

**HUNGRY FOR GOD:
STUDIES ON PRAYER**

1

**PRAYER:
INTIMATE COMMUNICATION WITH GOD**

Revelation 3:14—22

By Rhodie Shreve

“To pray is to let Jesus come into our hearts. ...it is not our prayer which moves the Lord Jesus. It is Jesus who moves us to pray. He knocks. Thereby He makes known His desire to come in to us. Our prayers are always a result of Jesus’ knocking at our hearts’ doors.”

O. Hallesby

“Prayer and helplessness are inseparable. Only those who are helpless can truly pray. ...Your helplessness is your best prayer.”

O. Hallesby

AIM OF STUDY

- To discover that the foundation for a life of prayer is a proper understanding of our relationship with Jesus.

KEY VERSE

“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.”

Revelation 3:20

PREPARATION

Read over the notes on “**How to Teach the Bible in Small Group**” and “**Some Practical Suggestions for Leading a Small Group Discussion**” in Vineyard Church of Columbus’ *Small Group Leadership Training Manual*. Before you read over the Scripture, pray that God would give you direction for leading your group and teach you something relevant. Then, read through the passage and the Bible study below. **You will need to go over the questions and choose which ones you want to emphasize and which you could eliminate if your time is limited.** Note that the application questions are marked with an asterisk (*). Rather than leaving these to the end of the study, ask one or two as you work through the passage so people are being confronted by Scripture’s truths and applying them to their own lives. If you find you are falling behind schedule and need to move ahead, you could summarize some of the passage and then go to the final questions.

These studies contain more background material and information on the passages than any group will cover in a meeting. The authors are supplying this for the leaders’ benefit—to help reduce your study and preparation time; to provide resources for possible questions group members may raise; and to clarify some gray areas of doctrine that may be in your mind as you prepare. Obviously, we cannot exhaust any one subject in a document like this, so you may want to do further reading and discuss doctrine with your pastor. We highly recommend *The New Bible Dictionary* or *The New Bible Commentary* as excellent resources for study.

OPENERS

Developing a life of prayer is difficult for those of us living in a culture that is saturated by materialism and every kind of distraction you could imagine. Even though American capitalism and democracy have allowed us to become the richest nation in the world, these values have also fostered an extreme bent towards independence and self-sufficiency. At the same time, there is a growing awareness that material things don’t satisfy the hunger in our souls. People all over our globe are searching for spiritual satisfaction. Jesus offers the most satisfying eternal

relationship and spiritual food imaginable, but our wealth can't buy either one of these things.

As we begin the path of discipleship, we need to recognize that it will be impossible to follow Jesus on our own. Jesus stands at the door desiring to be invited into our lives so that we might experience the intimacy of relating to God. Prayer is the unique, personal, two-way conversation we can enjoy with God. But Jesus does not barge in. He waits for us to see our need and to long for intimate friendship with Him. We can invite Him in to be our Savior, Lord, and Friend only if we are willing to humble ourselves first. We do not come to God under the pretense of our riches; we come to God totally empty and without anything. If we do not recognize our own helplessness and neediness before God, we will miss out on the relationship that Jesus has opened up for us with the Father. Ironically, this is the place of our greatest hope and our greatest battle. Because of our sin nature, we do not want to admit our helplessness and need, so we avoid the intimacy of prayer and continue on the path of self-sufficiency and self-determination. Those who want more discover that the foundation of prayer is spiritual poverty.

Pray that the Lord would create greater hunger for communicating intimately with Him as you study this passage together.

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

[This information is to help the small group leaders. You may decide how much to share with your group.]

This study is on a brief passage in the last book of the Bible, *Revelation*. It was written when the Roman Empire was persecuting Christians who would not worship the emperor as a god. It might have been composed around 54–68 A. D. or about 69–79 A. D., two major times of intense hostility towards Jesus' followers. Revelation describes a series of highly symbolic visions that were recorded by a leader in the church known as "John" (Revelation 1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). He describes himself as on the island of Patmos, a Roman prison colony, because of his association with the Word of God and his testimony about Jesus (v. 9). He might have been the apostle John, brother of James, or he could have been a man known in ancient writings as the *Presbyter*, meaning "elder." His purpose was to preserve the revelation he received and to encourage the early church as they waited for the return of the risen and ascended Jesus, who would defeat all the powers opposed to His divine rule. This particular passage is the last of seven letters from the Lord, which He told John to send to seven major churches in what is today western Turkey (Mounce, pp. 1923, 1926). The Lord greets each church with a different symbolic name, and then addresses the unique circumstances of each faith community.

The city of Laodicea was located on a plateau about 100 feet above the Lycus River. It was about 99.5 miles (160 km) west of the major city of Ephesus, but was further south and west of the other churches addressed in Revelation (NBD, "Laodicea," p. 671). The Romans had developed this area into a major trade center. Laodicea was a crossroads for three major trade routes. As a result, it had become very rich and affluent. It was also a banking center, where people could change their money into the different systems used throughout the region. The city was named after the wife of Antiochus II in the middle of the third century B.C. The name was derived from two Greek words, *laos* meaning "people" and *dike* meaning "to judge" or "to decide." This seems appropriate since the citizens were very interested in self-rule and self-determination. When a major earthquake damaged the city in 60 A.D., they declined "imperial disaster aid." The historian Tacitus noted that they "recovered by their own resources." Originally, Laodicea had been called Diospolis, "the city of Zeus" but it seems that religion had grown lukewarm because of all the wealth (Fowler).

This atmosphere of self-sufficiency, great wealth and self-determination plays a key role in Jesus' charges against the church of Laodicea. The metaphors used in this passage were familiar to people living in this region: being lukewarm, having gold, wearing white clothes and needing eye salve. Laodicea did not have a natural water supply, but six miles up the River valley, there were hot springs in Hierapolis. Unfortunately, by the time the water flowed down to the city, it was tepid and so full of minerals that it was distasteful. There was also a famous medical school associated with the Greek god of healing, Aesculapius. The school had developed a special powder used as an eye medicine. And lastly, the sheep herded in a valley not far from the city were famous for their beautiful soft black wool. Artisans made cloth, clothing and carpets from the wool (Fowler).

STUDY THE PASSAGE: Revelation 3:14–22

Let's read Revelation 3:14–18 and 19–22. Who would like to volunteer?

- 1. In verse 14, who is speaking and how does He describe Himself to the church in Laodicea? How does this establish His credibility and authority before He challenges them?**

Jesus is speaking to the church, even though the letter is addressed "to the *angel* of the church of" Here angel might mean the angelic messenger, the earthly messenger or minister, or the spirit of the church (Mounce, p. 1927). Jesus calls Himself *the Amen*, which designates Him as the validation of God, the last word about everything proven by His resurrection. He spoke our world into being, and His Word will endure beyond all others. He is not like our "amens" that try to validate our own conclusions and human destiny (Commentary in Simple English on Revelation).

Jesus also describes Himself as *the faithful and true witness*. He is the One who completely mirrors the true God and gives the truest testimony to the reality of His nature and His kingdom. Jesus calls Himself *the ruler of God's creation*. He is the One who is the source of all things and the one to whom all things belong because “through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made” (John 1:3).

- 2. In verses 15–16, what complaint does Jesus have about the church at Laodicea? Is the church at Laodicea lazy? Isn't it doing anything? What is wrong with their “deeds”?**

Jesus says that He knows their “deeds.” He doesn't rebuke them for too much activity or lack of action. He rebukes them for the half-hearted manner in which they are living as His followers. He states that He wishes they were either “hot” or zealous for His sake or “cold” completely against Him. Instead, they are in the middle, and probably self-deceived into spiritual complacency. He indicates His disgust by saying He is about to spit them out, which is literally “vomit” them out of His mouth. Note that lukewarm water is used as a liquid used to induce vomiting.

- *How would you describe the spiritual conditions of being hot, cold, and lukewarm? Why do you think Jesus is so intolerant of lukewarm disciples?**

You do not need to repeat this question if you have already discussed it in the previous one.

- *Are you hot, cold or lukewarm right now in your walk with the Lord? Is it possible to be involved in a lot of activities and yet be lukewarm in your personal relationship with God?**

- 4. Deeply held attitudes often drive the behaviors we exhibit. Even though the church members were active, what attitudes were underlying their behavior and hindering their personal relationship with God (v. 17)?**

Jesus exposes the church's spiritual complacency when He quotes them as saying “I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.”

- *We live in a wealthy and affluent culture. Do you ever feel you are too satisfied with your material possessions, your job, your status or other diversions? Does this ever dull your hunger for God? How does this affect your prayer life?**

5. What did Jesus say was their true spiritual condition (v. 17)?

Note that “poor, blind and naked” are direct references to the prosperity of the trade and banking industries, the famous local eye salve, and the cloth items made from the famous black wool in the area.

6. To most of us, Jesus’ diagnosis would be very negative. How could recognizing our poverty be a blessing?

“Jesus said, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.’” The Bible teaches that all of us are in this state. It is the place of *spiritual poverty*, a place of neediness before God. The Greek word for “poor in spirit” indicates a cringing beggar, absolutely dependent on others for survival. This is not a flattering picture of us! Yet the Kingdom of heaven belongs to those who experience their dependency. When we are comfortably independent, it is easy to avoid our need for God” (Cloud, p. 265). This is the true starting place for a life of prayer.

7. What does Jesus advise them to do in response to His rebuke (vv. 18–19)?

Jesus tells them they need several things that only come from Him. What is the gold? Is it **faith** in Him, something more precious than gold, which is highly refined in the fire, or tested by trials (1 Peter 1:7)? Is it the wealth of knowing God deeply or all the spiritual riches God promises and gives to those who exercise faith in Him (Beasley-Murray, p. 106)? They also need white clothes, signifying Jesus’ **righteousness**, which none of us can produce on our own (Romans 3:20; Revelation 19:8). Beasley-Murray points out that we need Jesus’ holiness when we stand naked, without pretense before God at the Last Judgment (p. 106). And, Jesus tells them that they are spiritually blind and need His healing to **see** their true condition. Having their spiritual sight restored would also help them see Him more clearly, something which may fuel their desire for greater intimacy. Also, they might be better able to distinguish between distractions of this world and the priorities of the kingdom of God. In John 9:39–41, Jesus points out how important it is to admit our inability to see rather than self-righteously declaring we aren’t blind.

In addition, Jesus tells them to be “earnest” (NIV) or “zealous” (RSV and NASB). And He tells them to “repent,” which means they need to turn and go in a different direction. Perhaps repentance would be like opening the door and not only inviting Jesus in but also lingering with Him at the table where relationship and open sharing could take place.

People often think that to repent means to feel bad or guilty about something they have done wrong, whether to themselves or to someone else, and then to apologize for it. This is true, but this is not the complete Biblical understanding of repentance. Repentance was the core message of Jesus and John the Baptist. For them, it meant the redirection of one’s life.

Repentance in the New Testament means a change of heart that results in a change of behavior. This is true *mentanioa*, the Greek word for repentance. The ending, *noia*, always connotes a persistent mindset and comes from the Greek noun, *nous*, which means mind. **Repentance, therefore, refers to the way we think, to set aside one mindset, to take up another, a new way of looking at things. When repentance occurs, behavior changes. A person's thinking about God changes and that produces a change in personal values, which produces a change in the way he/she looks at others and the world, which produces a change in behavior.** This is not rooted in our emotions, though they can be affected. Repentance focuses not on ritual or religious acts, correct answers or inherited ancestry to make things right. It focuses on how one lives. The foundational desire of repentance is not based on a desire to escape consequences. It is, instead, regret for the mistreatment of God, who blesses us. It is based on selfless awareness, not on a selfish focus. When Jesus gave the church of Laodicea the choice to repent, He was saying to them, "Will you change your mind, your thinking about this; will you examine your attitudes and get God's perspective on this; will you change the way you are living so you can please God?" (Chadwell)

8. Is this rebuke meant to drive us away from Him or to draw us nearer (v. 19)?

Jesus says, "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline." This is similar to the portions of Scripture that teach that the Lord disciplines those He loves, just as a good parent trains and corrects his children (Deuteronomy 8:5; Hebrews 12:5–11, quoting Proverbs 3:11, 12).

***What is the appropriate response to the Lord's discipline? Do we try to defend our actions by denying that He has rightly assessed our deeds or needs?**

***What in your life is Jesus asking you to trade in and buy from Him? What is He asking you to repent of right now?**

To begin a life of prayer means to begin a life dependent on God for everything. But this cannot happen if we are not aware of our true spiritual poverty and need for God. In a culture that has everything, we can think we are "hot for God" when, in fact, we have become full of ourselves and lukewarm. Acknowledging that we cannot do life on our own apart from a personal and intimate relationship with God is the beginning of a real prayer life. But God never pushes Himself on us. In these next verses, we are given a picture that captures the amazing approach God takes towards our hearts.

- 9. Why is Jesus standing at the door (v. 20)? What do you think the door represents? Is this the door of someone who believes in God or who does not believe in God? How do you know which it is?**

While many Christians use Revelation 3:20 in sharing the gospel with people who have not yet given their lives to Christ, the context of this verse is an urgent message to the church. You may want to discuss why Jesus pictures Himself outside the church or outside the hearts of each church member. Jesus says, “If *anyone* hears my voice...” and “I will eat with *him* and *he* with me” [emphasis added]. This seems to indicate that Jesus’ invitation is to each individual and requires an individual response (Beasley-Murray, p. 107).

- 10. What is special about dining with someone? Why do you think Jesus used this picture?**

- 11. What does it take for us to open the door to Jesus?**

APPLICATION

***Do you take time to hear God’s voice in your life? Do you want Jesus to “dine” with you and be with you in an intimate way?**

Prayer is like this meal. Both are meant to be an intimate experience. In prayer, we can discover greater depths of love and fellowship with the Trinity: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. We were not meant to be alone but sin separated us from God. Jesus has made it possible to reconcile with God. He wants to be invited by us into the place where He can share with us His food...a place at the table of relationship and fellowship with God. Faith in Christ becomes the way of entering into this intimate relationship, and prayer is simply communication with the One who loves us so deeply. Press into these questions with your group to help them evaluate honestly their condition before God and what they will do about it.

***Have you kept Jesus outside the door of your heart or let Him in? Are you experiencing the intimacy of dining with Jesus? Is prayer a part of your communion and day-to-day fellowship with God?**

***If the door of your heart has been closed, if you are living a lukewarm life, or if you have become so satisfied that you no longer hunger for God, what steps might you take alone or with someone else to bring about true repentance and a change of direction?**

***If you are experiencing deep communion and fellowship with God, if you have realized your spiritual poverty and are living out of that place, how can you help or encourage someone else who is struggling to connect in a deeper way with Jesus or grow in his or her prayer life?**

*** How could our group help one another experience deep communion with God on a more regular basis?**

WRAPPING IT UP

Jesus' invitation to intimate relationship is an awesome privilege. However, we may miss out if we ignore or reject His offer. In the weeks ahead, as we study and discuss prayer in our group, take time to press into private prayer as well. Set aside time, even ten minutes a day, to sit down and open yourself up to the Lord. Invite Him in to speak with and nourish you. Ask for more meat from His Word, more refreshment from His Spirit, more passion in your soul. Welcome and thank Him throughout the day, as well, and cultivate the kind of communication that best friends wanting to be together experience.

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