

Rev. Dr. Chris Montovino
John 20:19-23
April 27, 2025

Why Pray?

According to the Pew Research Center who publishes an annual report in February on the religious landscape in America, ‘fewer than half of American’s (44%) say they pray daily.’¹ This is a substantial decline since 2007 when the first Religious Landscape study was done. That found that 58% of American’s prayed daily.” Why is this? The report suggests two reasons. The number of people who no longer have a religious affiliation is growing. These are the “nones.” And the number of people in the largest American denominations, Catholic, Evangelical, and Mainline Protestants, are declining.

Still, of those who are religiously affiliated only 33% say grace or pray at meals.

Only 19% participate in weekly prayer groups, scripture study, or religious education classes monthly.

Of the religiously affiliated. 73% of Mormons are the most likely to pray daily.

72% of Evangelicals. 51% of Catholics. And 45% of Mainline Protestants.

Abraham Lincoln once admitted, “I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom...seemed insufficient for that day.”²

So why don’t most of us pray regularly? Even those of us who we consider to be mature followers of Jesus Christ?

I think it’s because we really don’t know how. We haven’t been taught how to tap into the power that Jesus made available to us through the Holy Spirit. So over the next month or so, stopping for summer, and then into the fall, we are going to look at many aspects of prayer. I’ll be using Pete Greig’s book, founder of the International 24/7 prayer movement, *How to Pray, A Simple Guide for Normal People*. If you are remotely interested in jumpstarting your own prayer life, then I highly encourage buying this book and following along.

Today we’ll be talking about Why Pray. Then we will explore topics like The Lord’s Prayer. Starting out in prayer. How to be still before God. The role of adoration in prayer. Petitioning or asking for yourself and others. Then we’ll talk

¹ Pew Research Center’s “Religious Landscape Study,” February 26, 2025 found at <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/prayer-and-other-religious-practices/#:~:text=More than four-in-ten,a few times a month.>

² Abraham Lincoln quoted in Pete Greig, *How to Pray, A Simple Guide for Normal People* (Colorado Springs, CO: NAVPRES, 2019), 4.

about unanswered prayer and how to deal with disappointment in prayer. And finally we'll consider contemplation or prayer without words.

My hope is that this will kick start our prayer lives. And I challenge you also to pick up the one hour prayer vigil guide and commit to doing that once over the next thirty days.

Our scripture story picks up where we left off last week in the Gospel of John. It's Easter evening. The first day of the week. Mary had just reported to the disciples that she had seen the Lord! This was exciting news. The scripture tells us that they were all huddled away together, in a locked room for fear of the Jews.

Did you ever wonder what they might have been doing in that room? I believe they were praying. Perhaps the prayer that Jesus had taught them.

Please join me as we hear about what happened next in John 20:19-23.

19 On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" **20** After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

21 Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." **22** And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. **23** If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

I remember when I first became a Christian as a young teen and I wanted to pray. Through my Catholic upbringing, all I knew was The Lord's Prayer or as Catholics call it, The Our Father. Actually that's not entirely true. I also knew "Now I lay me down to sleep I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. God bless Mommy and daddy... and so on." But now that I was a teen, that seemed sort of youngish.

So at night as I laid in bed, I would say the Lord's Prayer until I fell asleep. If I had a good day, I'd say it in a cheery mood. If I had a sad day, I say it in a somber mood. If I was mad, then a mad mood. I think you get my drift. But that was the extent of my prayer life until I went to college and began attending a Presbyterian Church. That was when I really learned to pray as I was surrounded by others who had a much more extensive prayer vocabulary and comfort level before the throne of God.

But like most people, I wasn't comfortable praying out loud in front of others. It just seemed too intimate and I was intimidated by what I heard from more mature Christians.

CS Lewis once said of prayer, “We must lay before Him what is in us, not what ought to be in us.”³

You see at that time I was more concerned with what wasn’t in me, than what was.

Jesus once told a Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

“Two men when up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: God, I thank you that I am not like other men - robbers, evildoers, adulterers - or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.

But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but he beat his breast and said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Jesus said, “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”⁴

Clearly Jesus taught that it is not what we say when we pray, but what is in us as we pray. The Pharisee was prideful. Spoke beautifully flowing words of self righteousness and judgment of others. The tax collector simply acknowledged who he was and how he was unworthy to even have his prayers heard. His words were few and honest. God listened to those. Not the other.

Pete Greig encourages us in prayer, “Keep it simple. Keep it real. And keep it up.” In other words, don’t give up. He also states, “I have come to believe that 99 percent of it is just showing up: making the effort to become consciously present to the God who is constantly present to us.”⁵

We heard in the Children’s moment this morning about the 5 W’s of prayer. Who. What. When. Where. Why. Later we’ll learn about the Acronym ACTS. Adoration. Confession. Thanksgiving. And Supplication. Today, I want to start off with the simple question of Why.

Why pray?

The Gospel of Mark tells us of Jesus, “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.”

We pray, because Jesus prayed. He also gave us the Holy Spirit who lives in us. The Spirit prays for us when we don’t have words. Through prayer, we are simply tapping into the same power source that Jesus had while he was with us.

³ CS Lewis as quoted in Tyler Staton, *Praying Like Monks, Living Like Fools* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Books, 2022), 21.

⁴ Luke 18:10-14

⁵ Greig, *How to Pray*, 10.

We may say, “But If God already knows everything, then he knows what’s on my heart, so why should I have to say anything at all? Great question. BUT. Something happens in us when we give voice to our prayers. Not only does God listen to our prayers. But He changes us in the process as we become part of the work that He is doing about whatever we are praying for. This is why Jesus tells us to pray for even our enemies. As we pray for them our hearts change towards them. We develop the heart of the Father for them.

Why pray?

We pray, because God is our Father and He has good intentions for us. Jesus said, “Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you...which of you, if their child ask for bread will give them a stone. Or if they ask for a fish, will give them a snake. If you then, though you are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him.”⁶

Why pray?

We pray, because we are human. Humans rely on verbal communication to express our wants and our needs. Our joys and our sorrows. Our hopes and our dreams. Our fears and concerns.

Why pray?

We pray, because both humans and God are relational beings. God exists in triune relationship Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And before the fall of humankind, Genesis tells us that Adam and Eve used to walk and talk with God in the cool of the day.⁷ Just as we talk with our loved ones to get to know them better, we talk with God to get to know God better. And so God relates to us relationally through prayer.

Why pray?

We pray, because we have direct access to God. Through Jesus Christ, we now are invited to come right before God’s throne with grace and confidence, knowing that God will hear our prayers and answer them in His time and His way.⁸

The late Timothy Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City wrote about the necessity of prayer and how he learned to pray. He said, “In the summer after I was treated successfully with thyroid cancer, I made four practical changes to my life of private devotion. First, I took several months to go through the Psalms, summarizing each one. That enabled me to begin praying through the Psalms regularly, getting through all of them several times a year. The second thing I did was always to put in a time of meditation as a transitional

⁶ Matthew 7:7-11

⁷ Genesis 3:8

⁸ Hebrews 4:16

discipline between my Bible reading and my time of prayer. Third, I did all I could to pray morning and evening rather than only in the morning. Fourth, I began praying with greater expectation.”

One year, I took time to also pray through the Psalms. German Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called the Psalms Jesus’ Prayer Book. I would read a psalm and then annotate in the margin the date and whatever prayer came to mind at the moment. It is so cool to look back and see how God answered many of those prayers.

There is a French expression that I used to tell my children time and time again. “C’est un fourgeant, quand deverant fourgerant.” It literally translates as “It’s in iron smithing that one becomes an iron smith.” We might simplify it today as “Practice makes perfect.”

So to Timothy Keller’s words of how he kickstarted his prayer life in a season when he needed clear channels of communication with God, I would add, “That we learn to pray, by praying.”

Why pray?

The Apostle Paul encouraged the church in Philippi who was in the midsts of an awful church division, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”⁹

We pray, because the Lord is near and that we know that God is in control of all things, so we don’t have to be! That gives us peace and rest.

Why pray?

We pray because we are overwhelmed. One of the curses of our post-Enlightenment age is that we don’t trust God anymore as a society. We think it’s naive to trust a higher power than ourselves. We believe that we should be smart enough, strong enough, more capable enough to handle whatever we might face today. Except when we aren’t. Humanity has proven time and time again that we can’t solve the problems we face. So we reach out to God, knowing that when we are weak, He is strong.¹⁰

Why pray?

We pray because trust comes before faith. Oftentimes when we pray, God is silent. Instead of rushing in to do whatever we ask, this waiting on God develops a sense that God is at work in ways that we may not understand at present. Tyler Staton in his book *Praying like Monks, Living Like Fools* writes, “Trust is the

⁹ Philippians 4:4-7

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

certainty that the listening God hears and cares. I trust the God who, even when he doesn't make the suffering go away, wears the suffering alongside me. Trusting the God revealed in Jesus means silence is real, but it's not forever."¹¹

Why pray?

We pray because God welcomes everything we have to bring. Even our most raw complaints.

One of the parts of the One Hour Prayer Vigil experience that we created was called Pick a Fight.¹² We listed thirty some injustices occurring in our country and around the world. Participants were asked to take one of the issues, research it, pray about it honestly to God, and then act on it by reaching out to their elected officials to let them know how they felt.

Let me tell you. I gave God an earful. Right here in the sanctuary, by myself. I yelled. I screamed at the top of my lungs. I told God exactly what I thought. Unfiltered. Why aren't you doing anything about this? Move now! And then on Saturday I emailed our elected officials to tell them what I thought.

Was God surprised or offended by my rant? NO! God knew exactly what was on my heart that I am so careful to filter before you all. David's Psalms invite us to get brutally honest with God. So let's not hold back.

Why pray?

We pray, because God ways are mysterious.

Why pray?

We pray because our prayers make a difference. Our hearts are changed by prayer and God listens to our prayers.

I'll close with this short story that Pete Greig shares in his book.

He writes, "I was stranded in Chicago. All airplanes have been grounded by the eruption of an Icelandic volcano, and I couldn't get home to England. I asked God how he wanted me to use the interruption. Several American friends had already been kind enough to invite me to stay, but as I prayed, I found myself thinking about a particular friend who lived 150 miles west in Madison, Wisconsin. "Hey, I'm in Chicago," I e-mailed. "Can I come crash on your couch?"

I didn't know that Joe had just received terrible news, nor that his worried wife had asked, "Who do you wish you had on your couch right now?" Those had been her exact words. Nor [did I know] that he had replied, "I wish Pete was on my couch, but I know that's crazy because he's in England, and he's never even been to our home."

The prophet Malachi says that "those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard" (Mal. 3:16). Sometimes God listens to

¹¹ Staton, *Praying like Monks*, 19.

¹² This idea was taken from the 24/7 Prayer Movement's brochure on How to Create a Prayer Room.

our casual conversations and receives them as prayers. Within hours of Joe's throwaway line, I had materialized on his couch.”¹³

Friends, this is how the God of the universe works, who came to us in the person of Jesus Christ. He is alive and well today. And He lives in our hearts by the power of Holy Spirit. As one former pastor of mine once used to say, “If this doesn’t get you fired up, then your wood is wet!”

So as we prepare our hearts to enter into a time of prayer as a congregation, let me ask one final question... “Why not pray!”

¹³ Greig, *How to Pray*, 151-152.