

“Discovering the Prayer-Filled Life 2012”

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18; 2 Thessalonians 1:11 ¹

The number 776-2323 looks like an ordinary phone number, but in the movie, *Bruce Almighty*,² that’s the phone number one uses to call *God*. Movies usually use phone numbers with a 555 area code, which is frequently used for fictional telephone numbers, but in *Bruce Almighty*, there was no area code given—just an ordinary seven-digit number, a number that’s valid in many area codes. Radio station KLMO (1060 AM) of Longmont, Colorado happens to have this number. And in the wake of the movie, KLMO received a number of calls from persons genuinely trying to make contact with God.

Have you ever wished you could “Direct Connect” with God as you might do with a Nextel phone? Have you ever felt like you were having a hard time connecting with God? Have you ever wished that you could hear God better? That’s what we’re thinking about this morning.

As we begin, I want to remind you that today begins a survey of six major characteristics of “Great Commission Christians,” that “PBVCIS” thing that I introduced last Sunday. You might even remember that PBVCIS stands for **P**rayor-Filled, **B**ible-Centered, **V**irtuous, **C**ompassionate, **I**ntegrated, and **S**piritually Powerful; and you may not be surprised to see that these six characteristics are closely related to the five principles around which our fellowship is organized. That relationship looks like this:

Worship = **P**rayor-Filled
Connect = **C**ompassionate
Grow = **B**ible-Centered
Serve = **V**irtuous
Go = **I**ntegrated/Congruent

All of these together = **S**piritually *Powerful*³

Today, we begin our journey by looking at prayer. So what *is* prayer? Prayer is conversation. Conversation is communication between two persons, and prayer has many things in common with ordinary conversation. Conversation involves listening and speaking, hearing, understanding, and responding. “Prayer” is the name we attach to conversation when one of the persons in the conversation is God.

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples” (Luke 11:1). It’s interesting that the disciples’ request about learning how to pray came as Jesus was returning from a time of prayer. The disciples knew what Jesus had been doing, and there was something about the “before and after” effect of Jesus’ prayer that caused the disciples to want that effect to be present in their lives as well.

Jesus responded by giving the disciples what we generally call “The Lord’s Prayer,” perhaps more accurately called “The Model Prayer.” This morning we’re not going to look at “the Lord’s Prayer” so much as at the Lord’s prayer. Not at the Model Prayer so much as at the Model Pray-er.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on April 22, 2012.

² *Bruce Almighty* (2003), directed by Tom Shadyac and written by Steve Koren, Mark O’Keefe, and Steve Oedekerker.

³ See Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (HarperOne, 2001).

I want to highlight four principles that emerge pretty clearly as we watch Jesus pray and listen to Jesus talk about prayer, and the first of these principles is this: **Make time to be alone with God in places that uplift your spirit.**

I don't remember how I got in the building. I don't remember what the occasion was. But I do remember sitting alone in the evening in the sanctuary of the church in which I grew up in Atlanta at some point during my teenage years. I imagine that there were events going on elsewhere in the building, and that I quietly left the group to make my way to the sanctuary—to meet with God. It was also during the tumult of my teenage years that I began the practice of talking aloud with God as I walked alone under the stars in our neighborhood.

I've continued both practices throughout the nearly fifty years since. I have many mental images of being in sanctuaries in solitary darkness to talk with God. There are also many, many images of being alone with God on various beaches, on mountaintops, in forests, in academic buildings, and on the decks of destroyers looking out over the open sea.

I expect that many of you could tell similar stories, and so could Jesus. The Gospels record many occasions when Jesus took pains to be alone with His Father. Jesus was returning from one such time of solitary prayer when the disciples asked Him to teach them to pray in the way that He prayed.

Rick Warren was talking about this principle when he wrote, "If you are serious about fulfilling your purpose in life . . . you have to make space for God in your life. And if you're going to make space for God in your life, you're going to have to cut some stuff out. Some good stuff—not sin—good stuff."⁴ If you and I are going to live with spiritual power, we have to stay focused, to keep the Main Thing the Main Thing.

In his wonderful study guide, *Experiencing God*, Henry Blackaby notes that "God is more interested in a love relationship with you than He is in what you can do for Him."⁵ Many of us have a hard time believing that, because most of us struggle with the idea that God could really love us, delight in us, and want to be with us, but it's true, nevertheless. ***The heart of prayer has to do with experiencing God's love and loving God in return.***

There's a huge difference between being in love with God and "saying prayers." Prayer is not a transaction or a "deal." Prayer is a relationship of love. God's relationship with the universe is not distant and impersonal, but intimate and personal. The Bible says that God knows the stars by name, calls His sheep by name, and follows the sparrows one by one.⁶

My sisters and brothers, **God knows your name!** If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If God had a wallet, your picture would be in it. God loves you with a fierce, undying, passionate, eternal love!

Let me say it again. Prayer is not about ritual and form. Prayer is not primarily about stuff, or healing, or protection. Prayer is about love. And, as happens when a man and a woman begin to look more alike as they love each other deeply over many, many years, living in this Love transforms us at the very center of our being. The very first principle of prayer is to make time to be with God, who is fiercely in love with you.

The second principle of prayer is to **pray in the awareness of your own constant need for forgiveness.** The background for this principle is found in Luke 18:

⁴ Rick Warren, online sermon, "Don't Waste Your Life."

⁵ Henry Blackaby, *Experiencing God* (Nashville: LifeWay, 1990), p. 75.

⁶ Psalm 147:4; John 10:3; Luke 12:6.

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 18:9-14).

Now I actually hope that most of us have a lot in common with the Pharisee in this story. I hope that you’re completely honest in all your dealings, that if you’re married, you’re faithful in every way to your marital commitments, that you give God a tenth of your income, and that you even fast occasionally. Those things are all important. Jesus wasn’t speaking against these things, but He clearly meant that we should have much in common with the tax collector as well.

Jesus reminds us that when we enter into conversation with God, we need to remember that all of our righteous deeds taken together amount to nothing more than “filthy rags” before God’s holiness (Isaiah 64:6). We need to come to God, not proudly, but with the attitude, “O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.”⁷

God’s power is never released into the life of someone who’s messing around with sin; but even when we’ve confessed and turned away from every sin of which we’re aware, the Bible tells us that we still don’t know all the sin that lurks in our hearts.⁸ That’s why we pray, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:23-24).

There’s a corollary to Principle Two that’s absolutely critical. Right after giving the disciples The Model Prayer, Jesus added, “For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matthew 6:14-15).

This corollary expands on that phrase in the Lord’s Prayer that goes, “and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12). “As we also have forgiven” means “in the same way and to the same extent.” Jesus’ point is that if you and I harbor resentment, unforgiveness, bitterness, or anger in our hearts toward another person—even just one—this reality proves that we have failed to understand the gravity of our own sin, and it’s therefore impossible for us to have truly repented of it.

The third principle of prayer is to **pray for God’s will to become your will**. Our limited understanding of what God is up to and our limited perspective on the real nature of things frequently cause us to ask for things that, while not wrong in themselves, are less than what God wants to give us. When we or our loved ones fall ill, we pray for victory over bacteria, cancer, or blocked arteries. It’s not wrong to do this; but what God wants to give us is victory over fear and victory over death itself.

God wants us to experience the freedom, the peace, and the spiritual power that come from having an eternal perspective on our lives. I’m certainly not going to sign up to get cancer or to be robbed or to be in a car wreck, and I’m going to do everything in my power to keep the people I love from experiencing these things. But I can sleep at night, because

⁷ Centuries ago, St. Ignatius Brianchaninov of the Balamond Monastery near Beirut, Lebanon, composed a prayer that has become known the world over as “The Jesus Prayer.” This prayer is on your handout, and it goes like this: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

⁸ See Psalm 19:12.

I know that when all is said and done, we who are in Christ are secure, both in time and in eternity (Psalm 4:8).

As Paul put it, “*I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate up from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Romans 8:38-39). This security is what Paul was referring to when he wrote, “*Let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will know what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect his will really is*” (Romans 12:2 NLT).

Although God’s will is “*good, pleasing, and perfect*” all the time, there are times when we’re strongly tempted to head in another direction, as Jonah did. And because Jesus faced all the same temptations that we do (Hebrews 4:15), Jesus knows what it’s like to want to be somewhere, anywhere, besides where we actually are: “*My Father!*” he cried in Gethsemane, “*if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will*” (Matthew 26:39).

Jesus knew that His death would set us free from death. He knew the good that would come, *but He was still afraid*. In His human frailty, Jesus still didn’t want to do it. Such times come to us as well, and in those times, because we know that our vision is limited, and because we know that in the deepest places we are safe, we can still say with our Lord, “Father, whatever I know to be your will, that I will do. Let your will become my will, both now and always.”

The fourth and last principle of prayer that I’ll mention this morning is that we need to **pray faithfully and persistently**. Rolfe Dorsey is one of a few persons I’ve known who has the spiritual gift of prayer. When I asked Rolfe to teach me more about prayer, he lent me an old and well-worn book by S. D. Gordon called *Quiet Talks on Prayer*,⁹ saying that this book had transformed his own understanding of prayer. In that book, Gordon talks about the prayer of Jesus:

How much prayer meant to Jesus! It was not only his regular habit, but his resort in every emergency, however slight or serious. When perplexed he prayed. When hard pressed by work he prayed. When hungry for fellowship he found it in prayer. He chose his associates and received his messages upon his knees. If tempted, he prayed. If criticized, he prayed. If fatigued in body or wearied in spirit, he had recourse to his one unailing habit of prayer. Prayer brought him unmeasured power at the beginning, and kept the flow unbroken and undiminished. There was no emergency, no difficulty, no necessity, no temptation that would not yield to prayer.

If you and I are going to pray like Jesus prayed, that’s what we’ll do, too: pray first, pray second, pray last, pray always. Paul put it this way: *Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer* (Romans 12:12). *Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful* (Colossians 4:2). *And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests* (Ephesians 6:18). *Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God* (Philippians 4:6).

The last thing I want to mention this morning about prayer goes along with this last principle of praying faithfully and persistently. It’s really quite an important point, and it was Harry Emerson Fosdick, the longtime pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City who helped me to see it.

⁹ S. D. Gordon, *Quiet Talks on Prayer* (Fleming Revell, 1904).

In his wonderful little book, *The Meaning of Prayer*,¹⁰ Dr. Fosdick identified what he calls “the prayer of dominant desire,” noting that “many of the speeches addressed to God that we have called our prayers are not real prayers at all. They are not our dominant desires. They do not express the inward set and determination of our lives. Prayer that is not dominant desire is too weak to achieve anything.”¹¹

This idea of “dominant desire” is of considerable help in our thinking about what we sometimes call “unanswered prayer.” While we may seem not to get what we ask for from God, Fosdick suggested that “our dominant desire, which is our real prayer, is nearly always granted. We become what we yearn for most deeply, and we often fool ourselves about what this desire really is.”¹² Dr. Fosdick noted that “the prayer of dominant desire always tends to attain its object.”¹³

It was for this very reason that Jesus told us, “So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. **But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well**” (Matthew 6:31-33).

The beginning of growth in prayer is fixing our dominant desire on Jesus and on His redemptive work in the world. Jesus didn’t tell us to use prayer to ask for anything we want or to use prayer as though God were a cosmic genie or vending machine. Jesus told us that if we see our situation as God sees it—which is how things really *are*—then we’ll want what God wants.

Jesus is really saying, “If you’re living in such a love relationship with me that my will is your will, then of course you’ll get what you desire.” Persistent prayer changes us into persons who are able to be channels of God’s redemptive, transforming power into the world.¹⁴

In South Carolina, 776-2323 belongs to a woman who, like station KLMO, got many calls after *Bruce Almighty* came out. Let’s call her Eunice. When one young woman naively called Eunice, sincerely expecting to be able to talk to God, Eunice responded, “You don’t have to use a telephone to talk to God, sweetie. Just ask him to forgive you. He’ll hear you.” And it’s always a local call.

¹⁰ Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Meaning of Prayer* (New York, Association Press, 1915).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 141.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

¹⁴ See Romans 12:2; Ephesians 6:18; Philippians 4:6-7; Colossians 4:2.