

Session 6 A Practical Plan to Grow in Prayer

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. There is more to developing a consistent prayer life than loving God; there are practical matters.
- B. I understand the difficulties involved in developing a consistent prayer life because I have struggled through them. But by God’s grace, I have been able to maintain a consistent prayer life. I will share a practical plan to help you grow in prayer, a plan that has helped me for many years.
 - 1. *Set a schedule for regular prayer times.* A schedule establishes *when* you will pray.
 - 2. *Make a prayer list.* A prayer list helps you to focus on *what* to pray.
 - 3. *Cultivate a right view of God.* A right view of God causes you to *want* to pray.
- C. I was struggling in college to establish my prayer life. A leader suggested that I schedule a time each day and make a prayer list. He assured me that doing these two things would change my prayer life over time. He was right! I was hesitant at first, but his counsel to me worked.
- D. If you schedule time for prayer and make a prayer list, *you will pray ten times more than you do now.* I have made this statement for more than thirty years. People usually do not believe it, and some even argue against it. Nevertheless, I continue to say it, because I have proved the truth of it in my own life and witnessed the results of others applying the plan in their lives.

II. SCHEDULE A PRAYER TIME

- A. There are many demands on our time. Therefore, we must be intentional about developing consistent prayer lives. If we do not set our schedules ourselves, others will set them for us, and the result will be very little time for prayer. It is of the utmost importance that we schedule time for prayer. It sounds simple, but setting a regular time will profoundly impact our prayer lives.
- B. Of course we will not keep our schedule 100 percent of the time, but we will keep it more often than not. I feel good if *I show up to start* my scheduled prayer times 85 percent of the time. I do not always stay in prayer for the entire time that I intended. But I set my heart to show up to start it, and then I go from there.
- C. I treat my prayer time as a sacred appointment that I try not to miss except for emergencies.
- D. I do not limit my prayer life to my scheduled prayer times; I pray “on the run” during the day, which is part of abiding in Christ. You will sustain an “abiding dialogue” throughout the day much more consistently if you have regular times to talk to God set into your schedule. It may be necessary to tweak your prayer schedule at times to keep it working with other things in your life.
- E. There are 168 hours in each week. If we use ten hours a day to sleep, eat, and dress (seventy hours a week), that will leave us about 100 hours a week for work and other things. With creative scheduling, most people can find an hour or more a day for prayer if they really want to.

III. MAKING A PRAYER LIST

- A. I recommend that you prepare a prayer list—or several lists. A prayer list is a simple tool that can help keep us focused during our prayer times. Often when I begin to pray, my mind is blank. I need a little “jump start” to help me focus, so I use prayer lists, which I have found invaluable. I was eighteen years old when I made my first prayer list; forty years later I still use lists because I still need them. I do not limit my prayers to the things on my lists, but use them simply as a guide.
- B. I depart from them at any time I feel led to pray in a different direction. I enjoy praying with the inspiration that comes from the leading of the Spirit, so I seek to follow His prompting.
- C. I have three prayer lists—for my personal life, for people and places, and for justice issues.
- D. ***For my personal life:*** This includes praying for my own heart, ministry, and circumstances (physical, financial, and relational). I use the acronym FELLOWSHIP in praying for my heart.
- E. ***For people and places:*** I keep a list of individuals, ministries, and cities that I pray for regularly. I pray for individuals (family and friends), ministries (including my local church), missionaries and mission endeavors, etc. I pray for my own city, for the destinies of specific cities, such as Jerusalem and Cairo, and for nations in great need, such as Egypt, Syria, Haiti, Russia, North Korea, Israel. I spend extra time praying for Jerusalem, as Scripture exhorts us to do so (Ps. 122:6; Isa. 62:6).
- F. ***Those in authority:*** We are to pray for people in authority over our city and nation (1 Tim. 2:2).
- G. ***For justice:*** This is a broad topic that includes governmental and social issues, such as the ending of abortion, human trafficking, and unfair educational systems. My list sometimes includes situations related to economic injustice, water rights, civil unrest (terrorism, riots, etc.), natural disasters (hurricanes, tsunamis, tornadoes, drought), disease (AIDS, tuberculosis, etc.), social crises (for example, famine and genocide), and more.
- H. Some protest that it is legalistic to schedule time for prayer or use a prayer list. It can be, but it does not have to be. We step into legalism when we seek to *earn* God’s love by praying or obeying rules. The good news of the gospel is that we don’t have to earn it; God offers His love and grace freely. Consistency in prayer—talking to the Lord regularly and with focus—*simply positions us to sit before Him more often* so that we can actually experience more of His free grace in our life. What Jesus freely offers in grace and what we actually experience are often two different things.
- I. Setting regular times for prayer is not an attempt to earn God’s love; it is a reflection of our desire to take control of our schedules to make prayer a priority. I urge you not to fall for the age-old lie that automatically calls all discipline “legalism.” This lie has robbed many of the blessing of a consistent prayer life. Being aimless or passive is not what liberty in grace is about.
¹³You...have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh. (Gal. 5:13)
- J. Scheduling time for Him is an expression of both my love for Him and my hunger for more. It is not an attempt to earn love from the One who gives His love freely and abundantly.

IV. CULTIVATE A RIGHT VIEW OF GOD

- A. Cultivating a right view of God is another essential aspect of growing in prayer. Too many believers have a wrong view of God. For example, they live under the wrong assumption that God is either an angry taskmaster who forces us to pray and endure conversation with Him to prove our devotion to Him or a stoic God who has no interest in our lives. But God is a tender Father, who deeply loves His children, and Jesus is a Bridegroom King filled with desire for His people.
- B. As we believe and understand the biblical truth of God as our tender Father and Jesus as the Bridegroom King, we are energized to seek God and experience new delight in our relationship with Him. Our prayer lives become very different when we come to Him with the confidence that He enjoys us. It is enjoyable to talk to someone who really likes you!
- C. We grow in our passion for God by understanding His passion for us—it awakens passion in our heart for Him. Encountering the father heart of God is foundational to growing in prayer. Jesus prayed that His people would know that the Father loves them just as He loves Jesus!
- ²³ *...that the world may know that You...have loved them as You have loved Me. (Jn. 17:23)*
- D. We have “received the spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, ‘Abba, Father’” (Rom. 8:15). In Hebrew, *Abba* is a term of endearment for a father, much like “Papa” in our culture; it indicates respect, but with affection and intimacy. The understanding of God as “Abba” and the knowledge of our identity as His children equip us to reject Satan’s accusations that we are hopeless failures.
- E. The truth that Abba-God enjoys us, even in our weakness, gives us confidence in prayer. As His sons and daughters, we can approach His throne with confidence and without shame or hesitation.
- F. John prophesied of “the Spirit and the bride crying out, ‘Come, Lord Jesus!’” (Rev. 22:17, 20). As sons of God we are positioned to experience God’s throne—as heirs of power (Rom. 8:17). As the Bride of Christ we are positioned to experience God’s heart—His emotions. Jesus is a King with power and a Bridegroom with desire (Isa. 54:4-12; Jer. 3:14; 31:32; Hos. 2:14-23; 3:1-5; Mt. 9:15; 22:1-14; 25:1-13; Jn. 3:29; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25-32; Rev. 19:7-9; 21:9; 22:17).
- G. The Bridegroom message is about Jesus’ fiery emotions for His people and His commitment to share His heart, home, throne, secrets, and beauty with them.
- H. In November 1995, I had a prophetic dream in which the Lord spoke audibly to me as I stood on the stage in a large auditorium of young adults. He said, “Call the people ‘Hephzibah.’” The Hebrew name Hephzibah carries the meaning “The Lord delights in me.” We can be confident in God’s love, knowing He delights to relate to His people as a bridegroom delights in his bride (Isa. 62:4-5).
- ⁴ *You shall be called Hephzibah...for the LORD delights in you...⁵ as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you. (Isa. 62:4-5)*
- I. How we view God determines how we approach Him in prayer. If we view Him as aloof or angry, we will not want to pray very much. When we see Him as a tender Father and passionate Bridegroom who desires for us to come to Him, then we will pray much more.

V. TOO BUSY TO PRAY?

- A. Most of us feel that we are too busy to pray, but the truth is that we are too busy *not* to pray. We cannot afford to carry out our responsibilities while living spiritually burned out. The Lord calls all of His children, no matter what occupation—lawyer, doctor, maintenance man, athlete, carpenter, accountant, teacher, homeschooling mom, and so on—to have a real prayer life.
- B. Some worry that if they take time to pray, they will lose valuable time to love and serve their family, friends, church, or business. People who pray regularly will love their families, friends, and neighbors more, because their hearts will be energized by the Spirit, and their negative emotional traffic will diminish, enabling them to love more deeply and consistently.
- C. The best thing husbands and wives, dads and moms can do for their marriages and families is to grow in prayer. The same is true for pastors and godly leaders in the marketplace. It is not a question of choosing either work or prayer; we are to engage in both in proper balance and in the right order. Jesus is our example, and He did not permit ministry to others to hinder His prayer life, nor did He allow His prayer life to hinder His ministry to others.
- D. **Jesus valued prayer:** Even after He had ministered long hours in preaching and healing the sick, He still departed to a lonely place to pray—to commune with His Father and be strengthened. If praying was that important to Jesus, how much more important should it be to us?

¹⁶***“So He Himself often withdrew into the wilderness and prayed.” (Lk. 5:16)***

⁴⁶***“And when He had sent them away, He departed to the mountain to pray.” (Mk. 6:46)***

¹²***“He went out to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God.” (Lk. 6:12)***

VI. TIME FOR BOTH GOD AND PEOPLE

- A. We have enough time to go deep in God and to relate well to people. We do not have to give up our prayer times in order to fulfill God’s will in our responsibilities related to our jobs and families. I have found that most of us can “steal” time for the kingdom from the time we spend on recreation and entertainment and still have time for our jobs and families. (There are exceptions.)
- B. We must be fiercely determined to grow in prayer, because our culture has grown increasingly busy and noisy, crowding out the ability to create “sacred space” for fellowshiping with God. However, even with busy work and school schedules, most of us have more time than we realize.
- C. If we do not schedule our time, others will seize it, and we will live in the *tyranny of the urgent*, giving ourselves to whatever social event, need, or crisis presents itself to us in the moment.
- D. Some live at the whim of everyone and everything that comes their way, but when they look back over the years, they sadly admit that many of those pressures, opportunities, and “urgent matters” were not connected to their destiny in God or the assignment He had given them in life.
- E. By living by what is important—instead of the tyranny of the urgent—we can live without regret.

- F. Some would be wise to downsize their lifestyles to make time to connect with God. Eliminating some of the nonessential activities we engage in is better than downsizing our time with God.
- G. Ask the Spirit to help you know the best way to spend your time in each season of your life.
- H. Paul exhorted lethargic believers in the church at Ephesus who were spiritually asleep to awaken and shake off their spiritual lethargy so that Christ would shine on them.
¹⁴Awake, sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you. ¹⁵Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, ¹⁶making the most of your time. (Eph. 5:14-16, NAS)
 - 1. Christ’s “shining” on them refers to the Lord releasing His presence to touch their hearts.
 - 2. Paul challenged them to do this by spending their time wisely as the way to experience Christ shining on their heart. In other words, using our time rightly in prioritizing prayer is connected in a practical way to the measure in which we experience Christ shining on our hearts by His manifest presence. We do not earn God’s presence, but we do position ourselves before Him to experience more of it.
 - 3. Instead of saying, “*making the most of your time*,” some Bible translations say, “*redeeming your time*.” To redeem our time is to use it with the utmost care so that we may grow in God and extend His kingdom. It involves setting godly and wise priorities for the use of our time.
 - 4. Time is a non-renewable resource in our life. Once we spend that time, we cannot get it back.
- I. Establishing time for prayer is one way that we can redeem our time—our time can “purchase” eternal things that last forever. We can invest our time in a way that will lead to our hearts being awakened from the death of passivity to experience more of the “light of God’s presence.”
- J. Writer and philosopher Henry David Thoreau recognized the importance of using our time wisely. He wrote, “*as if you could kill time without injuring eternity*.”
- K. With much “expendable time” available to many, we must be careful to invest each day wisely.
- L. The godly, healthy, biblical call to “sacred aloneness” allows us to grow in love. It energizes us to love God and to love people for the long haul. Being connected to Jesus at the heart level through prayer is the lifeline that enables us to sustain ministry for decades without burnout.
- M. We can find time for prayer by avoiding the tendency to waste time with idle talk; too much television, social media, or recreation; and an excess of networking (to help our ministries or businesses grow).
- N. We have to say no to certain things, even some good things, in order to have time to grow in prayer. Time for prayer will not suddenly appear in our schedules. We have to seize it by saying no to some legitimate activities.

- O. When Martha wanted her younger sister, Mary, to stop sitting at Jesus's feet and help her prepare the meal, Jesus corrected Martha by telling her that Mary had chosen the good part.
⁴¹Jesus answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. ⁴²But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part." (Lk. 10:41-42)
- P. During our prayer times it is important to turn off our phones, our email, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media. The person who is overly stimulated with information and communication will not connect with God in the same way as when he turns off his devices during times of prayer.
- Q. Our culture is over-stimulated with information and visual images, draining us emotionally. Our emotional energy is limited, just as our physical energy is. In the same way that we need to rest after physical exertion, we also need to rest from being over-stimulated emotionally.

VII. PEOPLE WITH A STRONG PRAYER LIFE VALUE RELATIONSHIPS

- A. A strong prayer life will eventually lead to strong and healthy relationships.
- B. People who most value their relationships with God and others are those who desire to love with greater depth and consistency. Therefore they are people who desire to grow in prayer.
- C. Prayer is not antisocial. In fact, true prayer is the opposite. It is all about love. We must draw back from the over-activity that hinders our ability to love God and people.
- D. It is a paradox that it *takes time with God* to grow in relationship with God and people. Only emotionally uncluttered people who cultivate a quiet heart are able to grow in relational depth. Some blame their antisocial tendencies on their prayer lives, but this is a dangerous cop-out.
- E. You do not need to engage in every social event that comes your way just because you value relationships. You will have to say no to some of them, but the relationships you maintain will be healthier.
- F. When we lack quality time with God, our quest for deep relationships with people often results in disappointment, frustration, and a sense of loneliness, even in the midst of social activities.
- G. To have the highest quality of relationships, we must take time to connect with God, because we simply do not have the emotional resources to relate well unless our hearts are energized and filled with peace by the Holy Spirit.
- H. It is not taking time for prayer that leads some into unhealthy isolation and avoidance of relationships, but rather fear, shame, and other emotions.
- I. **Conclusion:** If we will take the necessary time for prayer and implement the three practical steps outlined in this session for developing our prayer life—setting a schedule for regular prayer times, making a prayer list, and cultivating a right view of God—we will find that we will not only grow in prayer, but also in love for God and for people, and we will develop strong relationships.