

The Key of the Kingdom

Dear Friends,

Keys are really important. These small, little metal objects open up locked treasures. Have you ever tried to get into an important room or locked box without the right key? It is one of the most frustrating and futile things you can do. Unless you find the right key, the only way to open locks is to break them. Keys are so important that there are professional key makers and locksmiths. They are the ones who help you get into your car when you accidentally lock yourself out. Their job is essential, because let's face it: without keys, much of what we value would be lost or stolen. There are keys to the kingdom of God as well. These keys give us access to the rich fruits our heavenly Father wants to give us. Prayer is an essential key in the Christian walk of faith. Without prayer, we are like frustrated boys and girls beating on locked doors.

Why is prayer a key to the kingdom of God? If prayer is a key, how do we use this key? If prayer is so important to the Christian faith, how often should Christians pray? These are all good questions and today we are going to dig into some of what the Bible says about prayer. Because prayer is an essential key to access the kingdom of God, there is no way I can cover all that is involved in prayer in one sermon. Today we are going to look at how Jesus taught his disciples to pray and how the Holy Spirit works in us during prayer. My hope is to show you some of the rich treasures prayer has to offer.

Jesus was a master of prayer. Throughout the gospel narratives, Jesus lived a life of prayer. Often, he would perform miracles all day then escape to the mountains or the wilderness to pray all night. Jesus spent time talking to his Father. Even as the Son of God, he enjoyed fellowship with his Father through prayer. His prayer life is a powerful example for his disciples. In the great sermon on the mount, Jesus instructs his disciples how to pray. He said, ***“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”*** Matthew 6:5-8.

Prayer is conversation with God. In these three verses, Jesus lays out some guidelines for prayer. The first guideline, don't pray in order to draw attention to yourself. People who pray loudly in order to show their piety or devotion to God are not praying to converse with him. Instead, they pray to give themselves the glory. Standing in the synagogues would draw

attention to the speakers. Likewise, standing on the street corners lets everyone passing by hear you. They want others to see how righteous and good they are, and Jesus says they receive their reward. He means that externally they look good, but internally they are not receiving what they ask for. Second guideline, pray in secret with heartfelt devotion. Conversing with God, who is a Spirit, can be done anywhere, but removing yourself from distractions and focusing on him helps direct our hearts toward God. Jesus is also pointing out that God sees your heart, and he knows what you do in secret. Prayer should be between you and God. Third guideline, don't use fancy language to make yourself sound smart. The Greeks had very structured, poetic prayers they would say during sacrifice to foreign gods. Jesus is saying that many words don't draw you closer to God. Our Father knows what we need before we even ask him. Making long ornate lists or rigidly structuring our prayers does not equal greater love for God. Jesus goes further than just giving guidelines, he also gives an example.

In Matthew 6:9-15 Jesus says, ***“This, then, is how you should pray:***

***Our Father in Heaven,
Hallowed be your name,
Your kingdom come,
Your will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
As we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from the evil one.***

For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”

This is regularly called the Lord's Prayer and it is a wonderful framework for prayer with God. I believe that the Lord's Prayer shows what is important about prayer itself. Within the Lord's Prayer we find adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication or **ACTS**. Adoration is the act of loving God for who he reveals himself to be. Confession is the act of repenting and asking for forgiveness of our sins. Thanksgiving is praising God for what he is doing in your life and the lives of others around you. Supplication is asking God for your needs or the needs of others in your community. Each of these characteristics are found in the Lord's Prayer. Each are an important part of a rich prayer life. When you pray through the Lord's Prayer, you can add your own words to the framework. This makes the prayer alive and meaningful in your life. Jesus ends his lesson with a very important warning. He says that we must forgive others just as we have been forgiven. Our faith extends past our own personal

relationship with God. Prayer helps us get to the place of forgiveness by reminding us where we stand in Christ.

Prayer is one of the keys to the kingdom of God, but not for the reason that most people think. Most people think that if you pray like **A** then you add **B** you will get **C**. Prayer actually changes us from the inside out. When we pray to God we are reminded of who is in control. That perspective shift brings a whole world of comfort to us when we are going through struggles. Prayer also deepens our relationship with God. The more we pray, the more we rely on God to change our hearts and our circumstances. When we rely on God, we draw closer to Him as the only one who can provide. It is a very humbling experience to truly pray. Prayer changes how we relate to others. When we pray for others, we engage with them in a new way. We understand what they are going through, and there is a shared bond of faith through prayer. We become more sympathetic to their issues and we battle for them in prayer. Prayer changes our environment. I have experienced a change in my environment countless times after praying.

From the little things like losing some important keys, to the big things like wisdom in making a tough decision, God uses prayer to help me grow. Once, God saved my life through prayer. In 2016 I spent the summer working at Custer State Park in South Dakota. One day, I was hiking alone, off trail, away from anyone. I needed to be alone and my spirit felt disturbed and attacked by a fit of depression. As I hiked I saw a large 20-foot granite outcropping. I decided to climb it and pray on top of my small mountain. I sat on top of that granite outcropping for over an hour and a half. I battled hard in prayer before my God. I was looking for purpose and by the end of my prayer session, I found a sense of peace. It started getting dark so I began looking for a way down. I climbed down the backside of the sharp rock, but quickly got stuck. There was no good place to put my feet and hands to continue down the rock. I was about 15 feet in the air, with no good way down. A small, tough, scraggly tree was growing right between my feet. I tugged on it 3 or 4 times and put my trust in the tree. With all my weight hanging on the tree, I ripped it right out of the rock! I fell 12 feet and rolled down the hill another 15 feet. My head landed within 2 inches of the edge of a tree stump. When I stood up, I prayed hard that there were no broken bones or serious injuries. Miraculously, I walked away with only a few bruises and scratches. God watched over me and taught me more about himself through prayer.

I am sure that you have experienced the immense power of prayer. By working from the inside out, prayer helps us become children of God. Sometimes we just don't know how to pray, but we feel the immense pressure to pray. Paul describes this feeling well in his letter to the church in Rome. He said, ***“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.”***

Have you ever felt the Holy Spirit pressuring you to pray? It is so important to listen to that urge and allow the Spirit to work through you in prayer. The Holy Spirit knows the mind of God. As Christians, we believe that our bodies are temples for the Holy Spirit. Sometimes, we know we should pray but we don't know exactly what to pray for. The Holy Spirit is an ever-present help during such times.

Prayer is conversation with God. In the Bible, God reveals himself to be one and yet three persons. The trinity is expressed in God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. So, how do these three persons play a part in prayer? We address God the Father in prayer. Jesus Christ is our intermediary, giving us access to the Father through the blood of his sacrifice. The Holy Spirit helps us in prayer by prompting us to pray as God wills. Prayer is one of the keys to the kingdom, because it reflects the trinity and their relationship with one another.

Communication is an essential part of any relationship. If I only talk to my wife for five minutes a day, how can I grow in my relationship with her? If I only pray with God for five minutes a day, how can I expect to have a deep relationship with God? You see, without prayer Christians cannot have a deep relationship with God. We should be spending just as much time praying with God as we do talking to others. It takes practice to pray while doing the daily activities this life requires of us. I promise you this, the more you pray, the more you will realize you need to pray. God desires to communicate with you. He longs to bless you and give you peace during your trials. You cannot access peace without a strong prayer life with God.

Prayer is a spiritual discipline. The Bible is chalk full of incredible examples of the power of prayer. It is also full of wonderful stories of prayer warriors. From Moses and David to Jesus Christ himself, prayer plays an intimate role in their lives. The more we grow in our faith, the more we should grow in practicing prayer as well. Prayer reminds us just how much we need God. It changes us from the inside out. My hope is that you understand just how important prayer is and why Christians must pray. I think we can all agree that the world is a very broken place. I believe that the Bible encourages faithful disciples of Christ to pray in answer to the sin and brokenness. May the Lord bless you and keep you. May he make his face shine upon you. And may he give you peace.

Yours in Christ,



Chris Aaron Rice