

“Learning To Pray”

1 Timothy 1:17

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on September 4, 2016 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Please open your Bibles to 1 Timothy 1.
- Why is it that some Christians seem to enjoy sweet communion with God in prayer while others struggle to pray? Take the apostle Paul for instance. You cannot read his letters without being struck by the fact that this man knew God and enjoyed communion with Him.
 - And yet most of us find prayer difficult. Our minds wander. We are not sure what to say. Instead of communion many find frustration. It is comforting to know that even the greatest of Christians have struggled with this.
- I think of two famous Christians. The first is John Newton. Newton is of course the author of the famous hymn *Amazing Grace*. Before he was miraculously converted in 1748 Newton was a slave trader, a blasphemer, and a sexually immoral man. Reflecting on his early Christian life Newton later wrote,
 - ***“Though I cannot doubt that this change so far as it prevails was wrought by the Spirit in the power of God yet still I was greatly deficient in many respects. I had no apprehension...of the hidden life of a Christian as it consists in communion with God by Jesus Christ.”***¹
 - Many of you may feel that way as well – a Christian and yet deficient in apprehending what it means to commune with God.
- George Mueller echoes the same struggle, which is amazing because Mueller would go on to be remembered as a man powerful in prayer. During the middle of the 1800’s Mueller operated an orphanage in England that cared for up to 2000 orphans at one time. He never asked for money to support it and never went into debt. He just prayed and God provided millions of dollars. Now, Mueller was converted at the age of 20 and by his own admission he faltered along in prayer. When he was 35 he looked back on the failure of his practices in prayer.
 - ***“Formerly when I rose, I began to pray as soon as possible...But what was the result? I often spent a quarter of an hour, or half an hour, or even an hour on my knees, before being conscious to myself of having derived comfort, encouragement, humbling of soul, etc and often after having suffering much from wandering of mind for the first ten minutes, or a quarter of an hour, or even half an hour, I only then began to really pray.”***²
- Our text this morning provides good news for those who feel the difficulty of prayer. In this text we see Paul’s prayer life in action and we discover a major key to what fueled his prayer life. This key is no secret. The psalmist demonstrates it in almost every psalm. Once Newton and Mueller learned this key their prayer lives were also transformed. I will relate their stories to you later on.
 - My aim then this morning, by the grace of God, is to show you this very simply key. I want to do this that you might learn how to pray.
 - Let me give you the key right away and then we will develop it. **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** Let theology ignite your doxology. I will break this message into three parts. First, we will define the terms. Second, we will demonstrate the examples of this. Third, we will describe the practice.

DEFINING THE TERMS

- Before I show you how this works in Paul’s prayer life let me begin by **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** defining the terms. Let theology ignite your doxology.
- The word ‘theology’ is made up of two Greek words that simply mean ‘the study of God’ **(SHOW SLIDE 4)** Theology is the study of God. Some people think that theology is only for Phd intellectuals

¹ Cited in an audio lecture by John Piper.

² George Mueller, *A Narrative of some of the Lord’s dealing with George Mueller, written by Himself, Jehovah magnified. Addresses by George Mueller complete and unabridged*, Volume 1, pg 272-273.

and that theology has nothing to do with the average Christian. But listen, we all have a theology. It is unavoidable.

- Even if you deny God's existence, that is your theology about God. If you say God is an impersonal force then that is your theology of God. So the question is not ***“do you have a theology?”*** but ***“what is your theology?”*** and more importantly ***“Is it your theology true?”***
 - Christian theology says we can know God because He has revealed himself ***“through the prophets at many times and in various ways”*** but He has supremely revealed Himself in Jesus, the God-man. So when I say let theology ignite doxology I am speaking today of all the truths about God as He has revealed Himself us - who He is, what He is like, what He has done in creation and history, and supremely what He has done and will do in and through Jesus Christ.
- Doxology comes from two Greek words: ‘Doxa’ which means ‘glory’ and ‘logos’ which means ‘word.’ So it is speaking words to glorify God.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 5)** Doxology then is an expression of praise to God. It is to express worship to God.
- Now what is most important is that you see the connection between theology and doxology. They connect in at least two ways.
 - First, the end goal of theology is doxology. God did not reveal Himself to us and do all that He has done just so we could have a Trivial Pursuit game with interesting facts about God. No, he revealed Himself in order that we might know Him, that we might behold His glory, and that we might delight in worshipping Him.
 - So whether you learn about God in small groups or in reading the Bible you must never treat God simply as a subject to be studied but as a God to be adored. The end goal of theology is doxology.
- But we can go one step further and say that it is theology that ignites doxology. What is it that stirs the soul to worship? We worship when our minds have apprehended some great truth about God and we respond to that truth with praise.
 - This is the key to prayer. Prayer is a filling of the mind with truth about God so that those truths ignite the heart in worship. Theology then becomes the fuel for prayer.
 - Unlike Eastern religions that say prayer is the emptying of the mind, Christianity says prayer is so filling the mind with truth so that the soul is ignited to worship.
- Is this not what the psalmist always does? Psalm 117 for instance calls us to doxology saying, ***“Praise the LORD, all you nations; extol him, all you peoples.”*** Then the psalmist gives theological reasons for why we should do this. ***“For great is his love toward us, and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever. Praise the LORD.”*** So in order to ignite doxology the psalmist fills our minds with the theology of God's love and faithfulness.
 - The reason why many people struggle to pray is because they try to pray from a blank mind but that is like trying to start a fire without any paper or wood. Theology is the paper and wood that ignite the heart to worship. Let theology ignite your doxology.

DEMONSTRATING THE EXAMPLES

- Now that we have defined those terms let's move secondly to **(SHOW SLIDE 6)** demonstrate the examples.
 - Let me show you examples of how this works in Paul's prayer life, examples of how theology ignites doxology in him.
- 1 Timothy is a letter that Paul writes to a young pastor named Timothy who is pastoring a difficult church in Ephesus. In chapter 1 he tells Timothy to deal with the false teachers who deny the gospel. In verse 11 he refers to this gospel as being entrusted to him.
 - As Paul reflects on the fact that God entrusted him with this message he is amazed that God would do such a thing considering his sinful past.

- **READ 12-14** – *I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.*
- So Paul is thinking theological thoughts. He is thinking about his sin before God, how he was a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and a violent man. But these theological thoughts about sin lead him to the theology of what God has done for sinners. Verse 15 contains one of the greatest theological statements of the whole Bible.
 - **READ 15-16** - *The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.*
 - This is pure theology. God had promised a Messiah, a Christ, whom He would send into the world to save sinners. The man Jesus is that Messiah. And shockingly Jesus even saved the really wicked sinners like Paul thereby giving an example of his unlimited patience to all sinners.
- Do you see what is happening here? Paul is thinking about theological things. His mind has been filled with the glorious truths about God’s grace in sending a Messiah who would save sinners, even wicked sinners like himself. This theology has so filled his mind that it ignites his heart in worship. He cannot hold it back. Right here in the middle of a formal letter, he bursts out in praise – in doxology. Look at verse 17.
 - **READ 17** - *To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.* What ignites Paul to this doxology- this expression of praise? Theology! Specifically, the glorious theological truth that God sent Jesus to save sinners, even wicked ones like Himself. This theology ignites Paul to prayer, to give honour and glory to this sovereign King who has mercy on sinners; to this eternal God who entered time in Jesus to save sinners; to this immortal God who cannot decay or die who became a man to die for sinners and snatch them from the jaws of death; to this invisible God whom no one has seen who became flesh and made his dwelling among us that we might see his glory.
 - Paul’s mind is so full of the truth that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners that in the middle of a formal letter he breaks out into doxology – into prayer that ascribes glory and honour upon this God for all ages.
- And Paul expects us to join him in his prayer. We know this because of his last word ‘Amen.’ To say ‘amen’ is to say, *“So be it”* or *“May it be fulfilled.”* But to say amen is also to invite others to join you in your expression of worship. Paul intends for us to join Him in glorying in this theological truth and responding to it in doxology. Let theology ignite your doxology.

DOXOLOGIES IN PAUL’S LETTERS

- These doxologies appear all through Paul’s letters. There is another one in chapter 6. **(SHOW SLIDE 7)** Turn there with me. **READ 13-15b.**
 - *I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will display at the proper time...*
 - What is the theological truth that is filling his mind here? It is the fact that God will one day bring all things to a close with the glorious return of His Son Jesus Christ. This theology again causes Paul to throw aside formal letter writing and burst into doxology.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 8)** **READ 15-16** - *he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in*

unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

- Look at his letters. He does this all the time. In Romans 1-11 he talks all about how God has found a way of salvation. And it is like he cannot contain himself anymore.
 - At the end of chapter 11 burst out in praise saying, **(SHOW SLIDE 9)** *Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.*
- You see theology and doxology cannot be separated. In fact, we could say that theology *demand*s doxology. The angels know this. Do you remember when an angel appeared to the shepherds to announce the birth of Jesus in Luke 2. The angel said, **(SHOW SLIDE 10)** *“I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ, the Lord.”*³ This is theology. God has promised a Messiah and now the angel is saying that God has fulfilled this promise.
 - It demands a response of worship. And so we read, **(SHOW SLIDE 11)** *“Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests.’”*⁴
 - That is enough examples for you to see that Paul’s prayer life reached the heights it did because he filled his mind with theology, which then ignited his doxology.

DESCRIBING THE PRACTICE

- Now let me bring all of this to down into your life and speak very practically about how you actually go about doing this. We have defined the terms, demonstrated the examples, and now let me **(SHOW SLIDE 12)** describe the practice.
 - Let’s return to Newton and Mueller and allow them to describe one key way you practice this, one way you let theology ignite your doxology.
- You remember that Newton said in his early Christian days he was greatly deficient in many respects. One area of deficiency was that he had no apprehension of how to have communion with God. Later he wrote of how he overcame this.
 - In April some time between 1752 and 1756 he wrote in his diary these words: *“Prayed over a part of the 8th Romans.”* So that day he was reading over Romans 8 but notice he was not just reading it over, he said he was praying it over. How did he do this? *“Prayed over a part of the 8th Romans in a way of paraphrase with some readiness.”* What does it mean to pray in a way of paraphrase?
 - Well, he would for instance read 8:1 *“Therefore, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”* Then he would stop and paraphrase it into a prayer. Perhaps something like, *“Thank you Father that because of Jesus I do not stand condemned before you. Father I ask that you would cause me to know this and believe it for I often doubt it and believe I am condemned for my sins.”* Then he would go on to verse 2.
- Do you see then how this works? He lets the Bible fill his mind with theology and then he takes that theology and turns it into doxology. This has been a great help for me as well.
 - I confess that without the Bible I am not very good at praying. I find myself repeating things, cannot pray for long periods of time, and am not sure where to go with my prayers after I have covered the things I always do. But when I pray the Bible there is always some new subject.

³ Luke 2:10b-11.

⁴ Luke 2:13-14.

THE EXAMPLE OF GEORGE MUELLER

- I wish I had learned this early in life. I remember wanting to learn how to pray in college. Not understanding how to pray the Bible I thought the best way to pray would be to simply kneel for an hour every night and try to learn how to pray.
 - I did this for two weeks and though the motive was right I grew increasingly frustrated because I ran out of things to pray within 10 minutes and would just kneel there in silence trying to think of what to say for 50 minutes while my mind wandered to this beautiful girl named Heather I was pursuing.
- You remember Mueller said basically the same thing. When he was 25 he found prayer a great difficulty. But when Mueller was 35 he looked back on the failure of his practices in prayer and wrote,
 - ***“I scarcely even suffer now in this way. Now...the first thing I did, after having asked in a few words the Lord’s blessing upon his precious word, was, to begin to meditate on the word of God, searching, as it were, into every verse, to get blessing out of it...The result I have found to be almost invariable this, that after a very few minutes my soul has been led to confession, or to thanksgiving, or to intercession, or to supplication; so that though I did not, as it were, give myself to prayer, but to meditation, yet it turned almost immediately more or less into prayer. When thus I have been for awhile making confession, or intercession, or supplication, or have given thanks, I go on to the next words or verse, turning all, as I go on, into prayer for myself or others, as the Word may lead to it.”***⁵
 - Now there are many ways to do this. You could read a section and then pray at the end of reading. You could paraphrase your way through it. Whatever the case I trust you see the point. It is theology that ignites doxology so however you can fill your mind with theology, do it, so that you have something to ignite your heart into doxology.
- If you want some more practical help on this let me recommend a book to you. It is by Donald Whitney and it is called, “Praying the Bible”.

PRACTICAL TIPS ON CULTIVATING A LIFE OF PRAYER

- Let me give you some very practical tips on how to cultivate this in your life. **(SHOW SLIDE 13)** First, plan a time each day when you will devote yourself to prayer. I suggest early in the morning so that you are prepared for the day. It is so easy to say you will do it later and it never happens.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 14)** Second, plan a location. Make sure it is place where you are not distracted.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 15)** Third, plan a method for what you will do. I begin by offering a short prayer asking God to meet me, to open my eyes to understand the word. I then read and paraphrase pray my way through a passage of scripture. I follow this up with my regular requests, for things like family, church, and often finish with the Lord’s prayer.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 16)** Fourth, pray this way in corporate worship.
 - When a scripture is read, don’t just listen but pray it back. When we sing allow the words to fill your mind and ignite your doxology. This is why I press the worship leaders to choose songs that have lyrics and melodies that will provide fuel for worship. We purposely avoid singing fluffy songs with no substance. For instance the chorus of one contemporary song goes like this ***“yes Lord, yes Lord, yes Lord, yes. Yes Lord, yes Lord, yes Lord, yes.”*** How do you worship to that? We want songs and readings that will fill our minds with the great theological truths about God in order that our hearts might burst forth in doxology.
 - Why do we worship God singing ***“how great thou art?”*** Because ***“when I think that God, His Son not sparing, sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in, that on the cross, my burden gladly bearing, he bled and died to take away my sin.”*** Why do we adore him? Sing it and then whisper it in prayer to God.

⁵ George Mueller, *A Narrative of some of the Lord’s dealing with George Mueller, written by Himself, Jehovah magnified. Addresses by George Mueller complete and unabridged*, Volume 1, pg 272-273.

DOING THIS TOGETHER

- I thought a marvelous way to end would be to do this together. On the screen I have put a section of 1 Cor 15 (**Show Slide 17**). Here is what I would like to do: After you have read it one or two times just turn the theology of these verses into doxology. Whatever word, or phrase, or verse captivates you let it be expressed verbally in prayers of worship to God. Wherever the scriptures lead your heart turn it into prayer.
 - Your prayer may be praise. It may be a request to know this deeper or even an intercession that others come to know this. Whatever you like. Just let theology ignite doxology.

⁵⁰ I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. ⁵¹ Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

“Death is swallowed up in victory.”
⁵⁵ “O death, where is your victory?
O death, where is your sting?”

⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁵⁸ Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.