

The Seven Pillars of Christian Growth

Part 8 – The Seventh Pillar – Prayer

ILLUS – Daily prayer: Lord, so far today, I am doing all right. I haven't gossiped, lost my temper, been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish or self-indulgent. I haven't whined, cursed or eaten any chocolate. However, soon I'll get out of bed and I'll need a lot more help after that.

How many of you can identify with that prayer?

We are continuing in our series on The Seven Pillars of Christian Growth.

First pillar – God's Word

Second pillar – Serving

Third pillar – Evangelism

Fourth pillar – Worship

Fifth pillar – Giving

Sixth pillar – Being the Church

1. Prayer is talking to God

This has a number of important implications.

First, there is no special prayer language – and I'm not referring to tongues

We can't impress God.

So prayer doesn't have to be flowery or in King James English.

God doesn't lose track of what you're saying just because you don't pray in 400 year old English.

ILLUS – If my son wanted a bicycle for Christmas, he didn't have to come to me and say, "O gracious and loving earthly father, thou who dost provide us with all our food and clothing, O great and wise earner of money, winner of the bread, I do humbly beseech thee and seek thy favour. O father let thy face shine upon me and let thy countenance smile upon me that thou shouldst grant me this my request – a new bicycle for Christmas."

If he did that to me, I'd have him locked up. (Don't worry, I still love him – he's been like a son to me.)

Your prayer doesn't have to be a certain length; say what you mean and then shut up.

God isn't impressed because you can talk longer than the next guy.

ILLUS – Can you imagine God with a stop-watch? "I'm sorry, that was only two minutes; that's not good enough." Next time you pray for seven minutes, so God says, "That's better. Give him what he wants."

The length of your prayer is irrelevant.

You don't have to be in a special place.

ILLUS – Every year thousands of letters are addressed to God and sent to Jerusalem. One asked the "God of Israel" for help in getting a job as a bulldozer driver. Another: "Please help me to be happy, to find a nice job and a good wife – soon." Another asked for forgiveness for stealing money from a store when he was a boy.

ILLUS – Luke 10:19-23 – notice how Jesus so easily changes from speaking to people, to God? He didn't rush to a synagogue or try to get in a spiritual mood. He didn't say to His disciples, "Gotta go guys. Gotta pray" God was real to Him.

I don't have to be in church or my bedroom on my knees.

ILLUS – A man was doing a lot of travelling. In New York, he visited a church, and saw a red telephone on the wall with a sign: Hotline to God – only \$10,000. Church in Chicago – the same sign. Los Angeles – same sign. Then he came to Australia and visited one of our churches. The same red phone, but the sign said: Hotline to God – only 25c. He found the pastor. “How come it’s \$10,000 everywhere I’ve been. But your sign says only 25c?” “This is Australia mate. Here it’s just a local call.”

For the Christian, prayer isn’t long-distance.

I have instant access to God all the time.

Rom 5:2 through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

Eph 2:18 For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.

Eph 3:12 in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him.

ILLUS – Remember what we said about there being two kinds of internet connection – dial-up and broadband. The major difference is this: broadband is connected all the time.

A broadband Christian has access to God all the time, no matter where they are or what they’re doing.

I am connected directly to God through Christ all the time.

ILLUS – My son once asked me: “Do you say ‘ow’ if you hurt yourself and there’s nobody else there?” “Yes”, I said. Because there’s never a time when there’s nobody there. There’s never a time when I feel I’m alone.

Because I have permanent access to God.

2. Prayer requires faith

Faith is your spiritual muscle.

And faith, just like muscles, can grow.

And just like one set of muscles may be strong and another weak, you can have strong faith in one area, and weak faith in another.

How do you explain a person who can get healed, but they go to work and then they come running to the pastor: “Boo-hoo, I went to work and the boss told me off for being late. Then my friend Bruce called me lazy. Boo-hoo.”

Do you know what the problem is? Puny muscles.

And when they experience the trials of life, it’s too hard.

God wants us to have strong spiritual muscles.

Mark 11:24 Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them.

Heb 11:6 But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

Faith is essential for prayer.

It’s the only way you can truly connect with God.

What do I need to exercise my faith in? What is it that I have to believe?

First, according to Heb 11:6, I need faith that God exists.

What’s the point of praying if there’s nobody there?

If I don’t believe God exists, I’m just talking to myself.

But believing that God exists isn’t enough.

James 2:19 You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe; and tremble!

I need also to believe that God is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

And that He's listening, that God answers prayer, and that – regardless of the answer – God knows everything, and will do what is best.

ILLUS – I really admire Nick Vujicic, born with no arms or legs. He's not praying any more for God to give him arms and legs. Because he now sees that this is God's equipping of him. It's not just God's using his deficiencies, it's not just plan B. God made him that way for a purpose.

In a culture that fosters the desire to have everything nice and easy, that's tough faith.

We don't always get what we want, and we'll see why shortly.

3. Prayer is primarily relationship

Our relationship is on two levels – first, we are Jesus' friends.

John 15:15 No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you.

I was reading a book by a good writer, but he tends to drop names: "my friend Robert Schuller" or "I was talking to Billy Graham" Well I was talking to my friend God this morning – top that!

Second, we are Jesus' brothers and sisters.

Heb 2:11 For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren ($\alpha\delta\epsilon\lambda\phi\varsigma$ – brothers)

Prayer is not a formula, but signifies a relationship.

When we say, "In the name of Jesus", it signifies a relationship.

ILLUS – For instance, I had Power of Attorney over my mother's property when she was bed-ridden. I could have collected her pension and lived it up. But that's not what Power of Attorney is for. It comes with certain obligations – to act on their behalf and do what they would do. I paid off her credit card.

Would Jesus have misused prayer – His Power of Attorney – to ask for a Maserati etc?

Prayer is not just gimme, gimme, gimme – give me more money, heal me, help me, give me a promotion, meet my needs.

There's a problem with seeing God as just a great eternal vending machine.

If that's how we see Him, eventually we'll be angry with God.

ILLUS – Imagine a Coke machine. You put \$2 in the slot and a Coke comes out. You do that three times with the same result. But what happens when you put your \$2 in, and no Coke? You press the button again, then harder, hammer the machine, slap it, punch it, kick it. In short, you throw a tantrum.

And if God is just your vending machine, that's what will happen in your attitude towards Him, if you don't get what you want.

You'll complain, "Why didn't You heal so-and-so? Why didn't You give me that job? Why didn't You...?"

Prayer is **first** a relationship: it means sharing with Him, including Him in everything.

How else can you fulfil the Scriptural command: (1 Thess 5:17) "pray without ceasing"

You can't pray without ceasing if your definition of that is just talking non-stop.

Prayer is way more than that: it's a relationship.

4. Prayer is conversation

That means it's a two-way street.

It's not just talking, it's listening to what God has to say.

Let God speak to you, not only in your heart, but through His Word.

It also means being honest in your praying.

ILLUS – Mk 9:14-27 – Jesus said, “If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes.” Immediately the father cried out and said with tears, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!”

Do you know what I like about this guy? He was honest.

He didn't try to bluff his way through.

He knew how much faith he had and was prepared to admit it.

And the interesting thing is that Jesus never condemned him: “Go away you pathetic creature. Come back when you have a decent amount of faith.”

ILLUS – What if you say to the Lord, “Oh, Lord, I've been so upset and angry.” Can you imagine the Lord responding, “You what? Gabriel, Michael, get over here and listen to this quickly.” “Hey, Boss, you want we should go and rub dis guy out? We can loosen him up so much, he'll be able to store his elbows in his ears.”

God isn't easily upset.

Read the psalms; find out how honest the psalmists were in their prayers.

5. Prayer is according to God's will

1 John 5:14 Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.

In the name of Jesus means I'm representing His interests and therefore I will ask according to His will.

ILLUS – If I'm a missionary in Africa, walking from village to village, it might make me a lot more effective if I had a motorbike. I might have a growing sense in my spirit that this is what God wants. So do I look in my Bible for a supporting verse? Of course not. I'm not worried about a verse. I represent the King. And I'll expect all the help I can get in doing His will most effectively. That's what in the name of Jesus really means.

This means that we have to learn to align ourselves with God's will.

We won't get just anything we ask for.

ILLUS – Six-year-old boy asks for the keys to the car. The father says, “No son, you're too young.” The child stamps his feet. “Aw, Daddy, you never let me drive the car. I wanna drive the car, I wanna drive the car, I wanna drive the caaaaar.” Is it in that child's best interests that the father hand over the car keys?

Ask according to His will; if we do, God will give it to us.

There are two kinds of God's will; His general will, and specific will.

His general will is easy to know; because it applies to everyone.

I know the general will of God for your life.

He wants you to love one another, forgive one another, to be kind, he doesn't want you to lie, steal, commit adultery...

I know all of that because it's revealed in His written Word.

His specific will for your life is different from what it is for my life.

But His specific will for your life will never contradict His general will.

God won't write one thing in His Word, and then tell you something different.

Because God never contradicts Himself.

But let me say this: If a Christian is committed to doing God's general will, God Himself will make sure that they are in His specific will for their life.

God will make sure that it happens.

This is where people get into trouble.

They aren't committed to being obedient to God's general will for their lives as revealed in His Word.

But they still want Him to reveal His specific will for their lives, they still want Him to answer their prayers.

But it doesn't work like that.

Obedience is what God is looking for.

ILLUS – Some people are sitting round doing nothing for God, "Hey God, where's all that money you promised? And I asked for a new Ferrari, and a house in Hawaii." And the angels are up there (yawn), "Boring!" But when you align your will with the will of God, God is waiting to hear from you. If you pray something like, "Lord, we want to put on a big party to reach our unsaved neighbours, but we need some money." God responds: "Okay son. You, you and you, get onto that right away. I want you to make sure this happens."

God's will is God's bill.

When the world knocks you down to your knees, it's the perfect place to pray. Alan Beardall.

The shortest distance between a problem and a solution is the distance between your knees and the floor.

What do you do when you're in trouble? Do you go to the phone, or do you go to the throne?