

Chosen to serve

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[0 : 00] Let me pray and then we'll ask God really to speak this word to us. Father, we hear what you're saying. May we know what you're saying.

And may we, in this church, imitate what is happening in this early church here in Acts. So be with us now as we consider your word and have it explained.

We pray properly that what is of you, may it remain, and what is of man, may it forever disappear. In Jesus' name, amen. Well, as I said last week, we're considering our life as a praying life.

You can consider your life as a number of things, but consider it as a praying life. It is easier to pray, I think, when you get lots of prayers answered.

It's harder to pray, I also think, emotionally, spiritually, when you don't get your prayers answered.

[1 : 02] And so it seems to be the case that when you're going through a harder time, it's actually harder to pray rather than it being easier to pray. In other words, hard times don't necessarily mean that you go to God that quickly, because it's a difficulty.

Good times means that your mouth is full of praise for God, and because you've got lots to thank God for. But tonight, we're considering something completely different, and it's really the praying that somebody else has to do.

So I went through a few job descriptions of ministers and pastors and ministry trainees, which I'm able to get my hands on, since I used to be part of a partnership.

I'm no longer part of that partnership, because I'm here in Scotland. And I thought that I would look through them, just, you know, the old records that I had via email sent to me, just to have a look and to consider.

And how many of these applications, they were not for me, but they were for ministry trainees in other churches and that, how many actually wrote into their contract or their agreement to serve in the church that prayer was a necessity?

[2 : 20] It was a requirement. Not just you must have a prayerful life, as though that's something you do as a believer, but something more.

Then I decided to look at my contract that I got from this church. And I couldn't find it, so I don't know the answer. But the point here in Acts 6 is that we experience this in the church a lot.

And the reason why a person may not be devoted to prayer is because of how prayer is viewed by others. So, one of the common experiences in our church, like those in this church here, is that there is more to do than pray.

There is more to do than pray. And in fact, when there is more to do than pray, guess what happens? You pray less.

And so when there is more to do than pray, and you end up praying less, there is more to do even still because you are praying less. So, when there are several things to do, either we can all do the same thing, and therefore we get less done, or we can all do different things and therefore get a variety of things done.

[3 : 47] But it does seem to be the case that to devote yourself to any other type of service in the church is one, more visible, and two, more complete.

You get to see something at the end of it, whether it be serving on a Watt night or a YP night or even here on a Sunday. You've done something.

You've seemed to be doing something. You're stewarding on the door, and that's an important part. But it's also a visible part, and we notice it.

The trouble is, however, that in the book of Acts, it seems to be that prayer has to be considered in a slightly different way than we have come to consider prayer.

So, some people are devoted to some things in the church simply because not one person can do everything, but neither is one person to do everything. We have different people in the church for different reasons to serve in different areas.

[4 : 50] And that's the testimony, not just here in Acts, but the whole of the New Testament. We are different members of the same body. We all have a different skill set. God has given us different gifts, and God has also given us different responsibilities.

And so, because the role of prayer, according to Acts 6, is something that mustn't stop, especially in a busy, growing church, it must continue in any church, what do you do when you have a heavier workload?

Well, as we see here, they divide the workforce up, and some are to serve tables, some are to go and do the practical work, but here we notice in Acts 6 that prayer is also a work.

Now, that's where I think our distinction has to change because how many of us consider prayer to be a work? We often speak of praying for the work as though praying is secondary.

It's not the real work. It supports the real work, but prayer isn't the real work. And I think that's how the church has come to frame prayer, that prayer is not the real work.

[6 : 06] It's supportive of the real work, but it's not the real work. And so, the emphasis on prayer and prayer as work is just completely lost. And so, a person praying is misunderstood, wasting their time.

They should be doing something rather than just praying. And so, when those attitudes arise in the church, and that emphasis is made, the action of prayer is just lost.

You just don't pray. Now, before I came into the ministry, when I had a proper job, as some people would put it, I used to be a gang leader.

Now, that didn't mean that I had a hoodie and that I'd walk around. I was a gang leader in the sense that I had two or three men underneath me, and we would go out to work on a particular building site, and we would do a day's work.

And as we were traveling back in the work van, if I was driving, or if one of the other guys were driving, sometimes, when we would arrive home late, especially on some building sites, you know, we got permission to stay until sort of seven, eight at night in the summer months, just to boost the income.

[7 : 20] You know, you work while the weather's good, make hay while the sun shines, so to speak. And this is what we did. And when we used to drive home, every now and then, we would see people who had already finished their day's work, and they were jogging.

And this puzzled us, because, and the reason it puzzled us is quite simple, is because we thought that if that person has enough energy to do a day's work and still jog afterwards, then they haven't done a hard enough day's work.

Well, when I was a roofer, I didn't think that was unfair. You know, my job was both physical and mental. I had to use mathematics quite a lot in order to gauge and build.

And whenever I used to see a person jogging, I used to say that, if you've got enough energy to jog, you've not done a hard enough day's work. And then all of a sudden, I find myself in the ministry, where I do nothing physical.

And then I realized just how important it is just to get outside, and not that I would ever take up jogging, by the way.

[8 : 33] I said last week, I don't see any point in going for a run, only to end up in the place where you started. Why not just stay where you were? You're already there. But then I became a minister, and when I became a minister, it was pointed out to me that Daniel, prayer is work.

And then at that point, I began to realize that it is the hardest work that I've ever had to do. Even with a sore back today, I'd much rather load tiles onto a roof from the ground with a ladder.

It's easier than commit yourself to the work of prayer. I wouldn't rather do it, because I know God's called me to something else, but prayer is work, and prayer is hard work.

And so in the same way, I looked at people jogging, and said to myself, and said to my workmates, they've not done a hard enough day's work. I now have that said about me, where people can look at a pastor spending time in prayer, and think that he's not doing enough work, because prayer in their minds is not considered work, it's considered something else.

But according to Acts 6, prayer is work, and it is a work that cannot be sort of set aside for other types of work in the church.

[10 : 03] Prayer is a work. It is a vital work. It's not supplemental to the real work. It's not secondary to the real work.

It is the primary work of those in the church who have been given that work to do. So I'm going to consider a few points with you this evening.

Here's the first one. Are, am I, okay, I'll say am I, and I'll say are we, but this is really speaking of a few people, a servant of prayer, or a servant of pressure?

Now there are only a couple of options here. You can either be a servant of pressure, and therefore you run around, and you try and sort everything out, or you can be a servant of prayer. But being a servant of prayer doesn't mean that you don't get up and do physical things in the church.

It doesn't mean that you don't serve. But the issue here is not between the actions of serving and praying in the closet on your own. The action here is which are you a servant of?

[11 : 06] A servant of prayer or a servant of pressure? And in Acts chapter 6, pressure arises. There's a problem in the church. The church is growing. There's few and far people who are serving one another effectively, and so something is done about it.

They appoint men to serve in the church, but they appoint men to serve in the church so that those who have been committed to word and prayer will continue to be committed to the word and prayer.

In other words, they will not succumb to the pressures that they're finding in the church. But in most cases, whatever is the greatest pressure in the church is the thing that gets the most attention.

It is the thing where most time is spent and where service follows. And so the normal state of most churches is that most people are always succumbing to whatever the pressure is.

Somebody needs to do it or it's not going to get done. And so the next thing that happens when you become a servant of pressure rather than a servant of prayer is that you have to reassess the priorities.

[12 : 20] And prayer, unfortunately, gets set down way low on the list because other things in the church need doing and you're not doing them. And so prayer, where it should be at the top of the list, at least for a leader, pastor, elder, ends up being pushed down the list because the pastor is succumbing to the pressures that are found in the church.

When his calling is to preach the word and to pray a lot in particular. That doesn't mean that that's all he does, but it's certainly a large percentage of what he does.

And so the same is true in any church, even in this church, that those in the church will always succumb to the things that are the greatest pressure. And so what kind of pressure should we be under when it comes to praying?

I'm not a doctor, but I found out the other day how we breathe. I've always been amazed that when a child is born that they don't have to think to breathe. In fact, you're an adult and not even you have to think to breathe.

Imagine for a moment if you did, would you still be alive? And do you know why you breathe? Do you know why it's much harder to hold your breath than it is to breathe?

[13 : 39] It is because there is a certain amount of atmospheric pressure on the outside of your body that pushes down on your lungs that causes them to take air in. And so you take air in and you let air out and because of that, that's why you breathe and that's why it's much harder to hold your breath because you're going against the natural pressure that God has so formed this world.

And so prayer creates, it ought to create that same type of pressure when you understand what prayer is actually for.

The trouble is, is that it seems easy not to pray. It's easier to go out and to show people that you're actually doing something, that you're actually serving whatever that serving may be.

You could be waiting on tables in the church. You could be seeing to the needs of the congregation which are important. But the interesting thing here is that when the division was made between those who were going to be serving and those who were going to be concentrating on the word of God and prayer, notice how verse five, that this pleased everyone in the congregation, meaning that not only did the leaders of the church understand that word and prayer was important, but the fellowship understood understood that the leaders had to concentrate on word and prayer.

In fact, if you're ever going to hold your pastor accountable, it should be, are you praying enough? Get to prayer. The emphasis here on the importance of word and prayer is put on the fact that it continues at the top of the list for some who are in that role to pray.

[15 : 25] It doesn't mean that prayer is a more important work in the sense that it's because it's dealing with God and not waiting on tables. No, it just means some have to devote themselves to that while others devote themselves to serving actively, physically.

It doesn't mean one's greater than the other or one's more important than the other before God. It simply means that you don't become servants to pressure, but you become servants to the priorities of God.

God is the one who organizes his church and says how it needs to be run. So, prayer is not a lesser work, but it can be seen to be by the church as a lesser work.

Prayer is not supportive of the work, it is the work. Prayer is the work for some. So, secondly then, the hard work of prayer is misunderstood.

So, when we speak in the church of praying for the work rather than prayer being the work, we've already downgraded prayer. We pray for the work, prayer then becomes supplemental to the actual real work rather than prayer actually being the work.

[16 : 38] So, we begin to imagine that prayer is a lesser action than those who are actually serving. You know, if you're spending all your time in prayer, you're not really doing as much as I'm doing who's carrying out many, many actions.

In other words, the action of prayer, time spent in prayer, is a lesser thing, it would appear, at least observationally in the church, than those who actively serve.

And so, prayer is downgraded, supplemental, secondary, supportive, without it actually being considered to be the real work for some.

When we look at the praying life of Jesus, our misunderstanding about prayer often continues and it goes something like this. One, why did Jesus pray?

Two, what did he pray about? And the fact is, there's only a couple of prayers or three prayers that we actually get to hear what Jesus said. Most of his other praying life, we don't get to hear anything, but why did he do it?

[17 : 41] I sat for the whole week asking myself the question, why did Jesus pray? What was he doing when he was praying? And the fact is, is that Jesus not only spent time with his father so that he went off to pray, he went up to the mountain, he came down from the mountain, and there we have Jesus spending time in prayer, but we tend to put it like this, in order to motivate ourselves to pray, or at least to motivate somebody else to pray.

And so we say, if Jesus needed to pray being Jesus, then how much more do we need to pray bearing in mind that we're not Jesus, right?

So if Jesus needed to pray being that Jesus is Jesus, how much more do we need to pray? And what ends up happening is that we again have downgraded prayer.

Prayer becomes something that needs to happen in order to continue rather than something that should happen because it is the work. So I've come to the conclusion that the reason why Jesus prayed was not just devotion, was not just to draw strength, but because he's serving God.

He's serving as much, he's serving God as much up on the mountain in prayer as he is down on the ground preaching sermons and healing people. Prayer is a work, and so if it is a work, it is also a work for Jesus.

[19 : 09] As much as it is a time of devotion and strength and equipping, it's a work. And so when we've downgraded prayer, prayer becomes something that we do when we've run out of steam.

Prayer becomes something that we do when we've run out of options. Prayer becomes something that we do when we recognize the limitations of our own ability. In other words, prayer again comes second to it actually being the real work.

We tend to think that if Jesus needed to pray, and look how much he could do, then how much more do we need to pray because we're not Jesus? And the point is, that's not the reason for praying.

We don't pray when we've run out of steam. We don't pray when we've run out of options. Okay? We pray to be given the options. We pray to be given the strength. Prayer is the work of God that we are to be involved in.

And so, yes, Jesus had devotion with his Father. Yes, he drew strength from his praying life, no doubt. Yes, it was about communion. But again, it wasn't supplemental.

[20 : 17] It wasn't like going to the petrol station where you filled back up. Prayer was the work. And so, I think prayer is misunderstood because we downgrade it.

And it becomes something additional rather than it actually being the main thing. One more consideration then, and that is that since prayer is work, who gives the job description?

Right? I had my first job, my first full-time job when I was 15. And from the age of 15, I've been working ever since.

And I can remember my first job description, I looked at it and thinking, I haven't got a hope in getting all this done in a day. It's just never going to happen.

But then I come to prayer and I think, well, who sets the job description? Do I set my own agenda? Because if prayer is work, guess what I'm going to do? I'm going to make my job as light as possible, as easy to do as I possibly can.

[21 : 30] But then I read Scripture and I look at the life of Paul and I look at the life of Epaphras and I begin to recognize that prayer or the job description for prayer is actually set by God and not by the minister themselves.

The one praying, according to Scripture, is to be devoted to God's agenda and not his own. In other words, I can't sit at the manse as I study thinking this needs praying for and that needs praying for and I would like to see that happen so I'm going to spend time praying for that.

I would like these people to do this. I'm going to pray to God that these people do this. In other words, what I'm doing is I'm setting my agenda for God's church and it should be the other way around.

So since prayer is work, who sets the job description? And you begin to find out that God has set the job description, bearing in mind that prayer is work.

To give an example of this, we turn to Paul and when Paul prays for the church, he prays for the whole church and he prays for a number of things. He recognizes that the church is only ever going to grow, that people in the church are only ever going to grow up in answer to prayer, that God is only really going to work and build the spiritual strength of the church through prayer and so he prays.

[22 : 51] Colossians 1, go read the prayer. Ephesians 1 and Ephesians chapter 3, which is the key prayer, go read that. Philippians chapter 1, again, is a prayer and there you begin to see what the job description is of a praying life of a minister.

to bear the church in mind where he's praying for their spiritual understanding that they may be filled with knowledge, that they may be filled with wisdom, that they may grow up and become mature in Christ.

His praying life consists of all the things that God wants for his people. Okay, that's the job description. Praying for all the things that God wants for his people.

Now, we've seen the same kind of thing with Epaphras over there in Colossians and this is what Paul had to say about him. He says, Epaphras is one who struggles on your behalf in his prayers that you, so here we have Epaphras praying, that you may stand mature and fully assured in the will of God.

Now, why is that so important? Well, number one, Epaphras is like the local minister who's overlooked because of the greater minister, Paul. Paul doesn't consider himself to be a greater minister, but Epaphras is just the local minister who's overlooked and Paul has to point out to them that this guy in your church is struggling in prayer for you.

[24 : 30] He's doing a great work and so prayer again becomes the work of a minister, not just something that the minister does because he's a Christian, it's something that he does because it is part of his workload.

So, let's conclude. While prayer is for every believer, prayer seems to be the specific work of a leader, of a pastor, of an elder.

while it's true that the church can only grow strong through its prayer meeting and the strength of the church is only ever as strong as its prayer meeting and its Bible study as you'll find countless ministers saying, it might also be true to say that when a church acts without praying, it is as weak as it can be.

Okay, let me say that again. When a church acts without praying, it is very weak. For the leader, for the pastor, for the elder, he has to be reminded that he's not to pray for the work.

He has to be reminded that prayer is the work. But it seems impossible, or it ought to seem impossible, for him to consider himself to be a leader of the church without being engaged in that kind of work.

[25 : 56] prayer. In other words, if you're going to appoint a pastor, or you have one, which you do, make sure he prays. Not just prays for your work, but prayer is the work of the pastor.

So the work of the congregation is also prayer, but in a different setting. The work of the leadership is one in which they have to be devoted to that thing in particular, lest it gets demoted in their life and in their workload.

And so in order for God's work to be done on earth as it is in heaven, just as Jesus said, he gives us his priorities. Pray your kingdom come.

Pray for your will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. In other words, the role of the pastor leader in prayer is to have his mind and heart so transfixed on the agenda of God, he knows exactly what to pray for at every moment of every day for the church.

So remember, we all have different roles, but as we appoint elders year in, year out, and as churches throughout the country appoint their leaders, they must be reminded as we are reminding ourselves tonight, and I am reminding myself that I'm not to pray for the work.

[27 : 25] I am to be reminded that prayer is the work. Amen.