



TIME OF GRACE®

Pray Like a Pro: Be Like a Helpless Child

Study Notes

Summary

Who is the greatest pray-er that you know? If you could give out a gold medal for most impressive prayer life, who would receive your prize? One day, Jesus gave out such a prize, and the recipient might surprise you (and change your mind about prayer).

- **Matthew 18:1-4:** ¹ At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” ² He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. ³ And he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”
- “What Jesus has in mind here is an objective state that every child who has ever lived, regardless of race, culture, or background, has experienced—helpless dependence.”—Kent Hughes
- The Point: _____
_____.

Points to Ponder

1. When have you prayed most passionately and consistently in your life? Was there any connection between your prayer life and a problem that you couldn't fix?
2. Read James 4:13-17. What do these verses remind you about your dependence on God? What areas of life might you start praying about after having read James' words?
3. Agree/Disagree: The message of modern culture (“You are good. You are enough. You are worthy.”) will keep people out of the kingdom of God. Explain your answer.

Homework for Next Week

Read Matthew 6:5-8.

Time of Grace Ministry
Pray Like a Pro: Be Like a Helpless Child
Matthew 18:1-4
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And that's the thing that hit me about prayer. What keeps us praying, what keeps us with hands folded and eyes lifted to Heaven, what keeps us on our knees next to our bed is the childlike belief that without God, we can't.

A couple weeks ago, I asked our church family kind of a dangerous question. And the question was this. If you absolutely had to, what grade would you give your prayer life? Now a couple of you called me out on that question. And you're the ones that called it dangerous, and you're right about that. Whenever we look in the mirror and have to give ourselves a grade spiritually, it's never going to be an A+. And if it is, you're proud so then you don't get an A+. So it's a good way to feel guilty. That's not what I was after. I kind of wanted to know - when it comes to you and God and this conversation that we call prayer, how do you feel about it?

159 of you typed a survey response. And if I could summarize all of your answers in a single answer - how do we feel on average as a church about our prayer lives - the answer would be, eh. D+, one of you admitted. C-, another said. Maybe a B? D. D+. D-. C-. C. One of you said four. I laughed out loud at that. I'm like four out of four? Four out of 10? I wasn't quite sure.

You know, some of you felt great about your prayer life, but a lot of you kind of felt - I don't know - middle of the road. Below average. And what really helped me get into your heads were some of the comments that you left on that survey where you said things like this. My prayer life lacks intentionality. There never seems to be enough time to pray, yet somehow I always find time for my screen. One of you said to me, my mind always feels distracted. And another admitted, I feel like I'm just babbling to God, and I'm not sure if that's actually prayer.

Can any of you relate to those comments? You know, my point in asking you to grade your prayer life wasn't to make you feel guilty. My real motive in asking the question was to figure out if I was the only one. Am I the only one here at our church who really loves God - like deeply loves Him - and yet struggles to do this most basic thing that we call prayer? Am I the only one who can find time for a hundred other things, and yet this thing that I really do value and cherish - sometimes it slips through my fingers and doesn't end up on my schedule? Am I the only one who promises to pray for people? And not just about little things, and job opportunities, but big things. Surgeries. Divorces. And I even write it down in my prayer journal. And then somehow, the end of the week comes, and all those boxes don't always get checked. Am I the only one who starts out prayer super-strong, speeding down the prayer highway? Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name. And then before I get to that part about daily bread, somehow my brain is like in tangent town wandering.

Have you ever had one of those prayer moments where you stop, and you say how did I end up here? How am I thinking about this? You try to retrace like the streets that got you back from the Lord's Prayer, and it's impossible to track. You know, it's not just because I'm human and no one gets an A+. I've never felt the way about prayer that I do about church, or worship, or Bible reading. I feel like I'm not quite there.

Ah, but man, do I want to be. Like so many of you, I want to be a prayer pro because I believe in the power of prayer. I believe that prayer is effective. That it does things. It changes things. That it's good for me. That it's good for us. That without prayer, life just won't be as blessed as we all want it to be. Some of you know what the great 20th Century poet Stanley Burrell said about prayer. You might know him as M.C. Hammer. M.C. Hammer once said - and some of you know these lyrics - we've got to pray. Do you know it? Are you too young? We've got to pray just to make it today. That's what M.C. Hammer said, and he was right.

According to Jesus, you won't make it through the day as God intends without prayer. Jesus said you won't receive sometimes unless you ask. Doors won't be opened unless you knock on them in prayer. Unless you seek the face of God through the name and power of Jesus Christ, there are just some really great things in your life that will never happen. And so we want to pray.

And that's why I'm really excited to share something with you today. In my nearly 40 years as a Christian, I've preached on prayer, I've read dozens of books on prayer, I've had a prayer journal, taken prayer walks. But what I discovered in the Bible just a couple weeks ago has been a game changer for me with prayer. It hasn't made my prayer life perfect. I'm not a pro just yet. But since I discovered it, I found myself praying more and praying more passionately than I ever have before.

So that truth is what we're going to find in Matthew 18. If you have a Bible, a digital Bible, you can pull that our right now. Otherwise you can follow along on the screen. We're going to jump into an argument that Jesus' friends had where Jesus taught them a simple powerful truth about prayer and about the kingdom of God. So here's what we find. At that time, the disciples came to Jesus and asked - who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven? The disciples - the 12 apostles - they gather around Jesus. And if you read some of the other gospels, they're at each other's throats because they're arguing about who is the greatest disciple. Who is the greatest in the kingdom of God?

Guys love to pull up to the edge of the bar and turn on ESPN and debate - who's the greatest? There's all-conference, and all-division, and all-region, and all-American, and MVP, and Super Bowl rings. There's Yelp reviews. When you book a hotel for your vacation, what do you do? You want to figure out who's the greatest or the cheapest. Who's the cheapest and the greatest? We rate and review podcasts. Because with all the options, at the end of the day, we want to know - who do we look to? Who do we imitate? Who's the greatest?

And so what the apostles do is just bring that same idea into the world of prayer. And they ask Jesus. In your kingdom - the place where you're king, the place where you make the rules, you

set the agenda, you protect your people from evil - in the kingdom of Heaven, Jesus, who is the greatest? And believe it or not, Jesus answers the question. Where I would expect Him just to shake His head and walk away from the argument, He doesn't. Instead, He gives His friends the clearest answer He could about who's great in the kingdom of God.

Let's turn back to Matthew and see what Jesus says. Jesus called a little child to Him and placed the child among them. And He said, truly I tell you. Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven. Wow. Can you even picture it? You know, here's Peter. Red-faced. Cross-armed. Competitive. He's staring down the apostle John. And Jesus shakes His head and - I don't know. I picture Him getting down, calling the little kid over. Giving the kid a high five. Picking him up. Carrying him over and just stepping away. And here's Peter. Trying to be mad. Trying to scowl over at John. And here's this little kid. I don't know how old he was. I picture him as like a little preschooler. Just looking up. Smiling.

And I wonder - I wonder. This isn't in the Bible, but I wonder if Jesus just let the silence linger. Just let these tough, competitive, angry, ambitious fishermen look down at this little kid. And I wonder if after this lingering silence, Jesus smiled at Peter, put an arm around his shoulder, and said unless you change - Peter, unless you become like this, you can't be great. John, unless you change, unless you become like this little child, you can't even get into the kingdom.

Now Jesus should have your attention because do you know what He just said? That unless you and I - even if you're very religious, unless you are like a little child, it's not just that you can't get an A+ in God's report card. You can't even get into Heaven without being like a child. So if you care on the day that you die about getting into Heaven, you should care very, very much about what Jesus is saying in this text. Unless you become like a child, unless you change, you can't get in.

So what did Jesus mean? You know, some people say well, Jesus meant that you should be as innocent as a child. But have you ever met a child? Even behind the masks, I see the moms and dads giggling. Like no, no, no, no, no, no. They're not as innocent as we love to say when they take their baby pictures. So that can't be Jesus' point - you must be innocent to get into the kingdom. So what does He mean?

Well, today I'm going to have two friends help me describe what Jesus means. I want to invite my friend Mark and his son Asher to come up with me. Asher told me before church that he is an expert jumper. And today he's going to prove it, and he's going to help me with a little something with our message. Asher, how are you? Good. Alright, come over here, buddy, into the light. I'm not that scary. Alright. OK. I want you to stand right there, and I'm going to stand over here. And all you have to do is give me a high five, OK? You're a pretty fast runner? Yep. Good jumper? Alright. So you're going to run and jump, and on the count of three you're going to give me a big high five. Can you do that? You seem pretty confident. I like that. Alright. Are you ready? Alright. One, two, three.
I can't do it.

You can't do it? You want to try one more time?

OK.

OK, let's do it.

Lower this time.

Lower this time?

One, two, three. Oh, man. Hey, I have a question for you. Is there any way you think you could give me a high five if I was way up there?

No. I can't jump that high and do it.

You can't do it? Do you know someone who could help you? Oh, I bet he could. What if your daddy picked you up? Do you think you could get all the way up here? Let's see. One, two, three.

Boom. Good job. Alright, let's give Asher a round of applause. You did a great job. Thanks, guys. You have to know that I didn't even give Asher that line. Did you hear what he said twice? I can't. I can't. When Jesus says that you and I have to change and become like children, what He means is that we need to adopt the mindset that we can't.

I found this great quote from Pastor Kent Hughes. He said these words. What Jesus has in mind here is an objective state that every child who's ever lived, regardless of race, culture, or background, has experienced helpless dependence. And that's the thing that hit me about prayer. What keeps us praying, what keeps us with hands folded and eyes lifted to Heaven, what keeps us on our knees next to our bed is the childlike belief that without God, we can't.

Let me give you a few examples. Have you ever had a day that was like a good day? Great week. And like a single thought gets into your head that just - it just ruins your joy. That ever happen to you? And it's like stuck in there. One random thought. One fear. One anxious thing that like pushes you over the edge. Like if God doesn't keep all of those little thoughts from getting into our head and our heart, now we're helpless. You ever walk into a room, and you're having a good day, and you're smiling, shaking hands, meeting people? And that one person walks into the room with just - I don't know - you had a history, and they make you anxious, and you feel your hands kind of tightening up. Like one person's presence can mess with our whole mindset.

God, I need you. You ever try to go to your school or go to your job and love all of the people? Not like pick and choose one, or two, or some of the people, but really love all of the people? Oh, God, I need your help for that one. You ever tried to read the news and feel good 10 minutes later? Like to hear the headlines, the drama, the injustice, the politics, the pandemic, and just to know - OK, that's real. But God exists. And He's big, and He's for me, and He's with me, and He's got it. I don't need to be afraid.

Like reading the news proves how helpless and dependent we are. You ever tried to honor God with your body while you're dating? Like you can be here every Sunday, pray before every meal kind of person. But when emotions are high and the passion is there - God, I need you. You ever try to honor your parents if your parents aren't very honorable? God, I need you. Have you ever tried to work and do your best for someone who's not a great manager? God, I need you. You ever tried to forgive someone who hurt you? To like honestly want God to bless your ex? God, I need you. You ever tried to say no to an addiction that you lived in for 10, 20 plus years? God, I absolutely need you. You ever tried to go through your 20's as a passionate Christian? Or those

that just say I got it. Twenty years of church. Need to focus on my career. Focus on my job. Focus on my friends. Like I could uproot the tree, and it would still be fruitful. No. No. God, I need you.

And that's the simple thought. Helpless people pray. When I remember that in every conversation, every counseling appointment, every trip down the street, every moment with my family - it's going to blow up. It's not going to work unless God shows up. Then, like Asher, I say I can't. And I turn around, and I look to the Father who can.

So if you want passion in your prayer life, remember what Jesus says. Unless you change, you can't become great. But if you do, you can. And while you're thinking about that, remember what Jesus also said. He said unless you change, you will never even enter the kingdom of Heaven. The same thing that makes you a great Christian is what makes you a Christian in the first place. Unless you look up to the standards that God has set and say I can't - God, unless you lower that, and just say try your best, or be kind of good, or balance it out, I can't.

It reminds me of the story I heard a pastor tell a few years ago. This guy dies, and he ends up at the gates of Heaven, and there's the apostle Peter. And Peter pulls out a notebook, and he says welcome. He's like man, if you get in - whoo. It's amazing in there. But first, to get in you need to have a thousand points. And the guy looked at him and said a thousand points? Really? OK. Well, I went to church a lot in my life. I was raised in a really good home. I was married. Tried to love my wife the best I could. I raised three kids. One of them became a social worker, one a nurse, and one actually studied for the ministry. I escaped an addiction, and I used my story to help other people. I prayed. I served at the local homeless shelter. I wasn't a perfect guy, but I tried to love my neighbor. I used to cut the grass for the old lady who lived next to me. And the guy went on, and on, and on, and on for an hour straight, and Peter scribbled down every word. And the guy took a deep breath. He paused. And Peter said alright, that's one point. The guy said one point? One point? Are you serious? And he looked up, and he said God, have mercy. And Peter smiled. He said now you got it.

And the gates swung open wide. That's what Jesus is teaching. Unless you take the lowly position of a child and say I can't. To get into Heaven? It's Heaven. It's a perfect place with no pain, or suffering, or crying, or mourning, or tears. You don't just try your best. You can't jump a few inches off the ground. And when you realize that, you say I can't. God, have mercy. And He does. My favorite thing about church, my favorite thing about the Bible, my favorite thing about Jesus is He says if you humble yourself, if you just look to Him and say help, He does.

You see, 2,000 years ago, Jesus Christ came into this world, and He humbled himself on a cross. Even though He was glorious and strong, worthy to be worshipped, He changed. And like a little child, He made himself dependent. Hungry and thirsty in a frail human body, He gave up everything that was rightfully His. He humbled himself so that when humble people would turn to God, they would find absolute forgiveness. And you will always have an ear with the most compassionate, loving, good father that you could ever imagine. because what gets you into the kingdom is what makes you great in the kingdom. I can't, God. But you can.

My girls are pre-teens now. Feels like yesterday they were just little tikes. One of my jobs when the girls were growing up is that my wife would make a shopping list, and I'd take the girls, and we'd all go shopping together. A daddy double daughter date. I actually took a picture from way back in the day of my two girls. Yes, I would let them wear whatever they wanted to these grocery store dates. So there's Brooklyn. There's Maya. We'd get the fancy kids' cart, and I'd push them up and down the aisles. And do you know - do you know what word the girls would say at least 78 times when we'd go shopping? Daddy. Ooh, Daddy. Can we get that? Daddy, can we buy that? Daddy, candy. Daddy, candy. Daddy, more candy. Daddy, ice cream. Daddy, popsicles. Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy. Do you know why they said my name so much? because they couldn't. I could. But most importantly, because I cared. They were with a father who didn't just have money in his pocket. He had love in his heart. And so they never stopped talking to their father. And it's the same with you. He's not just the Almighty King, the maker of Heaven and earth. He is our Father. So what do you think?

Let's pray.

Dear God, it's crazy to think that you're God, but you're listening right now. But we can't see you, but Jesus, you said it, so we believe it. You promised in the Book of Psalms, Father, that if we call on you in a day of trouble, you would deliver us, and we in turn could honor you. And so whatever's troubling us right now, we bring it to you. Whatever has us freaking out about the week to come, we bring it to you. And we know you're not just a good friend who shows empathy and compassion. You are the Almighty God and the king of this kingdom. And so we give it to you.

Holy Spirit, I pray to you today because I can't make anyone believe, but you can. You can change hearts. You can make this the Sunday where someone actually walks through the gate called Jesus into the kingdom of God, and their eternity is safe and secure. God, that would set the angels off in celebration. It would make all of us smile. So do what I can't, what we can't, and change hearts here today.

Father, you know every need that's in this place. Everyone sitting at home, it would be such a joy and a blessing. You know that marriages could be restored. That forgiveness could be given. There are kids that we love, that if we pray, they might not stray from you, and the church, and the faith. There are people who could say no for the first time to a drink, to a joint. God, you could heal people. There are men sitting in prison right now listening to this message. You could give them peace and joy despite the hardship of their situation. You could give them, like the Apostle Paul, a peace that goes beyond understanding.

And so, God, for all of it, we pray to you because we know that you can. And because of Jesus, we know that you care. Thanks for listening, Father. We love you, we worship you, and we pray in the name of your son. And all God's helpless children said amen.