

Praying Through Praise

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Hi, my name is Ryan O'Hara and my wife and I, and our four sons live here in West St. Paul, Minnesota. I'm so excited for us to get started on this Advent retreat for Pray More Novenas. Let's begin with a prayer.

Opening Prayer

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God, we give you praise and thanks for who you are and for all that you have done for us. We thank you, especially for your Son, Jesus, and the gift of the Holy Spirit, and also for the gift of this Advent season and the technology that we can use to bring thousands of people together for retreat. Please do a powerful work in our hearts during this time. We pray all of this in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen

P-R-A-Y

In the 1960s, social commentator Marshall McLuhan famously said "The medium is the message". And the Church, when it comes to prayer, has a similar sentiment. What's meant by this, "The medium is the message", is that how we receive something really matters. And when it comes to the Church and prayer, the medium that we use really matters. The Church says that we believe that the law of prayer is the law of belief, "Lex credendi, Lex orandi". And so, the law of prayer is the law of belief. So, it really matters how we pray. And the reason that is, is that, as we pray, we are formed more and more into who God has created us to be.

And that's what these four talks are all about. A simple prayer method of praise, repentance, asking and yielding, P-R-A-Y, a simple prayer method that, when we do this repeatedly in our lives, each of these steps of the prayer method form us more and more into sons and daughters of God. And so, it matters how we pray. And we want to pray in such a way that it strengthens our relationship with God, and that relationship can form us into who God wants us to be.

Two Tips

If someone asks me or asks you, "How is your relationship with God?", what I think they're really asking is, "Tell me about your prayer life. How is your prayer life?". And this is a great opportunity for us to grow in prayer. And practically, how do we pray on a daily basis in such a

Pray More Advent Retreat 2021 - Transcript

way that it strengthens our relationship with God and forms us more and more into who God wants us to be? But first, two practical tips.

Tip number one, we've got to find a consistent time, a quiet place, and a simple plan when it comes to developing a daily habit of prayer. I can't take care of the first two, the consistent time or place, but we can address a simple plan in these talks. That's what I'm hoping to communicate to you. One for each step of the PRAY method, praise, repentance, asking and yielding. So, that's tip number one. We've got to find a consistent time, quiet place and a simple plan. We've got to predetermine those things, I think, to find the most success in prayer.

And practical tip number two is to use the daily Gospel as fodder for your prayer, particularly when you're using a method like this, rather than just, sort of, starting out cold. You can, you can do that, but I think it really helps to have, kind of, fertile ground to begin a conversation with God using the daily Gospel as that springboard for prayer. I find that it helps me to encounter God's word and God's voice, it helps me to pray in union with the whole Church, and it really gives God pride of place to speak first. In our relationship with God, it is always God who acts first. And so, even by praying with the Gospels, we're forming ourselves in that truth, that it's always God who speaks first.

Starting With Praise

So, let's dive right in. When we talk about this first step of the method, praise, I also want to expand that just slightly to be praise and thanksgiving. We'll talk more about the distinctions here in just a minute. And you might think, "Gosh, why start with praise? Shouldn't we get right to it?", kind of like, "I've got things I want to say to God, or ask of God". Well, again, we'll get there. And there's a reason we start with praise first. One of the main reasons is that it is God's gift to us. The liturgy says that God has no need for our praise, but our desire to thank Him is God's gift to us. So, praise is a gift or, how the Church might talk about it, praise is a grace. And I see this grace, this gift playing out in our spiritual life in three simple ways.

One, it's a weapon for spiritual warfare. There is a spiritual battle that surrounds each and every one of us, largely unseen, but sometimes we can sense it and we can feel it, and temptations can overwhelm. And we see, in Ephesians 6, that Paul says that our battle isn't against flesh and blood. It's not in our relationships with our neighbors, or our family members or our friends where the real spiritual battle takes place, but in the spiritual realms in the heavenly realms. And so, this praise is a weapon and how I like to think about it, when we praise God for who He is and thank Him for what He has done, we are right-sizing God and downsizing the devil. We're, sort of, hushing the voice of the evil one, or hushing that voice of temptation and giving a greater voice to God in our life. So, it's a weapon for spiritual warfare.

Pray More Advent Retreat 2021 - Transcript

Second, it's a fuel for our faith. And so, sometimes, in our hearts, faith is, you know, a single candle, or it's a campfire, and sometimes it's like a forest fire, but wherever we are, praise adds fuel to our faith. Again, when we give praise to God, we, sort of, inspire our tiny faith to grow. Because again, we're shining a spotlight on who God is and what He has done in our lives.

And lastly, praise as a gift is hope when things are heavy. I don't know about you, but just like it says in Isaiah 60, He would give us a "garment of praise for a spirit of heaviness". And that phrase, "a garment of praise for a spirit of heaviness", I've seen it happen so many times. If I would just stop, get outside of myself and begin to honor and glorify God with my words, with myself, with my body in prayer, there's a way in which that spirit of heaviness starts to lift. So, it's hope when things are heavy, it's fuel for our faith and it's a weapon for spiritual warfare. And this is just the beginning of why it is that praise is such a gift to us.

Praise and Thanksgiving

But is there a distinction, kind of, between the two? And I think a helpful way to look at it would be that praise is honoring God for who He is, for His character, His strength, His goodness, His mercy, whereas thanksgiving honors God for what God has done for us. He has saved us. He's redeemed us. He has loved us. He's provided for us. He is near to us. And so, I think it helps to not just thank God, absolutely, gratitude, critical foundation for the spiritual life, but when we start to praise God, we see more and more of what He is capable of and our faith grows, our hope grows, and our love for God increases as we praise Him for who He is and for what He has done.

And we see this all throughout the Psalms. That was Jesus's prayer book. And it's in the, I can only imagine what prayer life was like in the home of the Holy Family. What we know is Jesus meditated day and night on the Old Testament and, in particular, the scriptures, that His mouth was filled with praise for the Father, because that's what we see all throughout the Psalms. And Psalms means praises. So, that's a little bit of a distinction, and I think it's helpful to know that we praise God for who He is, and we thank God for all that He has done.

The Third Sunday of Advent

So, for each one of these four talks, I want to use one of the gospel readings from Advent. I want to use the third Sunday of Advent as the Gospel reading that we focus on. And a little bit of context there. Of course, John the Baptist is a key figure in advent. He is the one that is announcing the coming of the Messiah. He's the precursor to the Messiah, preparing the way for Jesus. And in this instance, in this Gospel, Luke 3:10-18, Jesus doesn't, himself, make an appearance, but He is alluded to and spoken about all throughout. So, in the first part of the Gospel, Luke 3:10 and following, John, the Baptist is asked by the crowd, "What must we do?". You know, he's inviting people to repentance and to reform their lives.

Pray More Advent Retreat 2021 - Transcript

And so, he's talking to them about three different things that they ought to do. And then it says that the crowd was "filled with expectation", that is John the Baptist the Messiah, or is he pointing to the Messiah? And we see, with great expectation, John the Baptist, speaking about the one who is to come. And when it comes to praise, when I'm reading the gospel and I'm beginning to prepare for my prayer time, what I find helpful is I can see right in the gospel, where is it that God can be praised? Where can I, sort of, extol His character? Where can I thank God for what He done for us? And so, in this particular verse, in Luke 3, right around verse 15 or so, John the Baptist says, "one mightier than I is coming".

And so, just with that verse, you can see that we could praise God for His strength and we can praise God for His presence in our life. He's strong and He's coming and He's going to be near. He wants to be involved in our life. So, we can praise God for His strength and His presence. It also says that, John the Baptist is baptizing with water, but he says "the one that's coming after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire".

So again, we can thank God, we can praise Him for the incarnation that God is coming to Earth and that we would be given the Holy Spirit. We can praise God for His generosity. We can praise God for cleansing us in baptism. And we can praise God for purifying us with the fire of the Holy Spirit. So, we can thank God and praise Him for His strength, His presence, His willingness to give Himself to us in the Holy Spirit and to purify us. And then it finally says that that one that is to come will gather the wheat in the barn and "burn up the chaff up in an unquenchable fire". And what, actually, we see here is that we can praise God and thank Him that He is merciful and just. And so, God's character, God's action is all over, particularly that second part of the Gospel. And it's important, again, you know, as you're entering into your prayer time, you're beginning with this posture of praise, of naming what it is that you love about who God is and thanking God for what He has done.

Confidence and Humility

So, praise and thanksgiving is all over this Gospel. But what if we don't praise God? Or maybe you've a better, what happens, like, what are the benefits? What's at stake? What do we stand to gain if the praise of God is firmly a regular part of our prayer life? Well, what I would say is that we grow in two particular ways. In confidence in God and humility before God. And through it all, just like when, you know, praise as a grace brings hope, you know, when life heavy, I think we stand to grow in the virtue, the theological virtue of hope.

So first, confidence in God. So, when I would boast in anyone, assuming I'm telling the truth, what that displays is a certain confidence I have in that person, and the kind of person that they are, to get a certain job done. And I know, for me, I want to have great hope in my life that God is who He says He is, and that God will do what God says He will do. And as I praise Him, as

Pray More Advent Retreat 2021 - Transcript

that becomes a regular habit of my life, I grow in confidence in God. And at the same time, it kind of right-sizes God and it right-sizes me. And so, I grow in humility. And then I realize that God is omnipotent, eternal, ever present, loving, merciful, just, et cetera, et cetera, kind, gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, steadfast in His love for us. This is God's character. And I realize how I fall short of that. And again, so it puts me in the right kind of place to relate to Him, but always in a relationship of love, just like I hope the confidence sons and daughters would have in their dads, even though our dads on Earth here aren't perfect.

Our heavenly Father is perfect, and God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit is perfect. And so, we can grow in confidence and humility. But above all, what that does is that no matter where life goes, we can continue to grow in hope because we believe that, with God on our side, He would see us through whatever difficulties there may be. The story isn't ever finally over. And that's the hope of the resurrection. That's the hope of the incarnation, that death would not get the final word, but that Jesus, the Son of God would come to Earth to rescue the people of God. First, the Israelites, and then the Gentiles and the rest of the whole world on down through history, including you and I.

And so, what's at stake is growing in confidence, growing in humility, and growing in hope. And if we don't praise God, I think our vision of God gets smaller and smaller and smaller. We decrease in confidence, and we might begin to grow in pride. And if you're like me, that's not something that I want to grow more and more and more in, an elevated sense of self. I want to have an elevated sense of God, and the gift of praise can help us do that.

A Question for You

So, I want to leave you with a question in this first talk. What is it that resonates most within you about who God is? So, how does God's character resonate in your heart? Do you have a strong sense of who God is, how strong God is, how capable God is, how much He loves you? Or, when it comes to time to praise God, do you not have a whole lot to say? And the reason I ask this question is that, I think, whatever really resonates inside each of us, we're going to radiate.

You know, when you get, you know, a new phone, or a new app on your phone, or you watch a television show that you love, or you just found a recipe that tastes amazing, when something resonates, a new restaurant, whatever it might be, a certain brand of clothing, I don't know. When something starts to work for us, we can't help but tell others all about it. And the same thing is true in our relationship with God, that we will glorify God to the degree that God really satisfies us and is growing in more and more importance in our life.

And so, if this first piece is a bit of a stumbling block, right? "I just don't know what to say", or, "I have very little confidence in God", I want to encourage you to spend time in the Psalms.

Pray More Advent Retreat 2021 - Transcript

Look throughout the Psalms, every other one is a Psalm of praise, or every three Psalms is a Psalm of praise, just to help strengthen that praise vocabulary in your life, and to ask God to give you that gift of praise, to be able to regularly praise Him for who He is and to thank Him for everything that He's done.

The other thing I want to leave you with is a practical help, because I know this isn't something that always comes so natural. Jesus has a number of names, both how he's been prophesied about in the Old Testament, and spoken about in the New Testament, and throughout, you know, through the Gospels and throughout the epistles, and there's a little handout that I've included with this talk that is the litany of praise, and the praise of all the different names of Jesus. And so, I think that could be really helpful to support you as you begin, kind of, strengthening your praise vocabulary, both for God's character, but also, particularly, for the person of Jesus.

Closing Prayer

Let's pray. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God, we give you thanks. We give you honor and glory. You are magnificent. You are holy. You are good. You are just. You're merciful, compassionate and gracious. Thank you for loving us, your sons and daughters, and offering your Son, Jesus. But even more, that you rose from the dead, ascended to heaven and gave us the Holy Spirit. We love you, Lord. Increase our praise of you in each and every day of our life. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.