

# THAT'S WHY WE PRAY

Week #3 of a 5-Week Series, "The Five Unity Principles"

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Rev. Richard Maraj

So how many people here have ever had a yearning or desire to have a deeper and more personal relationship with God? Anybody? And how many people would say you'd be willing to make a commitment to your daily spiritual practice and living a more spiritually centered life? How many people want to make that commitment? We want it, but are we willing to make the commitment?

So could you imagine if we actually did it? Could you imagine if we were that dedicated -- 100% dedicated -- to our spiritual practice to the point where we would be fully willing to fully and completely surrender our lives to God? Could you imagine living at that level of a spiritual life?

You know, I think every single one of us want to feel a fuller experience of love, of life. Every one of us wants a fuller experience of our divine nature and to connect and live from our most authentic place.

This year our theme is called: "Deeper into the Divine." It is really to help support us. Because this is the thing, I think, that we all yearn for. To support us in going deeper in our spiritual life.

And so I decided to kick it off with the five fundamental foundational principles of Unity: our teachings; the tools and principles we use to help have a deeper relationship and connection to the Divine.

In Week #1 Rev. Rogers looked at Principle #1. And it is: **There is only one Presence and one Power active as the Universe and in my life: God the Good.** And he shared that that statement -- that there is God and only God, and God is good -- means that there is no one to blame; the devil did not make you do it! [Congregation laughs] We have free will. We choose how much good; we choose how much we allow God into our lives. We choose more than we realize! Sometimes we choose to live in fear. Sometimes we choose to live in anger. Choose to live in lack. Choose to live in drama or negativity.

Anybody ever choose to say something unkind, where you could have been kind, or even could have said nothing? Anybody choose to not act in the most loving? Three of us. Okay; perfect. [Congregation laughs]

And so the thing is: there really is no one to blame with how our lives are. God is good and only good. And we have the choice. We get to choose. We can choose to live a God-centered life or we can choose to live an ego-centered life. We can choose to live a love-based or a fear-based life. God is not punishing us! We get to choose. God is good, and we get to tap into that goodness. And if we don't like how things are going, we can make new choices. But God is good all the time.

The second principle is: **Our essence is of God.** Therefore, we are inherently good. This God essence was fully in and expressed in Jesus the Christ. And so what this means is that we are all created in the image and likeness of God. We are made of God stuff. We are expressions of the Divine. We are, indeed, children of God. And so we're the temple of the Living God.

And this is great news, because it empowers us! We're not unworthy, miserable victims! We are empowered children of God! Because we have been created in that image and likeness. And that spirit and power and potential is in each of us.

So today we're looking at Principle #3, and that is: **Prayer and meditation is the way to align our hearts and minds with God.** That there may be all this good potential and spiritual power in us and around us. But the truth is that the way to tap into it -- the way to access it -- is through the power of prayer. It is through prayer that we access the goodness and the allness of God.

So this morning we're going to look at the power and the value and the importance of prayers. Because prayer really is the foundational spiritual practice that leads us to a deeper connection with God, and a greater and more spiritually-centered life.

And so speaking of prayer ... it reminds me of this lady that went to her priest and said, "*Father, I've got a big problem. I've got a problem! I've got these two female talking parrots, and they can only say one thing and I don't like what they're saying.*"

And he said, "*What do they say?*"

She said, "*They only can say, 'Hi! We're party girls! Wanna have some fun?'*" [Congregation laughs]

And the priest said, "*That is horrible! That is horrible! This is a problem!*" He thinks for a moment and he says, "*You know, I think I have a solution to your problem. I have two male parrots that I taught to pray and read the Bible all day, every day. They lead a very disciplined prayer life, and I know they'll be a good influence on your parrots. I know that, after they spend a little time together, that your female parrots won't say that anymore. They'll say more positive words. And they will learn the joys of worship and praise.*"

And she said, "*Okay; let's try that!*"

So the next day comes, and she brings over the two female parrots. And the two male parrots are holding their rosary beads and they're bowed in prayer. [Congregation laughs] And then the lady puts the two female parrots in the cage. And after a couple of seconds, they say, "*Hi! We're party girls! Wanna have some fun?*" [Congregation titters]

And both the male parrots look up. One leans over to the other and says, "*Put your beads down, brother. Our prayers have been answered!*" [Congregation laughs and applauds] [Rev. Maraj laughs]

So how many people believe in the power of prayer? [Laughs] And how many people would say that you right now have a regular daily prayer and meditation practice? Anybody?

And so my question for you is: Why do you pray? I want you to think about this. Why do you pray? What do you hope to achieve or accomplish when you pray? What is it that you want to feel or experience when you pray? What is your goal and purpose with prayer?

Perhaps it could be to feel a greater sense of peace; feel more grounded or centered. To feel a greater sense of clarity or strength. Maybe it is seeking a sense of healing or guidance or direction or clarity or wisdom or insight or understanding. Maybe it is to have your dream or desire manifested. Maybe it's to call forth some greater good into your life. Maybe it's to know the fullness of our souls and our connection and oneness with God.

Prayer is a spiritual activity that connects and opens and aligns us to the fullness and the unlimited goodness and love of God. I would say without a doubt there is no greater activity or energy or vibration that we can engage in or participate in to call forth more good for our lives. There is nothing greater or better we can do for our lives in all areas than time for prayer for meditation and connecting with the Divine; connecting with the Source.

And so how many people -- even though you know and agree absolutely of the benefits and the power of prayer -- would say you still don't use prayer as frequently and consistently as you could? Anybody would agree with that?

Eric Butterworth said, in his book *Discover the Power Within You*, that we frustrate our own potential. We get upset that life isn't happy or fulfilling and, yet, we limit our own happiness and success by not turning to the very Power that can actually change and transform and open our lives to good things.

And so the question is: Why? Why aren't we turning to prayer? Why aren't we engaging in this incredible activity more consistently and regularly when there's so many benefits to it? And it is our greatest power?

There are six things I think that hold us back.

Number one: I think we're a little skeptical about prayer. I think we don't take it quite seriously. [Closes eyes and feigns praying] *"That's it? Seems very passive; nothing seems to be happening"*. [Congregation laughs] *"Maybe that's lovely for a relaxing and a yoga class, but really! What about getting me a job? Or my legal situation? Or my family dysfunction? Prayer works for that?"* Sometimes we think thinking and doing is more powerful than praying and being. And prayer is more powerful, but sometimes were a bit skeptical, so we don't try it and practice it as consistently.

Second one is: We view it as something that's good for us but we don't really like. We sometimes view prayer and meditation like eating broccoli or working or doing your taxes. [Congregation laughs] It's important to do it, but we don't really enjoy doing it. And sometimes we think it's such an onerous task. Praying. I had a friend say once to me, *"Oh, I pray early in the morning so I can just get it over with."* [Congregation laughs] Not exactly the greatest attitude toward prayer!

Third one is: It's hard, because sometimes our minds are kind of busy. Have you ever had your mind wander and bounce around and get distracted when you're trying to pray? That's a tough aspect of prayer: the mind is busy; it's hard to quiet the mind. And it makes prayer kind of challenging.

The fourth one is: Silence. We are so unaccustomed to silence and being still and quieting ourselves that we tend to fidget and have a difficult time when Scripture says, *"Be still and know that I am God."* Blaise Pascal once said that all of our problems in life stem from our inability to just sit still.

Number five: Sometimes we think we don't have enough time. Ever said, "I was just too busy today to pray; just didn't have enough time to pray"?

And the final one is: Discipline. Prayer and meditation is spiritual work. It takes work! It requires a level of reverential openness; alertness; a certain consciousness to listen; to tune in; to connect and be aware. All these things are spiritual work that require discipline and us being fully engaged.

Prayer is the way that we connect into that infinite goodness of God. God is our essence and our nature, and prayer is the way that we call forth god's peace; and love; and wisdom; and guidance; and abundance. Prayer is the way that we know our oneness; we connect with our divine nature, and we expand ourselves to a greater, fuller, more profound experience of life. That's why we pray! To know the fullness of that Spirit of God in us and the fullness of the life that we've been called to live.

So let's look at four things we can do to engage in this incredible activity of prayer in a more effective way.

The first one is just to **HAVE A PRAYER PLAN.** Everyone will agree that success requires planning. If you have a business, you've got a business plan. Or you've got a marketing plan. You know, you've got a game plan. A strategic plan. You've got a fitness plan. We all agree that success requires some planning. And planning means taking time of thinking where we are; where we want to go; and the steps that it would take to get there. Planning: we all agree that would be important for success in any area of life.

How many people -- be honest now! -- have a written plan for your daily personal prayer life? One person! And I think he was being nice to keep me company! [Congregation laughs]

And the fact is: a personal prayer life will make us more focused; more motivated; more efficient; more effective; and more likely to find greater progress along that powerful, positive path of prayer. In life,

you can live randomly or casually, or you can live intentionally, consciously and deliberately. A plan -- we would all agree -- is a great thing for success in all areas. And I would suggest including our spiritual life.

Here are four things that we can do to develop a personal prayer life.

Number one is: **Have a prayer intention.** What's your ultimate intention? Is it self-realization or self-actualization? Is it to achieve Christ consciousness? Is it to fulfill your divine purpose? Is it to live a more spiritually centered life? What would be your goal and your ultimate intention for your prayer life and your relationship with God?

Two is: **A place.** Of course, you can pray anywhere! But I know people who have certain places where they have maybe a candle burning or incense or a picture of Jesus or Buddha or Krishna. And it's just a place that brings them into a feeling of sacredness and connection. It could be on the floor; it could be on a chair; it could be in a space in your room. I do it in my backyard or in my room. I've got different places. But it's a place that connects you and makes you feel centered. My parents, when we were in Trinidad, had a prayer room. It was a space dedicated for us to go and have quiet time and prayer. Having a place ... When you have a plan, you make appointments and you go to that place. And it helps and makes a difference.

Number three is: **Time.** And two things: What time of day is best for you? Some people are not morning people! Not a good time to pray! If you had me praying at four o'clock, I'd be meditating on the back of my eyelids. [Congregation laughs] Because that would not be happening! But I know myself well enough; I'm like a 7 a.m. type of prayer guy, and in-the-middle-of-the-day prayer guy. I'm not a late-night or early-morning. But what are you? It's about picking a time that's most effective for your reverential alertness in this powerful practice of prayer.

And the other one along time is: How long? I know some people who meditate once a day for 30 minutes. I know some people who do two sets of 20 or four times 10, or whatever it is you want to do. But what works for you? What's your plan? Your plan for the time of day and your plan for the length of your prayer practice?

And the fourth one is: **A method.** What method do you want to use? Do you want to use a guided meditation? Do you just want to do one where you focus on your breath? Do you want just pure silence? Maybe one where you repeat a mantra like "*God is love; God is love; God is love ...*"? Or "*Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*"? Whichever one you want to use! Because having a plan absolutely -- like everything in life -- makes a difference. It creates progress; it creates success and insights and breakthroughs and improvement. It is good stuff.

Remember when Jesus said, "*Seek ye first His kingdom and His righteousness*" ...? What he's saying is: make prayer a priority. And for our priorities in life, what we tend to do is: We tend to have a plan. We make a plan for things that are priorities; things that are valuable and important to us. Prayer is valuable! It is our pearl of great price! It is a powerful and important thing. It is a treasure that is the foundation of our spiritual life and a happy life.

Remember when Deepak Chopra said -- one of my favorite lines? He said, "*If you're too busy to pray once a day, pray twice a day!*" [Congregation laughs] I think what he's saying is that prayer is too important, powerful and valuable to not make it a priority. And if you're going to make it a priority, then develop a plan so you absolutely, consistently use it.

Because what we often do is: We say prayer is important; we believe it's important; but we don't have a plan to actually practice it and implement it every day in our lives. So besides your personal prayer life, I invite you to add some additional things. Like we have a Wednesday 6:15 p.m. meditation up in our Chapel. Or we have a 10:15 a.m. or 12:15 p.m. 10-minute visualization meditation [on Sundays]. Pray

with a chaplain. Call our prayer line. Take our prayer and meditation classes we have coming up. Support yourself! Develop your plan to help you have a daily practice of this powerful gift and tool we call prayer.

It's too important to not make a plan for this great priority.

The second thing is to **GO INTO YOUR INNER CHAMBER**. Jesus said, "*When you pray, go into your inner chamber, close the door, and pray to your Father, who is in secret.*" And so what he's basically saying is that prayer is an inside job. Only you can do it. Only you can go to your inner chamber. Only you can go to what they call the "Secret Place of the Most High." Only you can listen to the still, small voice for you.

**Every form of prayer is about quieting our hearts and our minds to connect and tune in to that Spirit and wisdom and love of God.** And only you can go there! Only you can do it for yourself. Only you can feel God. No one can feel God for you! No one can connect with God in prayer for you. It is a part of your journey. When Scripture said, "*The kingdom of God is within you,*" it means to go within. When it says, "*Christ in you; your hope of glory,*" it means go in you to feel that glory and that connection. So prayer: go to your inner chamber; it's an inside job.

The next thing about prayer: We should realize that **prayer is a unifying activity**. It is unifying. The first two words of The Lord's Prayer -- "Our Father" -- that's a kind of unifying thing. It means we're connected with the one Source and we are all from the one Source. That means we are all connected; we are all brothers and sisters. We are all children of God.

Prayer is unifying, because we tend to pray when we feel fragmented, disconnected, or distant or lost. And prayer brings us back to center. It brings us back to God. It brings us back to peace and love and oneness. It brings us back to unify with the very power that created this universe; created us. That power is in us! Prayer unifies us to the power that created the sun and the stars and the ocean and the flowers. It created us. So it is a unifying practice that we feel a sense of oneness.

And then the final one is: remember; prayer does not change God. When I was a kid, I thought prayer changed God. I thought if I prayed nicely enough and I said, "Please," and consistently enough ... or if I begged or made some promises, I could somehow get God to change God's mind to give me what I wanted. And then when I came to Unity, I heard something I loved. And it said: **Prayer does not change God. Prayer is only there to change us.**

God can't help but be God all the time. God is God all the time! God is love all the time! God is peace all the time! Prayer is about unifying ourselves and to change ourselves to be in alignment with the goodness and the fullness of God that's always there. Prayer helps calm our minds and soothes our fear and our worry. To raise our consciousness and our mindset and our outlook and perspective to a higher-elevated, divine level so we can be in the flow of God and the goodness that's always there. Prayer is about changing us; it is an inside job to unify that power and presence and to help change and transform our mind. To renew our mind to be in alignment with the Divine.

And the fact is: The more we immerse our mind in the Mind of God with prayer, things that are not of God fall away. Fear and negativity and resentments. And then we just are centered in God's peace. But it requires that we keep going within; keep going within; keep going within.

Jesus prayed five times a day every day! He kept building up his consciousness -- his God consciousness. Whether he needed anything or not, it was a regular practice to connect with his soul and connect with the Source.

Okay, the third one's going to sound kind of weird, but it's **SINCERITY**. It sounds like not a big deal, but it's a huge deal! The line before when Jesus said go to thy inner chamber to pray, here's what he said.

He said, *"When you pray, do not be like hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and street corners to be seen by men. But when you pray, go within to your inner chamber."*

And what he's saying is that prayer isn't about show. Prayer is not about focusing on just what I'm going to get. There needs to be a sincere desire for God. In Jeremiah it says, *"If you seek me, you will find me if you seek me with all your heart."* Remember the greatest commandment? *"Love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength."* In Psalm 51 it says, *"Create in me a clean heart, O Lord."* A Beatitude says, *"Blessed are the pure in heart."* It says, *"Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."*

The whole idea about heart is that heart is considered to be the center of our being. So when it says to love God with all your heart, it's to love it from your core. Love it from the very center of your being. Could you imagine sincerely seeking to feel the presence of God with all your heart? At the very core and essence of who you are? That is the most valuable, powerful and most important thing!

Jesus said, *"Seek ye first [His kingdom and His righteousness], and all these things will be added unto you."* He's saying: Don't worry about that stuff! Just sincerely seek the very Source out of which all things flow and good things will happen for you!

So how sincere are you to experience God? How much earnestness and open-heartedness are you willing to engage in in this activity of prayer? It doesn't sound like a big deal, but it is a huge deal. The sincerity and the purity of our hearts in seeking God in meditation will increase that connection and that flow in our lives.

And the last one is what I call **PATIENT PERSISTANCE**. You ever been meditating and your mind wanders? You bring it back and then it wanders more? You bring it back and it wanders one more ...? And you just get annoyed and frustrated? Anybody ever have that experience? [Congregation laughs]

I mean, I used to get upset at myself. And then when I became a minister, it got worse. It's like, *"Come on, man! You're a minister!"* [Congregation laughs] *"Your mind shouldn't be wandering!"* And I would spend more time in meditation either with my mind wandering or being angry that my mind was wandering! [Congregation laughs]

And there's a point at which you have to develop a level of patient persistence. Your mind is always going to bounce around; that's a part of the deal. It's a part of the process. So today my mind still wanders, but I have a more patient persistence of noticing it; taking a deep breath; and then bringing it back to center. It will happen again and again. But all I do is take a deep breath; notice it; bring it back to center.

Because we need patient persistence. We can't keep getting upset and angry about it; we're never going to progress spiritually. Just accept it's part of the process. It's not failing; that's how the mind works! It's just a part of the process. One of my favorite lines by Buddha is, *"It doesn't matter how many times you forget; it's how many times you remember."* [Congregation murmurs] It doesn't matter how many times your mind wanders; it's how many times you bring it back.

And that's an important thing: You develop patient persistence. Because it's absolutely needed if you want to have a good, long-term meditative practice. And the thing is: You can't rush spiritual connection. You can't rush the development and the unfolding of our soul and our relationship with God.

It's like this one guy who's a meditation guy, and he went to his guru and he said, *"Hey! Suppose I meditated five hours a day every day. How long will it take me to reach enlightenment?"*

And the guru said, *"Well, maybe 10 years."*

And he said, "Well, how about if I did 10 hours a day? How fast would it be then?"

And the guru said, "About 20 years." [Congregation laughs]

What he was trying to show was: Don't rush. Engage in the practice for the purity of the practice and good things will unfold. Things will get better. Things will improve and expand. You'll get deeper levels of understanding of yourself. Deeper levels of compassion and understanding of others. The deeper connections of your divine purpose and your calling. It'll all come in time! You don't need to know it all, but you need to **have patient persistence and just keep doing it**. Just keep doing it and you'll have deeper breakthroughs. Don't try and push it; don't try and rush it.

I saw on Facebook the other day, this guy did one of those 15-minute little clippy things. And he did it on his 11-year-old gymnastics student. He was the coach. And the coach is extolling and praising this kid. And he says stuff like, "I love this kid because he just keeps trying. He doesn't push himself; he doesn't expect to get it perfect. And he ends up doing things so well, and enjoys it so much, because he practices patient persistence. He just keeps getting better because he's not angry, or he just realizes that he's in a process of improving."

And that's how life is! It's a process. You've just to keep going. You've just got to keep at it. Keep bringing it back. Keep bringing it back, and you'll end up having breakthroughs and going deeper.

Prayer is a powerful thing! We all know it; we all agree about that! The question is: How committed are we to it? I say this year, let's take time to develop a prayer plan: to make prayer a priority in our lives. And second, remember: go to that inner chamber. It's within you; that's the only place you can go, and you're the one who needs to go there. Prayer is unifying activity that shifts our consciousness to get in alignment with the flow of God that's always there. And remember: sincerity matters. Your heart matters. How earnestly and sincerely you seek God with all your heart absolutely matters in that profound prayer connection. And finally: patient persistence. You've got to keep going; you've got to keep going; you've got to keep going. Because breakthroughs will happen. Just stay calm; don't get frustrated. There will be good days and bad days. Just keep at it. Patient persistence. Patient persistence!

And you will begin to know the fullness of the truth of who you are; the fullness of life that you came to live; and the fullness of the presence and power of God. That's why we pray.

God bless you all! [Congregation applauds]

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