

Xenos Christian Fellowship
Christian Growth
Week 8 – The Means of Growth: Prayer and Body Life, Part 1

Overview

- Introduction to the means of growth
- Prayer as a means of growth
 - Types of Prayer
 - Practical Guidelines for Prayer
 - Reasons for Ungranted Requests
- Body Life as a means of growth
 - Biblical basis for body life

Introduction to the Means of Growth

Before we begin to look at prayer as a means of growth, let's take a moment to remember where the means of growth fit into the bigger picture of us walking with Christ in the power of his Spirit.

Participation in the Means of Growth is only one of three elements of *walking by the Spirit*.

1. Setting your mind on the things of the Spirit.
2. Keep in step with the Spirit (Responsiveness to God's personal leading)
 - (4th Means of growth HE initiates: Proper response to Suffering / Discipline of the Holy Spirit)
3. Sow to the Spirit (regular participation in the "means of growth")
The Means of Growth
 - Prayer
 - Word
 - Body Life (Fellowship and Ministry)

Qualifications:

1. Beware of participating in the means of growth legalistically! They don't procure or maintain your acceptance with God. They don't make God more willing to bless you. Rather, they are *provisions* for spiritual growth. They are God's prescribed channels through which we receive his life-changing power (e.g. nutrition and exercise).
2. While avoiding a legalistic approach to the means of growth, we must feed ourselves spiritually! At times, every Christian feels aversive to reading the word or praying or being with other Christians. Choosing against our feelings to participate in these means of growth is not legalistic. By doing this we express our faith that God will transform us through these provisions.
 - The most common reason for spiritual problems is right here! In our pride, we want to believe that our spiritual problems have some exotic cause, when the real reason is usually embarrassingly simple. Like the man who complains of chronically feeling weak, hungry, vulnerable to sickness, etc., but doesn't eat or exercise consistently, so are many of us. When we realize we're not doing well spiritually, this is the first place we should look! Also keep this in mind when counseling others.

- Beware also of the temptation to look for dramatic, quick-fix spiritual cures! The means of growth (like sowing) are not super-stimulating most of the time, but they yield stable, solid, and rich spiritual vitality and maturity over time.
3. You need consistent participation in *all* of them, like eating a balanced diet. They are not like spiritual gifts, which we may legitimately specialize in. Habitual neglect of any means of growth can lead eventually to a complete spiritual breakdown.

Note to instructor: You should offer some examples of people you know who chronically neglected the means of growth and the effect it had on their walk.

Most of us tend to gravitate naturally to some means of growth, and to avoid others. So we say "I've never been a student, people-person, etc." Be aware of this tendency, and *cultivate* a taste for the ones you tend to avoid.

There is also an interconnectedness to the means of growth in which they each make the others more effective (EXAMPLE: Word helps us to pray more effectively; prayer helps us minister more effectively). Take note of the charts at the end of each chapter on the means of growth in [*Walking in Victory*](#).

Acts 2:42 is a memory verse because it has all three of these means of growth *and* emphasizes consistency ("they were *continually* devoting themselves"). This is a great verse to share with new Christians, to help them get started on the right foot.

Prayer as a means of growth

What is prayer? *Prayer is contentful interaction with a personal God.* In some religions, adherents are encouraged to empty their minds or to manipulate forces through ritual prayer techniques. Biblical prayer is a contentful conversation with a personal God who knows us and wants to interact with us.

Imagine a marriage in which the two spouses never speak to each other, or only speak in impersonal, memorized phrases and at certain set times! Yet many of us have been raised in church backgrounds that emphasize this way of communicating with God (Matt. 6:7ff.). In this passage Jesus instructs his disciples in personal prayer. What an irony that many have taken The Lord's Prayer as a ritualistic approach to God!

(Matt. 6:7) "And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition, as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words . . . Pray, then, in this way . . ."

Through prayer we have access to God. The Bible says that one of the greatest benefits of justification through the finished work of Christ is that we have access to God—the privilege to come into his presence and commune personally with him at any time. In ancient times, coming into the presence of a king unannounced was potentially a capital offense. By contrast, though our king is far more righteous and powerful, we can approach him with confidence of his acceptance and delight to fellowship with us!

(Heb 10:19) Since therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the

veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Many Christians struggle with their prayer lives. Even though we have the privilege to interact with a personal God, many Christians struggle in this area.

(Oswald Sanders) “If I wished to humble anyone, I should question him about his prayers. I know nothing to compare with this topic for its sorrowful self confessions.”¹

It's easy to become defeated about our prayer life, so we need to remember a couple of things:

- *The desire to pray reveals God's presence in our lives.* Our concern for our prayer lives is evidence that God is at work in our lives and that we are (to some extent at least) responsive to him. How many of us were concerned about our prayer lives before we came to Christ? Thank God for this evidence of our regeneration.
- *Expect aversion to prayer due to our sin nature and Satanic opposition.* We should not be surprised or fall under accusation when we feel extreme aversion to prayer. This shows us that our sinful nature is still operative, and is not a reliable indicator of our spiritual health. We should disregard such feelings and choose to communicate with God (Gal. 5:17). Realize too that Satan and his demons are intent on discouraging Christians from prayer.
- *God accepts us fully in spite of our poor prayer lives,* and helps our weaknesses in this area (Rom. 8:26,27).

(Rom. 8:26,27) And in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; (27) and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

- *Respond to God's initiation with prayer.*

(James 4:8) “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.”

(Oswald Sanders) "You are as close to God right now as you habitually choose to be."

Remember to listen in prayer.

¹ British clergyman C.J. Vaughan in *Spiritual Leadership* by Oswald Sanders, p. 85.

Before we discuss what to say to God in prayer, don't forget he has something to say to us. One key element in a rich prayer life pervades each type of prayer below—*listening*.

Since prayer is two-way communication, it is illogical and even more, unbiblical, to assume prayer is one-way—just me talking to God. Whether praying alone or with others, God will often provide guidance through thoughts, impressions, other people's prayers and leadings by the Spirit.

We should not expect to hear an audible voice and we must test spiritual leadings by scripture before we consider them valid. We need to cultivate a sensitivity to God speaking through each type of prayer below. The book, *Too Busy Not To Pray*² has an excellent chapter on listening in prayer.

Types of Prayer

1. Praise & Thanksgiving:

These two are closely related because they focus on God and his provision, but they are distinct:

Praise: *appreciating who God is, his attributes*. When we praise God we are reflecting on who he is and why he is worthy of praise.

e.g. Compare this to praising a good movie, a good meal, or someone you admire.

(Psalm 147:1) Praise the LORD! For it is good to sing praises to our God; For it is pleasant and praise is becoming.

See also Psalm 100 and Revelation 5:9.

What will occur if our prayer life does not include praise?

Thanksgiving: *appreciating what God has done, is doing, & promises to do*. We must remember and express gratitude for what God has given us—primarily the great blessings of salvation (e.g. identity truths), but also the temporal blessings he grants us (e.g., material provisions, ministry success). This is a big emphasis in the New Testament letters. There are about 47 uses of "thanks," "gratitude," and "thanksgiving"; 84 "blessed"; 28 "praise", etc.

(Col. 3:15-17) And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and *be thankful*. (16) Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing *with thankfulness in your hearts* to God. (17) And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, *giving thanks* through Him to God the Father.

Why are praise and thanksgiving so important?

- *Not because God needs it*. This idea is pagan, and is the result of anthropomorphizing God: God is insecure and will be more inclined to grant our

² Bill Hybels, *Too Busy Not to Pray* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 107ff.

requests if we stroke his ego. God *is* in fact pleased when we praise and thank him— because it shows that we are maturing. As parents, we are pleased when our children thank us for helping them. We don't need their thanks to validate us, but we are glad for them because their thankfulness shows that they are maturing.

- Rather, it is *primarily for our benefit*.
 - Praise *reminds* us of how powerful and loving God is, and thus counteracts our tendency to reduce him to our butler. We realize through prayer that we are not a prisoner of circumstances and we are no longer victims.
 - Thanksgiving *keeps us "sane"* because we are in fact lavishly and incredibly blessed even though we are sinners who deserve God's wrath. (KID ON CHRISTMAS DAY WHO DOESN'T GET THE RIGHT COLOR BIKE AND COMPLAINS or PARDONED DEATH-ROW CRIMINAL WHO COMPLAINS ABOUT HIS LIVING CONDITIONS)
 - Through praise and thanksgiving, *we experience the peace of God*. See Phil. 4:6,7. As we not only present our requests to God but also thank him for his loving sovereignty and faithfulness, our hearts come to rest. Unless we temper our petitions with this, we tend to become more self-absorbed, envious, and anxious.

How can you improve your praise and thanksgiving in your own prayer life?

- Some Christians utilize scriptural songs for this purpose (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16)! Scriptural truths on God's greatness and love, combined with music that you enjoy, has a special ability to lift your mind and heart and restore your perspective.
- Try modeling praise and thanksgiving in the Psalms in your own prayer life.
- Thank God until you feel thankful.

2. **Petition:** asking God to meet our personal needs (cf. Matt. 6:11)

(Phil. 4:6) Be anxious for nothing, but in everything . . . let your requests be made known to God.

Since God already knows what we need before we ask him (Matt. 6:8), why must we ask him (Jas. 4:2)?

Because this is the most basic and practical way in which we express *dependence* on God. When we pray in this way, we acknowledge that we are helpless to do the most important things in life (John. 15:4,5), and affirm that he is adequate.

This is the form of prayer which comes most naturally to us, but it needs to be tempered by other forms—and trust in God's loving sovereignty (NEXT SECTION).

3. **Intercession:** Praying for others; PAUL AS EXAMPLE (Col. 1:9ff)

Through intercessory prayer, we ask God to help people in ways that we cannot (ENCOURAGE; CONVICT; PROTECT; ACROSS THE WORLD).

(Col. 4:12,13) Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bonds slave of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always *laboring earnestly* for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God. (13) For I bear him witness that he has a deep concern for you and for those who are in Laodicea and Hierapolis.

Notice that intercessory prayer is not a casual activity (“laboring earnestly”). It takes thought, dedication and hard work. All lasting and fruitful ministry begins with and is sustained by this kind of prayer.

Why is intercession so important?

- God works through *human agency*, and human agency begins with prayer. (Oswald Sanders) "The goal of prayer is the ear of God. Prayer influences men by influencing God to influence them. It is not the prayer that moves men, but the God to whom we pray." (Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*, p. 133).

(Hudson Taylor) "It is possible to move men, through God, by prayer alone."

- Through intercession we *cultivate* and *express* an other-centered perspective, which the Bible says is so crucial for spiritual growth (Col. 4:12,13).
- Through intercession, we receive insight into how we can serve others as we pray for them.

4. Confession: Agreeing with God about our specific sinful attitudes and behaviors (Ps. 51; 32). **(Ps. 51:3, 4)** I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. (4) Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.

Why is confession important?

- It helps prevent hardness of heart. Heb 3:7,8,13 warns against developing an attitude of unresponsiveness to God's leading. Instead, the believer is to cultivate a sensitive and responsive attitude toward God's moral correction (Ps. 32:8,9).

(Heb. 3:7, 8, 13) "...TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, (8) DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS...(13) But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness."

- It is an indicator of growth. The growing Christian is receiving this kind of correction from God, talking it over with Him, and able to articulate their convictions, rather than reacting only when others point out their sin.

Qualifications:

- Confession is not necessary for God's forgiveness or acceptance. Note to instructor: If there's time, cover the misinterpretation of 1 Jn. 1:9 and explain that the verse is about *experiencing* God's forgiveness.

(Heb. 10:22) let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

- Avoid morbid introspection (self-focus vs. God/others-focus; cynical investigation of your motives; beating self for sins). Confession should be in response to God's correction through the Word (Heb. 4:12), prayer (as per Ps. 139:23,24), and other Christians (Psalms 32:9, Heb. 3:13) Some of us are more temperamentally disposed to morbid introspection—while others are just the opposite, and need to take time to pray as per Ps. 139. If we focus on continuing to move forward with the Lord, he will show us what we need to see when we need to see it (Phil. 3:15).

(Psalm 139:23,24) Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; 24 And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way.

As we grow in Christ, God continues to point out our sinfulness. As we agree with him, our appreciation of his grace deepens and we find ourselves in thanksgiving and praise. See Jesus' comment about the woman who washed his feet with her tears and hair (Lk. 7:41-47). The woman loved God more because she was more aware of her sinfulness and therefore appreciated God's forgiveness more.

5. Warfare: battling against spiritual forces of evil

Watchman Nee points out that whenever we pray, we should always pray *to* someone, *for* someone, and *against* someone.

(Eph. 6:18) With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view (previous context is spiritual warfare), be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints . . .

Key aspects of prayer warfare

- We should pray for alertness and insight into Satan's tactics in our own lives and in others' lives (Eph. 6:18 — see context). (More on Satan's Tactics in Christian Ministry).
- It also involves remembering and appropriating Christ's authority (Matt. 28:18-20) over Satan and our authorization to advance Christ's kingdom in specific situations (before witnessing, teaching, etc.).

Qualifications:

- Don't get more focused on Satan/demons than on God.
- Don't think that you can avoid all satanic attack by simply praying for protection (Lk. 22:31,32).

Practical Guidelines for Prayer

1. We need to maintain involvement in different *types* of prayer (REVIEW)

Petition/ Praise & Thanksgiving/ Confession/ Intercession/ Warfare .

Consider using scriptural prayer as models/structure

Matt. 6 (Praise-thanks; petition; confession; intercession)

Eph 1 (Praise/ thanksgiving for what God has done—then intercedes for the people along same lines)

2. We need to maintain involvement in different *modes* of prayer

- **Spontaneous prayer** (alone and with others): 1 Thess. 5:16-18; Neh. 13:14,22,31
(1 Thes. 5:16) Rejoice always; (17) pray without ceasing; (18) in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.
- **Private prayer**
(Matt. 6:5,6) When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. 6 “But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

Tips:

- Make time for private prayer. If you don't plan, it won't happen.
 - Try to be balanced in the types of prayer. E.g. “ACTS” - Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication, from Hybels' book, *Too Busy Not To Pray*.
 - Realize that it takes time to develop a prayer habit. Persevere!
 - Emphasize frequency over duration of prayer.
 - Do whatever works for you: POSTURE; PLACE; TIME; OUT LOUD/SILENT/WRITING
 - "Pray until you pray" (CARSON): "What is meant is that Christians should pray long enough and honestly enough, at a single session, to get past the feeling of formalism and unreality that attends to little praying. We are especially prone to such feelings when we pray only a few minutes, rushing to be done with a mere duty. To enter the spirit of prayer, we must stick to it for a while. If we 'pray until we pray,' eventually we come to delight in God's presence, to rest in his love, to cherish his will." D. A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), p. 36.
Draw near by faith, asking God to help you, and keep praying until you are communing freely with God (vs. constantly trying to sense God's presence).
 - Combine with scripture reading; try to consciously tie requests to scripture (PRAISE & THANKSGIVING; BIBLICAL PRIORITIES).
 - Write down what you need to pray for (prevents mental drift) and write insights that come to you during prayer.
- **Corporate prayer**
Corporate prayer appears to be more effective than individual prayer, perhaps because we have a better chance of discerning God's will this way. We should expect to hear from God in corporate prayer.

(Mat 18:19) "Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven.

Corporate prayer is implied at the beginning of the Lord's prayer: "OUR Father..." (Matt. 6:9). See also Acts 1:14ff., 4:23-33, 12, 20; 1 Cor. 14:13ff.

This mode of prayer is a unique combination of horizontal and vertical: communicating to God together in the unity of the Spirit.

Tips

- Young Christians are often reluctant to pray with others. Break this barrier as soon as possible!
- Find some Christian friends and pray together. Learn how to pray from more mature Christians.
- Teach younger Christians how to pray. This is an important aspect of discipleship. Accountability helps build consistency (e.g. getting in shape physically).
- Work corporate prayer into your schedule several times per week.
- **Be concise** to increase the interactive nature of corporate prayer and be sensitive to others; remain focused on edification *not education*.
- Have a strong prayer life with your spouse and children.
- Amen others' prayers. This affirms others' prayers and demonstrates the community effect of prayer.

Reasons For Ungranted Requests

Many Christians struggle in their prayer lives because they find that many of their requests are not answered. If we have a scriptural understanding of some of the reasons why God does not grant our requests, this will help us to keep praying.

1. Our request was not according to God's will.

God is a loving father and wants to hear your requests.

(Matt. 7:7-11) Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. (8) For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened. (9) Or what man is there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone? (10) Or if he shall ask for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? (11) If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!

A child who knows his father is both powerful and loving will feel the freedom to ask for anything—but he will trust that his father will answer in the best way—including "NO." God always answers. But sometimes his answer is "No."

(2 Cor. 12:8, 9) Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me. (9) And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

We can be confident that God will grant our requests *only* when our requests are according to his will.

(1 Jn. 5:14,15*) This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. (15) And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.

We are free to ask for whatever we wish, but unless scripture explicitly states that our request is God's will, we cannot be confident that God will answer the affirmative.

Doesn't God answer my prayers if I pray in his name?

To pray in Jesus' name is not a magical incantation that makes God grant our request. It means to pray as Jesus' representative (GOVERNMENT AGENT REQUISITIONING SUPPLIES). In Jn 14:13,14, He makes this very clear.

(John 14:13,14) And whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. (14) If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it.

Doesn't God answer my prayer if I have enough faith?

Some say that God's denial of a prayer request always indicates unfaithfulness in the petitioner. But if that's the case, we could make God do what we want by exercising our faith. This would again reduce prayer to a magical incantation that is not grounded in trust in God's goodness or in commitment to his will.

Are we to conclude that Paul lacked faith in 2 Cor. 12:8,9 when he asked the Lord to heal him and God said, "no"?

(John Stott) "Prayer is not a convenient device for imposing our will on God, or for bending his will to ours, but the prescribed way of subordinating our will to his. It is by prayer that we seek God's will, embrace it, and align ourselves with it. Every true prayer is a variation on the theme `your will be done.'"³

(Matt. 6:10) " ... your kingdom come, your will be done... "

(Matt. 26:39b) " ...yet not as I will, but as you will... "

Therefore, in our prayers, we should focus on issues about which we know God's will. When we turn to the Bible, it gives us quite a lot of knowledge of God's will in many areas of life. There are specific promises that God makes to all believers. There are direct statements of his will for our lives. There are inspired examples of what the biblical authors prayed for. These are the things that should become the focus of our prayer lives.

Biblical Prayer Priorities:

"Most of us . . . get bogged with down with trivia: Jane's sinus trouble, Ben's discouragement, Mary's problem with her mother-in-law . . . All of these may be important, but prayer, like warfare, calls for strategy. It is said of Napoleon that he would watch the development of his battles from a vantage, quietly analyzing the

³ John R. W. Stott, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistles of John* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1983) p. 185.

situation while he watched. His key general would watch with him. 'That farm,' he once said to Marshall Ney, 'that farm that you can see on the ridge there. Take it. Seize. Hold it. For if you can, the battle is won.' In praying for the Ephesians, Paul was aware that if the key to the whole battle was won, lesser skirmishes would sort themselves out rather easily. Smaller problems are so often symptomatic of larger issues . . . Prayer must be directed to that which is the key. It concerns itself with strategy, not with tactics . . . If therefore one thinks that Paul's prayer is spiritual and not practical, it is a sign of how blind he is to what life is all about . . ."⁴

- a. More practical insight into scripture so that you can apply it to your life (Col. 1:9,10).
- b. Better understanding of what God has given you in Christ (Eph. 1:16-19) and how much God loves you (Eph. 3:18,19).
- c. Greater love for other people (1 Thes. 3:12) and better discernment on how to love them effectively (Phil. 1:9).
- d. Opportunities for witness and the courage and wisdom to make the most of those opportunities (Col. 4:2-4; Eph. 6:19,20).
- e. Spiritual empowering and protection for ministry (2 Thes. 2:16-3:3).
- f. Exposure of attitudes that are counterproductive to your spiritual growth (Phil. 3:15; Ps. 139:23,24).
- g. Wisdom to understand what God wants to teach you through adverse circumstances that are in your life (Jas. 1:5).
- h. That God may raise up more workers (Matt. 9:36-38).⁵

Of course, these are the very same things that we should be praying for other people as well!

2. The request was answered, but not according to our expectations.

Especially if we don't know God's Word very well, we may be surprised when he answers biblical requests in ways we had not anticipated.

Examples:

Sometimes we pray for symptom issues, and then God answers by revealing and working on more root issues (WE FIND THAT OUR ANGRY OUTBURSTS ARE REALLY THE RESULT OF TAKING OUR ACCEPTANCE AND SIGNIFICANCE FROM PEOPLE'S VIEW OF US).

Sometimes we pray for good root issues, but don't realize that God often deals with them by engineering breaking (PAUL IN 2 COR. 12: God granted his request for power in ministry by giving him a thorn in the flesh).

(2 Cor. 12:7-9) To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. (8) Three times I pleaded with the Lord

⁴ John White, *Daring To Draw Near* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1977) p. 137.

⁵ See D. A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* for an excellent discussion of Paul's prayer priorities.

to take it away from me. (9) But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

3. God's timing for answering our request is different than ours.

Especially in our "instant gratification" culture, we expect quick answers to our requests. We tend to equate value with something's ability to bring quick and powerful results. But God's perspective is very different from ours. He is working from the perspective of eternity, and he is concerned with quality. "If God wants to make a squash, he takes three months; if he wants to create an oak tree, he takes a lifetime." He knows when we are ready for the good things that we ask for—and we need to trust him.

Examples: marriage (CHARACTER TRANSFORMATION NEEDED); having children (SAME); more ministry responsibility

Praying for instant deliverance from sin-problems sounds appealing, but God usually works a slow transformation that lasts.

(J.I. Packer) ". . . The Spirit works through means - the means of Growth . . . The Spirit shows his power in us, not by constantly interrupting our use of these means with visions, impressions, or prophecies, which serve up to us ready-made insights on a plate . . . but rather by making these regular means effective to change us for the better and the wiser as we go along . . ."⁶

This is one reason why we need to be persistent in prayer. See Lk. 11:5-13; 18:1-8. If an unrighteous, unjust, unconcerned and reluctant judge will respond, how much more will a righteous, just, and concerned father God delight to answer? This is an *a fortiori* argument (i.e., "all the more" - a conclusion drawn of greater necessity than something already accepted.) If persistence is effective even with people like this judge and neighbor, how much more will it be effective with the God of the Bible?

Why does God sometimes delay answers?

- He may be waiting for us to fulfill certain conditions (e.g., Matt. 6:33; Luke 16:11).
- The timing may not be right (MARRIAGE).
- He may be cultivating character qualities (e.g., dependence; perseverance) that require delay.

4. We have a legitimate request — but asked with wrong motives.

(James 4:3) You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.

Examples: Praying to be a leader (Jer. 45:5 contrast to 1 Tim. 3:1); witnessing opportunities so I can be recognized; teachers who ask for empowering so they can be praised; pray for spouse to change so you can avoid your own sins.

⁶ J. I. Packer, *Keep In Step With The Spirit* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1984), pp. 109,110.

Qualifications:

- If we are doing the right thing with wrong motives, the answer is not to stop doing the right thing. Rather, it is to ask God to do whatever is needed to purify your motives. Act while God works to clarify motives. God can make it clear to you if you ask him (Ps. 139:23,24; Phil. 3:15).
- Distinguish between needs and wants (Mt 6:32,33). God promises to meet our needs, but we frequently define wants as needs. Refer back to James 4:3.

5. We have a legitimate request — but we have a controversy with God.

(James 1:6-8) But let him ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. (7) For let not that man expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, (8) being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

"Doubter" here is not talking about someone who experiences contradictory thoughts or feelings welling up within him—we all have this at times, and God does not hold this against us (Mk. 9:24). The "doubter" in this context is the "double-minded man"—the person who presents an outward show of concern for God's will, but who inwardly loves the world (note Jas. 4:8 context).

(Ps. 66:18) If I regard wickedness in my heart, The Lord will not hear;

"Hearing" here means answering. "Regarding wickedness" does not mean being occasionally assaulted by temptations while basically being responsive to God's moral leadership. Rather, it means to choose rebellion against God's moral will.

(1 Pet. 3:7) You husbands likewise, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with a weaker vessel, since she is a woman; and grant her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

Peter singles this out as a common controversy with God. If you choose an unloving, unforgiving, scornful, etc. attitude toward your own spouse ("Heal my marriage - but I won't forgive my wife!"), this is such a serious issue that God may have to discipline you. One way he does this is to stop answering your prayers.

E.g. Should someone up to their eyeballs in materialism, or their career, or personal comfort expect the Lord to answer prayers for ministry success, or heal their marriage, etc.

E.g. Should a consistent fornicator expect revelation when asking for guidance on career choice? Can a man immersed in pornography expect his depression to lift?

In other words, this is a form of loving discipline to get our attention in the area of controversy.

6. God will not normally violate a person's free will to grant a request.

Since part of God's will is for humans to have free choice, praying for God to make people do things against their will is probably against God's will. Rather, we can pray to God for him to influence them.

Examples:

- It's fine to pray for people to come to Christ because this is aligning our hearts with God's will for them. But it seems better to focus our prayer on things like God showing

them their need, convicting them of their sin, bringing Christians into their lives, empowering us to share the gospel to them, etc.

- This would apply also to Christians who need to repent of wrong attitudes, behaviors, etc. We should focus our prayers on things like asking God to discipline them, enabling us and others to do our parts in confronting them, etc.

Conclusion

We are *not* saying that we can always determine why God has not granted our requests. God will not always reveal (in this life) the specific reasons for this. He chose to explain to Paul why he wouldn't heal him (2 Cor. 12), but he evidently didn't explain to Job why he lost everything. We should evaluate the possible reasons on our part, do our best to eliminate those reasons or amend our prayers—and then trust him with it and go on.

The better we know scripture, the more answered prayer we'll see and the better we'll understand why some are not answered.

Prayer as it relates to the other other means of growth

Fellowship	Jesus gave corporate prayer a special place when he said, "If two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 18:19). Based on this promise, we may fairly conclude that corporate prayer is more powerful than individual prayer, if only because when two or more agree, they have a better chance of truly discerning the will of God. The prayer ministry of the church is one of its most important.
Ministry	A ministry weak in prayer will tend to be overly strong on human effort. What we cannot accomplish via the power of God, we will try to supply through our own power. As we lose faith in the effectiveness of prayer, we may succumb to the temptation to use force and compulsion on people in an effort to bend them to our will.
Word	We need to pray that God will take scriptural truth and apply it to our lives in a living way. If we have learned the scriptures in good measure, God will find it easier to bring us understanding about what he is doing in our daily lives.
Suffering	Cultivating the vertical perspective through abiding in Christ is a prerequisite for making the Lord's discipline effective in our lives. As we shall see later, those who will not take their trials to God in prayer—not just asking that the trial go away, but that they understand what he is teaching—will not benefit from the suffering they undergo.

Charts from, Dennis McCallum, *Walking in Victory*.

Recommended books

Joel Commiskey, *Appointment with the King*

Bill Hybels, *Too Busy Not to Pray*

Mark Bair, *Mobilized Weakness*

O. Hallesby, *Prayer*

E.M. Bounds, *Power Through Prayer*

Body Life as a Means of Growth

Introduction

We come now to another means of growth – “fellowship” or “body life.” This means of growth is not well understood in the church today. Fellowship (*koinonia*) means "sharing." We are to share the life of Christ with one another. Spiritual growth is something Christians must do together; it is not just a private relationship between you and God.

Things we often associate with fellowship:

- Standing up and shaking the hands of people in the pews near us.
- A hall connected to the sanctuary filled with refreshments.

The problem with these associations is that biblical fellowship involves so much more than a hand shake and sharing a few snacks. When we settle for this definition of fellowship, we miss out on the rich interaction and opportunities for growth that God intends us to have.

Why the term “body life”?

The term “body life” emphasizes that the church is a community of people who give and receive the love of Christ. The NT describes the church not as a building, but as a body comprised of many parts (people) that work together to represent Christ in the world.

Every Christian is a member of the body of Christ. When each member works together, true spiritual growth and transformation will occur (Eph 4:11-16).

What is the biblically normative level of involvement in the Body of Christ? How involved in Christian fellowship should I be?

Some say, "attend church worship service on Sunday mornings." In Xenos, this would sound like, "attend [Central Teaching](#) weekly."

Others believe fellowship is defined by the number of committees on which I serve.

Instead we must see how the New Testament answers this question. There is a big difference between "going to church" and "being in fellowship." Many of us will have to challenge our upbringing, our past experiences in the local church, and our culture. ALL of us will have to challenge our priorities and our agenda in life.

1. Involved enough to live consistently with our [new identity](#) (1 Cor. 12**; Rom. 12**)

Let's take a brief look at the importance of the *vertical* aspect of being "in Christ"—our union with Christ. Our standing before God is based on the fact that we have been "put into" Christ (recall 1 Cor. 12:13, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, where the Spirit simultaneously indwells us and places us into Christ).

What is our identity? We are forgiven, accepted, and secure in our relationship with the Creator of the universe (and many others as we talked about during week 4). Our greatest needs have been met by God. This is our new identity.

But having a new identity also has a *horizontal* aspect, our union with one another. God has not only changed our standing with him, he has also changed our standing with other

Christians. Our new identity makes us members of the same body (1 Cor. 12:12-14; Rom. 12:3-5). We are interdependent on one another.

(1 Cor. 12:12-14) For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. 13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. 14 For the body is not one member, but many.

(Rom. 12: 3-5) For through the grace given to me I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. 4 For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

Therefore, we need to believe this on the basis of God's Word ("CONSIDER") and choose to act consistently with it in our interactions with other Christians ("PRESENT"). As we do this, we begin to grow and experience God's love and acceptance (LEARN >> ACT >> EXPERIENCE). If we don't, we will miss out on the growth God offers. Nowhere does the Bible describe a growing Christian who isn't involved in the Body of Christ.

What does it mean to be involved in the body of Christ in a way that is consistent with our new identity?

- **We need to regularly *receive* the life of Christ from other members**

(1 Cor. 12:21) And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."

We tend to be autonomous and self reliant. The Bible says we need each other. We often are not transparent about problems the Lord wants to change. We try to work things out on our own. This will quickly become a barrier to our growth. We need input and help from others. Normally, we learn this lesson first.

- **Then, we need to regularly *give* the life of Christ to others**

(1 Cor. 12:15) If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not *a part* of the body," it is not for this reason any the less *a part* of the body. (16) and if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not *a part* of the body," it is not for this reason any the less *a part* of the body.

We like to think of ourselves as love givers, but giving love does not come naturally. Most people are naturally self-centered and we see it manifested in behaviors like:

- Believing that others are around only to serve us.
- Judging relationships based on how that person makes me feel
- Expecting others to be sensitive to my needs and disappointed when they are not.

- or - "I'M INSIGNIFICANT". "I don't have anything to offer anyone in a friendship that they could want. I'm worthless."

The Body of Christ is a key provision for growth from God by which our understanding of Christ is deepened, where we have the opportunity to express Christ's love to others, and where we personally and often intimately experience the love of Christ.

Therefore, how involved do we need to be? *Enough to receive and give the life of Christ.* Now that we understand the theological basis for body life, we can move to more practical ways to incorporate this into our lives. Jesus gives us a similar answer with a little different spin.

2. Involved enough to "Love one another as I have loved you"

(Jn. 13:34,35) "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

Explain Jn. 13:34,35. Note the same two-sided involvement—giving love to other Christians and allowing other Christians to give love to us.

The disciples were committed to this imperative from Jesus and therefore committed their ministries to living this out. Their epistles unpack this command through several "one another" imperatives. Name them:

- Gal. 5:13 For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.
- 1 Thess. 5:11 Therefore encourage one another, and build up one another, just as you also are doing.
- Col. 3:16 Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another . . .
- Jas. 5:16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.
- Eph. 4:32 And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.
- Eph. 4:2 . . . with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love . . .
- Rom. 15:7 Wherefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God.
- Gal. 6:2 Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ.
- Rom. 12:10 Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor . . .
 "Devoted:" tenderly loving; showing affection. (Rom. 16:18)
- Rom. 12:16 Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly.

What do all these passages have to do with how involved we should be in fellowship?

We should be involved enough that we are receiving and giving this kind of love from and to other Christians on a regular basis. This assumes an intensive level of involvement with a relatively small number of people.

- How could we possibly accomplish this if our only context for knowing people was a large group meeting on a Sunday morning? These biblical principles of body life require being in a small setting of people.
- How can you encourage someone unless you're involved enough to know where and when they need this?
- How can they encourage you unless you are open enough for them to do the same?
- How can you admonish someone unless you're involved enough to know what they need to be admonished about?
- How can they admonish you unless you're open enough for them to do the same?
- How can you show forbearance and forgiveness unless you're involved enough that they offend or irritate you?

Conclusion

These two principles (living consistently with our new identity and loving one another as Christ loved us) are the foundation of healthy body life. Next week we will explore what it looks like to live out these principles in the local church.

Memory Verses

1 Jn. 5:14,15* - We can be certain God will answer our requests when they are according to his will.

Romans 12 & I Cor. 12****- Christians are members of the Body of Christ and therefore members of one another. This is the basis for interdependent involvement with other Christians

Assignment

Complete the *Word as a Means of Growth Assignment*.

Read chapter 16 of *Walking in Victory*. No writing is necessary.

Exam Review Guide

1. Know the main types of prayer, and one reason why each is important.
2. Know the reasons why prayer requests may go unanswered.
3. Be able to answer the question of how involved a Christian should be in fellowship (involved enough to live consistently with your new identity *or* involved enough to love one another as Christ loved us). Use biblical references to support your answer (Romans 12, 1Cor. 12).
4. Be able to define *koinonia*.

But I'm too busy

If you are serving the Lord, you might struggle with resentment about how busy you are. Have you noticed that 9 times out of 10 it is the church you blame that on? Is it possible that there are other things that are adding to your busyness in addition to your involvement in the church? Is it possible the Lord is trying to develop a work ethic in you that brings Him glory, versus a rest-ethic that brings you peace?