

Christ Community Covenant Church
"Why Prayer?"
Pastor Gloria Merritt - February 10, 2013

Before I get started today I want to read a funny story to you. In Mt. Vernon, TX, Dremond's bar began construction on expansion of their building in order to increase their business. So, the local Baptist church began an effort to keep them from expanding with their prayers and petitions. Work progressed right up until a week before their Grand "Re"-Opening when lightning struck the bar and it burned to the ground. After the bar burnt to the ground as a result of the lightning, the church folks were rather smug about the outcome, and were bragging about the power of prayer...that is, until the owner of the bar sued the church on the grounds that the church was ultimately responsible for the demise of his building, either through direct or indirect means. In its reply to the Court, the church denied all responsibility or any connection to the building's demise. The judge read through the plaintiff's complaint, and the defendant's reply, and at the opening hearing he commented, "I don't know how I'm going to decide this case. From the paperwork, it appears that we have a bar owner who believes in the power of prayer and an entire church congregation that now does not." FUNNY! ☺

Why Prayer? It almost seems scandalous to ask the question. It almost seems like there should be no reason to ask it. But, because God is the initiator of a loving relationship with us, our high and holy calling is to respond to His offer. The quality of our vertical relationship with God has a direct bearing on the quality of our horizontal relationships with others. Remember when months back we learned to boil everything down into LOVE God and LOVE others? It all begins with prayer!

While I appreciate the chance to talk about Prayer, you need to know that I am a fellow traveler with you -- still a student struggling to maintain the discipline of it.

Prayer is a topic that I love to explore, and some of what I share with you today comes from other resources and experts on prayer. In fact, some of what I share today comes from our own experts on prayer right here at 4Cs. One of those experts, who isn't here today, shared with me once that it is her practice to always pray before the message is given -- she not only prays for the one giving the message, but she asks God to open her heart to what He wants her to hear and receive. And, she says, she never ever leaves church without receiving something special from God. She has an expectant heart. Let's take a minute to pray for an expectant heart...

VIDEO: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FzHkuzjkosk>

I really enjoyed that video, and felt it was a good way to get our conversation going. It actually offers some of the "why's" of prayer:

- Prayer **is Transforming** – God is unchanging, but He changes US through prayer;
- **Life-changing** – often times we find that God does change our circumstances in ways that we never thought possible;
- In Prayer, we **receive more of God**, not just his answers;
- In Prayer we learn to **rely on God**, because, often, we have **nowhere else to go**;
- Prayer takes us from **desperation** to **discipline** to **passion** for Him;
- Prayer is the amazing opportunity that God has given to us to **bring the blessing and power of heaven**.

Why then, as E.M. Bounds was quoted to say, do we claim to agree that we must pray and yet give it such little time? Is it because we don't really believe that God is listening to us or that, He is distant and uncaring? Is it because we feel so much disappointment in unanswered prayers? Is it because we feel powerless with our prayers? Is it because we are all too self-sufficient? Is it because we have become too educated, too technological, or too politically savvy for prayer? Is it because, like a stale marriage with no passion, we have become indifferent to God -- we have journeyed so long as Christians that we are dry and lifeless inside, with nothing

more to say? And worse, we have turned away his whispers of love that might suggest some intimate time with Him? There are many times when I am watching tv or hanging out on the internet that I have heard God whispering, "Come away with me," and I push him away in pursuit of something worthless. How thankful I am that He doesn't relent!

I have come to discover that to NOT pray is actually sin. It is what has been called the Sin of Prayerlessness. It is an affront to all that God has done for me. Prayerlessness is equated with spiritual weakness or spiritual impotence. Why, because, **God is who we seek** in prayer. We believe in the power of prayer because we believe in GOD. Don't forget that there are many who pray, and for many, prayer is just an activity.

Interestingly, there are statistics that indicate that prayer is a popular activity in our culture. Barna research says that about 84% of adults in the U.S. claim they had prayed in the past week. In 2004 the internet site BeliefNet and U.S. News funded a poll to learn more about why, how, where and when people pray. Here is a summary of the findings:

- 75% were Christian.
- 64% say they pray more than once a day.
- 56% say they most often pray for family members, with 3.3% saying that they pray for strangers.
- A little over 38% say that the most important purpose of prayer is intimacy with God.
- 41% say that their prayers are answered often.
- 1.5% say that their prayers are never answered.
- Over 73% say when their prayers are not answered, the most important reason is because they did not fit God's plan.
- 5% say that they pray most often in a house of worship.
- 79% say that they pray most often at home.
- 67% say that in the past six months, their prayers have related to continually giving thanks to God.

Well, on the one hand, these are encouraging statistics, which seem to indicate that we are a devout group of people, very much in touch with our God and His ways, that we are about to part the *Red Sea* or move *Long's Peak* down to Colorado Springs. But ARE we? Are we mighty people of prayer like the heroes we read of in Scripture? There's Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Queen Esther, King David, Samuel, Daniel, Elijah, Peter and James, the apostle Paul AND, of course, our Lord and Savior Jesus. We know from Scripture that these people had effectual prayer lives and that God used them mightily to work His will on earth as it was in Heaven. Turn with me to James 5:16-18. I'm reading from the ESV:

16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. 17 Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. 18 Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

Is that not incredible? In this scripture, it is saying that our prayers can have the kind of powerful effect that Elijah's prayers had. I have to ask, where is this great power at work because of prayer? And, where is its effect in our lives, our communities, our churches, and our nation?

First of all, our prayers need to be accompanied by our obedience and by our repentance. Let's look at Psalm 66:17-19 from the New Living Translation (NLT):

***17 For I cried out to him for help,
praising him as I spoke.***

***18 If I had not confessed the sin in my heart,
the Lord would not have listened.***

***19 But God did listen!
He paid attention to my prayer.***

This particular passage speaks again of confession. It reminds me of what Mike shared with us last week about the vision God had given to him regarding sin – regarding his sin and our sin. We need to seek God and ask Him what He is saying to us about our sin. Another one of our prayer experts here at 4Cs shared this with me on Friday, saying, “the sins of 4Cs are those that we each bring through the door when we are here and how the enemy, Satan, uses our individual sin to harm this body of believers.” We need to be honest about that sin. Psalm 51:6 tells us that the LORD desires truth in our inward being. There’s nothing that we can hide from God, and when we allow him to lovingly point out our sin, we can be rid of it and he will ultimately attend to our prayers. This passage just showed us that if we harbor that sin, our prayers cannot be effective. Confession and repentance are a pretty big deal to God.

We know that Jesus spent lots of time in prayer, and we know that his prayers were 100% effectual. He was so aligned with God’s will and God’s heart that he absolutely acted according to God’s plan. He also demonstrated obedience. Let’s look at Hebrews 5:7: “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.”

If we continue in habitual sin – even as our nation is now doing – we cannot hope to have effectual prayers. Our intimacy and communion with God demands our obedience! And, it’s the kind of obedience that ONLY GOD can work in us. The more we are with him in prayer, the more HE will change our hearts, our attitudes and our actions. That’s where we can rest in His work. Our only work is to come, come in prayer.

I truly believe that the grave effects of sin that we see all around us are due to a lack of obedience. How can our prayers be powerful and effective when we are rife with greed, selfishness, sexual sin, hatred of God’s holiness and more?

Listen to what theologian A.W. Tozer says, "Have you noticed how much praying for revival has been going on of late - and how little revival has resulted? I believe the problem is that we have been trying to substitute praying for obeying, and it simply will not work. To pray for revival while ignoring the plain precept laid down in Scripture is to waste a lot of words and get nothing for our trouble. Prayer will become effective when we stop using it as a substitute for obedience." A.W. Tozer

Okay, there’s no doubt. We should PRAY. We know some of the reasons why. We’ve listed them. We know we should pray individually and corporately and we know that we’re supposed to do it a LOT! The reality of it is...we get stuck. We fall out of the habit. Our flesh doesn’t want to. God is spirit and we can’t see him and it’s easier to do the stuff of life. True? Yes. True for me, anyway.

I’ve asked Don Read to help illustrate the struggle that can so often take place for us in the life of prayer:

(SKIT)

Can any of you relate to that experience? It can be really hard to adopt the habit of prayer. In fact, we can be sure that the enemy of our souls -- that devil -- is hard at work to keep us from establishing the habit. But, the fact is, we CAN do it. **James 4:8 says, "Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you."** We so desperately need God’s help to do it. And, He delights to help us.

One of the reasons that we have an insignificant prayer life is not because of a lack of want to, but because of a lack of plan to. We haven’t established a time, or a place, or a procedure. We know that if we fail to plan, we plan to fail. And, quite easily we fall into a rut. A few weeks back Curt Vogt challenged us to take action. Our action should involve a new resolve, a new venture with God where we set a time, set a place, and set a procedure.

I have a few suggestions of ways that have helped me in this journey of prayer. As I have considered the life of prayer that was evident in the heroes of the faith from Scripture, it is apparent that they coupled their prayers with Scripture. Jesus grew up in the Jewish heritage and was well-acquainted with the prayers, psalms, hymns, and benedictions of his Jewish faith. The devout Jews took seriously God's command to tie his laws on their foreheads, his commands to meditate on God's word day and night. So, my first suggestion is to:

1) Use scripture as a basis for prayer.

By listening to the Holy Spirit in the words of Scripture and speaking to the Lord in our thoughts and prayers, we move in the direction of knowing Him better. The better we know Him, the more we will love Him, and the more we love Him, the more willing we will be to trust Him and obey Him. When we pray scripture, we can be confident that we ARE praying the things that God wants.

In John 15:7, another familiar scripture, we can see the principle of God's word being so important in effective prayers:

If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

Let scripture be the MEAT of your prayers.

2) Adopt a short sentence prayer of scripture to use throughout the day or week. (Psalm 51:10)

Praying God's word helps to give us holy language to use. Sometimes I use a phrase or verse from a song as a prayer. Sometimes, I simply say, "Lord, I want to love you with all my heart, my soul, my mind and my strength. Please help me." In that way, prayer truly becomes transforming, because I know without a doubt that God wants me to love Him and others. I know that when I'm praying God's word, I'm praying what he wants!

We also know that scripture says to "Pray without ceasing." (1 Thess. 5:17) How do we do that? By meditating on Him and the things that are true about him. It's not by keeping a long list of petitions before him. There are so many types of prayer, so many ways to listen and to commune with God.

3) PLAN to pray – set a time, an appointment, work to make it a habit.

For goodness' sake, think of all the wonderful habits you have adopted in your life! You brush your teeth, you take baths or showers, you exercise, and you put on sunscreen, or take your vitamins. So, let's PRAY.

Another one of our prayer experts here at 4Cs, said that his life was totally turned around when he set his alarm early every morning to have that hour each day in prayer with the Lord. I have to admit, that I'm still working on that myself!

4) Be intentional about praying at times when you wouldn't have thought to before.

Pastor Dave and I were talking about this habit this week. He said that during his sleepless nights, he'll sit on his couch and pray for the people in every car that passes by in the night. Also, how about in the line at the grocery store? Did you ever think that the person in front of you or behind you might need some prayer? What a better activity to do instead of scanning the covers of *National Enquirer* or *People* magazine! Pray when you hear sirens. Pray for the folks you see at bus stops, or the homeless folks at intersections. And, don't forget to say thanks to God again and again. Thank him that your plumbing works – and I mean that in more ways than one!

5) Pray with others.

I find that Corporate Prayer is a pretty big deal to God. He certainly communes with each of us individually, but there is no doubt that he works with us corporately. The book of Acts tells of many instances when the followers of Jesus were gathered together for prayer, especially when they were waiting on his leading for the next big thing. Here at 4Cs, we are waiting on God and looking to him for the sale of our land, and for our future, but are we taking the opportunity to gather together in prayer, to seek him for this body? Many experts on prayer have said that you can gauge the spiritual health, the spiritual temperature, the spiritual vitality of a church by its attendance at prayer meetings. I'm sure that many of us are earnestly praying for 4Cs and its future in the comfort of our own homes, but I'd be eager to see what would happen if we ALSO gathered as his church. Our first prayer needs to be that we are transformed into the people that God is pleased to use for His kingdom! We need to make it a priority. We have to stop acting like we can do it by ourselves and become a community of prayer!

In closing, please look in your bulletins for the white tri-folded piece of paper and get that out. I want to give you a little help in pursuing this habit of prayer. This is a prayer calendar to keep in your Bible. On one side is a list of scriptures that you can use in your prayers. I can't tell you how powerful the praying of scripture has been in my prayer life and I really, really, really want to see you benefit from this blessing too. On the other side are the 49 days we have until Easter. I encourage you to join with me in this season of Lent to pray these scriptures along with your other prayers, and let's see how God meets us in this adventure! I guarantee that we are going to have stories to share with one another – stories of change, of comfort, of encounters with God that tell of His goodness to us!

Prayer for the offering...

BENEDICTION

Let's pray together these words as our benediction today:

Psalm 105:1-6 Hallelujah!

***Thank GOD! Pray to him by name!
Tell everyone you meet what he has done!
Sing him songs, belt out hymns,
translate his wonders into music!
Honor his holy name with Hallelujahs,
you who seek GOD. Live a happy life!
Keep your eyes open for GOD, watch for his works;
be alert for signs of his presence.
Remember the world of wonders he has made,
his miracles, and the verdicts he's rendered—
O seed of Abraham, his servant,
O child of Jacob, his chosen.***