

Touchstones of Prayer – Part 1

Various Scripture Passages

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Sometimes, we require a shock to make a change. Last weekend and this Friday, we received a great shock. Little white specks began floating down from the sky. Last Saturday, they floated down all day. By Sunday morning, so many of these white specks had fallen that they began to pile up on our yards, roof tops and roads. I take Villeneuve Road on the North West side of St. Albert on my way to church. It was snowy and ice covered. My non-winter tires betrayed their weakness in addressing these conditions. Thankfully, I arrived safely at church along with many others of you. Most of the piles of white specks disappeared this week until Friday.

But I suspect that some of us received a great jolt of motivation to address any deficiencies that may exist on our cars when it comes to dealing with winter; that season which is over 2 months away and due to start on Dec. 21. Some of us may have even gone into the garage this past week to see about getting winter tires on for the last 2 months of autumn.

While in the garage, they may have done a quick inspection of the rest of your car. They want to help you ensure that your car is ready and equipped to deal with the harshness of winter which is scheduled to arrive in over 2 months. They check the brakes, oil, transmission fluid, headlights, coolant levels, battery, spark plugs and any other potential problems that your car might have in dealing with that season that will arrive on Dec. 21.

It's good that they do this. But if you're anything like me, you kind of cringe when you hear they are doing their 68 point inspection. Because it's possible that they could find 68 problems that I don't want to hear about. Yet if there are problems, I do want to know about them. I don't want my car to be a health hazard. Sometimes we do need to stop and check the state of our car to judge its strengths and weaknesses. Then if we find weaknesses, it is wise to address them before the next season arrives so we can be well prepared for it.

The same is true in our prayer lives. It's valuable to stop every once in a while and evaluate its strengths and weaknesses. If we are doing something wrong or inappropriate in our prayer lives that actually hinders our prayers, it would be good to know about that. Did you know that you can hinder or cripple your prayers? Psalm 66:18 states "if I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened." Or James 4:3 states "You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly to spend it on your passions." I don't think anyone wants to pray in a way that obstructs our

communication with God. So even though it might be a little uncomfortable to hear the news of an inspection report on our prayer lives, it can help us strengthen or adjust where needed.

So imagine with me that you're taking your prayer life in for a 12 point checkup. Over the next 2 messages, we will discover 12 touchstones of prayer. A touchstone is a small rock that was rubbed against a piece of gold or silver to test its degree of purity or genuineness. Touchstones have finely grained surfaces on which soft metals leave a visible trace. So it serves as a testing stone. You could scrape your gold ring on the stone and it would leave a gold trace.

But the term touchstone developed to be used in other areas. The term came to mean - a basis for comparison; a reference point against which other things can be evaluated; a standard or criterion by which something is judged or recognized. Imagine that we're going to take each touchstone and scrape it against our prayer lives. As we scrape, I pray God's Spirit will gently scrape our hearts with encouragement where he finds strengths and spurring on where He finds weakness.

These all come from Tim Keller's book on Prayer¹ that we have referenced throughout this series. These touchstones are Keller's attempt to put together a framework for prayer that incorporates the Lord's Prayer and the teaching of Augustine, Luther and Calvin that we looked at 2 weeks ago. I've adapted the application of them for our purposes. So let's take a look at the first half of these today.

The first 3 touchstones focus on what prayer is. **Touchstone 1 – Prayer is work. It is a duty and a discipline.** In Romans 15:30, Paul writes, "I appeal to you brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf. In Colossians 4:2 he writes "Continue steadfastly in prayer." Later in Colossians 4:12 he writes "Ephaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in the will of God." Nowhere in Scripture do we find a statement saying prayer is easy.

So this first touchstone scrapes against our prayer lives and tests our willingness to work at and persevere in prayer. Anyone can say "it's a good idea to pray." But to actually pray consistently, persistently and resolutely will take hard work. If we have the attitude that "I will pray when I have time; when I feel like it; when I need to and when I'm

¹ Tim Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*, Dutton, New York, NY, 2014.

motivated to” we will hardly pray. Keller writes – “Prayer should be done regularly, consistently, resolutely and tenaciously at least daily; whether we feel like it or not.”²

He also writes “we should pray even if we are not getting anything out of it.”³ Then he gives this example. Imagine that you are rooming with someone and he or she virtually doesn’t speak with you. All she does is leave messages. When you mention it, she says “Well, I don’t get much out of talking to you. I find it boring and my mind jumps everywhere, so I just don’t try.” What will you conclude? At the very least, it’s rude for her not to talk to you. She owes it to their roommate to at least interact face to face. Now transfer that scenario to God and us. We’re the rude roommate. Keller states “Of course ‘rudeness’ is far too weak a word to use for failure to directly address your Maker, Sustainer, and Redeemer, to whom you owe your every breath.”⁴

Maybe we need more time in our prayer lives to pay attention to God. Austen Phelps was a pastor and professor in the 1800’s. In 1860, he published a book on prayer *The Still Hour*.⁵ In it, he talks about a painting in the Royal Gallery of Dresden, Germany. It’s called the Sistine Madonna, painted around 1513 by the Italian master Raphael. It was originally created as an altarpiece for the Sistine Church of Piacenza and purchased by King Augustus III in 1754 for the royal sum of 20,000 ducats. The painting shows Mary with the Christ child flanked by 2 saints. But it is mostly famous for the two little cherubs Raphael painted at the bottom of the canvas. The image of the cherubs has been reproduced numerous times on all sorts of merchandise, a practice which started as early as in the nineteenth century.

Apparently this painting is a masterpiece of art, filled with wonder. People sit for hours before it. Phelps writes “Weeks are spent every year in the study of that one work of Raphael. Lovers of art cannot enjoy it to the full, till they have made it their own by prolonged communion with its matchless form.” He apparently visited the museum and observed this for he tells of a conversation with one of the painting’s admirers. This person said they had spent years looking at the painting yet found it possible over and over to discover some new beauty and a new joy.

You might not initially get anything out of your prayers with God. But how much more should we give Him the kind of patient attention in prayer than people do to this painting in Dresden. What painting, could be anything like our great God?

² Keller, 121.

³ Ibid, 122.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Austin Phelps, *The Still Hour*, Solid Ground Christian Books, 2005.

Yet prayer is always hard work and often an agony. We sometimes have to wrestle even to pray. “When those hours of the day come in which we should be having our prayer sessions with God, it often appears as though everything has entered into a conspiracy to prevent it.” We often wrestle in prayer just to concentrate. Our thoughts jump all over the place between God and many pressing duties or interests which await us. God does sometimes provide times of peace and tranquility. But no Christian outgrows the need to struggle and persevere in prayer.⁶

Touchstone #2 - Responding to the Word – Prayer is conversing with God. God demonstrated His desire to be in close relationship with us at the very beginning of time. God talked with Adam and Eve. He walked in the garden to have friendship and relationship with Him. When people walk together, they talk. A couple weeks ago we looked at prayer being a dialogue or conversation with God.

But how does this actually work? God does not answer us in prayer with an out loud voice. Sometimes we experience a dialogue with God throughout the day. Something happens and we pray and sense we must respond or make a call or stop what we’re doing and go over to see someone.

We do see examples of this in the Scriptures. God talked with Abraham and Abraham talked with God. God spoke through dreams to Joseph – angelic encounters with Mary. While Peter was in prayer, God gave him a vision about fellowshiping with Gentiles and eating foods that were once declared unclean. Jesus met Paul on the road to Damascus. God speaks to us through the Holy Spirit as we walk through each day and pay attention to his leading. But the conclusion we make from such dialogues with God must be governed by the Scriptures. Otherwise, it can lead to some very strange and troubling conclusions.

Imagine a Christian husband comes home and tells his wife “God told me to divorce you so I can marry this other person. Then we will be free to find our soul mates.” Well, was that really God talking? Such a conclusion goes against God’s hatred of divorce and Jesus’ teaching “what God has joined together, let no man separate.” I believe any personal prayer time with God and the impressions that come out of that time must be governed by the Scriptures. If we conclude that God said something that contradicts His Word, it’s pretty certain we’re wrong.

One way we can guard against incorrect prayers or conclusions is to pray the Scriptures. . As we read, the Spirit convicts and illumines God’s word. J. I. Packer wrote that “once we understand prayer as conversation, we must regularly link thoughtful scriptural meditation with prayer. Meditation on the Bible is a bridge between just reading the

⁶ Keller, 123.

Bible and prayers of response that come out of it.”⁷ We’re going to spend a whole message on this in two weeks with Psalm 1 as our passage. But hear Psalm 1:1-3 now – Blessed is the man or woman who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of mockers but his or her delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law he meditates day and night.” So as this touchstone of praying the word scrapes up against our prayer lives, it tests our time in the word and our reflection upon it. Do we spend time in God’s Word every day – not just reading; but thinking about it and responding to it in prayer?

Touchstone #3 – Prayer is balanced. It is an interaction of praise, confession, thanks and petition. We see this in the Lord’s Prayer. It moves from adoration and praise, to asking God for our needs to confessing our sin to thanksgiving for our blessings. Each dimension is crucial.

However, none should be preferred to any other. We should not think of some of them as lower stages preparing the way for other, higher stages. Each form is necessary for the others. They interact and stimulate one another. When we comprehend God’s greatness, it leads us to a new grasp of our own sinfulness. Then a deeper recognition and a repentance for sin results in thankful wonder at God’s grace. The more we see God’s power the more we will want to depend on him for our needs. All these ways of praying to God should be present, interactive, and balanced when we pray. So when this touchstone scrapes against our prayer life, it tests the balance of our prayers. When we come to God in prayer, do we offer a quick “Dear God – thank you for this day” and then get on with our list of requests? Do we only praise and never confess? Do we only confess and never give thanks. Each is necessary for a growing prayer life.

These first 3 touchstones answer “what is prayer.” Work, Response to the Word and Balanced. The next three answer the question “what does prayer require.”

What prayer requires

Touchstone 4 - Grace – Prayer must be “In Jesus’ name,” based on the Gospel. Keller writes “Our prayer must be in full grateful awareness that our access to God, as Father is a free gift won by the costly sacrifice of Jesus the True Son, and then enacted in us by the Holy Spirit who helps us know inwardly that we are his children. To come to the Father in Jesus’ name includes an awareness that we are being heard because of the costly grace in which we stand.”⁸ To close

⁷ J.I. Packer, “Some Lessons in Prayer,” *Knowing Christianity*, (Wheaton, IL., Harold Shaw, 1995), 129-130.

⁸ Keller, 125.

our prayer with “in Jesus name” is not a magic formula that releases God’s power. It recognizes that we come to God by the grace provided by Jesus’ sacrifice. When we pray in Jesus’ name, we pray for that which would make Jesus joyful.

So when the touchstone of grace scrapes against our prayer lives, it tests our attitude towards God as we come to Him in prayer. If we come with a proud, defiant and “confident in self” attitude, we are very likely to address God in inappropriate ways.

We see an example of this in a parable Jesus told in Luke 18:9-14

⁹He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: ¹⁰“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.¹¹The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.¹²I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’¹³But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Now if we rubbed the touchstone of grace up against those two prayers, the Pharisee’s prayer would leave a mark of pride. The tax collector’s prayer would leave a mark of humility. He prayed with a great understanding of the grace needed for him to even approach God in prayer. An appreciation of that grace shown to us will alter and direct our prayers to be more appropriate to God.

Touchstone 5 – What does prayer require? - **Fear – Prayer is the Heart Engaged in Loving Awe.** Now God hates it when we participate in some external act of religion while our hearts are not in it. Jesus says in Matthew 15:8-9 – “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” Our hearts must be engaged in prayer. We must not simply recite words. One sign of a heart love for God is a respectful awe before His greatness and before the privilege of prayer.

To gain a sense of this, we maybe need to recapture a vision of God’s glory. Look at what happened to Moses. He desired close fellowship with God. He also needed assurance of God’s presence to carry out the monumental calling of leading the Israelites from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. So in Exodus 33, Moses asks God first to show him

your ways. God promises that His presence will go with Moses and the Israelites. He would give Israel rest. Moses then checks to ensure he has heard God correctly. Exodus 33:15 – “If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people?” The Lord again promises that He will go with Moses and the people.

But then Moses makes an even bolder request. Exodus 33:18-23 – “Moses said, ‘Please show me your glory.’ God please let me see you. Perhaps Moses craved even more assurance of God’s presence. Doesn’t Moses know that no sinful human being could see God and live?

God replies; “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The Lord.’ And I will be gracious and will show mercy, on whom I will show mercy. But, “he said,” You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.” And the Lord said, “Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.” So God protected Moses from God.

In a way, that’s the Gospel. God sent His Son Jesus to take the penalty for our sins so that you and I could be reconciled and in relationship with God. In Christ, our sins are covered. We are hidden in the hollow of God’s hand in Jesus. But this doesn’t mean we take lightly the privilege of approaching God’s holy throne.

It is an incredible privilege to pray. It was paid for by unimaginable cost. So we speak to God neither in a sentimental or casual familiarity – nor do we have to speak in formality. Keller says that many of the best books on prayer counsel that before beginning prayer and meditation, we ponder for a few moments what is about to happen. We are going to talk with the Almighty God of the Universe who is also our Father. This touchstone tests our recognition of the privilege and blessing we enjoy to come to the Holy God in prayer.

Touchstone 6 - What does prayer require? Helplessness – Prayer is Accepting Weakness and Dependence. Keller quotes Norwegian author Ole Hallesby – “As far as I can see, prayer has been ordained only for the helpless . . . Prayer and helplessness are inseparable. Only he who is helpless can truly pray.”⁹ We see this taught by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount – Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Only one who confesses their spiritual bankruptcy can enter the kingdom of heaven.

⁹ Ole Hallesby, *Prayer*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975), 89-90.

Keller writes “When we get destitute and helpless we may not want to pray. Prayer, however, is made for those who have no other option, no other resort. In some ways, prayer is simply connecting Jesus to your absolute helplessness, your sense of fragility and dependence.” A key proof for this is Romans 8:26 – Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for the saints with groanings too deep for words.” So the Spirit’s helps is triggered by our helplessness. When we don’t know what to pray, He intercedes.

To pray is to accept that we are, and always will be, wholly dependent on God for everything. When the touchstone of helplessness scrapes against our prayer life, what will it find? Will the mark left behind be one of pride and a self-made person who thinks they don’t need God? Or will it be one of someone who realizes that despite all the blessings, skills and accomplishments, it’s all ultimately comes from God?

6 touchstones to get us started – Prayer is work; a response to God’s word; balance. Prayer requires grace, fear and a sense of our own helplessness. Which one did God use to maybe rub you the most today? Once you’ve identified that, ask Him to help you strengthen this area of your prayer life.