

Fil-Am Community Church

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“Why We Believe Better Than We Behave Concerning Prayer”

In 1886, John R. Mott was sitting in a crowd gathered in Northfield, Massachusetts when the Holy Spirit electrified him for the lost through the preaching of D. L. Moody. Moody called for 100 men to step forward for missions. John Mott left his seat to stand forth.

As God refined this call on Mott's life, it became clear that the mission field for him would be college campuses. For the rest of his life, John Mott devoted himself to the salvation and spiritual growth of college students. Simultaneous to this, he passionately worked toward the unifying of various denominations for the sake of advancing the Gospel globally. God granted John Mott amazing inroads internationally. Governments and religious leaders around the world were influenced toward cooperation, and because of this, John Mott was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize of 1946.

For all his achievements, Mott was bold to make one thing clear. These are his words: (and I quote) "More important than the most earnest thinking about a problem, more important than a personal interview to influence an individual, more important than addressing and swaying an audience - far more important than these and all other forms of activity is the act of coming into vital communion with God. It is indeed true that he that saveth his time for prayer shall lose it. And he that loseth his time for communion with God shall find it again in added blessing and power and fruitfulness." (unquote)

John Mott not only believed prayer was a weapon in the hands of the saints, he acted on that belief.

Graham Scroggie, who had the unenviable task of being a pastor and preacher in England during that nation's hardening against Christianity, once said, (quote) "One of the greatest mistakes that a Christian can make is to imagine that increased social or spiritual activity can be any compensation for the lack of...communion with God. There's time for business, time for pleasure, time for social and Christian service, but no time for that exercise which would give to all these, and other things, power and effect. The simple fact is, we must find time for prayer or we shall perish." (unquote)

Add to these statements what Jesus says on this matter: *"You can do nothing without Me...If you remain in Me and My words remain in you, ask whatever you want and it will be done for you."* (John 15:5b, 7 HCSB).

Now I have a question that I would like you to seriously consider for our time together: If we believe these statements to be true, then why do we find it so difficult to make prayer a priority in our lives and in our church? The Bible tells us that the very last command of Jesus before He ascended to heaven was that His followers go to a prayer meeting together. In Acts 1:4, Jesus commanded his disciples not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for the Father's promise. They understood what He meant by that and gave themselves to praying together.

So, why is something so foundational for Jesus, the apostles, and the Early Church so frail today? Why is it these days that praying together is so often the spare tire rather than the steering wheel for our churches? The answer is obvious: We believe

better than we behave when it comes to praying together. This morning, I want to highlight five reasons why our stated belief and our practiced behavior don't match. And we're all guilty of all five.

1. WE DO NOT SEE PRAYER AS RELATIONAL.

Let me ask you, when you and your spouse were still dating wasn't your spouse the most wonderful person in the world? Wasn't he or she the only person you'd rather be with/ the whole day and spent hours on the phone with? Now, what happened? No more kisses before going to work.

You'd rather be with your TV than with your spouse. A conversation is an occasional, "uh, huh", "ok", "bye." So, there's no more getting connected, no caring about what your spouse cares about. It's sad when a relationship turns to something like this.

Let me tell you something even sadder: we treat God that way. We live our lives with God on the surface. We're like one of those bugs that skates on top of the water, never really breaking the surface. I can't tell you how many times I've missed God even though He's standing beside me, His Spirit within me.

Understand something: God misses you more than you'll ever know. He longs for a conversation with you. He desires your company. IF ONLY you can capture that old fire that was burning when you first knew him.

Prayer is relational because God is a person and he is real. He loves you so much that he sent His Son Jesus to die for you. What could be greater than that? Because he loves you he rejoices over you with singing. Zephaniah 3:17 says, "*The LORD*

your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.”

Are you troubled today? Are you filled with anxieties? Does it seem like you're ready to break down? Come to God who is more than eager to hear your heart cries. As the verse says, *“He will quiet you with his love.”*

And when you come, he rejoices over you with singing. When I think of how God the Father rejoices over us with singing, an image comes to mind. I envision him swinging us around in circles, all the while bellowing His song of extreme affection over us. The Hebrew word used here to describe how the Father sings is 'rinnah'. It means to express a ringing cry, a loud shout, a proclamation of extreme joy and an expression of gladness.

So, just imagine, when you come to him in prayer, seeking him with all your heart, that must truly bring exceeding joy to his heart. And, mind you, he is listening. How could not he, when he is a doting father to you?

Another reason why we believe more than we behave concerning prayer is that

2. WE DO NOT PERCEIVE THE SEPARATING POWER OF TOLERATED SIN.

Isaiah 59:1-2 says, *“The LORD hasn't lost his powerful strength; he can still hear and answer prayers. Your sins are the roadblock between you and your God. That's why he doesn't answer your prayers or let you see his face.”* (CEV)

One of the greatest barriers to having an enjoyable fellowship with God is sin in our lives. This is the crucial factor that prevents us from coming to him and he from listening to us. What we're talking about here is sin that we willfully commit and then cover up. We think that we can hide it from God. King David committed the sins of adultery and murder. He didn't confess them. He didn't repent about them. He thought he would get away with it. And so, after committing those sins, he went on his merry way, like nothing happened. But God knew everything, of course, and made known his anger against sin by sending the prophet Nathan to confront him about his sins.

I remember a story I read about former preacher and writer Norman Vincent Peale. When he was a boy, he found a big, black cigar, slipped into an alley, and lit it up. It didn't taste good, but it made him feel very grown up. . . until he saw his father coming. Quickly he put the cigar behind his back and tried to be casual. Desperate to divert his father's attention, Norman pointed to a billboard advertising the circus.

"Can I go, Dad? Please, let's go when it comes to town."

His father's reply taught Norman a lesson he never forgot. "Son, he answered quietly but firmly, "never make a petition while at the same time trying to hide a smoldering disobedience."

Remember, as the Bible says, sin will find you out. But even if it doesn't for a while, continuing sin has a deadening effect. It camouflages its presence in us. Like sinful Samson. The Bible says he did not know that the Lord had left him

(Judges 16:20). And we will not immediately perceive God's absence in our lives because we have grown accustomed to the distance from Him we are already experiencing. We go on doing our little religious acts, but there is no power, no effectiveness, and the desire for Him wanes. Sadly, we're justifying our sins while they are corrupting our lives.

Let me give you the third reason.

3. WE DO NOT UNDERSTAND THAT PRAYER PREPARES US FOR SPIRITUAL WARFARE.

A few weeks back, I talked about the full armor of God. We looked at Ephesians 6 wherein Paul lists the spiritual equipment we are issued by God for the spiritual battles we face. We have the helmet, the breastplate, the belt, and all other defensive weapons. And then we have the Word of God, the Bible, which we can use as an offensive weapon. But there is one particular piece of armor that can serve as both a defensive and an offensive weapon. PRAYER! Paul says in Eph. 6:18: *"Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests"*. Prayer serves as a hedge of protection around us. With prayer, we also come against the forces of evil with an incredible power that can only come from God. It is no accident that Paul put it in the bottom of the list. He intentionally put it there to underscore the very important role that prayer plays in spiritual warfare. You see, you can have all the pieces of the armor in place, but without prayer, you don't stand a chance. Corrie Ten Boom said,

"When a Christian shuns fellowship with other Christians, the devil smiles, When he stops studying the Bible, the devil laughs. When he stops praying, the devil

shouts for joy.” And William Cowper said, “*Satan trembles when he sees the weakest Christian on his knees.*” You see, you cannot get casual about this piece of armor. Ignore it to your own peril.

When the British fleet faced off with the Germans during the Battle of Jutland, the largest naval battle of WWI, they quickly recognized a point of vulnerability. Almost immediately, a British heavy cruiser was hit by an artillery barrage and quickly sunk. Then another ship was hit in its powder magazine and blown to pieces. Next the Queen Mary was sunk, taking a crew of 1,200 sailors straight to the bottom.

What was the problem? The hulls of their ships were heavily armored, but they were built with wooden decks that offered almost no protection against enemy artillery shells dropped from above. This oversight cost the British thousands of lives and strategic opportunities until it was corrected. In the same way, if you leave off the powerful armament of persistent prayer, you will be quick work for the enemy, who will find a way to exploit that chink in your armor.

The fourth reason why we believe more than we behave is

4. WE CROWD OUT PRAYER WITH OTHER THINGS.

Luke 10 tells about what I call the Martha Syndrome. It happened on an occasion when Jesus and His disciples dropped in on the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Bethany. It afforded an intimate time with the Savior, and Mary took advantage of it, sitting at His feet drinking in His words.

But Martha made a different choice. Though no one requested an elaborate meal, Martha sets to work putting one together for the guests. She gets steamed at her sister for not helping, then transfers her anger to Jesus because He didn't notice her need of help and do anything about it.

What does Jesus say to Martha? Luke tells us in verses 41-41, *“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”* Jesus had come to Martha's home, but she gave herself to other things and missed Him.

D. T. Niles made this observation about our lives: "Hurry," he said, "means that we gather impressions but have no experiences, that we collect acquaintances but make no friends, that we attend meetings but experience no encounter. We must recover eternity if we are to find time, and eternity is what Jesus came to restore."

For many of us, prayer sort of becomes just like a fire extinguisher. Use only in case of emergency. We think it's not important enough to devote much of our time to. Martin Luther said, "If I fail to spend two hours in prayer each morning, the devil gets the victory through the day. I have so much business I cannot get on without spending three hours daily in prayer."

Finally, we come to the fifth reason:

5. WE THINK WE CAN HANDLE THINGS JUST FINE BY OURSELVES.

This is the root that underlies every other reason why we believe better than we behave. The evidence of arrogance in our lives is the level of our prayerlessness. Listen to James 4:1-2, *“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God.”*

Don't miss the plain and powerful truth: You do not have because you do not ask. Let that sentence run through your life. You do not have because you do not ask.

The picture we have of God in the Bible is of Someone who is eager, ready, and willing to bless us. He is not a Heavenly Miser, who is stingy with His goodness, letting go of a few crumbs of grace to His starving children only when they beg adequately enough. He is a Heavenly Father who loves to lavish His gifts upon us.

But we're so presumptuous, so self-impressed that we try to make a go of it in our own strength, using our own imagination, education, and personal history. And you know what happens in our hearts, in our homes, and in our churches when we depend on our own best thinking? There is fighting, scheming, planning, hating, killing, conniving, striving, trying in our own way to get the things we think we need. Meanwhile, God waits to be asked.

Adrian Rogers once told of a time when as a young college student, he and his wife Doris took their summer break from classes to work in a little church in the Indian River section of Florida. When the time came for Adrian Rogers to return to college, one of the deacons who owned an orange grove gave him several duffle bags of oranges to take back with him. He had more oranges than he and Doris

could ever hope to eat, but he could always share the wealth with others. When they got back to their garage apartment, they stashed the sacks of oranges in a closet and set to work eating oranges and giving away as many as they could.

Then one day, Adrian and Doris were eating lunch between classes when they noticed something unusual. Adrian Rogers said, "I looked out in the backyard and I saw a little fellow sneaking around. It became obvious to me that he was going to steal an orange out of my yard. We only had one orange tree, but it was a sour orange tree. Have you ever tasted a sour orange? The most bitter fruit known to man. One bite and you have lockjaw. It's unbelievably sour. This little fellow didn't know they were sour, and he was going to steal one, and I just watched. I saw him as he took that orange and made his way off.

"You know the thing that I could not get out of my heart and out of my mind is this: Suppose that little fellow had come up those stairs, knocked on my door and said, 'Mister, may I have one of those oranges from your tree?' You know what I would have said to him? 'Absolutely not!' because it's sour. 'But, son, if you'll come in here I will load you down with more oranges than you can carry. I've got the best oranges you'll ever eat right here, and they're spoiling for someone to enjoy them.'"

It's going to amaze you when you get to heaven. I believe God's going to call you over and open a door to His storehouse and say, "Look in there. Those are things I wanted to give you. Those are things that I wanted to load you down with but I couldn't give them to you. You went your own way scheming and planning and conniving and fighting and figuring, and you never stopped to ask Me."

How does that song go? "Oh what peace we often forfeit. Oh, what needless pain we bear. All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer."

In 2 Chronicles 16:9 listen to what God says: *"For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him"*. God is scanning this room, His eyes roaming down these tables, looking for a person who will passionately and persistently seek Him. His search never ceases and therefore He never misses one single opportunity anytime, anywhere to demonstrate His power on behalf of any individual or any people who rely on Him rather than relying on themselves.

"Will anyone call to Me? Will anyone seek me with their whole heart?" Tell me, as God searches this room, does God find such a person in you? Our Lord stands eager, able, willing, awesome in power, full of grace, glorious in mercy, ready to work for those who will wait in prayer for Him. He's waiting to hear from you.

Let me ask it on a larger scale: Does God find here a church that longs for Him and cries out to Him, so that He moves to powerfully support us in His working? His power will explode on behalf of such a church!

I close with a challenge from a praying pastor named Jim Cymbala, pastor of the Brooklyn Tabernacle: He says, "Anything and everything is possible with God if we approach Him with a broken spirit. We must humble ourselves, get rid of the debris in our lives, and keep leaning on Him instead of our own understanding. Your future and mine are determined by this one thing: seeking after the Lord. The blessings we receive and pass along to others hang on this truth: He rewards those who seek Him." (Heb. 11:6).

That quote comes from his book “Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire” which I mightily encourage you to please get a copy. Now, let me give you a little more background about this book. It says, “In 1972, the Brooklyn Tabernacle’s spark was almost out. Then the Holy Spirit lit a fire that couldn’t be quenched. Pastor Jim Cymbala shares the lessons he learned when the Spirit ignited his heart and began to move through his people. This unforgettable story will set a fire burning in your own heart to experience God’s mercy, power, and love as though for the first time.”

Next week, we’re going to make some copies available for you to purchase. It normally costs \$10 but the church will shoulder half of it and so you pay only \$5. I tell you it is worth the investment. This book is littered with stories after stories of how lives were changed and the church was changed due to God’s response to fervent prayers. It could change your life! And for those who want to read it right away, I have two books that you can borrow from me today. Just see me later.

In closing, let me share with you the example of Jesus. Jesus always took time to pray despite the many responsibilities he had.

The Bible says that he prayed anytime anywhere in long stretches of time. This is where his strength came from when he was on earth as a man.

He prayed earnestly and fervently in the Garden of Gethsemane when he faced the greatest trial in his life. He knew that he was going to suffer both physically and emotionally. He was aware that he was going to go it alone, that his disciples will leave him and people will despise him. He knew that he would be tortured and put to death by the most harrowing punishment the world has ever know, crucifixion.

But the Bible says that God sent an angel while he was praying and the angel strengthened him.

Someone said, “God speaks to those who take the time to listen and He listens to those who take the time to pray.”

Folks, let’s put aside all these five reasons I mentioned and begin to behave like what we believe concerning prayer.