There’s a story about a small town that had always been dry until a local businessman decided to build a tavern. A group of Christians from the local church were concerned and planned an all-night prayer meeting to ask God to intervene. Just a few days later, lightning struck the tavern and it burned to the ground. The businessman sued the church, claiming that the prayers of the congregation were responsible. But the church hired a lawyer to argue that they weren’t responsible. After an initial review of the case, the presiding judge offered this assessment, "No matter how this case comes out, one thing is clear: The tavern owner believes in prayer and the Christians do not."

This is our sixth week in our *DNA* sermon series. We’re focusing on what the Bible teaches about who we should be as followers of Jesus and what this church should look like as the church of Jesus Christ. And we’ve spent a lot of time in Acts 2:42-47, because those verses describe for us what the early church looked like right after Jesus sent the Holy Spirit and began to build His church. These verses tell us what this church should look like if Jesus really is the one building His church by the power of His Spirit. And we’ve identified seven values that make up the DNA of who we’re supposed to be as followers of Jesus. If we’re following Jesus, we’ll be learners, pray-ers, worshippers, givers, relaters, servers, and reproducers.

And last week, we zoomed in on the second characteristic: pray-ers who are in conversation with God. And today we’re going to spend a second week on that characteristic before we move on to worshippers next week. So turn in your Bibles to Luke chapter 18. We’re going to look at a story that Jesus told about prayer. But first, let me remind you very quickly of what we saw last week about prayer in the early church. Acts 2:42 told us that the early church was devoted to prayer. They clung to prayer. They held on to it. They were faithful to it. When Jesus formed His followers into His church, prayer was part of who they were. They didn’t just have a prayer life. Prayer was their life. And because the early church was so devoted to prayer, we tried to learn from their example last week. We looked at the first example of prayer recorded in the Bible after the church was formed. The Jewish religious leaders had just arrested Peter and John for preaching about Jesus in Acts 3. In Acts 4, the religious leaders threaten Peter and John and demand that they not talk about Jesus ever again, and then they release them. So Peter and John go back to the church and tell them about this threat of persecution. And the church’s response is that they begin to pray. In Acts 4:24-30, they pray, “*Sovereign Lord, you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: ‘Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.’ Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the peopleof Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”*

And what we saw in this text is that there were three great reasons why the early church was so devoted to prayer. First, they were devoted to prayer because they realized who God is. They knew that God is the Sovereign Lord who is in control of all things, so they prayed. The second reason they were so devoted to prayer is because they realized how much they needed God. They knew they were needy people, and they were dependent on God, so they prayed. And third, they were devoted to prayer because they wanted Jesus to be exalted. They knew the work of Jesus is a spiritual work, and that means it can only be done with spiritual resources, so they asked God to pour out His spiritual power and do the great spiritual work of exalting Jesus.

So the reason we should be driven to prayer… the reason we should be devoted to prayer… is because we know who God is, we know how much we need God, and we want Jesus to be exalted and we know only God can do that type of work. That’s *why* we should pray. Today, I want us to look at *how* we should pray. And there are a lot of places in the Bible that teach us how to pray, but I want us to focus on Jesus’ teaching in Luke 18. So turn to Luke chapter 18, and let’s read verses 9-14. Luke 18:9-14. Luke writes, *“To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.”*

*“‘But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”*

*“‘I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.’”*

Do you ever stop and just admire how powerful of a storyteller Jesus was? That story’s 88 words in the NIV. And in 88 words, Jesus exposes our hearts and calls us to the true heart of prayer. Most people can’t do that in 88 pages, and Jesus does it in 88 words. Jesus is the Master Teacher. And the truth that Jesus teaches in His stories is so powerful that it can literally change our lives.

So what’s Jesus teaching us in Luke 18? In verse 9, Luke sets the context for us and tells us why Jesus told this story. Jesus told this story because of some people *“who were confident in their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else.”* In other words, Jesus told this story in response to pride. Jesus encountered some people who were arrogantly trusting in themselves. They believed they were good enough to make themselves righteous, and they also believed that made them better than everyone else. They were conceited and condescending. So Jesus did what Jesus always does. He went straight for their hearts with the truth.

He tells a story about two men who go into the temple to pray. One man is a Pharisee. The Pharisees were strict keepers of the law and were considered the most righteous of all the religious people in Israel. The other man is a tax collector. Tax collectors were labeled as dishonest cheaters and traitors because they worked for the Roman Empire. People despised and loathed the tax collectors. So when Jesus tells us that the Pharisee prayed, *“God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get,”* and the tax collector prayed, *“God, have mercy on me, a sinner,”* the people would have thought, “Yeah, that’s about right. The Pharisee’s a clean-cut, well-behaved guy. The tax collector, he’s a scum bag.” That wouldn’t have shocked them at all. What would have shocked them is Jesus’ assessment of their prayers in verse 14, *“I tell you that this man (the sinful tax collector)… went home justified before God,”* and the self-righteous Pharisee did not. Jesus says the sinful tax collector receives God’s mercy and is justified… He is righteous… before God. But the self-righteous Pharisee is not. He’s condemned by God.

And Jesus leaves no doubt as to why this is the case. At the end of verse 14, He says as clearly as possible, *“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”* The reason the Pharisee’s prayer was not acceptable to God is because he exalted himself. The reason the tax collector’s prayer was acceptable to God is because he humbled himself. It’s that simple. How should you pray as a follower of Jesus? Humbly. You should pray humbly. That’s the type of prayer Jesus calls us to. That’s the only type of prayer God accepts. In fact, that’s the only type of prayer there is. If you aren’t praying humbly, you aren’t praying at all. Look back at verse 11, *“The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself.”* He’s not focused on God. He’s focused on himself. That verse can also be translated, “The Pharisee stood and prayed *to* himself.” He’s not even talking to God. He’s talking to himself about himself. And that’s not prayer. True prayer is a conversation with God. You’re focused on God. You’re talking to God. You’re listening to God. And that type of God-centered focus only happens to the extent that you’re humble. That’s because pride is self-centered. Pride is always focused on itself. So if you’re proud, you can’t be focused on God, because you’re focused on yourself. And if you’re not focused on God, you can’t pray to God. Pride and prayer are incompatible. The only true prayer is humble prayer. So when Jesus teaches us how to pray, He teaches us to pray humbly.

And when you think about what we already saw last week about why we pray, it becomes very obvious why humility is essential to prayer. We saw that the reason we pray is because of who God is, because of how much we need God, and because we want God to exalt Jesus. And I hope you see that each of those reasons are intimately connected to humility.

First, when you see who God is, you see someone who is glorious and wonderful and awesome and overwhelming and mighty and powerful and good. God is the Creator. He is infinite and eternal. He is first and last. He is perfect in love, perfect in grace, perfect in justice, perfect in wisdom, perfect in His very being. When you see who God is, you see someone who is better than you in every single way imaginable. You see someone who is bigger than you and stronger than you and greater than you. You see someone who needs nothing from you and gives everything to you. And let me tell you something, pride cannot live in the presence of a God like that! If you get so much as the briefest glimpse, the slightest whiff, of who God really is, it will break you and humble you and crush your pride, because there will be no doubt that He is God and you are not.

So the reason you pray is because of who God is. And when you see who God is that humbles you… which means that true prayers will always be humble prayers.

The second reason you pray is because of how much you need God. And clearly, the only way we will ever admit our neediness and truly mean it is when we’re humble. Pride can’t stand to be needy or dependent, because pride wants to demonstrate its own strength and its own sufficiency by being independent. So you can’t pray when you’re proud, because your pride won’t admit how much you need God.

Now don’t get me wrong, some of us get really good at playing the game. And we’ll say that we need God, but we don’t really mean it. We don’t live like that’s true. We don’t pray like that’s true. We just say it because we know it’s the right answer, and we’re so proud that we want to show everybody we know the right answer so we say it and try to pretend we believe it. And we actually feed our pride by pretending to be humble and dependent on God.

C.S. Lewis talks about this in his great book, *Mere Christianity*. He says, “How is it that people who are quite obviously eaten up with pride can say they believe in God and appear to (be) very religious? I am afraid it means they are worshipping an imaginary God. They theoretically admit themselves to be nothing in the presence of this phantom God, but are really all the time imagining how He approves of them and thinks them far better than ordinary people… I suppose it was of those people Christ was thinking when He said that some would preach about Him and cast out devils in His name, only to be told at the end of the world that He had never known them. And any of us may at any moment be in this death-trap. Luckily, we have a test. Whenever we find that our religious life is making us feel that we are good – above all, that we are better than someone else – I think we may be sure that we are being acted on, not by God, but by the devil. The real test of being in the presence of God is that you either forget about yourself altogether or see yourself as a small, dirty object. It is better to forget about yourself altogether.”

True humility comes when you see God as so big and so great and so sufficient and yourself as so small and so needy and so dependent that you throw yourself completely on God. You rely on God. You depend on God. You trust God. You give yourself up completely, because you know that God is your only hope, and you know just how much you need Him. That is humility. And that is the soil out of which true prayer grows.

Abraham Lincoln described this type of humble prayer perfectly when he said, “I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom, and that of all about me, seemed insufficient for the day.”

That’s it exactly. You’ve got nowhere else to go. You’re not sufficient. No one else is sufficient. And then you see who God is, and you realize He is sufficient. So you’re humbled before Him, and you pray because you realize just how much you need Him.

I said last week that every prayer, at its heart, is the cry, “God, I need you. Because of who you are… because you’re so great… I need you. Because of who I am… because I’m so needy… I need you. God, I need you.” That’s exactly what we see with the tax collector today, *“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”* Jesus tells us that’s the prayer God accepts, “God, I need you. I need you, because you are merciful. And I need you, because I am a sinner. I need you, God. Have mercy on me.”

Jesus teaches that the prayer that pleases God is real and raw and honest. It’s not about how you look or how you sound or what other people think about you. It’s about a heart that desperately needs God and longs for God and cries out to God.

And I want to share with you a silly little poem that captures this truth really well. It goes like this:

"The proper way for man to pray," said Deacon Samuel Keyes; "The only proper attitude is down upon his knees."

"Nay, I should say the way to pray," said Reverend Doctor Wise, "Is standing straight with outstretched arms with rapt and upturned eyes."

"Oh, no, no, no," said Elder Snow, "such posture is too proud. A man should pray with eyes fast-closed and head contritely bowed."

"It seems to me his hands should be soberly clasped in front. With both thumbs pointing to the ground," said Reverend Doctor Blunt.

"Last year I fell in Hodgkin's well headfirst," said Farmer Brown. "With both my heels a-stickin' up, my head a-pointing' down; And I done prayed right then and there, best prayer I ever said, The prayin'est prayer I ever prayed, a-standin' on my head."

True prayer grows out of a heart that realizes, “God, I really need you. And I’ve given up trying to look good or sound good. I’m so broken that I can’t even raise my head, and all I know to do is cry out, ‘God, have mercy on me! God, you are my only hope! God, I just need you.’”

That is true prayer. And that’s why our pride will keep us from really praying. Pride wants to look good and sound good, and pride certainly doesn’t want to admit that you’re desperate and needy. So pride can’t pray… Because true prayer only happens when you recognize how desperately you need God, and you cry out to Him from the depth of your heart. That is the prayer God loves. It is real and raw and honest.

So… the reason you pray is because you realize just how much you need God. And it’s only the humble heart that can pray that way… which means true prayers will always be humble prayers.

The third reason we pray is because we want Jesus to be exalted. We want people to see how great Jesus is. We want Jesus to be glorified. And the Bible clearly tells us that this is a spiritual work. And spiritual work always requires the work of the Spirit. You cannot work in your own strength and glorify Jesus. You cannot depend on yourself and glorify Jesus. You cannot rely on human methods and programs and glorify Jesus. The glory of Jesus Christ is a spiritual work that requires the work of the Spirit.

Let me show you two places where you can see this in the Bible. First in John 16:14, Jesus tells His disciples, *“(The Holy Spirit) will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.”* The work of the Holy Spirit is to glorify Jesus, and the way Holy Spirit glorifies Jesus is by making known the truth about Jesus. Now, listen to how Paul expands on this truth in 1 Corinthians 2:9-13. He says, *“As it is written: ‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him’—but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit… We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.”*

In 1 Corinthians 2, Paul’s reminding the Corinthians that the whole time he was with them the only thing he preached was Jesus Christ and His gospel. And in these verses, Paul tells us that no human eye has seen, no human ear has heard, no human mind can comprehend God’s great work for us in Jesus. We are humanly incapable of understanding what God has done for us in Jesus. But even though we as humans can’t grasp God’s work on our own, God has revealed the truth to us by His Spirit. And the Spirit enables us to understand what God has done for us. And any time we declare the gospel of Jesus, we don’t speak in words taught by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The Spirit brings glory to Jesus by revealing Jesus and making His gospel known.

So if we want Jesus to be exalted, we have to realize that is a spiritual work that can only be done by the Holy Spirit. We are dependent on the Spirit to exalt Jesus. And that’s why we pray. We pray because we want Jesus to be exalted, but we can’t do it on our own. We pray because we know that if Jesus is going to be exalted, God has to pour out His Spirit, and the Spirit has to reveal the truth of the gospel, and the Spirit has to teach spiritual truths with spiritual words, and the Spirit has to draw people to Jesus through gospel. And in all of that, Jesus is exalted.

Church, we have to realize that we’ve been called to a task that is impossible for us to do on our own. Our calling is a spiritual calling, and human resources are not sufficient for it. In fact, anything we produce in our own strength or by our own resources will be an utter failure, because human resources produce human results and human results will not last. We may look good for a while. We may impress people. We may draw a crowd with human resources, but we will not build a church. Building the church is the spiritual work of Jesus, and it will only be built by the Spirit of Christ. So we better pray like everything depends on the work of the Spirit… because it really does.

It doesn’t matter how strategic our plans are. It doesn’t matter how well attended our programs are. It doesn’t matter how many people praise us and want to copy our models. If the Spirit of God doesn’t fill this place and do the spiritual work that only He can do, nothing of spiritual significance will ever happen here. Period. That is why we pray. Because we are asking God to pour out His Spirit and do the spiritual work that only He can do.

A. C. Dixon says, “When we depend upon organizations, we get what organizations can do; when we depend upon education, we get what education can do; when we depend upon man, we get what man can do; but when we depend upon prayer, we get what God can do.”

Samuel Chadwick expressed the same truth from another angle almost 100 years ago when he said, “Satan dreads nothing but prayer. His one concern is to keep the saints from praying. He fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work, prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil. Mocks our wisdom. But trembles when we pray.”

All of our study, all of our work, all of our religion will come to nothing apart from prayer. All of our programs, all of our ministries, all of our strategies, all of our facilities are worthless for producing spiritual results apart from prayer. That’s because we have no spiritual power on our own. If we truly want to see spiritual work and spiritual results, then we have to turn to a spiritual source. And it is prayer that connects us to the spiritual power of God. God is pleased to pour out His Spirit and accomplish His spiritual work in response to prayer.

So the reason we pray is because we want Jesus to be exalted, and we know we’re dependent on the Spirit to do the spiritual work of exalting Jesus. And once again, it’s only the humble heart that recognizes its dependence, so once again, true prayers will always be humble prayers.

So… the reason Jesus tells us we should pray humbly is because that’s the only way to pray. Any true prayer to God is going to be a humble prayer, because when you’re really praying to God and you come into His presence and you encounter Him, you’re going to overwhelmed by who He is and how great He is. And you’re going to realize just how much you need Him, and just how dependent you are on Him and just how desperate you are for Him. And you’re going to know that if the spiritual work of exalting Jesus is going to happen, God has to do it by His Spirit because only He can do it. And there’s no room for pride in any of that. If you’re really praying, you will pray humbly, because true prayer in the presence of God kills pride.

And that raises a really important question for us. What do we do if we realize we aren’t humble? What if we aren’t anywhere close to being the humble pray-ers Jesus calls us to be? What do we do then? We pray. It’s a great paradox. When you realize that you aren’t the pray-er God calls you to be, you pray. You pray and ask God to make you into the pray-er He calls you to be. That’s the whole point. The whole point is that *you* can’t do this. You come to God because He has to do it. So you don’t get yourself humble and then start praying. You pray and ask God to make you humble. You don’t wait until you’re good enough to pray. You pray because you know you’ll never be good enough… unless God does His great work. So you throw yourself on God and you beg Him to do it.

Andrew Murray explains this truth perfectly. Andrew Murray was the son of a missionary in South Africa in the 1800s, and he became a pastor in South Africa. And a woman once came to him distraught, because she felt she couldn't pray. Listen to his answer, "Why then, do you not try this? As you go to your inner chamber (to pray), however cold and dark your heart may be, do not try in your own might to force yourself into the right attitude. Bow before (God), and tell Him that He sees in what a sad state you are, and that your only hope is in Him. Trust Him, with a childlike trust, to have mercy upon you, and wait upon Him. In such a trust you are in a right relationship to Him. You have nothing -- He has everything."

When you realize that you’ll never be the humble pray-er God calls you to be, that’s the first glimmer of hope… Because then you can pray and confess that to God. You bring Him your emptiness and you trust Him to fill you and make you into a pray-er, because only He can do it. And at that moment, God’s already making you the type of humble pray-er that pleases Him.

So… as followers of Jesus, we are to be humble pray-ers who are in conversation with God. We are to be devoted to prayer. And before we close, I want to focus on some practical ways we can truly be devoted to prayer. First, on a church-wide level, we have several opportunities to devote ourselves to prayer. We set aside four Sunday nights per year where our entire Sunday evening service is a time of prayer. Those four Sundays nights are the first Sunday of the year, where we pray for our direction as a church, Mother’s Day, where we pray for families, the Sunday before school starts, where we pray for teachers and students and evangelism, and a Sunday in November, where we pray for missions. We have also multiple prayer groups that meet at different times during the week, in people’s homes, here at church. If you’ll call the office, we can get you information about those. We have a prayer room with 24-hour access. We have a weekly prayer meeting in the worship center every Wednesday night at 6:00. But even more than just these specific prayer programs, we want prayer to be part of all our ministries. When we preach, we pray. When we give, we pray. When we worship, we pray. In our classes, we pray. In meetings, we pray. In rehearsals, we pray. I meet with the deacons to pray before each service on Sunday mornings. I’d like to ask you to consider coming into the worship center a few minutes earlier… maybe at 8:30… and praying for the day’s services. Starting this Sunday, we’re also having groups meet in the prayer room to pray while I’m preaching. We’d love for you to rotate into that group once every 3 or 4 months. We want prayer to undergird everything we do.

And that leads to the second practical point I want to emphasize. The point is not just that we’ll have some church-wide programs and that you’ll participate in those programs. The point is that we’ll become a certain type of people. The point is that we’re supposed to be followers of Jesus whose lives are being changed by Jesus. And one of the characteristics that should mark your life is that you’ll be a pray-er who is in conversation with God. So being devoted to prayer is not just something you do for a couple of hours each week at church. It has to become part of your DNA as a follower of Jesus, and it bleeds into every piece of your life. And that means everything we do here should simply be a starting place for you. We want to equip you and encourage you and help you grow in prayer. But the point is that you will then become a pray-er yourself.

And so the last thing I want to do is to talk about some practical ways to devote yourself to prayer on a personal level.

First, set aside time for daily prayer. I know you’re busy. But I promise, once you take time to pray, you’ll wonder how you ever got anything done before you prayed. Start small if you need to. Get up 5 or 10 minutes earlier. Shut your door for a few minutes on your lunch break. Sit in your car in the parking lot for a few minutes before you go into work. Just set aside time for daily prayer.

Second, get in the habit of praying continually throughout the day. Have a running conversation with God. Make it your first reaction to every problem to ask God for help. Make it your first reaction to every blessing to thank God. Make it your first reaction to every decision to ask God for wisdom. These don’t have to be long prayers. Just short SOS prayers in your mind. “God, please give me wisdom right now. God, please give me grace. God, please produce the fruit of the Spirit in me. God, please live in me and help me love this person. God, thank you for providing for me. God, thank you for the warm weather. God, thank you for the sunshine. God, thank you for the rain.” A running conversation with God… constantly aware of Him.

Third, look for times when you can multi-task as you pray. Pray as you’re driving… preferably with your eyes open. Pray as you’re standing in the checkout line at the grocery store. Pray in the shower. Pray while you’re cooking. The great thing about having a God who is everywhere all the time is that you can pray to Him everywhere all the time.

Finally, if you’re wondering what to pray, a great place to start is to pray Scripture. Pray the Lord’s Prayer from Matthew 6 and really think about each line. Pray the psalms. Pray the prayers of thanksgiving and the benedictions in Paul’s letters. Pray others truths you find in the Bible.

A lot of people also find the acronym ACTS helpful. A-C-T-S. Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication. Adoration means you worship and praise God for who He is. Praise God for being mighty and sovereign and wise and just and gracious. Confession means you confess your sins and ask God to keep making you holy in Christ. Thanksgiving means you thank God for taking care of you. Thank Him for food and health and life. Thank Him for His goodness and His grace and His love. And supplication means you ask God for help. Pray for your needs. Pray for other people’s needs. Pray for your pastors and for missionaries and for political leaders. Most of all, pray that God will do His great spiritual work and draw people to Jesus and exalt Jesus and build His kingdom.

But however you do it, pray. Be devoted to prayer. Grab hold of it. Cling to it. Martin Luther once wrote about the way his dog would sit by the table with his mouth open, waiting, hoping for a piece of meat. Luther wrote, “Oh, if I could only pray the way this dog watches the meat! All his thoughts are concentrated on the piece of meat. Otherwise he has no thought, no wish, no hope."

Church, I pray that we will pray that way. I pray that our every thought and our every hope will be God Himself. I pray that we will be humbled by who God is and by how much we need Him. And I pray that we will be completely devoted to prayer because we are completely dependent on God.