

A New Old Way To Pray

On Sunday we resumed our sermon series on prayer, exploring an ancient method of prayer that has blessed millions, but is probably new to most of us.

1. Warm-up Question: Jeff began Sunday's sermon with a joke about a little boy praying for a bike for Christmas. When you were a kid, what's something you asked for in prayer that, looking back now, strikes you as very childlike?
2. The point of our current sermon series is NOT that asking for things in prayer is bad. Philippians 4:6 says, "Do not worry about anything, but by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God." The point of the current sermon series is to challenge us to broaden and deepen our prayer life beyond simply asking for things.
 - a. What's something important to you that you're asking for in your current prayers?
 - b. Jeff said, "What tends to drive our prayer life is our felt need to get stuff from God – to the point that our prayers become one dimensional – ask, ask, ask." Does that statement feel like an apt description of your prayer life? What percentage of your prayer time is typically occupied with requests? What do you do during the remainder of your prayer time?
3. The Bible promises us access to the infinite wisdom of God to guide our lives. On Sunday, Jeff compared God's wisdom to the famous Yates oil field in Texas that was discovered years after Yates acquired the property. Yates lived in abject poverty for decades before discovering his property was full of oil just beneath the surface. God's wisdom is like that in our lives.
 - a. James 1:5 says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, ask, and God who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, will give it to you." What do you hear that verse saying to you?
 - b. In John 16:12, Jesus says, "When the Spirit of truth comes, the Spirit will guide you into all truth." What do you hear that verse saying to you?
 - c. Think about a really bad decision you made in your life. What was the decision? How did it hurt you and others? How much time, energy, and serenity could you have saved if you'd had the insight to not make that decision?
4. It's one thing to know, in the abstract, that we have access to God's wisdom, and quite another to know, on a practical level, how to actually do it. St. Ignatius of Loyola developed a practical method of prayer meant to help us. His method is called "Prayers of Examen." "Examen" is the Latin word for "inquiry or examination." Prayers of Examen can take two forms: (a) Big-Issue Prayers of Examen; and (b) Daily Prayers of Examen. Let's start with Daily Prayers of Examen.

- a. Take a look at the description of the five steps of Daily Examen listed on p. 3. Praying this way takes about 20 minutes a day. Have someone read the steps aloud. What do you think of this method of prayer? What resonates with you and what doesn't? Have you ever tried praying this way? How did it go for you?
 - b. To get a feel for this way of praying, let's move through the steps together as a group. Step 1: Ask For Light. Read the following statement as a group in unison: "Spirit of the Living God, we invite you into this time of prayerful conversation and ask you to guide us. We believe you are right here right now."
 - c. Step 2: Give Thanks. State something you're thankful for that has happened within the past 24 hours. (Don't pick something big you're thankful for generally in life. Pick something that you experienced in the last 24 hours.)
 - d. Step 3: Prayers of Consolation. As an example, have someone answer these questions: During the last 24 hours, when did you feel most blessed? What did you feel in the moment? What insight or learning can you take from that experience? Where was God in that experience?
 - e. Step 4: Prayers of Desolation. Have someone answer these questions: During the last 24 hours, when did you feel most desolate? Why did you feel so desolate? What can you learn from it? What could you have done better? What (if anything) do you need to confess? Where was God in that experience?
 - f. Step 5: Invite God Into The Day To Come. Name something you expect to face within the next 24 hours. What do you want to talk to God about to get ready for that experience?
5. "Big-Issue Prayers of Examen" happen when, instead of focusing on the past day, we focus on a big issue in our life and examine it in the presence of God. For an example of this kind of prayer, read about Elijah's experience in I Kings 19:1-16.
- a. What was Elijah's state of mind at the outset of this passage?
 - b. What key question did God keep laying on Elijah's heart? Why did God keep repeating that question? Why was it so important?
 - c. What's the significance of the tornado, earthquake, and fire, followed by "the sound of sheer silence" (sometimes translated as "a still small voice")? What point is being made here?
 - d. What specific wisdom did Elijah come away with? What game plan did he develop in consultation with God?
 - e. How do you think Elijah felt at the end of this prayer experience?
 - f. If you were to pick one big-picture issue to explore with God sometime in the next week, what might that issue be for you?

Two Kinds of Prayers of Examen

Prayers of Daily Examen

Step 1: Ask For Light. Consciously invite God into your prayer and ask God's Spirit to be your guide during your prayer. Imagine Jesus being right there with you.

Step 2: Give Thanks. Review the prior day and identify things you're thankful for from the day – not the big things in life you're most thankful for, but all the little things from the past 24 hour cycle. Doing this makes us much more conscious of the abundance of blessings in even the most ordinary days.

Step 3: Prayers of Consolation. Select the moment during the past day when you felt most blessed. Then spend some time reliving that moment by talking to God about it. Ask and answer questions like: Why was that such a blessing? What did I feel in that moment? What insight or learning can I take from that experience? Where was God in that experience?

Step 4: Prayers of Desolation. Select the moment during the past day when you felt most desolate. Spend some time reliving that moment by describing it to God and ask things like: Why did I feel so desolate? What can I learn from that? What could I have done better? What do I need to confess? Where was God in that experience?

Step 5: Invite God Into The Day To Come. Talk to God about a few things you anticipate in the day to come and consciously articulate what wisdom and guidance God may be offering for those situations.

Big-Issue Prayers of Examen

Select a big-picture issue in your life that transcends your days. Examine that issue in the presence of God.

1. Describe the issue to God.
2. Try to sense what questions God might want you to explore as you grapple with this issue.
3. Discuss those questions in God's presence.
4. Articulate the wisdom or guidance you believe you're receiving from God.
5. Do you feel at peace with this guidance or is further conversation needed?

*Take some time this week to experiment with Prayers of Examen.
It might just change your life!*