

PRAYER 2015

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- [0 : 0 0] Last week, Debbie took us in the passage of the Garden of Gethsemane on prayer, and Jesus was a little cross at his disciples for sleeping while he prayed.
- If you're at the working bee yesterday and you happen to sleep while I preach on prayer, I'm prepared to forgive that. It was a pretty big day. Don't forgive me, however, if I happen to sleep while I preach.
- I'm feeling pretty smashed today. It was a huge day. It was very hot. A lot was achieved. And I just want to add my thanks to that of Lindy's for everyone who participated.
- It was great. It was a real encouragement for me to see people from every congregation doing a whole range of things across the church. And it was wonderful to see all that. There was people cleaning, which was fantastic to see that happening.
- And it's wonderful to be able to go out there this morning and not have a building site as much as what it was. Painting preparation, as Lindy said. There was people doing a whole range of things yesterday, and I just appreciate all that.
- [1 : 0 8] And Lindy herself, who put in a big day but also provided everyone with a fantastic morning tea. When I first came to this church, someone said about working bees, they're worth going to for the morning tea itself.
- And that hasn't changed. And so thank you, Lindy, for that and for everyone else who's involved. Let me pray. Gracious Father, I pray that you would help us to pray, that you would teach us more about your priorities in prayer.
- And I pray, Father, that this year would be a year of prayer for us as a church. And so, Lord, for that to happen, we need to be humbled. And so, Father, humble us.
- Help us to see our weakness and our dependency upon you. And we ask it for your glory. Amen. It is the will of the Lord Jesus that St. Paul's be a church of prayer.
- He wills that you and I be given to daily prevailing prayer for the filling of the Holy Spirit, for the progress of the gospel, for personal needs, and for the glory of God's name.
- [2 : 2 2] A couple of weeks ago, when I preached on the Lord's Prayer, I reminded us of the incredible privilege of prayer to be able to go to the creator and sustainer of this world, who's got control of everything in your life and everything in this world, and to be able to call him Father.
- To be able to go to the God of this universe and call him Father. And yet, with all the privileges that prayer affords us, I think that the hard truth is that for many of us, we don't pray very much.
- You know, we pray at mealtime and we whisper a prayer, you know, before a tough meeting. We say something brief as we crawl into bed before we close our eyes and sleep.
- I suspect that very few of us set aside a time to pray, and few of us still think it's worth to meet with others to pray.

I would suggest that's one of the reasons why often, not just for us as a church, but for us in the Western world, our faith is weak, our hope is feeble, and our passion for Christ is small.

[3 : 33] Intentional, regular, disciplined, earnest, Christ-centered, God-glorifying, joyful prayer is not just a privilege, but it is in fact the duty of the Christian.

It's a duty in the way that it's the duty of a scuba diver to put his tanks and his mask on before he goes diving. It's the duty of a pilot to listen to air traffic control.

Prayer for the Christian is a duty in the same way it's a duty for a soldier in combat to clean and to make sure that his weapon is loaded. It's a duty in the way that hungry people need to eat food.

It's a duty in the way that thirsty people need to drink. It's a duty of, in the same way that I as a diabetic need to inject my insulin. It's that kind of duty.

It's a necessity duty. It's a lifeblood duty. And as we spend the first five weeks of this year on prayer, my hope is that it will contribute to us seeing that, not just the privilege of prayer, but the duty of prayer, and also for our prayer as a church to become more and more effective as we move into 2015.

[4 : 47] And so what I want to do today is I want to turn our attention to Jesus. We have him praying at the beginning of Luke 11. So get your Bibles, turn to Luke 11. It's our text for us this morning.

And there are at least four things that Jesus teaches us here about prayer and that I want us to turn our attention to. The first two I'm going to look at very briefly.

The last two I'm going to slow down a bit. The first two look at briefly because we saw them a couple of weeks ago when I preached on the Lord's Prayer. And I want to slow it down a little bit on the last two, especially because I think these last two things ought to be the heartbeat of our prayer in 2015.

In fact, not just 2015, but in fact every year. Firstly, Jesus teaches us to make our praying God center. That's the first thing. We saw it a couple of weeks ago. When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray in verse 1, he says to them in verse 2, when you pray, say, Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come.

As I said a couple of weeks ago, the Lord's Prayer is a prayer that Jesus gave for us as a model of prayer rather than a prayer that we are to pray with repetition in and of itself because both the Matthew version and the Luke version are actually different from one another.

[6 : 05] They're not exactly the same. On a particular note is what Jesus says, is that our first desire, our first request in prayer should be that God's name be hallowed or glorified and that his kingdom advance and he's come.

That is, the first thing is God. That is, 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 is foreign to you, if you never plead for the name of God 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, don't be content to just be stuck there in prayer.

Make the glory of God the center of your prayers. Pray again and again with as many different words as you can think and muster, Father, let your name be seen as holy in my life.

May your will be done and in the process of your will be done in my life, crucify my will and let your kingdom come. That my life be surrendered, that this world be surrendered to you.

[7 : 24] Secondly, Jesus teaches us to pray with a sense of security in the Father's love. You see, 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 two begins simply with Father. And then in verses 11 to 13, he unpacks for us some of the security which is implied in that title, Father.

This is the great promise to encourage us in our praying. 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? 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?

You see, the words there, how much more, means something utterly crucial for us. They mean that God is more inclined to hear me and help me when I pray than I am willing to hear or to help my daughters when they call out for my help.

[8 : 46] And that astounds me. I find that utterly astounding. Why does Jesus mention this?

I think he wants us to feel totally, totally secure in the Father's love when we come to hear him in prayer. He doesn't want us to feel insecure.

He doesn't want us to feel precarious or unsure of our acceptance. He doesn't want us to feel fearful that we will find the Father out of sorts with us or even that he will be unconcerned for us.

And this sense of security is utterly crucial for a life of prayer. You cannot sustain a life of prayer if you believe that God is stonewalling you or that you believe that he's angry with you or that you believe that he is neutral to you.

Prayer is sustained by the confidence that God is our Father and that he is concerned and that his disposition towards the disciple of the Lord Jesus is exactly what he says it is.

[10 : 12] He is more inclined to give you what you need than the best human fathers. That's his disposition. Thirdly, Jesus therefore teaches us to prevail in prayer without doubting the Father's love.

I mean here, hanging in there, persevering, persisting, not giving up in prayer. Keep on asking and seeking and knocking until the answer comes or until God says stop praying.

And to me, this instruction from Jesus to prevail in prayer on the surface feels inconsistent with the teaching to feel secure in the Father's love.

Feels inconsistent. I mean, if God is more caring than the best earthly father, then why would he sometimes be so slow to respond to me?

It seems strange that Jesus put both of these two things beside each other. On the surface, it seems strange. In verses 5 to 8, Jesus tells the story of a man who goes to his friend's house in the middle of the night to say that a guest has just arrived, he hasn't got enough food in his fridge and he needs some food to feed him.

[11 : 31] And so he asks his friend for three loaves of bread, but his friend says, go away, the door's locked, I put the cat out for the night, the children are asleep and frankly, I can't be bothered coming downstairs.

Go to the 7-Eleven store and find something there. And yet this friend keeps knocking, he keeps asking until his friend in frustration gets up.

Notice that he doesn't get up because he wants to help his friend, but because his friend keeps revailing, keeps persisting, keeps knocking and think, oh my goodness, I'm going to have to open the door and give him his food so I can go back to bed for the night.

It doesn't feel very attractive. It's not a very attractive vision of prayer in my mind. God only answers because I annoy him enough to give him what he wants, to give us what we want.

I mean, I'll be frank with you, when my kids badger me for an answer to a request of theirs, it's never attractive. More often than not, it's because the reason why they badger me is because I don't want to go out of my way to fulfill the request.

[12 : 50] Can we go to the park? Really? I mean, that involves me packing it, well, that involves not packing everything in the car.

It means food, it means water bottles, it means sunscreen, it means hat, it means, and then when we get there, it's not like I'm going to sit back on the bench and read the paper and have a drink.

It means I've got to do all the pushing, I've got to, can we go to the park? Maybe tomorrow. See, it's never attractive and that's the sort of vision that we have here of prayer or a vision of God, in fact, but immediately Jesus says that there's a lesson.

So I say to you, ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you. Three things here stress the importance of not giving up in prayer.

One is the present tense of the verbs that what they say is continuous action. Keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking. The second is that Jesus commands it.

[13 : 57] He commands the continuous actions and repeats it again in verse 10. And the third thing that stress is prevailing is that the three words used get increasingly closer to the answer as we press upon God.

asking is the simplest thing and requires no movement. Seeking turns asking into an activity of pursuit. Knocking on and on on the door again and again signifies an utter earnestness and perhaps even a sense of desperation and a sense of weakness that I'm totally dependent that God, you need to answer this.

And so Jesus, he clearly wants us to be like this friend who kept knocking. He wants us to prevail in prayer and prevailing in God-centered prayer particularly.

The point of these verses is to show us that prevailing prayer that is persisting and persevering in prayer is utterly crucial for us. Jesus stamps this truth on our memories with this terrible image of this friend who won't help unless he's being bothered to help.

But notice he makes this sudden turn in verse 11 and he shifts from the image of the grumpy friend to the image of the caring father again.

[15 : 33] He qualifies his point in verses 11 to 13 and saying that God is not like that friend. He's not like the owner of the house who can't be bothered.

God is the caring, loving, approachable father and so yes, sometimes he gives us what we need only after a long season of prevailing and persisting in prayer but no, it's not because he's like the grumpy friend.

There's another reason. What makes it difficult for us is that Jesus doesn't directly tell us the other reason but he does 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.

That is the only answer that Jesus gives us as to why he wants us to prevail in prayer. When the father in heaven gives us a slow answer, when he wills that we persevere for a season in prayer without an apparent answer, it's because he's giving us a fish and not a snake.

[17 : 04] That's the only reason. He is giving us what is good for us. There is something in the persevering, the asking, the seeking, and knocking that we need and that he's giving to us.

The prevailing prayer is part of his gift to us. It is good for us. The power of prayer never means that God stops being God.

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 his way. The Christian is to live by faith in his goodness and in his sovereignty and we'll talk more about that next week.

And the promise that will encourage us in prevailing in prayer is simply verse 10, everyone who asks receives, he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks the door be opened.

God is not unresponsive to our prevailing prayer. We do not pray in vain. He is our father and when he hears his children he responds.

[18 : 19] He is not deaf or indifferent or powerless. He hears and he acts. And specifically what does he hear and what does he act for?

And so the final thing that Jesus, final direction if you like, that Jesus gives us in prayer is in a sense of circling back to the very first point of God centredness.

And if I understand Jesus here correctly, he means for it to be the prevailing heartbeat of our prayer life here at St. Paul's this year.

And in fact, I want to suggest every year, but let's just focus on 2015. The prevailing heartbeat of our prayer life for 2015. Jesus teaches in verse 13 that our prevailing in prayer, our pleading and knocking and seeking and asking should be prevailing upon God for the filling of the Holy Spirit.

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 you a fish?

[19 : 33] What's the fish? The good thing that we need? The Holy Spirit to those who ask him. That's the fish that he delights to give us.

Luke tells us in chapter 3 that while Jesus was praying, the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove. The outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost came at the climax of a 10-day prayer vigil.

And in Acts 4 verse 31, when the church had prayed the place they were gathered were shaken and they were filled with the Holy Spirit, prevailing prayer is the pathway to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

This is a constant need for the church, ongoing and continual spiritual renewal. It's interesting that as you go through the New Testament that even under the leadership of the apostles, it is evident that there is still a need for continual renewal in the church.

Just as Israel's election as God's people was demonstrated at Mount Sinai, so the church is constituted by the descending and the filling of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2.

[20 : 48] But just as Israel is continually called upon to Sinai-like covenant renewals, so the church, even when it doesn't seem to be in any form of major decline, receives fresh and ongoing fillings of the Holy Spirit throughout the New Testament.

Many Pentecosts happen right throughout Acts, chapter 4, chapter 7, chapter 8, chapter 10, chapter 13. There is a continual need to renew the fullness of the Spirit amongst the church.

And we see in the Old Testament that the fullness of the Spirit in general is connected to the prevailing prayers of the church, especially in the face of challenge.

And I don't know about you, but I can see a significant number of challenges before us as a church right now. Why would we want to prevail in prayer for the filling of the Holy Spirit in us as a church?

I can think it's because of our mission statement that's written on our walls that we as a church exist to know Jesus, treasure Jesus, and represent Jesus. Why do we want to do that? For God's glory and the joy of all people.

[22 : 17] St. Paul's wants to see God's name hallowed amongst us. God's name is a God's name and when it is, we and all people connected with that will experience maximum joy.

And so we ought to prevail in prayer for the Holy Spirit to come, that our mission statement might be fulfilled. As Tim Keller has written, 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.

He goes on to suggest that historically there is an outpouring, where there is an outpouring of the Spirit on and within the congregation, the presence of God amongst people, amongst God's people, becomes evident and palpable.

He said, when that happens, when spiritual renewal happens, sleepy or stagnant Christians wake up. He said, there is a new and deeper conviction of sin and repentance, not for major behavioural sins but for attitudes of the heart.

But with that they experience at the same time a far more powerful assurance and the nearness of the love of God with the end result is that Christians become both humbler and bolder at the same time.

[23 : 47] The more deeply one feels our sin, our debt, the more intensely we will feel the wonder of the payment of that debt for us by the Lord Jesus.

Nominal Christians or Christians by name only begin to realise that they don't actually have a living relationship with the Lord Jesus by grace, they get converted. And when this begins to happen, it electrifies people.

this is spiritual renewal in the church. It electrifies people. Long-time members start getting up and talking about being converted and speaking of Christ in radiant terms and expressing repentance in new ways.

And the early stages of renewal shake up everyone else in the church as nominals, other sleepers start to get renewed by the Spirit as well. Corporately, there's a sense of more passion and freedom and presence of God in corporate worship.

And as a result of his outpouring of the Spirit, new people are brought in the church and begins to grow. On the one hand, the renewed believers create a far more attractive community as they share and care and they love for one another and corporate worship becomes something that they aspire to be part of and desire to be part of week by week.

[25 : 01] There is a beautifying of the community of the King that attracts people from the outside. And on the other hand, Christians who begin to experience God's beauty and his power and his love, put their relationship with Christ and the church first in their lives.

They become radiant and attractive witnesses, more willing and confident in fact to speak about the Lord Jesus, their faith in him. They become more winsome in the way they speak and less judgmental when they do so and more confident in their own church and so they start bringing people along.

That's renewal of the Spirit. people get converted, potentially even in significant numbers. And so there is an impact of the community surrounding the church and even the broader culture.

So spiritual renewal produces people who become involved in works of social concern and social justice. The reason for this is that real, genuine relationship with Jesus results in real, genuine holiness and it changes not just your private life but your public life as well.

That's spiritual renewal. True religion is not merely a private matter providing some sort of internal peace and fulfillment. It transforms our behavior and our relationships and that is public.

[26 : 30] life. Let me make one point of clarification. I'm not saying that spiritual renewal equals church growth. That's not what I'm saying.

The fact is that many churches do grow rapidly but there are telltale symptoms of lifelessness. Much growth can be transferred growth rather than conversion growth.

life. There is no, not necessarily a deep conviction of sin and repentance and therefore few people attest to any sort of dramatic change in lives. When this sort of growth happens in a church, the church makes no impact on the local social order whatsoever because people do not carry the Christian faith out into the use of their wealth and into their work and into their public lives.

With our deep renewal of the gospel in our hearts, our external lives will be sealed off from what we believe and our beliefs will never result in concrete change in our lives.

So when I talk about spiritual renewal, I mean deep renewal of the gospel in our hearts, which is the work of the Holy Spirit through the word of God and it's often throughout the New Testament and throughout history connected to the prevailing prayers of God's people for an outpouring of the Spirit upon his people.

[28 : 02] Now there is much that can be said about spiritual renewal of the church, but we will concentrate on just that last point. Biblically and historically, the non-negotiable universal ingredient in times of spiritual renewal is corporate, prevailing, intensive, kingdom centred prayer.

Not whether the prayer is local or global. Let me make that point. Not whether prayer is local or global. Kingdom centred prayer.

Kingdom centred prayer is focused on God's presence and his kingdom. It's a sort of prayer that is modelled for us in the Lord's prayer. It is a prayer for grace, for us, the people of God, to confess sins, to humble ourselves, a compassion and zeal for the flourishing of the church, a yearning to want to know God, to see his face, to see his glory.

Such prayer need not, in fact, usually does not begin as an organised church program. It most often begins with people who spend time in personal, prayerful, self-examination.

With confidence in the gospel of grace, they examine themselves for idols and they set those idols aside. Kingdom centred prayer is prevailing prayer.

[29 : 37] By this I simply mean that prayer should be constant, not sporadic, and not brief. Not because, as I've already said, that Jesus wants us to grovel or that he doesn't care, but sporadic, brief prayer shows a lack of dependence on God and unhealthy self-sufficiency.

And so we must pray without ceasing to pray long and to pray hard for spiritual renewal. When we do, we will find that the very process in praying itself is bringing about that which we are asking for.

Get that? The very process of prevailing in prayer is bringing about the thing that we're actually asking for. To have our hard hearts melted, to tear down barriers, and to have the glory of God break through.

And so as we begin another year together, I want to urge you to take time to pray for yourselves. That you would enter a season of self-examination.

That we would enter a season of self-examination. And that you, that I, may be with full gospel assurance hard on ourselves.

[31 : 06] ask that God would show you ways in which you don't represent Christ as you should, in your relationships, in your work, in your family life, in your habits, in your attitudes, in your relationships within your church.

Take time to pray for yourselves that God will make things you know about the gospel so real in your head and in your heart that it will change everything in your life.

love. So I'm going to lead us in prayer now. I'm going to pray, starting off with confession, and then having prayed with confession, I'm going to move us into a time of the assurance of our relationship with God in the Lord's Supper together.

Father. So if you'd like to bow your heads, we'll pray. O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God, you have most magnificently revealed your power and goodness to us in the person and work of your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thank you that in him, by grace and mercy, you have brought us to know and to love you and to delight in your commands.

[32 : 43] And yet, our gracious Father, we confess that our love for you is flawed. We love ourselves and our concerns ahead of you and your people and your kingdom.

We think little about some sins. We think big about some sins, but little about others. We think often of sins in terms of issues, mistakes, flaws, rather than attitudes of independence from you.

Father, we gossip and we malign and we harm our relationships. We are greedy for gain. We'll be dishonest if we think we're not seen and we can get away with it.

We are drawn to the works of darkness. And yet, even times we delight in hidden wickedness. Turn our hearts from such wickedness and help us to delight in your goodness.

Please forgive us, Lord Jesus. Help us to live knowing your eyes, see everything, and wanting to please you, our King. We ask that you would pour out upon us your Holy Spirit.

[34 : 00] Give us the patience and the endurance to keep prevailing for that request. Revive us with a passion for you and your purposes. May we be a true light to your goodness in this dark world.

Keep us from hypocrisy and pretense. Please bless your church family at St. Paul's. May our work and our witness be blessed because your name is great.

May our unity be testimony to love that we have for one another in Christ. Grant us your favour as we minister in your name to the communities in which we live and we work and carry the name of the Lord Jesus.

Revive us, Lord Jesus, we pray. Our magnificent King. We thank you, our Father, that in your love and mercy you gave your Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross for our salvation.

By this offering of himself once and for all time, the Lord Jesus made a full and perfect, total, sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.

[35 : 10] And he commanded us to continue remembrance of his precious death until he's coming again. And so hear us, merciful Father, and grant that we who receive these gifts of your creation, this bread and this wine, according to our Saviour's command, in remembrance of his suffering and his death, may be partakers of his body and blood.

Amen.