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Dr. David Powlison, served as theological advisor and reviewer of this *PrayerLife* study. He teaches counseling at Westminster Theological Seminary and edits the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*. At the end of each lesson, Dr. Powlison has added some additional reflections of his own.

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LESSON ONE

WHY IS PRAYER SO HARD?

Or, “How do I pray when my own prayers put me to sleep?”



I. GROUP PRAYER ASSIGNMENT: Pray for five minutes—quietly in your seats.

GROUP DISCUSSION:



Q. For some of you, that might have been a positive time, but for most Christians, prayer is hard. I want to focus on the negative, even though it might have been positive for some of you. What was hard for you about that five minute prayer time?

RESPONSES FROM A CHURCH IN RICHMOND TO:

“What was your five minute prayer time like?”

- I thought a lot about myself.
- I prayed 3 minutes and daydreamed 2 minutes.
- It felt like ten minutes.
- Hard to stay focused.
- Is 5 minutes up yet?”
- Overwhelming.
- No physical voice responding.
- Hard to be still.
- Feels futile...it may not happen.

- I don't want to pray for what I really want.
- Hard to be silent.
- Fell asleep.
- How do I distinguish my thoughts from God's?
- If I haven't prayed, catching up is overwhelming.
- I feel like a failure.
- Feels like a chore.
- Do I need to say things in the right order?

GROUP DISCUSSION (CONT.):



Q. Let's expand our question by examining problems with prayer in general. What is hard for you about prayer in general, or having a prayer life, or any aspect of prayer?

RESPONSE FROM OTHER CHURCHES ANSWERING THE SAME QUESTION. (You are not alone!)

CHURCH IN WILLIAMSBURG:

- Mind floats. Is that praying?
- How do you connect with a Spirit?
- Can I pray for what I want? How do I know if it's your will?
- Requires faith.
- Why pray when you can work?
- Feels like I'm praying to a Spiritual being who doesn't want to talk with me.
- Active oriented culture. Hard to slow down.
- Hard to concentrate, to stay focused. The day's to-do list pops up as soon as I slow down.
- He knows it already? Why bore God? Sounds like nagging.
- I like to have a conversation but I don't hear a voice. It's like I'm talking to myself. How's He listening? So hard to concentrate.

- Prayer is boring.
- It uncovers our hearts. I don't want to be uncovered.
- I feel too guilty to stop.
- Overwhelming. So much to pray for.
- Prayers aren't answered. My prayers must be wrong. He's not listening to me. Is He there?

CHURCH IN PHILADELPHIA:

- Takes time.
- Feels like one way—I'm doing all the talking.
- Hard to concentrate. I'm in the middle of praying and I go off.
- We're used to being entertained. Prayer isn't entertainment.
- Evil forces/barriers. Satan uses all these things against us.
- Asking. We're used to doing.
- Seems like it should come naturally. It doesn't.
- Don't do it often enough.

CHURCH IN CHICAGO:

- We try to make it academic. Something we'll be graded on. We think, "I didn't do it right."
- I'm pre-occupied with my petitions, not with God's.
- My mind is crowded. Where do I put prayer?
- Spiritual warfare: fantasies, mind wandering.
- You aren't engaged with anything. How do you dialogue with someone you can't see or hear?
- Doesn't seem natural, therefore I don't think it is real.
- "I have to do it," therefore I feel guilty.

"There is a dichotomy between our experience of sonship and our belief in sonship."

II. OUR EXPERIENCE OF SONSHIP



Q. Define Sonship—I'm not hunting for a technical definition. Just what does Sonship mean to you personally?

2 COR. 6:18 "I WILL BE A FATHER TO YOU,
AND YOU WILL BE MY SONS AND DAUGHTERS,
SAYS THE LORD ALMIGHTY."

You Visit a "Prayer Therapist" to help you with your relationship with God. The therapist asks you,

Q. Tell me about your relationship with your heavenly Father?

Q. But what is it like on a day-to-day basis?

Q. What would you think of someone who talked in glowing terms about his father but had these kinds of things characterized by his or her relationship with their father?

Summary:

III. FIVE THINGS THAT DEFINE GOOD PRAYER

(helpful to know where you are going)

1. Prayer is like a feast (A good party).

REV. 3:20 “HERE I AM. I STAND AT THE DOOR AND KNOCK. IF ANYONE HEARS MY VOICE AND OPENS THE DOOR, I WILL COME IN AND EAT WITH HIM AND HE WITH ME.”

2. Prayer as relationship.

3. Prayer is connected with every other part of the Christian life.

IV. THREE CAUTIONS

CAUTION #1: When God begins to give you a rich prayer life—be quiet about it.

CAUTION #2: We will learn a system in prayer in a later session, but use systems with caution.

CAUTION #3: Learning to pray is very possible, but it is not easy, it takes time and aids to learn.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Jesus taught his disciples to pray because they came to him and said, “Teach us to pray.” You can’t learn how to pray unless you have a sense of your inability to pray. Lesson 1 is focused on being aware of our inability so we can say with the disciples, “Teach us to pray.”

David Powlison's Reflections



Honest prayer also feels like a dire need for help, or like loving someone with all your heart, or like being grateful to someone who does you great good, or like a fear of offending someone whose opinion matters very much, or like hoping that someone will come through on what he promised. In prayer, you'll express the full range of human feeling and desire – directed towards God. Be careful of making prayer pietistic, as if it were a “religious” activity or “spiritual” feelings.



Instead of A.C.T.S., I like to use 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18. This guides my relationship with God using active verbs. **REJOICE ALWAYS.** Joy is the emotion of delight in a person, because of who that person is. **PRAY CONTINUALLY.** We ask for the help we need and want. This has two aspects. We need God's mercy for our sins and struggles. We need His aid amid life's hardships and pressures. **GIVE THANKS IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES.** Thank you is how we respond to a gift, to what a person does that helps and blesses us. In a nutshell, these three aspects of prayer focus on who God is, what I need, and what God does. (If you look at it carefully, it covers the same ground as A.C.T.S., but comes out Adoration, then Confession & Supplication, and then Thanksgiving!) Those three verbs summarize all 150 Psalms, so 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 operates like a hot link to the Psalms. There's where your life and what you are facing come alive in honest relationship with God.