

Prayer

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Introduction.

- A. When we compare our lives to what the Bible says our lives should be, we quickly see that there are lots of things we should be doing that we aren't doing, or, at the very least, aren't doing enough of. We should be saving more lost people, we should be doing a better job of teaching our children, we should be more involved in the Lord's work, and so on. Many of us spend a lot of time thinking about this list and working on it.
- B. Of all of the things that we aren't doing enough of, though, perhaps the most important one of all is praying. Prayer is an amazingly powerful force. Jesus once described it as being literally able to move mountains, and it hasn't lost any of its potency in the past 2000 years. Sadly, however, even though prayer can accomplish so much in our lives, many Christians and many churches fail to use it as they should. I suspect we would all be shocked to learn just how many brethren don't pray at all outside of the assembly, and even the prayers that we say in the assembly often don't seek to address the congregation's needs. We pray that everything we say and do here might be pleasing and acceptable in Thy sight, but as with so many of our other thought patterns, that one really sells the work of Christians outside the assembly short.
- C. We need to change that. We need to pray as much as we should, and we need to pray for help in all the areas where we need help. Every Christian needs to pray, but the elders decided that it would be useful to set up a special prayer service group to spearhead our prayer efforts. This is a group that any Christian with a functional mind can join, and I believe it will prove the most useful of all the groups. To preview its work, let's look at what the Bible tells us about the availability, the power, and the many uses of prayer.

I. Understanding Prayer.

- A. Before we can use prayer effectively, we have to understand why it works and what it can do. Along these lines, perhaps the first question we naturally ask is why prayer would be effective at all. After all, when I'm walking down the street, I don't listen carefully to the requests of the ants and help them carry seeds back to their anthill. Why, then, would the Creator of the universe listen to us when we aren't any more significant than the ants? Jesus clues us in in John 16:23-24. The point is that God listens to our prayers because we pray in the name of Jesus. Now, this doesn't just mean that we say, "In Jesus' name, Amen" at the end of our prayers, although that's why we do that. Instead, just as in so many other places in Scripture, when the Bible talks about "in the name of," it means, "by the authority of." Our prayers are effective because they have been authorized by Jesus. We are acting as the agents of Jesus. When some sinful non-Christian prays to God, the Bible tells us that his sin has made a separation between himself and God so that God does not hear that prayer. By contrast, when we pray, God sees that we have been purified by the blood of Christ, so there isn't a sin barrier there. Also, because we pray in the name of Jesus, God regards our prayers as favorably as though they were offered by Jesus Himself. The only thing that can stop them is our lack of faith.
- B. Now, since God is omnipotent, and we offer prayers to Him in the name of His beloved Son, logically we could expect our prayers to accomplish just about anything. In fact, that's what the Bible tells us to expect. Consider what James tells us about this in James 5:16-17. This is a passage that naturally divides into two parts. In the first part, James tells us that the prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. In the second part, James backs up his statement by pointing to the example of the prayers of Elijah. Elijah prayed once, and it didn't rain for three years. Elijah prayed again, and the drought ended, just like that. Automatically, we tend to assume that the example of Elijah doesn't apply to us. After all, Elijah was a prophet of God who did all kinds of miracles, and we're just ordinary Christians living nearly 3000 years later. However, that pessimistic dismissal is exactly the opposite of where James wants us to go. His point is that Elijah and we are the same, not different. Certainly, we don't have a word to confirm like Elijah did. We can't expect those kind of flash-bang miracles in answer to our prayers. However, we have what's important. We have the faith that Elijah had, and if we give that faith voice through prayer, we can see the results that Elijah did.
- C. Let me give you an example to illustrate the results. When first I came here, I can remember visiting Dorothy Seeman at her apartment, back when she was still a shut-in, and how she prayed constantly that her legs could heal so that she could come back to church services. That prayer didn't suddenly miraculously cure Dorothy's lameness, but I'll tell you what it did do. It got that elevator put in, so now Dorothy can be with us nearly every Lord's day. Our prayers might not be answered in the way we expect, but they will be answered.
- D. From this, it logically follows that we should pray as much as possible, and once again, the Bible backs this up, this time in Romans 12:12. Notice that Paul tells us to pray not intermittently, not infrequently, but steadfastly. We need to pray and pray and pray until God answers us. This doesn't mean that we should engage in rote repetition like many in the denominational world do, but it does mean that like the persistent widow in the parable, we should pray at all times and not lose heart. That way, we get results.

II. Things to Pray For.

- A. All right, so we have this extremely powerful weapon in prayer. Where should we point it? What sort of things should we be praying for? Simply because there's so much other ground to be covered, I'm excluding things like praise and thanksgiving. Although they're an important part of prayer generally, if I talk about them, I won't have time to focus on some other important things. The first of these things that I want to point out as a prayer target is the growth of the church. Let's take a quick mental poll here. Let's each of us ask ourselves if we've prayed for the spiritual growth of the church, either corporately or in its individual members, at some point in the past week. I suspect that some of us have, but I also suspect that most of us haven't.
- B. Brethren, that's a terrible oversight. In the first century, Christians prayed for churches in very lengthy, heartfelt, specific fashion. Look, for instance, at the prayer of Paul recorded in Philippians 1:9-11. I can't remember ever hearing a prayer like this in the assembly, and yet it is so obviously vital. Can there be anything more important for the church at Margaret St. than that we prosper in the way Paul is praying for here? Clearly, then, we need for God to be hearing these vital prayers from us all the time, not just on behalf of the church as a whole, but for each individual member. Simply put, these prayers are a must-do.
- C. We see a similarly important topic prayed for by Christ in Matthew 9:37-38. In our context, this would be a prayer about the work of the church, specifically, the work of evangelism. Brethren, I am convinced that just as they were in Jesus' day, the fields are white for harvest. It's true that a lot of the approaches and techniques that have worked in other areas aren't going to work here because the people are culturally different. It's true that at times, it seems like other religions have this whole region in a stranglehold. But brethren, even with that, the fields are white for harvest. All around us in this community are people who are hungry for God, and the worse this economy gets, the more of them there will be. We just have to find them and reach them in a way that best meets their needs, and the only way to do that is with boots on the ground. Not just preachers, not just elders and deacons, but an entire congregation of Christians, working together to save the lost. Friends, to be perfectly frank, we are a long, long way off from that right now, and that's not a good thing. The only way we're going to get there is through prayers to the Lord of harvest for workers.
- D. On a much smaller scale, we can pray for individual Christians, particularly those who need help. We see an instance of this in James 5:14-15. At first glance, this passage appears to describe the physically ill, but in reality, that's not the case. If we were to look at the rest of James 5, we would quickly see that the context of this passage includes things like singing hymns when we're cheerful and restoring brethren who have fallen away. Because that's so, we must logically conclude that this passage is about the spiritually sick, and it describes the spiritual cure that prayer can accomplish. When we see a brother who isn't as spiritually strong as he could be, the first thing we should do is pray. If the situation is less dire, as, for instance, with some physical illness, we should pray for that too. Without that prayer, anything else we do is useless.
- E. Finally, though, we should pray for anyone who asks for it. Consider Paul's request in 1 Thessalonians 5:25. He doesn't describe his specific situation here; he doesn't say specifically what he wants the Thessalonians to pray about. He just requests their prayers. In just the same way, we should be willing to pray for anyone who asks for it. That's obviously true of Christians, but it's true of outsiders too. Just think about it. If someone requests our prayers, they're already halfway convinced that we've got a special connection with God, and if we show love for them by praying for them, that very well may get them the rest of the way.

III. Our Prayer Group.

- A. As we look at these things, it's quite plain that we need to be a praying church. All of us need to participate in this, but for those who are particularly interested in putting their right to pray to good use, the elders have set up a **PRAYER GROUP**, led by James Hensley. Here's the way this group is going to function:
 1. **Anyone with a prayer request forwards it to group leader.** Basically, folks, if you want lots of Christians praying for you about something, just let James know that you want to be mentioned.
 2. **Group leader passes on prayer request to group members.** Probably, this will happen as needed.
 3. **Group members pray for the person who needs help.** What else would a prayer group do?
 4. **Group members also pray for the church, its work, and its members.** This is the bulk of what people in this group are going to do, I suspect. Basically, if you're in this group, you need to be aware of what your prayers can accomplish, and you need to try to accomplish as much as possible. It might be useful, for instance, to periodically pray through our church directory so that all are benefited.
- B. In a nutshell, that's what the prayer group does. Here are some **REASONS** why we might join up:
 1. **You want to help the church in a powerful way.** Brethren, even though it won't result in a tangible product, this may be the most important of our new service groups. If we do this, we're doing a lot.
 2. **You aren't physically able to participate in other groups.** Folks, as long as our minds are still intact, we can work usefully in this group. That makes it a good choice for our elderly and shut-ins.
 3. **You want to talk to God and pray on behalf of others.** Maybe you already spend a lot of time praying. Maybe you don't and want to get started. In either case, this group is for you.

Conclusion. However, the right of prayer is only available to Christians. Become one today.