

Ten Top Tips for Improving Your Prayer Life

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[0 : 0 0] Let's pray. Father, we pray that you would help us today to learn what it means to talk to you in prayer and to find things that might be helpful for improving this part of our life before you. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Please sit down.

Now, I want to start today's talk with a confession, actually. The confession is that there have been periods in my life where I have prayed well and have been good at it, but they have been few and far between.

On the whole, I am not that good at praying, I think. I find it intensely difficult to pray at times. I find it hard to set aside the time regularly. I find myself occasionally overwhelmed with the tyranny of the urgent. No, I find myself often overwhelmed by the tyranny of the urgent.

There is always something that has to be done and that cannot wait while I pray. And when I do actually get around to praying, I find that prayer is quite often quite difficult.

That is, I don't know what to say. I don't know how to say it. I can't keep my mind on the subject. I drift off with relative ease. I'm not very good at praying, but I really want to get better.

[1 : 2 0] I really want things to improve. I want my prayer life to be stronger. I want it to be more vital. I want it to be more scriptural. And so I have searched for help. I've been a Christian for over 30 years and I've found I've often gone searching for help.

And some of what I've learnt has been contained in the sermons I have preached the last few weeks. But I've also looked at other Christians to see how they grapple with the same things that I grapple with.

And I've worked out some practical tips that help me. And that's what I want to spend time on today. I want to tell you 10 top tips for prayer. Now, this is a bit unusual for me because what I'm going to do is for the first time in three years here at Holy Trinity, I'm not going to work through a passage of scripture.

I'm going to give you some practical advice from people. Now, I prefer working through the scriptures systematically myself, but this is a subject where I think we need this sort of practical help.

So for once in three years, I'm going to divert from my usual practice. I don't think it hurts once in three years, so I'm sure you'll all manage. So here are my practical tips.

[2 : 3 2] I want to tell you that most of them are, I could say stolen, perhaps I might say borrowed. They are borrowed tips on how to pray. They come from people throughout Christian history who have struggled just like I have struggled.

They've felt what I have felt. They have perhaps failed as I have failed. They've worked out ways of coping or improving their prayer lives. So I offer these tips to you today as suggestions.

As I said, we've had lots of the Bible stuff on prayer in this last few weeks, and there's lots more to come. We're going to spend a lot of time talking about prayer.

But here are the tips for today. So I've given you an outline, and you might like to even, if you've got a pen, to fill in some of the gaps. My first tip is to suggest that you change the way that you think about prayer.

That is, change your thinking. And change your thinking in this particular way. First, realize and change your thinking so that you recognize that prayer is work.

[3 : 36] Second, prayer is ministry. And third, prayer is a necessity. Let me explain. Prayer is work. A couple of weeks ago, I said one of the great problems for us as Christians is our pragmatism.

We are people who are into doing things. I know lots of Christians who are very pragmatic. We hate laziness. We're convinced that work is what life is about, convinced that our work must be able to show itself in fruit if it's to be rightly called work.

And so we often, I think, if not consciously, subconsciously dismiss prayer as a weak alternative to practical action. It's an alibi for doing nothing.

And often we think to ourselves that to offer to pray for someone is sort of like a graceful and spiritual way of excusing yourself from a difficult situation.

Oh, I will pray for you. Prayer has a terrible image among us, doesn't it? We need to change that image. First, we need to be convinced that prayer is actually work.

[4 : 35] It is doing the work of God's kingdom. So I want you, having said we won't do much Bible, we are going to do some, I want you to open your Bible at Colossians chapter 4. Now, I'm vaguely recalling it's page 1185.

So if anyone finds it and finds out, can you, is that the correct page number? 1185. So I want you to look at verse 12 of chapter 4. Paul is speaking about his friend Epaphras.

And he says this. Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Jesus Christ, of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you that you may stand firm in the will of God, mature and fully assured.

Did you hear the word wrestling? It is strenuous. Prayer is strenuous and hard work. But it is also ministry. We learn this from Acts chapter 6.

In Acts 6, the apostles are finding themselves in difficulty. The Christian community is growing. And with that growth, there is increasing social problems. And there's a need for practical social programs that will help the people of God.

[5 : 48] There's a need to make sure that the right people get the right food. This is, as I said, in Acts 6. And so there's some practical down-to-earth Christian work that needs to be done.

But if you read Acts 6 closely, you'll notice that the apostles refuse. Their ministry, they said, is the word of God and prayer. They must do that above any other ministry.

That ministry is more important for them than any other ministry, even helping the socially disadvantaged. They can find others to do that, but they must do the work God has assigned to them.

The ministry of prayer and the word of God. Prayer is hard work. It is also a ministry. And what's more, it's a human necessity.

God made us with this need and sowed it into our being to speak to the one who made us. We listen to him as we read his scriptures and as we come to know his son.

[6 : 45] And we relate back to him by speaking back to him. So, friends, please recognize this. Prayer is work. Prayer is ministry. And prayer is a necessity. And I'll see if you really believe this by trying one thing out on you.

Let me give you a suggestion as to whether you really believe this or not. I want to imagine, just as we are, that this is a normal family church.

Imagine for a moment that your minister announced from the pulpit that he was no longer going to do some of the routine tasks in the church. He said, I'm no longer going to do any administration or organization.

I'm no longer going to meet with people. I'm no longer going to visit people in need. Instead, I'm going to spend all my time praying for the congregation. What would you think?

Would you be happy? Let me suggest that if you're not entirely happy, there may be some good reasons for that, because the ministry of the Word of God might need to be done as well amongst people, one to one and so on.

[7 : 47] But if you're unhappy because you think that him locking himself up in his study, praying for you is not really what ministry is about, then you've misunderstood what the Bible is clear in saying.

That is, prayer is work and it is ministry. And it is very important. It is a necessity. And particularly a necessity for those engaged in the work of ministry.

But let me move on to tip number two. First one was a bit long. Hopefully the next not going to be quite as long. Tip number two is plan to pray. I want you to listen to John Calvin, who's already had a mention in our service earlier on with Ruth.

John Calvin, a wonderful 16th century reformer. And he says this. Since our weakness is such that it has to be supported by many aids and our sluggishness such that it needs to be goaded, it is fitting that each one of us should set aside certain hours for this exercise of prayer.

These hours should not pass without prayer. And during them all, the devotion of the heart should be completely engaged in it. These hours are when we arise in the morning, before we begin daily work, when we sit down for a meal, when by God's blessing we have eaten, when we are ready to retire.

[9 : 05] These things are a tutelage for our weakness, which should be thus exercised and repeatedly stimulated. Can you hear what Calvin's saying? He's saying plan, set aside times, do it.

And so my suggestions are this. First, plan to pray at particular times. That is, set aside particular times when you pray and make them habitual.

You can choose to associate prayer with particular activities. For example, associate your prayer with eating a meal, with walking the dog, with travelling home from work, with having a quiet drink before bed, with saying goodnight to your kids, with cooking dinner, with catching the bus.

Associate any of these items, or the ones you do regularly, with prayer. You can also work at a time of the day when you're most alert and have time to pray. Set that time aside for doing this task.

It doesn't matter what that activity is, but stick to the time. Stick to the opportunity. Second subheading under this is plan to pray by determining to pray first in any Christian activity.

[10 : 11] That is, my experience with Christian groups is that we do what we consider to be most important first. Read the Bible, plan, whatever. And then if we have some token time at the end, we pray.

Why not pray first? We should pray as much as is necessary for the task we are about to engage in. So pray before your Bible study instead of after. Pray before church meetings instead of after.

Pray before making decisions instead of after. Plan to pray by determining to pray first in any Christian activity. Third subheading is plan to pray by determining strategies to cope with your own sinfulness.

My next item under prayer is that. Let me explain what I mean. You see, I'm not as prayerful as I could be. There's one thing I do almost every day. In fact, I do it every day.

I wake up in the morning and before more than an hour has passed, I have opened this thing. And I sit down in front of it and I spend a lot of my day in front of it.

[11 : 14] Well, I worked out that you could put little reminders into your computer that would pop up all the time. So that's exactly what happens. They are prayer reminders.

They pop up on my computer like appointments. They tell me, pray at this time for such and such. So, for example, pray for my sons, Joel and Daniel, that they grow in godliness and in the knowledge of God.

Pray for this or that friend. Pray that I might seek only the glory of the Lord Jesus. Pray for faithfulness in my preparation. Often I'm sitting in front of the computer preparing.

So I should pray for faithfulness in it and that Christ might be central in my preaching. You see, pray for those things and work out what you're doing every day.

Find some way you can remind yourself to pray. That's tip number two, plan to pray. Tip number three is this one, don't aim too high. I'm going to slightly exaggerate for you now, but you'll get the idea.

[12 : 13] One of my great problems in prayer is that I read books on prayer or great prayers that tell me that so-and-so thought prayer was so important that he or she prayed for 10 hours every day starting at 3am in the morning.

You read those sorts of books? Then they set aside six days a week for fasting. I am exaggerating slightly, but you get the idea. Or they went through 24-hour prayer vigils every month, whatever.

And as a result, I determined that I too am going to be prayerful like this. And so I get up at 3am and pray for 10 hours every day. No. You know what happens on day one?

I crash. Have you done that too? You've thought of, you know, Martin Luther, he gets up, prays for four hours every morning. I'm going to do it too. And you don't even make day one. You inevitably fail to reach those things, don't you?

So don't aim quite so high. Be a little more realistic. Aim at something that is manageable. Set yourself some realistic goals. For example, I aim to pray for the things that are in my prayer diary.

[13 : 14] That's a manageable goal. Or I aim not to turn off the reminder that pops up on my computer telling me to pray. Or I aim to pray at meals every day.

Or I aim to walk around the block a couple of times a day and pray. Or I aim not to walk straight from the office to the office from my house, but to walk around the block and pray as I go.

Or I aim to turn off the radio in the car when I'm going on long trips so that I can pray. Or I aim to pray with my family before important events in our lives. You see, they're all manageable things.

They're not goals that are totally unmanageable for me. That's tip number three. Tip number four is pray out loud. This is a really good one. One of the things I've found is that if I'm praying in my mind, then my mind inevitably drifts off.

And all my prayers become lacking in vibrancy. The greatest aid here is to pray out loud. And this can just mean moving your lips if you get a bit embarrassed about praying out loud.

[14 : 18] But what it does mean is you vocalize your prayers. That energy is often enough just to help me with my concentration and to order my mind and discipline it. So tip number five is to get organized.

Now what I mean by this is one of the greatest prayers is that we are so badly organized. One of the greatest problems in prayer is that we're so badly organized. Let me tell you how I organize myself. Now I need to tell you I'm an ordered person.

So if this is not you, then you find some other way to get ordered. But order yourself. So what I do is every two or three years I work out, I just write a list of everything I should be praying for and categorize them.

And then I put all of those things on the left hand side of one page. And across the top I put Monday to Sunday.

And I put columns down and I tick how often in a week I want to pray for those things. So for Heather and my sons and their wives, I might want to pray every day for them.

[15 : 19] So I put a tick under every day. But I might just pray for the archbishop once a week. Okay. And so I hope he doesn't pick up this MP3 off there.

And so I might pray for him on Mondays. Okay. And I might pray for this particular friend on Wednesday. Does that make sense? So that way I can categorize.

And then I go through all of those and I just have one sheet for prayers for each day. And I just write them out. Or I not necessarily write out all the prayers.

But I write out that this is what I'm going to pray for on that particular day. And that means I know what I'm going to pray for when I get up and I come to that particular prayer time. So that's just a brief survey of how I might get myself organized.

You might get yourself organized in a different way. But whatever you do, do get yourself organized. Tip number six. Pray Bible prayers.

[16 : 23] And by this I mean two things. First, pray prayers that are biblical in their content and direction. And I talked to you about that last week. Let me give you some examples though. People in the Bible spend more time praying about their need of forgiveness in my view than their need of healing from illness.

I think we spend more time praying about our healing from illness than we do about our need for forgiveness. People in the Bible spend more time praying about our growth in the knowledge of God than our passing our exams or whatever it might be.

They pray more about children being godly than they pray about their children being successful. We should follow their example. Praying prayers that are biblical in content and direction.

But more than that, you might actually pray Bible prayers. That is, there are so many prayers in the Bible. Why not take one and turn it into a prayer? Let me show you.

Open your Bibles. If you've still got them open at Colossians, you're doing very well. 1183, I think, is the page number for Colossians chapter 1. I want you to open it with me and I'll show you the exercise that I'm going to do.

[17 : 30] So Colossians 1, 9 to 14. Look at it with me and I'm going to pray it. It's easy to do. Here we go.

Lord God, I pray today for each member of Holy Trinity. Please fill them with the knowledge of your will through a wisdom and understanding that your spirit gives. I ask this so that they may live lives worthy of you, pleasing you in every way.

Please cause them to bear fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of you. May they be strengthened with all power according to your glorious might, so that they may have great endurance and patience.

May they give joyful thanks to you, their Father, who has qualified them to share in the inheritance of your holy people in the kingdom of light. For you have rescued them from the dominion of darkness, brought them into the kingdom of your Son you love, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. What a good prayer to be praying for a congregation. What a good prayer to be praying for your Christian children. And you can do that.

[18 : 39] There's lots of prayers in the Bible. Just even turn your Bible reading into a prayer. Tip number seven is find a mentor. Most of us know people who do pray and who pray well. My experience is that most of those people are very quiet people because they just get on with quietly praying. Somehow, we know they do pray. So if you've found people like this, track them down and say, will you teach me, mentor me, show me how to pray?

That might involve praying with them. It might involve them giving you their tips on things they've found helpful. It may involve them in checking up on you and praying for your prayer life.

In my view, this sort of mentoring is a desperate need that Christians have. My generation and the generation that follows me is a prayerless generation in my view.

Unfortunately so, but truly. We need people to school us in prayer. To introduce us to the joy of prayer. I had a friend like this when I was younger. As some of you will know of him, his name was Paul White.

[19 : 44] He was otherwise known as the Jungle Doctor. Some of you may have even read children, the stories that he wrote. He befriended me when I was in my 20s. And he was a very prayerful man.

And he taught me lots of helpful things about prayer and prayed with me. So find someone you know who prays and get them to teach you and get them to pray with you.

Tip number eight is find a friend. Now that's different to what I just said. Not a mentor, but a friend. Here I'm suggesting that each one of us should seriously team up with another person.

And determine that we'll pray with them. Heather has done this in nearly every place we have gone. And she's not long in a new place when she finds someone she's going to pray with. And she meets up with them regularly to pray with them.

Now I do it now regularly. I've learnt from her. And so for example, when I was coming out here from Ridley to Holy Trinity, I found a person who'd been studying with me at Ridley.

[20 : 45] And he was going to St. Alf down the road. He was a curate there. And I said, look, we're both going back from doctoral studies to parish ministry. Let's pray together.

And so ever since I came to Holy Trinity, he and I have been meeting once a month to pray. And we've now added another person. We've made it a prayer triplet. We meet, you know, once a month, first week of the month on a Tuesday afternoon.

And we spend an hour and a half talking with each other and praying with each other. And the last couple of weeks, I've added another person to this. I found out that some of you will remember Tim Johnson, who was a student minister here.

Well, Tim's just been taken up the parish or about to take up the parish at Diamond Creek. And I heard he was going there. So I emailed him and I said, Tim, you're going to start there.

You know, I've been through it three years earlier than you. Why don't we meet to pray together once a month? And so that's what we're going to do. So that's tip number nine. Find a friend. Tip number, what are we up to?

[21 : 50] We are up to 10. No, we're up to nine now, aren't we? That was eight. Tip number nine. Keep a prayer diary or journal. This is a time-honoured tradition among many Christians throughout history.

And the journals differ in how they approach things. Some record your own experience of God. Others record prayers or thoughts or successes or failures. Others simply record what happened in a particular day.

I've done this at various times in my life. And it has a number of benefits. For example, it enforces you to slow down and be disciplined. It fosters a self-examination of your relationship with God.

And it ensures that you articulate what's going on in your relationship with God. So give it a try. See if it's helpful. And tip number 10 is this. This one comes from the Puritans.

And their tip is pray until you pray. Pray until you pray. That is, pray long enough and honestly enough in a single session to get past the feeling of formalism and unreality that characterizes much of our prayer.

[22 : 58] That is, until you get to the point where you've entered into the spirit of prayer. And sometimes you actually have to stick at it for a little while before that time comes. If you've ever had a great time of prayer, you'll know that often it has come after you've been praying for a while and suddenly you've got into gear.

And off you go. Now I haven't done this recently, but occasionally in my life I have taken a slice of time off and gone to a good place, prayed until I've really got into it.

And I've prayed until I've found it smooth and easy. That is, I've prayed until I've prayed. So there's my top 10 tips. Perhaps you've got some more that I haven't mentioned.

If so, please tell them to me and next time it'll be 20 tips in a longer sermon. But these are the ones I've personally found the most helpful. Change our thinking about prayer.

Plan to pray. Don't aim too high. Pray out loud. Get organised. Pray Bible prayers. Find a mentor.

[24 : 03] Find a friend to pray with. Keep a prayer diary. And pray until you pray. So let's now pray and ask God to help us with this. Lord God, we thank you that you speak to us in your word.

And we thank you that you've entered relationship with us through the Lord Jesus Christ. Please help us to respond back to you in prayer. Please make us people of prayer.

Please help us to be disciplined in it. Please bring us to a situation where we find it such a rich experience of you that we can, we only want to do more.

And Father, we pray these things in the name of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[25 : 17] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.