

SEVEN HABITS OF EFFECTIVE PRAYER

BY JEREMY MCKEEN

Prayer is extremely important, but you probably already knew that. Most people do not need to be convinced that prayer is one of the most important practices in a believer's life. What seems to elude a lot of people is the "how" of prayer. How do you maintain a healthy prayer life? How do you pray with any sense of satisfaction and effectiveness? Prayer is important, but prayer is hard. Yet, it can look like prayer comes easy for some people. It doesn't. Not right away anyway. An effective prayer life is developed and maintained over time through a series of habits or key characteristics. So how does the Bible characterize an effective prayer life?

Honest

It takes a child-like faith to pray effectively, and children speak their minds. Prayer is taking both your burdens and joys and instead of burying them, bringing them honestly before God. Prayer is pouring out your soul to God. Prayer is not meant to be a formal business presentation full of big theological words. A Christian cries out, "Abba, Father!" That is what it means to pray "in the Spirit." It's to pray with a sense that God is your heavenly Daddy who wants to hear what's on your heart. You're not giving him any new information. You're giving him yourself in honesty. The disciples said to Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray." That request in itself was an honest prayer. One of the best ways to get your prayer life off the ground is to tell God that prayer is coming difficult for you or that you don't even feel much like praying today. Now you're beginning to really pray. You're being honest.

Regular

To pray most effectively, you need a regular time, place, and list. This might be one of the most challenging aspects of prayer because it takes a lot of self-discipline. In the Bible, men like David and Daniel prayed regularly three times a day. And for Jesus, the Mount of Olives was his designated place of prayer. Paul had a list of churches and people that he would regularly pray for. Prayer is like anything else, if it's not planned for, it probably won't happen. So, imagine you plan this all out. What do you do when you just don't feel like praying? Well, what does a faithful employee do when he's not in the mood for work? He shows up anyway. What does an athlete do when he doesn't feel like practicing? He shows up anyway. Everyone knows the discipline of keeping important appointments even when you don't feel like it. Just do the same thing with God. Make regular appointments, and then keep regular appointments with God.

Specific

It's easy to just "say your prayers," but it's not as fun. Praying in generic terms is the "safe" way to pray because you don't have to be confronted with not getting what you asked for. Yet Jesus asked specifically, "Remove this cup." Like Jesus, ask for specific things with specific timelines. Pray for people by name. Be specific. The more specific you are about your requests, the more definite the answers will be.

Thankful

The Bible is full of reminders to pray with thanksgiving. Giving thanks is the secret recipe of effective prayer because it fosters a humble perspective on life. Thankfulness is more than just recounting all the good things in your life, although that's important. A prayer of gratitude also takes into account God's sovereignty over your life. Effective prayer is coming to the place where you can say like Jesus did, "Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done." Christians give thanks for the cross of Jesus because they know it's beautiful purpose. In the same way, Christians are called to give thanks in and for everything by faith knowing that one day it too will be seen to beautiful and meaningful. God wants you to be honest about what's really going on while acknowledging that you don't see the whole picture. Thankfully he does. There's a big difference between making your complaint to God (being honest) and complaining about God (being ungrateful). Prayer is not just God's means for changing things; prayer is God's means for changing you.

Confident

It's hard to pray when you don't think it does any good. Wouldn't it be nice to know that God will answer you on the very day that you pray? Well, David wrote, "On the day that I called, you answered me; my strength of soul you increased" (Psalm 138:3) Tim Keller once put it like this. Imagine that you are on a raft heading down a narrow raging river and suddenly in front of you there is a wide rock sticking a few feet above the water. Either the rock must somehow be removed, or the water must somehow rise and take you above it. On the day David prayed, God didn't remove the rock; he raised the water. You see the same thing in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus prayed, but the cup wasn't removed. Instead, "An angel appeared strengthening him" (Luke 22:43). Sometimes God removes the rock, but other times God raises the water. Be confident that through Jesus you have access to God, and your prayers do make a difference.

Scriptural

One way to pray with more confidence is to let God's promises and purposes in Scripture motivate your prayers. This is what it means to pray "In Jesus' name." It's not a superstitious magical formula tacked on at the end. Praying in Jesus name is coming to God in the merit of Jesus but also praying according to the revealed will and kingdom purposes of Jesus. Use God's word to motivate and inform your prayer life.

Continual

Finally, Paul reminds Christians to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess.5:17). This doesn't mean that you need to pray every minute of the day. Rather, it's like a hacking cough that could flare up any minute of the day. Unceasing prayer is frequent prayer. It's being ready to talk to God at any moment. This happens in two ways – formally and casually. A strong marriage involves both sit-down dinners and also passing conversation. If its just dinner, then the relationship becomes too formal and rigid, but if it's always casual conversation, then the marriage lacks intimacy and fellowship. It's the same with prayer; you must have concentrated time, which the Bible calls, 'supplication,' but also casual time, which the Bible calls, "all prayer." It's always a great time to pray.

These habits are not exhaustive but when they are regularly applied prayer begins to make more sense and becomes much more effective.