

Home Group Leaders Discussion Guide

Ephesians 6:18-24

Please allow me to open up with a rather lengthy excerpt for Klyne Snodgrass' commentary on Ephesians:

Praying "in the Spirit" is different from just praying. Most people pray, if religious surveys can be trusted, but most of our prayers tend to be "wish lists" and prayers for protection. Praying in the Spirit involves engagement with God and assistance from the Spirit that takes us beyond our immediate concerns. True prayer is a comprehensive activity, involving a variety of modes from praise to lament, from confession to obedience, and from contemplation to intercession.

All of life is to be prayed, not just lived. What is why Paul instructs us to pray in the Spirit "on all occasions". We cannot spend all of life "having our quiet time," but we can be continually in communion with God. Christians are not merely to experience their joys and problems, but to assess them in dialogue with God. Prayer is a kind of spiritual breathing.

What we must do is keep the channel open, aware of God and our relation to God. Too easily, we greet God in the morning or over a meal, but do not interact with Him the rest of the day. Specific time of prayer are crucial, but all of life is to be prayed.

In addition, prayer is not "life with me and God." It is a means of being aware of the world and a larger set of relations. We do not merely pray for ourselves, but for all God's people, and by extension, for all of God's world. Prayer also reminds us of our need for the prayers of other people. We are not in this life alone, but are supported by a community of faith. If Paul felt that need, we should too. By prayer we are kept from being provincial, by prayer we express our love and concern, and by prayer we involve ourselves in the purposes of God.

To put this in shorthand—Prayer is communal, prayer is formational, prayer is missional. Part of praying "communally" that we likely don't think much about is praying other people's prayers. (Part of our individualism is thinking we have to come up with our own prayers. But a good way to learn to pray is reading, reflecting upon, and even adopting other people's prayers.) The book of Psalms has been a prayer and song book for God's people for centuries. Even in the book of Acts we catch a glimpse that praying well established prayers at established times was part of the rhythm of the early church. In Acts 2:42 we read, "*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*", which is better translated "the prayers". The first Christians, who were Jewish, had daily times of prayer, and prescribed prayers they prayed...which was a continuation of their heritage. Likewise, Christians throughout the ages have utilized prayers of earlier believers. Even at Riverside, we have a tradition...Keith will often end our Sunday gatherings with a prayer of blessing...a blessing that's been around a LONG time...it's from Numbers chapter 6...it's the blessing God instructed Aaron (and subsequent priests) to pray over the Israelites:

The Lord bless you and keep you;

The Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you;

The Lord turn His face toward you and give you peace.

The Book of Common Prayer is a prayer book produced by the Anglican Church, and borrowed from by many other denominations and churches. Throughout the centuries many saints have

recorded their prayers, and others have adopted them and prayed them. Borrowing the prayers of brothers and sisters of yesteryear has many benefits: it can teach us to pray better; it reminds us of our heritage and the communal nature of our faith; it can give us words when we can't come up with our own; it can broaden our perspective of the Church and God's work in the world. Personally, I'd rather read a book full of prayers from saints than a "how-to" book on prayer (though, those have value too).

If we want to become like Jesus (which is the goal of the Christian faith) than we need to spend time with Jesus and do the stuff Jesus did. We spend time with Jesus in/through prayer. Also, Jesus prayed...a lot. Luke tells us that "*Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed*" (Luke 5:16)...notice the word "often". Interestingly, the verse immediately preceding that states that "*the news about Him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear Him and to be healed of their sicknesses.*" (Luke 5:15) How easy it would have been for Jesus to get busy and distracted. Can you relate to "busy" and "distracted"? Jesus stayed focused on what was most important...His connection to the Father. Nothing will form us more than this particular discipline/practice/habit...spending time alone with God in prayer.

Now you might be thinking, "So, wait...is prayer an individual activity or a communal activity?" The answer is a resounding Yes! Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it well in his classic book *Life Together*:

"Let him who cannot be alone beware of community... Let him who is not in community beware of being alone... Each by itself has profound perils and pitfalls. One who wants fellowship without solitude plunges into the void of words and feelings, and the one who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the abyss of vanity, self-infatuation and despair."

A similar passage to this one in Ephesians is found in Colossians (which shouldn't be too surprising considering Paul wrote both of them during the same prison term). But the one in Colossians is even more explicitly "missional" in orientation:

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone. Colossians 4:2-6

Missional breakthroughs start with prayer. Through prayer hearts are softened and opened. Through prayer strongholds are brought down. Through prayer chains are loosed and prisoners are set free. Through prayer we are empowered by the Spirit to make the gospel known.

Q. Describe your relationship and experience with the practice of prayer.

Q. What gets in the way of your prayer life?

Q. Is there anyone who prays for you on a regular basis? Is there anyone you pray for on a regular basis?

- Q. Which of the dimensions discussed—communal, formational, missional—is the most intriguing to you? Which is the most challenging for you? Why do you think that is?**
- Q. Whose prayer life do you admire? (either someone you know or someone you've read). What about it do you admire?**
- Q. Describe how your prayer life has evolved over the years.**
- Q. How mindful are you of God throughout the day? What brings Him to mind? (Or what can you do to bring Him to mind more often?)**
- Q. As a group discuss everyone's thoughts/feelings about the prayer life of your group. What would you like to see different? (Like, perhaps a greater level of vulnerability, as opposed to praying for your neighbor's aunt's cousin's bunions...for instance.)**
- Q. For those with kids, how are you teaching your kids to pray?**
- Q. How have you been formed through prayer?**
- Q. When you pray, do you spend more time talking or listening? Explain. How do you incorporate elements of praise/thanks, confession, lament, etc. into your prayers?**
- Q. Take a gander at Paul's prayers throughout Ephesians—1:15-21; 3:14-21; 6:19-20. What can we learn from Paul's prayers?**
- Q. Do you have any borrowed or inherited prayers (prayers from others that you've made your own)? Describe.**
- Q. Describe any answers to prayers you've experienced.**