



# Prayer

Teaching Notes



PRACTICING THE WAY

# Teaching Outline

## Intro hook:

- Growing up, my mother was a first generation follower of Jesus.
- When I was born, she was still learning how to pray.
- And when I was just a few years old, she was diagnosed with a rare autoimmune disorder, and began to go deaf.
- The pain of her loss was her portal from a superficial Christian spirituality to a deeper life with God.
- As her hearing was fading day by day, she began to rise early in the morning, to pray...
- And I just remember as a kid, no matter what time I got up, there she was, sitting in the arm-chair by the window, alone, in the quiet... in prayer.
- At the time, daily prayer, *for me*, was a duty and honestly, a bit of a drag. But it was clear to my young mind, she was experiencing something in prayer that I was *not*.
- For her, prayer was not a duty, but a delight.
- It was not until many years later, when I went through my own season of pain and loss, that I discovered the joy of prayer.

**Seam:** *But let's face it: for many of us prayer is still a duty.*

## Experience:

We're all so busy, it's hard to find the time to pray, and when we do...

- It can be boring. And it's hard to focus. We get distracted by all the things on our to-do list for the day, or as the spiritual writer **Robert Mulholland** once said, spend our time just worrying in God's general direction.
- It can feel like talking to yourself, or reading a Christmas list to the Santa in the sky.
- So, we make excuses — I have young kids, or I have to go work, or whatever, etc. And we feel a tinge of guilt. Then we just pick up our phone.

- Prayer — for a lot of us — is like eating our vegetables; we know it’s good for our health, but very few of us enjoy it.
- Let me *normalize* this for you: we live in one of the most difficult times in all of human history to pray.
  - The smartphone alone is a deathblow to prayer for our entire generation, not to mention: social media, the internet, digital streaming, entertainment, noise pollution, urbanization, secularization, and more.
- My point is, if you struggle to pray, you are not alone.
- As **St. Teresa of Ávila** used to say, when it come to prayer, we’re all beginners.
- And yet, *prayer is the portal to life with God* — the life we all crave in the deepest part of our being, whether we identify it as a desire for God, or misidentify it as a desire for something else.

**Seam/interlude:** *Thankfully, Jesus was full of wisdom on prayer. Turn in your Bibles to **Luke 11...** (Many people are beginning to read Scripture on their phones; and that’s fine, but we recommend you carry a hardcopy Bible with you to each Session, and follow along. Luke 11...)*

## **Luke 11:**

*One day Jesus was praying in a certain place.*

- Pause for a minute.
- We are dropping into the middle of a much larger story. And in the literary design of Luke’s biography of Jesus, this is a running theme...
- In chapter **5[v15-16]**, **Luke** writes...
  - “ Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.”
- In **Luke 6[v12]**:
  - “One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God.”
- Or in **Luke 9[v28-29]**:
  - “[Jesus] took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray.”
- Here he is again, praying... Keep reading...
  - When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John*

*taught his disciples.”*

### **Teach us to pray:**

- This is a fascinating request: Jesus did all sorts of amazing things — but the disciples do not ask Jesus to teach them how to heal the sick, or to cast out demons, or perform miracles. They ask him to teach them how to pray.
- My theory is it's because living with Jesus 24/7, watching his daily prayer rhythm, they realized that Jesus' extraordinary *outer* life with people was the byproduct of his even-more-extraordinary inner life with God.
- They were smart enough to intuit that Jesus was experiencing something they were not in prayer; prayer wasn't a duty, but a delight. He really enjoyed his Father's company. In prayer Jesus was drinking from a deep well, and they wanted a taste of the water.
- So, right now, right where you are — I invite you to take a moment, and make the disciples' prayer your own. “Lord, teach us to pray.”

**Seam:** *And if you're ready to apprentice under Rabbi Jesus in his school of prayer, pay close attention to what Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, and how Jesus teaches his disciples to pray. A short word on each. First off, what...*

### **1. What Jesus teaches his disciples to pray**

- Verse two:
  - *He said to them, “When you pray, say:*
  - *“Our Father in heaven,*
  - *hallowed be your name,*
  - *Your kingdom come.*
  - *May your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*
  - *Give us each day our daily bread.*
  - *Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.*
  - *And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.”*
- Protestants call this “the Lord's Prayer”; Catholics, “the Our Father.”

- And it's not just a liturgy — or a pre-made prayer; it's also a theology - or a theological orientation for prayer; it's a way of coming before God.
- A lot of people equate prayer with asking God for things. But while asking is a key part of prayer, there's still much more to prayer.
- Notice, Jesus does not ask our Father for anything until midway through the prayer.
- The entire first half is orientation.
- Let me point out four theological truths from the Lord's Prayer that are Jesus' framework for all prayer. For Jesus...

## God is our Father

- Line *one*: "Our Father..." Or in Aramaic, *Abba*. What a child would call their dad.
- In Jesus' day, that was a revolutionary way to address God.
- The NT scholar **Joachim Jeremias** argues, "There is not a single example of the use of *abba*... as an address to God in the whole of Jewish literature."
- Yet it was Jesus' go-to name for God. He thought of God as his Father, *and*... he taught his apprentices to do the same.
- I know this is really hard for some of you due to difficult relationships with your human fathers.
- But for Jesus, what comes to mind when you think about God will make or *break* your prayer life.
- My friend **Jon Tyson from Pray NYC** put it this way:
- "Unless you break the stronghold of false images of God in your mind, you'll never be drawn to prayer—"
- For many of us, our journey into a deeper life of prayer must begin with the healing of our false images of who God is.
- If you think of God as an angry tyrant in the sky, mad at the world, waiting to lay into you... or the cosmic life coach there to make you happy, but who doesn't seem to deliver — you will not be drawn to prayer.
- *But*... if you think of God as your *father*... that's a whole other story.
- When I get home from work, my kids don't grovel at my feet and say, "Pastor Comer, welcome." They run up and give me a hug and immediately start telling me about their day or asking me for things — can we go see a movie? Can we eat ice cream tonight? Because they

know, for all my shortcomings as a dad, I have a welcoming heart and good intentions toward them.

- The first thing Jesus has to teach us about prayer is that the God we come before has a welcoming heart and good intentions toward us.
- The primary emotional word used for God in both the Old and New Testaments is [*rakum* in Hebrew] “compassionate,” and in Hebrew it’s referring to the feeling that a father or most specifically a *mother* has toward their infant child. That is God’s baseline emotional disposition toward you — compassion, delight, tender care. He’s our Father. Secondly, for Jesus...

## 2. God is as close as the air

- Line two: “Our Father, *in heaven*.” Read the footnote in your Bible, and you’ll read that while most copies we have of Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer are shorter, some ancient manuscripts add on the full version found in the other Gospels.
- Now, “heaven” is a tricky word, because in English, when most people read heaven, they think of a place that you go to when you die.
- But while there’s truth in that, in Greek, the word is *ouranos*. It’s actually plural, the heavens. More literally, it just means the air.
- Hear it this way: Our Father in the air.
- Think about it: the air is all around you, up against your skin, *inside* your body, in your *blood*.
- That’s how close the availability of God is.
- Jesus is teaching his apprentices that when we come to our Father in prayer, he’s not far away, but closer to us than we are to ourselves.
- Third, for Jesus...

## 3. The first goal of prayer is the worshipful enjoyment of our Father’s company.

- The next line is: “hallowed be your name.”
- That’s another tricky word to translate into English.
- Basically, to “hallow” means to rever and respect the holiness of God.
- And to be holy means to be unique and special and beautiful.
- To say God is holy is to say there is no other being in all the cosmos more radiant than God.
- The Presbyterian **Timothy Keller**, in his book *Prayer*, writes:

- “To hallow God’s name is to have a heart of grateful joy toward God — and even more, a wondrous sense of his beauty...
- When you start to pray — to commune with God — and you begin to enter into the inner life of the Father and the Son and the Spirit and share in their love and joy and peace... you realize, they radiate beauty...
- And as you are caught up in the beauty of God, you can’t help but desire for others around you to see God for who he really is.
- The Anglican theologian **N.T. Wright** translates “hallowed be your name,” this way:
  - “May you be worshiped by your whole creation; may the whole cosmos resound with your praise; may the whole world be freed from injustice, disfigurement, sin, and death.”
- Here is Jesus, in loving worship of his Father.
- Think about how different Jesus’ approach to prayer is from our own. Often, we come to God to get things from God that we feel we need to be happy... this is one of the reasons we tend to pray mostly when our career or relationships or life circumstances are under threat. And that’s fine, but it’s also a gentle sign from our own heart that, for most of us, we are still searching for happiness outside of God; for most of us, God himself has yet to become our happiness.
- But for Jesus, the first goal of prayer is just to enter into the beauty of God. And when you do that, you can’t help but desire the world around you to experience that same beauty.
- Finally, for Jesus...

#### 4. Our prayers really do make a difference

- Jesus’ next line is: “Your kingdom come. May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”
- Notice, Jesus assumes that his kingdom has *not* yet come and that his will is *not* yet done.
- In part, yes, but not in full.
- And he assumes that through prayer, we partner with Jesus to bend reality in the direction of our Father’s good intentions.
- That through prayer we drag the future age of the Kingdom of God *into the here and now*.

**Hinge:** Now, much more could be said about the Lord’s Prayer, but for now, think of how different this is from how many of us approach God...

1. We think of God as a grumpy dictator or cosmic vending machine, not our Father.
2. We think he’s far away in outer space, not as close as the air.

3. We think the main point of prayer is to get things from God (what Mullholand calls “symptom management,” not to delight in God himself.
4. And we assume that what’s going to happen is going to happen, with or without our prayers, not, that prayer really makes a difference.
  - No wonder we avoid prayer!

**Seam:** *So... that’s what Jesus teaches us to pray. But that can all sound overwhelming. Where do we start? Well, next, look at...*

## **2. How Jesus teaches us to pray.**

- He does not *start* by teaching us to say whatever is on our mind...
- Nothing wrong with that, *at all*.
- But he *starts* by saying, “When you pray, say.”
- The NT scholar Scot McKnight argues that v2 can be translated “Whenever you pray, recite this...”
- That Jesus is tapping into the first century Jewish custom of praying memorized or pre-made prayers.
- This is what we mean by talking *to* God; praying pre-made prayers, that someone else, in this case Jesus, created for followers of Jesus across the world and down through history to pray.
- Let me give you a few examples of pre-made prayers:

### **1. The Lord’s Prayer is the most famous in the NT.**

- It was prayed three times a day by the first Christians.

### **2. The Psalms. Which are called the “prayerbook” of the Bible.**

- Because most of them were designed not to be read, but to be *prayed*.

### **3. Scripture itself.**

- Many people find great life in praying Scripture back to God, calling on God to fulfill his promises.

### **4. Singing.**

- There’s a power in prayer set to music. St. Augustine famously said, “To sing is to pray twice.”
- We don’t think of modern worship music as liturgical, but it is; it’s a pre-written prayer



we're all praying together, to God.

- But there is also formal...

### **5. Liturgy.**

- In more historic streams of the church, or in *The Book of Common Prayer* or *The Liturgy of the Hours*.

### **6. And in today's world, Apps on your phone...**

- ...that guide you through prayer as you drive to work or walk your dog in the park.

- These are all examples of talking to God with pre-made prayers.

- This type of prayer is very helpful in a number of situations:

#### **1. When you're first learning to pray.**

- Think of how children learn to write, by tracing letters and then words on a page, before they write on their own; this is how God wired the brain to grow — by copying. And this is a great way to learn how to pray.

#### **2. When you're traveling and away from your daily prayer rhythm — you're on an airplane or in a hotel room. And you don't have the habit cues of your home life.**

#### **3. When you're exhausted and can't focus your mind very well, because you have a newborn, or you didn't sleep well the night before, or you're in a demanding season of school, or work, or caregiving.**

#### **4. When you're emotionally or physically unwell.**

#### **5. When you long for greater articulation in your prayer and you're searching for the right words to express your heart to God.**

#### **6. When you're in what St. John of the Cross called "the dark night of the soul" — a season where you don't feel God's presence like you used to.**

- In these situations and more, this can be a really helpful way to pray.
- Now, there are limitations to this type of prayer. It can feel impersonal or inauthentic or intellectual.
- It's very important with pre-made prayer that we slow down and bring our heart's intention to it, less it become rote.
- But if we open our heart to God, we tap into a quiet power that is running underneath the surface of the Kingdom of God.
- We are praying with the communion of the saints, adding our voice to millions around the world and down through history.
- We are praying with articulation and theological weight and beauty.

- We are guarding our mind from distraction and guiding it into God's presence and purposes.
- These pre-made prayers are a kind of scaffolding for building a temple of the Holy Spirit in our body.

**Seam:** *So, this coming week, our Practice is to begin to develop a daily prayer rhythm. And to explore when and where and how to pray.*

### Ending:

- We have all sorts of recommendations for you, but really there's no "right way" to pray.
- Ronald Rolheiser writes:
  - "There's no bad way to pray and no single starting point for prayer. The spiritual masters offer one nonnegotiable rule: You have to show up for prayer and show up regularly. Everything else is negotiable and respects your unique circumstances."
- So as you practice, remember, the ultimate aim of prayer is not to master a discipline. It's not to master anything; it's to *be* mastered, and as a result, be set free.
- The point of prayer is to open our heart to God, to offer deeper and deeper parts of our life and world to him to heal and save, and to move farther down the path toward what ancient Christians called "union" with God.
- Union is the answer to Jesus' own prayer for his apprentices in John 17:
  - "Father, just as you are *in* me and I am *in* you. May they also be *in* us so that the world may believe that you have sent me." (**John 17v21**)
- As the 14th century Englishwoman **Julian of Norwich** once said:
  - "The whole reason why we pray is to be *united* into the vision and contemplation of God to whom we pray."
- Whether you pray the Lord's Prayer or Psalm 23 or Gregorian chant.
- The whole point is just to live more and more of our days receiving and giving the love of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.
- And while we never "arrive," that is our ultimate aim; and prayer is the way.
- So, this coming week, as you begin, I can't think of a better place to start than the disciples' simple request: "Lord, teach us to pray."



# Teaching Outline

## Intro hook:

- Just a few nights ago we had our friends over for dinner, who have two little kids, a baby and a preschooler. The baby is just learning to talk. All night long, he was making noises that I could not decipher, but I was watching his parents teach him to speak. “Say, hi. Say, please. Say, thank you.” Teaching the child to talk *to* me.
- The preschooler, on the other hand, had a basic grasp of the English language and was learning to talk *with* me.
- At the very end of the night, she came up to me and — shy and bashful — asked me a question. And then sat there in a squirrely four-year-old kind of way, listening for my reply...
- Both children are going through a God-created process of learning how to communicate and commune with others.
- In a similar way, we are working through a four-stage progression in the life of prayer:
  1. Talking to God
  2. Talking with God
  3. Listening to God
  4. And being with God
- And while the spiritual journey is *not* linear, most of us learn to pray just like children. First, we learn the vocabulary and grammar of life with God. Say, Daddy. Say, mommy. Say, Our Father who is in heaven... To talk to God.
- But there comes a time when we desire a more personalized relationship to God. More grounded in the highs and lows of *our particular* life... so we begin, most of us intuitively, to talk *with* God. Just meaning, to tell him what’s on our mind.

**Seam/interlude:** Turn again in your Bibles to **Luke 11**... We see this progression — from talking to God to talking with God — in Jesus’ central teaching on prayer. We left off last Session in verse four; let’s pick it up in verse five...

## Luke 11v5-13

5 Then Jesus said to them, “Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.’ And suppose the one inside answers, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.

- This is a rabbinic form of teaching that NT scholars call “how much more.”
- It’s Jesus’ way of drawing attention to a point.
- His point is not that God is the grumpy neighbor with a “do-not-disturb” sign on his front door, but if you bang loud enough he’ll give you what you want; it’s, if the grumpy, begrudging neighbor will answer your request, how much more will our Father?
- Jesus goes on...

9 “So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

- And then, notice, Jesus goes straight to the metaphor of a father and his child...

11 “Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? 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 the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

### Progression:

- Do you see the progression?
- Jesus *starts* by teaching his disciples to talk *to* God — meaning, to pray a pre-made prayer. “When you pray, recite this: *Our Father who is in heaven...*”
- But he assumes his disciples will move on to talk *with* God... to come to our Father, with all we need and desire.
- This progression is kind of like learning to play music. I played in bands for years. And the first thing you do is learn basic music theory and scales and chords on your guitar. You have to learn to *play other people’s* music, before you can learn to *write your own* music.
- When you watch a savant like John Coltrane — he’s so mastered all the ins and outs of music, that now he’s just feeling his way into each song.

- In the same way, we begin to pray by learning the basics of life with God, but then we move onto just riffing in our conversation with our Father.
- Or what we are calling, *talking with God*.

**Seam:** Now, under this second category of talking with God, there are three sub-categories. They are:

**Overview:**

1. Gratitude — talking with God about what is *good* in your life and world
2. Lament — talking with God about what is *evil* in your life and world
3. Petition and Intercession — asking God to fulfill his promises to overcome evil with good.

**Seam:** A short word on each. First off, gratitude...

**Gratitude — talking with God about what is good in your life and world:**

- **Ignatius of Loyola**, the founder of the Jesuit Order, said the beginning point for this type of more interactive prayer is “to give thanks to God our Lord for the benefits received.”
- He called ingratitude— “the failure to recognize the good things, the graces, and the gifts received. As such, [ingratitude] is the cause, beginning, and origin of all evil and sin.”
  - Think of Adam and Eve in the Garden; their sin was ultimately a failure to receive life as a gift, but rather, to take it as a right.
  - And while human rights are a thoroughly Christian concept; we must hold it in harmony with the fact that, ultimately, life is a *gift*.
- Therefore, gratitude isn’t just the beginning of prayer, it’s the heart and soul of our entire relationship to God.
- At the center of the Divine Dance we call the Trinity, is a generous, joyful, self-giving, others focused *love*.
- It is written, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son.” (**John 3v16**) And of Jesus, “He gave himself for our sins.” (**Galatians 1v4**) The Father gave the Son and the Son gave his life and the Father and the Son together gave the Holy Spirit.
- Generosity is at the center of the Gospel and the inner nature of God himself.

- Therefore, gratitude is the primary way we relate to God.
- Paul writes that we are to be, “overflowing with thankfulness”. (**Colossians 2v7**)
- The Jesuit Priest Timothy Gallagher says this:
  - “Recognizing God’s loving gifts and recognizing God’s loving presence through them — summarized by the word “gratitude” — lies at the very heart of our entire relationship with God.”
- One way to measure your spiritual maturity is by your level of genuine, unforced thankfulness.
- It’s been said that to be a saint is to live from grateful joy; to see all of your life as a gift.
- Secondly...

### **Lament — talking with God about what is evil in your life and world:**

- The honest truth is our life and world are both full of things that are *not* good, or beautiful, but are ugly and evil.
- What are we to do with all the pain and suffering we carry in our heart?
- Pray it!
- As **Pete Greig**, the founder of 24-7 Prayer would say, “Pray what you got!”
- If you have gratitude, pray that! Grief, pray that! Anger, pray that!
- It’s an open secret that many Christians find prayer boring; one reason for that is because they aren’t actually praying; they’re performing.
- We are so used to performing our life with other people; we edit our thoughts; to present a more polished image of ourselves to the world; in order to be loved, and not rejected, and succeed and not fail. It’s like we can’t help but carry that way of being over into our relationship to God.
- But C.S. Lewis said we are to lay before God what is in us, not what *ought* to be in us.
- Learning to pray is about learning to bring all we are to God, because he already knows *all* that’s inside you!
  - I think of **Psalm 139**: “You have searched me, LORD, and you know me... you perceive my thoughts from afar... Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely.” (**Psalm 139v1-4**)
- Talking honestly with God about our pain is a type of prayer called lament.
- It’s very rare in modern worship, but very common in ancient worship.

- Read the Psalms, the so-called “prayer book of the Bible.” Scholars tell us *two thirds* of the Psalms are lament! Read them — they are full of rage, anger, vengeance, jealousy, envy, doubt, suicidal ideation, etc. — and worse! Why would God put *that* in Scripture? Because we are full of rage, anger, vengeance, and more.
- One way of thinking about lament is as an emotionally healthy way of processing the pain of your life and world with God. Learning to complain to God. Because if we don’t complain to God, we’ll end up complaining to our spouse, or our friend group, or our boss, or the internet, etc. We’ll vent and rage and criticize and just leak emotional waste into the atmosphere.
- And another way of thinking about lament is a theological protest.
- Our generation is all about protest and speaking truth to power and the social media rant.
- What if we were to channel all that pent-up anger into prayer?
- The social activist **JT Thomas** calls this “pray-test” — and argues this kind of praying against evil and injustice does something both through us and *in* us...
- It’s a way of fighting with God, and against evil...
- As Ann Voskamp has said:  
*“Lament is a cry of belief in a good God, a God who has his ear to our hearts. A God who transfigures the ugly into beauty.”*

**Seam:** Now we’re getting into the third category. Lament will naturally lead you into...

### **Petition and Intercession — asking God to fulfill his promises to overcome evil with good:**

- Which are two sides of the same coin:
- Petition is when we *ask* God to do something on our behalf: God, help me get a job or make rent or know what to do in a tricky situation.
- Intercession is when we ask God to do something on someone *else’s* behalf.
- It’s a priestly work, standing before God on behalf of people and people on behalf of God.
- Intercession is a form of love. A way to carry one another’s pain into God’s healing light.
- And both petition and intercession are summarized by Jesus’ command to *ask*.
- **Paul Miller**, in his book ***A Praying Life***, writes:
  - “All of Jesus’ teaching on prayer in the Gospels can be summarized with one word: *ask*.”
  - Over and over again, Jesus says, “Ask, and it will be given to you.”
  - He regularly says to people, “What do you want me to do for you?”



- Many of us have *thought* about a problem in our life many times; but we have never stopped to *ask* Jesus to do something about it.
- But the 19th century Baptist preacher **Charles Spurgeon** said, “Whether we like it or not, asking is the rule of the kingdom.”

**Seam:** *But the single most important thing Jesus teaches his disciples about asking is to not just to ask, but ask “in Jesus’ name...”*

### “In Jesus’ name”

- For example, in a few chapters later in John, Jesus says, “I will do whatever you ask in my name...” (**John 14v13**)
- Most people put the tagline “in Jesus’ name” at the end of their prayer: “In Jesus’ name, amen.”
- But not *once* is it used that way in the NT.
- If it goes anywhere in a prayer, it should go at the *beginning*, not the end.
- Because it’s not a magic incantation you add to the end of your prayer to get what you want. Like the open sesame of the Kingdom of God.
- It’s a way of praying.
- There are two dimensions to asking “in Jesus’ name.”

#### 1. The first is to invoke our status as those who are “in Christ.”

- The NT scholar **Larry Hurtado** put it this way:  
 “To pray in Jesus’ name ... means that we enter into Jesus’ status in God’s favor, and invoke Jesus’ standing with God.”
- It means that when we come before our Father, we come not as beggars off the street, but as royal sons and daughters, adopted into the family through Christ — what the NT writer Paul calls “co-heirs with Christ.”
- We come in the name and authority of King Jesus with access to the full resources of the Kingdom.

#### 2. The second is to pray in alignment with Christ.

- In the ancient world, a person’s name was a synonym for their nature or character.
- We ask “in Jesus’ name” when we ask for the kinds of things Jesus would ask for in a given situation. *That’s* the sacred alignment through which the miraculous power of God flows.

- This is why, if you pay close attention to the prayers of Scripture, be it from Moses in the OT or Paul in the New, they don't pray problems, they pray promises!
- They call on God to do what they know God *desires* to do!

**Seam:** *But to pray in Jesus' name, we must come to believe that our prayers actually make a difference in what does or does not happen.*

### **Prayers make a difference:**

- The theologian **Walter Wink** said this beautifully:
  - "Intercessory prayer is spiritual defiance of what is in the way of what God has promised. Intercession visualizes an alternative future to the one apparently fated by the momentum of current forces. Prayer infuses the air of a time yet to be into the suffocating atmosphere of the present. History belongs to the intercessors, who believe the future into being. Even a small number of people, firmly committed to the new inevitability on which they have fixed their imaginations, can decisively affect the shape the future takes. These shapers of the future are the intercessors."
- Tragically, very few modern Christians actually believe this. That through prayer we can "decisively affect the shape the future takes."
- Much less think of prayer as "spiritual defiance."
- Few of us live with Jesus' worldview, what some theologians call a "warfare worldview," that sees humanity as besieged by evil forces, and Jesus as it's Savior come to liberate occupied territory with the Kingdom of God, and prayer as how we join Jesus in the fight.
- There is a deadly undercurrent of determinism in the modern church.
- Like the ancient Greeks, many believe we are trapped by the fates!
- Listen to the philosopher **Dallas Willard**:
  - "God's 'response' to our prayers is not a charade. He does not pretend that he is answering our prayer when he is only doing what he was going to do anyway. Our requests really do make a difference in what God does or does not do. The idea that everything would happen exactly as it does regardless of whether we pray or not is a specter that haunts the minds of many who sincerely profess belief in God. It makes prayer psychologically impossible, replacing it with dead ritual at best. ...of course this is not the biblical idea of prayer, nor is it the idea of people for whom prayer is a vital part of life."
- Think of the Lord's Prayer: "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

- Jesus assumes:
  1. That the Kingdom of God's will is *not* yet come and his will is not yet done, at least in full.
  2. That prayer actually makes a difference in what does — or does *not* — happen!
- Of course this raises all sorts of questions about the tension between God's power and good intentions — or what some call Sovereignty or Providence — and human free will.
- Is prayer something God is doing in me? Or something I am doing with God?
- Both.
- God is king of the world; but he's not a dictator. He hasn't totally taken his hands off the wheel, but he really has entrusted a level of management of the world to his sons and daughters, and prayer is one of the ways we steward our task as co-rulers with Jesus in his world.
- The Reformed theologian R.C. Sproul said it this way:
  - “The prayer of his people is one of the means he uses to bring things to pass in this world. So if you ask me whether prayer changes things, I answer with an unhesitating “Yes!”
- To pray is both a moral responsibility and a spiritual opportunity to partner with God to bend the arc of human history in the direction of his Kingdom.

### **Ending:**

- But as we pray, we must never forget that...
- Whether we come to God with...
  - Gratitude
  - Or lament
  - Or petition and intercession...
- Through it all, God is forming us into the answers to our own prayers.
- Prayer is a way we ask God to act and do things only he can do in the world; and it is a way of giving God the space to do what only he can do in us.
- So, this coming week, may our anthem be: Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth, and in our own heart, as it is in heaven.

# Teaching Outline

## Intro:

- Just before her death, Mother Teresa made a rare television appearance on 60 Minutes.
- At one point in the interview, the journalist asked her, “When you pray to God, what do you say to God?”
- She answered, “I don’t say anything; I listen.”
- She was referring to a stage of prayer that, sadly, many followers of Jesus never step into, but for those who do, it’s a whole other dimension of life with God.
- We are working through four dimensions or stages of prayer:
  - Talking to God
  - Talking with God
  - Listening to God
  - And being with God
- Up next is listening to God.
- And while these four stages are not a linear progression; most of us start our prayer life like a child; by speaking other people’s words.
- As we mature, we begin to pray our own words.
- But in time, we desire not just to speak to God, but to listen to God. To hear God’s voice.
- Now, this raises all sorts of questions about what exactly we mean by “God’s voice”; and for many of you, this likely brings up a lot of fear and trepidation...
- But the desire to hear God’s voice in prayer is a Spirit-generated desire in the heart of a disciple of Jesus.
- As my seminary professor Gerry Breshears once said to me, “Learnin g to hear God’s voice is the single most important task of a disciple of Jesus.”
- He was not making that up; he was getting that from Jesus himself.

**Seam/interlude:** *If you have your Bible, turn over to John 10... In context, Jesus is teaching, and he is likening himself to a shepherd and his disciples to his sheep... Verse two...*

### **John 10v2-6:**

*“The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.”*

- Jesus is saying that all those who are truly his “sheep” — a word picture for his disciples — will “know his voice” and “follow” it.
- For Jesus, discipleship to him is not just about the learning of doctrine or following a Rule of Life — it’s an interactive, dynamic, living relationship.
- It was said of Jesus’ disciple, Mary, that she “sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said.” (Luke 10v39)
- To “sit at the feet” was an idiom for discipleship in the first century.
- And what is Mary doing at Jesus’ feet? Listening.
- A disciple of Jesus is one who is regularly found sitting at his feet, listening...

**Seam:** *But this idea of prayer as listening to God is not original to Jesus; it’s a central theme running all the way through the library of Scripture.*

### **The Shema:**

- We spent the last two Sessions on the Lord’s Prayer; because it’s the central prayer of the Way of Jesus.
- But there’s an even more ancient prayer, that Jesus himself would have grown up praying, because for over a millennium it was the anchor prayer of the Hebrew people; they would pray it three times a day; they would literally write it on little scraps of paper called phylacteries and bind it to their foreheads during daily prayer; and to the doorposts of their houses all week long.

- The prayer is found in Deuteronomy 6 and it's called the Shema, named after the opening word:
  - "Hear, oh Israel [Or in Hebrew: shema Israel]: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."
- That first word — shema — is hard to translate into English, because it kind of has two meanings: it means to hear, but also, to obey.
- It can also be translated to "heed" or to "listen."
- Think of when a parent says to their child, "Listen to me." They don't just mean make eye contact and pay attention; they also mean, Do what I'm asking you to do!
- This is the Father saying to his children, listen to me, and obey, and it will go well with you.
- Early on, the Shema became the center point of Israel's prayer life for millenia.
- In fact, when Jesus was asked what the most important command in all of Scripture was, he quoted the .Shema...life
- For Jesus, to listen and obey is the single most important thing in all of the spirituaIt's one way of summarizing all of Christian discipleship.

Now, many of you likely have mixed feelings about the word "obey." It goes against the dogma of our "be true to yourself" culture.

- But a disciple is one who is listening for Jesus' voice, in order to go out and obey it.
- Jesus' final words to his disciples in Matthew 28(v19-20) were:
  - "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."
- Learning to hear Jesus' voice is one of the great tasks of a disciple; learning to obey his voice is an even greater task.
- To do this, we must come to believe, come to trust, that obedience is not an obstacle on the path to a happy life, it is the path.
- Ignatius of Loyola defined sin as "unwillingness to trust that what God wants for me is only my deepest happiness."
- Until we come to trust — in the deepest parts of our hearts — that what God wants for us is only our deepest happiness, we will not desire to even hear God's voice, much less obey it!
- In fact, we won't want to know what God is saying to us!
- But once we come to trust Jesus' good intentions toward us; the driving aim of our life will increasingly become to listen for his voice...

- Not to control our life, but to more deeply surrender it.
- Many people only attempt to discern God's voice when they face a major decision and are scared of the future. Often, this isn't so much an attempt to listen and obey, as it is a kind of divination or magic — an attempt to bypass pain.
- But when we sit down and listen to Jesus, our goal is not to get divine fortune cookies about which way our life will go.
- It's to follow the intimations of our shepherd, wherever he may lead, even when, like in Jesus' own story, the Father calls us toward pain, not away from it.
- Listen, and obey.

### **Hinge:**

- The question is, how? How do we "hear" God's voice?
- God doesn't have a body. He doesn't have vocal chords that make sound waves.
- And there's no one-size-fits-all formula for how to discern his voice. Because God comes to each of us inside the contours of our own life — our personality, background, stage of life. In fact, you likely already hear God way more than you realized, but like young Samuel in the Temple, you may not recognize it as God yet.
- God does speak, but not in the ways we're used to.

**Seam:** *Let me offer you six ways we hear God's voice.*

- Jesus
- Scripture
- Circumstances
- Desire
- The prophetic
- Listening prayer

First, and foremost, is...

## 1. Jesus

- ... in Jesus himself.
- The author of the book of Hebrews in the New Testament writes:
  - “In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.” (Heb. 1v1-3)
- In fact, Jesus is called “the word” all through the NT.
- Modern Christians refer to the Bible as “the word,” but when you read “the word” in the NT, it’s usually referring to Jesus and the good news of his kingdom.
- Hearing God’s voice begins and ends with Jesus... the Word...
- All the other ways God communicates come through Jesus and point back to Jesus.
- That said, God does speak to us through...

## 2. Scripture

- Some of the library we call the Bible is the written record of God’s audible voice from heaven — such as the Ten Commandments in the Torah, or the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospels.
- But much of the Bible is God speaking through the minds of human writers.
- And yet, all of it is a way to listen to and to obey God.
- The Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck said:
  - “Holy Scripture is not an arid story or ancient chronicle but the ever-living, eternally youthful Word, which God, now and always, issues to His people. It is the eternally ongoing speech of God to us.”
- Now, there are all sorts of ways to approach Scripture — but long ago the monks developed one way that is especially designed to hear God’s voice.
- They call it *lectio divina*, a Latin phrase meaning “spiritual reading.”
- Where you read a short passage of Scripture slowly and quietly and prayerfully. And you ask the Holy Spirit to illuminate a particular word or phrase or idea to speak to you.
- It’s different from Bible study. If Bible study asks, What did this text mean to them, then, and how do we apply it to our life, now? *Lectio* asks, How is God coming to me personally through this text?



- Now, we have to be careful here, not to manipulate the Bible, or allow the deceiver to manipulate the Bible, as he tried to do with Jesus in the desert.
- We're not asking for a new meaning; we're asking for what aspect of the original meaning the Holy Spirit is wanting to directly impress into our own life.
- This way of reading the Bible has become an earphone to God's voice for countless followers of Jesus down through the ages.

**Pause:**

- Now, a lot of people stop here.
- Honestly, many Christians think, or at least live, as if a long time ago God said a whole bunch of important things, and people wrote them down, but ever since heaven has been silent.
- And while the cannon is closed...
- Heaven is anything but silent.
- The God whose first recorded act in all of Scripture was to speak the cosmos into existence...
- Whose Son said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word which proceeds from the mouth of God..."
- Who call me by the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 and immediately caused his new church to prophesy... to speak on his behalf.
- That God is still speaking.
- Let me offer you a few more ways he does that. The third way we hear God's voice is through...

**3. Circumstances**

- Now, this is an area where there is a wide spectrum of Christian thought.
- Some disciples of Jesus emphasize God's sovereignty or rule over the events of life, and others give more place to human free will and demonic rebellion against God's rule, but all disciples of Jesus agree that at least some of the circumstances of our lives are the shepherd's voice coming to us to lead and guide us — opportunities, closed doors, limitations, giftings, relationships, where and when and to whom we are born, the situations we find ourselves in — God is often in those circumstances, coaxing us forward by his voice.

- As Paula D'Arcy once said, "God comes to us disguised as our life."
- Learning to discern how God is coming to you through the events (or non-events) of your life is a key part of learning to hear God's voice.
- Fourth, is...

#### **4. Desires**

- One of the ways we discern God's voice is by listening — both carefully and critically — to the desires of our heart.
- Much of secular culture tells us "be true to yourself" and just "follow your heart" and it will lead you to happiness. But this is, at best, a half truth.
- The writers of the Bible itself have a far more sophisticated view of desire; they tell us the heart is complex, full of both beauty and ugliness; light and shadow.
- Some of our desires, left unchecked, would lead us over a cliff to ruin.
- But other desires are actually God at work deep in our heart.
- A professor of mine once said to me, "Sometimes our desires is God desiring through our desires."
- Generally, desire is a good indication of design. God made birds want to fly and fish want to swim.
- Of course, because our heart has been infected by the disease of sin, we have to sift through our desires to find God's desire within us.
- But overall, desire is one of the ways we "hear" God's voice.
- So, if you feel a desire to move to a new city, listen for God in that; if you feel a pull in your heart toward a career path or a new friendship, listen for God's will in that.
- Fifth...

#### **5. Prophecy, dreams and visions**

- God speaks to us through one another.
- In the NT, this falls under the umbrella of the prophetic.
- Prophecy is not primarily predicting the future or pronouncing judgment; most of it is what the Apostle Paul calls "[The one who prophesies speaks to people for their] strengthening,

encouragement, and comfort.” (1 Corinthians 14v3)

- In the charismatic tradition, people are often trained in how to hear God’s voice for other people; often, it’s as simple as opening your imagination to God before you pray over a person, and waiting to see if a word or phrase or line from the Bible or a picture or short film begins to play in your mind’s eye, and then offering that to the other person as a possible word from God, to be then tested against Scripture and in community.
- I believe deeply in this type of prayer, and, frankly, I could not explain my life to you apart from prophecy’s central role in my discipleship.

But other Christians would be very leery of that, and just say things like, When I was praying for you, I had this thought... Or, I felt like I was meant to share this verse with you...

- Often people “prophecy” without even knowing it, they just say to you whatever is on their mind, but as you hear it, you feel a weight from the Spirit of God, and you sense, that is a word for you.
- God also speaks through dreams, when we are asleep, and in visions, which are kind of like a waking dream.
- In scripture, in both the Old and the New Testament, this is one of the most common ways that God speaks.
- Finally, the other side of prophecy, and the most pertinent to our Practice is...

## **6. Listening prayer**

- Which is simply waiting quietly for God to speak into your mind or heart.
- You see, because the Holy Spirit is within you; God has direct access to your inner life.
- People often wonder, Why doesn’t God speak audibly? There’s no simple answer to that question, but one reason is, God doesn’t need to. He has direct access to your mind and imagination.
- Think about it: what is communication? It’s guided thought.
- When I say, Think about a sunset, what’s in your mind right now? A sunset. By listening to me, you are trusting me to guide your mind. Which is a bit creepy when I say it like that!
- God doesn’t need to speak in an audible voice to guide our mind; he can reach directly into our mindstream and direct our thoughts, feelings and desires by the Spirit.
- We often have a thought come to mind, and we think, “Is that God? No, it’s just in my head.”
- Of course it’s “in your head!”

- Your “head” is where thoughts are formed, emotions created, ideas born — all of life is “in our head” in that life is an experience of consciousness.
- Now, all our thoughts must be, like prophecy, tested, or weighed. To determine their source. But the truth remains, God can and will speak directly into our thought life.
- Why would Alexander Graham Bell mail a letter to his friend when he could pick up the telephone he invented and call him? Why would God speak audibly to us when he could guide our thoughts into his word and will?
- Of course, like Elijah in the cave in 1 Kings 19, most of us experience God’s voice as a “still small voice,” not a deafening yell. That Hebrew phrase can be translated a “gentle whisper” or even: “the sound of gentle silence.”
- Therefore, much of developing a rich prayer life with God is learning to quiet our mind and body; as our mind is jumpy and distractible and prone to anxiety and anger... and our world is more and more what C.S. Lewis called “a kingdom of noise.” Learning to quiet the outer and inner noise and to sit before God; and there wait for his voice.

**Seam:** *My point is: in prayer we are learning not just to speak to Jesus, but to listen to Jesus. To hear his voice. And obey.*

### **Discernment:**

- All of these ways of listening to God require what the New Testament calls “discernment.”
- The ability to sift through ideas and events and thoughts and feelings and clearly see — what is my own imagination, or worse, my flesh or sin, what is the evil one, and what is God’s voice coming to me.
- Without this, we could get wildly off base, or worse: open our mind to lies from the world, the flesh, and the devil himself.
- Discernment is an absolute necessity as we learn to hear God’s voice.
- And discernment is both a work of the Spirit within us, and a skill we develop over time.
- And it’s something we do in community, not alone.
- But again: growing in discernment, and with it, our ability and willingness to hear Jesus’ voice, is a key task of discipleship.
- As Jesus said later in the same passage we started with: “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.” (John 10v27)

- How do we grow in the ability to discern Jesus' voice from all the other voices in our head? Simple: the same way we learn how to discern the voice of our best friend or our spouse or our parents when we're babies — by long hours of listening. Our brains come to recognize, almost immediately, a person's voice. Think of the saying, "I'd know that voice anywhere..."
- You can do this! If a sheep — not known as the most intelligent of animals! — can learn to recognize their shepherd's voice, and distinguish it from the voice of the thief and robber, then surely we can learn to do the same.
- So, our exercises for you this coming week are all about learning to quiet your mind and listen for God's voice.
- But hearing God's voice takes more than a quiet mind, it also takes a surrendered heart. After all, why would God speak to us if we're not going to heed his voice?
- Like Mary, we must begin to sit at Jesus' feet, and listen for his word.
- We must say yes to Jesus' invitation: "If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear..."

# Teaching Outline

## Intro hook:

- In the last session I told you the story of Mother Teresa, where the journalist Dan Rather asked her, “When you pray to God, what do you say?” and she answered, “I don’t say anything, I listen.” But I left the story unfinished.
- If you watch the interview, after her response there’s an awkward moment, where he is a bit thrown off; then he asks her the follow up question, “Okay, when you pray to God, what does he say to you?”
- She’s quiet for a minute, and then answers, “He doesn’t say anything, he listens....”
- Then there is a very awkward moment and she clarifies, “And if you don’t understand that, I can’t explain it to you.”
- She was referring to a dimension of prayer that goes beyond words to simple, loving presence...
- Over the last three Sessions, we’ve covered three stages of prayer:
  - Talking to God
  - Talking with God
  - And listening to God
- Now we come to the final stage: being with God.
- To reiterate: these are not “stages” in that you never mature beyond one.
- For example, you never mature beyond the need to ask God for help, anymore than an NBA player matures beyond dribbling.
- But there is a progression: in basketball, you start by learning the rules of the game and practicing dribbling, not by trying nothing-but-net from the three point line.
- But the farther we progress in prayer — just meaning, in our life with God — the more we grow to love him and desire to talk with him, yes, and listen to him, even more, but also, to just be with him in love...
- As a general rule, in relationships — with God or otherwise — you can gauge the level of intimacy in that relationship by how comfortable you are being alone together in silence.

- Early on, relationships are full of a lot of words and activity, and that's good; but as you grow closer, you continue all that, but you are also more at ease with one another and desire time to just be together.
- All human analogies fall short here, but in marriage, there is a level of intimacy that is literally the intermingling of persons at the deepest level, that is wordless, yet deeply loving, that the mystics have long said is ultimately a picture of our union with God.

**Seam:** *When applied to prayer, this level of wordless communion has come to be called “contemplation.”*

- Now, contemplative prayer means different things to different people at different times and places in church history.
- But there are three basic dimensions to contemplative prayer:
  - Looking
  - Yielding
  - Resting
- A short word on each.
- The first is...

### **1. Looking at God, looking at you, in love.**

- Turn in your Bibles to 2 Corinthians 3... [interlude]
- The label “contemplative prayer” is based on language found in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, where he writes in verse 18...
- “We all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory.”
- Did you see the word in there? “We all who with unveiled faces...” And the imagery here is of a bride in intimacy with her husband... “Contemplate.”
- The word is *kato-treezo/κατοπτρίζω* in Greek, and it can be translated “to gaze at.” Or “to direct the inner gaze of your heart at.”
- Another name for contemplative prayer is “beholding prayer,” because in it, we behold, we look at, in Paul’s language, “the Lord’s glory.”

- Glory in the NT doesn't mean God's fame or celebrity status, as it does in the Country Music Awards — "Glory to God." It means God's presence and beauty.
- In the OT, God's glory was the cloud over Mt. Sinai or the Tabernacle.
- To contemplate God's glory is to look at his beauty and goodness and love pouring out toward you.
- This is the essence of our faith.
- As A.W. Tozer once said:  
*"Faith is not a once-done act, but a continuous gaze of the heart at the Triune God. Believing, then, is directing the heart's attention to Jesus. It is lifting the mind to "behold the Lamb of God," and never ceasing that beholding for the rest of our lives. At first this may be difficult, but it becomes easier as we look steadily at His wondrous Person, quietly and without strain."*
- Of course this raises the question, How do we "look" at a God who is invisible? It is written, "No one has seen God."
- Bonaventure — the medieval intellectual monk — said we each have three eyes:
  - The eye of the body — by which we see the world around us
  - The eye of the mind — by which we see the world within us - ideas and concepts.
  - And the eye of the heart — by which we see God.
- As St. Theophan the Recluse put it, "To pray is to descend with the mind into the heart, and there to stand before the face of the Lord, ever-present, all seeing, within you."
- St. John of the Cross said, in this kind of prayer we "remain in loving attention on God."
- This is the most basic aspect of contemplation: loving attention on our Father, and on his love and compassion and goodwill coming toward us in Christ and by the Spirit. Secondly, it's...

## **2. Yielding to his love**

- There is a type of prayer where you are laboring with God to change what is — petition and intercession — and that is good and necessary; but there is another type where you are laboring, not to change, but to accept what is...
- Think of Jesus in Gethsemane. He begins by praying, "Father, let this cup pass from me!" He's trying to change the circumstances of his life! But he ends by praying, "Not my will, but yours be done."
- This yielding, this letting go of outcomes, this surrender of our will to God's will... is at the



heart of contemplative prayer.

- The NT theologian Robert Mulholland said it's...
- *"The deep inner posture of a joyful release of our life and being to God in absolute trust, without demands, without conditions, without reservation... [it is] neither a passive resignation nor a fatalistic acquiescence to whatever comes. It is, rather, a consistent posture of actively turning our whole being to God so that God's presence, purpose, and power can be released through our lives into all situations."*
- It's just, God, here I am, I'm yours.
- Not as an act of "submission"; but of surrender to love.
- Walter Hilton called contemplation "love on fire with devotion."
- Finally, it's...

### 3. Resting in God's love

- Asking — whether it be petition or intercession — feels like work, because it is. We're co-laboring with God to bring his kingdom to birth in our life and world!
- For that reason, Orthodox Jews forbid all intercessory prayer on the Sabbath.
- But contemplative prayer feels less like work and more like rest — more like a portable Sabbath.
- That's why it feels very different from the previous three stages — it's less something we do, and more something God does in us.
- Ultimately, we just come to rest in his love...
- That's mostly what prayer is, the medium by which we experience the love of Christ.
- It's how we experience the answer to Paul's prayer in Ephesians:
  - *"I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."* (Ephesians 3:16-19)
- This type of prayer is how we are "filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."
- What the saints have long called his "loving light."
- St. Teresa of Ávila just called this type of prayer "silent love."

And St. Augustine said, “True, whole prayer is nothing but love.”

- In the modern world, where so many of us live in a state of chronic fatigue from our performance-oriented culture, this type of prayer, just resting in and receiving the gift of his love for us, receiving our identity as well-loved sons and daughters of our Father, and then offering our love back in worship... is our lifeline.

### **Hinge:**

- It comes as no surprise that contemplative prayer is at the heart of spiritual formation —the process by which we are formed into people of love in Christ.
- Look back at Paul’s letter... again, 2 Corinthians 3, in verse 18...
- He writes that as we “contemplate the Lord’s glory” we are “being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”
- That word “transformed” is metamorphao in Greek, where we get the word metamorphose, the word for how a caterpillar is transformed into a butterfly. It’s the word and word picture for the type of change that is possible in Christ, and the process by which we change, or what is called “spiritual formation.”
- In Paul’s framework, the core of this change is contemplation, or looking at God himself.
- The Singaporean writer Hwee Hwee Tan said, “You are what your mind looks at; you are what you contemplate.”
- Think about it: people who spend hours every day reading or watching angry political news, tend to become angry, political, radicalized by ideology, etc.
- People who spend hours every day scrolling on Instagram or Twitter tend to become angry, or anxious, or emotional...
- People who spend hours every day watching dirty TV tend to become lustful, addictive, etc.
- We become like whatever it is we gaze upon, whether that’s a TV or the Trinity.
- Therefore, the yellow line down the middle of the pathway to become like Jesus is looking at Jesus.
- One way we do this is by reading Scripture, especially the four gospels, and another way is through prayer where we “look” with the eyes of our heart upon Jesus.
- This is how God designed your brain to grow and develop!
- Your brain is full of mirror neurons that cause you to take on the properties of whoever or whatever you look at. When someone smiles, what do you do? You likely smile back.

- If somebody glares at you, it's likely you do this (flinch) or glare back!
- The secular neuroscientist Dr. Andrew Newberg in his book *How God Changes Your Brain* writes:
  - *"If you contemplate God long enough, something surprising happens in the brain. Neural functioning begins to change... [we have ] a nervous system that actively participates in its own neural construction, something we do not see in other animal brains."*
- Basically, there's a little part of our brain called the anterior cingulate, that sits between our limbic system and prefrontal cortex. When stimulated, it decreases our impulses of anger and fear, and it increases our feelings of compassion.
- Very simply, as we contemplate the love of God coming toward us, it literally rewires our brain... and makes us into more compassionate and loving people.
- But the opposite is also true; if your view of God is of an angry, authoritarian tyrant in the sky, it also changes your brain... and Newberg argues, has a similar effect to PTSD, and changes your brain to make you more fearful and aggressive.
- The Anglican Bishop William Temple once observed that if people have a wrong view of God, the more religious they become, the worse they will become.
- This is why it's so incredibly essential to think Christianly or "Christ-ianly" about God.
- Because as we contemplate God's love, we become more loving.
- As it is written in Psalm 34: "Those who look to him are radiant." As we look at God's beauty, we become more beautiful.
- This is the gift of contemplative prayer.

**Seam:** *And contemplative prayer isn't just for monks, nuns and introverts!*

- Anyone can and I would argue should pray contemplatively.
- But that's not to say, it's easy. It's hard!
- You will face three major challenges:
  - Distraction
  - Hurry
  - Fear

- First is...

## 1. Distraction

- The moment you begin to sit in loving attention to God; without words, your brain will start to jump all over the place... “I need to pick this up from the grocery store, and...” Oh, God... “I can’t believe what she said to me. Or what I said to her...” Oh, God.
- That doesn’t mean you’re bad at prayer; it means you’re human!
- You have a mind.
- The mind is jumpy and distractible.
- That is a normal and natural part of your brain’s inner workings, and while it can be calmed and quieted over time with dedicated practice, distraction will never go away.
- The key to quieting distractions is not to give them a second thought. Literally. When they come — not if, but when — just bring your mind back to God.
- Thomas Keating — whose book *Open Mind, Open Heart* is the seminal work on what he calls Centering Prayer, writes about how, if your mind gets distracted a thousand times in ten minutes of prayer, that’s a thousand chances to come back to God.
- Secondly, you will have to face...

## 2. Hurry

- To be with God in this way, “You must,” as Dallas Willard once said, “Ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life.”
- But to do so, will force us to confront our impatience and how quickly we get bored.
- Henri Nouwen once called prayer “wasting time on God.”
- He didn’t actually mean it’s a waste of time.
- He meant, in our productivity-obsessed culture, where time is money, and money is God; where entertainment and stimulation fill every crevice of our time... to give God your time and loving attention... for him to do, or not do, with it as he pleases... is “wasteful” — in the eyes of our culture. But like the story in John’s gospel of Mary pouring out expensive perfume on Jesus’ feet, it’s an act of love and worship... and it’s the only fitting response to the beauty of who Jesus is.
- Because, again, the main thing we “get” out of prayer isn’t different life outcomes from God; it’s God himself.

- The third thing we have to face is our...

### 3. Fear

- Whatever is down in us will come up to the surface in prayer.
  - Desire for God; lack of desire for God.
  - Love; hate, anger; anxiety, insecurity, envy, jealousy, hurt, regret, etc.
  - All the inner turmoil and tension we carry in our body... will come up in the quiet.
- As we begin to pray contemplatively, we become more and more aware of how we've been using distraction, hurry, noise, work, people, entertainment, food, shopping, and a thousand other cultural narcotics to run from our pain.
- Now, all of that pain is in you and me, and it is likely leaking out in all sorts of unhealthy ways.
- In quiet prayer, we create space for it to come up in a healthy way; and for us to offer it to God to heal.
- And that is scary for a lot of people.
- But if you stay with contemplative prayer long enough, you will move through that inner turmoil to a kind of surrender, freedom, and inner peace.
- Pay attention and you will notice that the people who give themselves to God in quiet prayer over a long time tend to be very calm and happy.

**Hinge:** *All that to say, in light of these challenges, and there are more, you will quickly realize that to pray contemplatively, you have to adopt a contemplative lifestyle. Put another way, to be with Jesus in this way, we have to slow down to a more prayerful pace.*

- As a general rule, how you are outside of prayer is how you will be inside of prayer.
- If you are stressed and hurried, and distracted by your phone, when you sit down to pray, all of that will bleed into your time.
- We must slow down to what the Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama called "the speed of love."

**Seam:** *One way of thinking about discipleship to Jesus in the modern era is about slowing your life down to pray; it's about arranging, or for most of us re-arranging, our life around God.*

## The Daily Prayer Rhythm:

- Historically, the way followers of Jesus have done this for thousands of years is through cultivating a daily prayer rhythm.
- In the Hebrew tradition, that Jesus himself would have gone by, there has long been a rhythm of stopping three times a day to pray — morning, noon, and night.
- You see this all through the Psalms, and famously with the story of Daniel and the lions in Babylon.
- In Acts 2, on the Day of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit happened during morning prayer.
- As did several other key inflection points in Acts' story of the first Christians.
- St. Benedict and the monastics upped the rhythm from three to six times a day.
- The Book of Common Prayer dialed that back to twice a day — morning and evening — to make it more accessible for non-monks and nuns.
- But the idea is all the same, that to pray all the time, we need to pray much of the time. To practice the presence of God all day long, we need to pause at intervals throughout the day, even for only a few minutes, and come back to our home in God; and his home in us.

## Ending:

- In the same way, the end goal of a daily prayer rhythm is what Paul called “praying without ceasing.” What A.W. Tozer called “constant conscious communion.” What Madame Guyon called “a continuous inner abiding.”
- To live, as Jesus did, saturated in the loving light of the trinitarian presence.
- Looking at God, looking at you in love, yielding to his love, and resting in his love...
  - Can you imagine a more compelling, beautiful life?
  - If you ache for that kind of life, start right where you are..
  - Begin slowly, begin humbly, by being with God.