

A New Community: “Prayer”

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West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42 NIV).

PRAYER IN LUKE-ACTS¹

“Prayer” or “giving thanks” appears over 30 times in Acts, and nearly 30 times in the Gospel of Luke. For Luke, prayer is rooted in the life of Jesus Christ. Jesus prays at all the most important events of his life: at his baptism (Luke 3:21), before choosing the Apostles (6:12), at the mount of Transfiguration (9:29), at the last supper (22:17, 19), in the garden of Gethsemane (22:39-46), and on the cross (23:34, 46). Not only that, prayer was habitual and routine for Jesus. He would go to solitary places to commune with God (Lk 4:42-43; 5:16), and in his prayers—wouldn’t you know it—he thought of you! We hear that in the language of John 17 (I don’t pray for these alone, but also they who will believe on me through their word); but even Luke puts some easter eggs in his gospel to remind us of how our Lord thought of us, his people. When Peter naively and wrongly (though good-heartedly) blocks the way to the cross, do you remember what Jesus said to him? Simon, Satan wants to have you...but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail” (Lk 22:32). Oh yes. With all that he had going on in his life, he thought about his feeble followers, individually. And he prayed for them.

And so the gathered people of God, here in Acts 2, devote themselves to prayer. This is not the first time Luke says this in the book of Acts. Back in 1:14, he mentions the apostles, the women, Jesus’ mother Mary and his brothers, and Luke tells us “all these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer” (Acts 1:14). When the apostles saw the daily needs of people needed more attention, they appointed deacons to take

¹ See Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 261-68.

care of it. Do you remember why they didn't just do it themselves? "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables" they said (Acts 6:2). Oh yes, we remember that line. But that's not all they said. "We will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4).

Just as Jesus prays at all the major events of his life, even so the followers of Jesus pray at all the significant turning points in the book of Acts. Jesus prayed before appointing the Twelve, and the church prays before they appoint church leaders (1:24; 6:6; 13:3; 14:23) and before accepting new converts (8:15). Jesus prayed at the hour of his betrayal, and the early church prays during times of severe persecution (4:23-31; 12:5, 12; 16:25). Jesus prayed that the Father would forgive the ignorant, and Simon the Magician begs for such a prayer from Peter for his own transgression (8:22-24). Jesus prayed "thy will be done," and throughout Acts, people seeking the will of God or wanting to follow the way of God are found praying (9:11; 10:4, 30-31). When Peter (9:40) and Paul (28:8) want the Spirit to allow the gift of healing to come upon them, they prayed.

But we also see prayer as a normal and routine part of everyday life. Peter goes to the rooftop for his usual hour of prayer (10:9), and Paul in his missionary journeys ended his farewells kneeling in prayer (20:36; 21:5).²

WHY WE PRAY³

We long for God to be with us, to work in us, and to forgive us. And so we pray. Rowan Williams rightly points out that prayer is not first of all primarily something we do for God, as if we are trying to persuade God to take notice of us or be good to us. **Prayer is, first, God's work in us.** Paul shocks the world, as every eye bursts wide open, and every jaw hits the floor, when he announces that "God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying 'Abba! Father!'" (Gal 4:6). To think—we can talk to God as our Father. Not only that, we can talk to God like a beloved baby chats with the Daddy she adores as we utter the cry "abba" father. Not only that, it isn't even we who are shouting this adoration or lifting up this praise: it is the spirit of Jesus dwelling in our hearts. To borrow a line from Williams, "let Jesus' prayer happen in you!" We stand where Jesus stands, as we say what he said to his Father, because Jesus speaks to God for us, as we

² Corporate, congregational singing is hard to distinguish from prayer. There are two places in Acts where a communal address to God takes place (Acts 4:24-26 & 16:25); one is a prayer, and one is a song. When Mary sings her Magnificat in the first chapter of Luke, it simply says Mary "said" it (Lk 1:46). I wonder if the language in Revelation might help us think of singing as an extension of our communal prayer.

³ See Rowan Williams, *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), pp. 61-83.

speak to God in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. We don't even know what to pray for or how to do it. But the Spirit intercedes for us. Will you let Jesus pray in you? Will you let the Spirit of Jesus speak on your behalf? If you will, then open your mouth and cry out the words that seem too lofty for us and yet we confess to be true: Abba, we cry, Father! All else is but a footnote to this audacious claim. Some wonder what could possibly follow, what could flow from praying to God as Father. But I see it the other way round: If God is our intimate Father, then what *doesn't*?

The second thing to notice about prayer is that God's work in us is a work on behalf of the world. We are intercessors, after all—called to be priests, called to share God's blessings with a waiting world, and standing as beacons of light in a dark and dreary place. God wants justice in this world, and prayer is the vehicle for God's work and wonder. Praying "our Father" naturally leads to the prayer "thy kingdom come." There is a lot of confusion about what it means to pray "thy kingdom come." But Jesus' meaning here is not left to our imagination. He explains it in the very next line: "Thy will be done on earth—just as it is in heaven." God getting what God wants. He lists them in the beatitudes. Those who long for what God wants hunger and thirst for righteousness (which can also be translated justice). But it's not a blood-thirsty justice. It's an overwhelming of love that unites both parties and brings about the renewal of friendship between once bitter enemies. We are peacemakers who love mercy. Reconciliation, mercy, and extending love all come pouring out of our lives as the prayer for such things comes pouring out of our mouths because we—in the spirit of Jesus—are set free from selfish ambition or fear or anxiety, or the desire to compete in order to find our purpose or identity. The second century Christian Origen said "the whole of our life say Our Father," and that is because prayer is not just the words of Jesus being repeated; it's—as Williams puts it—"the life of Jesus coming alive in you."

A third note about prayer is that it is our profession of Faithfulness. It is our "I do." And that is why we end our prayers with an "Amen." Prayer is our confession that we will stand for and stand with the faithful God who always stands for us. While we ask for God to forgive our trespasses and to lead us not to temptation, we also proclaim that we will forgive others of their trespasses against us, and we will follow where God leads.

Charles Hodge was once asked if he believed in the power of prayer. "No," said Hodge, "I believe in the power of God, and so we pray."

HOW WE PRAY⁴

The prayers of Scripture, and the prayers of the early Christians in the first few centuries, seem to follow a basic pattern. There is no rule—since some of the most beautiful prayers in Scripture are one liners like “have mercy on me, a sinner” or even one word, “Lord, Save!” But longer prayers tend to follow something of this order:

(1) Prayers begins with adoration. The model prayer of Jesus begins by declaring that God’s name is sacred or hallowed, something worthy of glory and honor, and his desire for the kingdom to fill the earth is forever expanding our own field of vision. Adoration often doesn’t even need words. Just look at creation, the moon and the stars that God has ordained. Just stare at a soul-stirring sunrise, or a magnificent sunset, and just try to keep yourself from giving all praise to the King of Kings. But if you are able to speak, you may just find that the words bubbling up inside you find inspiration from every direction. The pouring rain that gives way to a majestic rainbow, the feel of the grass underneath your bare feet, the wonders you behold on every fresh trip to a new place. Adoration encourages you to keep your sense of wonder. It allows you to fill your imagination with the glory of God.

[Prayer of Adoration by Mike Hendricks]

(2) Prayers of adoration move us to prayers of confession. Opening our minds to imaginatively see God in every place will inevitably cause us to see new ways that we might be deceiving ourselves. The light of his face highlights the contrast with the darkness that often pervades my soul. The atheist Michel Foucault once said confession is the best thing Christianity has going for it, because in a world of power games, self-centeredness, and manipulation, in confession we go on record against ourselves! We acknowledge our participation in the evil we see and count the ways our seemingly small white lies are part of the root that leads to the most horrendous evils in our world. That we are, at base, no different from the vilest of sinners for we, too, have crucified our Lord and, without him, we would have no hope. But in our confession, we also confess that we believe in God’s saving mercy. We know where to turn in our brokenness. We confess not only our sin; we confess that we know who delivers us from evil.

[Prayer of Confession by Si Tilton]

(3) Prayers of confession ultimately result in prayers of thanksgiving. Where we once were simply has no comparison by order of magnitude to where we now stand. And so

⁴ See especially Sam Wells, “Let’s bow our heads for a few moments,” a sermon preached in Duke University Chapel (Jan 22, 2006).

we thank God. We re-tell the story of the world, the story of our lives, through a new lens. Even the worst parts of our lives, the chapters of our life story we once wanted to keep hidden forever, becomes a story of God's redemption. In the words of Sam Wells, "It means re-narrating the events of each day as a letter of love from God" to yourself. And we are most apt to be thankful when we rub shoulders with those who have less than we do. When our daily lives match our daily prayer, we become thankful for our daily bread. And we live content and grateful lives. In the words of Paul, "Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer" (1 Tim 4:4-5).

[Prayer of Thanksgiving by Steve Choate]

(4) After thanking our Father, we ask our father for what we see as a need. Only God truly knows our needs. But when Jesus came to a village, he didn't tell hurting people they didn't know what was really ailing them. He healed them. Then he told them. And so it is with us. Our Father cares about our cries. My two year old wants me to kiss her elbow when she scrapes it. I know what she really needs. I also know just how effective my kiss is medically. But I kiss her elbow, knowing what it does for her soul—and for mine! I know in the grand scheme of things my requests are peanuts. But they seem large to me, and so my compassionate father says "if they seem big to you, I will treat them as if they are big to me, too." So God says to cast all our cares upon him. To ask for anything in his name believing we have already received it. He wants to hear from us. He wants to know the needs on your heart. He loves the needy. "Let us with confidence," says the Hebrew writer, "draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb 4:16). And the practice of sharing our needs with God pushes us to share our neighbors needs as well. It pushes us to reflect on what the world needs. It pushes us when we turn on the news not to revel in the senselessness or think only of whether we agree or disagree with the perspective we are hearing on the radio; it causes us to ask who can I pray for in this mess? For God wants to hear our cries. And we need to hear the cries of others.

[Prayer of supplication by Casey MacDonald]

(5) Finally, prayers end in Doxology. A prayer that reminds us and others that God is in His holy Temple. That he is Father, Son and Spirit, living forever in loving relationship. That when you get God, you get 'em all. When you pray to God, you pray to 'em all. When you need strength and power, you have it all. And so we offer this blessing as our doxology:

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. For Thine, Father, Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.