

Renewal in Prayer

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[0 : 0 0] We are in a brief two-week series on spiritual renewal for 2018. God's program for spiritual renewal for us, for the church, is called the spiritual disciplines. And spiritual disciplines, they're the ordinary way God has given us to change. They're the ordinary path that God has shown us in the New Testament to find joy, to know Him, to change in life. And Donald Whitney, who's kind of the grandfather of thinking about spiritual disciplines today, defines them as the habits and the rhythms of our devotion to God. Now he says they are not attitudes, but they're practices. They're attitude-shaping practices, the spiritual disciplines. And the idea for this comes straight out of 1st Timothy 4-7. Paul says, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness. And so we practice the spiritual disciplines as the ordinary way to grow in the Christian life.

Typically the church has identified six or seven different spiritual disciplines. So read, scripture, meditate on scripture, pray, learn, study, serve, or show mercy, fast, and worship, corporate worship together. So those are the seven spiritual disciplines that the church has recognized for two millennia that come right out of the Bible. And last week Derek preached on reading and meditating on scripture. And I wanted to do that one. I asked for it, but he put himself in it instead and left today. Because, you know, because prayer is way harder than reading scripture. I think it's the toughest of all the spiritual disciplines. P.T. Forsythe, one of the great Scottish theologians of the last century, he died in 1921. He said it like this, it's a difficult and even formidable thing to preach on prayer. One fears to touch the Ark. But perhaps the effort may be graciously regarded by the Holy Spirit, whoever and even now lives to make intercession for us. And hopefully that will be true for us today.

Martin Louis Jones, the preacher of the 20th century in London, just a decade before his death in 1971, he said, I've never written on prayer because of the inadequacy I've always found in my own prayer life. I know how he feels. Maybe you do too today. And so we're here this morning in this little series to revive our prayer life. Things that need to be revived have to be revived because they were once revived but are no longer revived. And so we need to revive our prayer lives, some of us today, and strengthen them. So we're just gonna look at two moments here in the greatest chapter, Paul's greatest chapter, Romans 8, to learn from Paul three things, the basis of prayer, the problem with prayer, and some lessons for prayer or own prayer. So first, the basis of prayer, verse 15.

Verse 15, he says this, you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption as sons or as sons and daughters. The word means both. Paul here is contrasting two spirits, the spirit of slavery and the spirit of adoption. He's talking here about your inner life, about who you truly are at your deepest, about your heart, and how who you truly are, your inner life, your heart relates to God. And he's saying you can have one of two spirits. You can either have the spirit, the heart, of slavery or the heart of adoption, of being a son or daughter. One produces fear, the other produces freedom. And he goes on, did you see it, to clarify, what is he talking about? And this is what he says, you have received the spirit of adoption as sons and daughters by whom we cry, Abba Father.

And what that means is that Paul is talking about prayer here. You've received one of two, you have one of two spirits, and if you have the spirit of adoption, from that spirit, that's the ground, the basis from which you can cry out to God, Abba Father. He's talking about prayer, crying out, crying up before God. He's saying that if you have the Holy Spirit of adoption, the spirit that gives you the spirit of adoption, you can, you have a basis to cry out before God, Abba Father. Now the first thing to say about this is that Paul is assuming here something that the whole New Testament assumes and that he says very clearly in Romans 1 and that Jesus also says in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 6, and that's that everybody prays. That's that everybody in the whole world prays. Prayer is global, it's universal, it's always been at all times and all places. There's never been a society, a people group, a religion, nothing ever in history that hasn't been grounded in some sort of prayer. People have always prayed, and that's not to say that every single individual today prays. But in a BBC survey, in the last decade, they went and interviewed most of the, a segment of the people who mark not the nuns, the people who say I'm not religious, I'm either atheist or agnostic on a survey or a census, and even among those almost 40% of those people said sometimes they pray too, they try it, sometimes they even make an attempt and talk to, as you see in the movie, something like the guy upstairs or however they might frame it.

[6 : 25] An Italian scholar recently, a famous sociologist in the Academy named Giordon, he says this, in virtually all studies of the sociology of religious behavior, it is clearly apparent that a very high percentage of people in the world declare that they continue to pray every day, and many even say that they pray many times a day. But there are different reasons for prayer, there are different grounds of prayer, there are different bases for prayer, there are different ways of praying.

The Muslim goes to mosque, the Buddhist goes to the prayer wheel and spends the prayer wheel, the Hindu goes to a different temple depending on the God that they want to pray to at any given time, and all of these types of religious actions in prayer have different goals to salvation, praying for rain to come down on the crops, praying to escape cycles of reincarnation, all different types of reasons and goals and grounds and ways and forms of prayer.

And Paul is saying he's assuming here, as Jesus did in the Sermon on the Mount, that everybody prays, but not all prayers are equal, not all prayers are the same, and what he's speaking of here, what he's assuming here is that there's a distinct ground, a distinct basis of what it means to have Christian prayer, that Christian prayer is distinct according to Jesus' categorization.

Christian prayer, pray then like this, our Father is distinct from all other types of prayer in the whole world, and that's what Paul is talking about here. There's a distinct idea of Christian prayer, and so the question he is answering here is on what basis do you pray? On what basis, on what grounds do you pray? And I think that he has in his mind in the background, I think he's thinking of Jesus in Matthew chapter 6, I think he's thinking of Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus comes and says, pray to his disciples, pray then like this, our Father who art in heaven, and you know the rest of the prayer, but you remember that that passage has a context, and the context is that when he says pray like this, he's saying, because I've just told you don't pray like that, and before that prayer he had introduced two ways not to pray, and he said first, don't pray like the hypocrites who go out into the streets and pray eloquent prayers, he called what they do hypocrisy, and what he meant by that is that their inner life, their spirit is actually not a spirit of adoption but a spirit of slavery, in other words they have a public prayer life but they have no private prayer life, and that's the definition of a hypocrisy, to have a public prayer life, a public religion with no private devotion, that's the spirit of slavery because it's based on a slave's performance, the performance in the hypocrites case before other human beings that need to be seen and known as a person who's religious, as a person who prays but actually has no true inner spirit of prayer, and then the second way that Jesus says not to pray is not only not like the hypocrite but he also says don't pray like the pagan, now the pagan that's kind of a dirty word today, all he means there is any other religion out there, pagan religion is just any other religion besides the one he's referring to there, the Christian religion, and he's saying how does, so how does the pagan pray, and you'll remember from Matthew chapter 6, he says that the pagan babbles before his gods, and the word babble there simply means literally in Greek, empty and anxious words, so the hypocrite goes out into the square and he prays in order to be seen and that's performative, it's performance, it's the spirit of slavery, the need to perform for other people, but the pagan goes into the temple he's saying and babbles empty and anxious words also on the ground of slavery on the need as Paul categorizes it, the need to perform, in other words empty and anxious words because their gods are capricious, they have no stable foundation to come before their gods and know that they're being heard and so what they're forced to do is to repeat empty, vain, repetitious, anxious words, words as Paul calls it in Romans 8, words of fear, right, and in both instances, both categorizations that Jesus gives just like Paul gives here in Romans 8, a spirit of slavery in prayer is performance, birthed out of fear, it's the spirit of performance, it's the need to perform, it's the need to come before a god, a deity and exchange, have an exchange relationship to say I'll do this for you if you'll hear me, if you'll bless me, if you'll give me this, this, this and this, but the only way that that god is going to hear you, Paul is saying and Jesus was talking about in the

Sermon on the Mount, is if you perform, if you do a dance, if you do a jig, if you get it all right, if you come to the temple at the right time, right, that's the spirit of slavery, it produces fear, how do you define Christian prayer? How do you know if it's real and it's true? And what Paul says is this, it's when the spirit of Christ testifies with your spirit, your heart, your inner life, that you pray not out of the fear of a faraway deity, but on the ground of a family relationship to a father. The basis of Christian prayer, he says, is adoption, it's being adopted, it's being a son or a daughter and having a father. Tim Keller, he helpfully illustrates the difference in these two grounds, bases for prayer, by talking about the types of relationships that we all have in our daily life in the modern 21st century world. All of us, the well the the capitalistic situation that we exist in is helpful for making this clear. All of us leave our house every day if you do and most of the relationships that you experience on a day-to-day basis are retail relationships, they're exchange relationships, business-like relationships, right? So anytime you go before the sales clerk at Boots or Morrison's or wherever you go, you have entered into a type of relationship there and that's a retail exchange relationship and how does a retail exchange relationship work? Well, you provide something that is worth the amount that the item cost, money in that instance, and they give you the goods, right? It's performative. But there are all sorts of other relationships in your life that are more meaningful than a retail relationship, right? And that exists on a spectrum and you can think of the relationship you've had with the best teacher that you ever had in your life, a type of deep mentorship or something. That was meaningful but even more maybe a boyfriend and a girlfriend, even more a really good lifelong friendship, but even more. What is the deepest relationship? What is the ground of the most strong, long-lasting, deepest, most meaningful relationship in the human life? And it's, of course, it's family. It's being the blood of your, it's being the blood of my blood. It's sharing blood with somebody. It's family, right? In non-Christian prayer, non-Christian prayer deals with a God who only responds based on retail exchange relationship, performative relationship, sacrifices, pleadings, incense, empty and anxious babble, hoping behind hope that if you got the dough, if you bring what you need, you'll get the blessing. And Paul and Jesus and Matthew 6 are saying Christian prayer is different. It's based on family relationship. It's based, it's not based on performance, it's based on your status. It's based on status, on how you stand, who you are before God. I mean scholars, theologians have said that when

[15 : 12] Jesus says, pray them like this, our Father, that at that moment there was a revolution in the history of prayer. That never before, never before in the history of prayer had someone been told, go to your Father, go to your Father. It was a revolution in the ground of your prayer life being childlike dependency. It's totally new in the history of the world. Now did you think, did you think the possibility of God listening to you was based on your performance? And that's a pagan idea is what he's saying. That's a pagan concept. Now just think about it. Just think about adoption, what it means to be an adopted son or daughter. When somebody gets adopted, when a child gets adopted, who is it that does the work of adoption? When a child gets adopted, of course it's the parent that does the work of adoption. The parent goes, the father, the mother goes and signs on the dotted line, signs the paperwork and immediately as soon as the parent chooses and signs the paperwork, what happens to that child? Their status changes. Immediately they were once a stranger but now they're a son. Immediately in that moment by divine fiat, just like that, it's the parents, it's the performance of the parent of the father or the mother in an adoption that makes the child into a son or daughter. It's the parents' performance that changes their status and that's exactly what Paul, it's a metaphor of adoption. That's exactly what happens to you. That's the ground, the basis from which you can go pray. Now look, if you're a parent today and even if you're not, you know this too, but if you're a parent especially, you know the love that stands behind this reality with God. You know the love that stands behind this ground from which you can come to your father and sit on his lap. If my oldest son,

Ethan, presently four, but if someday he grows up a little bit, we're close to this already maybe, but if he becomes the worst guy on the block, the bully, the rebel, the prodigal, the restless and he takes all my money and he goes and he becomes the spin-thrift and he ruins himself and he ruins our family and he becomes a criminal even. But then I see him on the horizon coming back towards me, coming to speak with me, coming to talk to me. What do I do? I put on my shoes and I get dressed and I run to him, right? And I greet him and I pick him up and I hug him and I bring him back to my house and I throw a feast, right? And is there discipline? Sure. Is there a consequence for what he's done? Of course.

Any loving parent would give discipline and consequence for that, for something like that. But I'm not gonna cast him away. If he wants to come and speak to me, I'm gonna be there, right? But why? Because he's blood of my blood. He's flesh of my flesh. He's my son or she's my daughter, right? That they can always come back to me. This is what Paul is saying. This is the ground. No matter what you've done, no matter how bad your prayer life was in 2017, no matter how stale it was, the ground of Christian prayer is that a father sees you on the horizon and he runs out to you no matter what you've done, even as a Christian, no matter how little you've prayed to him. He's a father, a father. Now just to close out this point, this is the long point by the way in the next two are very short, I promise. Let me just say, is your prayer life stale? Do you talk with your father or do you talk at a distant God? Commentators say about this verse 15 and 16 that there's something strange. Paul puts side by side two different languages here when he says, by the spirit of adoption, if your son or a daughter in Christ, you can cry out, Abba, father. Now Abba is an Aramaic word and father, pater, is a Greek word. So literally if you translated the Aramaic, like they translate the Greek here, it would just say you cry out, father, father, or dad, dad, or whatever. Now why does he put these two words side by side? Well, it's at least for this reason. In the first century, Abba is a normal term, the everyday term for speaking to one's father. They often spoke Aramaic in the first century as well as Hebrew and Greek and Abba would have been the term that Jesus would have used to talk to his earthly dad, Joseph. Abba was the regular term that I've just come home from work or from school kind of a term that you refer to your dad. Israelites, Jews in the first century, would not use this term to talk to God. It was forbidden. You cannot say this to

God. It's too homely, it's too colloquial, it's too easy, if you will, but how did this come? Why does Paul say this? It's because Jesus introduced this in the Gospels for the first time in history. If you go back and look at how Jesus prays in the Gospels, he goes and he says, Abba, a father, he prays all over the Gospels using the colloquial, the homely term Abba, even in the Garden of Gethsemane. Before he's about to go to the cross, he looks up and he says, Abba, let this cup of death pass from me and his father says no. And John Stott says this, Abba was an everyday word, a homely family word. No Jew would have dared to address God in this manner, but Jesus did it always in all his prayers which are handed down to us, but with one single exception. Jesus always prayed like this to his father, Abba, dad, father, except for once. And when he was hanging on the cross being murdered, he did not say, the one time he did not say Abba, he said the generic, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? He lost his father when he was on the cross, you see, so that you could get adopted by the ultimate father and you could look up to heaven and say Abba. That's Christian prayer. That's

Christian prayer. You can call God the same thing that Jesus does. That's Christian prayer and you can have this status by faith. Now very briefly, the last two points, just a few minutes each, the problem of prayer. Even when you know what prayer is, what Christian prayer is, even if you have the firm basis, when you come to God as Father, let's be honest, prayer is so hard. Prayer is so hard. It is so hard to maintain a consistent prayer life, right? Yeah. 826, just look down at 826. Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know what to pray for as we all, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us.

[23 : 15] Now here's the beauty of this passage. This is Paul. This is Paul saying, I'm weak at prayer. You see, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. He's talking about Himself too. You see, this is Paul and I'm pretty confident that Paul prayed more than you, I think. I know he prayed more than me. This is Paul, the great apostle, and he had a strong prayer life. There's no doubt about it, but he's saying there's a weakness. And what does he mean exactly? Well, I think that when he says there's a weakness in our prayer, for we do not know what to pray for as we all, he's giving you an example of one of our weaknesses. We have a weakness in prayer. The first one is we don't know what to pray for as we all. We might call that the problem, the weakness of knowledge, meaning we don't know what to pray for as we all, because we don't know what we need all the time. And you know, Paul experienced this in his own life three times. He prayed, God removed the thorn from my flesh, and each time God said, no. He didn't know what to pray for all the time. But John Knox, our reformed, reformed father, he says it this way, our needs go far beyond the power of our speech to express them. Our needs go far beyond the power of our speech to express them. But

I think he's thinking here that there's more weaknesses than just the problem of knowledge of what to pray for. There's the weakness of emotion. And all, I think, I think, all of you know, the weakness of emotion. I say them, but I don't feel them.

Right? And then as soon as I say them, I start looking at the dust on the ground and the dirt on my shoe and the car that's passing by outside and the curtains or whatever it is and my mind wanders away. Or when I come to prayer meeting and we circle up in a group and where it's time to pray, I think the whole time about what I'm gonna pray and miss entirely the prayers that everybody else prays. Can we say it? Can we be honest there? That that happens to us. That's our weakness, that's the weakness of knowledge, weakness of emotion. That's not a relationship with a father. That's the spirit of slavery trying to perform. Or the weakness of desire is another one. I know at least it's true of me. I say them, but I don't really want to. I don't really have desire for prayer sometimes. I feel forced. I feel a duty, not a delight. Flannery O'Connor, one of the great Southern fiction writers from Savannah, Georgia. She was a devout Roman

Catholic, a very spiritual woman. And she laments in her journal once that she quote was exasperated by her prayer life. And she said simply, is there anyone out there that can teach me how to pray? And prayer is hard. And Paul said so too. And admitting it is critical. Admitting it like Paul did here. It's biblical even.

You see, it's encouraging. It's helpful. One of the pitfalls in our weakness and prayer is that if we can't come up against it and know that it's a reality and fight against it in a minute and even talk about it, then we might fall into the sin, the sin, the grievous sin of prayerlessness. One pastor says this, the failure to pray is not merely to break religious rules. It's the failure to treat God as God. And it's a sin against his glory. So thirdly and finally very briefly, I'm just going to rattle off five lessons of prayer and no more than a few sentences on these each. That we can get straight from what Paul said here or discern by good and necessary consequence for our confession fans. First, we may need to start, some of us may need to begin today by repenting of prayerlessness. Prayerlessness is being self-oriented. It's living in your world, not living in God's world. And so the first thing that some of us may need to begin today by repenting of prayerlessness. Secondly, we need to emphasize the spiritual discipline, the word discipline in spiritual disciplines. And that's that just practically pray, prayer morning and evening is critical. Praying morning and evening has been the recommended practice of the church for two millennia. Every great theologian, church father and church mother, all the great saints of the past have continually written over and over again that morning and evening prayer is critical. It's where change, how change truly happens, the habits of devotion and that in that prayer we have to adopt a spirit that prays with expectation. Coming to prayer thinking that this is real, this works. I expect things to happen, I expect to change. Pray morning and evening with expectation. Secondly, that's two, three of five. Paul tells us here that we have to fight, to cry, to cry, abba father. In other words, we have to return to prayer as an experience of communion with a living God. Prayer is not talking at a deity, but it's an experience of communion with your father God. It's a real relationship. Now the

[29 : 16] Roman Catholic tradition has on the far, on the one hand, really over emphasized at times in its history mystical experiences in prayer, which we call mysticism, which can mean all sorts of things, but it's over emphasizing experience in prayer to the neglect of petition and kingdom centered type prayer, thy kingdom come that will be done. But on the other hand, the Protestant tradition, our tradition, we often over emphasize kingdom centered petitionary prayers, listing our petitions over actually coming to prayer as deep communion with God. And what Paul says here is the word cry. He said cry, abba father. It's a deeply emotional word in Greek. It's using the whole self. It's coming to commune with a real living person. It's a real relationship. This is what John Stott says. Some commentators rightly say that the verb cry, *κρῖναι* is often used in such a strong way that it expresses a loud, spontaneous, emotional cry before God. But in this case, I think it's also the case that Paul finds the particular verb here cry, not merely an enthusiasm or ecstasy, but in childlike and joyous assurance as contrasted with the attitude of the slave. It's at least coming in childlike joyous assurance of a real communing relationship when you enter into that conversation. I had a great C.S. Lewis illustration from his science fiction trilogy here, but we have to skip it for time. That's what you're tragic because it's, if you haven't read that trilogy, amazing. Four of five, very briefly. We have to recognize the spirit.

Paul says here, when we are weak, the spirit helps us and intercedes for us. Strengthen your prayer life by being conscious, conscious of the spirit's work in your prayer as you pray. John Stott, again, in prayers to the Father, we experience the inward witness of the Holy Spirit. When we cry, Abba, Father, taking on our lips the words what Jesus used, it is the Spirit himself that is bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God. What does this mean?

Very simply, why you pray the Spirit who knows you better than you know yourself prays your heart with you. As you pray, this is a fact, this is a fact, catalog this fact. As you pray, the Holy Spirit of God prays your heart for you in a way that is more meaningful and powerful than your prayers. And you've got to be conscious of it in your weakness. Alright, fifthly and finally, and we'll close, it's a question, how much have you changed in your Christian life over the years, over the weeks, over the days, maybe? Have you seen virtue spring up, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness? Truly changed, true change. Are you different? And the question is, depending on how much you've changed is what is your prayer life like? But St. Augustine, he said the primary way we change, that our loves, our desires get reshaped and reordered, is through real deep consistent prayer. If he says, and I'll just close with this, if you love your success more than God, it will make a heart heart. But if you love God more than your successes in life, which has only brought about through a change in your inner heart through prayer, no circumstance can crush you. You will be fruitful in all seasons. We'll close with Paul, Galatians 4-9. Prayer is not just sharing your requests and ideas. And this is actually Paul. It is knowing God and being truly known in a way that no other body else can know you. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for the gift of prayer. It is so hard. We need help. Change us, Lord, by your spirit who intercedes now. In Jesus' name, amen.