

AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANITY SERIES
“BELIEVING VS. PRAYING”

Craig Groeschel, the pastor of LifeChurch tells the story of how they had just finished building the first unit of their new church in Edmond, Oklahoma and it was already too small. They expanded their worship offerings doing two services on Saturday night and four on Sunday and still were turning people away. They decided to believe God for another capital campaign and put their efforts into a big financial campaign, but it ended up woefully short. It wasn't near enough money to build another worship space that they badly needed. They decided to drop the whole idea. Then suddenly in a staff meeting someone suggested that they start some worship services at another location. They found a movie theater seven miles away and started offering worship there via live TV. LifeChurch.TV today offers worship in 14 different locations.

Groeschel wrote a book that just came out this year called “The Christian Atheist: Believing in God, But Living As If He Doesn't Exist.” It is a call for Christians or those of us who call ourselves Christians to take a hard look at the lives we are living. Does the life we live look as though we really believe in God? Do we live by faith in a big, powerful God who is involved with his world and his people? Do we practice what we say we believe? Last week we examined the idea of believing in God versus really knowing God. It is easy to believe that God exists. Though it still takes faith. It is quite another thing to have the kind of relationship with God where you know Him and He knows you and you really know each other like two close friends know each other. Authentic Christianity is based on that kind of a relationship with God. It is real and personal. It is authentic. It is not a show. It is not to look good or about making others think good about us. It is a real relationship with the God of the universe where you can honestly say you know God exists because you have personally experienced him in your life and you really know who He is and what He is like.

Authentic Christianity also practices real praying, not just those “for show” prayers. You know those prayers that rhyme and you can say from memory. Those mealtime prayers that always go the same way each time. You have heard the expression that goes, “I know God exists, I talked to Him this morning.” Wouldn't you like to have the kind of relationship with God where you could say that honestly?

The truth is all of us have found prayer hard at some point in our lives and maybe you find it hard even now. If prayer is communication with God, everybody who believes in God, or who believes that God exists wants to be able to say that they pray, right? But if we are honest, we will also have to admit, that sometimes it doesn't seem to work!

Sometimes it doesn't work because we just forget to do it. I can remember growing up when I would get real close to God and want to get serious about my faith. I would start reading my Bible and praying and going to Bible studies, etc. And then a few months later suddenly I had gotten pretty slack with all those things. I wasn't doing them anymore. Someone did a survey and found that the average pastor only prays for about

five minutes a day. It's easy to get busy and value work and activity and busyness doing all these "good" things and sometimes leave prayer out.

Sometimes prayer hasn't worked for us because we have found that we get bored when we pray. It is hard to stay focused when you pray for more than a minute or two it seems like, right? Your mind may wander. You are praying for something serious and starting to get into it and then you suddenly realize you are thinking about someone you are upset with or some problem in your life or what all you have to do that day. Your mind is off and running on other things rather than God and your prayer time. It is hard to pray and stay focused on God when you can't see him. Maybe your prayer time feels like an empty experience for you.

Sometimes prayer hasn't worked for us because we are not sure it makes any difference. We don't see many results from our praying. And the few results we have seen might have happened anyway without our praying. So we are not convinced that our prayers are changing anything or making a difference so we wonder, "Why bother?"

Sometimes we don't pray because we know that God is way up there in charge of the whole universe. And God has all these really big things to do and take care of and all kinds of huge problems to deal with. He has to deal with wars and earthquakes and natural disasters. He has to hear prayers from people that have much bigger problems than we do, so why should we bother him with our little issues? Our things are so small compared to what others have to deal with. So we just don't pray.

Other times we don't pray perhaps because we don't feel like we are very good at praying. Some people say, "I can't pray very well." "I don't pray those long prayers." "I can't pray like those people do in church." "I'm not strong enough spiritually to pray yet." "I don't have enough faith to pray." "I can't pray with those spiritual words that others use when they pray." Or maybe deep down inside you have the idea that you are not good enough to be praying to God in such a way that He will hear you or in such a way that you should deserve God to answer your prayers. So you just don't do it!

I love the illustration Craig used when explaining how God must feel about these rationalizations. How would you feel if your young child came up to you and addressed you like this? "*Grand omnipotent Father of the Household, I beseech your presence. Great Provider of all I have, grant me thy presence through the long watches of the night, for lingering fears beset me—verily, until dawn's first rays at last light my heart with hope.*" Or maybe you would rather your child simply say, "*Daddy, I'm afraid of the dark. Would you help me?*"

Prayer is simply "communication with God." And communication with God is at the heart of any authentic relationship with God. Can you imagine being on a sports team and never having any communication with the coach? Every team has a coach and every coach communicates constantly with his or her team. They are constantly trying to find ways to communicate better with their team and influence them and guide them and teach them and motivate them and get the most out of them. The whole relationship of team

and coach is one of constant communication. It is no different in our relationship with our God.

Maybe we wouldn't get bored praying to God if we focused on him rather than on us. Maybe we wouldn't get bored praying to God if we kept reminding ourselves who it is that we are actually praying to. Listen to how the Psalmists opened some of the psalms, which were actually prayers: *"The Lord reigns, he is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed in majesty and is armed with strength. The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved. Your throne was established long ago; you are from all eternity,"* (Psalm 93:1-2). Or maybe we should focus some on what all he has done and is doing for us like the Psalmist did here: *"Praise the Lord, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's,"* (Psalm 103:1-5). Remember who it is you are talking to and what he has done or what he wants to do for you and in you. Remember that he is as excited to talk to you as you would be to your own son or daughter. Move the focus away from you to Him when you start to get bored when you pray.

Here are some things you should remember if you want to experience authentic prayer in an authentic relationship with God. First of all, God answers our prayers with what we need rather than what we want. We have all probably experienced a time when a small child was headed for something that was dangerous, like putting their hand into a fan that was on, or about to touch a burning stove. And maybe you interrupted them. You grabbed them and turned them away and said very strongly, "No!" And they weren't very happy with you. You got the evil eye or a loud anguishing cry of defiance. The item in front of them was what they wanted. They were convinced it was what they wanted. It wasn't what they needed though. Craig Groeschel said his church thought what they wanted and needed was a larger worship space. God knew what they really needed. God knew that this other way they could eventually reach many times more people using existing spaces in many different places for worship.

Sometimes we need to work on our relationship with God or with someone else in order to experience authentic prayer. Listen to these words of Jesus: *"Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.* (Now notice what he says next.) *And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins,"* (Mark 11:24-25). Sometimes our prayers don't get through to God because of a relationship that is out of order. If we are not in right relationship with someone, it can affect our relationship with God. And if your relationship with God is not where it needs to be, it can affect your prayer life. That is not to say that we can't pray to God if we have sin in our life or if we aren't in a perfect relationship with Him. But, not being in a right relationship with God or with those around us does negatively affect our prayer life.

Sometimes we need to make sure our motives are right. Have you ever heard someone say, or maybe you have said it, "If I win the lottery, I am going to give some of

it to the church.” Do you think their desire or prayer to win the lottery is for completely pure and unselfish motives? Listen to what James said, *“You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures,”* (James 4:2-3). Some pretty hard words. But words that probably convict all of us at some point or another. Ask God to give you pure motives as you pray.

We also need to make sure our lives are headed in the right direction in order to pray authentically. The Psalmist said, *“The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears attentive to their cry,”* (Psalm 34:15). James said it like this: *“Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective,”* (James 5:16). Again, it doesn’t mean you have to be living a perfect life in order to be effective in your praying. But it does mean that if your life is headed in the right direction and you are living in a right relationship with God and seeking his will for your life and allowing him to make you clean and whole and righteous, then your prayer life will be powerful and effective!

And then finally, perhaps it should go without saying, but unfortunately it can’t, make sure that when you pray, you pray in faith and trust. Pray believing that God can and will do what it is that you are asking him for. Of course we always pray in His name, which means, we pray according to his will. We pray believing that whatever we ask, it will be according to what He ultimately wants. But it is not authentic praying to pray for something, all the while not really believing that God can or will do what it is we are asking him to do. Again, this is how James explained it: *“But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does,”* (James 1:6-7).

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians and gave them these instructions at the end of his letter. They are our instructions as well: *“Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus,”* (I Thessalonians 5:16-17). What that means is pray honestly, pray openly and pray constantly.

Amy Grant has written a new song that has become quite popular. The producers said as soon as they heard the words they knew it was going to be a huge success. Listen to the words of “Better Than a Hallelujah.”

*God loves a lullaby in a mother’s tears in the dead of night
Better than a hallelujah sometimes.
God loves the drunkard’s cry; the soldier’s plea not to let him die
Better than a hallelujah sometimes.*

*We pour out our miseries, God just hears a melody;
Beautiful the mess we are
The honest cries of broken hearts
are better than a hallelujah.*

*The woman holding on for life.
The dying man giving up the fight
Are better than a hallelujah sometimes.*

*The tears of shame for what's been done
The silence when the words won't come
Are better than a hallelujah sometimes.*

How is your prayer life? Do you pray? Is it authentic? It can be. You can talk to God about anything you want. Talk to him honestly, openly and constantly. Unload on him. Cry out to him. Let him hear your anger if that is where you are. Let him know your hurt or your pain. Turn everything over to him. Place your needs and concerns and worries at his feet. If you have been away for a while, tell him you are ready to come home. Talk to your Father. He wants to talk to you.

Let's pray. O God, open the channels of communication for us. Lead us into an authentic relationship with you. Help us to pray openly and honestly and regularly. Show us how to really communicate with you so that we can both speak from our hearts and also hear what you are saying back to us. Lord, teach us to pray. Amen.