

A Prayerful Church

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When we consider the subject of prayer, we often think of it as a very individual thing. We remember the stories of men like David and Jesus, how they often went aside to pray, and we look to model our own prayer lives on theirs. Now, there's absolutely nothing wrong with emphasizing solitary prayer. In fact, if we don't have a robust prayer life when we're by ourselves, it's impossible for us to have a healthy relationship with God. We need that kind of prayer.

However, it's just as important for us to emphasize our prayers in the assembly as it is to emphasize prayer when we're alone. Jesus teaches us in Matthew 18 that when even two or three of us are gathered together, He is gathered with us. This doesn't mean that God doesn't pay attention when we're by ourselves, but it does mean that when we assemble, we are a particular focus of His attention. Our worship services are a priceless opportunity to come before Him.

Sadly, however, we often fail to exploit this opportunity to its fullest. It's very easy for prayer to become just another part of the order of services. When we fall into this trap, we lead prayers not because we are eager to thank God for His graciousness and to implore Him for His aid, but because our name has popped up on the duty roster. We are less concerned about what is said in our public prayers than that a public prayer be said, so that we can check off that part of our worship ritual and move on to the next part, without having really joined in the prayer at all.

As we spend this next year focusing on improving our prayers, much of that improvement is going to have to come when we're by ourselves, in our private prayer time. However, we're also going to focus on ways that we can make the prayers of the congregation better too. Let's turn to the word, then, and learn how to be a prayerful church.

Characteristics of a Prayerful Church.

If we want to maximize the value of prayer in our congregation, we must turn our attention to what a prayerful church looks like and put those things into practice here. First, a prayerful church **BELIEVES IN THE POWER OF PRAYER**. The classic Biblical text that speaks to this is James 5:16-18. James tells us here that our prayers are powerful, that they are effective, and to give us some idea of what our prayers can accomplish, he points us to the example of Elijah. Elijah wasn't wielding some awesome miraculous spiritual gift when he prayed for the rain to stop. Instead, he was simply praying just as we might, and his godly and righteous nature led the Father to hear his appeal.

Brethren, if we pray with Elijah's faith, we can see Elijah's results. In this past quarter in the adult Bible class, we've been looking at Scriptural reasons for the passing of spiritual gifts, at why we should not expect the Holy Spirit to work miracles in our lives. However, even as we acknowledge the truth of those concepts, we must be careful not to take them too far. I fear that many Christians live in a world where all God does is speak to them through the word and otherwise leaves them to their own devices. That's not at all what the Bible actually teaches. Instead, we serve a God who is still active today, who loves us and will intervene powerfully in our lives if only we ask Him for help. The only thing that can short-circuit that power is us. If we are sinful, doubtful, or apathetic, God will certainly not hear us. Our responsibility, then, is to pray together in faith, confident that our heavenly Father will hear the cries of His children.

Second, the prayerful church **KNOWS WHAT'S IMPORTANT**. They pray for what matters. For an example of this kind of prayer, look at Paul's words in Colossians 1:9-10. This doesn't mean that it's wrong to pray for our physical needs and our physical concerns. Paul prayed for those things too. However, they took second place in his prayers to spiritual needs and spiritual concerns. We spend a lot of time praying for our health and the health of our loved ones, for the success of our businesses, for the house we're trying to buy or sell, and that's fine, but how much are we going to care about any of those things ten thousand years from now? Honestly, friends, I'm not even sure I'll remember. On the other hand, when we pray for our own spiritual development, for brethren who are struggling with their faith, for the lost who need to hear the gospel, will we care about those things ten thousand years from now? Absolutely! This life is our one and only chance to alter the eternal destiny of a soul, and prayer is one of the best tools we have. What a joy it will be to see a ransomed saint in heaven, to know that we prayed for them and God heard us!

Third, the prayerful church **PRAYS TOGETHER**. Look at the example of the early church in Acts 2:42, 46. We often read "the breaking of bread" in this text to refer to the Lord's Supper, but as v. 46 makes clear, that's not really what the text is talking about. Instead, this describes the daily practice of the Jerusalem church. Today, we're kind of unusual in still having a Wednesday night service. Most of the denominations have moved away from that because they couldn't get their members to come anymore. However, for our brethren 2000 years ago, one mid-week service wasn't enough. Every single day, those early Christians would invite other Christians into their homes, share a meal with them, and then pray and learn about God's will together. In fact, the text tells us that they were devoted to this practice. We too need to have an appetite for praying together. We need to think of our assemblies as valuable opportunities for prayer, and we need to come together outside of the assembly to pray also. We need to share our lives and our prayers.

Fourth, the prayerful church **TURNS TO GOD FIRST**. Consider the way that the apostles behaved in Acts 4:23-24. At this point, discipleship had just taken a scary turn. Before He ascended, Christ had commanded Peter and John, along with all the other apostles, to preach the gospel to everyone. Now, the Jewish authorities have just commanded them NOT to preach the gospel, and they threatened physical harm if the apostles disobeyed. I'm sure that Peter and John knew that the leaders of the Jews were willing and able to follow through on that threat, too.

In this increasingly difficult situation, what do they do? They don't flee the country. They don't buy a bunch of swords. They don't board up the windows. They go home, tell their companions about it, and then they all pray together. Instead of relying on their own solutions to the problem, they rely on God. Friends, any time we face any kind of problem, this should be our response. We don't try to solve it on our own. We don't try to hide it so that people won't worry. Instead, we gather the brethren together, and we bring that problem before the Lord. That's such an obviously wise thing to do that it's baffling we don't do it more. What possible reason could there be for not taking every difficulty straight to the Almighty? He can help us even when we can't help ourselves. Let's constantly lean on Him.

Fifth, the prayerful church **GIVES GOD THE GLORY**. Among many, many other places, we see this in Romans 15:5-6. God loves to see His people glorifying Him together. This is so important because ingratitude is such a problem among the Lord's people. I have to tell you, friends, when I consider my life and all the blessings that God has heaped on my head, and then I compare that to what I deserve, I have to admit that I'm just plain spoiled. We're all in that boat. And yet, how much time do we spend whining to God about the .01 percent of our lives that doesn't satisfy us, rather than giving Him the praise for the 99.99 percent that is everything we could ask it to be?

This tells us that we need to be a thankful people and a thankful church. We need to praise God in the assembly for all that He has done for us. We need to glorify Him publicly for our health, for our prosperity, for all the physical joys that brighten our lives, but more than that, we need to praise Him for our spiritual joys, for the knowledge that our sins have been washed away, for the fellowship that we share in here, for the fellowship that we have with Him, and for the hope of an eternal communion with Him and with one another in heaven. We ought to be a thankful people, both outwardly in what we say and in our hearts. From us, our gracious God deserves nothing less.

Finally, the prayerful church **CONTINUES STEADFASTLY** in prayer. Paul makes this quite clear in Romans 12:12. As always, this is one of the biggest challenges to genuine discipleship. Right now, I have to say that I'm on a spiritual prayer high. I learned so much from that wonderful gospel meeting we had with Edwin Crozier, and all of the studying and thinking I've been doing about prayer on my own has really got me focused on being a better pray-er. Hopefully, a lot of you are in that same position. Really, what good does it do us if we've got this bubbly prayer high like the fizz on top of a glass of soda, and we just let it dissipate? That's not going to make a long-term difference.

Instead, both individually and as a church, we need to keep our focus on. From all that the Bible says about prayer, it's obvious that it should be a central part of our spiritual existence. We need to put in the time and the effort to make it that central part, and we need to keep that time and effort up, month after month, year after year. That's obviously going to be work, but the results in our lives will surely be greater than we can even imagine.

Building a Prayerful Church.

That's the theory. Let's spend the rest of the lesson looking forward to the concrete, practical things that we're going to do here to make sure that we are a prayerful church. First, starting in January, we're going to begin a monthly **MEN'S PRAYER BREAKFAST**. This will be a work of individuals, not the church, but like the Christians in Acts 2, the men are going to start eating together and then praying together. The details are still unsettled, but as things stand, it looks like we're going to go out to Cracker Barrel or someplace, and then come back to the church building and spend as much time in prayer as we want to spend. It'll help us get to know one another better and get closer to God at the same time. If you have any thoughts or questions about this, talk to the elders or to Marshall Williams, who's spearheading this.

Second, all of us are going to have the opportunity to join in a special **SUNDAY NIGHT PRAYER SESSION**. As you may have noticed, one of the weird things about our assemblies is that our Sunday evening services only last about 45 minutes. I'm not going to preach longer than half an hour, the songleaders aren't going to lead more than two songs before the lesson, and 45 minutes is where that leaves us. Starting with the new year, we're going to use that extra 15 minutes every Sunday night for prayer. Once again, none of the details are firmly settled yet, but here's the way it looks like it's going to work: Every Sunday evening, before services begin, the man who is designated to lead the special prayer is going to talk to as many brethren here as he can. He's going to ask them what they're thankful for, and he's going to ask them what they'd like to pray about. These prayers could be for anything, for our families, for our businesses, for a friend we're trying to study with, for our own physical or spiritual health—basically, if it's not private and embarrassing, volunteer it. Then, once the prayer leader is done collecting his information, we'll have the announcements to signal the start of services, and then the prayer leader will begin his prayer. After that, the rest of the evening service will progress normally. As with all of these things, I'm confident this will produce blessings beyond what we could even guess at.