

On Our Knees: Praying For All (Eph. 6:18-20) Jan. 17, 2010

Chris Altrock

I've decided to devote at least part of 2010 studying the prayers of Jesus. I've already spent several weeks immersing myself in the prayer-life of Jesus. And one thing I am struck by is the simple fact that *Jesus prayed*. I often think of prayer as the pathway to two things: *resources* and *relationships*. I pray in order to gain resources I cannot produce myself. And I pray in order to gain a deeper relationship with God which I cannot deepen in any other way. Yet on both of these counts, it would seem that Jesus would not need prayer. Consider *resources*. Jesus had the power to create most resources by himself. He had the power to create food—multiplying fish and loaves. He had the power to heal illness—from blindness to leprosy. He could control the weather—stilling a storm with just a phrase. Why would someone like that even *need* to pray? What resources would Jesus require that he could not produce himself? In addition, consider the issue of *relationship*. Jesus is God. He and the Father are one. If one purpose of prayer is to cultivate intimacy with God, it would appear as if Jesus already has the deepest intimacy possible. He is so intimate with God that he *is* God.

In spite of all of this, Jesus still prayed. I've discovered at least 29 references to the prayer-life of Jesus. From his baptism in Luke 3:21 to his ascension in Lk. 24:51, we find Jesus praying. As Luke explains in Lk. 5:16 *"16But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray."* Prayer was a habit. It was something Jesus constantly did. He prayed *at* the feeding of the 5,000 (Mk. 6:41) and *after* the feeding of the 5,000 (Mk. 6:46). He prayed for the forgotten (children) (Mk. 10:15-16), his fellow workers (John 17), his global family (Jn. 17), and his foes (Lk. 23:34). He prayed when *healing* (Mk. 7:32-34) and when *hurting* (Matt. 27:46). It seems there were *resources* needed by Jesus that he could gain in no other way but through prayer. It seems there was a level of *relationship* with the Father that could be experienced in no other way but through prayer. Because of this, Jesus prayed.

The mere fact that Jesus prayed so passionately and so consistently is striking. As someone who wants to pattern his life after Jesus' life, I am compelled to pray as Jesus prayed. As those who wear the name of Jesus, it seems especially crucial for us to make room in our lives for prayer in the same way Jesus did.

But what would that look like? How would that flesh itself out? One way of answering that question is to turn to a brief passage on prayer written by a follower of Jesus'. It's found in Ephesians: *18praying 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, 19and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, 20for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak. (Eph. 6:18-20 ESV)*. This text is part of a much longer explanation of what it means to *...be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might (Eph. 6:10 ESV)*. Paul has found that one of the primary ways in which we are strong in the Lord and in which we find the strength of his might is prayer. And Paul certainly learned this from Jesus. Though Paul never met Jesus prior to Jesus' death, Paul did spend time with the resurrected Jesus. And he seems to have gained a deep

appreciation for prayer from that time spent with Jesus. Here, Paul summarizes much of what he's learned about prayer.

Before we dive into it, first a word about "in the Spirit." Paul urges us to be praying "in the Spirit." The word "Spirit" is a reference to the Holy Spirit. Earlier in [Eph. 2:18](#) Paul wrote that no matter what your race or nationality, you have access to the Father through the Spirit. Paul acknowledges that again here. In this prayer-summary statement Paul reminds us that no matter your race or nationality, you have access to the Father through prayer because you pray by means of the Spirit. What he's about to teach us about prayer, which I believe he learned from Jesus, is for anyone of any color, any language, and any background.

Notice the four-fold use of "all" in Paul's summary statement about prayer: *18 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.* These four "alls" point to four general areas which ought to inform our praying.

First, let's explore "praying at all times." This seems to be a favorite theme for Paul. We find it over and over again in his writing:

- *12 Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. ([Col. 4:12](#) TNIV)*
- *11 With this in mind, we constantly pray for you... ([2 Thes. 1:11](#) TNIV).*
- *16 Rejoice always, 17 pray continually, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. ([1 Thess. 5:16-18](#) TNIV)*
- *9 God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you 10 in my prayers at all times... ([Rom. 1:9-10](#) TNIV).*
- *18 Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, 19 speaking to one another with psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, 20 always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ([Eph. 5:18-20](#) TNIV).*

It's likely that Paul learned this from Jesus. It seems Jesus was always praying. And so was Paul. As the year begins, Paul urges us to adopt a constancy of prayer, to pray at all times.

What would this look like? As the early church strove to apply this teaching, they developed a specific application: *the divine hours/offices*. In her book [The Divine Hours](#) Phyllis Tickle writes about this.¹ Tickle states that by the time of Jesus, there were set times during the day at which Jews would pray. These times were set in conjunction with times common in the Roman Empire. In the cities of the Empire, a bell would ring at six o'clock each morning (the "first" hour). The same bell noted the day's progress by striking at nine o'clock (the third hour). It sounded again at the lunch break at noon (the sixth hour) and called people back to work at three o'clock (the ninth hour). The bell finally closed the day's markets by sounding again at six o'clock (the evening hour). Jewish prayer became organized around these hours. Eventually, so did Christian prayer. We find a hint of this in [Acts 3](#) where we are told that Peter and John are going to the temple "at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon." This would have

been the ninth hour. Again in Acts 10 we read first of Cornelius praying at 3:00 PM and then of Peter praying at Noon. These appear to be references to the set times of prayer which Jews and then Christians observed. By the second and third centuries we find numerous references to Christians observing prayer at the morning (6 AM) and evening hours (6 PM), and many also observing prayers at the 9:00 AM, Noon, and 3 PM hours. These became known as “offices” after the Latin word meaning “work.” At fixed times during morning (6 AM and 9 AM), day (Noon and 3 PM), and evening (6 PM) Christians would pray— they would literally work by praying.

One way of following this tradition, and thus applying Paul’s admonition to “pray at all times” is to cultivate the habit of stopping for a few minutes in the morning, at midday, and in the evening to pray. As you wake, or after eating breakfast, take a few minutes to pray. Then, during your lunch break, devote some more time to prayer. Finally, as the day draws to an end, steal a few minutes aside to pray. By keeping these basic hours or offices, prayer becomes more and more something you are doing at all times.

So here’s what I want you to try: set an alarm on your watch, your phone, or your computer for 6 AM (or whenever you wake), sometime around Noon, and near 6 PM. And each time that alarm goes off, sneak off somewhere if you can and pray. Or just silently pray where you are. If you’d like some help with this, and you have a text plan on your phone, follow me on Twitter. I’ll send you a morning prayer, midday prayer, and evening prayer each day as a reminder to pray.

Second, let’s explore “all prayer and supplication.” Paul urges our prayer life to be multi-faceted, to consist of all kinds of prayers and supplications. The word “prayer” here refers to generally to all prayer. The word “supplication” refers specifically to requests, petitions, and intercessions. Paul believes the best prayer life is one characterized by many kinds of prayers, requests, petitions, and intercessions.

In his book Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home Richard Foster surveys thousands of years of Christian praying.² He suggests that these thousands of years can be summarized into three basic kinds of prayers: *Inward, Upward, and Outward*.

- *Inward prayers are those focused on self--our inward transformation, our mind, our character, or our heart.* When we pray inward prayers we bring specific sins, character flaws, behaviors, and mindsets to God and ask for his help in transformation and renewal. We confess sin. We review the day, acknowledging times during which we were not who we were meant to be. We focus on the fruit of the Spirit, asking God to fill us with that fruit throughout the day. We pray for empowerment to be the friend, child, parent, spouse, and human being we long to be.
- *Upward prayers are those focused on God.* When we pray upward prayers we devote time to praising God, adoring God, thanking God, and exalting God. It might take the form of praying some of the Psalms out loud, or praying other prayers which focus on the majesty and wonder of God. It might take the form of contemplative prayer, simply resting quietly with God in silence. It might take the form of “breath prayers,” a phrase

about God we quietly pray all day long. These prayers are primarily focused on who God is and what God has done and then praising, thanking, and adoring God for these.

- *Outward prayers are those focused on others.* When we pray outward prayer we bring specific people and ministries before God. We intercede for others. We petition God to meet the needs of others. This might become such a habit that we silently pray for every person we see or interact with throughout the day, asking God to bless them, help them, grant them grace and mercy. We might make lists of people we know or know of and pray through those lists. We might pray regularly for the radical transformation of groups, institutions and societies. There is no end to the ways that our prayers might move outward.

Praying all prayer and supplication might take these forms. It's one way to put into practice what Paul's learned about prayer. The ideal prayer life will be one consisting of prayer at all times and filled with all kinds of prayers and supplications. One way to broaden our prayer life is to move into all three of these areas: inward, upward, and outward. If you are like me, your prayers probably gravitate most easily to outward prayers. It's the kind of praying we do in our Sunday School classes and small groups. I have to work much harder to ensure that my prayer life also includes significant times of inward and upward prayers. My advice would be to identify which of these three comes naturally to you and then do two things. First, consider how you could build on and expand that strength. Second, consider how to balance your prayer life by doing more praying in the other two areas that don't come as naturally.

Third, let's consider "praying for all the saints." "Saints" doesn't mean "the really holy people." Paul uses "saints" as a word that refers to all Christians. Almost as a subset of "all prayer and supplication," Paul now specifically points out the need to pray "for all the saints." This would be what Foster called "outward prayers."

I would recommend cultivating two kinds of praying for the saints: *systematic and spontaneous*. *Spontaneous* intercession for the saints is often what we practice in our small groups and Sunday School classes. We take requests for individuals and we pray right then and there for those individuals. But spontaneous can be extended beyond this. When someone comes up to you and asks you to be praying about something, stop right there and pray with them for that very thing. As you enter a worship service, Sunday School class, or small group, pray silently for God to bless each Christian there. When you are checking Facebook, pray for each Christian whose page you visit. When a Christian friend texts you, pray silently for that friend. When you read a newspaper or listen to the news, pray for the Christians in the countries where conflict or turmoil is taking place. These are some ways to practice spontaneous prayer for all the saints.

But second, we can practice a more *systematic* kind of intercession. We should create ways of gathering and recording prayer needs, and organizing them so that we bring them before God in a systematic manner. Start with the many prayer lists generated at Highland. Ask your Reach Group leader to forward you the list from your last meeting. Get the prayer list from your Sunday School class. And put on your attendance card that you'd like to receive the

prayer requests people fill out each Sunday in our services. We'll email that each week to you. Then, sit down and just write out every Christian, Christian organization, and Christian ministry you can think of. Each day pray part way through these lists.

Finally, let's explore praying "with all perseverance." Most of us know how prayer can start or re-start with a bang, like at the beginning of a new year, and eventually slow down to a crawl. We're good at starting and re-starting prayer. We're not always so good about keeping prayer going week after week, month after month. Paul addresses this. He urges us to pray "with all perseverance."

What keeps us from praying? What makes it difficult for us to persevere in prayer? Sometimes the issue of *when* keeps us from praying consistently. We just aren't sure when to pray, or haven't found a convenient time for prayer. But Paul hits this head on by instructing us to pray "at all times." Sometimes the issue of *how* gets in our way. We don't know how to pray, what kind of prayer is best, or we've been doing prayer in the same way for so long that we're burnt out. Paul freshens up our prayer lives by urging us to pray with "all prayer and supplication." Sometimes the *who* question slows us down. We don't know who to pray for, or we've been praying over the same list of the same people with the same needs that we're about to die of prayer-boredom. Paul urges us to pray for "all the saints" – providing a never ending list of needs and people. But I think what ultimately slows most of us down is the *why* issue. Many of us fail to pray "with all perseverance" because we lose sight of why we are praying.

And Paul points us back to a long-lasting motive with his words earlier in [Eph. 6:12](#): *12For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.* ([Eph. 6:12](#) ESV). There is a fundamental truth about life: there is more than what we see. Behind the visible world is an invisible world. Woven in between what we see are powers and forces we do not see. And according to Paul, what we do not see is more important than we do see. The unseen is of greater significance than the seen. So often we quit praying because we do not see any results, any answers, or any changes affected by those prayers. We quit praying, we cease praying "with all perseverance" because of what we see or don't see. But prayer, I believe Paul is saying, is not ultimately about what we see. Sure, some prayer does have visible results. Some prayer ought to have a tangible impact. But of greater importance is the unseen impact of prayer. Prayer is ultimately about something we cannot see. Often it will not have visible results. But it will have invisible results. We may not see the tangible result of our prayer until we are raised from the dead and live face to face with God and are given insight into what is now invisible. But we pray, and we never quit praying, because we believe prayer is our only way into this invisible world.

John Stott writes, "Most Christians pray sometimes, with some prayers and some degree of perseverance, for some of God's people."³ May we be just the opposite: praying at all times, with all prayer and supplication, for all the saints, with all perseverance. May we pray like Paul praying like Jesus.

¹ Phyllis Tickle, The Divine Hours: Prayers for Summertime (Doubleday, 2000).

² Richard J. Foster, Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home (Harper, 1992).

³ John R. W. Stott, The Message of Ephesians *The Bible Speaks Today* (IVP, 1979), 283.