

WHY PRAY?
Personal Prayer Life
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This morning I begin a new series that will be for three Sunday mornings on the subject of prayer. There is probably no discipline in the Christian life more difficult than the discipline of prayer. Probably there is nothing that the enemy fights more to erode in us than praying. For many if not for most Christians the very mention of the subject of prayer brings with it an almost instant feeling of guilt – like we haven't be doing it or doing it enough.

I have felt impressed as we enter 1986 that the Lord wants to free us from past failures and especially past failures in prayer. Therefore we look at this series on prayer. Today the subject "Why Pray?"

Nest Sunday morning, How to pray every day. Then the third Sunday "Unanswered prayer."

Why pray?

I want to advance to you today, seven reasons why we ought to pray. The reason I'm doing this I because I'm convinced that since we're a logical and thinking people we really don't pray unless we're motivated with solid reasons as to why we should be praying. The scriptures provide for us an understanding of why it is that God calls us to pray.

The first reason I would give if you were to ask me, Why should I pray? is you should pray because Jesus prayed and because he taught us to pray.

That doesn't get into the whole mystery of prayer and the relationship of God's sovereignty and our asking and does prayer really make a difference and all these kind of things but it just starts out very simply. Jesus prayed and he taught us to pray.

We've been traveling through the gospel of Luke on Sunday morning for some months. We've seen how time and time again Jesus prayed. At his baptism he was praying. He was in a certain place by himself praying. Before he called the twelve he spent the whole night praying. When he was at the Mount of Transfiguration his change came as he was praying. He was praying in a specific place and the disciples came to him and said, "Lord, teach us to pray." And he said in Luke 18 that "We ought always to pray and not to give up." In Gethsemane he prayed. On the cross he spent those hours we know from the words that he's speaking from the cross that he's praying. Jesus was/is a man of prayer. In his earthly existence he did not forsake prayer even though he was the eternal Son of God. He therefore sets a model for us in praying.

Sometimes a person who has newly become a Christian will come to me and ask, Should I be baptized in water? Yes. Why? There are many reasons to be baptized but the first one is because Jesus says, "Repent and be baptized." If you just enlisted in the military you wouldn't think of beginning your service disobeying the first order that was given to you by your sergeant. You wouldn't last very long either if you started out by disobeying. We have an order from the commander in chief: be baptized. And we have an order from Jesus as well: pray.

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Why pray? Because Jesus sets the example and teaches us to pray. It's called Product Endorsement! Madison Avenue thinks if we get big name people to endorse the product people will trust the product and buy it.

Jesus is giving a product endorsement to prayer. He's saying, I do it. You do it too.

A second reason why we ought to pray is that God has chosen to do his work through our praying and not without it.

There was a time in my life when I felt prayerlessness was a mark of higher spirituality. The reason why I felt this was simply, "Other people have needs and they're praying. But Lord I trust you no matter what you do. I know you're going to do whatever. So Lord just do whatever you want and I yield my life to yours. Let the people take up your time who really need it." To me that was a real sign that I had faith. I trust God and he's going to work it out. My praying doesn't make a difference anyway, so why pray?

Then I come to the scripture and principles and examples in the scripture that teach me that it really does make a difference. My praying really makes a difference. And God has chosen to do his work through my praying, not without my praying.

Examples in scripture.

One in Mark 8 where Jesus comes down from the Mount of Transfiguration and at the bottom of that mountain some of the disciples are trying to cast a demon out of a boy and they're unable to. Jesus casts the demon out and then alone with his disciples they ask him, "Why couldn't we do that?" And Jesus says, "This kind does not come out except through prayer." Some translations add "and fasting." Jesus is saying that there are some things that never happen in the spiritual world unless they are backgrounded and surrounded and bathed in the context of prayer.

A second example in Acts 10. At noontime Peter had gone onto a rooftop to pray while a meal was being prepared. God wanted to make a connection that would take him to a Roman centurion's home and bring the gospel for the first time out of the narrow cultural confines of Jerusalem Christianity into that broader world of Greek and Roman and barbarian. God was going to do it through first working in Cornelius. But it was because Peter was at the place of prayer that he was in a mode to listen to God and to hear God.

Someone has said, God cannot do some things unless we work. For example he stores the hills with marble but God has never built a cathedral. He fills the mountains with iron ore but God has never himself made a needle or jet airplane. He leaves that to us. If then, God has left so many things dependant upon our thinking and our working why should he not leave some things depended upon our praying as well. That's why Jesus says, Ask. There are some things that God does not give us unless we ask. We cannot suppose that God will do for us without prayer what he has promised to do only through prayer.

So praying is a vital gateway of seeing God at work in greater dimensions in our life. Sometimes that praying in Hebrews 11 language will shut the mouths of lions and it will totally change circumstances and work miracles. At other times that praying will give us a special strength to

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go through circumstances that are not changing. But in either case we need God's help to either strengthen us or change the circumstances.

Hebrews 5:7 "During the days of Jesus' life on earth he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death." Jesus prayed not simply mental thoughts but words and beyond that the passion of life. It seems that one of the dimensions of life we need to have as Christians is to recognize that God has made us emotional. Jesus epitomizes that in his prayer life. There are times when we pray calmly. But because we are emotional it's all right and it's proper for us when we are going through times of intensity to be like Jesus and to cry out in prayer. Our praying should not simply be thought kind of prayers. It needs to involve our words and at times our body as well.

Jesus knew it was necessary for him to pray that God's purposes through him could not be accomplished, the cross could not be accomplished unless he prayed. John 17, we find that Jesus is praying for me. One who is far off. That I will be included in his kingdom. I look at that and say, Even you and I are an answer to the prayer of Jesus. We wouldn't be here if Jesus hadn't prayed. I don't know anybody who ever gets saved without someone praying for them. We need to pray because God's work doesn't get done without it. He's limited himself to work through our prayers.

The third reason we ought to pray is because we are created for God and only in fellowship with God can we find fullness of life.

Prayer is the language of communication with the Lord that brings fellowship. When God created Adam, Adam found loneliness in the animals. There was no companion. There was no communication. Because Adam was created in God's image he needed fellowship. God wants fellowship and he created us to fellowship with him and with each other.

Communication is difficult within relationship. Everybody knows that. What's the toughest thing about family life and married life? It's keeping the lines of communication open. It's making sure your family doesn't degenerate into thirty seconds at the dinner table, one moment a day. I think probably the hardest single task in marriage is communication. I talk to couples a lot and I know from my own experience, good marriages have good communication. Marriages that are rocky are having difficulty in communicating to one another.

We get in trouble when we quit talking to God. We get hardness in our life. It's then easy to let bitterness pile up. It's easy to let sin pile up. It's easy to let lack of discipline pile up. We begin to get estranged from God in our life.

The psalmist cried out, "Bless the Lord O my soul and all that is within me. Bless his holy name." Let the communication keep coming.

It's been said that prayer needs to have the focus that the emphasis is on life changing qualities rather than simply problem solving one of the things we often do as Christians is we try to solve this problem or that problem. Prayer is that life transformation aspect of our life that helps us deal with all of our other problems. If we're just trying to solve our problems sort of piece meal and not doing it out of the context of prayer we get in such dilemma because the problems become greater than us. When our heart is distanced from the Lord our problems in coping with

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life increase. We therefore need to keep coming to the Lord in prayer. Relationship with God. Fullness of life. Focus more on life changing than problem solving.

If you are engaged in being counseled I suggest that you not use that as a substitute for your own personal praying. You'll find that any counseling that you receive will be far more vitalized in your life if you will precede it by serious praying on your part. That's part of the healing. That's life transforming.

A fourth reason that we ought to pray is that prayer is a means of cleansing the soul. 1 John 1:9 says "If we confess our sins he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." David after his sin with Bathsheba acknowledges how when he did not come to the Lord in prayer he felt awful. "While I kept silent my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For say and night your hand was heavy upon me. My strength was sapped as in the heat of summer." It wasn't until he acknowledges his sin, Psalm 32, and began this recitation of prayer that the cleansing came with it.

Why are we as Christians having so much difficulty with worldliness? I'm not talking about makeup and cosmetics. I'm talking about a non-Christian lifestyle. I'm talking about throw away relationships I'm talking about immorality. I'm talking about a pursuit of materialism that excludes spirituality. Why are we having so much problems with worldliness? We have the best teaching resources that the body of Christ has ever had. There has never been an era in the church when there are better commentaries, better magazines, better teaching, better churches than there are right now. There has never been a time when the music of the church has been richer for the body of Christ. Now you have music not only for all of us older folk who like the great hymns but we have the new music for the young people as well. We have it all. We're rich in the word. We're rich in music. Yet our churches and our Christians are having such a struggle with the world.

If I were to really put my finger on it I would say the reason why we're having this struggle is an absence of prayer. You have all the rich teaching of the world and all the wonderful music in the world but unless that is rooted in an axis out of which is flowing prayer it's not going to really take hold and change and do something in our life. We need prayer to keep our hearts pure. As the song, "Create in me a clean heart. Renew a right spirit within me."

Then a fifth reason we need to pray is that prayer brings strength and power in the fight of life. Life is a fight. There are battles in life. And there are reverses in life. There are struggles in life. It's not just a piece of cake. It requires strength to live.

A few days ago, we had a baptismal service at the river Jordan. We decided this year to have our baptismal service at day break. We got up in the dark, left our hotel at Tiberius and bussed down about fifteen minutes away to where the Jordan river is flowing out of the Lake of Galilee. A nice wide spot there. There were 160 on our tour and I figured 30-40 would get up for the baptism but about three-fourths of the tour showed up for the baptism. As I looked there were white robes on about 15 people. I gave a little teaching as we started out.

I said this water is very cold. I know from first hand experience that the Jordan is very, very cold. You just sort of suck in your breath when you step into it. I said in the second century there was a book called the *Dedica*. The early Christians used it at the beginning of the second

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century. It gave instructions that water baptism had to be conducted in a running stream that had cold water. Baptism was not valid if it were in a standing pool with warm water. It had to be in a running stream with cold water. The reason it had to be running was to symbolize the sin was being purified and carried away. And the reason why it was cold, the *Dedica* explained was the Christian life is a life of rigor. It's no warm Jacuzzi (twentieth century language). It's not a life of ease. But it is a life that requires discipline. It is a life that involves struggle. It is a life with rigor. A new convert ought to be initiated in the Christian life to know right off he's in for a shock. He's in for a fight. He's going to have to battle the elements and it's going to be a shock to his system and to his flesh.

That's the way the Christian life is. Don't become a Christian because you think suddenly you'll have no more struggle. You're just going to have victory in struggle is the difference. You're going to have God with you in the struggle. We need prayer when we're going through life's fights. Ephesians 6 talking to us about the armor of the Lord tells us to not only have the belt of truth on and the breastplate of righteousness and feet shod with the gospel of peace and the shield of faith and the helmet of salvation. All that is just armor and it won't do anything unless it's animated. There has to be something living inside all that armor. What is the living vital principle? It's prayer. Pray, Paul says after he talks about the armor. Pray at all times.

We need strength in life's valleys. Our weapons are not of this world. They're divine with power to demolish strongholds. We need prayer to bring us strength in the fight of life.

There are times when we do not know even how to pray, Paul says. But the Spirit takes over in those moments in overdrive and helps us to pray.

We need to pray because prayer is essential for the spread of the gospel. There will be no growth of the church of Jesus Christ, no ingathering of the unsaved, without prayer. Jesus tells us that right off the bat. Matthew 9:35 when he says in Galilee "Pray the Lord of the harvest to send workers into the harvest." There has never, never been a move of God in the whole history of the church unless it has been first saturated in prayer. If the revival has lasted it is because prayer kept going. If it lost out it is because prayer lost out.

We were in the Upper Room a few days ago. It's the traditional site. The authentic site has been lost. But as we stood in that place I'm thinking, God has a crazy idea about how to make a church effective. If I were Jesus and I were leaving earth ascending into heaven, I would have left a copy of my new book on how to grow a church. I would have some of the gold mined out of the hills to leave a billion dollar endowment fund to power the church for the next number of centuries. Think what that billion dollars would have been worth now invested at a reasonable interest rate for twenty centuries without spending the principle! I'd have done some practical things. All Jesus does with the church to get it started is he starts it with a prayer meeting. A 120 people and everything is to come out of this prayer meeting. We can never improve on God's methods. Absolutely no way to improve.

Some people I've talked with have said, I like a small church. Yes, I think we all like small comfy relationships. But the fact is if something's living it's going to grow. I don't know of any kid we'd say, "You're small and I'm going to freeze you at that age. I'm going to look metal things on you so you can only grow *so* high." You cannot stifle growth in something living. If the church is alive and it's alive in prayer there's no way for it to avoid growing. God wants to

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do something in us as a church family this year. I'd encourage you to embrace as your own personal praying for the harvest in this area and for this community and for your neighbors and friends and mine. There will never be growth, there will never be evangelism unless we give ourselves to pray.

I think we ought to not only pray for this church but every gospel preaching church in this whole area that God will give us an incredible visitation of the Spirit in 1986.

Prayer helps our faith to be a way of life and not a ritual. We have a Jewish tour guide in Israel who is as articulate as anybody I've ever listened to in my whole life. She not only knows fact and where things are but she has an understanding of events and theology. She's not a Christian but she can't be far from the kingdom. She was commenting all through the trip on the difference between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day. She was saying the real fundamental point between them is that they looked upon religion as a ritual, a duty you do. You go to the altar, you go to the temple, you do your deed. You do it and then you walk away and you have the freedom to become a person different from where you are than when you were in the ritual center where the good deeds were being done to God. So you have this split in life. During the week it doesn't matter what I am as long as I come back and do the ritual. But she said, Jesus taught us that we must have a way of life and that what we are influences every moment of all 144 hours of the week.

That's exactly what is involved in being a Christian. Prayer helps us to avoid just being ritualistic persons, putting in our duty by showing up at church. Which is what we ought to do. We ought not to neglect a gathering together. But we ought to assemble together. But beyond assembling, we need to be every minute believers and prayer helps keep our faith vital and it becomes a way of life for us.

I love the true meaning of the word "religion." A lot of people don't like the word "religion." I understand why. Religion can be suffocating. But the Latin means to tie or to bind, to retie, rebind, or tie back. The true purpose of the word religion from Jesus' point of view is to bind us back to God. Prayer is a means of that bonding.

It's interesting how words come around. The big word today in child care is "bonding." Being bonded to your child. Prayer is God's way from the start of our Christian life of bonding us to him. That we know who our Father is.

I've advanced 7 reasons for prayer. One, Jesus prayed and taught us to pray. Two, God has chosen to do his work through our prayer and not without our prayer. Third, we were created for God and only in fellowship with God can we have fullness of life. Fourth, prayer is a means of cleansing the soul. Fifth, prayer brings strength and power in the fights of life. Sixth, prayer is essential for the spread of the gospel. And seventh, prayer helps our faith to be a way of life and not simply a ritual.

Let me turn from the question, Why pray to another question, Will you pray? Once we know why we should pray and it makes sense to pray, then the question becomes, Will you pray? I would suggest to you if you do not have a regular time of prayer during the day that you select the five best minutes you have in the day, the five minutes when you're most wide awake, whatever time of day that is, and give that as an offering to God to pray. Why am I suggesting 5

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minutes? Because it's like any discipline you don't start out when you're out of shape by taking on more than you can chew. I wouldn't recommend you go jogging for an hour if you haven't been walking or running. Same way with prayer. Don't try to do everything at once. Start out with something reasonable as a goal. But establish it and do it. You never learn to pray simply by listening to sermons or reading books. Although that can be a stimulation. Just like you never learn to swim by reading books about swimming. The only way to learn how to swim is to get in the water and start doing it. Then what you've heard begins to make sense.

Same way with prayer. Prayer is best learned as it is done. We'll talk more next week about how to pray every day. But would you make a commitment in your life if you're not praying to begin somewhere? Begin by taking 5 minutes a day and praying.

Lord, we come to you as did the disciples and we say to you, Teach us to pray. There's something vital in praying like you prayed, Lord. The prayer of the professionals doesn't do anything for us. That's why your disciples didn't want the formalized prayers that hadn't worked their way into the heart. But they knew you and observed you...

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