

Discipleship *and* Prayer



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Dan. 9:2–19; Matt. 14:22, 23; 26:36; John 17:6–26; Heb. 2:17; 1 Pet. 4:7.*

Memory Text: “‘I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me’ ” (*John 17:20, 21, NKJV*).

Whatever else we do in the work for souls, whatever outreach programs we create, we are to earnestly pray for those whom we are seeking to reach. This is central to what it means to be a Christian, even more so a disciple-maker. What powerful changes might occur if constant, fervent prayer was central to our methodology in seeking to make and keep disciples!

“Let the workers grasp the promises of God, saying, ‘Thou hast promised, ‘Ask, and ye shall receive.’ I must have this soul converted to Jesus Christ.’ Solicit prayer for the souls for whom you labor; present them before the church as objects for the supplication. . . . Select another and still another soul, daily seeking guidance from God, laying everything before Him in earnest prayer, and working in divine wisdom.”—Ellen G. White, *Medical Ministry*, pp. 244, 245.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 18.

Time-tested Compassion

Frequently, prayer assumes a self-centered posture. Believers present their wish lists before God, hoping to get that which they ask for. Though, of course, we are told to set our petitions before God, sometimes our motives are not pure. After all, are not our hearts corrupt, wicked, and deceitful? Might not our prayers, at times, simply reflect the sinfulness that lies within?

Intercessory prayer, however, focuses on another person's needs, thus removing the likelihood of selfish motivation. Throughout history, intercessory prayers have represented the highest expressions of spiritual discourse. Untainted by the desire for personal gratification, these conversations demonstrate selflessness, compassion, and earnest longing for the salvation of others.

Read Daniel 9:2–19. What burdens Daniel throughout this prayer? What role does confession play within the prayer? Because of his advanced age, Daniel would not likely personally benefit from Jerusalem's restoration. Therefore, what motivated this prayer?

Seventy years have passed since Jeremiah uttered the prophecy that Daniel now considers. After so many years, Daniel's Jerusalem friends have likely already perished. Jerusalem's restoration would not restore Daniel's personal fortunes either. Nothing in Daniel's prayer suggests selfish concerns. The ancient prophet expressly implores God regarding the future of the exiled Jewish nation and the reputation of Jehovah Himself. Extended confession precedes his requests. In confession, Daniel includes himself among the disobedient. The prophet is unwilling to presume his own innocence. Daniel himself takes responsibility while primarily pursuing restoration in order to benefit others.

Think about your prayer life: what you pray for, why, and for whom. How much death to self is involved in it? How can you learn to be less self-centered in your prayer life? That is, how can your prayers, even the ones for yourself, be less selfish?

Time for Prayer

Think through what prayer really is: fallen, sinful beings, worthy of death, are able, instantly, to have direct communication with the Creator of the universe—our Holy God.

Also, when God in Christ clothed Himself in human flesh, accepting humanity's limitations, He, too, sensed the necessity of prayer. Though not standing before the Father in the same position that we as fallen sinners are, Jesus as a human still saw the necessity for prayer.

Read Matthew 14:22, 23; 26:36; Mark 1:35–37; and Luke 5:15, 16; 6:12, 13. **What characterized Jesus' personal prayer life? Describe the circumstances that surrounded Jesus' praying. What lessons can we glean from the particulars of Christ's prayer life, such as the frequency, location, and timing?**

Christ certainly modeled the prayer life that He enjoined on His disciples. Mornings, evenings, after preaching, before preaching, whenever possible—Jesus prayed. Gardens, mountains, solitary places, wherever distractions subsided—Jesus prayed. Separated from the Father's presence spatially, Jesus united with the Father through prayer spiritually. Christ's spiritual lifeblood came coursing through the spiritual artery of prayer. Should Christ's modern followers—weakened by sinful tendencies, choked by worldly cares, frustrated by failures—settle for something less than Jesus' prayer life?

“Prayer is the opening of the heart to God as to a friend. Not that it is necessary in order to make known to God what we are, but in order to enable us to receive Him. Prayer does not bring God down to us, but brings us up to Him.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 93.

Read Mark 11:22–26, Luke 11:13, John 14:12–14. **How are we to understand the promises written here about prayer? How have you experienced what Jesus said here? At the same time, how have you learned to cope when things you have prayed for haven't happened the way that you had hoped?**

Timeless Teaching

Prayer miraculously bonds finite souls with their infinite Creator. Prayer is spiritual adhesive. Bonded with the heavenly Father, believers transcend their earthly natures and sinful tendencies. This transformation separates them from the world. Should Satan successfully recast prayer into a self-centered mold, thus robbing prayer of its potential for our transformation, we might be powerfully compromised and our witness stymied.

Read Matthew 6:7, 8; 7:7–11; 18:19, 20. What do these verses teach us about prayer?

The sincere believer trusts in God’s ability to honor His promises. Never has anyone lodged a request that intimidates God. His authority is unlimited, His strength unmatched. God’s people approach heaven’s portals with trust in the Lord—that He will do what is best for us, even if we can’t see it at the time. Faith is not simply trusting in what we can see; true faith is trusting God when we can’t see the outcome that we want and anticipate (*see Heb. 11:1–7*). No doubt, as long as you serve the Lord, as long as you walk in faith, you will have to trust in God even when you don’t see things working out as you had hoped, or even prayed for. Even a quick reading of the Bible will show you that you will not be alone either.

Read Matthew 6:9–15, 26:39. What do these verses teach?

Trust should not be confused with arrogance or insolence. Boldly approaching God’s throne involves no sense of entitlement. The believer’s demeanor is characterized by boldness and humility. In Gethsemane, Christ plainly declared His preference but concluded, “ ‘Not My will, but Yours’ ” (*Luke 22:42, NKJV*). In addition to complete surrender, a forgiving spirit is another indication of humility. We ourselves, having been forgiven so much, must do the same to others.

Are you angry with someone, finding it hard to forgive? Take it to the Lord in prayer. Pray for yourself that you will learn to forgive. Pray for that person. Over time, what do you think will happen?

Timeless Compassion

Christ was the embodiment of perfection; that is, all God's perfections were revealed in Him. Thus, was anyone ever more compassionate than Christ? Who possessed a stronger desire than Jesus to alleviate human distress?

We, therefore, ask, What relationship did Christ's compassion and intercession have with discipleship?

Read Luke 22:31, 32 and John 17:6–26 (see also Heb. 2:17). **How did Jesus' identification with humanity influence His intercessory prayers? What are the ultimate objectives of Christ's intercessory prayers?**

Jesus could effectively intercede on His disciples' behalf because He was actively engaged in their lives, thoroughly understood them, and passionately desired their good. Effective intercession today demands nothing less. The twenty-first century disciple-maker will discard time-consuming pursuits that interfere with his or her relationships with lost souls. Making money, achieving fame, even educational excellence must become subservient to the greater goal of the redemption of the lost. This is an important truth that so easily slips from sight, because we are so often caught in the daily grind of living.

Jesus invested Himself in the lives of His disciples. He visited their homes, became acquainted with their relatives, spent leisure time in their company, and worked alongside them. Nothing significant to their lives escaped His notice. Disciple-making today requires more than tract distribution and airtight biblical argumentation. Praying in a sympathetic consciousness of another's distress, and with a passionate desire to alleviate that distress, is still the standard of intercessory prayer in effective disciple-making.

Though it can sound quaint, there's a lot of truth in the statement "People care little about what you know until they know how much you care."

Timeless Compassion Replicated

The sincerest offering of praise is imitation. Christ's earliest disciples imitated their Master's prayer life. Naturally, they prayed for personal safety, for their daily necessities, and for individual spiritual guidance. Nevertheless, intercessory prayer became an important component of their discipleship.

Read Acts 1:13, 14; 1 Timothy 2:1–4; James 5:13–16; 1 John 5:16; Jude 20–22; and 1 Peter 4:7. **What role did prayer assume in the early church? What were some of the specific situations for which they prayed? What can we learn from these examples?**

Constant prayer anchored the early church. Whenever Paul departed for missionary purposes, he was commissioned through prayer (*Acts 13:3, 14:23*). Even their farewells were clothed in prayer (*Acts 20:36, 21:5*). Frequently their prayers assumed the form of intercession. They prayed for government leaders, fellow believers, and, generally speaking, everyone! Paul interceded for the father of Publius, the chief official who suffered from dysentery. Even when he lay dying, Stephen interceded for his murderers. The centrality of prayer among the earliest believers can hardly be overstated. Scripture says that prayer pleases God because He desires salvation for everyone and seeks the advancement of truth. Through prayer—combined with apostolic teaching, fervent preaching, miraculous wonders, and loving fellowship—the early church rapidly multiplied. Despite vigorous persecution, Christianity enveloped the empire. Thousands upon thousands accepted the gospel. Transformed lives burned as living lights from Caesar's palace to points unknown.

How much time do you spend in intercessory prayer? Think through your answer. Better yet, perhaps the question should be, How much more time should you spend in intercessory prayer?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “A Reformatory Movement,” p. 126, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9; “By Personal Efforts and Living Faith,” pp. 244, 245, in *Medical Ministry*.

“He who does nothing but pray will soon cease to pray, or his prayers will become a formal routine. When men take themselves out of social life, away from the sphere of Christian duty and cross bearing; when they cease to work earnestly for the Master, who worked earnestly for them, they lose the subject matter of prayer and have no incentive to devotion. Their prayers become personal and selfish. They cannot pray in regard to the wants of humanity or the upbuilding of Christ’s kingdom, pleading for strength wherewith to work.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 101.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Why does an absence of intercessory prayer stunt the growth of the church? Conversely, how does an active intercessory prayer life stimulate disciple-making activity? What are the keys to effective intercessory prayer? How can the intercessor know what to pray about?
- 2 What should members do on behalf of those for whom they pray that would go beyond their private petitions at home? How can members build relationships with the neighbors, relatives, and coworkers for whom they pray? Why should private prayers for others always be accompanied by sustained efforts to be friends with those same people?
- 3 What steps should twenty-first-century Christians take to experience dynamic prayer lives? What is the relationship between successful disciple-making and the encountering of God’s divine presence through prayer? Can prayer change those prayed for without first changing those who pray for them? How might the subject matter for prayer be altered by having passion for lost souls? What impact does personal holiness and prayer have on the would-be soul winner’s capacity for the sharing of truth?
- 4 What specific things can believers do to expand their contacts with those who have not accepted Christ? What can Christians do to get beyond surface relationships with their peers so that they will know specific needs for which to pray?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *John 17:20, 21*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize that prayer is an essential ingredient in the life of a disciple.

Feel: Affirm the importance and necessity of prayer while also admitting that it is a practice bathed in mystery.

Do: Cultivate an attitude of prayer that permeates his or her daily life.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Prayer Is Not Just About “Getting Things.”

A Name some of the Bible’s great heroes of prayer. In what ways do their experiences reflect our ideals about prayer?

B What one word would you use to describe effective prayer? Why did you choose that one? What does it say about God?

II. Feel: Effective Prayer Doesn’t Have a Secret Formula.

A Prayer is communication with God, pure and simple. What subjects are most likely to come up in your conversations with God? Why those?

B Does it matter to you that God cares about what you care about? How does it feel to know that He’s heard your prayer?

C Why is it so hard to give God the freedom to answer our prayers in His own time?

III. Do: Pray Without Ceasing.

A The Bible’s great heroes of prayer were those to whom God was an ever-present reality. How do you cultivate that reality in your life?

B In what ways do your family, friends, and coworkers understand that you’re a person of prayer?

► **Summary:** There is power in prayer. It is not that we tell God what to do and He does it. It is that, through prayer, we think His thoughts and live accordingly.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *John 17:20, 21*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Prayer is an essential ingredient in the life of discipleship. It involves much more than just getting answers.

Just for Teachers: Most people entertain a lot of misconceptions about prayer. They treat it as though it were some kind of magic formula that “forces” God to do whatever we ask of Him. Others believe that if they don’t receive what they ask for, they’re not praying hard enough or that their spiritual experience is somehow deficient. This week’s lesson will show that answered prayer is not necessarily a reliable barometer of someone’s spiritual condition. Lots of godly people pray without realizing answers to their prayers.

Opening Activity/Discussion: Begin your conversation by having each member of your class describe his or her earliest memories of experiences with prayer. Such experience could include simple prayers (“Now I lay me down to sleep . . .”), involve some notable answers to prayer, or involve some crisis in which heartfelt prayers seemed to have been ignored. Be sure to provide a safe place where people can share their experiences frankly—their faith as well as their doubts.

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: It’s easy to simplify the experience of prayer, leaving the impression that God “always” does this or that He “never” does that. In fact, as we will see, prayer is one of the most mysterious of all God’s activities in our experience. We should always pray, but we should avoid claiming too much credit for what happens when we pray.

Bible Commentary

I. The Prayer of a Righteous Man (*Review Daniel 9:2–19 with your class.*)

Among the interesting aspects of Daniel’s prayer are these:

First, Daniel prayed in the first-person plural (we). This is significant because we often assume the role of *intercessors*; that is, we pray as if the

problem rests with someone other than ourselves. But Daniel prayed, “ ‘We have sinned and done wrong. *We* have been wicked and have rebelled; *we* have turned away from your commands and laws’ ” (*Dan. 9:5, NIV; emphasis added*). Even though Daniel is one of the few characters in the Bible about whom nothing negative is written, Daniel still identified with his people who, no doubt, were guilty of all the things he mentioned. When Daniel prayed, he didn’t seek to fix the blame on “them”; instead, he used the pronouns “we,” “us,” and “our.” He fully identified with his people.

After Daniel confessed his and his people’s sin, he extolled God in terms that recognized God’s majestic power. Daniel used words such as “great,” “awesome” (*vs. 4, NIV*), “righteous” (*vs. 7, NIV*), “merciful,” “forgiving” (*vs. 9, NIV*). In other words, after confessing his and his people’s shortcomings, Daniel acknowledges that their only hope is in the mercy and forgiveness of a great and righteous God.

Daniel’s request is simple and to the point: “ ‘O Lord, listen! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, hear and act!’ ” (*vs. 19, NIV*). Daniel doesn’t presume to tell God what to do; he only asks that God will act on behalf of His people.

Consider This: While we are taught to pray earnestly and persistently, Daniel’s prayer reminds us to trust God to act in our behalf in a way that best suits His purposes, not ours. What other examples of effective, powerful prayer can you recall from the Bible? Have you ever prayed as Daniel prayed? If so, what was the result? If not, why not?

II. Praying Without Ceasing (*Review Mark 1:35 with your class.*)

The example of Jesus getting up to pray while it was still dark, along with the record that Jesus often spent entire nights in prayer, has led some to assume that God is somehow honored if we sacrifice sleep in favor of a more strident prayer life.

But nowhere (except perhaps in the Garden of Gethsemane) did Jesus give the impression that there is any virtue in praying instead of sleeping.

That being said, we can all remember situations in which we were so burdened by situations and circumstances beyond our control that sleeping, even eating, was all but impossible. Additionally, while our burdens prevented us from sleeping, our only hope came from clinging to God and, like Jacob, praying, “ ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me’ ” (*Gen. 32:26, NIV*).

If anything, Jacob’s protracted wrestling match with the Angel and the long, dark hours of Christ’s Gethsemane experience teach us the value of persistence and perseverance in prayer.

Consider This: Prayer, like salvation, is about faith, not works. We pray not in order to twist God’s arm so that He’ll give us what we ask but

because we can't do anything else. (Where else would we go?) When do you find it most difficult to pray? How do you overcome this difficulty? Define prayer by finishing this sentence: "For me, prayer is . . ."

III. Praying Without Answers *(Review 2 Corinthians 12:7–10 and Luke 22:39–44 with your class.)*

Sadly, too many Christians, when they confide that their prayers don't seem to be answered, are informed that they don't have enough faith or that they have been praying the "wrong" way. In other words, if they had more faith or if they prayed correctly, God would be obligated to answer their prayers.

While this sounds plausible in theory, in fact, prayer doesn't work like that. We pray to an all-wise, all-loving God, because we can't trust ourselves to ask for the right things or even to know what the right things are.

Consider the apostle Paul: he mentions "a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan," sent "to torment" him (*2 Cor. 12:7, NIV*). No one would accuse Paul of being faithless; yet, no matter how much he prayed for relief, God allowed his request to go unanswered, or so it seemed.

With the benefit of hindsight, Paul was able to admit that God knew what He was doing. "He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'" (*vs. 9, NIV*). And Paul was able to conclude, "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses. . . . For when I am weak, then I am strong" (*vss. 9, 10, NIV*).

Another example of a prayer that seemingly went "unanswered" is Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (*Luke 22:39–44*). With the weight of the sins of the entire world on His shoulders, no one would blame Jesus for begging His Father to remove that burden from Him. (One could argue that the Father did remove it—but only after Christ gained the victory over sin through His death and resurrection.)

Instead, Jesus bowed before the perfect will of His Father and allowed Himself to be taken as the plan of salvation demanded. While Jesus had enough "faith" to deliver Himself from certain death, He also had enough "faith" to go ahead and play His part in the salvation of humanity.

Consider This: Does it take more faith to get what we want when we pray or, after stating our case before a loving God, to accept what He offers on the basis of His perfect will? Discuss.

Discussion Questions:

❶ Would you rather worship a God who can be persuaded to answer our prayers no matter what? Or would you rather believe in a God who answers prayers in such a way that sometimes they may only be fully explained and understood in eternity? Discuss.

- ② What Bible character, text, promise, et cetera has been most influential in your understanding of prayer as a spiritual discipline? Why?

► **STEP 3—Apply**

Just for Teachers: The subject of prayer is not only complex, it also has the potential of being a source of guilt. While some people, it seems, are always ready to share a story about some incredible answer to prayer, for others, a real, live answer to prayer is rare. For this reason, this subject has to be presented with great sensitivity.

Life Application: When Paul told the saints in Thessalonica to “pray continually” (*1 Thess. 5:17, NIV*), he wasn’t saying that they had to stay continually on their knees; he was saying that their hearts and minds should always be in an attitude of prayer.

Activity: Invite each member of the class to share experiences of unusual places or unorthodox ways in which they’ve found to pray “without ceasing.”

- ① Simply put, prayer is communication—both talking and listening. When has God spoken to you? What did He say?

- ② How do you know when you’re praying “well”?

► **STEP 4—Create**

Just for Teachers: The success of one’s prayer life has nothing to do with how many answers one receives or what one receives physically as a result of praying. Success is measured more by how well we have communicated with God, both in talking and in listening.

Activity: Hand out pieces of paper, where such supplies are available. Have each class member grade his or her prayer life on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being the highest), and write the number on the paper without showing it to anyone. Have each member fold his or her paper, and put it in a basket or a hat.

Mix up the pieces of paper. Then pull them from the basket one by one, reading each number without comment. After all the numbers have been read, conclude your class by praying that each person will experience God in a new way as a result of his or her individual prayer life. (Alternatively, do this exercise without supplies, ask each class member to silently contemplate his or her prayer life and any improvements he or she might like to experience in it [i.e., more prayer, deeper faith, etc.]. Then conclude class with prayer for a more meaningful prayer life for each member.)