

REFLECTING CHRIST IN PRAYER

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When's the last time you had a prayer check-up? Performance appraisals of employees are commonplace; routine medical check-ups have become a way of life for many people. But when's the last time you assessed your prayer life?

If you did undertake a prayer check-up, what standard would you use?

Doesn't it make sense to use Jesus Christ as that standard? After all, He claims that "He who has seen me has seen the Father," and that "I and the Father are one." The 'Father' He is referring to is God, and it is to God that we pray. So if we pray to God, and if Jesus calls God 'Father' and claims to be the exact representation of the Father, one with the Father, then we can expect to learn a great deal from Him about how to communicate with the Father.

By reflecting Jesus in our prayer life, we can engage with God in the way God desires, and experience God in the way Jesus experienced Him on this earth. At the same time as our prayer life is enriched, our understanding of God will be expanded. As our understanding gets stretched, our service to God will increase. As our service increases, the transforming power of God will become more evident, not just in our own lives, but in the lives of those we influence. To reflect Jesus in our prayer life is to extend the power of God in the world.

Thus, Jesus provides the *model* for how to pray.

All but one of Jesus' recorded prayers are brief, pointed, and uttered in absolute confidence that the Father knows what is essential. As the all-knowing Father, God does not need to be instructed as to the situation or person being prayed for; He simply needs to be included in one's efforts to intercede, or to seek clarity as to what course of action to take. Secure in the

knowledge that God knows what is essential, Jesus willingly subsumes His will to that of the Father.

Mark, the author of the second Gospel, records that “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.” Solitude, quiet, a place where God could get at Him without external interruptions or distractions, preparing Himself before the challenges of the day began – those were key to Jesus’ prayer time. We would do well to practice that.

Evening, too, could be a time of prayer for Jesus. After feeding the 5,000 late in the afternoon, He sent the disciples by boat to go on ahead of Him to the next town, while He “went into the hills to pray.” His prayer continued long enough that the disciples “straining at the oars, because the wind was against them” had reached the middle of the Sea of Galilee, some 5 kilometres distant, before He looked up and saw them. Jesus did not need to be with his disciples, his followers, every moment, even in times of storm. No leader needs to be present to her staff all of the time. There are times when prayer alone is much more valuable than ‘busy’ time in the presence of others, even when those others seem to require one’s personal attention.

The Gospel writer Luke pulls back the curtain and lets us see Jesus in the midst of demands, and in the process gives us a model to follow. “...crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.” Now there’s a picture designed to get our attention! Our schedules are over-flowing; the demands of the ‘crowds’ are ever present; our Blackberries bear constant testimony that we really are indispensable and just have to at least read, if not immediately respond to, the latest email. In fact, our lives bear a striking resemblance to that of Jesus at the height of His ministry. Too many demands, too few resources, too little time. So what did He do, habitually? “Withdrew to lonely places and prayed.” Isn’t there something there in His practice that can help us in ours?

On occasion Jesus would do the unthinkable. Sometimes, He “spent the night praying to God. “ Our thought is, “Well, I could do that too if I had nothing to do but sleep in the next day.” We can’t (usually), and He didn’t. After one notable night of prayer, Jesus the next day selected his ‘inner circle,’ the Twelve to whom He would entrust the entire future of the Christian faith. Then He went on that same day into the midst of “a large crowd of his disciples ... and a great number of people” from the major population centres of Judea. He healed in the midst of throngs pushing in on Him, and taught patiently, all the time walking as He went until He reached the next town. Talk about a demanding schedule! As a great Christian has said, “I have so much to do tomorrow that I have to get up two hours earlier for prayer so I will be prepared.”

Jesus had a way of packing a great deal of content, of pain, agony, heartbreak, into a very succinct sentence. Faced with the prospect of the crucifixion, recoiling from the horror that lay ahead, He would say only a handful of words: “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” Again, a model of placing ourselves at the disposal of the Father, in absolute confidence not only that He is wiser, but that His strength is sufficient for us in our time of greatest trial and need.

In addition to being a model for prayer, Jesus also asks us to understand that He is the *means* through whom prayer is offered. Jesus is very specific that general prayers offered generally to some general deity are of no avail. We are to pray to a very specific God, whom we are to call, by invitation, “Father,” for very specific items. But more than that, we are to pray *in the name of Jesus Himself*.

As He was preparing the disciples for the pending events of His trial and crucifixion, Jesus made an astounding statement. “...the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.” A short time later at the same meal, as if to ensure that the disciples would not misunderstand the import of His words, Jesus repeated the promise: “I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.”

Now we need to understand two elements of this. The first is that we need to put aside our fuzzy thinking about the One to whom we pray. We pray to God the Father, not to Jesus, and we pray in the name of Jesus.

Secondly, when we pray in the name of Jesus, it helps us to clarify our understanding about what to pray for. In human terms, there are certain claims we do not make about specific individuals, because we know them well enough to know that such claims would not be true. While supermarket tabloids may be able to make the most outrageous claims about movie stars we do not personally know, with some expectation that people will actually believe the claims, we are much more careful about what we believe about the behaviour of our friends and family members. We put all rumours and charges through the filter of what we know to be true about that individual.

Similarly, as we come to know Jesus better, and allow Him greater sway in our life, our prayers become more refined, more reflective of what we know is in keeping with His teachings and His representations of God, the Father. To pray with the assurance that the Father will give us whatever we ask in the name of Jesus is not a licence to pray for outrageous outcomes, or personal glory. Such prayers are not at all consistent with Jesus' teachings or the meaning of His life, death, and resurrection; the words for such prayers would catch in our throat before we utter them, because they are not 'in the name of Jesus.' To pray in His name is to pray as He would pray, for the things for which he would pray, and always with the desire that God's will will be done, not our own.

James, the half-brother of the Lord, writing a number of years after the resurrection of Jesus, comments on what it means to reflect Christ in prayer. "You want something but don't get it. ... You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. ... Submit yourselves, then, to God."

Reflecting Jesus in our prayer life is not always easy. It requires that we spend some time in solitude, whether morning, evening or other times of the day. It requires that we willingly

turn people and circumstances over to the Father, and give up the notion that we are indispensable. It requires that we develop the capacity to pray and to do at the same time. Just because our schedules are busy and people press in does not mean that prayer is impossible. In fact, it is in those times that prayer is especially essential. It requires that we allow God's will to prevail, and to not mistake our wisdom or desires for His. And it requires that we pray in Jesus' name, and allow our prayers to be guided by His desires, not our own.

How's your prayer life? By using the eight-point check-up outlined above, you'll be able to take corrective action where you need to. In the process, you'll be reflecting Jesus in prayer and extending the power of God in the world.