

DUTY TO DELIGHT

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Today we come to the end of our eight-week series on prayer. As I was wondering what would be a fitting way to conclude these seven messages that we've had, I felt that the Lord was leading me to motivate us to make prayer not an event that happens in our day, but something that becomes a lifestyle for us. Not something that we have to do, but something that we want to do. Not something very specific to morning, or grace for good, or something like that, but that we are just in constant conversation with God.

So, I felt that we needed to talk about how to make it a way of life, a constant connection with God, not just scheduled moments of communication. The shift is from duty, as it were, to relationship. Within duty we have discipline, and I'll delineate as we go along. But many people view prayer as a task on a to-do list, rather than a natural part of their walk with God. But scripture teaches that prayer should be an ongoing conversation, something that is as natural as breathing.

Think about the relationships that you and I have. How awkward it would be if we only spoke to our loved ones at scheduled times. I'll meet you at 5:30 this evening and we'll have a 15-minute chat. It's really not going to work. So, today we're going to explore how prayer can become a lifestyle rather than a duty or just a discipline.

PRAYER AS A LIFESTYLE.

1. Prayer flows from a heart of joy and gratitude.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 says, *"Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you."* Paul commands us to rejoice always, to pray continually, and give thanks in everything. Prayer isn't just about making requests. It includes praise and gratitude, confession and surrender.

This past week, the last podcast that I did on intersections where I talked about being chiseled by the Master. One of the listeners wrote back and said, "Do you want to share what prompted you, or what challenges you faced with this particular podcast?" I thought about it. I wrote it out of the challenges actually.

- It needs chiseling, because when you get chiseled by the Master, it's not often a pleasant experience. A chisel is something that is chipping away at you, and it cannot be pleasant.
- It needs obedience. It needs submission, because unlike a block of wood, you and I have a will of our own, and we can say 'no' to the chiseling.

So, I responded and said, "The challenge for me always, is to submit myself to God and say, 'Go ahead and chip away. However it's going to hurt, whatever it's going to do to me, however inconvenient it may be, I want You to do it.' Because ultimately, God calls us His masterpiece." We are His masterpiece.

So, prayer includes praise and gratitude and surrender to Him. When we develop a grateful heart, prayer naturally becomes part of our daily rhythms.

Consider David. His psalms were joy and sorrow and anger and hope and frustration and desperation, all of these. He didn't have set periods where he said, "Okay, today at 9:35, I'm going to

be frustrated with God.” When there was frustration, he called out to God and said, “Lord, I’m frustrated.” It was just something that happened. He communicated to God whatever was going on in his heart. And that’s where we ought to be as well – able to just reach out to God at any moment.

Questions for us:

- How often do we pray outside of emergencies or mealtimes even?
- What if we started thanking God throughout the day instead of only coming to Him with our needs?

Every morning I have a cup of tea that Sheila makes for me. It’s the only cup of tea I have through the day (I’m a coffee drinker), but that cup is very special. I get it, it’s piping hot, and I draw the curtains and look outside. It’s a beautiful day whether the sun is shining or it’s raining. It just reminds me that God has given me a new morning. And so, even before I take a sip, I always thank God for it. Thank you for this beautiful day, because there are many people who didn’t wake up to this beautiful day. Just a time to say: Thank You.

2. Prayer is also abiding in Christ.

It is abiding in Christ, not just talking to God.

John 15:7 Jesus says, *“If you abide in Me and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”* Jesus invites us to abide in Him.

Abide means that we don’t just visit Him occasionally. We don’t occasionally abide in Him. It means to be completely in Him. It means to stay connected like a branch to a vine. This means prayer is not just about saying the right words, but staying close to Jesus in heart, mind, and spirit. Why is that important? Because the more I align with Him, the more His will becomes mine. Very often, we take this particular verse, John 15:7 and say, “I can ask anything of God and He will give it to me.” It’s not that. God is not a genie that we just rub a bottle and He says: What can I do for you? But when we go to Him, we go to Him completely in His will. When we abide with Him, His will becomes our will. And so, we are one in heart, and mind and spirit. Then we can ask anything and He will give it to us.

Jesus modelled this lifestyle of constant connection with the Father. time and time again, He went away from the crowds to just spend time with Him.

So we need to ask ourselves: How do I treat prayer in my life? do I only go to God when I need something or can I develop a habit of remaining constantly in His presence? Can I bring this John 15:7 concept of abiding in Him and say, “Lord, that’s who I want to be. I want to be constantly connected with You so that all the natural virtues, those godly virtues flow into me and Your will becomes my will.

3. Prayer is the key to spiritual strength and guidance.

As we pray, we are able to, because of this connection with God, get spiritual guidance from Him, and strength as well, for each day.

Philippians 4:6 *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.*

What happens? The peace of God which surpasses your human understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. So, when prayer becomes a lifestyle, we experience God’s peace, direction, and strength in every moment.

Prayer is our first response and not our last resort.

When we pray regularly, we stop carrying burdens alone and we actually invite God into every moment. The early church devoted themselves to prayer. We see in Acts 2, and in Acts 6, they prayed before making decisions, before facing trials, and in thanksgiving. And that's what we need to incorporate into our lives as well. We need to develop this habit of constantly talking to God about everything before stress, before decisions, before teaching.

How many of us deal with stress every day? And what if we, when we feel stress coming upon us, just took one step back and said, "Lord, would You point out to me the trigger for this stress so that I can take it and lift it up to You, so I don't need to be in this stressful place.

Those are the moments that we need to find as we abide in Him, when we take decisions to stop and say: Lord, this decision that I'm taking has grave consequences. It's going to affect people, it's going to affect the way our relationships are, it's going to affect all the things that matter. Lord, I need Your wisdom.

Take a step back. We need to be able to say, "Lord, help me to be able to cast this upon You." *Cast your burdens on the Lord. Why? Because He cares for you.* What a loving God we have. In other words, "Those things that you carry, you don't need to carry. I'll carry them for you. Cast them onto Me. Because I care for you. I love you deeply."

So, the thrust of this first half is that we make prayer a natural part of our life, not just a few points of connect. I was running this premise by Sheila the other day, and she reminded me that, apart from it being just a lifestyle, there needs to be a discipline in that lifestyle as well. Daniel prayed three times a day. There was a certain discipline that he brought into his prayer life. One of the reasons that I push you all to reply to me is that the moment you take onus for a 15-minute slot, you pray in that 15-minute slot. When you just think that you'll pray, the chances are that you won't, because something that you're not committed to, you won't do. So we need to take onus and say, "I will. I will connect with God at times." A constant discipline brings about a prayerful lifestyle.

Yet, there needs to be a delineation between us looking at it as a sense of duty. It's possible that prayer, Friday prayer, for example, can become a sense of duty. You think: If I don't go, Pastor is going to ask me, "What happened? Why didn't you respond?" So you make sure that you send it in, because it's a duty. It's not something where you say: I need to do it. If my brothers and sisters are in need, I need to stand in the gap. I'll commit to doing that because they stand in the gap for me when I have needed it. Simple logic.

So, we need to be able to have some kind of discipline in our prayer life for us to make it a lifestyle. Let me point out what duty is and what discipline is.

Duty:

- An obligation or responsibility imposed externally.
- Source of motivation comes from external expectations or an authority.
- Purpose – fulfilling responsibility towards others.

Discipline:

- Self-control and training to follow principles. It's an act of the will.
- Source of motivation comes from internal commitment. Because you're committed to something, you do it. It's a matter of self-motivation.
- Purpose – personal growth, mastery, and consistency.

I will not go through the whole table. But duty is something that is external and imposed upon us, and we do it because somebody else says you've got to do it or something else. Discipline is saying: I recognize that this is important in my life, and I'm going to put the required processes into place to

make this happen. Take an athlete for example. I want to run the 100m. I'm a good runner. I want to really do well in my running. The discipline is getting up every morning and running. Discipline always has a goal. Duty doesn't have a goal. The goal is to do what was expected of you. It doesn't move forward. Discipline is a journey that you're on. So, you put in practices into your life and it becomes a lifestyle for you.

That's where we need to go with prayer. We need to make sure that our lives are prayerful lives, that we are in constant communication and conversation with God. A believer, out of duty, may attend church because you're supposed to do that on a Sunday. But a believer may pray daily out of discipline because they've cultivated a habit of seeking God. So, that's the focus for us, that we need to be able to develop a lifestyle of prayer.

Even as we've separated duty and discipline, we should look at moving from this function of 'Here's something that I must do because it's expected of me' to 'something I want to do because I know it's good for me.' And then, because of that, I will put that into a disciplined process in my life so that it becomes something like a lifestyle change for me. Discipline and delight. We spend time in delight with the Lord. "I delight to do Your will, O Lord," is what the psalmist says.

DISCIPLINE AND DELIGHT.

- Discipline is what sustains us when delight wanes. Why does delight wane? Because it is an emotion. Delighting in prayer can sometimes wane when you're having a bad day. Then it's discipline that will sustain you through that day and say, "Nevertheless, I will still put in play what I need to do."
- Delight brings depth and intimacy. So while discipline sustains, a good part of delighting in a prayer life is that it brings intimacy. Intimacy comes through an emotional connect with God. If prayer is only a routine, it can become mechanical and lifeless. But delight comes when we experience God's presence, His answers, and His transformation in our lives. And so, the more we enjoy God in prayer, the more we desire to spend time with Him, not just to tick a box and say – I prayed today.
- Discipline and delight go hand in hand as well. There's a balance between discipline and delight. In the early stages, prayer may feel like a habit we must build. But over time, as we experience God's faithfulness, guidance, and power, prayer becomes a delight rather than a duty of discipline. Practice makes perfect. So the more we put into our lives a discipline of prayer, the more we begin to enjoy it, because it becomes a second nature to who we are. Discipline leads to delight; delight fuels discipline. The key is balance.

I want to leave you with this final thought in closing, that as we take all that we have learned about prayer and put it together, the focus must be that we are able to move from prayer being an occasional connect with God, to an ongoing connect with God, something that is constant and continuous. Discipline establishes a strong prayer life. So, put into your life a discipline. Delight deepens it, and both work together to make prayer a natural, life-giving part of our walk.

Amen.