

**Lesson #1**  
**Communicating With God**

**Main Passages:**

**Ephesians 6:18**

*“And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people.”*

**Matthew 6:5-8**

*“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 6 But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. 7 And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.”*

**Matthew 7:11**

*“If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him!”*

**John 15:4-7**

*Remain in Me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in Me. 5 “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in Me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from Me you can do nothing. 6 If you do not remain in Me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. 7 If you remain in Me and My words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.*

**James 4:8**

*“Come near to God and He will come near to you.”*

**Big Idea:**

We are wired to pray. God created us in such a way that prayer seems natural. Everybody in the world prays – Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Jews and Christians all pray. Who they pray to and what they pray differs, but there is an internal desire in every human being to pray. Most of us would say that we’re not very good at praying. Most of us feel inadequate about prayer and we don’t feel confident. You are not alone! Even the disciples said this to Jesus: “Teach us to pray.” They did not ask Jesus to teach them how to do miracles or how to preach. They realized that prayer was an integral part of everything Jesus did.

What is one word that best describes how you feel about prayer?

## Outline:

**1<sup>st</sup> Teaching Point:** God loves for me to talk with Him.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Teaching Point:** God listens to prayers that are sincere and simple.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Teaching Point:** God longs to be close to me.

## Lesson:

### **1. Common misconceptions about prayer**

- Prayer is not a magic wand.
  - It is not a genie in a bottle that pops out when you rub it and says, “Your wish is my command.” God is not a genie. God is not your servant. You are God’s servant. Prayer is not a special set of words that you say to suddenly and mysteriously change things magically.
- Prayer is not a fire extinguisher.
  - Many people treat prayer like it is hanging on the wall behind a piece of glass with a sign that says, “Break glass only in case of emergency.” They don’t pray on good days. The only time they pray is when they are in pain or there is an emergency. They pull out the fire hose of prayer and start spraying prayer all over it. Sometimes we hear ourselves say, “I guess all we can do is pray.” That is wrong. Prayer is not meant to be a last resort. It is meant to be your first choice.
- Prayer is not a ritual to relieve guilt.
  - Maybe you grew up being taught that if you sin, and it is a big sin, that you have to go and say a certain number of prayers. That is not found in the Bible. Jesus taught us the exact opposite. Prayer is never punishment for your sins. Prayer is a privilege, not a duty.

### **2. God loves for me to talk with Him.**

- Prayer is the most personal way to experience God, to encounter Him, and to grow in the knowledge of Him.
  - It is simply talking to God. He loves for us to talk to Him about anything. It doesn’t have to be something spiritual. Your prayers should reflect whatever you are interested in. After all, all of our interests and hobbies came from God. He wired you that way and that’s why we are all so different. God’s desire is for us to pray on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.
  - **Ephesians 6:18**  
*And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people.*
  - God enjoys talking with His children. If you are a parent, you will understand this desire. I am interested in whatever interests my children. God is our Father and He is tender and compassionate. So even if you don’t talk to God, He still loves you deeply. He longs to have a conversation with you. God never says, “Oh no, you’re here again?” God is waiting to talk to you and He wants you to talk to Him about anything.
- Prayer consists of 2-way communication with God; we speak and we listen, we pray and we meditate.

- Prayer is a conversation, not a ceremony. A conversation means you talk but you also listen. One of the reasons people get bored with prayer is because they do all the talking and never listen. We need to be quiet and listen. Ask God – “Is there anything you want to say to me? Sometimes God speaks through the Scriptures you have just finished reading. Other times, He puts an impression on your mind. Other times, He is silent. Most of us believe prayer is only me talking to God. Have you ever been part of a conversation with another person where they did all the talking? That is ok for a while but eventually you begin to think, “All this person cares about is themselves.” We need to say our prayers but we also need to listen for God’s voice.
  - Prayer is a relationship, not a ritual.
    - It is all about getting close to God. Prayer is not something to check off my to-do list. It is not repeating a memorized prayer again and again. When our prayers are motivated by guilt, (I have to, I should, etc.) they become insincere and ritualistic. God doesn’t want you feeling guilty about prayer. We need to see prayer as a privilege. I get to talk to the Creator of the universe, and He wants to listen. That is an amazing truth! I get to talk to God.
- 3. God listens to prayers that are sincere and simple.**
- You don’t have to use flowery language or fancy phrases.
    - You don’t have to sound spiritual or use religious clichés. You just talk to God but it must be sincere. That means your prayer comes from your heart and it is simple. It’s authentic, it’s real, it’s gutsy, and it’s honest. You pray about what is on your mind, not what you think you should be praying or saying. Sometimes the simplest prayer is the most powerful prayer.
  - Be genuine and real when you pray, especially when others are listening.
    - **Matthew 6:5-8**  
*“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. <sup>6</sup>But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. <sup>7</sup>And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. <sup>8</sup>Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”*
    - God detests hypocrisy. Are you pouring out your heart to God or trying to impress others? Don’t use prayer to show off. Instead be sincere and keep it simple. And remember, longer is not stronger when it comes to prayer. You don’t need to preach a sermon during your prayer. Just get to the point.
  - God grows your faith and trust the same way a child learns to trust a parent.
    - First, the child recognizes an unmet need.
    - Second, the child expresses that need.
    - Third, the parent meets that need.

- God uses this same cycle to teach you how to trust Him. If you are not expressing your needs to God, how can you grow to trust Him? That is the only way we learn to trust God.
- **Matthew 7:11**  
*If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in Heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him!*

#### 4. God longs to be close to me.

- I must be connected to Him, tapped into His power if I am to receive anything from God.

##### **John 15:4-7**

*Remain in Me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in Me.*

*<sup>5</sup> "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in Me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from Me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup> If you do not remain in Me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. <sup>7</sup> If you remain in Me and My words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.*

- What do these verses tell you about prayer? God longs to be close to you and me. If you are away from somebody you love for a long time, you can't wait to talk with them. We must remain in the vine, the source of our fruitfulness and service.
- God hears our prayers on all occasions, whether we pray out loud or silently in our hearts and minds. He even hears the prayers we cannot put into words! So talk to God throughout your day. Pray without ceasing! You don't have to close your eyes in order to pray. But you do need to pray. There is an ache in the heart of every parent that has a child that refuses to talk to them. So make an effort to touch base with God throughout your day.
- When I pursue God through prayer, He comes close to me and I achieve intimacy with Him. Another word for closeness is intimacy. I once heard the definition of the word intimacy as: "in to me see." God wants us to open up to Him. He wants us to be transparent. You cannot hide anything from God but some of us still try. That doesn't create intimacy with God. So be real, open up every part of your life to Him and you will experience true intimacy with God.
- **James 4:8**  
*"Come near to God and He will come near to you."*

#### **Small Group Discussion Questions:**

1. Do you think most people pray and meditate or only spend time talking at God? Why?
2. How can we change that to create space to actually listen to the Lord in prayer?
3. What approach would you use to teach a new Christian to pray?
4. Do you volunteer to pray out loud in front of others? Why or why not?
5. How effective is your ministry or your service to God without prayer? What is the relationship between praying and doing?

6. How would you evaluate the level of intimacy in your prayer life? How can prayer help you grow closer to the Lord?
7. APPLICATION: What is one thing you can take away from today's lesson that can be applied this week? Please explain.

**Small Group Prayer Suggestions:**

1. Prayer is a conversation. Pray right now in the same way you would have a conversation with your best friend.
2. Think about your conversation with others – do you only make requests of others? Incorporate the other aspects into your prayers to God – praise, confessions, thankfulness, etc.
3. Begin to pray simplistic prayers, using words not meant to impress others or that sound spiritual. Be genuine and honest about your feelings and state of mind.

**Additional Commentary: John 15:4-7<sup>1</sup>**

**15:4** In moving to this verse the evangelist returns to one of his basic themes, that of “remaining,” “abiding,” or “dwelling” (*meinate* here is the aorist imperative), which he emphasized in the previous chapter. Just as the Father abides/dwells in Jesus (14:10) and the Paraclete would abide in them (14:17), so they are commanded as his disciples to abide in the Vine. R. Boring has perceptively noted that this interabiding is a fundamental idea in Johannine

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from: Gerald L. Borchert, [John 12–21](#), vol. 25B, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002), 142–145.

thinking.<sup>217</sup> A branch is not a self-contained entity, and neither is the Christian disciple. And as a branch separated from the supply of nourishment cannot produce fruit, neither can the Christian. Fruit bearing for the disciple is totally dependent on a direct connection to Jesus.<sup>218</sup> Attachment to Jesus or abiding in him is, therefore, the *sine quo non* of Christian discipleship.

But there can be a slight problem with this verse because although the initial clause contains the verb *meinate* (“remain in me”), the follow-up clause contains no Greek verb (lit., “and I in you”). Therefore interpreters are left to imply what is meant. The NIV and NLT have “and I will remain in you.” This idea appears to be a promise of Jesus’ presence dependent on or conditioned on the action of the disciples, namely, their consistency. Such a rendering is not impossible and might be the intended sense. Yet one cannot be sure about the Greek grammar pattern here. If, however, a parallelism is implied, that would mean that Jesus would be commanding the vine to abide or remain in the branches. But this option seems more remote. The KJV and RSV do not supply a verb and leave it to the reader to interpret the meaning. The NRSV (see also NAB, REB, NJB) has “as I abide in you,” which suggests that Jesus is the model for the disciples’ abiding. The problem with this view is that this clause is immediately followed by *kathōs*, meaning “just as,” and that sense of the double “as” seems to be less likely. Thus the first option seems to carry the balance of probabilities, but one cannot be certain. Morris attempts a paraphrase: “Abide in me, and see that I abide in you,”<sup>219</sup> which is not an impossible implication of the Johannine shorthand.

This verse concludes with the absolute connection between fruit bearing and abiding in the Vine. Failure to abide in the Vine cannot help but lead to failure in fruit bearing. Independence of the branches from the Vine (disciples from Jesus) necessarily means becoming fruitless. Moreover, that directive is not merely a general statement. It is addressed pointedly to the readers/disciples (*hymeis*, “you” pl.), and the remaining “in me” (cf. the Pauline idea of “in Christ”) is set as the clear prerequisite to acceptable discipleship.

**15:5** The reader may regard this metaphorical statement/*mashal* to be rather redundant. But the evangelist was not bothered by redundancy. He was obviously concerned that the reader recognize a core point in discipleship. That point is an age-old issue of identity that goes back to the story of the Garden of Eden, wherein the humans were tempted by the desire to become like God (Gen 3:5). The evangelist obviously did not want there to be any confusion over the issue of identity. The branches were not to be confused with the Vine, and the Vine was to be regarded as very different from the branches. The use of the Greek *egō eimi* (“I am”) is undoubtedly purposeful here and is certainly to be contrasted with the pronoun *hymeis* (“you,” pl.). Jesus, the one who at 20:28 will be confessed as Lord and God, is clearly to be considered as very different in essence from the disciples who are here being addressed. This identity contrast is often overlooked by commentators and preachers.

But it is the identity issue that is fundamental to the additional seeming redundancy concerning fruitfulness or lack thereof in this verse. The mutual abiding in Jesus, the “I am,” and he (the “I”) in the disciple(s) means that a disciple must be attached to the divine source in

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<sup>217</sup> R. Boring, *Der wahre Weinstock* (München: Kösel, 1967), 44–46.

<sup>218</sup> Cf. H. Bussche, “La Vigne et ses fruits (Jean 15, 1–8), *BVC* 26 (1959): 12–18.

<sup>219</sup> Morris, *John*, 595.

order for fruit bearing to occur. It also explains why the opposite to abiding and bearing fruit is here designated as accomplishing “nothing” (*ouden*). The radicality of the Johannine Gospel should not be missed by familiarity with its words. Nothing is “not something” in the judgment of Jesus. It is still nothing. Such a verdict is not very popular, but it is central to this bull’s-eye text.

**15:6** The downside of the *mashal* here reaches its epitome. Failure to produce fruit brings a severe warning concerning the certain end of unfruitfulness. Employing the indefinite pronoun *tis* (“anyone, someone”), the evangelist separates any unfruitful person from the faithful, persevering, fruitful disciples/branches and indicates that such a person is thrown away and withers. The verbs here are in the aorist indicative. These aorists here are not primarily used in a chronological sense but as Newman and Nida have indicated, they are either used to indicate certainty of action or customary action (the gnomic sense).<sup>220</sup> It is almost as though the evangelist is treating unfruitfulness, either present or future, as already resolved.

Several questions may emerge from this statement: (1) Who does the handling of these unfruitful branches? Although it is not stated in this verse, the reader is likely to imply from v. 2 that it is the work of the gardener/father. (2) Does this verse refer to Judas Iscariot? The early Christians could hardly not have thought of Judas when reviewing this verse. But the application is hardly to be restricted only to Judas. Then (3) the lingering question may be: does this verse about the thrown out, withered, and finally burned up branches refer to the eschatological judgment scene? This question is a little more involved.

There is no doubt that the image of burning the dried branches is a judgment motif that goes back to the Old Testament including the plagues of Egypt (Exod 9:23) and the cities and disobedient people who are burned (Lev 10:2; Num 26:10; Deut 10:21; 12:3; Josh 6:24; 8:19; 1 Sam 30:1–3). God’s anger is linked to fire (Deut 32:22), and fire is often used as a symbol of judgment both in the Old Testament (Ps 11:6; Jer 4:4; etc.) and the New (Matt 3:12; 5:22; 13:40–42; Mark 9:47; etc.). And, of course, fire is repeatedly used in the judgment scenes of Revelation (Rev 8:7–8; 11:5; 14:10; 16:8; 18:8; 19:20; 20:9–10, 14–15; 21:8). But Beasley-Murray, who wrote a great deal on eschatological subjects, made a special point of stating that readers should not jump to the conclusion that fire here symbolizes the “judgment of Gehenna.”<sup>221</sup> I would add that it is unnecessary to restrict judgment here to the final cataclysmic events of the world. The *mashal* is a picture, and this verse is a vivid portrait of the significance of fruitless vine branches. Unlike olive wood, the cuttings of the vineyard are good for nothing except burning. That was the judgment of Ezekiel when he likened Jerusalem to fruitless vines (Ezek 15:1–6), and that is the judgment of fruitless disciples in this core metaphorical picture of John.

**15:7** Although Brown begins a new subdivision at this point, the implications of the vine imagery are drawn out more fully through v. 11.<sup>222</sup> The focus of the present verse continues the

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<sup>220</sup> Newman and Nida, *Translator’s Handbook*, 482–83. Cf. also Carson, *John*, 519.

<sup>221</sup> Beasley-Murray, *John*, 273.

<sup>222</sup> R. Brown, *John*, 2.679. Although Brown ends the *mashal* at v. 6, he entitles the new subdivision that begins at v. 7 as “Development of the *Mashal* in the Context of the Last Discourse.”

theme of abiding or remaining in Jesus, the Vine, but that theme is here linked to the subject of prayer, which was discussed at 14:13–14 (cf. also 15:16; 16:23–24). The way of stating the “asking” is phrased differently in the previous chapter, but the actual implications are quite similar. Here it is unnecessary for a repetition of the discussion on asking “in my name” because if one is abiding in Jesus, it would be virtually impossible to pray in any other way than that of representing the nature of Jesus.<sup>223</sup>

Moreover, the condition is not only that of abiding in Jesus but also of his words (*rēmata*) abiding in his followers. As Westcott pointedly states, the “petitions of the true disciples are echoes (so to speak) of” the words of Jesus because his teaching is “transformed into a supplication, and so it will be necessarily heard.”<sup>224</sup> There is a direct connection between how one prays and the primary commitments of one’s life. Jesus in this core *mashal* demands that the fundamental commitment of a disciple’s life is abiding in him.<sup>225</sup> That means that the model of Jesus in life and word must permeate the life and words of the disciple. When this happens, praying ceases to be selfish asking and becomes aligned with the will and purposes of God in Christ.

**15:8** At this point the twofold purpose or result of fruit bearing is specifically articulated. In the first place, the verse begins literally “By this my father is glorified.” The aorist passive here probably is similar to the uses of the aorist in the previous verse. It emphasizes either the certainty or customariness of an action (here glorification). The NIV has restructured the statement.

In the Johannine Gospel the verb *doxazein* (“to glorify”) is usually employed in two ways: to refer to the hour of Jesus’ glorification (namely, his death and resurrection) and its result, the Father’s glorification in the Son (7:39; 8:54; 11:4; 12:16, 23, 28; 13:31–32; 14:13; 16:14; 17:1, 4–5). But here the Father is glorified through the disciples. This text, however, must not be understood as implying that the disciples glorify the Father directly as the result of their own actions. It is because they abide in Jesus, the Vine, and are obedient to him in the bearing of fruit that they bring glory to the Father.<sup>226</sup> This derivative relationship of the disciples to the Father is a significant point in this bull’s-eye *mashal*. The primary task of the disciple is to glorify Jesus (cf. 17:10; 21:19), who glorifies the Father. This bearing of fruit, therefore, not only indicates that the followers are true disciples (*mathētai*) of Jesus but also that God is glorified in their discipleship.

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<sup>223</sup> See the discussion in chap. 14 and the views of F. Untergrasmair, “Im Namen Jesu,” 140–46.

<sup>224</sup> Westcott, *St. John*, 2.201.

<sup>225</sup> For the relationship of Jesus’ words to the idea of commands or law see S. Pancaro, *The Law in the Fourth Gospel* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 414–20.

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<sup>226</sup> Cf. C. Barth, “Bible Study IV. The Disciples of the Servant. John 15:1–11,” *SEAJT* 6 (1965): 7 and 7 (1965): 14–16.