

## ***Real Faith for Real Life: Prayer***

Lesson: **I Timothy 2:1-4 and I Thessalonians 5:15-18**

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?version=31&search=I%20Timothy%202:1-4;I%20Thessalonians%205:15-18>

This is the first week of our look at Real Faith for Real Life. Over these six weeks we are developing personal and corporate practice of what Michael W. Foss<sup>1</sup> calls “the six marks of discipleship.” The six marks are prayer, worship, reading the Bible, service, connectedness, and generosity. Or, to use the active verbs, since these are all activities: Praying, Worshipping, Reading the Bible, Serving, Relating, Giving. PWR SRG. Power Surge. The marks of a soul that is fully alive in God are praying, worshipping, reading the Bible, serving, relating, and giving. Since we want everyone to have a life that is fully alive in God – that is, a real life – together we’re going to learn about and practice these marks.

These are also the marks of a church that is fully alive, but we’ll talk about that more later this year.

The first mark of a real life – of a living faith – is prayer. In the two passages we read from the Bible today, the message is pretty clear. Talk to God. Listen to God. Repeat. In the words of the athletic shoe manufacturer: Just Do It. Just talk to God, and listen to God, and through prayer, let God be intimately involved with your life.

I always like those Nike ads – the “Just Do It” ads. They’re inspiring. I look at those athletes – both famous and anonymous – and they make me see the value of both Nike shoes and being really fit. For about 30 seconds after the commercial. But then I lose interest. While I love the Nike ads that say “just do it”, I can’t say I’m a big athlete, or I purchase Nike shoes. Why? Because that kind of athletics takes effort, and I don’t really believe I’ll get anything out of it.

I suspect that many of us may have these same filters blocking us from even thinking about a practice of regular praying. It takes effort, and we don’t really believe we’ll get anything out of it. And we certainly don’t expect anything powerful to happen in the wake of it. We meet someone who has a strong connection to God through prayer, and are inspired for about a minute. Or, we read about Jesus praying and think “yeah, but that was JESUS!” Or we hear all the promises about answered prayers and the healing power of prayer and we just don’t believe them, or they don’t jive with our experience of prayer.

I don’t play basketball like Michael Jordan. Hence, playing basketball isn’t for me. I don’t pray like Paul, so praying isn’t for me.

Many of us just tune out the call to live a praying life, out of a deep sense that prayer, at least prayer when we do it, does not fulfill its hype. But the problem may not be prayer, but what we expect from prayer. I believe that many of us have certain images of how prayer should work, and these are based on false understandings of how God relates to us as people God loves.

Let’s read a text about prayer together. Before we do, let’s ask God to open us up to what the whole of Scripture says about prayer, and God’s real life interactions with us, as God’s beloved children.

Please open your Bibles to Psalm 145. When you’ve got it, look up, so I know you’re ready. Let’s pray:

God, revealed through the life of Jesus, our lives, and through the living words of Scripture, open up our hearts to the holy conversation you have blessed us with in prayer. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> In *Real Faith for Real Life*, 2004: Augsburg Fortress. I am grateful to Rev. Foss and Prince of Peace Lutheran Church for both the structures and the themes of this series.

(Read **Psalm 145:17-20.**) <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?version=31&search=Psalm%20145:17-20>

There are three separate promises that are made in the Psalm about prayer. They reveal important aspects of God's interaction with us in our lives:

- God promises to draw near to all who call upon God (vs. 18)
- God promises to fulfill the desires of those who fear God (vs.19)
- God promises to watch over all who love God (vs. 20)

These are big promises, and they may sound too big for you to believe. How should we understand these promises on our real life faith walk?

Let's take them one at a time.

First, God promises to draw near to all those who call upon God. If you find this one hard to believe, you may be remembering a time where God seemed distant or not there at all. You may be going through one of those times right now – when God seems silent and absent. You may wonder if this promise is simply another empty statement, or if it's a promise for someone else, and not for you.

If that's your experience, you might turn the question around: Instead of asking, "where is God and why is God silent?" you might want to ask, "How should I understand this promise? What *happens* when God is present to me?"

It is important to say that God drawing near is not like having a personal assistant or a nanny. God doesn't leap in to rescue us from every swing in mood, and God isn't concerned with always giving the answer we want to hear. God is a sovereign God, a creator God, who draws near to those whom God created and loves dearly. God's goal is not to coddle us in every circumstance simply so we feel better.

God has bigger dreams for us than to simply feel nice and happy all the time. God's goal is to care for us in such a way that we grow up into spiritual maturity. God's goal for us is that we become spiritual adults.

If you have seen the movie, *Ray*, you know what God's goal for us looks like. In the movie, the young Ray Charles has been going blind. His mother, who believes in him and encourages him constantly, is also teaching him to learn to get along by himself, to stand on his own two feet. One day the young Ray Charles trips and falls just inside the doorway of his house. His mother is standing in the kitchen, and sees it happen. He cries out, and is desperate and sad and lost. She leans toward him, her heart reaching out to him, but she remains silent. He cries and is afraid to stand up. She keeps leaning, and loving him, silently. Eventually he stops crying, and starts hearing the sounds around him: children outside, the whistling kettle on the pot-bellied stove. A cricket on the floor. He gets up, and moves tentatively around the room, near the heat of the stove, nearer the cricket. After some time, with his mother watching in love and hope – and remaining silent – Ray hears the cricket, finds it with his ears, and catches it. He realizes his mother is in the room, and proudly shows her what he has done. And her love holds him up, supports him, and praises him. They rejoice together.

He did not see his mother. He did not hear his mother right away. But she was very near, hovering, loving, encouraging him to grow into the fullness of his creation and his strength.

God draws near, but that does not always mean our mood is lifted or we feel happy. God's presence may not appear in our perspective at the moment. But we can depend upon is God's sovereignty and love for us, and that God is present in those times for the purpose to both comfort us and bring us to maturity. We all know the famous poem, "Footprints in the Sand," that illustrates this same point. We will quote it here...

*One night I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord. Many scenes from my life flashed across the sky. In each scene I noticed footprints in the sand. Sometimes there were two sets of footprints, other times there was one only. This bothered me because I noticed that during the low periods of my life, when I was suffering from anguish, sorrow or defeat, I could see only one set of footprints, so I said to the Lord, "You promised me Lord, that if I followed you, you would walk with me always. But I have noticed that during the most trying periods of my life there has only been one set of footprints in the sand. Why, when I needed you most, have you not been there for me?" The Lord replied, "The years when you have seen only one set of footprints, my child, is when I carried you."*

The second promise that this Psalm gives to us is God's promise to fulfill the desires of those who fear God. The word "fear" in the Bible may also be translated as "awe" or "respect" or "honor".

Even if you have a sense of God always drawing near to you when you call, this one may be the dealbreaker for you. If you have ever prayed for something specific and not had it come to be, you may be rolling your eyes. You may even be angry. Unfulfilled desires or broken hearts are powerful barriers to prayer.

I know there are people in this room who are this close to giving up on God completely, or simply don't expect much from their devotional lives. You don't bother, or you're giving up because some desire of your heart remains unanswered, or you feel you've lost a great desire of your heart.

Another image may help: God is not a giant vending machine; God is a loving parent. What is the difference? First of all, a vending machine simply takes your literal request and answers it. There is no personal involvement at all. If you have diabetes and are 50 pounds overweight and put \$1 into a vending machine, it will give you a Snickers the same way it will give it to the Nike athletes we mentioned earlier. No personal involvement. No care.

If a parent does that, time after time, we begin to wonder about the parent's abilities. A loving parent, who actually cares for you and is responsible for your character and value formation, takes your requests and demands through the filter of what truly will be helpful for your life, at the right time, in the right amounts, and with the right outcomes. Why do parents filter our requests through all these filters? Because they genuinely care and they know that not all things are good for us, or even helpful to who we uniquely are or what time of life it is for us. So it is with God. Literally answering all our prayers, without the filters of care and maturity, could be very harmful or even destructive at times.

Those of you who are parents know that you want your children ask you for what they want or need. And, you know that you will need to weigh their requests. You will love them, and want them to ask, but you still may say no.

Part of building a real relationship with God through prayer is that in time our dreams and desires change. One of the great mysteries of interacting with God, not as a cosmic vending machine but as a loving parent, is the way that God will change the desires of our heart through the power of the Holy Spirit. Praying – speaking with and listening to God regularly and over time – changes the pray-er. Like all ongoing conversations with a loved one, like all real communications where both hearts are open, you will be changed.

One the one hand, God wants to deeply respond and fulfilling your desires. On the other, as a loving parent, God factors in what is genuinely good for you. God wants you to be saved – from yourself, from destruction, from isolation – and God wants you to live in the light of truth, fulfilling your creative purpose. If you pray, you will be changed.

To go back to the children who get whatever they want whenever they ask, what do we say about them, and about their parents? We find them spoiled. Immature, and focused only on what they are getting, rather than on the good around them and the good of the world.

In a deep relationship with God, God gives us what we need when we need it that we may be mature and deeply spiritual beings, fulfilling our callings and being lovers in the world.

The third promise in this Psalm tells us that God watches over all who love God.

This one is hard. Many Christians have suffered in tough or life-altering ways, and they didn't feel protected. Some of you have recently gone through horrible loss, and must be asking yourself: if God was watching over these events, how do I understand this God as caring or being protective at all?

Once again, an image may be helpful in understanding this. Being watched over is not like a having a Romulan cloaking device or an impenetrable force field surrounding us. Being watched over, being shepherded, is much more like a wise counselor guiding, directing, supporting, and restoring our lives when we are hurt or broken.

We live in a broken world. God's goal for us is not a painless life, but a life that fulfills its promise and purpose. God's goal for us is a rich life, a full life, a fully alive life that is whole and purposeful and loving and beloved. Your life, even as a most devoted follower of Jesus, the Michael Jordan of prayer, will at times include suffering and encountering evil and sinful actions directed our way. When you are in deep relationship with God, and are listening as well as talking, you will find that God sometimes warns, sometimes guides, and sometimes strengthens you to help you through the trials and tribulations of life.

God does not remove all painful and tough circumstances. But knowing God, clinging to God, and letting God know you, redeems and heals and restores when the pain of life threatens to destroy you.

Finally, though this is not in the psalm for today, here is the other promise God gives about prayer: Your life expands, and your relationship with God and others deepens. There is a mysterious and miraculous opening of your soul that happens with regular prayer. And you can't get to know God, deeply know God, without it. It can't be occasional. It can't be just when you need a good parking space, or a hole-in-one, or a healing. We are told to pray continually because you can't build a deep relationship without communication. Not a human one; not a divine one. And God can't shape you if you aren't open to being shaped. God loves that free will stuff: if you don't choose it, God won't give it.

Even with all this understanding around prayer, many of us still have unanswered questions usually grounded in very painful experiences that make it hard to pray or trust God's goodness in responding to our prayer. But even in the horrible, even in the mundane, even in the 37<sup>th</sup> "no" answer you've gotten to your prayers, God's promises are true—God does draw near, God does fulfill desires, and God does watch over—not as a personal assistant, or a vending machine, or even an impervious force field, but as a sovereign God, a loving parent, a guide, and a restoring healer to help us through whatever we face in this world.

This is the mystery experienced by people living the mark of discipleship known as prayer. So just do it.

Let us pray: God, help us to believe in your promise to draw near, to love us, to guide us, and to be in strong relationship with us through the practice of prayer. Help us to overcome our apprehension, and to trust in you. Help us to believe in the experience of millions who have found their source and strength in you. Teach us to pray, and help us to just do it, for the sake of our selves, and our souls, and your world. We ask this in your name. Amen.