

January 1, 2012
 Isaiah 62:1-7 / I Thessalonians 5:12-18 / Colossians 4:2-6
 An Earnest Call To Prayer

Today is New Years Day 2012. It's a day when many people will be making resolutions. Resolutions to quit smoking, or stop drinking, or manage money more wisely, or spend less time working and more time with family, or get in better shape, or (so I'm told) make the #1 New Year's resolution every year (in America at least) -- to go on a diet or lose weight.

Yet, as Christians, our priorities should be different. So as an alternative to the one's I just mentioned, I would like to suggest the one thing that could help anyone and everyone far more than all those others (and even make those others unnecessary) -- ***praying more.***

For almost two months now, the elders have been sensing the need for our church to focus on and engage in and make prayer our priority for 2012. At our meetings we've talked of the importance of prayer and have been spending more time in prayer.

So despite the fact that today is a holiday / and thus many people might be traveling or absent / we thought it was the perfect time to extend an earnest call for everyone here to engage more earnestly and consistently in the faith-nurturing, fruit-nurturing, life-changing practice of prayer. Actually I should say, "the life-changing privilege of prayer."

Yet as I contemplated what I wanted to share I was overwhelmed. There's so much one could say that I struggled to know where to begin. / For where does one start when they want to speak about the NEED for prayer / and how IMPORTANT prayer is / in the life of the individual Christian / or the Body of Christ as a whole / or the health and vitality of any Christian endeavor and enterprise that takes place anywhere in the world?

And then it hit me -- start at the beginning of the Bible and go on from there. Because it's there (in the Christian's ultimate authority for life and practice) that we find all the reasons we will ever need for engaging in prayer / and understanding the vital importance of prayer.

All the divine invitations and commands and admonitions that we will ever need to prompt us to engage in prayer are found there. There is no greater source of encouragement, nor do we need any, to prompt us to pray.

So let me share some of the reasons I want to extend this "earnest call to prayer" to us as a congregation. And the **FIRST** reason is the most foundational of them all -- it's because prayer is our main means of conversing with the God we love.

I have often shared from the pulpit that communication (earnest, interested, from the heart, give and take communication) is one of the most / if not "the most important" ingredient to any healthy marriage (or any deep and lasting relationship). And nearly anyone I share that with, agrees.

Yet sometimes -- when it comes to our relationship with God -- we somehow tend to forget that. If we go days or weeks or months -- without spending any lengthy, focused, heart-engaged time (not just speaking but also listening to God) -- it will create an emotional distance between us that makes it easier and easier to let the relationship slide even further into a lukewarm state. (Just as it would in a marriage if you ignored speaking to your spouse about anything significant for a week or a month or a year).

You can't be relationally close to another individual, nor can you be relationally close to God, if you never speak with Him, or give Him time to speak to you. That's why John Calvin once noted: ***"The principle work of the Spirit is faith (that's the main thing the Spirit seeks to nurture in us) and the principle exercise of faith is prayer."***

He's right you know. Prayer is our lifeline to God. / Prayer is like the fire that warms the affections in the heart for God. / It keeps the flame of our relationship with God from growing cold.

Yet you know what the Christian life is often like? (And this describes me at times in my Christian walk) -- we are often like a group of people sitting around a campfire in the woods on a chilly Autumn night. When we first come to the Lord the fire is burning bright. We pray often. In fact, sometimes we can't pray enough!

In the initial stages of our love life with the Lord, prayer is like logs or fuel being thrown onto the fire, and we're throwing them on every few minutes! Sometimes we even have to be told to stop, because the fire is getting so hot it's hard to be near it!

But then as the years pass, we tend to prefer a more gentle fire. One we can gather near, and listen to it as it crackles and warm our hands over it. It's more mellow. It's no longer hot, it's just warm. We throw a little log on the fire very infrequently, just enough to keep it going. At this point it's little more than a pile of glowing orange embers.

And as even more time goes by (and this has been the case throughout church history) you can find people sitting there rubbing their hands together, but the fire has completely gone out. They're still there, sitting around where the fire used to be, and going through the motions of warming their hands -- but there no flame, because the fuel of earnest, heartfelt, consistent, intimate times of prayer has all but ceased.

Yet those who pray (if I may put it this way) are "Keepers of the Flame." And I'm not talking about rote prayers. / Not dutiful, "do it because we're supposed to do it" prayers. / Not even because it's the thing "spiritual" people do. / No. Keepers of the Flame are people who earnestly seek GOD in prayer -- seeking to be with Him, and speak to Him and listen to Him.

In fact, it would be fair to say that the gage of the health of any person's relationship with God can in many ways be discerned -- not just by the time they spend in prayer -- but by the intimacy of the dialogue that takes place between them and God when they do pray.

I'm so thankful that one of the first books on prayer that I ever came across in our small (and I mean small) library in the D.R. was a book by Rosalind Rinker, a former missionary to China. After wrestling with right and wrong ways to pray / or what words to use (Thee or Thou or You. Special religious words or normal everyday words) / and even right and wrong postures to be in when you pray -- she came to discover that none of that really mattered.

For when it comes right down to it, as she says, "**Prayer**" is simply **"the expression of the human heart in conversation with God. The more natural the prayer, the more real God becomes."** In its simplest form, she says, **"prayer is a dialogue between two people who love each other."**

That's the first reason we pray: It's our lifeline to God. It keeps the flame of our affections for God, alive. It stokes the fire for God in the human soul. Calvin was right: It is the primary fruit of faith in the life of a believer. That's why the Psalmist can say (32:6): **"Let everyone who is godly pray..."** For prayer is like putting wood on the fire for God in the believer's soul. And when the oxygen of the Holy Spirit blows into the mix, the fire rages!

Then **SECONDLY**, we are to pray because the Scriptures assure us that God hears prayer and answers prayer. In fact, this second reason to pray comes from only the second reference to prayer in the whole Bible (Gen. 25:21) where we read: **"Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren. And the LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant"**

So why do we pray? Because prayer connects us with the power of God, who alone is able to change circumstances and situations (As we see in the case of Rebekah who through the prayer of her husband Isaac was healed of her inability to have children). The same was true of Hannah, the mother of the Prophet Samuel, who prayed for her own inability to have children -- with deep agony and many tears -- only to have God give her the child Samuel, whom she then gave back to Him.

That's one of the first things the Bible tells us in relation to prayer. That God has graciously and sovereignly chosen to share a degree of His infinite power with us, and the means by which He has chosen to do so is through prayer.

J. F. Huegel once wrote: **"It is when men bow the knee and call upon Almighty God that in a sense they become as mighty as the Almighty. And do not misunderstand me. I am not being irreverent. I am only saying what God says in His holy Word: 'Call unto me and I will answer you and show you great and mighty things which you know not.' 'You pray,' says**

the Almighty God, 'and I will work. If you ask anything in my name, I will do it. Call upon me in the day of trouble and I will deliver you and you shall glorify me.' "

Paul points out this same aspect of prayer in Eph. 3:20, where he says: ***"Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than we could ever ask or think..."*** That's why we pray. Because we are weak, and He is strong, and knowing our weakness, He has graciously given us prayer as a way of tapping into His unlimited strength.

And it isn't just God's people who knew the power of prayer. Pharaoh, after seeing the power of God manifested in the plagues, pleads with Moses on five separate occasions in Exodus: ***"Pray to the LORD to take away the frogs..."*** (8:8) / ***"Pray to the LORD for we have had enough thunder and hail..."*** (9:28). / He asks the same for the flies, the locusts and the snakes: ***"Pray to the LORD your God to take this deadly plague away from me."***

Thus we see that even a proud, heathen, ungodly, oppressive, disobedient, foreign king, KNEW that the power of God to change situations and alter circumstances was came through prayer.

Yet, given how infrequently many Christians pray, I think Pharaoh had more faith in the power of prayer than many Christians in our day! For how could someone be convinced -- by both faith and experience -- that the power of God to change people and circumstances comes through prayer, and then not avail themselves of that power on behalf of others by praying?

A recent Neilson Poll tell us that the average Christian in America spends about 3-7 minutes a day in prayer, and the majority of that time is spent in simply giving thanks before meals.

Compare THAT to the fact that the average American adult (which includes those same people) spends on average -- between computers, gaming devices, and TV -- an average of 6 hours every day, or about one-third of their waking hours (more than that if you're a teenager).

In fact, 65% of those polled said they spend more time on their computers than they do with their spouses (when in the house).

[An addiction which has given rise to a growing sense of relational alienation and emotional distance between spouses and family members.]

Now IMAGINE (just for a moment) if Christians spent less than 1/10th of that time praying -- that is, a mere half hour each day. People say, "*I'm too busy to pray,*" and yet they manage to find (on average) anywhere from 2 to 6 hours (or more) every day to watch TV or play on the computer.

The average American (and that includes many professing Christians) know more about Kim Kardashian's clothes and love life than they do about the Gospel / or salvation / or justification / or evangelism / or holiness / or the state of the missionary enterprise around the world / or the spiritual and physical needs of their neighbors!

IMAGINE, then, if we would spend less than one-tenth of the time we spend in front of a TV or computer -- praying!

Praying over the map of the world for people who have never heard the Gospel.
 / Praying for the needs of the poor or the persecuted church around the world.
 / Praying for the salvation of our friends and neighbors. / Praying for the Church to gain a vision of what she was intended to be, and to do. / Praying that God would pour out His Spirit in great love and power upon His people. / Praying for the things that matter to the heart of God!

Praying that God's people would come to grasp and understand the great power that is available to them through prayer / and thus devote significant periods of time pleading with God to touch and convict and heal and change people's lives or relieve their difficult situations. God's people bring God's power to bear on the struggles of life through prayer!

As Luther once correctly noted: "***None can believe how powerful prayer is, and what it is able to effect, except those who have learned it by experience.***"

He's right. And Luther HAD "learned it by experience." That's why he spent so much time praying! Yet that's the paradox of prayer. Many people do not pray

because they don't understand the power that is unleashed through prayer. / And yet, it is only by engaging in prayer that anyone will ever come to know of that power. We have to see it to do it, yet you'll never see it unless you do it!

That's why, before God invites us to pray, He shows us the power of prayer. Look in your Bibles and you won't find any command for God's people to pray, until AFTER you see God displaying His power through those who did pray -- like Abraham praying for Abimelech, and his wife, and slave girls / and Isaac praying for Rebekah -- and all of them being healed.

In fact, to Luther's comment I would add this: ***"Once we know by experience, how powerful prayer is, and what it is able effect, we will devote more and more and more time to praying."***

Yet, not only do we have to pray to know how powerful it is, we also have to learn to pray "in Jesus name." That's the THIRD thing I need to emphasize.

Jesus says, ***"Ask me for anything in my name and I will do it that the Father might be glorified in the Son."***

And most people I speak to focus on the ***"ask me for ANYTHING"*** part of the verse, when I believe it's the ***"IN MY NAME"*** part of the verse that should be our focus. ***"Ask me for anything IN MY NAME and I will do it."***

And here's the key. Praying "in Jesus name" does not mean simply tacking the words "in Jesus name" onto the end of any prayer we pray! (And don't hear me wrong: I believe we should do that, so that people know that when we go to God, or when they go to God, they must always go to God through Christ our Redeemer and Mediator who alone makes our access to a holy God possible.)

Yet in a much deeper sense, praying "in Jesus Name" means praying for those things that we KNOW Jesus would want us to pray for! In other words, the promise of Jesus could be phrased like this: ***"Ask me for anything you know I would want you to have, and I will do it, that the Father might be glorified in the Son."***

So don't do what some Christians do and pray: "Lord give me a Rolls Royce... in Jesus name." / Or, "Lord, I want that mansion... in Jesus name." / Or

"Lord, I'm going to steal this car, so help me not get caught... *"in Jesus name"* -- as if just adding, *"in Jesus name"* to any prayer means He'll do it!

Yet it did say **"ask me for ANYTHING,"** didn't it? Yes, it did. But that's to misunderstand the word *"anything,"* pluck it from its context, and fail to realize what Jesus is promising, as well as what it means to pray, *"in Jesus name."*

It means to pray for the things He would want us to have. Or better yet, to pray for the things Jesus prayed for, and told us to pray for! Like praying for **"His kingdom to come and His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven."** / Like praying for God to send more laborers into the fields of harvest. **"Ask the Lord of the harvest,"** says Jesus in Mt. 9:37, **"to send out workers into His harvest field."**

When we pray for things like that we can know He will answer. Because we're not only praying for something that's in accordance with His will, we're praying for what He specifically told us to pray for! When you ask for **those things**, you can be SURE you will get the answer to your prayer -- for that is praying *"in His name"* in the truest sense of that phrase.

In fact, I'm one who is convinced that the REASON many people do not see God answer their prayers in powerful ways is because they're always praying for what THEY want / with little concern and little time spent praying for what HE wants and even tells us to pray for!

"This IS the will of God," says Paul in 1 Thess. 4:3, **"your sanctification."** Do you pray for it? / Do you pray for moral purity / and a fuller consecration of your life to God / and greater understanding of His will?

"Understand what the Lord's will is," says Paul in Eph. 5:17, **"Do not get drunk with wine, which leads to debauchery, but instead, be filled with the Holy Spirit."** Do you pray for it? Do you pray to be filled with the Holy Spirit?

Do you pray for me / and everyone here / and all Christians everywhere to experience the Holy Spirit's fullness to a greater degree? Do you?

"Be joyful always, pray continually, and give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God for you," says Paul in I Thess. 5:16-18. / Do you pray continually? Do you know its sin not to since He tells us to?

"Seek first (and that has to include the seeking we do in prayer)... Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness..." Which means that we should be praying for the advance of the Gospel / and the salvation of the lost / and the health and growth of the Church worldwide / and the Christian missionary enterprise / and for people to turn from sin, and pursue righteousness, holiness, blamelessness, love and godliness.

"The prayers of a righteous man are powerful and effective," says James. Why? Because a righteous man prays for the things he knows God wants.

Things like unity in the church / and the grace to forgive (70 X 7!) / and the resolve to love our enemies / and the advancement of the Gospel / and for people everywhere to be disciplined in the faith / and to be kept from temptation / and to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ!

THAT would be "*praying in Jesus name*," because we KNOW those are the things Jesus wants! In fact, if we prayed for those things continually, and with all our hearts, we couldn't help but see the mighty power of God at work through our prayers! And not just His power, but revival in the Church.

Which brings me to my LAST point. Anyone who looks around at the current state of affairs in America can't help but sense the Church in America desperately needs to be revived.

The Church needs to become what it was meant to be! The radiant Bride without spot, or wrinkle, or any other imperfection, but holy and blameless.

She needs to be like a light on a lamp stand / a city set on a hill / or salt that gives savor to the earth. / People who champion the cause of the orphan and widow; the poor and downtrodden.

/ Those who give generously / are meek / and merciful / and turn the other cheek / hunger and thirst for righteousness / forgive everyone who sins against them / and love even their enemies.

People who not only to speak the truth -- but speak it in love / and love one another with a deep, affectionate, sincere love / and give an answer to anyone who asks them about the hope that is within them, with meekness and fear.

Those are the type of things we need to pray earnestly for! Things the church has often forgotten to pray for, because it's become so consumed with worldly pursuits / worldly priorities / and worldly possessions / and drawn off course by worldly entertainments and worldly distractions.

In fact, let me finish with a quote from a sermon by Jonathan Edwards, preached during the First Great Awakening here in America (in the 1730's and 40's) telling why the people of his day gathered for organized times of **"extraordinary prayer."**

"We are, unfortunately, too little inclined to pray because of our laziness and immaturity, or because of the distraction of our own worldly, private affairs. We have prayed at times, but without special seasons for prayer, we are likely to neglect it, either partially or totally. But when we set aside certain times for prayer, resolving to fulfill this commission unless extraordinarily hindered, we are less likely to neglect it."

That's why we are starting this prayer watch. Because, ***"when we set aside certain times for prayer, resolving to fulfill this commission unless extraordinarily hindered, we are less likely to neglect it."***