

## Why Pray?

### John 15

If I told you that you were going to have the opportunity to talk with Jesus Christ for 10 minutes this afternoon and you could make one request of Him, what would your request be? If you could ask Him anything, would you ask for protection, a new job, or money? What would you ask for?

The disciples got this opportunity at one point. Luke 11 tells us they came to Jesus one day and they had a request. "*Lord, teach us to pray.*" Why, of all the things they could have asked Jesus, why did they ask that question?

I think it was because they saw the results of prayer in His life. They saw Him pray and they saw what happened. It's interesting that the disciples watched Jesus preach the greatest sermons ever, they watched Him do miracles, heal the sick, raise the dead and all kinds of things, but never once did they say, "Lord, teach us to preach" or "Lord, teach us to do miracles" or "Lord, teach us to raise the dead". Instead they said, "*Teach us how to pray.*" They saw that was the life support system of Jesus Christ. They recognized that was the key to His life. You see, there is nothing more vital to your Christian life than prayer.

We're going to begin a new series this week called "Try Prayer". Why? The average Christian knows more about Ann Landers than they do about prayer. Now, there are a lot of faulty misconceptions about prayer, a lot of ignorance about how prayer works and why we pray and when to pray.

Some people think prayer is a magic wand. We kind of wave it at something -- it's a superstitious approach -- and you get what you want. God is kind of like a genie who says "My wish is your command!"

Some people think prayer is a first aid kit. For them, prayer is an act of desperation. For a lot of people, prayer is like a fire extinguisher: Use only in case of emergency. It is a last resort.

For some people, prayer is a tug of war. A religious con game that you play with God where you try to convince God to do something nice for you. But, the worst idea or the worst misconception about prayer is, for many people, prayer is simply a religious duty. The basic motivation behind it is guilt. I know I should pray more, I ought to pray, it's something I ought to do. It becomes a duty. You have a sense of obligation that if you don't pray you'll be on God's Bad List.

If prayer is a duty for you, you have missed the total point of prayer. You don't understand prayer in the slightest, if you think it's a duty. It's no wonder you can't get motivated if you're going around saying, "I should pray, I must pray, I have to pray."

In this series, we're going to demolish some of these misconceptions. Today I want to talk to you about the four purposes of prayer.

## **THE FOUR PURPOSES OF PRAYER**

John 15 is actually in the middle of four chapters. Chapters 13, 14, 15, 16 are Jesus' last words to His disciples, the last discussion that Jesus Christ shared with the twelve disciples before He was crucified on the cross. He is telling the people repeatedly, "I am going to die and then be resurrected and go back to heaven. I'm not going to be here physically but I'm going to be here spiritually. I'm going to put My Spirit in your lives -- the Holy Spirit -- and you can still talk to Me, even though I'm not here physically. You can talk to Me through prayer." And He gives us the four reasons for prayer.

### **1. Prayer is an act of dedication.**

It is an opportunity to express, one, our devotion to God and two, our dependence upon God. It is an act of dedicating ourselves, saying, "God, I need You."

Our biggest problem is we don't feel a dependence upon God. We think we can do it ourselves. Ever since Adam and Eve, man has vastly overestimated his ability. So we go thinking, "I don't need to pray because this is something I can do." Our problem is we don't admit we need God's help. The reason why a lot of people don't pray is because it costs. It costs honesty. You have to be honest to God -- "I admit I am inadequate. I am helpless. I need Your help in this situation." As long as you think you're self-sufficient, prayer can have no meaning for you. You think you've got it all together. So, prayer is an act of dedication: "God, I admit I have a need. I need Your help in my life." And prayer is a declaration of dependence upon God. It's our way of saying to God, "This proves I'm depending upon You."

In John 15:5-7, Jesus is giving an illustration of a plant, he says, *"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."* That's like a blank check. He says "If you really put your dependence on Me, you can ask whatever you will and I will give it." That's an unbelievable promise in prayer! It's like a branch and vine. If you cut the branch off, it loses all its strength, all its power. If you cut a Christian off from God, he withers.

There was this TV documentary about deep-sea divers. They recovered some gold from a sunken ship in the North Atlantic.

They talked about how they let a diving bell down, 800 feet under the water. The only link between the people 800 feet below the water was the hose of air. The hose was the lifeline, the support system, the connection between those above and those below.

Likewise, prayer is our support system. You cut it off and you run out of spiritual air. Prayer is an act of dedication. It shows our dependence. Until we realize we need God, we can't pray.

## **2. Prayer is an act of communication.**

Most of our problems in life are communication problems. Communication with your wife/your husband/children/your co-workers, etc. You can't understand a person unless you communicate with him or her. And you can't understand God, God's will for your life, unless you communicate with Him.

In the early 1960's, there was an international incident -- the Cuban Missile Crisis. It was a standoff between President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev of Russia over planting missiles in Cuba. We nearly went to war over it. But we didn't because communication was established. There was one positive benefit of the Cuban Missile Crisis. They established right afterwards a communications link called a Hot Line. They put a red telephone on the desk of the President of the United States and a red telephone on the desk of the Premier of Soviet Russia and there was only one number. Even if the employees went on strike, they'd still get through. It was there so there would be no misunderstanding. If at any time somebody thought somebody else was doing something wrong, they could simply lift up the phone and communicate.

Communication is vital on the international scene. Likewise, it's vital in the Christian life. Prayer is an act of dedication and it's an act of communication.

But then, you can't communicate with somebody unless you know your relationship to them. What is our relationship to God? In v. 15-16 Jesus says this, *"I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. 16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you."* He says the reason you can ask anything in prayer is because we're friends. Isn't that amazing? God says, "I don't treat you like servants, like slaves. I treat you as friends."

We seldom pray -- we have a hard time praying -- because we fail to recognize what a privilege it is to talk to God. In this very passage you are invited to converse with the creator. That's going to the top! You're not working with some little bureaucrat. You don't have to know the key men if you know the man who holds the keys. God says, "I am the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, and you are My friend and I want to talk to you!" That's what prayer is. It is dedication but it is also communication.

Our problem is we have a hard time believing that God is really interested in us. We can't seem to conceive that the Creator of the entire universe is interested in car payments and house payments and buying new clothes for the kids for school and the guy at work who irritates you and the fact that you have back problems and everything else. When you fully discover how much God really loves you, prayer will no longer be a problem for you. The problem is not, "I have to pray." The problem is you don't really realize how much God cares about and loves you. Why? Because we love to talk to the people who love us the most.

If you find prayer is a duty, a ritual, a routine that you don't look forward to going through, it means you don't understand how much God's in love with you and how much He's interested in everything that is of interest to you. Sure, if you have to go to God and talk to Him about things of no interest, who's going to want to do it? Nobody. But God says, "We are friends."

Prayer is an act of dedication. It is the way we express our dependence upon God. Prayer is an act of communication. It is the way we communicate with God. It is our life communication, the umbilical cord of the Christian life from which we draw our strength.

### **3. Prayer is an act of Petition.**

Petition means request. In Philippians 4:6, it says, *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God and the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."* The result of your asking, your requests in prayer, will be peace of mind.

Prayer is a petition. It is the way we make our requests. Someday go through the New Testament and circle all the "whatevers". He says, "Whatever you ask, whatsoever you pray for, If you ask anything ...". In John 16:24, Jesus says, *"Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive and your joy will be complete."* He says, "You're going to be joyful because you're going to ask and I'm going to answer and you'll be filled with joy."

The fact of the matter is prayer is God's chosen method of meeting your needs. The Bible teaches that there are some things that God has promised to do only if we pray. Some people think, "God knows what I need so I don't need to ask. He'll just give it when I need it." That's not true. God has set it up in His plan that there are some things He will only do if you ask, if you pray.

When we read the New Testament and read about the New Testament Christians, they were unbelievable. They were happy, joyful, contagious, and enthusiastic about life. They had power in their lives. They saw miracles happening on a regular basis. You ask a typical New Testament Christian, "How's it going?" and he'd say, "Business as usual. One miracle after another!" We say, "How come I don't have that kind of power? Why don't we have that same kind of power they had in the New Testament?" We don't ask.

James says, "You have not because you ask not." Over twenty times in the New Testament the Bible says, "Ask". Ask, seek, knock, and keep on asking.

There's the story of a guy who died and went to heaven. All over heaven were these warehouses. Inside there were these tremendous gifts, fantastic things, spiritual situations, homes, jobs, happy families, all kinds of neat gifts. The guy said, "Lord, what are all these gifts?" Jesus said, "There is a tag on every one of these gifts. And the tag says the same thing." So he goes over to look and reads, "Never asked for."

C.H. Spurgeon, a great pastor in London, England, once said this, "God never shuts His storehouses until you shut your mouth." You have to ask. Prayer is an act of petition.

What are you lacking right now in your life simply because you've never asked God for it? You've tried other things but you've never stopped to ask God for it.

What do you ask for? Ask for what you desire. **Psalm 37:4 "Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart."** If you're delighting yourself in God, you're trying the best, as you know how, to let God's Spirit live in your life, your desires aren't going to be wrong.

Psalm 84:11b " *...no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless.*" God is not up there holding all these things back and saying, "You've got to convince Me to give them to you!" He says, "Ask!"

I read this true story about a high school student who had just become a Christian. He was learning all these words about God. Big theological words. God is omnipresent -- that means God is present everywhere. God is omnipotent - - that means God has all power, there is nothing too hard for God. Then he learned God is omniscient -- that means God knows everything -- the past, the present, the future. So the student went home one day and got to thinking about this. "If You know everything that's going to happen in the future, that means You know what's going to be on the Algebra final before the teacher even writes it." He prayed, "God, if You know what's going to be on the test, I pray that You'll help me know what to study for, that I'll study the right things." He began to study, pray, work. He said, "You said to ask for anything so I'm going to be specific. God, I pray that I'll get an 87 grade on my test." He didn't have enough faith for an A, I guess. He prays for an 87. This is a true story. He took the test the next day and thought he did pretty good on it. He went back to school the next day and found he'd gotten an 86. He was really discouraged. He was a brand new Christian and didn't know any better than just to believe God. "God, You really let me down! I prayed for an 87 and only got an 86. I really believed You were going to do it." He went back to school the next day and the teacher said, "I made a mistake on five papers. I need to call those papers back in." He did and he'd gotten an 87.

Why did I tell you that? So you could go out and get an A on your final? No. I'm trying to tell you that God is intensely interested in every factor of your life. He says, "You are My friends. I'm interested!"



When you love someone you're interested in everything about them. Prayer is an act of dependence or dedication. It's an act of communication and it's an act of petition. Ask.

Why does God want us to ask in prayer? *"That your joy may be complete."* It will make you happy. As a father, I love to grant the requests of my children. Even if I know they don't need it, I like to give it to them. God says, *"Ask, that your joy may be full"*. When you ask, everybody gets blessed. God gets blessed because it shows His nature as a giver. You get blessed because you get the answer to your request. People get blessed because all of a sudden you've got a testimony. One thing about people who have answered prayers is they can't keep it to themselves. That's why in your home groups, make it a practice, and I'm sure you're already doing it, to ask people to share their testimony. Everyone gets blessed with a testimony. My former pastor used to say, "Share even though it makes a monkey out of you." Don't worry about being nervous or not saying the right words as long as you talk about God's goodness, people will be blessed.

In Luke 11:11 Jesus 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? 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!"*

If I, being an imperfect dad, know how to give gifts, and know how to answer the requests of my children, how much more does God who's perfect, in perfect love, know how to give us good gifts? God delights in answering requests.

Prayer, an act of dedication, communication, petition.

#### **4. Prayer is an act of cooperation.**

This is the most exciting thing about prayer. It's an act of cooperation. God has sovereignly chosen, in His plan, that we can cooperate in His plan by praying and helping see His word done here on earth. Prayer is God's program.

Prayer is God's *modus operandi*. Prayer is God saying, "I have chosen to limit Myself to what I accomplish on earth simply by limiting Myself to the faith of My children on the earth. What they believe Me for, I will do." When we pray for other people, we are cooperating with God. We are teaming up with God to accomplish God's work in the world.

Probably the most amazing passage in the Bible is John 14:12-13. Just before it, v. 11, Jesus says, *"Believe me when I say I am in the Father and the Father is in me or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves."* Then, in v. 12 *"Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing."*

Have you been doing what Jesus has been doing? Have you been raising any dead lately? Healed any sick? I think that's the hardest verse in the Bible to believe. The rest of the verse says, *"...and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father."*

I have to admit to you, as your pastor, if there is any verse in the Bible that I have a hard time believing, it's that verse. I don't see myself doing greater things than Jesus. Do you see yourself doing greater miracles than Jesus Christ? I doubt it. That's kind of a hard verse to believe. But He says it. "Anyone who believes in Me will do what I've been doing and even greater works."

I honestly had a hard time accepting that verse until one day I got smart and read the verse right underneath it and all of a sudden it made sense. *"And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son."* How is it possible to do greater miracles than Jesus? Simple. Through prayer. By

prayer. When we pray, it can do greater things than Jesus Christ did while He was here on earth. You say, "How is that possible?" Simple. Prayer is not limited by time, nor by space. It is limitless in scope.

When Jesus Christ was here on earth, He voluntarily limited Himself by becoming a man. By God coming in human form He said, "I can only be at one place at one time and I can't be in the past, the present, and the future at the same time. I can only be at this time and in this place." He was limited to do the miracles within the vicinity where He was.

But prayer is not limited by time or space. Prayers are not limited by time. The prayers of Jesus Christ 2000 years ago are still being answered today. The prayers I pray today can be answered three weeks today. They're not limited by time.

Prayer is not limited by space. You can pray and it's like sending a missile. I could pray for somebody in California and it's like sending a missile directly to that person's heart and I never leave Virginia. I can pray all over. I get up tomorrow morning and go into my study and spend fifteen minutes in prayer and I pray for missionaries around the world. My wife comes and knocks on the door, "What are you doing in there?" I say, "Nothing much. I'm just going to Africa, Asia, Middle East..."

The prayers are penetrating behind those places. Prayer is limitless in its power. People may reject your appeals, reject your arguments, reject you as a person, but they're totally defenseless against your prayers. They have no defense system. They go straight to the heart. The Bible says, *"The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases."* (Prov. 21:1) Like a river, God can change the course of history by prayers.

Many times I have people come to me for counseling, kind of discouraged with an impossible situation. They come and say, "I'm so discouraged. I don't know what to do. I guess the only thing I can do is pray." I want to say, "Great! At least you've got a resource that most of the world doesn't have."

If you can pray, you can make the impossible possible. All of a sudden you're not trying to work it out on your own. You've got God's power behind you.

Who are the heroes going to be in heaven? The Billy Grahams of this world? The Jim Cymbalas? The great Christian leaders? I don't think so. The heroes in heaven are the little, unknown people who prayed for the front men. The people who prayed for the superstars of Christianity and God blessed those guys ministry because the little people prayed. There are no little people in God's eyes. Prayer is the most important thing you can do.

D. L. Moody, a great pastor, once said, "Every great movement of God can be traced to a single praying, kneeling figure."

Today, I have given you an introduction -- Why we pray. In the future we're going to talk about, how do you pray specifically and get answers, how do you pray for other people, how do you pray for an impossible situation, and what do you do when it doesn't look like the answer is coming through, when there's a delay.

I want our church to be a praying church. A praying church is a blessed church, a committed church. When you pray it makes you sensitive to God and to other people. It sensitizes your life. A praying church is an enthusiastic church. We're excited. Churches that pray see miracles and that gets people excited. We need some miracles in our church. We need a miracle for expanding ministries, building a building, lots of miracles in our church. Some of you need personal miracles. A miracle in your marriage. Some of you need a miracle in your health.

Some of you need a miracle in your job, your finances. A growing, praying church is a church that sees God act. God acts according to prayer.

When you pray and get answers, your joy is full. There's nothing more fun than seeing answers to prayer. You get excited. It's contagious. We need to pray. And pray more. Shall we pray right now?