

Listen to the following thoughts on prayer:

If you want to see how popular the church is, attend Sunday morning worship. If you want to see how popular the pastor is, attend Sunday evening. If you want to see how popular God is, attend the prayer meeting. - Fred Hartley

The gospel, in its success and power, depends on our ability to pray. Prayer is our most formidable weapon. - E. M. Bounds

I know of no better thermometer to your spiritual temperature than this, the measure of the intensity of your prayer. - Charles Spurgeon

Today, we continue our "Practical Christianity" series by talking about that mysterious, powerful, and elusive thing called prayer. We do so with a different bent this morning by focusing on practical prayer/praying. It may sound strange because we generally associate prayer as a spiritual activity. Fundamentally it is just that, but it is also an applied spirituality and therefore, practical. Let's learn a few things about prayer before we do something with it.

Prayer Is

Prayer is petition, intercession, and supplication (praying for needs). Prayer is a confession, thanksgiving, and adoration. Prayer is praise for who God is, what he has done, is doing, and will do. Prayer is engagement in spiritual warfare and, as such, our primary weapon against demonic and dark forces hostile to God, his church, and his people. Lastly, prayer is direct communication with God and, as such, the simplest way to deepen our relationship with him. There are 650 recorded prayers in the Bible, 375 references to the word, "pray" and another 377 to praise. There are dozens of commands to pray; the two most notable are I Thessalonians 5:17 and Ephesians 6:18:

Never stop praying!

Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere.

My favorite command is found in James 5:16-18:

16 Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The passionate prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results. 17 Elijah was as human as we are, and yet when he prayed earnestly that no rain would fall, none fell for three and a half years! 18 Then, when he prayed again, the sky sent down rain and the earth began to yield its crops.

Elijah prayed, and rain ended a 3.5-year drought. Abraham prayed, and spared Lot and his two daughters the holocaust of Sodom and Gomorrah. Moses prayed, and God renewed his covenant with the Israelites even after they defiantly created and idolized the Golden Calf. Indeed the "passionate prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results." None more righteous than Jesus, of course. His prayers were so powerful and productive that his Disciples pleaded, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). They asked him for this because their prayers lacked power and productivity and so did those of the "professional" prayers and teachers of prayer, the Pharisees.

Believe It?

So, church, do we believe that our prayers will be powerful and productive when prayed in Jesus' name and authority? Do we believe that God, in His absolute sovereignty and infinite wisdom, has ordained prayer as means through which he runs his universe interactively? Do we believe John Wesley when he said, "God does nothing except in response to believing prayer"? If so, we will pray more.

The Pharisees, which I mentioned a moment ago, had a reputation for ostentatious prayer. They impressed the masses with ritualistic and rote praying. Jesus railed against this kind of praying because it wasn't powerful and productive but just the opposite, vain glorious and hypocritical. After all, the Pharisees didn't believe in what they were praying, and their hearts certainly weren't into it. In other words,

Sure, we'll pray for Brother Buck's cancer because it makes us look spiritual and compassionate. Buck getting healed, however, "Whatever."

Ritualistic and rote praying is praying just to pray and praying to look good. It treats prayer as a duty, not a delight, and a mechanism to either appease God or try to compel him to do something. Jesus despised this prayer because it was the opposite of the nature and purpose of prayer: to communicate with him, our Heavenly Father and take our needs to him as a trusting child would a loving parent. Growing up in a semi-Catholic/semi-Lutheran household, our family engaged in ritualistic praying four times a day, once before each meal and once at bedtime. Here's what we prayed:

*Bless us, O Lord, and these Thy gifts which we are about to receive,
Through Thy bounty. Through Christ our Lord, we pray. Amen.
Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord, my soul, to keep
If I should die before I' wake, I pray the Lord, my soul, to take.*

Powerful & Productive Praying

On the face of it, there's nothing wrong with praying written and/or ancient prayers. I use them often to jumpstart my prayer time. However, what is wrong, is if these are the only prayers I pray, the only time I pray, and I think of them as recantations of a magical spell. The good news is that God wants us to pray to him as often as we can. It's why we have the commands to "never stop praying" and to "pray at all times and on every occasion." However, if we want our prayers to be powerful and productive, we need to move from ritualistic/rote praying to robust/remarkable praying. How so? First off, we need to allow that there are times when God wants us to stop the world and be alone with him. Continual visits to the "prayer closet" demonstrate that God is popular (above quote) in our lives. If you don't have a designated prayer closet, get one and watch your prayer life flourish (mine, office at home). But as we know, "Life happens when we're making other plans" (life interrupted), so short of making habitual visits to the prayer closet, here are three practical ways to become a powerful and productive prayer.

Practical Praying

Walking Prayers. Every morning I take our dog Crosby on a long walk. It's peaceful, other than when he tries to chase down rabbits. I pray for the folks in the houses we pass-by, i.e., that God would draw them closer to him. I won't know how powerful and productive these prayers are until I get into eternity, but I rather err on the side of the unknown rather than not pray at all.

Coffee Prayers. Martin Luther once quipped, “Beer is proof that God loves us.” What else would a 16th century German Reformer say? Not being a “beer man” I respectfully disagree only to say, “Coffee is proof God loves us.” Nothing like a hot cup to pull one out of his melatonin coma. Between sips of coffee, I thank God for yet another day where I will enjoy his mercy and steadfast love. I ask him to lead me to people who need led to him. Because my favorite mug holds two cups worth, this practice gets me more prayer time than you might think.

Pop-Up Prayers. Pop-Up prayers happen when you're casually doing your thing and someone "pops up" in your thoughts. These pop-ups could result from ADD (lol) or are generated by the Holy Spirit. Whichever doesn't matter because whomever pops up in my brain, I try to pray for that person immediately with a simple prayer. I may never know the need, but I do know the power of prayer.

Conclusion

We opened with a pen-ultimate scene from Marvel Studios' "Infinity Wars." It's when Thanos, the villain of the series, tells a defeated Dr. Strange, "You never once used your greatest weapon." Church, given the madness of our day, let's use our greatest weapon, powerful and productive practical prayer as often as we can.