

“Spiritual Habits for Ordinary People - prayer”

Scripture: Luke 11:1-13; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Graphics: prayer

Big Truth: The people of the Panama UMC are called and commanded to build a habit of prayer.

Focus Phrase: Prayer moves mountains, makes people whole, moves the heart of God, and gives clarity for my life.

1. Introduction

A. Let's talk about **habits**.

- i. In your mind right now, think of 3-4 habits that you have and you engage in every day.
- ii. It's not easy, is it? Why is that? Why can't we just name our habits? Well, because they're HABITS! We just DO them because it's what we DO... usually without thinking to much.
- iii. A habit is defined by Merriam-Webster as ***an acquired mode of behavior that has become nearly or completely involuntary.***
- iv. It can be an addiction like smoking, or it can be something we have conditioned ourselves to do like waking at a certain time each day or driving a specific way to work.
- v. Habits can be bad habits...or habits can be good habits. Either way, they're habits.
- vi. Let's focus on a very specific BRAND of habits...spiritual habits, which is the title of this sermon series.

B. **Spiritual** habits, which we will explore for the next 5 weeks in worship, are a special category of habits in which the God of the Universe wants us to engage, for His glory and to draw closer to HIM.

- i. Spiritual habits are actions we're called or commanded by God to do regularly as faithful followers of Jesus. These are not optional for us...but pathways to discipleship.
- ii. And there are many...and there are lots of lists and variations of these habits. It's hard to know where to start. But, the awesome thing is that we don't dive into these on our own...but we build these habits **in the presence of - and help from - the Holy Spirit**, for God's glory and for building up the church and its disciples.
- iii. Listen, God wants SO MUCH to be in relationship with each of us that He's provided multiple ways for us to BE in that relationship. God wants SO MUCH for us to be changing and growing as disciples, that He's given us the gift of spiritual habits, or spiritual disciplines, you may know them.

- C. However, the main problems with spiritual habits, or any habit that's good for you, is that they are difficult to establish, but OH SO EASY to drop.
- i. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, we have had many of our habits upended. Our daily and weekly and monthly schedules are messed up. We aren't going to meetings or gatherings or work like we used to. And when we do, we have to think in a different way.
 - ii. I'm JUST NOW, after 6 months, remembering to take my mask with me everywhere I go. How many times have I gotten in the car and been driving somewhere and thought, "Oh crud! I forgot a mask!" (turn around, go home and try again). But now, I have one in the car, one in my pocket, one in my bag, 2-3 in my office, and a few stashed in the house. It's a habit every time I leave my office or house.
 - iii. For many, we've gotten out of the habit of worship attendance, or prayer, or serving in this ministry or that ministry. Those things are slowly changing and restarting. I will tell you, it's **A LOT** easier to shut a church down than it is to restart it after it's been shut down. Trust me on that one.
 - iv. And it's **A LOT** easier to stop doing something good than it is to restart it after you've gotten OUT of the habit.
- D. This series is all about how to start (or REstart) 5 new or renewed straightforward spiritual habits this fall. And whether you're watching online or are here in person, these are for all of us. And when I say, "us," I mean you, and me, and the person next to you and the one who's hearing this later in the day or week. *Spiritual Habits for Ordinary People.*
- i. WE are just ordinary people. You and I are human. And we're alive in 2020, for better or for worse. And we're mortal. You and I are not that different or special from everyone else. We're all just showing up every day and doing the best we can with what we have.
 - ii. BUT...BUT...(whew!) we have an EXTRAORDINARY GOD who has reached down from heaven, sent His only Son, Jesus, who lived among us and taught and performed miracles, and then died for our sins, walked out of His own grave, and breathed HIS HOLY SPIRIT directly into EACH believer, so that we could carry on the ministry of Jesus today.
 - iii. SO, even though we may each be pretty ordinary, and struggling in 2020, we have been saved by and serve in EXTRAORDINARY, supernatural, saving, powerful, God.
 - iv. And in order for us ordinary Jesus-people to grow into powerful, saved, world-changing disciples, we're called to get in the habit of praying, studying scripture, practicing simplicity, serving others, and being guided

by the Holy Spirit. And those are in addition to other things like worship, fasting, meditation, and other more popular spiritual disciplines.

- E. This series is based on a book by Richard Foster called *Celebration of Discipline*. This is one of the best-selling books of all time and has been around since 1978, when I was in 3rd grade!
- F. Author Richard Foster says this, “In one sense, the Spiritual Disciplines are not hard. We need not be well advanced in matters of theology to practice the Disciplines. Recent converts - for that matter people who have yet to turn their lives over to Jesus Christ - can and should practice them. The primary requirement is a longing after God. “As a heart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the Living God,” writes the psalmist (Psalm 42:1-2).
- G. Spiritual Habits for Ordinary people like you and me. And I can’t think of a better time in the history of the world to forsake ALL else and grow into a deeper relationship with the God of the Universe than RIGHT NOW!
- H. Next week, I’ll be giving away a copy of this book in worship right here. I’ll have a trivia question for you to answer and the first one to answer it correctly will get a copy. So, be here and be ready!
- I. Let’s pray and dive into the first spiritual habit for ordinary people - **prayer**. Prayer is one of THE most important habits we’re commanded to do by our Lord, but it’s one that continuously falls off the table. We have to pick it back up, and get it back before us.
- J. Let’s pray and then learn about prayer...
- K. **PRAY!**
- L. Turn with me to Luke chapter 11, starting in verse 1. I had no idea what Pastor Roy was going to preach about last week. His topic of prayer breaking down strongholds was excellent. So, we pick up on what he talked about, and let’s put some legs on the HOW of prayer...and why it’s critical that we all establish a HABIT of true and deep prayer. Luke 11...like the disciples, we ask Jesus to TEACH US...

2. Scripture

A. READ Luke 11:1-13

- i. Foster opens his chapter on prayer with this statement, “Prayer catapults us into the frontier of the spiritual life. Of all the Spiritual Disciplines prayer is the most central because it ushers us into perpetual communion with the Father. ...it is the Discipline of prayer that brings us into the deepest and highest work of the human spirit. Real prayer is life creating and life changing. ...To pray is to change. Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us.” (p33)

- ii. The disciples who were with Jesus on the day described in Luke 11 wanted to change. Or at least they wanted to be more like Jesus. They saw Jesus praying and were blown away...amazed.
 - iii. It's like they could sense that Jesus was communing with the Father at a level that they'd never before experienced...and didn't even know existed.
 - iv. And they wanted a piece of that. And it's THAT desire - that hunger - that led to them wanting to know what Jesus knew about prayer. To pray like Jesus prayed.
 - v. And it's what leads us to want to change so that our lives are, like the disciples, more and more aligned with God...more and more like Jesus... more in communion with the God of the Universe through the presence of the Holy Spirit.
 - vi. As Pastor Roy talked about last week, Jesus' model prayer starts with revering God - giving honor to God's name. And then praying that whatever is happening in heaven would be happening HERE, NOW!
 - vii. Then we pray for change to come into our lives when we ask for forgiveness for us and others, and we pray for God to deliver us.
 - viii. (This is serious stuff Jesus is about!)
 - ix. Jesus then explained to the disciples that this wasn't a rote prayer that you say without thinking, once and done. Check off the box and move on with your day.
 - x. Jesus made it clear to the disciples, after they said, "Lord, teach us to pray..." that prayer is a habit that's established and built through perseverance.
 - xi. You keep going to the Father, like someone who's in desperate need of food, and you keep asking and praying and keep praying.
 - xii. Jesus said, "Ask, and it WILL be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened."
 - xiii. Keep persevering in asking. Keep persevering in searching. Keep persevering in knocking. And you WILL not only find yourself with a new habit, but you will receive, find, and have the pathway to God's heart - the door - opened to you.
- B. The Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

- i. Yet, praying without ceasing, or praying like the giants of the faith like Martin Luther or John Wesley, is daunting for us *ordinary people* with busy, ordinary lives.
- ii. I mean, Martin Luther said, “I have so much business that I cannot get on without spending three hours daily in prayer.” Foster writes, John Wesley said, “God does nothing but in answer to prayer,” and then backed up his conviction by devoting two hours daily to that sacred exercise.”
- iii. Yikes! I’m lucky if I squeak out 20 minutes. And even then, we’re sometimes so distracted that we wander into 25 things about our day, the world, and the to-do list, if we have time at all.
- iv. What are we do do about it? How do we each establish a habit of prayer that ordinary people can engage in?

3. Application

- A. Well, first, remember that **God meets you right where you are** and then He slowly invites and moves you to a deeper experience of prayer.
 - i. The disciples were eager to grow in prayer, but they had to start by listening for Jesus to teach them. They couldn’t rush it.
 - ii. People who jog once in a while don’t all-of-a-sudden become marathon runners without a LOT more training. People who play pick-up football in the side yard don’t get drafted into the NFL overnight. It’s all about training, and building a habit of getting up in the morning to exercise, work on form and positioning and conditioning.
 - iii. **Prayer is no different.** You might get discouraged because you don’t know what to pray. Or you want to pray for everything and everyone.
 - iv. Prayer is, most simply, a conversation with God. In order to start this spiritual habit, **keep it simple.** And, not to get too mystical on us, but that conversation can only begin when the Holy Spirit opens the porous veil between the physical realm and the spiritual realm.
 - v. So, simply begin with inviting the Holy Spirit to help you...to be present with you.
 - vi. And then, just begin a conversation with the Father. And, I don’t know about you, but with my earthly father, those conversations tended to be him talking and me listening more than the other way around. That’s NOT a bad mode to be in with prayer: listening more than talking, hearing more than speaking, receiving more than offering, learning and listening.
 - vii. Remember that in order for God to meet you where you are, you have to show up and then invite the Holy Spirit to open the conversation channel.

viii. And then, once you do, don't just dive into a list of prayer requests and people. Wait until you're sure that God is asking you to pray for a person or that situation before you proceed. That seems a little counter-intuitive, but it leads us to point #2...

B. Pray God's will for the world, not YOUR will for God to do.

- i. It may very well be that God wants you to pray for a person in your life who has cancer or a marriage between friends that's falling apart.
- ii. But you may also get discouraged pretty quickly if you try to pray for EVERY person that has cancer or EVERY marriage that's in trouble.
- iii. Instead, ask God who and what to pray for. Ask God to show you what HIS will is. It's not YOUR job, Christian, to pray for every person in the world. Let the Holy Spirit draw you into what to pray and how to pray and for whom to pray.
- iv. I often hear people end their prayers with, "...if it be your will God." That prayer phrase reveals that the person praying isn't fully aware of God's will because they haven't taken the time to listen for God's will.
- v. Foster writes, "One of the most astonishing characteristics of Jesus' praying is that when he prayed for others he never concluded by saying, 'If it be thy will.' Nor did the apostles or prophets when they were praying for others. They obviously believed that they knew what the will of God was before they prayed the prayer of faith."
- vi. If you start with praying for God to reveal his will in a specific situation, then you can focus your prayer on **His will**. If God gives you a vision of what healing looks like or what wholeness looks like, then you pray THAT and are in agreement with God's will.
- vii. Prayer is about changing your mind and heart to agree with the mind and heart of God, and then praying for God's will to be done on earth, now.

C. And then, as you grow in prayer, look for answers to prayer that are tangible.

- i. There's no greater motivation to keep building a habit of prayer than to see answers to prayer right before your eyes. But you have to keep working on prayer in order to increase the awareness of the answers.
- ii. Foster uses the metaphor of a TV that doesn't work to illustrate how we have to seek after prayer that works.
- iii. If your TV doesn't work when you turn it on, you don't automatically declare that there are no electronic frequencies in the air or in the cable, right? You try to figure out what's wrong. Check the plug. Check the power. Adjust the TV until you figure out what's blocking the signal.

- iv. Same thing with prayer. If you don't see tangible results from prayer, then keep growing and learning and changing some things about how you pray until you begin to identify results. And don't give up... Jesus told his disciples to "**persevere in prayer.**"
 - v. Foster wrote, "We can know that our prayers are being answered as surely as we can know that the television set is working." (p. 38)
 - vi. Keep prayer simple, letting God meet you where you are right now.
 - vii. Ask for and listen to understand God's will.
 - viii. Pray with perseverance and look for tangible answers.
- D. But how do you start praying and make it a spiritual habit that becomes the foundation of all your faith life?
- E. Let me start by simply saying that God wants, more than anything in the world, to have your heart. And He desires to have your heart as your first love when you put your trust in Jesus, but then more and more and more every day, growing and changing to be more like Jesus, His Son. So, if you needed any motivation at all to build the habit of prayer as an ordinary person, it would be that God wants you because He loves you. Try this...
- i. **Set aside time each day to start.** We know that habits can only become habits after we start with the first time. And you can only create a habit after you keep doing the thing over a period of time. Experts say you need to do something 7 times to build a habit. So, start and then keep going. Day 1... pray. Day 2... pray. And make it all the way to Day 7. If you've gotten OUT of the habit... start at Day 1 again. Like Luther, you have too much to do in a day to NOT spend time in prayer each day.
 - ii. **#2 Let Jesus simply sit with you.** Seriously. Just imagine or envision Jesus sitting across from you or next to you. And just talk with Him. Ask him to tell you about you, God's will, and what he wants for your life. Every day.
 - iii. And then, as you rise from praying, **make an appointment to come back to that spot and time tomorrow.** We all have calendars and appointments. Put that time in your calendar and look forward to being there tomorrow. After 7 days or two weeks, you'll have a new spiritual habit or you'll be renewing one that you've been missing!

4. Conclusion

- A. **Ordinary people CAN do extraordinary things when an extraordinary God is involved in their ordinary lives.**
- B. Don't let anything get in the way of increasing a life of prayer to an extraordinary God.

- C. If we look at our Intentional Discipleship Plan, prayer helps us grow in a life of worship, a life of community, a life of openness, a life of obeying, a life of sharing and a life of service. It's involved and a catalyst for every single milestone of every single category. It's THAT important a habit for everyday life in Christ.
- D. Find time to, make a priority for, and then build a habit of praying...it'll move mountains, make people whole, live the heart of God, and give you clarity for all of life.
- E. God CAN and WILL hear our prayers and respond!
- F. Let's pray together the Lord's Prayer, slowly and intentionally, listening to ourselves say every word (on screen).
- G. *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses and we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen.*
- H. Amen!