prioritized the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9–13) as a template for prayer.

* **“Our Father in heaven,”**
  + To call God “Father” is to pray in Jesus’ name, as it is Christ’s sacrifice that allows us to be adopted as children of God (Romans 8:14–17).[[8]](#footnote-8) As such, we begin our prayers—and rightly orient our hearts—by trusting in God’s fatherly love.
* **“Hallowed be your name.”**
  + God is holy and that cannot be changed, which reminds us that we bear God’s name and, thus, should act holy in order to honor Him.[[9]](#footnote-9) It’s both a prayer for God to be glorified among the nations and an acknowledgment that we glorify Him.
* **“Your kingdom come,”**
  + The cause of every human problem is the refusal to let God rule our lives.[[10]](#footnote-10) However, by the Holy Spirit, who convicts us and guides us through God’s Word, we allow God’s Kingdom to rule our lives.[[11]](#footnote-11)
* **“Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven ”**
  + Unless we know God fully and believe that He is our Father, we will never plead in prayer for His will to be done. We must trust that God knows best—and pray for His will to be done—or we will never experience peace and contentment.
* **“Give us this day our daily bread,”**
  + Our “daily bread” refers to our necessities, not our luxurious desires.[[12]](#footnote-12) In reading “us,” Luther reminds us to pray for *all* people as well as for social justice.[[13]](#footnote-13)
* **“And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”**
  + This reminds us to tend to our relationships, an area in which our pride is often tested.[[14]](#footnote-14) If we have a problem with confession, repentance, and reconciliation, then we do not truly understand our salvation by grace. Furthermore, if we cannot forgive others, then we should see the hypocrisy of seeking forgiveness for our own sins.
* **“And lead us not into temptation,”**
  + Temptations are inevitable, and the struggles that come with them—if handled wisely—can sharpen and grow us. However, temptations leave us vulnerable to committing acts of sin, which we must seek to avoid.
* **“But deliver us from evil.”**
  + Ephesians 6:12 reminds us that our battle is against the spiritual forces of darkness; so, here, we pray for God to protect us from the schemes of the devil and his minions.

The Colossians 4:2 Model[[15]](#footnote-15)

Colossians 4:2 reads, “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”

* Be **devoted** in prayer.
  + As the Apostle Paul states in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, we should “pray without ceasing.” Too often, we regard prayer as an oxygen mask—it is only needed in the case of an emergency. However, we should regard prayer as oxygen itself—it is *essential* to living in a healthy and vibrant relationship with the Lord. Paul also says that we should present our bodies to God “as a living sacrifice” (Romans 12:1). So, devotion in prayer doesn’t so much refer to a perpetual physical posture but to a spiritual posture in which we orient every aspect of our lives toward God, remaining in constant communication with Him.
* Be **watchful** in prayer.
  + The Greek word for “watchful” is *gregoreo*, which means “to be awake, vigilant, or on the alert.” If you are watchful and vigilant, then you are acutely interested in knowing what God expects of you and in fulfilling God’s plan for your life (Ephesians 2:10; Hebrews 12:1). Can you imagine beginning each day in prayer, asking God, “What are you up to do today? What do you have for me today?”
  + Because we are called to a holy calling, the spiritual forces of darkness—as mentioned above—seek to derail and destroy us. Thus, the Apostle Peter reminds the saints, saying, “Be sober-minded; be **watchful**. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). In addition, Paul exhorts believers to put on the full armor of God, “praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication” (Ephesians 6:18).
* Be **thankful** in prayer.
  + “The Lord is at hand,” Paul says, “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” (Philippians 4:5–7). We can be thankful always, knowing that the Lord has redeemed us and that we await His return to us.
  + If we know God’s precepts, that He loves us, and that He sustains our every need, then we can be most thankful indeed. We can thank Him for what He has done, for what He is doing, and for what He will do. The more we know God, the easier it is to be thankful!

The A.C.T.S. Model

Finally, the model summed up by the acronym A.C.T.S. provides a simple but helpful guide for effective prayer:

* **A**cknowledgment or **A**doration
  + We acknowledge God, His works, and His ways, and we praise Him for all that He has done for us through Christ Jesus.
  + **Psalm 145:1–3**: “I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever. Every day I will bless you and praise your name forever and ever. Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable.”
* **C**onfession
  + We confess our sins before the Lord and ask for His forgiveness.
  + **1 John 1:9**: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”
* **T**hanksgiving
  + We thank God for all that He has done in our lives and all that He is presently doing.
  + **Psalm 138:1–3**: “I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise; I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word. On the day I called, you answered me; my strength of soul you increased.”
* **S**upplication
  + We humbly present our petitions (or requests) before the Lord, asking Him to meet our needs. We endeavor to align our will with God’s will.
  + **1 John 5:14**: “And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.”

Some final tips

Now that we have discussed several prayer models, let’s look at a few more tips for effective prayer.

* Pray **specifically**
  + Our prayers must be specific, well-defined, and measurable. Avoid vague prayers like “Be with them” or “Bless them.”
  + See Mark 10:51 for an excellent example.
* Pray **consistently**
  + Though God is omniscient—that is, He knows all things—He still wants us to be in constant communication with Him. Our consistent prayers mature us and mold us into greater Christlikeness.
  + The Parable of the Persistent Widow (Luke 18:1–8) is a great example.
* Pray **expectantly**
  + When we pray, we should expect God to respond according to what He knows is best for us (Roman 8:28; Ephesians 1:11). Though He may not grant us what we ask for—or even what we want—we can trust that He will grant us everything that we need.

**Inhibitors to effective prayer**[[16]](#footnote-16)

Scripture gives us several answers concerning what inhibits our prayers toward God:

* Refusing to examine our hearts and confess our sins (Psalm 66:18)
* Ignoring the instruction of Scripture (Proverbs 28:9)
* Not doing what is right; ignoring justice and kindness (Micah 6:6–8)
* Refusing to forgive others (Mark 11:25; Ephesians 4:32)
* Being inconsiderate to one’s spouse (1 Peter 3:7)
* Doubting or having a lack of faith in God (James 1:6–7)
* Improper motives or not aligning with God’s will (James 4:3; 1 John 5:14)

**Prayer in the midst of prodigal chaos**

So, how do we take everything that we have learned so far and apply it to our own prodigal situations? Paul serves as a paragon of prayerful obedience: he prayed for the lost (that is, for prodigals), for believers in the midst of persecution, and for believers who were actively spreading the gospel. When Paul prayed for fellow Christians, he didn’t pray that their circumstances would change (though it certainly would have been acceptable if he did). Instead, he most often prayed that they would **know God better**— “having the eyes of [their] hearts enlightened” (Ephesians 1:18). Keller explains that “[t]o have the ‘eyes of the heart enlightened’ with a particular truth means to have it penetrate and grip us so deeply that it changes the whole person.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

And this is the emphasis of the Prodigal Ministry—that our goal in prayer should be to know God more fully, to understand Him as more real, 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. … Then again, without [an] enlightened heart, bad circumstances can lead to discouragement and despair … Therefore, knowing God is what we must have above all if we are to face life in any circumstances.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

It is critical, therefore, that Prodigal participants make this paradigm shift. The overwhelming majority of newcomers to Prodigal focus on changing their circumstances, helping their prodigals beat addiction, controlling their children’s rebellious behavior, saving their marriage, or getting their spouse to “change.” We have no control over such things, however. So, consider this ministry and your current circumstances as opportunities to get to know God better. **Prayer helps you do that**.

I have found that the more I know God, His goodness, and His love for me and my prodigal, the more I trust that His will is best. He knows *all* things; I don't. And so, my prayer for my prodigal has become much more simple: **“Lord, do whatever it takes … for them to know you better.”**

**Conclusion**

Keller brings everything together concerning the importance and necessity of prayer in our lives:

“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.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

*At the time of writing this, it has been several years since Ginny and I received that phone call that eventually caused us to turn to prayer more consistently. Praying together for our prodigal son soon expanded to praying together for our own forgiveness and for others both inside and outside of our family. Such prayer practices gradually aligned us more with God and, in turn, with each other. We consistently prayed each night for our son’s repentance and for him to gain a personal knowledge of God that would open his eyes to truth. We prayed that he would return to his wife and family.*

*To this day, unfortunately, God, in His wisdom, has not answered our prayers in this specific manner. However, God has blessed Ginny and I with a greater knowledge of Him. The greater our prayer life together is, the more clearly our petty issues are put into perspective. Seemingly significant irritations fade in the light of the knowledge of God and of our refocusing on His eternal purposes. Our prodigal chaos has made us realize we are not in control; it has also helped us realize Who He is—and we meet Him in prayer. By hearing the truth of His Word through prayer centered in Scripture, God gives us peace and joy despite our circumstances.*

*I would love to say that Ginny and I have remained continually steadfast in our commitment to pray together—but we haven’t. It’s been a journey, with ups and downs along the way. That’s life. Most people, even those with the sincerest hearts and intentions, wax and wane in their spiritual intimacy and walk with God. Personally, I have found that when I drift toward the desert—so to speak—and, so, feel more dry and distant from God, such distance has actually been caused by my neglect of communing with King in prayer. Simply put, prayer cannot be over-emphasized; it must become the center of a believer’s life. We must learn to pray, not only for our own health but also for the benefit of our loved ones, our prodigals, the world, and—ultimately—our relationship with the Lord our God.*

**Closed Group Discussion Questions**

**Day 1**

What are your purposes in prayer? Describe everything you hope to accomplish in detail.

**Day 2**

This message states that our knowledge of God affects our prayer life. How does such a statement apply to your personal prayer life today?

**Day 3**

Do you “tether” your prayers to God’s Word? Why or why not? If you are comfortable, please share examples with the group.

**Day 4**

Do you have a template or a routine for prayer? What has worked for you and what hasn’t?

**Day 5**

Based on this week’s message, have you gained any insight into how you might pray more faithfully for your prodigal? For others?

**Day 6**

Examples were given in this message of how our prayer life can deepen our intimacy and love for God. Can you comment on how that has happened in your life? If it hasn’t happened, can you identify the obstacles that have prevented it?

**NOTES**

1. The audio version of this message is available at: [audio link placeholder]. The video version is available at: <https://youtu.be/pLwR7HkNzqM>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A saying commonly attributed to A. W. Tozer. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Keller, *Prayer*, 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Keller, *Prayer*, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 39-40; see also J. I. Packer and Carolyn Nystrom, *Praying: Finding Our Way Through Duty to Delight* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Eugene Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 5–6. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.20.36. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, “The Lord’s Prayer: The First Petition,” <http://bookofconcord.org/lc-5-ourfather.php>; see also Matthew 5:48; 1 Peter 1:16–17. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Augustine of Hippo, *Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount*, 2.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.42. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Augustine, *Letter 130: To Proba* (AD 412); see also Proverbs 30:7–9. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Luther, “The Lord’s Prayer: The Fourth Petition.” [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Luther, “The Lord’s Prayer: The Fifth Petition.” [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Adapted from Jonathan “JP” Pokluda, “Power of God: Power of Prayer,” sermon, July 14, 2013, Watermark Community Church, Dallas, TX, <http://www.watermark.org/message/2570>. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See also Tim Challies, “Six Ways to Hinder Your Prayers,” *@Challies*, May 23, 2008, [https://www.challies.com/‌christian-living/six-ways-to-hinder-your-prayers/](https://www.challies.com/christian-living/six-ways-to-hinder-your-prayers/). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Keller, *Prayer*, 20–21. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Keller, *Prayer*, 20–21. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Keller, *Prayer*, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)