

Prevailing Prayer

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[0 : 0 0] And before he knew it, this guy was pinned to the ground. The bear had its paw on his chest and its other paw up ready to strike him. And in that moment, this atheist just screamed out, Oh, God, help me!

And then the bear was momentarily startled, and the atheist sort of realized the inconsistency of calling out to God for help after living a life that acknowledging God doesn't exist and then calling him, he needs help.

And then so he throws out an ultimatum instead to God and says, Well, in fact, I don't believe you exist, buddy. In fact, I don't care if you do. But if you do, then prove yourself that you're good and that you're powerful, as people say you are, and make this bear a Christian.

He figured that that's a pretty smart move. He can then, the bear won't kill him because the bear has to, you know, turn the other cheek and look and not kill him. And he'd be able to go on living on like he always has for the rest of his life, not acknowledging God.

So he figured that was a bit of a stroke of brilliance there in just that moment. And to his great surprise, in that very moment, the bear pulled back and knelt down beside him, took his paw off his chest and put his paws together and bowed his head and started to pray.

[1 : 1 6] And he prayed, Dear Father, for what I'm about to receive, may the Lord make me truly thankful. I don't think it's a true story.

I'm pretty convinced prayers don't pray, but it's pretty much universal that people on our planet pray. It doesn't matter who the person is. You see them on the television. I've even seen declared atheists in a moment of tragedy get on the TV being interviewed about something, about some tragedy that's happened, and they've said our thoughts and our prayers are with the family.

I mean, you hear that again, you hear it again and again and again. Even devout atheists have said our thoughts and our prayers. I'm not sure exactly what they mean by prayers at that point, but that is the thing, is that prayer is virtually universal activity.

But what we mean by it, what the atheist means by it on that moment of the TV, is very different than what I would mean by it. Individual to individual, what we actually mean by prayer is very different. And what is significant is that the difference between our prayers is the difference between what we think about the being to whom we're praying to is, what sort of being that is, what sort of God they are, what we think about that God, and also what our relationship with that God or that supreme being is.

You see, when the Buddhist spins his prayer wheel, or when the Hindu sits in mystic silence, or when the Muslim gets his prayer mat and faces Mecca five times a day and prays, they are all reflecting in their own different ways the character of the God or the gods to whom they're praying to, and also the relationship and how they think the relationship works with that God.

[3 : 1 1] So our prayer is shaped and defined by the being to whom we pray, and that's no different for the Christian. There are many Bible passages that shape the Christian prayer life.

For instance, Jeremiah 32, 17, That verse shapes the way you pray.

It's talking about God being the creator of all things, and nothing is too hard for Him. That's a shaping prayer. That's a verse that shapes our prayer, view of God. Or our relationship with God.

For instance, the stunning picture of the Christian life that's laid out before us in Romans chapter 8, where it says, We once were slaves to sin and death and fear.

We were hostile to God, unable to please Him at all. We are now free sons of the Father, co-heirs of His kingdom in Christ.

[4 : 12] Through being united with Jesus, who died to free us, we now have this new life in which God Himself dwells with us, in us, by His Spirit. It's because of the saving work of Jesus that we are raised up from our low position, which is the position of being cut off from access to God, and have been granted free access to the almighty, true, living God, creator and sustainer of all that is.

And so what that means for the Christian is that prayer is not an appendix. It's not an addition to the Christian life.

It's the heart of who we are as His children and how we relate to Him and His Father. In fact, I would go one step further. I didn't say this this morning, but I think you can think about it today. I would suggest that prayer is one of the barometers, if not the key barometer, to indicate what your spiritual state is.

Prayer is the outworking of your relationship with God in the same way that if I've got no communication with my wife, Natalie, that would be an indication of the state of our relationship.

Don't care whatever, don't care how much money I spend on holidays or whether I buy a clothes or anything like that. It's how do I communicate with her as a fair indication of what my relationship status is with her in the same way it is with God.

[5 : 35] And what we see as a Christian is that prayer is a privilege. To be able to go to the creator and sustainer of the universe and to call Him Father. And yet with all the privileges that prayer affords us, I think the hard truth is that many of us don't pray very much.

We pray at meals, possibly. We whisper prayers before tough meetings. We say something brief as we crawl into bed. And I suspect that very few set aside times to pray alone and even fewer think that it's worthy to meet with others to pray.

I would suggest that our lack of prayerlessness is one of the reasons, one of the chief reasons why our faith is weak, our hope is feeble, and our passion for Christ is small.

And so what I want to do today is I want to turn our attention to Jesus to be enthused by prayer from Him. We see Jesus at the beginning of Luke 11.

He is praying. And there are at least four things that Jesus teaches us here about prayer in these verses. And I want these things to shape the way we're thinking as we begin a new ministry year here at St. Paul's, that for these things to shape our prayer life at St. Paul's.

[6 : 54] So firstly, Jesus teaches us to make our praying God-centered. You see, when the disciples come to Jesus to ask Jesus to teach them how to pray, as they do in verse 1 of chapter 11, He says in verse 2, Now the Lord's Prayer is a prayer for us to model our prayer on rather than a prayer that we are to pray with repetition.

I think it's somewhat ironic that Jesus, in the same context of giving us the Lord's Prayer, He says don't keep babbling on as the pagans do. That's what He does in Matthew. And yet ever since He's given us the Lord's Prayer, we've babbled it on consistently ever since then.

It's not a prayer that we're meant to pray with repetition. It's meant to be a model for prayer. That's what the disciples are asking of Jesus here. And of particular note is that Jesus says, our first desire, our first request should be that God's name be hallowed or glorified, that His kingdom be advanced and come.

And that's what I mean by God-centered prayer. The glory of God's name, the advancement of God's kingdom are the primary concerns of prayer. And if that's foreign to you, if you never plead for the name of God to be holy in the way that you live, for Him to be seen as holy in the way that you live, or the kingdom of God to come in such a way that you want to totally surrender to Him, then don't be content.

Let me say, as you look forward into this year, do not be content to stay stuck at that level of praying. Make the glory of God the center of your prayers. That's why we exist as a church.

[8 : 31] We exist to know Jesus, treasure Jesus, represent Jesus for God's glory and the joy of all people. So pray again and again in as many different words as you can possibly think of and phrases you can come up with.

Father, let your name be seen as holy in my life. Your will be done. Your kingdom come. Your rule be established over my life. In all things, that's what you're praying.

So secondly, Jesus teaches us to pray with a sense of security in the Father's love. Jesus doesn't want us to feel precarious or insecure in our prayers.

And He shows this mainly by teaching us to call God Father when we pray to Him. The prayer in verse 2 begins simply, Father. And then in verses 11 to 13, He unpacks for us some of the security which is implied by the word Father.

This is a great promise to encourage us in our praying. It says, Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?

[9 : 42] If you then, though you are evil, there's Jesus' assessment of me as a father, if you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?

The words, how much more there, mean something utterly, utterly important for us. They mean that God is much more inclined to hear me and help me when I pray that I am willing to hear and help my girls when they ask for my help.

I find that so, so astonishing. So, so astonishing. You know, if my girls are asking for help, they're in need, I will do whatever I can to assist them at that point.

You know, one of them got dumped in the beach, you know, we're on holidays, came up, as you do, and I, I didn't sit there going, yeah, they'll be right.

They'll work it out. I've got other things to do. And, and, and, and what it's saying here is that the God is much more inclined to hear and help me than I am to take those extra steps to help my daughter who's gasping for breath.

[11 : 14] Why does Jesus mention this? I think He wants us to feel secure in the Father's love when we come to Him in prayer. He doesn't want us to feel precarious. He doesn't want us to feel unsure of our acceptance.

He doesn't want us to feel fearful that we will find Him out of sorts with us or that He will find us, that we'll find Him unconcerned about us. This sense of security is utterly crucial in the life of prayer.

You, I don't think you can sustain a life of prayer if you believe God is stonewalling you or that He's angry with you or even neutral to you. And that is why a life of perseverance in prayer has its absolute foundation, security and assurance in the gospel.

They're not disconnected. Prayer is sustained by the confidence that God is our Father, that He is concerned and that His disposition towards us is as Jesus says it is, He is more inclined to give you what you need than the best human father is inclined to give their children what they need.

Thirdly, Jesus teaches us to prevail in prayer. without doubting the Father's love and I mean hanging in there, I mean persevering, persisting, not giving up in a life of prayer, keep on asking and seeking and knocking until the answer comes or until God says, frankly, stop praying about that issue.

[12 : 37] To me, this instruction from Jesus though to prevail in prayer, it feels a little inconsistent with His teaching to feel secure in the Father's love.

I mean, if God is more caring than the best earthly father, then why would He sometimes be so slow to respond to our prayers? There seems to be a little bit of inconsistency there for me.

It seems strange that Jesus would put both of these things together, side by side. In verses 5 to 8, Jesus tells the story of a man who goes to his mate's house in the middle of the night because a mate of his has turned up to his place and he hasn't had enough food and he needs to feed him in the middle of the night and he's obviously diabetic, his sugars are running low or something like that, he needs to eat now and he can't wait for breakfast.

And so he goes to his mate's place and he says, give me three loaves of bread. He's obviously pretty hungry. Give me three loaves of bread. But his friend, you know, from upstairs goes, oh my goodness, you know, leans out the window.

The door's locked, the cats are out, I put my teeth out, you know, and the children are asleep, you know, go down to 7-Eleven and grab some loaves of bread from down there. But his mate just keeps knocking and asking until his friend finally, you know, jams on his boxer shorts and wanders downstairs.

[13 : 57] But he doesn't get up because he wants to. It's not because he wants to help his friend, it's because his friend has been prevailing, persisting, persevering in knocking and knocking and knocking.

It's like a car alarm that's gone off in the car park and won't shut up. It feels like an unattractive image of prayer, doesn't it?

God only answers because we annoy him enough for him to answer. You see, when my kids badger me for an answer to a request of theirs, it's never attractive. Neither is my response either, but it's never attractive.

More often than not, it's because frankly, I don't want to go out of my way to fulfill the request. It's going to cost me something, either dollars or energy or... Just like this man in this house, go away, it's the middle of the night.

It's not an attractive image of prayer and frankly, it's not really an attractive image of God, is it? But immediately, Jesus says, there's a lesson to learn here. He says, See, three times, there are three things here, sorry, that stress the importance of not giving up in prayer.

[15 : 13] Firstly, it's the present tense of the verbs that signifies a continuous action. Keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking. The second is that Jesus actually commands this continuous action three times.

And then he repeats the three words, again in verse 10. And the third thing that stress is prevailing is the three words used here get increasingly close to the answer and if you like, show a pressing in on God.

You know, asking, it's the simplest thing, it's basically where we mostly give up. Asking, it requires no movement at all, just ask God and see what happens. Seeking turns the asking into an activity of pursuit and then the knocking on again and again and again signifies an utter earnestness, perhaps even a desperation that this prayer must be answered.

Jesus clearly wants us to be like the friend who just was out there and just kept knocking, just kept knocking. He wants us to prevail in prayer, to prevail in God-centered prayer.

Not prayers for your Ferrari and stuff like that, in God-centered prayer. The point of these verses is to show us that prevailing prayer, persisting, persevering in prayer is utterly important for us.

- [16 : 38] You see, and what Jesus does is he stamps this truth into our memories with this terrible image of this mate gone to bed who just cannot be bothered to get up and help without being bothered enough to help.

But then notice what Jesus does, is he makes this sudden turn in verse 11. And he shifts from the grumpy mate to the image of the caring father again.

Jesus qualifies his point in verses 11 to 13 by saying that God is not like your friend in the house. God is the caring, loving, approachable father.

So yes, sometimes God gives us what we need only after a long, long season of prevailing and persisting in prayer.

But no, it's not because he's uncaring, it's not because he's insensitive, it's not because he's unable. What makes it difficult for us is that Jesus does not tell us directly why the answers to our prayers are postponed.

- [17 : 46] That's what makes this passage so difficult. He doesn't give us an answer why. But he does tell us indirectly. He says in verse 11 that a good father will not give his son a serpent if he asks for a fish.

In other words, a good father will only give his children what is good for them. And that's the only answer to the question in this text.

When the father in heaven gives us a slow response, when he wills that we persevere for a season in prayer without an apparent answer whatsoever, when he wills that we keep knocking, knocking, knocking, knocking, it's because he's giving us a fish and not a snake.

That's the only answer we get from the text. He is giving us what is good for us. There is something in the persevering, in the asking, in the seeking, in the knocking that we need.

You see, the power of prayer never means that God stopped being God and that we start being God. That is, we start telling God what he needs to do.

- [18 : 56] That's not what power of prayer is. We do not have the wisdom or the grace to run the universe. God is God. He will continue to decide how to run the universe the ultimate, the best way.

The Christian lives by faith in God's goodness and his sovereignty. And the promise that will encourage us in prevailing prayer is simply verse 10, everyone who asks receives, he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

He's not unresponsive to our prayer. We do not pray in vain. He is our father. When he hears his children, he responds. He's not deaf, he's not indifferent, he's not powerless, he acts and he hears.

The final direction that Jesus gives us here in prayer, and it's really important for us to understand about this concept of prevailing prayer, just keep knocking and knocking and knocking and knocking until we get the answer.

Because the final direction, if you like, is a circling back to the first point of God-centered prayer. And if I understand Jesus here, he means for this to be the prevailing heartbeat of our prayer life here at St. Paul's, and the heartbeat for your prayer life for 2017, Jesus teaches in verse 13 that our prevailing for prayer, our prevailing prayer, our consistent persistence, our knocking and knocking and knocking and seeking and seeking and seeking, should be a prayer for the seeking of the Holy Spirit.

[20 : 33] If you then, verse 13, if you then, though you are evil, there it is again, know how to give good gifts to your children. How much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?

You see, that's the fish that he delights to give us. That's the fish right there. Luke tells us in chapter 3 that Jesus, that while Jesus was praying, the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove.

The outpouring of the Spirit of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2 came at the climax of a 10-day prayer vigil and in Acts 4.31 where the church had prayed, the place where they gathered was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.

I would suggest that prevailing prayer is the pathway to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and this is a constant need for the church. It's a constant need for us here at St. Paul's for ongoing and continual renewal.

Even under the leadership of the apostles in the New Testament, it is evident that there is still and there was still a need for continual renewal in the early church.

[21 : 43] Just as Israel's election as God's people was demonstrated at Mount Sinai, so the church is constituted by the descending and filling of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2, but just as Israel was continually called right throughout the Old Testament to Sinai-like covenant renewals with God, likewise the church, even when it doesn't seem to be in any form of major decline, receives fresh feelings of the Holy Spirit.

If you look at the book of Acts, there are many pentecosts in Acts 4, 31, 755, 817, 1044, and 139.

That is, there's a continual need to renew, continual need for fullness of the Holy Spirit for the church. I had a conference church, a few years ago, I heard American Pastor Tim Keller conduct a seminar on the history of revival, which is basically what I mean and what he means when we're talking about spiritual renewal.

And he gave you a glimpse of what the outpouring of God's spirit looks like in the local church. And let me tell you, it was compelling for someone like me, it just set my heart on fire when I listened to him say this.

He said, spiritual renewal, he's also written about it, which is what I'm quoting here. He said, spiritual renewal is a work of God in which the church is beautified and empowered because the normal operations of the Holy Spirit are intensified.

[23 : 10] When there is an outpouring of the Spirit on and within the congregation, the presence of God among his people becomes evident and palpable. When spiritual renewal happens, sleepy or stagnant Christians wake up.

There is a new and a deeper conviction of sin and repentance not just for the major behavioural sins but for attitudes, deep attitudes in the heart. But with that, they experience, the same people experience the far more powerful assurance of the nearness of God and his love for them.

And with the end result, the Christians become both humble and bold at exactly the same time. The more deeply one feels his or her debt of sin, the more intensely he or she feels the wonder of the payment on their behalf.

He goes on and says, nominal Christians or Christians by name only begin to realise they don't actually have a living relationship with Jesus, with Christ by grace and they get converted.

And he said it electrifies people. Long-term members are getting up and talking about being converted or speaking of Christ in radiant terms and expressing repentance in brand new ways. The early stage of renewal shake up other nominals and sleepers into renewal.

[24 : 25] And corporately, there's a sense of more passion and more freedom and the presence of God in corporate worship is just palpable. As a result of this outpouring of the Spirit, new people are brought into the church and the church begins to grow.

On the one hand, the renewed believers create a far more attractive community of sharing and caring and often great worship. This is the beautified community of the King.

This can attract people from the outside. On the other hand, Christians who begin to experience God's beauty and His power and love put their relationship with Christ and His church as first in their lives.

They become radiant and attractive witnesses, more willing and confident to talk to others about their faith, more winsome and less judgmental when they do so, and more confident in their own church and thus more willing to invite people to visit their own church.

And as a result, there are numerous conversions, significant, even at times astounding, church growth occurs. And so there is an impact on the community surrounding the church and even the broader culture.

[25 : 27] Spiritual renewal produces people who become involved in works of social concern and social justice. The reason for this is that real holiness changes the private and the public lives of Christians.

True religion is not merely a matter, a private matter, providing internal peace and fulfillment. Rather, it transforms our behavior and our relationships. man, that just, bring it on.

You know, that's what spiritual renewal, pray for that for St. Paul's. Pray for that across the church. That just sets my heart on fire. You see, when Callie is talking about spiritual renewal, as I believe the Bible does, he means a deep renewal of the gospel in our hearts, which is the work of the Holy Spirit through the word of God.

It's not some random thing that happens without the word of God. It is something where the Spirit of God does a deep work in our hearts through his word and brings us alive.

Let me just stand over here just for a moment and put my community group hat on and say, get in a community group in 2007-8. This sort of stuff happens in community.

[26 : 46] Get into a community group for your joy, for your maturity, for your growth, and for your transformation as a Christian. And if your community group is not praying for this kind of renewal, then work for this kind of renewal in your community group.

Okay, that's my plug. This is the sort of stuff I want to see happen here at St. Paul's this year. Will you pray for it? Pray for this kind of renewal in your heart for you and for us corporately in this coming week.

This is prayer week. Make it a focus this coming week. There is so much to say about spiritual renewal of a church, but we will, let me just focus on what is biblically and historically the one non-negotiable universal ingredient in times of spiritual renewal.

Corporate, prevailing, intensive, kingdom-centered prayer. A pleading for God, for the fullness of the Spirit.

Kingdom-centered prayer is focused on God's presence and His kingdom. It's the sort of prayer that is modeled for us in the Lord's prayer. It is a prayer for grace to confess our sins, to humble ourselves, prayer for compassion and zeal for the flourishing of the church and for a yearning to know God, to see His face, to see His glory.

[28 : 08] Such prayer need not, in fact, I would say, usually does not begin as an organized church program.

All right, first way to begin is let's organize a church prayer program. Let's have some prayer meetings. That's not normally how it starts. It often begins with people like you, people like me, who spend time in prayerful self-examination.

That's where it begins. So this is prayer week, and if you do nothing else this week, spend this prayer this week in prayerful self-examination with confidence.

And on one hand, total confidence in the gospel and what you have in Jesus. Be hard on yourself at the same time and search out, examine your heart for idols that that displace Jesus as the supreme treasure and Lord of your life.

kingdom-centered prayer is prevailing. By this, I simply mean that prayer should be constant, not sporadic.

[29 : 15] It shouldn't be brief. Not because, as we've already seen, that God wants us to grovel or that he doesn't care, but sporadic, brief prayer shows a lack of dependence on God.

It's a healthy self-sufficiency, an unhealthy self-sufficiency. We must pray without ceasing, we must pray long, we must pray hard for spiritual renewal.

And when we do, we will find that the very process itself is bringing about the very thing that we're asking for, to have our hard hearts melted, to tear down barriers, barriers, and to have the glory of God break through that we might see his face.

So as we kick off a new year of ministry, we are doing what we have done for a number of years, beginning the ministry year in a week of prayer. And we do this, I think, for a number of reasons.

One is we make a statement as a church. It's a statement to God, it's a statement to the world, it's a statement to our own consciences, that we exist as a church to do things that we cannot do without the supernatural grace of God.

[30 : 28] I believe that God has given us a vision for the future for us as a church. We launched it back in November last year. But he's given us a vision which is just so hard and so difficult that we ought to consistently be going back to him to ask him for the ability to fulfill the vision he's given us because we cannot do it ourselves.

Everything good, everything worthwhile, everything eternal, and God glorifying that we want to do as a church, we cannot do without the supernatural grace of God. And so as we begin this year together, I would urge you to take time to pray for yourselves, that you would enter into a brand new season of self-examination.

If you're not used to praying, maybe the first prayer is, Lord, help me to pray. Teach me to pray. Ask that you may be with full assurance in Christ, nonetheless hard on yourself.

Self-examination. Lord, expose the idols of my heart. Ask that God would show you ways in which you don't represent Christ as you should in your relationships, in your work life, in your family life, in your habits, in your attitudes, in your relationships here, even with church.

Take time to pray for yourself. That God will make things you know about the gospel, things that you've heard over and over and over again, make their way to your heart so that it explodes your affections for Christ.

[32 : 03] Amen.