

Renewal through Prayer

Ezra 8

The title of this series through Ezra is *RENEWAL: Return from Exile*. The first seven chapters of Ezra have mounded up a lot of reasons for our need for renewal. We've been faced with our inability to be faithful public servants (serve our city), obedient peculiar saints (obey our Lord) and truthful prophetic voices (love our community) in our City Groups and in our city. We are all called to be Citizens, Exiles, and Missionaries, and we all fail. Why? Because we aren't being renewed. Our faith in Christ isn't being invigorated. Why? It's that we don't put ourselves on *the path* of renewal. We hurry down the paths of busyness and self-reliance, and like Israel, we put rebuilding *before* renewal, roles before identity, community before Christ. These paths consistently wear us out, and yet we insist on traveling them, on avoiding the road of renewal. We are not all too different from Israel. Decades after their return from exile, they are battling some of the same old sins, but then something happens. Ezra returns. The Word of God is rediscovered. In Ezra chapter 7, Israel turns a corner and in chapters 7, 8, 9, and 10 we see that Israel moves into covenant renewal with YHWH. How is this accomplished? Well, each chapter emphasizes a different "means of grace", a way to put ourselves on the path of renewal. In chapter 7 we saw the first means of grace, the Law—studying, obeying, and teaching God's Word. Ezra set his heart to study the Law and taught others to do the same. Reading God's Word with the eyes of our heart puts us on the path of renewal. Today and next week we will consider the second means of grace—Prayer—which is prominent in chapters eight and nine. This morning, let's consider two questions: 1) What is prayer? 2) How do we pray?

What is Prayer?: Definition & Types

What is prayer? In his book, *Prayer and the Knowledge of God*, Graeme Goldsworthy defines prayer as "talking with God." Is this a sufficient definition of prayer? Well, I like its simplicity. Talking with God reminds us that prayer isn't something reserved for the spiritual elite. We can all talk. In this sense, prayer is simple, but it's also more profound. Prayer is talking, but it is also *listening*. More accurately, prayer is talking with God and God talking with us. It is *communication*. Prayer is communication, but it is more than communication! It is also *communion*, intimate communication with our gracious and glorious, triune God. To commune with someone is to share something with them that is of mutual benefit. You might commune with a friend over a great piece of music, a film, or a theological truth, when you both delight and exult in its creativity, excellence, brilliance. John Owen defined *communion* as "the sharing of good things between persons who are mutually delighted being cemented together by some union."¹ So, it's not just the shared delight, but also the cementing effect of that shared delight that produces communion. No doubt you have experienced this with close friends. Why are you close friends? Because you both delight in many of the same things (music, film, food, values, beliefs), and that shared delight has a cementing effect, a bonding between friends. We see this kind of friendship between best friends, Jonathan and David in the OT. It is said that their "souls cleaved to one another" (1 Sam 20:17). They *communed* together over many good things. Prayer is simple but it is profound. It is talking to God and listening to God. It is a cementing of

¹ This definition adapted from John Owen, eds. Kopic and Taylor, *Communion with the Triune God*, 93.

our souls with God in the gospel. It is, dare I say, friendship with God, though this friendship has a lesser and a greater. And it precisely because we are the lesser, the finite, the created, that we can find perfect and complete communion with the greater, infinite, uncreated God. What is prayer? Prayer is *communion with the triune God*. In fact, I want to use communion as an umbrella term *and* as a specific term, for a specific type of praying. We can organize prayer around three main types:

Prayers of Communion – fellowship with the triune God through worship and thanksgiving.

Lingering over God's greatness and goodness with gratitude.

- Praise God for his *attributes*: immensity, sovereignty, trinity, mercy, kindness, goodness,
- Thank God for his *acts*: creation, provision, salvation, protection, suffering, trial
- Meditate on his *promises*:

Prayers of Confession – confession of sin, repentance, and hopeful faith in Christ. **Being honest with God about who we are (sinners) and who he is (Savior).**

- Confess sinful thoughts, actions, or feelings towards God or others
- Repent from valuing, cherishing, desiring, trusting in that person or thing or event
- Receive God's perfect forgiveness and grace for our God-belittling sin
- Trust in the truth and grace of the gospel, that Christ is more desirable and trustworthy than these other things, no matter how good they are

Prayers of Petition – **requests for all kinds of things in Jesus name for Jesus' fame.** Our requests shouldn't treat God as the divine slot machine, put our prayer in, pull the lever, and hope you hit the jackpot. Instead, prayers of petition are *an opportunity for our desires to be aligned with God's desires*, not our will but his will. All of our requests, in the end, should move us closer to his will.

- For wisdom
- For healing
- For provision
- For mission

How to Pray: *Focused and Frequent Prayer*

How are we doing? How do we pray? In a recent study, the *Pew Foundation* discovered that 6 out of every 10 adults pray once a day in the U.S. Among the prayerful, women pray more than men, the older pray more than the younger, and the poorer pray more than the richer. Where does that put us? Let me give you a hint. We are a young church. The average age is probably around the average age of Austin, 31. According to statistics, only about 48% of people around this age pray *once a day*. So less than 50% of our demographic prays only once a day. But I thought prayer was communion with God, a relationship. What kind of relationship can we really have with God, if we pray to God just once a day? Think about it. What if a married couple only talked once a day? What kind of relationship would they have? Mere co-habitation, right? Communion with God requires more than a prayer a day, just like marriage requires more than a conversation a day. In fact, like any relationship, communion with God requires

both focused and frequent praying. **Focused prayer** is set apart, undistracted times of communion with God. It can be morning or evening, indoors or outdoors, loud or quiet, but it is *focused*. It is time to focus on God, to talk and to listen, to commune, to cement our souls with God in Christ through the Spirit. **Frequent prayers** are those intermittent prayers we say throughout the day. Like text messages, they may be as short as “Lord have mercy.” Like texts sent to heaven in an instant, God wants us to pepper him with prayer throughout the day. They are constant acts of dependence upon God in communion, confession, and intercession. A relationship with God needs to be nurtured like any other relationship. Intermittent, frequent communication isn’t enough. We also need regular times of focused prayer. Many of us struggle or don’t even have a focused time of prayer. And when we try we find ourselves easily distracted (fatigue, responsibilities, kids). John Newton, the great hymn-writer and preacher said that, even the buzz of a fly could overpower his attention to prayer. **But very often, it is not our lack of sleep or time that keeps us from focused prayer; it is lack of desire.** We just don’t desire God. We are far too easily satisfied with other things. How do we overcome this lack of prayer, this of desire? Dig in our heels and do it? Repeat meaningless phrases? Self-discipline? In his very helpful book, *A Praying Life* (which we have at the book table), Paul Miller says that what we need is not so much self-discipline but **poverty of spirit**. What is “poverty of spirit”? Matthew 5:3 “*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*” The word “blessed” means “delighted” or “happy.” *Happy are the poor in spirit.* Where do we get the desire we lack, the delight we don’t have in God? By being poor in spirit. What does it mean to be poor in spirit? It’s realizing how desperately dependent we are upon God for everything. Less of us and more of Him. It’s helplessness. Acknowledging who we really are, that we lack the desire for God, and repenting and pleading for his blessing, his help. It is acknowledging our own poverty before an infinitely wealthy God. How do we cultivate this? We need around God more. The more we get around him, the less we will think of ourselves. What happens when you get around your wealthy friends? All of a sudden we become aware of the year model of our car. We become acutely aware of our poverty in the presence of their wealth. So it is with God. The more we get around the wealth of his grace, the poorer we will become in spirit, the less we will value our own resources and the more we will value him and his resources. The poorer we become in our own strength the richer we will become in our Savior. Dependent. The more we become like a child, asking Daddy for everything, the more communion we will have, focused and frequent.

Be a Child

In the chapter “Spending Time with Your Father”, Miller makes the point that Jesus acted like a child. Whenever asked about his Father, his comments were laced with affectionate dependency and admiration. “I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me” (Jn 8:28; cf. 5:30; 5:19; 12:49; Matt 6:9-13). The night before the cross: “Not my will but thy will” (Lk 22:42). Like a child depending on his father. Miller asserts that “**Jesus was the most dependent human being who ever lived.**” Why? Because his entire sense of self is not self-reliant, self-centered. Rather, interdependent, community-centered. His identity comes from his community, his relationship with Father and Spirit, not from his earthly or heavenly performance. Jesus *is* because the Father and the Spirit *are*. He is dependent upon them, like a child. He knows himself only in relationship with his Father. He can’t conceive of himself

outside of that relationship. Our trouble is that we have a self that is created out of relationship with the Father, a sinful, self-reliant not God-reliant self. Prayer returns us to our proper place, to poverty of spirit, to child of God, as Jonathan-in-relationship-with-Father-Son-Spirit. Prayer reminds us of who we really are, where we find our identity, where we are most loved and best fathered. We spend time alone with God in prayer, not because it is a Christian duty, but because he is our *father*, because we love him, and we spend time alone with those we love most. We pray because we are children desperately dependent upon our Father.

Praying in Austin City Life

Now, I'd like to confess that, as a pastor, I haven't emphasized the importance of prayer enough. I'm guilty of focusing on what Richard Lovelace calls horizontal communication at the expense of vertical communication. Lovelace writes: "*The proportion of horizontal communication that goes on in the church (in planning, arguing, and expounding) is overwhelmingly greater than that which is vertical (in worship, thanksgiving, confession and intercession...The old midweek prayer meetings for revival have vanished from the programs of most churches or have been transformed into Bible studies ending with minimal prayer.*"² We need more vertical communication, as individuals and communities! So, I'd like the opportunity to cultivate poverty of Spirit by praying more specifically and consistently for you. If you would like me to pray for you, by name and need, every week, just fill out a card at the back of the Parish and drop it in the fish bowl. I will take those cards home and commit to praying for you for the rest of the year. I'm excited about this. Don't let me down! ☺ Perhaps you could do something similar in your City Groups to make prayer more focused and more frequent. Lovelace says most churches have been transformed into Bible Studies ending in minimal prayer. What about your City Group? Does your City Group just tack prayer onto the end of discussion or does it occupy a central place? Prayer is one of the Four Practices of a City Group: SHARE, PRAY *for one another and the city*, ENGAGE, LOVE. We don't have to be a statistic, Austin City Life. We can be a vibrant, praying church that communes with God, prays for one another and the city! May God grant us renewal through this means of grace.

Praying Together

Now, I'd like us to take some time to pray as a church. To pray prayers of communion, confession, and petition. Jordan and the band are going to play instrumentally for about 15 minutes. I'd like for us to take this time commune with God. You can do this silently or you can pray aloud. Just listen and talk to your Heavenly Father. Practice poverty of spirit. To guide us, I'll pray a prayer of each type every so often, and then close us.

- *Communion: Linger over God's greatness and goodness with gratitude*
- *Confession: Be honest with God about who we are (sinners) and who he is (Savior).*
- *Intercession: Request all kinds of things in Jesus name for Jesus' fame*

² Richard Lovelace, Dynamics of Spiritual Life, 153.