

# GROW

## AN SMBS SERIES

### Lesson 10 – The Right Means: Prayer

#### Teacher Edition



**Review:** So far we have seen that in order to change, you have to want to change and you have to be given a new nature so that you can change. Next we saw that in order to change, you need God’s help, although God still requires you to put forth effort as well. Then we got a broad overview of God’s masterplan for change: put off, be renewed, put on, and examined what it means to put off sin and what it means to be renewed. We saw that in order to renewed, we must have God’s grace, and that requires humility. That grace then comes through three channels that Scripture clearly gives us: Bible meditation, prayer, and fellowship.

**Overview:** This lesson will cover the next means of grace: prayer.

**Introduction:** The story of the emperor’s new clothes is a humorous one. The emperor of a small country hired two shrewd men to make him the most beautiful garments that had ever been seen. When done, the charlatans brought him nothing, but told him that because of its exquisite beauty only those with the most refined taste could even see the splendid piece of art. The emperor, not wanting to look foolish, pretended to see the garment, and even praised its elegance! His servants, not wanting to look foolish, did the same.

Soon a parade was in order, and the king put on his underwear, then the “new garment,” and was paraded about before the people. The whole kingdom had heard of the clothes so handsome only the most distinguished could see them, and not wanting to look silly or uncouth, all the people praised the great outfit. That is, until one little boy cried out, “The emperor has no clothes on!” Once the boy said what everyone was thinking yet afraid to say, laughter slowly began to spread

throughout the crowd. Eventually others chimed in with the boy, affirming that they too couldn't see clothes, until the whole gathering laughed uproariously at the funny sight of their leader in his underwear.

The moral of this somewhat odd story? Often we all think the same thing, yet are too scared to verbalize it. This can often happen in Christianity. Many Christians struggle with *how* to pray and study their Bibles, but for fear of others never get help. The result is that many silently struggle, too proud to admit their need and get help. So I'll say it. Praying is hard work, and knowing how to pray well isn't always obvious. It's easy on one hand: just talk to God. It's hard on the other hand: my flesh hates going to God, and I don't know what to talk about, and sometimes I feel like I'm just talking to myself, or repeating the same words over and over, and I don't always see how prayer is making a difference.

The disciples felt this way. They wanted to pray, but didn't know how. So when they heard Christ pray, they finally asked him "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). If Peter, James, and John needed Christ to teach them how to pray, how much more do we? Fortunately, Scripture contains much instruction on how and what to pray for.

Prayer is a huge topic, worthy of its own series. Scripture has much to say on the topic, because prayer is critical to our spiritual lives and because we struggle with how to pray. This lesson is taking a narrow focus on prayer for personal growth, but realize that prayer includes much more than this!

## **A. The Function of Prayer**

### **1. Prayer provides connection to God (1 Peter 3:18).**

When Christ died for us, it was to do more than just remove our sins, although it did remove our sins. Christ's sufferings for sin was intentional, it was "to bring us to God." Spiritual growth is more than just not doing bad things so that we can do good things. Spiritual growth is about getting closer to God, and in order to do that and as a result of doing that, we sin less and less. This is why prayer is so critically important in our spiritual growth, because it is through prayer that we draw closer to God (James 4:6).

Everything else that will be said in this section about pray is necessary and important, but it must be seen in the context of a relationship. If we're not careful, we can reduce our spiritual growth to a list of steps that can be accomplished almost robotically. "Twenty minutes of Bible reading; ten minutes of prayer; go to three services a week; and presto! You'll become holy!" While God does direct us to do things in order to grow, but those are all means to an end, that end being a growing relationship with the God of the universe. And it's pretty hard to have a relationship with someone you never talk to.

***How does viewing growth as a relationship with God change the way we think about it?***

The only way to grow closer to someone is to talk to them. We don't get to know people we never talk to. One of the signs that someone is close to you is often how easily you can talk to them. Perhaps you remember when you first met a close friend of yours and how awkward things were. Now you find you can talk for hours on end and not run out of things to talk about! The only way to get to know God is to talk to him, and to allow him to talk to you through his Word. Although at first both of these disciplines will be awkward and even hard, over time they become more natural, until you can't imagine life without daily, meaningful interaction with your heavenly Father.

**2. Prayer provides strength (Hebrews 4:16).**

We talked in a previous lesson about the fact that grace can mean either God's favor, or the strength he gives us to live our lives for him (2 Corinthians 12:9). We then discussed how God's enabling grace comes to us: through his word (Acts 20:32), through fellowship (Ephesians 4:29), and through prayer (Hebrews 4:16). Prayer is a means of God building us up so that we will have the ability to live for him.

**(Illustration)** This was a lesson that the apostle Peter learned all too late. In Mark 14:26-31 Christ warns that his disciples will deny him, to which Peter strongly argues that he would never deny Christ. Immediately following, the disciples go with Christ to the garden of Gethsemane, where Christ pours out his heart to the father in prayer (Mark 14:32-36). When he comes back, his disciples had fallen asleep. Yet Christ targets Peter, the one who has a strong temptation coming, the one who had set himself up as holy, with these words “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mark 14:37-38). In other words, you want to do what’s right, but you don’t have the strength on your own to do it. So what’s the solution? “Could you not watch [pray] one hour?” How many have struggled with temptation for years and have never sat down to pray for one hour?

Notice that here, as in the Lord’s Prayer, the prayer is specifically that the person would not enter into temptation (Matthew 6:13; Luke 11:4; cf Luke 22:40, 46). God gives us the strength to resist temptation and live rightly, but more importantly he wants us to be seeking to escape temptation (1 Corinthians 10:13). Praying that God would keep us from temptation helps put us in an appropriate “escapist mentality” where we are seeking to avoid temptation rather than to engage with it.

***What are some other ways in which Scripture repeats this theme of escaping temptation rather than fighting it? How can believers cooperate with God by seeking to avoid temptation?***

**3. Prayer provides wisdom (James 1:5-8).**

James begins his letter by telling his listeners that God is using all of the trials of their lives to mature them. He then transitions straight into a discussion on the importance of

gaining wisdom. So what is the connection between wisdom and maturity? We often think of wisdom as simply knowing things, but wisdom in the Bible runs deeper than that. Wisdom in the Old Testament is more the idea of skill in living. It is not only the ability to know what the right choice is, but the character to do it. This means that part of the growth process involves getting wisdom from God.

The claim of James 1 is astonishing. Pray in faith and you will receive wisdom. Growing in Christ can often be a confusing, difficult process. And yet in that perfecting process, as we try to figure what is right and what we're doing wrong, God's promise to freely give wisdom to whoever would ask shines as a beacon of hope for those crushed by their desire to grow but struggling to know how.

## **B. The Attitude of Prayer<sup>1</sup>**

### **1. Pray worshipfully**

***Consider handing out pieces of paper and ask people to write down their anonymous estimates as to what percentage of their prayers is spent in Confession/Praise/Petition. Read out loud the answers.***

Prayer should exalt God. Too often prayer becomes complaining, or going to God with a grocery list of requests. In our prayers we must keep our focus on the greatness and goodness of God, or our prayers will become more and more self-focused. This means both that we will specifically praise God for the good things he's done, but it will also impact the way we ask for our requests (Philippians 4:6).

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<sup>1</sup> Included in this lesson is a handout that covers these attitudes with Scripture passages. If you have time, you may want to pray through a few of them.

## 2. Pray humbly

The attitude with which we approach our Father should be one that remembers that “God is in heaven and you are on earth” (Ecclesiastes 5:2). This doesn’t mean we should pray less, but we should be careful when we pray. Pray should be intimate, but we must be careful when we go into the presence of our king (Hebrews 12:28-29).

***In what ways can an irreverent attitude in prayer be seen? What is the danger with such prayer?***

## 3. Pray thoughtfully (Matthew 6:7-8)

Christ here warns against empty, repetitious prayer. Unfortunately, it can become all too easy to put our brains in neutral as we pray, simply repeating the same phrases over and over without really giving them any thought.

Thinking in prayer takes effort. It isn’t something that requires concentration and thought. Our minds tend to wander, so don’t let them! Pray out loud if you have to. Write out your prayers and then recite them if that helps. Make sure your brain is engaged, because anything less than that isn’t prayer, it’s rambling.

EM Bounds began his classic work on prayer with the following paragraph: *“Prayer has to do with the entire man. Prayer takes in man in his whole being, mind, soul and body. It takes the whole man to pray, and prayer affects the entire man in its gracious results. As the whole nature of man enters into prayer, so also all that belongs to man is the beneficiary of prayer. All of man receives benefits in prayer. The whole man must be given to God in praying. The largest results in praying come to him who gives himself, all of himself, all that belongs to himself, to God. This is the secret of full consecration, and this is a condition of successful praying, and the sort of praying which brings the largest fruits.”*

***What are some “empty phrases” Christians commonly use in their prayers? What should you do if you use such phrases?***

## **C. The Methods for Prayer**

### **1. Pray Scripturally**

Do the ways you pray line up with the ways Paul, Daniel, or Christ prayed? Are the things that moved them the things that move you? So often our prayers are hollow because we don't know what to pray for, and when that is the case, there is no better place to go for content than the prayers of Scripture! Pray through a prayer of Paul, or a Psalm of David, or Daniel 9. Read the prayer back to God word for word, or paraphrase the passage. Included in this lesson is a handout for just this sort of exercise.

***Consider taking a passage such as [Philippians 1:9-11](#) or [Colossians 1:9-12](#) and work through them, asking for feedback about the types of things Paul prayed for.***

### **2. Pray Regularly**

Christ was often found taking time for communion with God (Luke 5:16, 6:12, 9:28; 11:1; 22:40-41). If he needed to pray, how much more do we! Prayer is something that needs to be scheduled into our days, or too often it just won't happen. While scheduling a time to pray might seem artificial or hypocritical, the reality is we rarely do things we don't plan to do. So plan to pray! Pick a small amount of time, say 5-10 minutes a day, and seek to spend that time praying to God. Spend time thanking him, asking him for help, and interceding for others. Remember, people are creatures of habit. And we are either in the habit of praying daily or we are in the habit of not praying. The best way to build a habit is to do something repetitively, whether we feel like it or not, until it a part of our regular activities.

### **3. Pray Systematically**

When someone you to pray for him or her, do you? How often do you pray for those closest to you: brother, sister, parent, friend? Consider making a prayer list to work through. Include specific requests from people that you have agreed to pray for. Pray through our church's missionaries or pastors (we have prayer guides for both in the lobby!). Include political leaders, lost friends, and other items you think deserve daily or weekly attention. Prayer like this requires a lot of effort, but it will make a huge difference in your life and in the lives of those you pray for.

***Ask for suggestions or tips people have from their own personal prayer lives.***

Perhaps one of the biggest takeaways from this lesson is the need to get better at praying. Prayer is a skill, and can and should be improved upon. Read Scripture about prayer, listen to preaching on prayer, and read good books on prayer. And pray. Pray quick prayers. Pray longer prayers. Pray through Scripture. Pray through lists. Thank God. Confess sin. Pray for yourself. Pray for others. Become a person of prayer and you will find that you are a person who grows.

***It would be odd to have a whole lesson about prayer and not pray! Consider using the prayer guide handout, picking a category or two, and praying through that as a group.***