

Prayer can be a touchy subject. Because if we're completely honest, very few of us feel like we're any good at it. Chances are, your prayer life doesn't meet even the modest standards you set for yourself, let alone the perfect standard of God's Word. And that's true even of pastors like myself.

I grew up with a mother who prayed... a lot. Prayer was a part of my life from birth. Not just at mealtime or bedtime, but throughout the day. My mom liked to pray. And I learned to pray from her.

Yet, even after all that time watching her pray, hearing her pray, practicing prayer with her, I still feel very awkward when I pray. I don't feel very like my prayers are very eloquent. Like I express my thoughts very well. And I certainly don't feel like I pray as often as I ought to.

Maybe that's why, even though I grew up in a congregation with fairly contemporary worship, I've always gravitated back toward the traditional liturgy. I can set all that worry and awkwardness aside and just embrace what men wiser and more eloquent than I have already written. In the ways and at the times that they have suggested.

Whatever the case, if you feel like your not very good at praying, you're definitely not alone. And passages like Paul's encouragement in 1 Thessalonians to “rejoice always” and “pray without ceasing” can often feel like a tremendous burden. Because, I suppose if we truly did pray without ceasing, in complete faith that we have a Father who's listening and answering, then we would easily rejoice always.

But we don't pray without ceasing. We don't have complete faith that our heavenly Father is listening and answering. And so we are filled with worry, sadness, and frustration.

In the Old Testament Reading, we read about a man who understood the struggle of prayer. Jacob is returning to Canaan. Fleeing away from one enemy: his father-in-law Laban. But also fleeing towards another potential enemy: his brother Esau. Who he expects is still quite angry about that whole stealing-the-birthright-for-a-bowl-of-soup thing. So Jacob is right smack in a middle of a rock and a hard place.

Why is Jacob going to Canaan, if he's so afraid of his brother? Well, because God commanded him to. And for possibly the first time in his life, Jacob has put his faith in God. After an entire lifetime of scheming and stealing and backstabbing, Jacob has decided to be the patriarch that God always wanted him to be.

Jacob trusts that God will do whatever is best for him. But he's still not going to put his family in unnecessary danger. So he sends Leah and Rachel and his children and servants ahead to a safe location, and is left by himself for the night.

What happens next is rather remarkable. A man shows up and wrestles with Jacob all night long. Apparently, it was quite a match, because neither could defeat the other before morning comes. But as things unfold, we slowly begin to realize that this was no ordinary wrestling match. Jacob wasn't wrestling just anyone. He was wrestling God Himself. God in the form and likeness of a man. He was wrestling with Jesus.

Now, all of this is rather odd, isn't it? Why in the world would Jesus want to wrestle with Jacob? And why was it so important that Jacob refused to let him go at daybreak?

Well, it has to do with Jacob's persistence. His perseverance. His faithfulness. Jacob has spent his entire life thus far doing things his own way. Suffering for doing things his own way. And running from the consequences. Jacob got into this whole mess because he tried to steal God's blessing from Esau, but not once does Jacob say to God, “Please give me your blessing.”

Until now. Until he literally grabs hold of God and refuses to let go until God gives him his blessing. Until he suffers the undoubtedly excruciating pain of having his hip dislocated and still refuses to run from his suffering. Because, at that moment, he has the love and faithfulness of God in his hands. And that is worth all the pain in the world.

And, in the process, Jacob is transformed. He is no longer Jacob: the man who schemes his way through life and run from every problem he's ever confronted. No, he is Israel: the man who kept struggling, even in the midst of pain and defeat, just so that he could have the blessing of the almighty God.

It's very much the same as what it means to be a Christian. The story of Jacob wrestling with God was a very real event. But it also serves as a bit of a parable for our lives as well. Because you also are sinful people living in a sinful world, like Jacob. You also are faced with the consequences of your actions and the actions of others, like Jacob. You also are tempted to run from suffering to your own solutions, like Jacob.

You wrestle with God... in your prayers. You ask for the things that you believe you need. You struggle with the prayers that are not answered as you hoped. You long for God's clear guiding and directing, and you groan under the weight of the trials that you must endure. But in the end, through your prayers and your wrestling, God changes you. Forms you. Molds you into something more like Jesus.

Jacob prevailed through this struggle. He told God, "I will not let You go unless You bless me." And he was absolutely right to do so. In the context of prayer, this would be something like "I won't stop praying until You answer me."

We hear a story just like that in the parable of the persistent widow in Luke, chapter 8. The one where the widow comes before the unrighteous judge again and again demanding justice, and he finally gives in. A parable in which Jesus emphasize how much greater the blessing is from a God who actually loves you and cares about you.

The problem is that most of us don't come to prayer prepared to go toe-to-toe with God all night long. As I said before, we don't feel very good at prayer. We're far more like Peter and James and John than we are like Jacob and Jesus: falling asleep when we should be praying, dozing off when we should be keeping watch. We don't know what to pray for. We don't know how to pray. And we give in to temptation when we try to pray. And very often, we just don't pray. Like those disciples, Jesus commands us over and over again to watch and pray. Yet we have wandered far away from prayer.

Now, I could tell you all sorts of solutions to this problem. As I mentioned, for me, using the liturgy is quite helpful. Praying at specific times of the day is helpful. Training to be more constant in prayer is helpful. But ultimately, you and I will never be as good at praying as we want. And we certainly won't be as good at praying as God wants.

St Paul, however, gives us a difference answer to our problem: don't worry about it. You don't know what to pray for? That's OK. You feel awkward and inadequate when you pray. That's OK. You realize that you don't pray as often as you should. That's OK.

Why? Because "the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words." And what the Spirit does, you can be sure He does perfectly. Your prayers may falter, but the Holy Spirit makes up for it. What you cannot do, God does for you. What you are unable to do, God does with ease. Where you fail, God is perfect.

You are a sinner and your prayer life reflects that. That's not a good thing. But it yet another part of you that Jesus has redeemed. That he has sanctified and made holy. What you could not do, Jesus did for you. Where you failed, Jesus was perfect.

Ultimately, your prayer life is not about you. It's not about how well you do it. God doesn't answer your prayers because you said them perfectly or repeatedly. He answers them because, like Jacob, you have been called according to his purpose. And he will help you in your weakness. Just like he always helps you in the weakness of your sinful flesh.

So we don't make ourselves the focus of our prayer life. We make the cross the focus of our prayer life. We let it comfort us as we speak our petitions to a loving God who sent His only Son to save us. Your feeble prayers do not define you before God. Rather, Jesus' perfection covers all of your sins and you bear His righteousness.

God commands you to pray. And like every command, the command to pray simply brings you to the foot of the cross, where you can look up and see the good news that covers your shortcomings. So a return to prayer, is simply a return to the Lord.

The Lord who gave his life for you. The Lord who prays with you. For you. And in your stead. That even when you don't know how to pray, your prayer is answered. Amen.