

How to Break Bad Prayer Habits

We are all creatures of habit. We get up every morning about the same time, we run through the same routines as though diligently memorized – turn off the alarm, use the bathroom, turn on the coffee, take a shower, brush teeth, shave, comb hair, dress, sit down for a brief coffee and breakfast, and off to work.

Sound familiar? Perhaps your routine is somewhat different than mine, but it is a routine nonetheless. We all establish routines or habits. It is the way we live. We generally swing a golf club the way we always have, we drive with the same idiosyncrasies we always did, we dress a certain way, comb our hair the same every day. We even have patterns for the way we brush our teeth!

Just as we have developed physical routines or habits so too we get into spiritual habits. Some of those spiritual routines are good, but others are bad habits that need to be broken. God has some important things to teach us about ourselves and our prayer habits. We often think our prayer habits are pleasing to God but once we examine them in the light of His Word we realize how far short we fall.

Fill in the blanks:

- The journey of a 1000 miles begins with the ____ ____.
- How do you eat an elephant? One ____ _ _ ____.
- Old habits ____ slowly.
- You can't teach an ____ ____ new tricks.
- New habits require ____ to ____ weeks to develop.
- Strength training is based on r____.
- Any skill or ability is developed by _____.

Silent Rebellion? (Isaiah 30:15)

Rebellion can be the quiet ignoring of the Master's commands. Jesus referred to a land owner who sent his sons into the fields to work. The first said he would go, but did not. The other said he would not go but then thought better of it and went. Who was the obedient servant? Certainly not the one who talks the talk but lacks the walk. Many Christians model the first son saying how they love the Lord and love to pray, but do not. We don't like to see ourselves as rebellious in our prayerlessness – we are just busy. Yet, if we are to be honest we are disobedient or stubborn choosing our business over His business. King Saul stands out as a bad example. He was pleased to be ruler over himself and everyone else but did not want God to tell him what to do. Samuel had the unflattering task of informing him of what God thought of his self-made importance. Let us be aware of our own silent stubbornness.

22 And Samuel said, Hath the LORD *as great* delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey *is* better than sacrifice, *and* to hearken than the fat of rams. 23 For rebellion *is* as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness *is as* iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the LORD, he hath also rejected thee from *being* king. – I Samuel 15:23

Old Prayer Habits

1. Not Praying, or Praying Little – Jer 2:32 / Prov. 1:24-30

Prayerless or prayer-little people still have the same needs as praying people. The difference is where they turn for their resources. The saint turns to his Heavenly Father, while the prodigal pray-er turns to himself, horses and chariots, money, or other men for his resources. Bootstrap Christians insult the Spirit of God who longs to rescue, provide, protect, heal, and sustain us. We think nothing of running to the doctor before we think to run to God with our physical needs. That pattern continues unabated in all our needs in life. We run to the credit card when finances are not sufficient rather than asking our Father in heaven to provide us with what we need. Jeremiah decries the sin of Israel in turning to cisterns that hold no water instead of drinking deeply from the artesian well of God's grace. We have nothing against doctors or credit cards, but when they become substitutes for our Heavenly Father's care we have made them gods. Proverbs 1:24-30 is a stern warning from our Heavenly Father who longs to bless us. Listen and let the Lord teach you wisdom.

24 Because I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded; 25 But ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof: 26 I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh; 27 When your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind; when distress and anguish cometh upon you. 28 Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me: 29 For that they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the LORD: 30 They would none of my counsel: they despised all my reproof.

2. Ritualistic Public Prayers, (never) Matthew 6:5 / Matthew 6:7

The problem with public prayers without private devotion is that it makes us hypocrites. The word hypocrite comes from the word to act or put on a mask. It is pretense. Jesus said that the Pharisees for pretense make long prayers. Jesus prayed in public, but he was mighty first in private prayer. A danger of our prayer meetings is that when we pray one by one we are praying to be heard of men. Certainly we are praying to God but often we are more conscious of men's listening ears than God's. We speak differently when we pray in public. We might add the holy tone, or the thee's and thou's in place of normal speech. We flower up our talk to God to appear godly or spiritual when what God really wants is a broken and contrite heart.

When I was a teenager Mom and Dad always traipsed us off to prayer meeting every Wednesday night. The pastor often divided the groups into smaller prayer circles so more people could pray with less listening in. At times the youth were given a room of their own. I remember being terrified of praying out loud. I knew I could not pray like I heard the adults praying, with rich flowing and flowery words. But then my friend Rex was bold enough to reach out to God in a simple child-like prayer that shocked and encouraged me. It was a prayer so simple it was beautiful. He talked to God as he would a friend. I remember he started, "Dear Jesus – ." Now that was a serious break from the normal, "Oh God, our Almighty and Everlasting Father" that I heard from the adults. Rex prayed in public just as he prayed in private – no hypocrisy! So it is that Jesus encouraged his disciples to pray.

3. No Closet of Prayer - (wherever) Matthew 6:6/ John 18:2

Often the problem with nervousness of praying in public is a lack of practice in private. If you are little with God, you will be little for God. Jesus taught his disciples a principle that he exemplified in daily practice. The closet is often misunderstood. In Victorian England during the time of kings and castles the king had an inner room where he would meet alone with

friends. That inner room was known as a “closet.” In Israel the closet was a secluded storage room where you could go to be away from the hustle and bustle of home life. It was a place where no one would hear you, see you, or interrupt you. The point Jesus was making was not that we replicate the “closet” but that we would have a regular daily place of retreat where we would pray to our Heavenly Father. It is there in the secret of His Presence that we grow strong in faith and intimacy with God. Peter exemplified this pattern in Acts where he is found on a housetop praying. His closet on this occasion was a secluded beach house he borrowed from a friend. Jesus often would go into a deserted place early in the morning before anyone else was up. He also made it a regular practice to seek God in the solitude of the Mount of Olives.

I have a friend who says his house is so busy with people the only time alone with God he can find is in his pickup truck on the way to work. There he finds himself alone with God and prays out loud, silently, worshipping with CDs or cassettes, and pouring out his heart to God in secret. He says it is often the most private and blessed meeting with the Savior and frequently he arrives at work and has to spend some time drying his tearful eyes before facing his coworkers. I don't suppose Jesus had pickup trucks in mind when he directed his disciples to pray alone, but if that works for you then get into your truck and seek the Lord!

4. No Specific Prayer Hour - Jesus (whenever) Mark 1:35

My wife once said, “You never have any time for me anymore.” When you are involved in ministry every day of your life it is easy to take God for granted. I wonder how many times God feels like we don't have any one-on-one time with him. We are all busy people. Even stay-at-home moms find it difficult to squeeze in a spare moment. There is always something to do, somewhere to go, or someone to see. In our day of instant access to television, cell phones, faxes, and the Internet it is very difficult to have time just for God. Yet, we schedule everything else on our calendars and rarely miss one of our important meetings. The problem is not one of time but of priority. “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,” is a command, not a suggestion. First means first. Prioritizing our relationship with God doesn't mean making it important along with a lot of other priorities. It means making it your top priority, before everything else. Does not God, the Creator and Sustainer of our lives deserve some one-on-one time with us? He is not the God of leftovers.

I know a well known minister in our denomination who so prioritized his hours with God that men had to take second place. Whenever he had guests in for the evening without fail at exactly nine o'clock he would stand and say, “Well it's been good to share this evening. Let's have a word of prayer before you leave.” He stated privately that the reason for this abrupt ceremony was that years before he had made a covenant to meet with the Lord early every morning at 4:00 a.m. Therefore, to obey the Lord in this matter he had to get a good night's sleep, so guests were a blessing but not a controlling factor in his life.

And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed. – Mark 1:35

Too often we let others control our schedules rather than being in control. Discipline is making yourself do the hard thing because you know it is good for you. No discipline is easy, but later the fruit of its consistency will be seen by all.

5. No Accountability, No Prayer Partner (whoever) Ecclesiastes. 4:9-12

Let me say here that I do believe in recent years too much is made of accountability partners. I have seen prayer partners lie to each other maintaining a guise of honesty and integrity, all the while having an affair. Accountability is not someone else holding you accountable, but you holding yourself accountable to another. Integrity and character is what you are when no one is looking. Yet, there is a place for prayer partnerships. We need prayer partners, people with whom we meet on a regular basis to pray together for each other and our world. Solomon recognized the value of a three-fold cord in Ecclesiastes 4:9-12. "Two are better than one because they have good reward for their labor, they keep each other warm, they help pick each other up when they fall."

A couple of years ago I began requiring my elders and deacons to enter into prayer partnerships. They were to have a prayer partner with whom they would meet every week for not less than a half hour. Prior to that our elders were loners praying only in their prayer closet. After the first year I let up on the men and assumed they would continue the practice as a command of the Lord. That year few of the men maintained any consistent prayer partnership. One of my deacons complained at the end of the year that he needed the pastor to require it so he would not be spiritually lazy and begged me to reinstitute the required prayer partnership. I learned that "People do what is inspected, not what is expected."

6. No Prayer Plan - prayer "floating" - (whatever) Daniel 6:10

Daniel had a prayer plan as did all men of God. Jesus taught his disciples to pray what we call the Lord's Prayer. John the Baptist must have taught his disciples a disciplined prayer plan for it was that example that led the disciples to ask Jesus to teach them to pray. Someone has rightly said, "*A failure to plan is a plan to fail.*" When we have no map to follow we tend to lose our way and wander aimlessly. A prayer plan is a simple outline to follow when you pray so you don't get lost. The Lord's Prayer is a good pattern to follow, as we will suggest in our teaching on the discipline of prayer. It includes essentials as we have suggested in our plan for intimacy with God – worship, thanksgiving, confession, armor of God, and petition.

Too often our prayers are primarily petition and nothing more. Pay attention to your church prayer meetings. Often they degenerate into "me" and "us" centered petitions for everyone who is sick and little else is prayed for. If you have no rule over your own spirit you will degenerate into making prayer only asking things from God and nothing more. Whatever prayer pattern you follow it ought to be your planned prayer. Some have used the acronym ACTS as a guide to their prayers (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication). If that works for you then work it. But remember, "*A failure to plan is a plan to fail.*"

Daniel, knelt upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime.

7. No Extended Times of Prayer – "watch and pray" (never-never, or hardly ever) Matt 26:41
Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed *is* willing, but the flesh *is* weak.

The road to hell is paved with good intentions. Most Christians will tell you that they want to pray more, but don't. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak indeed. It is good that we schedule extended times with God otherwise we will never have such times. It is good for churches to schedule special prayer vigils and concerts of prayer to provide opportunity to extend our times with God.

The term "watch and pray" has nothing to do with watching someone else pray, or keeping one's eyes open during prayer. Jesus was referring to being vigilant in extended times of prayer. We are no different than the disciples. We often fall asleep when we pray.

I used to fall asleep almost every time I prayed until I started to change my lazy prayer patterns. I once asked a visiting preacher how he managed to stay alert and not fall asleep when he prayed. He said, "That's easy. Once I realized that I fall asleep on my knees I decided to stand, walk and pace during my prayer times. I have never again fallen asleep."

We encourage our church people to schedule encounters with God at least three times each year. It was a rule for Israel that all the males had to appear before the Lord three times each year at the specified feasts. We do this by offering a \$10 discount for anyone who desires to do a personal prayer retreat at a nearby Retreat Center. We also try to add a couple of group prayer retreats to our church calendar thus providing encouragement, fellowship and extended times of prayer for our congregation.

New Habits - Biblical Obedience

The beginning of each year is an ideal time to evaluate your prayer habits and begin the process of change. None of us is perfect, but we are to constantly "press toward the mark" of the high calling of God. Our calling is to be a kingdom of priests, so let's press toward that mark. Here are a few suggestions for changes to incorporate into your new year.

1. Praying always, everywhere, about everything – 1 Timothy 2:8, 1 Thessalonians 5:17
2. Prayer in the Spirit – Jude 1:20, Romans 8:14, Romans 8:26
3. Prayer closet – "shut the door, pray in secret" - Matthew 6:6, Acts 10:9
4. Prayer time – specific times alone with God - Mark 1:35, Acts 10:9
5. Prayer partner(s) – accountability - Matthew 17:1, Eccleastes 4:9-12
6. Prayer plan – a specific strategy for intercession - Matthew 6:9
7. Prayer actions – active praying, alert, "watching" - I Thessalonians 5:6

Answers: Fill in the blanks:

- The journey of a 1000 miles begins with the one step.
- How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.
- Old habits die slowly.
- You can't teach an old dog new tricks.
- New habits require 4 to 6 weeks to develop.
- Strength training is based on repetitions.
- Any skill or ability is developed by practice.