

1 Thessalonians 5:12-22

“But we beseech you, brethren, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we exhort you, brethren, admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything; hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil.”

These past few weeks we have heard about altaring our lives, altaring our attitudes, and this week I hope to speak on altaring our prayers. 7th century poet George Herbert said prayer is “the soul’s blood.” What would it mean for the church to once again be a “house of prayer?” What would it mean for believers to move from “faith in praying” to “praying in faith?” What do you do when you get anxious and troubled? Do you run to your room and hide? Do you just open your mouth and cry out? What do you do when the doctor gives you that terrible news? Do you attempt to run away? Jesus did! Jesus ran to the Lord and He prayed it out.

This is one sermon I have been praying you take very seriously. 2 Thessalonians 1:11: “*We pray always for you, that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness, and the works of faith with power.*” Do we, do we pray always? Do we pray for each other? Do you pray for me? Do you pray I am worthy of this calling? I realize I am not worthy or equipped to be your pastor and lead, and I apologize for that. But I also firmly believe God wants us to recognize our weaknesses, and to humbly and honestly admit them to Him. Then and only then will there be room for His power to take over.

I've heard it said 'I pray too much,' and for that I will not apologize. I do not believe we can ever pray too much, especially here. We read in Matthew 21:13, as well as Mark 11 and Luke 19; Jesus having just overturned all the tables in the outer courtyard of the temple and says "*It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer;' but you make it a den of robbers.*" I pray from this sermon we shall all come to terms with what Jesus meant when He said, "*My house shall be called a house of prayer.*"

I have been thinking about starting a prayer meeting, where we could come together and lift up in prayer the needs of this church, the needs of the people, the needs of this community, and the needs of this world. And I believe down deep in my heart what would happen at those prayer meetings would be a barometer of this church. I truly believe what would happen on those nights would be a gauge by which we could determine success or failure because what would happen on those nights more than any other would be the measure by which God would bless us.

You can tell how popular a church is by who comes on Sunday morning. You can tell how popular the pastor or speaker is by who comes for Sunday evening services.

But you can tell where Jesus stands within a particular church by who attends prayer meetings. A preacher once said “the greatest answer to prayer is more prayer.” Famous British preacher Charles Spurgeon said over 100 years ago:

“The condition of the church may be very accurately gauged by its prayer meetings. So is the prayer meeting a grace-odometer, from which we may determine the amount of divine, working among the people? If God be near a church, it must pray; and if He be not there, one of the first tokens of His absence will be slothfulness in prayer.”ⁱ

I have come to the realization that most people are not hungry for fancy sermons or liturgical perfection. They just want love. They want to know that God loves them, and that He is there and that He will pick them up and strengthen them to continue on. I believe people yearn for a real and close relationship with their Lord and Savior and prayer builds that relationship.

I read about a church which had a small choir. The choir director was struggling with the few members she had. She started a half hour before every choir practice with prayer and what happened next was only from God. More than once she said “the spirit of worship fell upon our small group.”

Members might give a testimony or feel impressed to read a particular Scripture. She said that some nights there was more prayer and worship than practicing, and sometimes they never got around to practicing at all.

When will we reach the point where prayer and worship to and of God become more important than all the pomp and circumstance, more important than all the liturgical correctness? When? True and authentic prayer cannot be taught by some strict principles or from some book, or through classes, seminars or symposiums. Prayer has to be born out of an environment of felt need. If we say, “We ought to pray,” we will soon run out of motivation and eventually quit; the flesh by itself is too weak. We have to be driven to pray. We have to be driven to pray by the Spirit of God and guided by the leading of that same Holy Spirit. If what you’re looking for is to just come sit and be entertained I’m sure there are many faith communities that would fit the bill for you. But I believe it’s time we abandon the thought of just coming and come seeking the face of God. Coming ready to humble ourselves and fall before Him in honest open prayer.

Prayer is the source of a Christian life, a Christian's life-line if you will. Not just a time to cry out Lord gimme gimme gimme. It does no good to pray from a comatose state of mind. Real prayer is focused not on the individual but on God Himself. A spiritual life cannot be taught it must be lived. Not until we become uncomfortable enough with our current lives to say, "We are not Christians if we don't have an active vibrant prayer life. Think about what Acts 2:42 says *"they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."*

Look at this, they devoted themselves, which is more than just being present; they devoted themselves to the apostles' teachings; they devoted themselves to fellowship with each other by the breaking of bread, which means sharing meals together; and to prayer. If we are not praying together we shouldn't be boasting of anything else we do.

The picture of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane never ceases to amaze me. It's almost impossible to conceive. Here is Jesus, the son of God, the one who existed with God from before creation. This Son of God is so afraid of death which He is facing, that He does what ... He prays.

Not only does He pray, but He cries like we cry while praying, but more than that He prays until He literally sweats blood. If ever God were at somebody's side, if ever anyone had a direct line to heaven, Jesus surely did, but yet He prayed.

God's first people were not called Jews or the Children of Israel, or Hebrews. In the very beginning they were called, as found in Genesis 12:8 *"there he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord."* They were called *"those who called on the name of the Lord."* Is that how God sees us, is that how He sees you? Can we be described as a people who call on the name of the Lord? Or do we only call on God when we need something?

Each week during our offertory prayer we say the Lord's Prayer, but there's more to it than just saying this prayer. Jesus does not want us to just say the Lord's Prayer. Jesus wants us to become the Lord's Prayer. **REAL** praying is God moving in us through the Holy Spirit. Real praying is the Spirit of God praying in and through us, making us into the likeness of Christ.

In the words of Francois Fenelon: “*Lord, teach me to pray. Pray thyself in me.*” Prayer is the breathing of the soul. Is your soul breathing? When we pray God should know us so well He never asks “*Are You Talkin to Me?*” It’s time we put this altar to use. I think it’s time we wear it out. Scripture says “*Pray constantly*” or “*Pray unceasingly.*” Are you ready to do just that? Come join me.

ⁱ Tom Carter, comp., *Spurgeon at His Best* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), p.155: selections from the 1873 edition of the *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, p.218.