

I enjoy travelling, as you may be aware I was away for a month in August to visit Portugal both the mainland and the Portuguese Islands of the Azores. This picture is of the Church of Our Lady of Lapa – it's a beautiful little chapel built on a high mountain in Northern Portugal. A few years ago we decided as a family that we are going to visit this site but had no idea where it was. What do you do when you want to get somewhere and have no idea where it is? That's right set the GPS – this was before the time of Google maps. So my mom, dad, aunt and uncle hopped in our rental car, and we put in the destination in our GPS and off we went. Turn Left at... Turn Right at... Make a U-Turn it seemed the GPS had a mind of its own. This was not helping the situation in the car as tempers were flaring up and words were exchanged.

At last, the GPS finally stopped giving direction and said, 'In less than a half of a kilometer you will arrive at your destination.' We were anticipating, preparing to see this beautiful Church but what we saw instead had my aunt, uncle and all of us laughing hysterically. The GPS proclaimed, 'you have arrived', we sure did – we arrived at the water treatment and sewage plant of this Northern Village. I can tell you the smell was far from the smell of old Church wood and incense. It was a trip with no direction, no signs, and no end in sight.

As Catholics we are called to be followers of Jesus Christ, referred to as discipleship. But, if you grew up in church, or have been around it for any amount of time it can begin to feel like that car ride of ours... a trip without any direction, and no end in sight. Discipleship is about following Jesus Christ. It's a journey. And every journey is made up of steps.

And that's what this series is all about: the simple steps of discipleship.

Because it turns out, successful discipleship all comes down to simple steps. They're not easy, but they are entirely simple. This evening/morning we are going to take a closer look at P the practice of prayer. The steps are not necessarily taken in any particular order so neither will our series.

The practice of prayer is an important step of faith if we want to be saints we are meant to have a profound prayer life – this truth probably doesn't shock you.

But here is what may surprise you: we may be praying the wrong way.

That can sound a bit offensive or off-putting; is there really a right and a wrong way to pray? Isn't it just like the Nike slogan – Just do it, Just pray? There is and to help us understand this, we turn to the book of St. James, our second reading.

The book of St. James was written as advice to all Christians to help them grow in faith and spiritual maturity. We're looking at the 4th chapter where he asks this very important question.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from?

This is a pretty good question.

Why are there wars between nations?

Why are the wars in our families at work?

The news is full of conflicts that rage out in the world, but it isn't just out there, maybe there was a war in your workplace or home last week, or your car this evening/morning – especially in Church parking lot.

Why does there have to be all this fighting?

Perhaps conflict comes from a lack of resources or boundaries.

If your children each had their own room, they wouldn't fight.

Perhaps it comes from a lack of proper communication. If they would just listen to one another, the marriage could actually. But really those are just contributing factors to the real problem.

St. James says,

You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts.

There is this disordered part in all of us that wants what we want when we want it. We call it Sin. We can be envious and selfish, downright childish. There is conflict on the outside because there is a war in the inside. And this is where prayer enters the picture. St. James says,

You do not have, because you do not ask.

Asking is about prayer. Sometimes we don't have the answer because we haven't prayed about it. How often does that happen? In our little adventure in Portugal we were getting frustrated at each other and we never once thought maybe we should stop the car and pray.

We want something, we need something and we never even ask or as St. James says, You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

Do you know why God answers some of our prayers with a resounding “no”? St. James says you are praying for the wrong things, foolish or selfish things. We treat God like a vending machine – put pray in and receive reward.

In prayer, of course, we bring our needs to God. And if we ask as he teaches us to ask, we’ll receive a positive response. How do we do that? St. James gives us the answer, he says,

Submit yourselves therefore to God.

The meaning in the original Greek was a military term in which one military force aligned itself with another military force of far greater power and authority. A strategic decision aimed at success and victory. Prayer is like that. When you pray in a way in which you are submitting to God, to see him as a creator and we as the creature, one who has greater authority in our life, which is a strategic decision aimed at success and victory.

Then he comes to the main point of prayer,

Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

The point of prayer is not about getting what we want or manipulating God to give us what we want. The point of prayer is drawing closer to God so we can hear his voice and follow him. Then he adds saying,

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

Go to God with a humble heart. Pray in a manner in which you confess that God is God and you’re not... and he will exalt you. Approach God in prayer with a humble heart – And submit to him.

It’s a lifelong lesson to learn. It is a choice to keep meeting God in prayer.

And when you commit to that choice, you will experience a significant reduction in unhealthy conflict in your life. You will begin to see God’s will and how it affects your life.

So how do we get better at prayer? How do we pray so that we grow our in a relationship with Christ?

Fr. Michael Schmitz from his series Ascension Presents have an interesting video which he gives tips for prayer. Here is what his three questions he asks us in order to deepen our prayer life.

One, When are you going to pray? Many times we put our prayer in our calendar, and we think I put it in my calendar, pray, but I slept through it, my alarm didn’t go off, I forgot about it, other things came up etc. We make excuses and fail to pray in this case

because...it was just another thing, another when on our calendar, just another when on our schedule. If prayer is just another when on our schedule then pray takes on all the importance of cleaning our toilets – it is not that important. It's just another thing. The time we pick for our when in prayer has to become more than just an appointment – our whole day needs to be built on this time of prayer. So, for example, if we are going to get up early for prayer, we need to plan to set a good bedtime so we can get up early and be ready to pray. Or we build off our when we pray, and we set our work schedule according to when I am going to pray. The when we prayer has to be the thing that defines our day and not just another scheduled event.

Two, where are you going to pray? During my time in the seminary, I found the perfect time, my perfect when for my prayer but I saw that during my prayer time I would fall asleep – and Fr. Michael Schmitz gave me the answer. My prayer routing was like this - I would get ready for bed, lie down in my bed, under the sheets and then I would think – Okay time to pray. And it was just common sense – my where, lying down in bed led me to a shallow prayer life as I would fall asleep. Our where we pray makes a big difference.

Another example is sometimes people tell me they want to pray but they find they get distracted in their prayer. I ask them where do you pray? They say something like, oh I pray at the kitchen table as I get my family's breakfast ready and getting the kids ready for school. Our when is important but our where is as well – we have to find a place where we are free from distractions but not so free from distractions that we fall asleep. Sometimes people express I need to pray in a Church; personally, I love praying in front of the Blessed Sacrament. However, we may not be able to get to a Church or chapel meaning we have to find another place. Set a prayer area in your home, could be a separate room, could be a different place, outside in the patio, we will have to discover this for ourselves, but we need to find out our where we pray. Our parish has a number of opportunities where to pray; we have regular adoration, the chaplet of divine mercy, and some great program to help us with this including our Alpha series and our bible reflection on Mary and the Scriptures. Our parish gives us ample times and spaces to help us to find where to pray.

Third, what are you going to do when you pray? What often happens when we are zealous with our prayer we say something like I got to pray my rosary, then the chapel of divine mercy, I got to read some scripture and the lives of the saints, I got to do some quiet meditation, and I only got 15 minutes to pray. If you only have 15 or 20 minutes to pray out of all the devotions and prayer options, our Church has you can only choose one. Fr. Michael invites us also when we choose the one what in our prayer we should give ourselves a season – meaning we should continue that one type of prayer for a period of time like for the next four weeks I'm going to read scripture, or I'm going to pray the rosary. The reason is because after 4 or 5 days we think; you know I'm going to move on and do something else in my prayer. Don't jump from thing to thing - by giving ourselves

a season, like four weeks, we make a commitment, but we have the freedom to evaluate and asks ourselves; was that four weeks of prayer beneficial, was it helpful, did I find it fruitful? If not then we have the freedom to try something else and change something in our prayer life.

However, with all that is said it is our weekly worship here at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, in which we receive the Word of God as he gives himself to us in Scripture and in Holy Communion is the most important thing we can do. Weekly worship is going to be far richer and rewarding; it's going to be the nourishment and encouragement it's meant to be if it matched with that daily prayer time. In turn, the Eucharist can be the source and summit of a life lived with prayer. For the Mass is the perfect prayer we can participate in – for it is the gift of God to man.

We often think of prayer as a good thing to do, but not essential, except in times of emergency.

Prayer is, in fact, the game changer when it comes to the better you 're aiming at... the one increasingly free from anger and pride, and war and conflict, because we're bringing that stuff to him instead of to our other relationship. Prayer is essential if we're to win the war inside us, submit to God and grow as disciples.

One last story I want to share comes from the Alpha Youth Series; we are starting the Alpha Series for adults soon in our parish.

A little boy was spending his Saturday morning playing in his sandbox. He had with him his box of cars and trucks, his plastic pail, and a shiny, red plastic shovel. In the process of creating roads and tunnels in the soft sand, he discovered a large rock in the middle of the sandbox.

The lad dug around the rock, managing to dislodge it from the dirt. With no little bit of struggle, he pushed and nudged the rock across the sandbox by using his feet. (He was a very small boy, and the rock was very huge). When the boy got the rock to the edge of the sandbox, however, he found that he couldn't roll it up and over the wall.

Determined, the little boy shoved, pushed, and pried, but every time he thought he had made some progress, the rock tipped and then fell back into the sandbox.

The little boy grunted, struggled, pushed and shoved. But his only reward was to have the rock roll back, smashing his chubby fingers.

Finally, he burst into tears of frustration. All this time the boy's father watched from his living room window as the drama unfolded. At the moment the tears fell, a large shadow fell across the boy and the sandbox. It was the boy's father. Gently but firmly he said, "Son,

why didn't you use all the strength that you had available? Defeated, the boy sobbed back, "But I did, Daddy, I did! I used all the strength that I had!" "No, son," corrected the father kindly. "You didn't use all the strength you had. You didn't ask me." With that, the father reached down, picked up the rock, and removed it from the sandbox. The story about the boy in the sandbox is less about a rock that needs to be moved and more about a father who wants to be close to his son. Prayer is all about us growing closer to God and seeing him as the good father he is and not being afraid, with a humble and contrite heart, to ask him to provide for all that we need to be disciples. It only requires us to journey, step-by-step.