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Pray Big: *Learn to Pray Like an Apostle*

© Alistair Begg, 2019

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INTRODUCTION: WHO WE PRAY TO

I want to pray bigger, and better. I want you to, too. Our prayers tell us a great deal about ourselves, and about our faith. The great nineteenth-century Scottish preacher Robert Murray M'Cheyne put it memorably:

*What a man is on his knees before God, that he is,
and nothing more.*

Our conversation with others declares what is on our minds. But our conversation with God in private reveals what is in our hearts. Listen to someone pray—or listen to yourself pray—and you gain a window into the very center of the being.

To put it another way: the way we use our money and spend our time reveals a great deal about what are our real priorities and what are our real beliefs. And so do our prayers—whether we pray, for whom we pray, and what we pray.

So how about you, as you read this introduction and decide whether to read on (or whether to buy the book in the first place)? How big are your prayers? Do you ask God for anything? And when you do, are you asking him for big things?

So many of us struggle with prayer. Many books have been written on the subject (and now we can add this one to that long list)—and the a reason for that is that prayer doesn't come easy to most of us, in most seasons. And when we do pray, our prayers often seek to do a deal with God; or they are tentative in their requests because we're not sure God will come through; or they are, frankly, so self-centered that they bring little pleasure to the Creator and Savior of the world, as he listens to us present our shopping list of worldly requests to him.

I want to pray bigger, and better. I want you to enjoy praying like that too.

And to do that, we need to discover how to pray as Paul did, which means we need to learn to believe what Paul did. We need to know who we're speaking to, and we need to know what to say to him.

WHO WE SPEAK TO

Pray Big

Paul was a man who knew to whom he was praying.

You can meet people who will talk about God in an intellectual way, or a distant way, or a business-like way. But it is distinctly Christian to speak of God as a Father, and to therefore speak to God as a Father. Paul could speak of the grace and peace that come “from God our Father” (Ephesians 1 v 2). The Christian knows that the Creator of everything is not *a* father; he’s *their* Father. That’s not a metaphor—that’s a reality. The apostle John put it this way:

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.

(1 John 3 v 1)

In Galatians Paul puts it wonderfully as he says that...

when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

(Galatians 4 v 6-7)

God sent his Son to make us his sons. God sent his Spirit to enable us to relate to him—to speak to him—as his sons. It is fantastic. That word “Abba” is best trans-

lated “Dearest Father.” It’s the word we find on the lips of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, at his moment of supreme anguish, as he cried out to his Father (Mark 14 v 36; Luke 22 v 41-44).

Paul knew that, through the death and resurrection of his Savior, he knew God as his Father. He understood and enjoyed the great truth that, as Christians, in prayer we do not only approach a majestic Sovereign (though we do) or an impartial Judge (though we do)—we approach our Father in heaven and say, “Dearest Father...”

This is who we speak to when we pray. It’s a truth that’s easy to understand but equally easy to forget in daily life.

WHAT WE SAY TO HIM

My trouble in prayer is not only that I forget to whom I’m speaking—it’s that, often, I’m not really sure what to say. What is it that my Father loves to hear about from me? What is it that I can best pray for my family, my church, and myself?

One of the great privileges of reading the letters of Paul—the first-century apostle, evangelist, church planter and theologian—is that we are allowed to hear the prayers of Paul. We are able to gain a window into the very center of his being, to see what was on his heart. We are able to look in on him not as he is up on his feet, going about the activities of his day, but as he is down on his knees, coming to God in prayer.

This book is not about a doctrine of prayer. It is not a

whole theology of prayer. It's not even going to look at all of Paul's prayers. We are going to focus in on Paul's prayers for his friends in the church in Ephesus, which he recounts to them in Ephesians 1 v 15-23 and 3 v 14-21. He's writing to them from prison (though the joy and selflessness that saturate his prayers give no indication of his own predicament). And by explaining what he is praying for them, he's setting them an example for their own prayers—and for ours. The truths that underpin and shape his prayers will motivate us to pray, and they will help us know what to say.

So I am praying that this book will get you praying. You might find it helpful to read one chapter a week, and spend the rest of the week putting Paul's divinely inspired wisdom into practice in your own prayers. Or you could read it at the same time as a friend, and both commit to praying for each other in the ways the apostle lays out.

But whatever you do and however you use this book, be praying that you would pray like Paul—because Paul was a great pray-er. He was confident, he was committed, and he was humble and bold and compassionate. He clearly enjoyed prayer, and was excited about it. He expected his Father in heaven to hear what he said and to act in other people's lives accordingly. He prayed and then was “watchful in it with thanksgiving” (Colossians 4 v 2), ready to see how God would be pleased to answer his prayers.

Paul prayed big prayers because he believed great things. Let's learn from him how we might do the same.

¹⁶ I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, ¹⁷ that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, ¹⁸ having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might ²⁰ that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. (Ephesians 1 v 16-21)

¹⁴ For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶ that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

²⁰ Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3 v 14-21)

1. PRAYER IS DEPENDENT

To pray is an admission and an expression of dependence.

A self-assured person is not going to pray prayers of petition; there's no need to pray if you think you have got it all covered. A self-righteous person is not going to pray prayers of confession; there's no need to pray if you think you're good enough to earn God's blessing. But the person who knows their heart before God—the person who knows the depth of their need of forgiveness and help from God—does what Paul does. They bow their knees (Ephesians 3 v 14).

Paul achieved great things. His ministry literally changed the world. His preaching set a fire raging round the Mediterranean—a gospel fire that stretched from Jerusalem up through Turkey into Greece and westwards to Rome. Few men have done as much, or had as great

an impact, as this short, stooping, near-sighted Jewish convert.

But Paul never thought he did any of it alone. He knew he had a privileged task:

I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace ... to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things. (3 v 7, 8-9)

And he knew that, without God's help, it would be an impossible task. So he prayed. He recognized the direct link between his preaching and his praying—the first must be accompanied by the second. He was aware of the fact that “unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain” (Psalm 127 v 1). He lived out what the nineteenth-century hymnwriter Arthur C. Ainger described:

*All we can do is nothing worth
Unless God blesses the deed;
Vainly we hope for the harvest-tide
Till God gives life to the seed.*

This undergirds all of Paul's thinking. One plants the seed and another waters, but only God can make it grow (1 Corinthians 3 v 6-7).

THE PATTERN OF THE MASTER

In this, Paul was following the pattern of his Master, the Lord Jesus. As we read the Gospels, we discover that Jesus was praying to the Father all the time. Presumably, the many instances that the Gospel writers record for us were the tip of the iceberg, not the whole of it. Jesus' approach to life rested on dependent prayer. So the night before his death, in what we refer to as the upper room discourse, Jesus teaches his disciples in some of his most famous and moving words:

Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. (John 14 v 1)

I am the true vine ... As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. (15 v 1, 9)

Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. (15 v 13)

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. (15 v 18)

When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. (15 v 26)

Take heart; I have overcome the world. (16 v 33)

And then comes the first verse of chapter 17:

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When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said...

Jesus prayed. And he said, in effect, *Father, I'm praying now that the things that I have instructed my friends about, and that they have come to understand as a result of my teaching, may actually be their experience as they go out into the world.*

I find this a tremendous truth and a rather uncomfortable challenge. My prayers—whether I pray, how much I pray, about what I pray—reveal my priorities. And they reveal how much I really think I need God, or whether I am, deep down, in fact self-assured and self-righteous. If Paul, “an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God” (Ephesians 1 v 1), knew that he needed to “bow my knees before the Father” (3 v 14), what of us? If Jesus Christ, the greatest teacher in the world, followed up his instruction by prayer, what of us? If Jesus Christ, who was set on a mission that changed not just world history but all of eternity, took time to pray, what of us? If Jesus Christ, the Son of God, knew that he needed to pray, what of us?

MANNERS AT THE MEAL

This dependent prayer does not come naturally to us. If we think it will, then it will never happen.

Charles Simeon was minister of Holy Trinity in Cambridge, England, for a long time—54 years. In his congregation for some years was Henry Martyn, who would become an early missionary to India. On one occasion,

having listened to Simeon preach, Martyn wrote in his diary:

Mr. Simeon, in his excellent sermon tonight, observed that it was easier for a minister to preach and study five hours than to pray for his people for one half hour.

It's true. Haven't you found that it is far easier to talk to others than to talk to God? Haven't you found it far easier to be engaged in busy activity, to be about good work, to be busy checking off the to-do list, than to stop and kneel before your Father? Aren't we usually on the wrong side of the Martha and Mary story? Aren't we more like Martha, who was so "distracted by much serving" that she did not join her sister Mary, who "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching," spending time with her Lord in conversation (Luke 10 v 39-40)?

Are you recognizing your dependence? That's the challenge. Remember, Paul knew the link between preaching and praying. So here is one way both to diagnose whether you are dependent and then to start to address any lack in your praying. Simply ask yourself: will I pray before and after I hear God's word preached to me next Sunday? The way we come to listen to the Bible and the way we go off after we have listened—both on our own and also as a church—matters. And it is revealing. We tend to teach our children to say thank

you to God for a meal before they eat it, and that you don't just walk away from the table after a meal; you say thank you before you get down. That's fair. It's just the same with the bread of God's word. You don't just start the meal—you thank God for it, and you ask him to use it to nourish you, spiritually. Then you don't finish the meal and run for your car; you finish the meal and you take some time to say, "Thank you, Father, for the food. It may not have been served the way I like it, it may not have been quite the flavor I was hoping for; but I believe the pastor, whoever he was, prayerfully prepared and delivered it as best as he could, and I want to thank you for providing for me before I head out."

HEART AND KNEES

So Paul writes this immense letter to the Ephesians, speaking of the glories and the wonders of God, and we look in on his bedroom (or rather, his prison), and where do we find him? On his knees, declaring his own helplessness. Even his posture is dependent. I think that's why he mentions it: "For this reason I bow my knees." Jewish men, by and large, prayed standing. Paul knelt, as an acknowledgment of who he was, and who the Father he was speaking to is. The great Victorian preacher C.H. Spurgeon said we may speak boldly with God, yet he is still in heaven and we are on earth, and we must avoid presumption. We come confidently, but we do not come complacently. We come to a loving Father, but we do not come as his equal.

One day, at the name of Jesus every knee will bow as every tongue confesses that Jesus truly is Lord, and this brings the Father glory (Philippians 2 v 10-11). As we look in upon Paul in his prison in Rome, Paul is getting a head start on things as he bows his knees. His posture is an expression both of the wonder and the awe that he feels before God and of his earnestness in seeking God. Paul's decision to pray is driven by his awareness of his dependence, and his posture in prayer emphasizes this awareness.

When you and I pray, that's really what we're saying. I'm not saying we must kneel. The posture of our hearts and not our bodies is the issue. Are we coming to God in dependence? Are we asking him to bless our work, to empower our service, to change our flaws, to forgive our sins? What matters is a dependent heart, not a particular posture, as one of my favorite poems makes hilariously clear:

*"The proper way for a man to pray,"
Said Deacon Lemuel Keyes,
"And the only proper attitude,
Is down upon his knees."*

*"No, I should say the way to pray,"
Said Reverend Doctor Wise,
Is standing straight, with outstretched arms,
With rapt and upturned eyes."*

"Oh no, no, no," said Elder Snow,

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*“Such posture is too proud:
A man should pray with eyes fast closed
And head contritely bowed.”*

*“It seems to me one’s hands should be
Astutely clasped in front,
With both thumbs pointed toward the ground,”
Said Reverend Doctor Blunt.*

*“Last year I fell in Hodgkin’s well
Head first,” said Cyrus Brown,
“With both my heels a-stickin’ up,
And my head a-pointing down;
And I done prayed right there and then
Best prayer I ever said,
The prayingest prayer I ever prayed,
Standing on my head.” (Sam Walter Fox)*

The “prayingest prayer”—real prayer—is a prayer of a dependent person to a divine Person.

HE CAN FIX IT (YOU CAN’T)

This reminds us that there is, of course, such a thing as unchristian prayer. Looking within to find spiritual reality is not the same as praying to God. Self-help mantras are not the same as praying to the One who is our Helper. Equally, praying in some vague hope that the God who is up there, removed and distant, might care to hear and may just bother to act, is not the same as praying to a Father who we know loves us as he loves his Son.

Sometime last year when I picked up my mail, I discovered that the Church of Scientology had sent me a very nice magazine. Apparently, they're trying to recruit me. And I commend them for their attempt, though they will be disappointed with the results. But as I looked at the magazine, and I went to the back to see the aims of Scientology, I realized their view could be summed up in four words: We can fix this: through our technology, through doing it our way, through our various stages of the "dianetic" discovery, you can be okay.

This is modern religion, and it comes in many guises (including a quasi-Christian one), but the view can always be summed up in those four words: *We can fix this*. So if you've got a problem, you need to know that it's not your fault. And if you're looking for an answer, look inside of you because you'll be able to fix it, or look to follow our rules or techniques because they'll be able to fix it. This view says, "Look into yourself, because you'll be able to find divinity in there if you search hard enough, and you'll sort yourself out if you find the right path and follow it well enough."

The Christian gospel says, "If you look into yourself, you will ultimately find only that which disappoints you and confronts you with your own ineptitude and your inability to fix even the simplest of the things that really matter. The problem is inside of you. It's your fault. And so the answer must come from outside of you and not rely upon you—so it is the most wonderful news

that Jesus has come in order to fix your problem. He came to bring down the barrier between you and God, and restore you to the relationship you were made for, enjoying God as your loving Father.”

It’s the complete opposite.

This is why Christian prayer is uniquely dependent and humble; it’s also reflective of the cry of every human heart. Even those who wouldn’t name Jesus as their Lord and Savior, when they pause and are honest, acknowledge that something is broken and that they need help. Annie Lennox sums it up neatly in a song I keep on my phone (I’m a fan of Annie Lennox, only partly because she’s Scottish). Called “Oh God,” it asks God where he is and whether he is willing to help her, because she has “gone and broken everything.” If ever there was a soul who needed saving, Annie sings, “it must be me ... it must be now.”

The Christian prays with more confidence than that song expresses—but with no less dependence. The more we realize our need, the more we will pray as Paul did; the more we will say, as he did, “I bow my knees before the Father.” It’s the heart attitude of dependence that counts, whether or not we express it physically by kneeling. But personally, I find it helpful to cause my body’s posture to follow my heart posture. At our church, we kneel as elders as we pray in the prayer room before the services. We could sit; we could stand; we’re free to do whatever we want, and our Father is not going to refuse us access to his heavenly throne room in prayer simply

Pray Big

because our knees are not touching the floor. But we choose to kneel. It's an expression of our dependence upon God. It's good to do.

We will not pray big prayers if we do not pray at all. And if we are self-assured or self-righteous, our prayers at best will be irregular, impersonal, functional and prosaic. But Jesus was neither, and nor was Paul. Prayer reminds us who we are, and who our Father is. Prayer expresses our dependence and it reinforces our dependence.

For this reason, God's children bow their knee, in their hearts if not with their bodies, and they pray.

Father, thank you for the privilege of addressing you in this way. Help me to remember that the Lord Jesus obtained this access for me through his death on the cross. Please help me to remember that I am entirely dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit as I pray, and entirely dependent on you in my life in every way. Help me to learn to pray as I pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen.