

## **Q&A with Paul Miller, author of *A Praying Life: Connecting With God in A Distracting World***

### **Q: Why do you think it is particularly difficult for American Christians to pray?**

**A:** I believe American culture is probably the hardest place in the world to learn to pray. We are so busy that when we slow down to pray, we find it uncomfortable. We prize accomplishments, production. But prayer is nothing but talking to God. It feels useless, as if we are wasting time. Every bone in our bodies screams, "Get to work." Because we can do life without God, praying seems nice but unnecessary. Money can do what prayer does, and it is quicker and less time-consuming. Our trust in ourselves and in our talents makes us structurally independent of God.

### **Q: You say that cynicism is increasingly the dominant spirit of our age. How does cynicism affect our prayer lives?**

**A:** When I say that cynicism is the spirit of the age, I mean it is an influence, a tone that permeates our culture, one of the master temptations of our age. Cynicism creates a numbness toward life. It finds a cloud behind every silver lining. Satan's first recorded words are cynical, and he suggests that God's motives are cynical. Cynicism critiques. It questions the active goodness of God on our behalf. It is passive, cocooning itself off from the passions of the great cosmic battle we are engaged in. It is without hope.

But a praying life is just the opposite. It engages evil. It doesn't take no for an answer. The psalmist was in God's face, hoping, dreaming, asking. Prayer is feisty.

### **Q: You remind us that Jesus wanted us to come to him like little children. Why is this challenging?**

**A:** The difficulty of coming just as we are is that we are messy. And prayer makes it worse. When we slow down to pray, we are immediately confronted with how unspiritual we are, with how difficult it is to concentrate on God. We didn't know how bad we were until we tried to be good. Nothing exposes our selfishness and spiritual powerlessness like prayer.

Yet Jesus does not say, "Come to me, all you who have learned how to concentrate in prayer, whose minds no longer wander, and I will give you rest." No, Jesus opens his arms to his needy children and says, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." The criterion for coming to Jesus is weariness. Come overwhelmed with life. Come with your wandering heart. Come messy.

### **Q: What did Jesus mean when he said, "Ask and I will give it to you"? Should we really ask for anything we desire?**

**A:** When I ask people at our prayer seminars to react honestly to Jesus' seeming blank check in this Last Supper conversation, everyone is uncomfortable. But you really can summarize all of Jesus' teaching on prayer in one word: ask. His primary concern is to get us into the game. Start asking. Don't just ask for spiritual things or "good" things. Tell God what you want. The real you has to meet the real God. Ask anything.

### **Q: Do you think effective parenting and prayer are intertwined?**

**A:** Yes, I do. So it is surprising how seldom books on parenting talk about prayer. We instinctively believe that if we have the right biblical principles and apply them consistently, our kids will turn out right. But that didn't work for God in the Garden of Eden. Perfect environment. Perfect relationships. And still God's two children went bad.

It took me seventeen years to realize I couldn't parent on my own. It was not a great spiritual insight, just a realistic observation. If I didn't pray deliberately and reflectively for members of my family by name every morning, they'd kill one another. I was incapable of getting inside their hearts. I was desperate. But even more, I couldn't change my self-confident heart. That's why I need grace even to pray. God answered my prayer. As I began to pray regularly for the children, he began to work in their hearts. It didn't take me long to realize I did my best parenting by prayer.

**Q: Some people say they've quit praying because God hasn't answered their prayers. How do you speak to these situations?**

**A:** If I were a "prayer mentor" to someone who's experiencing unanswered prayer, I would first want to know his or her story. And I'd ask that person how he or she views prayer. The praying life is inseparable from obeying, loving, waiting and suffering. It could be that this person is a modern-day Job, enduring meaningless suffering in which he/she is innocent. But I'd also tell her stories of God's 25-year answer to our prayer for our daughter Kim to learn to speak—sometimes answers are a long time coming.

Mostly, I'd invite this person to pray in the context of the larger story God is weaving. Sometimes when we say "God is silent," what's really going on is that he hasn't told the story the way we wanted it told. He will be silent when we want him to fill in the blanks of the story we are creating. But with his own stories, the ones we live in, he is seldom silent. When the story isn't going your way, ask yourself, "What is God doing?" Be on the lookout for strange gifts. God loves to surprise us.

**Q: So you believe life is a series of smaller re-enactments of God's larger story?**

**A:** The gospel, the Father's gift of his Son to die in our place, is so breathtaking that since Jesus' death, no one has been able to tell a better story. If you want to tell a really good story, you have to tell a gospel story. And whenever you love, you reenact Jesus' death by giving yourself sacrificially for another.

As we wait and pray, God weaves his story and creates a wonder. We learn to watch for His story unfolding, and we are dazzled by the wonder of his love.

**Q: You've entitled your book "A Praying Life." What does that life look like?**

**A:** A praying life looks like a relationship—between you and God. That is why prayer is not actually the center of the book I've written. Getting to know a person, God, is the center. Consequently, a praying life isn't something you accomplish in a year. It is a journey of a lifetime.

Many assume that a spiritual person is unruffled by life, unfazed by pressure. But even a cursory glance at Jesus' life reveals a busy life. If Jesus lived today, his cell phone would be ringing constantly. If we love people and have the power to help, then we are going to be busy. Learning to pray doesn't offer us a less busy life; it offers us a less busy heart. Because we are less hectic on the inside, we have a greater capacity to love.

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***A Praying Life: Connecting With God in a Distracting World***

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