

## **Prerequisites for Intimacy with God Part 1: Pray Daily**

### **Intro**

#### **A. Word of exhortation**

What I want to share tonight is not your typical sermon. Or, to be more precise, I will not be doing expository preaching.

Rather, what I want to share with you is more of a “word of exhortation” (Hebrews 13:22). It began with a prophetic sense that God was calling us to greater intimacy with him.

I have had the strong impression since early March that God wants to bring renewal to the personal prayer lives of the people in our church. This was confirmed to me in several ways. First through a picture, then through Peter Eavis's sermon series on prayer, then through a second picture. Furthermore, I have felt urged by the Lord to intercede for this personal prayer renewal for our body.

Finally, I shared my impression with the senior staff a few weeks ago, and they all seemed to agree with it. And recently, a number of people have already begun to experience a renewed excitement and enthusiasm for their personal prayer times.

So God seems to be emphasizing, through repeated confirmations, that he wants us to grow in intimacy with him.

And it all begins with our personal prayer lives.

The Biblical principle is this, “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.” (James 4:8, NASB)

#### **B. Three Prerequisites**

Intimacy with God is a big topic. Books have been written on it. We could do an entire sermon series on it. However, before we can talk about intimacy itself, we have to talk about some prerequisites for intimacy.

Just as there are prerequisites for certain college courses and most jobs, there are prerequisites for becoming more intimate with God. There are certain things we have to do if we are to grow closer to him. It's these prerequisites that are often left out of the discussion on intimacy with God. Perhaps that is because these prerequisites are so basic and fundamental, maybe even painfully obvious. But they are essential if we are to grow closer to Christ.

Tonight and next week, I want to talk about three of these prerequisites. If we master these, we will be well on our way to a vastly improved relationship with God.

The three prerequisites for intimacy I want to cover are these:

1. Pray Daily
2. Pray Fully
3. Pray Confessionally

## **I. Pray Daily**

To start off with, let me say that all of our prerequisites for intimacy lie in the realm of prayer. That is because prayer is the primary means God has given us to communicate with him.

The prerequisite we'll discuss tonight is daily prayer. We'll discuss the other two next week.

I believe the two pictures the Lord showed me address our need for more consistent, deeper, daily prayer. Allow me to share one of them with you.

### **A. Prophetic picture**

#### Picture 1: Closed closet door (March 20, 2005)

During worship on the UWS, I saw the following picture:

I saw a person in their home heading for the front door. They were in a hurry. As they walked briskly to the front door, they glanced over at a nearby closet. Then they looked back to the front door and exited their home. I saw a close-up of the keyhole in the closet door and the door was not locked but it had been unopened for some time.

The closet represents a prayer closet, that place where we go for our daily devotions. The person was in such a hurry to get to work in the morning that he didn't take time to go into his prayer closet first.

The interpretation was that too many of us are neglecting regular, private prayer time with God because of other pressures and priorities in life.

I believe the Lord was convicting (though not condemning) us of how little time we spend with him. He was also challenging us to pray more, to spend more time with him. Not out of a sense of obligation, but because he wants our fellowship. And because he knows that prayer is for our benefit. It is the best way we can deepen our relationship with him.

## **B. The importance of daily prayer**

If we are to heed this call of God to prayer, we must start at the most basic place. We must start by making time for frequent personal devotions, ideally on a daily basis.

The importance of daily prayer is emphasized in scripture and throughout church history. Throughout this sermon I will reference the Psalms because of all the books in the Bible, it is in the Psalms where we see intimacy between God and man best expressed. The Psalms of David and others show us what true intimacy with God looks like in a way we can both apprehend and emulate.

### Examples from the Psalms

Ps 5:3 — *In the morning, O LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation.*

Ps 88:13 — *But I cry to you for help, O LORD; in the morning my prayer comes before you.*

Ps 63:6 — *On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night.*

Ps 55:17 — *Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice.*

David and the other psalmists gained intimacy with God by engaging in prayer on a daily basis. While this is only hinted at in the Psalms above, we understand it to be true historically. As observant Jews, they practiced set times of prayer multiple times during the day, every day. Prayer was as regular to them as eating and drinking.

### Other examples of daily prayer

Daniel, another OT saint who had an especially close relationship with God, practiced daily prayer. Even when Daniel knew that praying to God would break the king's decree and get him thrown into the lions' den, he continued to pray daily.

Da 6:10 — *Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened towards Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.*

The apostles also practiced daily prayer:

Pentecost occurred when they were all gathered for their 9:00 a.m. prayer meeting (Acts 2:1,15).

Later in Acts (3:1), we read, *One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon.*

In addition, historically, large portions of the Church have practiced praying at fixed hours throughout the day using such guides as the Book of Common Prayer.

In the overly individualized Western Christian culture of recent years, the concept of fixed-hour daily prayer has become largely unknown. But even today, groups like Inter-Varsity and Campus Crusade stress the importance of having a daily “quiet time.”

### **C. Structured vs. spontaneous prayer**

In short, throughout church history the importance of having a daily prayer time has been recognized as vital to developing one’s relationship with God. And by daily prayer, I mean a structured, daily prayer time. I mean setting aside a particular part of the day to get alone with God. I do not mean those prayers we say on the fly every day as we go to and fro on the subway or walking down the street.

I am certainly not against spontaneous prayer. In fact, I am a huge advocate of it. But it should augment a devotional prayer time, not replace it.

#### Personal testimony:

When I first came to Christ, almost thirty years ago, I was fortunate to receive instruction in the importance of a daily devotional time. God graciously used the habit of daily, structured prayer to lay a solid foundation in my spiritual life.

Years later, as I gained a wife and family and my work responsibilities increased, my daily prayer times fell by the wayside. I still prayed, of course, but almost exclusively in a spontaneous, throughout-the-day manner. Maybe once or twice a week I would still have a good, old-fashioned quiet time. Something inside me felt a little guilty about abandoning daily devotions but I reasoned that God didn’t require that kind of structure and he certainly still heard me and spoke to me through spontaneous prayer.

Several years ago, though, I came to the realization that if I was to deepen my relationship with God, I needed to reinstate a daily devotional time in addition to my spontaneous prayer life. It took several false starts and a lot of effort, but eventually it became my habit again. And I can’t tell you how rewarding it has been.

I share this in hopes that I can spare you from making the same mistake I did. Don’t think that spontaneous prayer alone is enough to go as deep as you can with God. It isn’t.

I am convinced we need both types of prayer, structured and spontaneous. We need meat and vegetables (or at least protein and vegetables!). We need solid food and liquids.

Both types of prayer are clearly evident in scripture.

But I believe God is highlighting our need for structured, daily prayer because it is by far the more neglected of the two.

## II. Overcoming Obstacles to Daily Prayer

Now, I know what you're thinking. Having a consistent, daily prayer time is easier said than done.

Ken Wilson, a Vineyard pastor who teaches on devotional prayer, has observed that people are very insecure about their prayer lives. Therefore, he says we need to "tread lightly" when discussing it. I agree. I certainly don't want anyone to leave here feeling guilty into praying more. But I do want you to leave here feeling motivated to pray more.

We all live such incredibly busy, over-booked lives. Short of going off to a monastery, how can we develop (or renew) consistent, daily prayer times?

There are very real obstacles that we all face. How do we overcome those obstacles so we can have the quality prayer life God is calling us to?

Let's talk briefly about what some of our obstacles are and suggest some practical ways we can overcome them.

### A. Lack of Discipline

There are no magic formulas for imparting sufficient self-discipline to anyone. Self-discipline or self-control is actually a fruit of the Spirit and must be cultivated over time.

However, there are practical tips to help overcome a lack of discipline. The key is to make a regular devotional time seem less intimidating and demanding.

1. Take it one day at a time. Like establishing any good habit (a diet or workout routine), developing a regular devotional time becomes self-perpetuating once one overcomes the initial inertia. The trick is to overcome that inertia.

To do so, just focus on the first day. Mark it on your calendar. Get one day under your belt. Then focus on the second day. Etc. If you do it four or five days in a row, it should begin to become a habit and much easier to continue. It becomes its own reward and something to look forward to,

2. Insert reminders into your daily routine. Use your devotional guide like a Post-It. Put the devotional on your breakfast table so you see it in the morning. Put it on your bedside table so it's handy to read at bedtime. By placing it in the path of your daily routine, you're reminded to pick it up and read it.

3. Enlist the help of others. Ask a roommate or spouse to remind you to have your devotional time. Have a friend call you at a set time in the morning. Make an agreement with a friend or loved one for you both to use the same devotional guide and compare notes regularly. If someone else is depending on you, it holds you accountable.

## **B. Lack of Time (Too Busy)**

1. Start small. Don't start out attempting an hour-long or even a half-hour-long devotional time. Try five or ten minutes at most. There are plenty of daily devotionals that only require a few minutes per day (Our Daily Bread, Open Windows, My Utmost for His Highest).

2. Experiment with the time of day. Are you a morning person or an evening person? Don't feel locked into early morning just because that is the classic time to have devotions. Are you a night person? Maybe nighttime is best for you. If morning or bedtime don't work for you, try lunch time. Not ideal but better than nothing. Find whatever time works for you. Experiment.

Here's the bottom-line question: What time of day can I best give Jesus the attention he deserves?

## **C. Sleepiness**

When it comes to having our devotions, often the spirit is willing but the body is weak.

How do we avoid getting sleepy when praying?

1. Choose time of day carefully. Remember what we said about morning vs. evening prayer times. Choose the time when you will naturally be most alert.

2. Coffee and light. Make sure the room isn't too dark. Keep a light on. If you like, have a cup of coffee or tea to keep you alert.

3. Shave or shower first. If showering helps wake you up in the morning, you may want to do that before you begin your devotions. I find shaving first thing in the morning takes the edge off my sleepiness.

4. Consider your prayer posture. You want to be comfortable when praying but not too comfortable. Having your quiet time while laying in bed is probably not the best way to stay alert! Try kneeling on the floor or sitting at a desk to prevent being overcome by sleepiness.

## **D. Wandering Mind**

What are some things we can do to prevent our minds from wandering?

1. Pray out loud. When we keep our prayers silent, it is easy for our minds to go off on tangents or to make free associations. By praying out loud, of necessity we have to keep our focus on what we are saying.

2. Fix your sight on something. Our minds are more apt to wander when we don't have anything visual to refer to. Try referring to a written list of prayer requests to keep you on track. Or read a scripture passage and pray through it, keeping your eyes on it as you go. Or look at a painting or some flowers or out the window (if you have a nice view) while you pray.

3. Write out your prayers. Try journaling. You can write in a notebook or type on a computer. By writing out our prayers and God's responses, we are kept active and focused. There is less opportunity for our minds to wander or daydream.

## **Conclusion**

Following these tips should help us to improve our daily devotional lives. Undoubtedly, some days we'll fare better than others. But let's not give up. Let's keep at it.

It's worth the effort. Because, as we've said, consistent daily devotionals are a prerequisite for increased intimacy with God. And what could be better than getting closer to Jesus?