

**Touchstones of Prayer**  
**Part 2**

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Imagine with me today that Prince William and Kate have come to Edmonton for a visit. Imagine that you are downtown during their parade that will be happening during the lunch hour. So you decide to go to the street to see if you can get a glimpse of them. You get out on the sidewalk. There are lots of people. They begin cheering as the car carrying William and Kate approaches your location. You can't really see over the crowd in front of you. But you think you saw them for a second.

But then the cheering subsides as their motorcade stops. Then the crowd goes wild as the door to their car opens and out pops Prince William. He waves to the crowd but then begins walking towards the side of the street on which you stand. The crowd hushes as the prince continues towards it. He gets to the front and begins asking people to make way. They part to make room for him. He proceeds to make his way towards you.

When he sees you, he smiles. He calls you by name. "Hello! I've been looking for you. I would like to invite you to join me for supper tonight. I've made arrangements to meet at the restaurant on this card. Please meet me there at 6 PM." You're kind of stunned. But then you muster enough courage to say "but you don't even know me." "I want to get to know you," says the prince. Please make sure you join us and we'll have a wonderful time together."

The prince leaves and gets back in the car. The motorcade continues. You walk away in a daze. Then you call your family and tell them the news. Yet as the afternoon drags on, you look at the card he gave you. Maybe you doubt if that was real. Maybe it was an actor who looked like the prince. Maybe this was a prank set up by one of your friends. So you wonder if you will even go to the restaurant. Maybe you won't keep the card. How could Prince William possibly be that interested in knowing you?

Yet you figure what do you have to lose? So you take the card. You get dressed and you go to the restaurant. And there in the corner with a smile and a wave sits Prince William. He has waited just for you and he can't wait to spend time with you.

Now of course this seems far-fetched. Yet, someone much greater and more important than Prince William has done something like this for you and me. That someone is God who desires a close relationship with each one of us. He hasn't given us a card to meet him for dinner. He's given us the gift of prayer to meet with Him anytime. But will we

show up? Sometimes we too may have doubts about the reality of God's invitation. Or we may doubt if He really wants to spend time with us. But we have His Word and prayer. And when we accept that invitation and come to Him in prayer, He's always there waiting and glad that we came.

We've talked about prayer throughout September and October. We've considered why prayer is great and our desperate need to pray. In recent messages, we've looked at how we actually go about praying. And last week, we began looking at some areas that may need growth in our prayer lives. We called them touchstones of prayer. Remember a touch stone is a testing stone. You scrape a rock whose identity you're unsure of against the touchstone. The mark the rock leaves on the touchstone reveals the identity and quality of the rock. So if you rub your gold ring against a touchstone, it will reveal the purity of the gold in your ring.

We started last week with 6 touchstones of prayer that are found in Tim Keller's book – Prayer, Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God. These touchstones were:

- 1) Prayer is Work – Duty and Discipline
- 2) Prayer is response to God's Word
- 3) Prayer is balance between adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication.
- 4) Prayer requires Grace – Prayer is "in Jesus' name" based on the Gospel.
- 5) Prayer requires Fear – It is the heart engaged in loving awe.
- 6) Prayer requires Helplessness – It is accepting one's weakness and dependence.

We stopped with each touchstone and pondered the question – what would our prayer lives reveal when this touchstone rubs against them? We continue that journey today as we look at the second half of the touchstones on prayer. Even if you weren't here last week, I invite you to take a moment to open your prayer life up to God who wants to have a close relationship with you. Wherever you are at in prayer, I invite you to ask God to show you where you're doing well and where He wants you to grow. So will you talk with God for a moment and prepare your heart. Then we will begin. .

(Silent Prayer time)

The first three touchstones of prayer answered the question "what is prayer." The next three answered "What does prayer require?" # 7, 8 and 9 answer the question what does prayer give?

**What Prayer Gives** - The first touchstone in the category of what prayer gives is perspective. **Touchstone 7 - Perspective – Prayer reorients your view toward God.** “Prayer brings new perspective because it puts God back in the picture. Telling God about our needs, fears, hopes, concerns and sins almost immediately forces us to think differently about them.”<sup>1</sup>

An example of this occurs in Psalm 73 if you would like to turn their now in your Bibles. I like calling this the worship leader’s Psalm because it was written by David’s worship leader – Asaph. He was the chief musician in David’s court. In Psalm 73, he confesses a personal struggle. He wonders why wicked people prosper. He saw the godless living well. He noted how they mocked the faithful and God because there was no apparent consequence for brashly ignoring God’s reign. Asaph experienced so much concern that he wonders why he should even bother keeping his heart pure. Verse 13 – “All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.” He was troubled, he was about to blurt this out in an assembly of believers in a worship service. In Psalm 73:15, he says “If I had said, ‘I will speak thus,’ I would have betrayed the generation of your children.” But the turning point of the Psalm comes in verses 16 and 17.

“But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.” So Asaph goes to worship God in spite of his troubled heart. While there, he regains perspective concerning the wicked because God is once again in the picture. Then he goes on to share this perspective in verses 18-20. “Truly, you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.”

Now Asaph sees the wicked on a slippery slope. He is confident they will fall into ruin. He believes their end will come quickly. What resulted in this dramatic change? It seems he spent time in prayer. This brought God and His sovereignty back into his thinking. This brought God’s faithfulness and holiness back into his mind. Somehow, prayer generated a remembrance of the bigger picture. It reminded Asaph of the ultimate destiny of the wicked. It reminds us that what we see now is not the whole picture. We have to look at things from an eternal perspective.

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*, New York, NY, Dutton, 2014, 129.

I remember how this changed my perspective sometime in the last year. I was coming to God in prayer and struggling with how other people viewed me. It's a challenge to wade your way through that.

That particular day I was reading in Psalm 147. In verse 4, the Psalmist states "he determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names." Then in Psalm 147:10-11, it says "His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the legs of a man, but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love."

The little devotional I was reading that day then stated: *The number of stars is still uncountable by human science, yet God knows them each by name. . . . Yet this unimaginably immense God is given pleasure, real joy and delight when human beings put their life's hope in his gracious love.*" God experiences delight when we put our hope in him. That means God delights in most of us here. Some of us really need this perspective of God when we come to Him in prayer. People can disappear on us. And we can project this onto God where we think He's up in heaven frowning at our lives and the struggles we have in faith. But God delights in those who fear him; in those who hope in his steadfast love." This doesn't mean we are excused from facing tough stuff in our lives or facing up to character flaws. But it does mean we know God is on our side. God delights in us. The one whose opinion matters most in the universe is delighted in us. Prayer can give us the perspective that God is with us and for us.

So when the touchstone of perspective rubs against our prayer lives, what will it find? Will it discover a self-sufficient attitude that excludes God from the picture? Will it discover a hopeless perspective because God has been forgotten in the picture? Or will it reveal a renewed perspective with God in the picture?

What else does prayer give? **Touchstone 8 – Strength – Prayer is spiritual union with God.** This touchstone tests whether or not we gain strength after times of prayer. That is one of the goals of prayer after all. We come to God helpless, weak and incomplete. We leave helped, strengthened and whole. This often happened when people came to Jesus. He responded to their need and gave them strength to continue on in life.

J.I. Packer writes "Prayer is a means to energy. Spiritual alertness, vigor and confidence are the regular spin-off from earnest prayer on any subject." P.T. Forsyth wrote "Prayer brings with it, as food does, a new sense of power and health . . . Prayer is the assimilation of a holy God's moral strength. . . . To feed the soul we must toil at prayer."

When we came to Christ, we were united with Him. Scripture portrays this in several ways. One picture is of Christ indwelling us. In John 14:23 Jesus says, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him and we will come to him and make our home with him.” So we are united with Christ because he lives in us. Another image is of a vine and its branches. John 15 is the classic passage on this. In verse 5, Jesus says, “I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” This is a wonderful picture of spiritual life and strength received from the Lord. When we connect to the Lord through prayer, it is like we are a branch connected to the main plant giving the nutrients. Branches attached to the main plant flourish and bear fruit. Branches detached from the main plant dry up.

It is through prayer that God pours spiritual blessings and strength into our lives. Keller writes “Prayer is the way that all things we believe in and that Christ has won for us actually become our strength. Prayer is the way that truth is worked into your heart to create new instincts, reflexes and outlooks.” So imagine that your family is facing a very serious health crisis. Someone’s life hangs in the balance as they go into surgery. This surgery has a 50% success rate. So you come before God in prayer. You ask for your family member’s life. But during prayer, God reminds you that He has your loved one in His hand. God speaks to you that He is on your side and your loved one’s side. God impresses upon you that His will is ultimately the best. The Spirit speaks to you that “In all things, God works for the good of those who love him, who are called according to His purpose.” You have received all of this during prayer in the hospital chapel. As you get up, you have gained strength. It’s not a strength based on a requirement that everything turn out okay. It is a strength based on God’s goodness, love, wisdom, power, compassion and promises. No matter what happens, you leave that chapel knowing you’re not alone and that God will see you through. This strength is possible to receive through prayer. So when the touchstone of strength rubs up against your prayer life what will mark it? Will your prayer life leave a mark of weakness or renewed vigor and strength to go forward?

What does prayer give? **Touchstone 9 – Spiritual Reality – Prayer seeks a heart sense of the presence of God.** Another way to think of this is awareness of God’s presence. Edmund Clowney a pastor, educator and theologian wrote, “God does not merely speak. He is present. Prayer is steeped in the awareness, often awe-filled awareness of the presence of God.” Through prayer, God moves from abstract knowledge to realness. We don’t just believe in God’s glory in our minds. We sense His greatness. We don’t just believe that He loves us. He floods our heart with His love.

Yes, prayer is work and a duty. That was the first touchstone. We have to do it. But in this work, the Holy Spirit can tune our hearts to God's presence. I don't know how this happens for you. But when I am in tune with God and given the gift of sensing His presence, I have a deep impression on my heart. "God you are here. God you are speaking. God you are lifting my heart. God you are ministering to me."

John Newton, the writer of Amazing Grace, spoke of God's "sensible presence: - a feeling of his presence on our hearts – as a gift of God that we cannot dictate.

God's presence is not an audible voice heard with the ears or a visible sight seen with the eyes. Yet it is a kind of voice and a kind of sight – a sense on the heart. In prayer you can come into the presence of God.

So when this touchstone rubs up against our prayer lives what will it discover? Will the stone reveal a heart ignorant and unconscious of God's presence because it is so preoccupied with self? Or will it find a heart aware of God's presence?

The last 3 touchstones of prayer answer the question "Where prayer takes us." **Where Prayer Takes Us - Touchstone 10 - Self-Knowledge – Prayer requires and creates honesty and self knowledge.** True prayer begins with humility. But it must take us beyond simple humility to a deep honesty with ourselves. Keller points out that honesty before an all-knowing God would seem like a no brainer. But we can easily mouth clichés without taking the time or making the effort to expose to God and ourselves our deepest fears, hurts, flaws and sins. Yet if we're truly praying, it should not allow us to deceive ourselves.

Through prayer and especially responding to God's Word in prayer, we discover explicit sins and wrongdoing. But we also uncover inner attitudes, perspectives and desires – many of which we would not want anyone else to see; and many that we may not even want to admit to ourselves. Yet coming close to a holy God makes us more aware of our impurities and the twisted motivations of our heart.

So knowing God better helps us to know ourselves better. The more we know ourselves, the more we discover our need for God to do His reshaping work in us. One of the clearest examples of this comes from Isaiah 6. Isaiah is given a vision of the Lord God in the temple. He sees the angels declare "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty. The whole earth is filled with his glory. " Isaiah responds "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live

among a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.” (Isaiah 6:5). It was because he’d seen the king in a new way that he saw himself in a new way.

Clowney notes: “Prayer involves an honesty that has no real parallel in human relationships – because every human relation involves only a part of your personality. We relate differently to our spouse, our business partner, a chance acquaintance on the street because each of our social roles expresses only a part of our personhood. Even our spouse sees only a part of who we are. In relation to God however, our masks are gone, pretense is useless; the relationship is not partial but total. All that we are stands revealed before our Maker and Redeemer.” Hebrews 4:13 – “And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”

So when the touchstone of honest self-knowledge scrapes against our prayer lives, what will it discover? Will it find a heart that lies to itself and God about the real you? Or will it find a heart that is willing to be honest with God and self about the weaknesses and flaws that need strengthening. If this touchstone finds such honesty, it reveals a heart ready to work with God and all He wants to do in our lives.

Where does prayer take us? **Touchstone 11 - Trust – Prayer Requires and Creates Restful Trust and Confident Hope.** A healthy prayer life keeps in balance submission to God’s will and persistence for God to act. We must submit all of our prayer requests to the will of God. We may need to pray for strength to accept thankfully whatever God sends or does not send in His wisdom. Our Father knows best and sometimes granting our prayer requests might be the worst outcome for us.

But we are invited to specifically, repeatedly and intensely make our needs known in prayer with confidence that they will be heard. Abraham pressed God again and again in intercession to save Sodom and Gomorrah. Moses pleaded for mercy from God for Israel and Himself in Exodus 33:12-22. Habakkuk declared that he would stay in his watch tower until the Lord answered his questions about why evil seemed to be winning. Jesus encourages the disciples to keep praying and not give up in the parable of the persistent widow.

Norwegian pastor Ole Hallesby writes “Prayer is work and wrestling. Though we must always end prayers with “your will be done,” our prayers should begin with great striving with God.” A balance between restful trust and confident hope is absolutely crucial. If we overstress submission, we become too passive. We will never pray with

passion and force appealing for God to act. But if we overstress insistence, we ask without a foundation of trust in His sovereignty. Then our prayers become demands and we get angry if we don't get the answers we seek.

Hallesby illustrates this by mining in Norway. To actually get down into the earth to mine its resources, you need to create mine shafts or tunnels to get at them. There are two basic actions that create mine shafts – boring holes and explosions or blasts. Boring or drilling holes requires long periods of time to go deep into the rock. To bore the holes deeply enough into the most strategic spots is work that takes patience, steadiness and a great deal of skill. Once the holes were finished however, the shot was inserted and connected to a fuse. To light the fuse and fire the shot is not only easy but also very interesting. One sees results. Shots are loud and pieces fly in every direction. He concludes that while the more painstaking work takes both skill and patient strength of character, anyone can light a fuse.

This helpful illustration warns us against only doing fuse lighting prayers, the kind that we soon drop if we do not get immediate results. If we believe both in the power of prayer and the wisdom of God, we will have a patient prayer life of hole-boring. Mature believers know that handling the monotony or sameness is part of what makes for effective prayers. So a hole-boring prayer might be “Lord, will you please bring my wandering child back to yourself. Work in their heart to turn it once again to you.” A fuse lighting prayer might be “Lord, please bring my child back to you this weekend when they are over to our house for supper.” There are times to pray such a fuse lighting prayers. But persistent prayer is a must for many of the long term situations we face in life.

So when the touchstone of trust rubs against our prayer life, what will it find? Will it discover anxiety or anger because God has not answered in the way or time we expected? Or will it find a restful trust in God who will bring the best answer when the time is right.

**Touchstone 12 – Where does prayer take us? Surrender – Prayer requires and creates surrender of the whole life in love to God.** We are called to place God as supreme and central in our lives. If we live in a way that God does not have our highest allegiance, then we will use prayer simply to try to get things that already may be running our lives. So if our greatest allegiance is to money, we will ask for more security and prosperity. If our greatest allegiance is to comfort, we will ask for more comfort and vacations. If our greatest allegiance is to pleasure, we may ask God for that which will make us feel good.



A growing prayer life takes us to complete surrender to God. This begins when we give our supreme loyalty to God. He must be first and foremost in our lives. We see this need related to prayer in James 1:5-8. “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God who gives generously to all without reproach and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.” Now Tim Keller points out that “The phrase ‘without doubting’ throws many readers into great anxiety, because it looks on the surface as if James says we must have absolute psychological certainty in our minds as we petition God. That is not what he is talking about. He defines doubt in verse 8 as being double-minded – using the word two psyches.” Two allegiances or a divided allegiance – one part of our loyalty towards God and another part of our loyalty towards something else. If we live like that, our prayers will be hindered by this division.

So we must make a decision that God is our God and we will “ditch all competing concerns the moment we discern them.” Though we imperfectly love God, we desire to love Him supremely. Unless we know that God is the one thing we truly need, our prayers may actually be disguised forms of worry, greed or coveting.

Remember a few weeks ago when we looked at the master teachers on prayer? We saw Augustine’s thoughts on prayer in a letter to Anicia. She was that formerly wealthy Roman widow who had to flee Rome and start a new life in North Africa with her granddaughter. Augustine writes her about prayer. He states “you should not begin to pray for all you want until you realize that in God you have all you need.” So when the touchstone of surrender rubs against our prayer lives, what will it discover? Will it find a life that pays lip service to God? Will it find a life that shows some respect to God but sees Him only as a compartment to whom we’re willing to give an hour or two of our week if it’s convenient? Or will our prayer life leave a streak of gold on the stone of surrender that declares “the Lord is my Lord and my life’s purpose is to love and glorify Him with all I have and am?”

12 touchstones of prayer that can help test and strengthen our prayer lives.

What is prayer? Work, Responding to God’s Word and Balance.

What does prayer require? Grace, Fear and Helplessness.

What does prayer give? Perspective, Strength and Spiritual Reality.

Where does prayer take us? Self-Knowledge, Trust and Surrender.

Wherever you are at in your prayer life, the Lord comes to you today and says “I desire to walk with you and connect even more deeply than we already do. Will you open your life to me so I can teach you and grow you in prayer. Then you will discover even more my care, sufficiency and love for you.” Will you open up your life and heart further to the Lord now?