

Fil-Am Community Church

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Key Verse: Acts 6:1-7

“The Priority of Praying Together”

Good morning! We’re starting a new series called “The Power of Praying Together”. This series was preached by Pastor Lloyd Stillely to his church in Alabama some years back and I got his permission because I felt this is something we need to learn. Pastor Stillely himself based this series on a book called “And the Place Was Shaken” by John Franklin. In this series, Pastor Dave and I are going to look at what the Scriptures tell us about corporate prayer or praying together as believers.

You see, corporate prayer has become a lost art. In the Old Testament and in the New Testament, we will find many instances of God’s people coming together at various times in regular fashion. Even in modern times, it was quite the norm. It sparked the Great Awakening and the Second Great Awakening in this country and also certain revivals around the world. But since the second half of the last century, it seems that it has lost its luster and importance.

So, my aim this morning is, first, to so persuade you from God's Word and from church history of the primacy of corporate prayer that you will never view the prayer meeting of our church the same again.

Second, my aim and my prayer is that you will determine to take one step forward in your participation and confidence in prayer, not just as an individual, but with other believers.

Now, I feel a sense of **caution** as I was preparing this message. **Caution** because this very topic can induce false guilt rather than a true persuasion.

You see, prayer is one of those topics that bring **excitement for some**, especially the intercessors or prayer-warriors as we call them, and **guilt to the rest of us**.

Intercessors are a different breed. They talk about going to a prayer meeting like watching the Redskins play football. Their tone and excitement changes at the very mention of the very thought of corporate prayer. But without knowing it, they can also make the rest of us feel like novices when it comes to corporate prayer.

I bring up the issue of praying together for three reasons:

1. Corporate prayer is on par with preaching and teaching as a priority in a healthy church.
2. Praying together is a vital key to opening God's presence and work among His people in unique ways. And
3. The tendency among believers, even among those who occupy leadership positions in the church, is to think of prayer gatherings as the extra-curricular activity in the life of the church. It's good to have, but not important enough to join; something you briefly tack on to a meeting before you get down to the real business. There

are a growing number of believers who view prayer meetings as optional, secondary.

This morning I am on a mission: I want to convince you that God has sovereignly ordained the corporate praying of a church, such that His mighty workings increase exponentially and His purposes are accelerated when we pray together. Now, I don't mean to minimize personal prayer. I believe in personal prayer and we teach that here. But there is something more profound, more essential when it comes to the reality of God working powerfully to transform lives and nations.

"Pretty bold statements, pastor. You got anything to back that up?" I'm glad you asked. I want to give you five proofs from the Word and world history that establish the fact that God wants his people to pray together. For what reason? It is because of this: Praying churches are used of God to change our lives, our church, our cities, our nation, and our world.

Here are the five proofs:

I. Praying Together was a Priority for the Apostles

In Acts 6, the Church in Jerusalem faced one of its first dilemmas. Please get your Bibles and open to this passage. Here's how it happened:

"In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of

the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

Now let's look again at the second part of verse 3 and verse 4. The apostles say, *“We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”*

Some say that this meant that the apostles delegated ministry responsibilities to others so that they would be freed up to spend time in personal prayer and receive a fresh word from the Lord to preach to the people. But that is not the point of this passage.

The apostles are not referring to the need for personal, private prayer. Nothing in this passage indicates that this is so. In fact, two commentaries say that the apostles refer to corporate prayer. In short, the apostles here are talking about the ministry of mobilizing the people of God to pray together. They were marking out the two ministries they must especially do as church leaders: leading prayer meetings or encouraging people to pray together and preaching and teaching the Word of God.

Some things we do as pastors **ARE** more important than others. There are some things **ONLY** we can do. According to this text the two priorities for the Pastor are: 1) Prayer and 2) the Word of God. This is why I am not taking away our prayer meeting on Wednesday nights even though sometimes there are only a few who show up. Like Kuya Elvin and Ate Bebutte who faithfully show up every Wednesday night. And you know what, it gladdens me when people turn in their prayer requests Sunday after Sunday which Tita Nelly faithfully compile together and bring them with her or email them to us to pray for. And when a few more folks like the family of Toks show up every now and then to join us to pray, it gladdens my heart some more and I want to shout “Hallelujah!”

Now, one thing we can also deduce from this statement of the apostles is that prayer is given the same importance as preaching. You see, in the book of Acts we see the word “preach” mentioned 24x. Then, we see the word “teach” 19x. And we see the word “pray” **34x**. Note that there’s even more mention of pray than preach and teach. I find this surprising. What we can say is that the Scriptures place great emphasis on prayer. It certainly is **NOT** the emphasis I received in my education. I have a Masters of Divinity degree but I don’t recall a class I attended which focused primarily on prayer and corporate prayer for that matter. Acts 6, however, shows us that prayer is an integral link to preaching.

So by testimony and by example, it is plain that the apostles placed a high premium on the people of God praying together. They considered guiding the corporate prayer life of the church just as critical a priority as the preaching and teaching of God's Word.

Let's add a second proof:

II. Praying Together was Modeled and Practiced by Christ

So, in the book of Acts, the apostles led the early Christians to pray together.

Where or from whom did they learn this leadership pattern?

Of course, from their Master, Jesus Christ. When you study the gospels, you will identify more or less 37 verses in which you will find Jesus teaching or practicing prayer. Of those 37 instances in which Jesus refers to prayer, 33 of them were addressed to a plural rather than singular audience. In other words, Jesus' instruction decisively leaned toward praying with others, not just praying in private.

Take, for example, the Lord's Prayer. It starts with "Our Father" not "My Father". Then it goes on..."Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses." Notice those are plural nouns, "Us", "Our". In other passages, Jesus deliberately emphasized the significance of praying together. Listen to Matt. 18:19, "*Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.*"

Jesus could have said, "If anyone asks..." instead, He deliberately chose to emphasize a group gathered for prayer. This focus of Jesus' on more than one praying indicates that there is a design of God in such gatherings, through which He uniquely and powerfully works.

We will note too that most of Jesus' private prayers occurred prior to choosing his twelve disciples. But after he chose them, most of his recorded prayer times

involved the disciples. Even in the Garden of Gethsemane, when facing the greatest crisis of his life, he asked his disciples to pray with him.

And so, years later, because of the teaching and example of Jesus, the apostles made it a point to also teach and practice prayer the same way.

The third proof that God wants us to pray together is that

III. Praying together Was Practiced in the New Testament

Again, we look at the Book of Acts. And we see there recorded the mighty works of God for and through His church in its early years, and clearly connects them to unified, corporate prayer.

For example, the 120 disciples were gathered in an upper room praying in one accord on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came down on each of them like tongues of fire and enabled them to become bold in preaching. (Acts 1:13; 2:1).

In Acts 1:24, the disciples prayed for wisdom in knowing who Judas' replacement should be. When Peter and John reported the Sanhedrin's threats, those gathered cried out to God in one accord for boldness, and the place was shaken where they prayed (Acts 4:24, 31).

The church prayed over the seven men appointed to serve the widows (Acts 6:6).

After James was martyred and Peter imprisoned by Herod, the church was fervently praying, and God miraculously delivered Peter from his cell (Acts 12:1-11).

While the prophets and teachers were praying and fasting, the Holy Spirit called Paul and Barnabas to go on their first missionary journey (Acts 13:1-2).

Paul and Silas were praying when God sent an earthquake that resulted in the conversion of the jailer and their release (Acts 16:25).

Again, let me say that I am not disparaging or putting down personal, private prayer. Ananias was praying alone when God instructed him to go to Saul (Acts 9:10ff.). Peter was alone on the rooftop when he had his famous vision leading him to share the Gospel with a Gentile named Cornelius (Acts 10:9ff.). Nevertheless, the majority of God's recorded workings came when His people prayed together.

God wants us to pray together. And God works more mightily, impacting lives, nations, and the world when his people pray together. So now, let's turn our attention to the fourth proof.

IV. Praying Together Sparked Revivals in the Past

There are so many examples of how corporate prayer was the springboard for the sweeping movements of God. Let me mention a few. In 1857, America was riding the wave of a strong economy. As tends to be true in times of prosperity, people showed a radical decrease of interest in the things of God. But there was a layman named Jeremiah Lamphier whose concern led to a call for prayer. He tacked up

notices in NYC calling for a weekly prayer meeting on Wednesdays from noon till one at a rented space on Fulton Street.

The first prayer meeting was on September 23, 1857. Only six people came, and they didn't arrive until just before 12:30. The next week, the attendance jumped to 20. The numbers continued to climb week-by-week.

Then, on October 10th, the Stock Market crashed and financial panic ensued. Trouble had its humbling effect / and the hearts of many turned to spiritual matters. It wasn't long until somewhere between 10 and 50,000 businessmen were meeting every day in NYC to pray at noon. By week 15, the meetings moved from weekly to daily.

In 1858, this prayer movement leaped to every major city in America. A great revival swept this land. Estimates are that a million Americans out of a population of 30 million at that time were converted in less than two years. And it all started with prayer.

Then there's also Rees Howells, a Welsh coal miner, who journeyed to South Africa as a missionary in 1910 in response to an increasing burden from the Lord. Six weeks after arriving, he joined in a prayer meeting. Out of that came the sweeping work of the Holy Spirit in which they had two revival meetings a day for fifteen months and all day on Friday. Thousands were converted as a result.

And you know what, prayer is the secret of success of Billy Graham's crusades. Months before his crusades begin, groups of people are organized who held daily prayers up to the end of the crusade. I read somewhere that one time, while he was

preparing for his sermon, Billy Graham felt a sudden surge of energy in his body and right there and then he wanted to preach and it was like he was receiving constant impressions from the Lord. It turned out that at the same time, a group of people were interceding for him not far from the hotel where he was. I wish we could also have a dedicated group in this church who would intercede for me and Pastor Dave as we prepare our sermons and even as we preach them.

I could tell you story after story of how corporate prayer became the springboard for the mighty movement of God. But I want to add one more proof that is as current as today's newspaper.

V. Praying Together Moves God's Hand Today

Right now, the Gospel is sweeping the globe at a rate that is unimaginable. Avery Willis, the VP of the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, has reported that statistically, most of the people who have ever been saved in history were saved during the 20th Century. Willis suggested as high as 70 percent of the total number of people who have been saved throughout world history have come to Christ in the last hundred years.

But get this: 70 percent of that number has been saved since 1945! Let me boggle your mind with one other layer of observation from this world missions expert: 70 percent of those saved since 1945 were saved since 1990! That's how fast the Gospel is storming our world. That means that at the turn of the 21st Century, possibly one-third of all Christians who have ever lived have been converted since 1990!

What does that look like? In Nepal, just 2000 Christians were known in 1990; ten years later that number had grown to half a million.

Cambodia claimed only 600 believers in 1990; there is a reported 60,000 today. In Korea during the 20th Century, the country advanced from being 2 percent Christian to about 40 percent Christian today. East Africa is experiencing one of the greatest movements of God in history. In Uganda alone, HIV/AIDS once claimed the lives of one-third of the population. The World Health Organization predicted the complete collapse of the Ugandan economy by the year 2000.

But revival has come to that country. With the salvation of many has come a transformation in morals, so that AIDS is down to 5 percent. So great is this revival that one church alone went from 7 in attendance to an average of 2000 in just two weeks! Currently, that same church has a membership of 22,000 and has planted 150 other churches.

In almost every quarter of the globe, Christianity is advancing...except for four primary areas: North America, Japan, Australia, and Western Europe. Guess what one of the common denominators is everywhere Christianity marches forward? Christians spend time in prayer together. Track what God is doing in Korea, in China, in India, in Eastern Africa, and you will find behind the scenes prayer meetings.

I know what you're thinking. Our prayer meetings don't seem to convey that sort of power. And you're right. Over the next several weeks, you will see some strategic shifts in how we spend our time on Wednesdays. But as we progress in that direction, you be the change that's needed.