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01.12.06 Y Pray: Why We Do What We Do

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Like every one else, I have my fair share of **idiosyncrasies**. I don't know why, but **I always set my alarm clock to an even number**. An odd number would totally mess me up. For what it's worth, **I always start shaving on the right side of my face**. I shave from **right to left**. And I never drive off after pumping gas without **checking my right-hand rearview mirror**. A couple y ears ago I forgot to take the nozzle out of my car and I pulled the hose right off the tank! So I instinctively check the rearview mirror.

All of us are **creatures of habit**.

Some of those habits are **subconscious habits** we aren't even aware of. Others are habits that we have worked long and hard to develop. One way or the other, we're all creatures of habit **by default** to **by design**. It's human nature.

How many of you have accidentally **written last year's date on a check**? It usually takes me till the end of January to really get used to writing this year's date. After we got married, Lora would sometimes write her **maiden name**. Why? It was an **ingrained habit**. She did it **without thinking**!

We all have countless habits that repeated every day without thinking. And there is an **inherent danger**. If want aren't careful, we **learn how** and **forget why**. Psychologists call it **habituation**. When we learn how and forget why we're just **going through the motions**. Our actions become **empty rituals**.

I read a fascinating study a few years ago. I honestly don't remember who did the research, but this study found that **after singing a song thirty times you no longer think about the words**!

That has huge implications when it comes to **worship**. If we aren't careful, we can give God **lip service**. We're singing the songs **without even thinking** about the words. All we're doing is **lip syncing**.

We've learned how and forgotten why.

Here's what happens when we learn how and forget why: **opportunities turn into obligations**. Stop and think about it. **Prayer is one of our greatest privileges**. Almighty God invites us to carry on a conversation. He promises to hear every word. But some of us treat pray like it's something we "have to do." You don't **have to** pray. You **get to** pray! One is one of our greatest privileges. But most of us have learned how and forgotten why.

The goal of this series is pretty simple: remind us of why we do what we do. I could rattle off a dozen reasons why you should pray. For starters, I Thessalonians 5:17 says, "**Pray continuously.**"

God wants us to live our lives in **prayer mode**.

Prayer is the only way any of us will **reach our God-given potential**. Prayer is **the catalyst that sets off spiritual chain reactions**. When I pray I get **God ideas**. The **more I pray the more I dream**. My dreams get **bigger** and my convictions grow **deeper**. When I pray, "coincidences" happen. When I don't pray they don't happen! Prayer is the way I **zoom in** and **zoom out** and **get perspective on life**. Prayer heightens **spiritual awareness** and increases **spiritual intuition**. Prayer is the way I **untangle my problems**. Prayer is the way I **see opportunities** and **believe God for miracles**.

If you take prayer out of the equation, then all we can hope for is **our human best**. Is that depressing to anyone else? **My life is limited to me if I don't pray**. Prayer is the way we overcome our **natural human limitations**. It adds a **supernatural element** to our lives!

Sanctified Expectations

Psalm 5:3 is one of my favorite verses in Scripture. It uses so few words to say so much. I think it reveals one reason **why God used David in such a profound way**. David had a well developed **prayer habit**. He says, "Listen to my voice in the morning, Lord. **Each morning I bring my requests to you and wait expectantly.**"

Let me make an observation up front. When I don't pray I have **low expectations**. When I do pray I have **high expectations**. And all of us **live up** or **live down** to our expectations.

God wants to **sanctify every part of us**. He wants to sanctify our **imagination**s. He wants to sanctify our **dreams**. He wants to sanctify our **passions**. And He wants to sanctify our **expectations**.

David had **sanctified expectantly**. He "waited expectantly." He was dreaming **God-sized dreams**. He lived each day in **anticipation of what God would do next**.

David had bad days like the rest of us. In fact, our bad days aren't even comparable to David's bad days! But he maintained a profound **sense of destiny** through it all. How?

How did David maintain such a positive outlook on life when he was **hiding out in caves** because Saul was trying to kill him? How did he stay hopeful when **his son rebelled against him and tried to assume the throne**? How did he get back up when he **fell into sin** with Bathsheba?

David had a **prayer habit**.

Every morning David would **upload his prayer requests** and wait expectantly to see what God would **download**.

Priming

I learned something about **priming** last week. We're painting some of our **coffeehouse walls** an accent red. Our painter told us he'd have to use a **dark primer** otherwise the wall would take ten gallons of red. Evidently, red is a tough color to paint if the primer isn't right. **The key to painting is priming.**

Hold that thought.

In his book, *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell cites a **priming experiment** done by a psychologist named John Bargh at New York University.

Bargh and several colleagues chose a group of undergraduates as subjects and gave them two **scrambled-sentence tests**. The first test was sprinkled with **rude words** like "disturb," "bother," and "intrude." The second test was sprinkled with **polite words** like "respect," "considerate," and "yield."

In both cases, the tests were indiscreet. None of the subjects picked up on the word trend consciously. But it **primed them subconsciously**.

After taking the five-minute test, students were asked to walk down the hall and talk to the person running the experiment about their next assignment. **An actor was strategically engaged in conversation with the experimenter when the students would arrive.** And the goal was to see **how long it would take students to interrupt.**

Bargh wanted to know if the subjects who were **primed with polite words** would **take longer to interrupt** the conversation than those primed with rude words. They thought the **subconscious priming** would have a slight affect. But the affect was pretty profound in quantitative terms.

The people primed with "rude" words interrupted, on average, after about **five minutes**. But **82% of the people primed with polite words never interrupted at all**. Who knows how long they would have patiently and politely waited if the researchers hadn't give the test a ten-minute time limit.

The study dramatically shows the effect of what is called **priming**. The brain is **subconsciously primed by everything that is happening all the time**.

Two Dutch researchers did a similar study that involved a group of students answering **forty-two questions** from the board game *Trivial Pursuit*. Half of the subjects were told to take five minutes to **think about** what it would mean to be a **University professor** and write down everything that came to mind. The other group was told to sit and think about **soccer** for five minutes.

The “professor” group got **55.6%** of the questions right.
The “soccer” group got **42.6%** right.

The professor group didn’t know more than the soccer group. Gladwell says, “They weren’t smarter or more focused or more serious. They were simply in a **smart frame of mind**.”

What does that have to do with prayer?

Prayer puts us in a **spiritual frame of mind**. Prayer is **spiritual priming**. When you live in prayer mode your **spiritual radar** is on. Your **spiritual antenna** is up. If you *don’t* pray there will be **countless God-given opportunities that come and go without you even knowing it**. Why? Because you aren’t primed and ready!

Prayer Mode

Colossians 4:2 says, “**Devote yourselves to prayer** being **watchful** and thankful.”

The word “**watchful**” is a throw back to Old Testament “**watchmen**” whose job it was to **sit on the city wall, scan the horizon, and keep watch**. They were the **first ones to see** an attacking army or caravans of traders.

People who pray are “watchmen.” They see things **before** other people see them. They **see things other people don’t see**.

Now look at verse 5: “**Make the most of every opportunity**.”

Life is full of **God-given opportunities**—opportunities to learn, opportunities to love, opportunities to serve, opportunities to give. **Stewardship** is making the most of those opportunities. And prayer is the key to **seeing** and **seizing** those God-given opportunities!

I think there are two ways to live your life—**survival mode** and **prayer mode**. Survival mode is doing the **required minimum** to get by on a day-by-day basis. You **aren’t believing** God for anything. You **aren’t praying** for anything. Not only are God-given opportunities **wasted on you** when you live in survival mode. **It’s boring!**

Prayer mode is the exact opposite. You live in **constant expectation** of what **God is going to do next**.

The Neurology of Prayer

To really appreciate the power of prayer you have to understand the **neurology of prayer**.

At the base of our brain stem there is a cluster of nerve cells called the **reticular activating system**. We are constantly bombarded by countless stimuli—sights, sounds, and smells. If we had to process or pay attention to all the stimuli it'd drive us crazy. The reticular activating system determines **what gets noticed** and **what goes unnoticed**. It is the mind's **radar system**.

If you buy a **new car** you will **suddenly see that car everywhere you go**. It's not because everyone went out and bought the same car at the same time you did. Before you bought the car you **didn't have a category** for the car in your reticular activating system **so it went unnoticed**. But when you bought the car, it **created a category in your reticular activating system** so you now notice every time you see the car.

What does that have to do with prayer?

When you pray for something it creates a category in your reticular activating system. Anything related to that prayer category now registers on our radar.

It's interesting that the Aramaic word for prayer is *slotha*. It means **"to set a trap."** Prayer is setting your mind like a trap so that you **catch the thoughts of God**.

If you don't pray you'll never know what you **could have done** and who you **could have become** with God's help!

Billy Graham said, **"Heaven is full of answers to prayers for which no one ever bothered to ask."**

How-To

We've talked a little bit about **why**. Let's also explore **how**.

If you want to develop a **prayer habit**, you've got to determine **when** and **where** you're going to pray. That sounds pretty simple. But the key to establishing a prayer habit is **choosing a time** and **choosing a place**. And most of us have never done that. And we wonder why our prayer lives are sporadic.

Mark 1:35 gives us a sneak peak into **when** and **where** Jesus prayed. "The next morning Jesus awoke **long before daybreak** and went out alone into the **wilderness** to pray."

This verse reveals **when Jesus prayed**—long before daybreak. I think he had in the habit of beginning his day in prayer. And it reveals **where Jesus prayed**—the wilderness. I think we underestimate the **geography of prayer**. You've got to find a place where you **aren't distracted**—a prayer closet. And you've got to find **a place that inspires you**. Jesus loved to pray near lakes and mountains. I love praying on the rooftop of Ebenezers and right in front of Union station.

Susanna Wesley raised **seventeen children**, including John and Charles who started the Methodist movement. There is no "getting away to pray" with seventeen kids, but where there's a will there's a way! Susanna would **sit in her rocking chair in the middle of the living room and put a blanket over herself**.

In their book, *The Power of Full Engagement*, Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz say, “Building rituals requires **defining very precise behaviors** and **performing them at very specific times**—motivated by deeply held values.”

Here are a few ideas. **Set your alarm clock a little early** and spend that time in prayer. Use the **natural rhythm of your day**. Turn a **commute** into prayer time. Every once in a while I **fast ESPN radio** and use my drive time to pray. With an iPod you can turn your **workout time** into **worship time**. Or keep a **prayer journal**. It’s a great way of keeping things on your **prayer radar**. Too often we pray for things but we **forget what we prayed for** so when God answers our prayers we fail to give credit where credit is due.

A **prayer journal** is a great way of **putting Psalm 5:3 into practice!** Why not do a **prayer experiment** in 2006?

Oswald Chambers said, “If you will give God the right to yourself, He will make a **holy experiment** out of you.”

One key to becoming the person God has destined you to be is **developing a prayer habit**.

Your life will become a **Holy Experiment**.