

The Privileges of Praying Together

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 14 January 2024

Preacher: James Ross

[0 : 00] God together. So, I'm deliberately focusing on the together aspect. And one reason is because of... someone asked the question, what happened to the church prayer meeting? You know, praying together seems to be something that happens less and less. It was a very revealing statistic I came across recently. There's a Barna Research Institute that researched trends within the Christian church. And a group of Christians, a couple of thousand Christians, were polled on their spiritual habits over a three-month period. And, you know, on the positive side, many of those Christians reported praying, you know, at least once a week over those three months. But 94% of those who prayed only ever prayed alone. So, never with a friend, never in a family, and never in a church gathering. And so, the researcher drew this conclusion. Corporate prayer and corporate needs are less compelling drivers in people's prayer lives. So, praying together and the needs of one another seems to be of less importance if 94% of people only ever pray themselves. Maybe the statistic reveals a struggle that we have when it comes to praying together with and for others. Again, sometimes people struggle with it because it seems so unusual. You know, when we gather to pray, you sit around in a circle, you close your eyes, there's often silence. One person prays, heads are bowed. It can seem unusual. In a day of great activity, stopping to pray together, for the church to give time to pray together, can seem really passive. Well, shouldn't we be out there doing and doing? Again, we thought about it last week. It seems very unspectacular.

Or maybe it's just that we feel awkward about it, that it's something that we've never begun. And the longer that you go without praying with someone else, the harder it can seem to be. And so, for many Christians, we struggle with the idea of praying with anybody else. And I was thinking about the loss that that brings. So, I was imagining a household. Imagine a household where you have, you know, lots and lots of kids in the house, but each of those kids only ever spoke to their mom and dad on a one-to-one basis. There was never those shared family conversations around the table.

Everything was always just me and my parent. And you would think, well, you're missing sort of learning and growing and enjoying together. Because it is a privilege for the family of God to be able to spend time together as brothers and sisters in Christ, talking to our Father in heaven together.

So, that's what I want us to think about this evening, the incredible privilege that we have of praying to God together. We just sang Psalm 106, which reminds us wonderfully of the power of prayer. You know, we find so many examples, but Moses is a great example. Moses is a mediator for his people. In Psalm 106, he's presented as standing in the gap between the holy God and sinful Israel, claiming covenant promises so that they would not be destroyed. And God gave Moses that job and gave him those words to pray so that they would not be destroyed. Or maybe we can think of that battle.

[3 : 43] Remember that battle scene where Joshua and the armies are down below, and there's Moses up on the hill, and he's lifting his hands. And while his hands are lifted in prayer, the people are winning the battle. But when his arms begin to droop, the other side wins. So, you see Aaron and her holding his hands up in prayer for victory. Or how we began with Solomon in the temple. As the temple is finished, and as the people gather together for worship, the glory of God is there. So, we need to understand that when we pray, and when we pray together, we're accessing the power of God. We are together invited to enjoy the presence of God, and to understand that God is pleased to use our prayers for his purposes. Think about the example of Jesus. We've seen that in Luke's gospel. He was the man of prayer, and he created a praying community. Remember his disciples asking the question, Lord, teach us to pray. And then he gave them the Lord's prayer, which focuses on the corporate nature and reality for the people of God. And so, Jesus creates this

praying community that we then see in the book of Acts. So, Luke in his gospel focuses on Jesus, the man of prayer. In the book of Acts, there's a focus on the church as the people of prayer. It's fundamental to the life of the early church. So, I want us to be encouraged as we look at three snapshots that Luke takes of prayer meetings that happen in the first church in Jerusalem, to remind us of the privilege that we have when we pray.

And when we pray together. First of all, in Acts chapter 1, and especially verse 14, we're going to think about these first disciples praying for the Spirit. So, in Acts chapter 1, verse 14, they all join together constantly in prayer. Now, the context, as Stephen read it for us, Jesus is about to return to heaven. Jesus has promised the Holy Spirit. And so, they're told in verse 4 and verse 5 to wait in Jerusalem for that gift. Wait until the Spirit comes on them in power. They're told in verse 8, you'll receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you'll be my witnesses. So, they are to wait for this power because this power is going to enable them to continue in the mission of Jesus. As a by-the-by, sometimes this book is just called Acts. Sometimes it's known as the Acts of the Apostles. But as you read it, don't we discover that it's also the Acts of the Apostles as they are filled with the Spirit? And we also understand that it's the ongoing activity of Jesus by the Spirit and through the church at the same time. So, these great promises are made. Jesus returns to heaven. Then, verse 12 and 13, we find the apostles heading back to Jerusalem as they were told to do. They go to that upstairs room. There's 120 of them gathered.

There's the apostles. There's some women. There's some of Jesus' brothers who are followers. Now that they've met Him, resurrected in glory. And then, we come to the reality that they all joined together constantly in prayer. And we could say, well, we don't know what they were praying for, but surely, surely we're to understand that they are praying for this gift that Jesus has said they are to wait for. Surely, that's what they're doing. And we find then for 10 days, the gap in between ascension of Jesus and Pentecost, praying together that God, that Jesus would send the Spirit as He promised. And look at verse 14. They all joined together. There is a unity. There is one heart, this one desire that they would get this gift that was promised.

Christ. And they all joined together constantly. So, they're persevering. They know this is supremely important if they are to be effective in their mission of serving Jesus. Jesus has just taught them to wait. And remember, too, and that just before Jesus died, in His farewell address that we find in John's gospel, He gave them so much information on why the coming of the Spirit was profoundly good news. So, if you turn over to John chapter 14, we will see there, we're just going to look very briefly at just some of what Jesus promises about the ministry of the Spirit. Because this will help us to see, I think, why they persevere for 10 days waiting for the Spirit to come, and why it's important for us to pray for the ministry of the Spirit in our lives and in our shared life, too.

So, John 14, 18 is a good place to begin. Having spoken about the Spirit of truth, in verse 18, Jesus says, I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you. How does Jesus come to His people? He comes by the Spirit. We pray for the Spirit because the Spirit brings the presence of Jesus to His people.

[9 : 30] John 14, verse 26, the advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. So, here's the ministry of the Spirit in the life of the apostles. All the rich teaching that they heard from Jesus, they'd be able to recall, to understand its significance, and to communicate. It's what we have in the New Testament. John chapter 15, verse 26, when the advocate comes, who I will send you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who goes out from the Father, He will testify about me. So, the Father's going to send the Spirit of truth, the Spirit who reveals the truth about Jesus. The Spirit is going to testify. The Spirit wants us to know the glory of Jesus, to know the truth that Jesus brings. And in verse 27, it says, you also must testify. People who are filled with the Spirit are then able to testify as the Spirit testifies. And then John 16, 13 to 15. Well, verse 12, Jesus says, I have much more to say to you more than you can now bear. But when He, the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth. So, the Spirit's going to keep speaking to them from Jesus and of Jesus. He will not speak on His own. He'll speak only what He hears, and He'll tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me, because it's from me that He will receive what He will make known to you. So, the Spirit guides into truth. The Spirit reveals the glory of Jesus. The Spirit brings Christ and His gift to His people.

So, having been told that by Jesus, of course, they pray and they pray and they pray, because they know they want and they need this gift. Back to the book of Acts. How's the prayer answered? It's

answered at Pentecost, isn't it? Acts chapter 2. In verse 4, we find the Spirit comes to be present. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit. We find them then beginning to preach about Jesus straight away.

Verse 11, we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues. Remarkably, the Spirit enables them to preach in other languages. And we recognize the power of the Spirit in transforming hearts and lives. At the end of Peter's sermon, it talks about people being cut to the heart. Brothers, what shall we do? Repent and be baptized, and you'll receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. And so, 3,000 people are added to the church, and they receive the gift of the Spirit. What are we seeing happening at Pentecost?

Jesus comes to be present by His Spirit, and His mission continues in the power that He gives. Let me think about two ways for us to apply this today when it comes to our praying together with and for one another. The first way I think this is really important is when it comes to our own sense of Christian identity. So, I guess it must have been the tail end of last year.

Where King Charles, big supporter of the big issue, as is Prince William. And you probably saw in the news, Prince William spending a morning out as a big issue vendor, having that experience just for a few hours here as a prince, but he's acting as if he is in poverty. He went back to his palace, of course.

[13:17] But sadly, in our Christian experience, though we are rich, we can act as if we are poor. In Jesus, we are children of the King, and we have every spiritual blessing, but so often we can lose sight of that. We can be prone to wander. We can be prone to lose our focus.

And so often we hear in the Bible that call to be who we truly are. And that takes us to the ministry of the Spirit and why we pray for the work of the Spirit. Because the Spirit is, according to Paul, the Spirit of adoption. The Spirit that confirms to our hearts that we are children of God. It's the Spirit who helps to remind us of the truths of the gospel.

It's the Spirit who shows us the glory of God our Father, of Jesus our Savior, the privileges that we have of being the people of God. And so we need the ministry of the Spirit for ourselves and for others to help our hearts believe maybe what our heads know. But there can be a great disconnect, can't there? So we need to pray together for each other, bearing in mind this important ministry of the Spirit, that we would know who we are, that we would know who we belong to, that we'd pray for each one of us to have help to live out our identity as children of the King. I think praying for the Spirit also has significance when it comes to our Christian mission. So we have a warming scene up there of a log fire. Some of us have wood-burning stoves, or maybe over the holidays you went home and you got to enjoy a roaring fire. While it's very nice and attractive to see a fire with logs all stacked up, we know that there is something missing. There is no heat until there is fire.

When it comes to our work of mission, our responsibility is, as it were, to pile up the logs. We present truth. We teach God's Word in church and at home, in our conversations. We look to bear witness to the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection so that people would have the information to go on. But we know that we don't have the power to change a heart.

We need the fire. We need the fire. The fire comes from the Spirit. And so we pray together for God to set hearts burning as people encounter Jesus, that we would pray for the effectiveness of our mission. All our preaching, all our teaching comes to nothing unless the Spirit is pleased to take it. Take it and bless it in the hearts and lives of others. And so we too are to pray constantly with one mind and heart and purpose, that Jesus would continue His work, that He would continue to come in power. So we pray for the Spirit. Now we're going to look at another of our prayer meetings in the Jerusalem church. That's the one that was in Acts chapter 4. So you can turn there to Acts chapter 4 where we encounter a different kind of prayer meeting. It's prayers as the church faces opposition. One of the things that this section reminds us of is that principle that no soldier fights alone. If you like watching war movies or if you like reading history about world wars or other wars, what gives courage to soldiers in the heat of battle, you know, what gave courage to soldiers on those beach landings when they knew that they were going to come under heavy assault was the fact that they stood shoulder to shoulder with a band of brothers. And in the heat of spiritual battle, our need likewise is to form that spiritual band of brothers and sisters in Christ, those who will stand with us when things get tough. So our context this time in Acts chapter 4, the apostles are beginning to feel opposition as a follower of Jesus. Remember Jesus said, they hated me, so they'll hate you also.

[18 : 08] And so they've been arrested and they've been questioned for both their power and their preaching of Christ. It's really interesting. Chapter 4, verse 8, look at what happens when Peter is filled with the Holy Spirit. Look at the power of his communication. Verse 10, know this, you and all the people of Israel, it's by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. Salvation is found in no one else. For there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved. Peter, before the Spirit, before the resurrection, was hiding in fear, but now the Spirit has come. Now he knows Jesus is alive. He is powerfully proclaiming true. And so as the story goes on, we find these apostles threatened but released. And as they are released, they return to the church in verse 23. And in verse 24, what happens? A prayer meeting begins. And again, let's ask the question, what do they ask? Before we ask the question, what do they ask? We need to recognize who they are praying to. Before they ever ask anything of God, we hear this, when they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God's sovereign Lord.

They've been confronted by the religious authority, the political authority of their day, but they remind themselves there is a higher authority. There's an ultimate authority, the sovereign Lord. And this sovereign Lord, He's the God of creation. You made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. He's the God of revelation. Verse 25, you spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David. And this is the God of history. Because they see in the attitudes and the actions of Herod and Pontius Pilate and that conspiracy of evil against Jesus, a fulfillment of those words spoken of in Psalm 2. And they understand, verse 28, they did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Fulfilling Scripture, fulfilling God's plan of salvation. God is the sovereign Lord. And I think it's worth reminding ourselves that the clearer our vision of our God is, the greater our boldness and our confidence in prayer will be. I think that's why Jesus told us, our Father in heaven, your kingdom come, your will be done. And then we come to our request.

There are three requests. Verses 29 and 30. The first is interesting. Verse 20, now Lord, consider their threats. That's it. Simply consider their threats. We might pray, or we might pray for the persecuted church. You know, stop those evil opponents. Smash those who are against the church, or at least give the church safety and security. But that's not how they pray. Consider their threats. [21 : 14] And then the second request, enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. So they have been boldly speaking with the help of the Spirit. They don't want to lose that in the face of opposition.

So they pray to be enabled to continue. And the third one, stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant, Jesus. Asking that God would continue through them to work miracles of mercy, to point to the truth and reality of Jesus as Lord. Not miracles of judgment, but miracles of mercy. How is the prayer answered? Well, we see it first in verse 31. After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. God answers their bold prayer. We see it in chapter 5, verse 12. The apostles perform many signs and wonders among the people. And in verses 27 to 29, we find the apostles brought in for questioning before the religious leaders again. And Peter declares, we must obey God rather than human beings. So you get this wonderful thing, this recognition that Christian discipleship and mission takes place on a spiritual battlefield. And that prayer is bringing the Spirit with power to enable them to continue boldly. A spiritual band of brothers is being formed here in Jerusalem. And so they stand together, and they pray together for one another, and they're proclaiming Jesus together. And that bold speaking would go on in response to God answering as the church prayed together.

How do we apply this today for our praying together? I wonder if you can identify with a sense of sometimes feeling discouraged in your faith and witness. Perhaps there are people in your life that you've been looking to share faith with for years, and you seem to be getting nowhere.

[23 : 19] Perhaps you feel worn down by circumstances, feeling oppressed or opposed, maybe aware of personal weakness, maybe tempted to give up and go home. Maybe you feel that it would be much easier to stay silent rather than to speak up.

I would suggest that what we need by God's design is a praying band of brothers and sisters to pray with us and for us to pray with and for them, to give us strength, to encourage us when we feel like that. Like William Carey, the founder of the missions movement who resolved to go to India in 1793, he told his praying friends, I will go down into the mines. I'll go into the darkness of India if you will

hold the ropes, if you will pray, if you will bear me up in prayer. As a missionary or as a church member goes into the world representing Jesus, we don't want to do that alone. We need the prayers of the church.

Two points of application then for when we pray together. I think it's important that we find an ability to share our personal stories, our joys and our struggles, that we make room to share our prayer needs.

Perhaps if we feel isolated as Christians in our family, perhaps if there are challenges and struggles in our workplace, maybe it's the temptations and struggles that we encounter week by week. Maybe it's the gospel opportunities that we have or we long to have, that we would make room in our community groups, engine room, in our Christian friendships to make time, spaces to share and to pray.

[25 : 17] But I think whenever we think about a church facing opposition, it reminds us of the importance of us standing to support the persecuted church.

Those who endure levels of hatred and opposition that we will likely never know. In North Korea or Afghanistan or Iran, parts of Nigeria. That we would stand shoulder to shoulder to do what we can. To pray for them. To ask for them to have the courage to stand for Christ. To live and even to die with hope.

To pray that Jesus would continue building His church in the darkest of places. One last prayer meeting to look at. And it's in Acts chapter 6.

Acts chapter 6 verses 1 to 7. Context for this prayer meeting. Let's read.

[26 : 39] And we'll give our attention to prayer. And the ministry of the word. So what we see here is that the church is growing. The church in Jerusalem was growing. And church life was getting messy. Church life is always messy.

They're pursuing God's concern. God said the church should care for the poor. They're looking to care for the poor. But the administration of that is going wrong. One group is being overlooked. And tensions are building up. One of these points of danger in the early church. Of splitting. Of dividing along cultural lines. And so the apostles call the church together.

What do they ask? In effect, they ask the church to appoint deacons. Wise and godly men who will be able to oversee the practical food distribution.

Why don't the apostles do it? That's not because serving others is beneath them. They saw Jesus do it. It's not because social care doesn't matter.

[27 : 35] Because they saw Jesus do it. No, it's because they were called to proclaim God's word. And they knew it was so important for them to stay focused.

And that others who were gifted could do that work. Look at verse 4. We will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.

A natural connection. Prayer and preaching. They belong together. The seed of the gospel needs watered by the Spirit for it to grow. Preaching is vital and prayer is vital.

They needed to communicate. And they needed to communicate with God and seek blessing. And the apostles are afraid that those priorities would be squeezed out.

Now is it wrong to make sure that widows have food? Of course not. But for them, they were called and set aside to communicate the gospel. And so they needed to keep that as their first priority.

[28 : 38] Now how is this prayer answered? Prayer is answered in two different ways. We see it first in verses 5 and 6 as this mixed group of godly deacons are appointed. And then in verse 7, the prayer is answered as the word of God spread.

And the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly. So now there are more people using their gifts. Now there are more people doing what they're called to do. There are more people serving and loving others.

The church is praying and the church is preaching. And the mission continues. How do we apply this today? When we think about our praying together.

Let me give one specific and one general application. Specifically, can I ask us to be praying for our elders? And particularly praying that our elders would be men of prayer.

With all the good things and all the various responsibilities that could land on an elder's plate. With the limits of time and various responsibilities.

[29 : 45] Can we pray that our elders would be given to prayer? That as a church we'd be praying for our elders to be spiritual and godly leaders.

But then generally, this text reminds us that prayer is a fundamental priority of a church that looks to be on mission.

That the book of Acts is showing us, the Old Testament, the New Testament is showing us time and time again. That God is pleased to act in response to the prayers of his people. That God has designed the world in that way.

That his mission, his plan of salvation will continue in part in response to the prayers of his church. And so it needs to be a priority for us.

To pray. Remembering our wonderful privilege that the Spirit brings the presence of Jesus. We share the presence of Jesus together. The same Spirit equips us to speak and act for Jesus.

[30 : 54] That same Spirit is the power to bring change. So let me just close by encouraging each of us to, in our own way, to enjoy the privilege of praying together. To enjoy being the children of God.

Sharing family life together. Speaking to our Father together. Doing his work in prayer together. To use the analogy of a soldier.

That we would sign up, we would enlist to be spiritual soldiers. Ready to sacrifice time and energy. Ready to sacrifice time so we can pray.

Pray with and for our fellow soldiers in spiritual battle to seek God's kingdom advance. I'll leave you with John Stott's challenge and encouragement.

He once said this, We should take the task of public intercession much more seriously than we commonly do.

[31 : 56] If local churches were to bow down before God every Sunday for 10 or 20 or even 30 minutes, what might God be free to do?

God is pleased to work through the prayers of his people. And so we're going to start on a journey of discovery tonight. We're going to pray for 10 minutes.

And once we've closed our service, maybe after 10 minutes or so, anybody who wants to stay, please stay. So that we can pray for the mission of God in our church.

To pray for God's work in our lives. To pray for the world. To find out what might God be free to do. As we enjoy the privilege of praying together.

To that end, let's pray. Father God, we thank you.