BE ONE
Essential Disciplines

BETHANY CHURCH
Prayer
For the next several months, we will be working through Four Essential Disciplines that will grow and empower our faith:

1. Bible Reading
2. Prayer
3. Stewardship & Giving
4. Sharing Your Faith

We have just completed the Bible Reading discipline, and now we will spend four weeks focusing on Prayer, using the Lord's Prayer as our guide. This prayer addresses four deep levels of human need:

- Worship
- Physical Needs
- Relationship Needs
- Spiritual Needs

This Study Guide will enable you to discuss the biblical ideas and practical suggestions that will emerge from our reflections.

May God bless as you grow deeper in to your commitment to become and make disciples of Jesus, to Be One and to Make One.

Next Steps:

2. Read Prayer Study Guide.
3. Discuss in a Group or one-to-one.
4. Come to church next Sunday.
1. What is Prayer?

Welcome to the second of our four Essential Disciplines: Prayer. Prayer is perhaps the most misunderstood and underused tool that God has provided for us. So, before we go any further, we need a definition. According to the Bible, what is prayer?

If we were to examine the hundreds of references to prayer throughout scripture, we would see a rich and diverse picture. Many different perspectives, forms and nuances of prayer appear in the long story of God's people. Running throughout this rich tapestry, however, we would see a common thread. At its root, prayer is dialog with God, a conversation with Him about His ways in the world. In this dialog, we may express a whole range of human emotions: joy and sadness, peace and anxiety, thankfulness and anger, hope and despair. As we wade through these emotions, we seek to reconcile what God says with our daily experience, with what we see in real life. Our goal in this conversation should be to reconcile our will with God's will, our ways with His ways.

To fully realize the power of this ongoing dialog with God, we must understand three fundamental dynamics of prayer:

1. The Role of the Spirit
2. The Role of Faith
3. The Role of Community

Let's briefly describe each of these dynamics.

2. The Role of the Spirit

The Spirit with Us

First let's look at the role of the Spirit. Before Jesus returns to the Father, He says something that confuses His closest disciples. He says:

“...[V]ery truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.”

John 16:7

And then he explains further, saying:

“...[W]hen he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth.”

John 16:14

Jesus promises the presence of the Holy Spirit to guide those who follow Him. But why is this better for us than having Jesus Himself here in the flesh, talking to us and teaching us as He did His early disciples?
While Jesus was here in the flesh, He, like all human beings, could only be in one place at a time, but the Spirit can be everywhere all at once. When Jesus ascended to the Father, the Holy Spirit came in power at Pentecost, and launched a Kingdom that would one day spread throughout the world, into all places for all time. (See Acts 2) Now, the triune God Himself — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — is constantly with us. In 1 John we read that:

“This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God.” 1 John 4:13-15

The Spirit Speaking for Us

Because we are communicating, then, with the one God who is always and everywhere present with us, prayer truly is a spiritual experience. The Apostle Paul says:

“In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.” Romans 8:26-27

The Holy Spirit acts as our mediator in prayer. He listens to our innermost thoughts and feelings, which we ourselves are sometimes not even able to express. Then, in ways we cannot imagine, the Spirit Himself intercedes with the Father on our behalf, reconciling our will with His will.

The Spirit Speaking to Us

At the same time, while the Spirit speaks for us, He also speaks directly to us, to our hearts and our minds, confirming God’s truth to us. Earlier in the same chapter of Romans, Paul says:

“The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.” Romans 8:16

Jesus had earlier explained to His disciples that:

“He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you.” John 16:13-14

The Holy Spirit confirms and seals within us the will of the Father and the work of the Son. This is not something we have to worry about or try to manipulate. As we come before God in prayer, Father, Son and Spirit are already at work, ready to listen and ready to speak.

3. The Role of Faith

A Powerful Faith

If, then, the Spirit is at work in our prayer, speaking for us and to us, what is our role? How do we fully participate in this powerful dialog with God? This is where faith comes in. On one occasion, Jesus assures His disciples with these words:

“Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.” John 14:12-14
And, on another occasion, He says:

“Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.” Matthew 17:20

From these two statements alone, we can clearly see that faith plays a central role in a powerful prayer life.

Faith is powerful because it knows things that are otherwise hidden. The writer to the Hebrews says:

“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” Hebrews 11:1

And Paul tells the church at Corinth:

“For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” 2 Corinthians 4:17-18

In faith, we understand that mountains cannot stand in the way of God’s will. As we dialog with God in prayer regarding His will and His ways, we will begin to see the world how He sees it. We will no longer focus on the obstacles or the challenges, but on the work that He is doing to change us and the world around us.

A Trusting Faith

Sometimes, however, God’s ways remain a mystery to us, but we are nevertheless called to trust Him. At some point in our lives, most of us have prayed for things that did not come to pass. Perhaps in those cases we ask what we did wrong. Did we lack enough faith? Did we not have the right kind of faith?

One answer to this question has to do with the fact that God’s ways are not necessarily our ways. Through the prophet, Isaiah, God says:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the Lord. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” Isaiah 55:8-9

Genuine faith accepts the fact that God’s ways are the best ways even if we do not understand them. The Apostle Paul learned this lesson when, after asking God three times to remove the “thorn in his flesh” (whatever that may have been), he received this message from the LORD:

“But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’” 2 Corinthians 12:9

Faith allows us to trust God’s ways, even when we cannot explain them. Our faith is based upon the powerful, consistent and loving character of God, not on His compliance with our will and our ways. We fully trust Him, even when He chooses a different way.

A Righteous Faith

There is yet one more aspect of faith that effects our prayer life. Powerful prayer requires a righteous faith. The Apostle James says:

“The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.” James 5:16

Earlier in the same letter, he addresses those who are not getting what they want, whose desires are not being fulfilled. He says:

“You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.” James 4:2-3
And the blind man whom Jesus heals expresses a similar idea when he says:

“We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will.” John 9:33

And, finally, the Apostle Peter says:

“Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.” 1 Peter 3:7

Taken together, these verses tell us that moral choices will affect our prayer life. We cannot have meaningful, intimate, result-producing conversations with God if we are living in open rebellion against His ways. Powerful prayer requires a faithful lifestyle. While none of us are perfect, and all fall short, we must nevertheless come to God in prayer with open hearts and open minds, ready to change and be changed in accordance with His will. And we are not coming with this kind of humility if in fact we have no intention of accepting or living in obedience to His ways.

4. The Role of Community

So, then, both the Spirit and our faith play important roles in our prayer life. But the scriptures also assign an important role to community in this dialog with God. After Jesus ascends to be with the Father, we see His early disciples frequently gathered for prayer. Their example demonstrates several ways that prayer unites us as God’s people.

1. By seeking God’s will together, we can agree on our next course of action, like when the apostles decided who would replace Judas as one of the twelve (Acts 1:24), or when the church in Antioch commissioned Paul and Silas for mission work. (Acts 13:1-3)

2. By praying for those among us who are hurting or in danger, we express our true love for one another, like those who prayed for Peter while he was in prison (Acts 12:5), or when James urges those who are sick to call for the leaders of the church to pray for them. (James 5:14)

3. By praying for one another’s ministry, we share together the common mission of disciple-making, as when Paul so frequently asks the churches to pray for him in his mission, while he continually prays for them where they serve. (Romans 15:30-31, Ephesians 3:16-17, etc.)

4. By praying for one another we build one another up, rather than tearing them down, just as Paul prayed for the Ephesian church, when he says:

“For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” Ephesians 3:14-19

Conclusion

These then are important dynamics in a powerful prayer life: The role of the Spirit, the role of faith and the role of community. In our next session, we will build on this foundation and talk specifically about how to pray. But, in the meantime, we pray that God will lead you even deeper in your relationship with Jesus. For more information, please visit us at bethanychurch.com.
1. Introduction

Welcome to this second session on the Essential Discipline of prayer. In our last session, we covered some foundational principles, and, in this session we get practical and talk about how to pray. Thankfully, we are not left to figure this out on our own. Jesus Himself provides clear direction on the subject when one of His disciples asks Him plainly:

“Lord, teach us to pray....” Luke 11:1

In response to this request, Jesus gives His disciples a model prayer, which has become known as the “Lord's Prayer”. This model prayer is filled with requests regarding four of our basic needs:

1. Worship
2. Physical Needs
3. Relationship Needs
4. Spiritual Needs

By praying about these needs, we confess our dependence upon God to provide for them, and we express our faith in our Heavenly Father who promises to care for us. Let’s look, then, at each of these needs.

2. Worship

First, the Lord’s Prayer addresses our need to worship. According to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus begins His prayer with these words:

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Matthew 6:9-10

As followers of Jesus, we are called to work out the heavenly kingdom which He brought to earth. His truth, righteousness and love must reign in our lives, displacing the lies, evil and hatred that now infects our world. If we are to succeed in this struggle, we must worship. We have a basic human need to worship, or we will get lost in the chaos that otherwise seems to reign.

1 Focusing on the Father’s Name

The model prayer therefore begins by focusing on the Father. We ask that His name be “hallowed,” which means that we want God to keep His name holy among us. We want this because we know that the Holiness of God changes everything. Through His Servant Moses, God says:

“I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy.” Leviticus 11:44
We want God's holiness to be crystal clear for us, so that we know how to live. We want to know the true God, the real God, not a god that we invent on our own. A human-made, human-defined god cannot help us. Before all else, we must hear the God who reveals Himself as the great 'I AM'. (Exodus 3:14)

2. Focusing on the Father's Will

After focusing on the Father's name, then, the model prayer continues by focusing on His will. We pray that:

“...[Y]our kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Matthew 6:10

As God's people, we must be obsessed with the Father's will, just as Jesus Himself was when He walked on this earth in our flesh. Remember His prayer before submitting to the cross?

"Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." Luke 22:42

By praying for God's will to be done, we get to the very heart of prayer. We dialog with God to reconcile our will with His will. As we pray, we tell God what we think, what we want, what we would like to see happen. Then we reflect on His Word and listen to His Spirit as we seek to understand His will and His ways. In the end, however, we know that His will must overrule our will. Our ways must submit to His ways, because, ultimately, His ways are always better. As we begin our prayer, we must remind ourselves of this truth.

3. Physical Needs

After addressing our need to worship, we are better prepared to dialog with God about other needs. The Lord's Prayer next deals with physical needs. We read:

"Give us today our daily bread." Matthew 6:11

God remembers that we are flesh and invites us to come to Him with the basic needs of our body. A little later in this passage, Jesus addresses these physical needs in more detail. He says:

“...[So] do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” Matthew 6:31-33

In this passage, we learn three important truths about our physical needs.

1. Dependent upon God

First, God is teaching us to depend upon Him, rather than ourselves, for all our physical needs. Too often we depend upon ourselves, and then turn to God only when this doesn't work. On another occasion, Jesus says:

“Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” Matthew 19:24

Wealth and possessions have a way of separating us from God. We delude ourselves into thinking that we can provide for ourselves, by ourselves. This false thinking then allows us to trust our own ways rather than God's ways. By praying, therefore, about our physical needs, we remind ourselves how much we depend upon God in all times, not just when our money runs out or our bodies start breaking down.
Contentment with God

Second, by praying for “daily bread”, we learn contentment with God as we separate imagined need from real need. Unfortunately, we live in a culture that exaggerates its need. Sometimes we even jokingly refer to our “First World Problems.” Yet, sadly, we can watch the news for ten minutes and see what real needs, real poverty, and real brokenness look like. If we keep reminding ourselves that we only need the basics, our “daily bread”, we will learn to become thankful for what God does provide, rather than obsessing about what we do not have.

Comforted by God

In other cases, however, our physical needs of course are real and genuine. Cancer is real, homelessness is real, poverty is real. In cases like these, we learn a third truth, that God desires to comfort us. When our physical needs become so intense that they overwhelm us and drive us to despair, God invites us to come to Him. We cry out to Him, with all our fear and sadness. In the process of this lament, we learn to shift our burdens upon Him, because we cannot bear them ourselves. The Apostle Peter says:

“Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” 1 Peter 5:6-7

Because we cannot control all the forces that drive us into real need, we bow before the sovereign God who rules over all, and we know that He is fully aware of our need. As we wait on Him, and focus on doing His will in His kingdom, He promises to “lift us up in due time.”

4. Relationship Needs

After addressing physical needs, then, the Lord’s Prayer takes up our relationship needs. It says:

“And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” Matthew 6:12

Just as “bread” represents physical needs in this model prayer, “debts” and “forgiveness” address the wider range of human relationships, and God calls us to pray about these relationships, especially when they are broken.

We pray about forgiveness because it is the cure for those broken relationships. In forgiveness, God offers the power of His grace to heal us when these hurts take place.

Forgiveness for Us

We begin with our need for forgiveness, so we confess our own “debts”, where we have sinned against God and others. The Apostle John writes:

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” 1 John 1:9

In our Essential Truths course, “Why the Cross?”, we learned the reason for our confidence. Jesus Christ died for us, and in our place. He takes upon Himself the guilt and judgment that our sin deserves. By confessing our sin in prayer, we remind ourselves of this sacrifice. Because of Jesus, the Holy God is also our Heavenly Father, and we can boldly enter His presence as His beloved children, now clothed in the righteousness of Christ.
Forgiveness for Others

As we embrace our own forgiveness and grace made possible in Jesus, we are better prepared to address the “debts” of others, who have sinned against us. In prayer, we ask God for the power of His grace to forgive, because only then can we be healed from the damage that broken relationships cause.

When someone hurts us, we can become obsessed by that hurt, so that those who hurt us still have power over us. We can remain their victims. God wants to empower us to grow beyond this hurt. The first step in this journey of healing begins when we introduce God's forgiveness into this brokenness. Initially, we may not be able to forgive another on our own, but we can accept the forgiveness that God offers freely to everyone. We may not be strong enough to forgive, but God is strong enough, and has demonstrated that strength in the cross of Jesus. By talking with God about the hurt that others have caused, we gradually come to see that person as God sees him or her, a sinner that needs His love and grace, just as we need them.

5. Spiritual Needs

This takes us, then, to the last request in this model prayer that deals with our spiritual needs. The prayer says:

“And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.” Matthew 6:13

This is a fitting conclusion to a prayer that begins with our need to worship. As we seek to put God first in our lives, as we work through our physical and relationship needs, we are in the end dealing with spiritual matters. The Apostle Paul says:

“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” Ephesians 6:12

And the Apostle Peter says:

“Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” 1 Peter 5:8

In prayer, we dialog with God about how to fight against these spiritual forces that seek to destroy us.

Practically speaking, this means that we must learn to deal with temptation. Temptation is the enemy's strategy to draw us away from God's will and ways, back into our old, sinful, self-serving ways. For this reason, we pray that God will deliver us from temptation rather than lead us into it.

God Himself, of course, does not tempt us. James says:

“When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed.” James 1:13-14

In our prayer, therefore, we are asking God, through His Spirit, to protect us from our own errant ways. We do not want to be “dragged away” by our own evil desires.

Conclusion

This, then, is the model prayer that Jesus has given us, to teach us how to pray. It addresses our deepest human needs. But what about timing? How often should we pray? The Apostle Paul gives this advice:

“And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people.” Ephesians 6:18

In other words, led by the Spirit, we should be praying all the time about everything. And because God is everywhere with us at all times, we know that He always listens and cares.

So, we will continue to pray for you, that God will lead you even deeper in your relationship with Jesus. For more information, please visit us at bethanychurch.com.
Prayer Discussion Guide

Opening
Describe a time in your life when prayer was especially important. Why was it important? Do you remember what words were used? What the results or effects of this prayer were?

Going Deeper

1. What Is Prayer?
   ✓ Do you agree with the statement that “Prayer is perhaps the most misunderstood and underused tool that God has provided for us?” Why do you agree or disagree with this statement?
   ✓ How would you define “prayer”?

2. The Role of the Spirit
   ✓ Read John 16:7-15. Why is it important that the Holy Spirit come to the disciples of Jesus?
   ✓ Read Romans 8:26-27. How does the Spirit help us in our weakness, as we dialog with God in prayer?

3. The Role of Faith
   ✓ Read Matthew 17:20; John 14:12-14. How can faith the size of a tiny mustard seed move mountains?
   ✓ How should we respond when God does not seem to answer our prayer in the way and in the time that we would like Him to answer it?
   ✓ Read James 1:2-8. How should we deal with questions, doubts or uncertainty about God's plans for us? Does this passage mean that we should keep silent about our doubts, or that we should dialog openly with God about them?
   ✓ Read Isaiah 55:8-9. How does this passage help us to understand why God may not be acting in the way that we want Him to?
   ✓ Read James 4:2-3. How do life-choices affect our prayer life?

4. The Role of Community
   ✓ Why is it important that we pray together with others?
   ✓ Why is it important that we pray together for the needs of others?

Next Steps

• Start a prayer journal. Within your first week, record at least three conversations with God. Be honest in those conversations. See if God works to strengthen your trust in Him through these conversations.

• Take time to pray with at least one other person this week. Join with that person in praying for specific needs and share with one another how God may be working in those situations.
Opening
Why is Lord's Prayer so often repeated in cultures throughout the world? Why has this prayer had such a powerful effect on so many people?

Going Deeper

1. Introduction
✓ Read the Lord's Prayer as it is found in Matthew 6:9-13. Why did Jesus give this prayer to His disciples? Did He intend for them to repeat this prayer word-by-word?

2. Worship
✓ Why do we begin our prayer by addressing “Our Father in heaven”?
✓ Why is it important that the Father’s name be kept holy?
✓ Read Luke 22:42. Why does Jesus pray that the Father’s will be done, rather than His own will?
✓ Why should we begin our prayer with worship?

3. Physical Needs
✓ Why do we pray only for “our daily bread”?
✓ How does prayer help us when we get concerned about our physical needs?
✓ Describe a time when you have been content with and comforted by God, as you prayed through a time of real need?

4. Relationship Needs
✓ Why does Jesus include this need to give within His model prayer?
✓ Why is forgiveness so difficult?
✓ Why does Jesus tie our forgiveness to the forgiveness of others?

5. Spiritual Needs
✓ Read Ephesians 6:12 and 1 Peter 5:8. Why should we pray to be delivered from temptation?
✓ Read James 1:13-14. Why, according to the Lord’s Prayer, do we ask God not to “lead us into temptation”, when James clearly says that God tempts no one?

Next Steps
• Continue your prayer journal this week. Spend one day on each element of the Lord’s Prayer: Worship, Physical Needs, Relationship Needs and Spiritual Needs.

• Continue to pray with and for someone else this week. Share with another person how God is working in those situations as you pray.