

Prayer

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[0:00] On these luncheon and afternoons, as we've had opportunity, we've been opening the doors on various aspects of spirituality.

! Those are different ways that Christians like you and I here in 2010 can draw near to God and come close and have dealings with Him.

So how can a world like ours, full of iPods and Blackberries and a lot of hurry and hustle, how can we meet with God? That's our question on these afternoons.

We've looked at fasting and silence and solitude, meditation and simplicity. This afternoon we want to look at prayer. So let's be honest with each other right from the very beginning.

Prayer is something that we all need help with. Amen. I need help. The reason this is the fifth sermon in this series and not the first or the second is because a part of me says, how could you preach on something that you're so bad at?

[1:16] I need help. And I'm sure you would say that you need help. Prayer is something that we're not good at. But I think it is something we can get better at.

That is actually my firm conviction that we don't have to stay where we are. We can be better prayers than what we are. Now, it's easy to pile guilt on people for their prayerlessness.

It's easy to quote Martin Luther. If I fail to spend two hours in the morning in prayer, or if I fail to spend two hours in prayer each morning, the devil gets the victory through the day.

Well, two hours. Well, that's easy for me to say. Well, that's the kind of Christians that we need to be. And we do in some ways need to be that way.

But Martin isn't done with us yet. But he also said, sometime later, maybe, I have so much to do that if I didn't spend three hours a day in prayer, I would never get it all done.

[2:19] So three hours. That's what we need to be aiming for. That's what kind of Christians we need. It's easy to say those things, and I could pile that all on you. But here is what would happen.

If, and this is a big if, if you were actually motivated by that, you would wake up at four tomorrow morning. And then you would get on your hands and knees, and you would pray for ten minutes. And you would run out of things to say. And you would fall asleep. And then the next day, you'd feel terrible all that day because you haven't prayed. And then the next day, you would wake up at four in the morning and pray for seven minutes and fall asleep and feel terrible that day.

And then on the third day, you would sleep in and just forgo the prayer. It's easy to hear about those champions of prayer and just to say, well, what's the point?

I'm not going to be that way. I could never pray like that. Well, how about we think of those people as God's Olympic runners.

[3:27] And while we will never be Olympic runners, we can certainly get up every morning and jog. We can jog every day.

And perhaps we'll never win a gold medal, but we can all be better prayers than what we are. And that's my conviction. And I hope that will become your conviction, your glad and hopeful conviction when we're done with today.

Now, I have four points this morning or this afternoon. And the first is this, that prayer is hard. It is not impossible. Prayer is hard.

It is not impossible. Now, on May 10th, 1940, Winston Churchill became prime minister of Great Britain. Now, Germany had just invaded the Netherlands and Belgium and France.

And the Allied forces were just getting rolled back. And they were getting funneled toward this one city of Dunkirk. Things were not looking good. Three days later, May 13th, Churchill addresses the House of Commons.

[4:33] And he said this, I would say to the House, as I said to those who joined this government, I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat.

We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering. And you ask, what is our policy?

And I can say, it is to wage war by sea, land, and air with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us. Why did Churchill say, I have nothing to offer you except for blood, toil, tears, and sweat?

Because he wanted to depress them? Well, no, not at all. They needed to hear the hard truth. And only when they came to grips with that hard truth could they move forward with some hope.

And that's why I say prayer is hard. We have to come to grips with that from the very beginning.

And if we do not come to grips with that, we're going to be forever surprised at the difficulty that we face when we come to pray.

[5:48] And we're going to be forever coming up to that wall and then stopping and not really praying. Prayer is not going to be easy.

You can't expect it to be easy, but by God's grace, it is not impossible. It's not easy because we have a flesh that hates God.

Turn in your Bibles to Romans chapter 6. Or Romans chapter 8 and verse 6. Prayer is not easy because we have a flesh that is at enmity with God.

You have this problem. I have this problem, and it makes prayer hard. Listen to what Paul says.

Romans 8, verse 6. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace. The sinful mind, or the flesh, is hostile to God.

[6:51] It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Now, we are new creatures in Christ Jesus, but the remnant of the flesh still remains.

It's not in control, but it exerts its influence all the time. This is an insurgency that will not die. It is always there. It is always rebelling.

And the flesh is hostile to God. Literally, it is hostility. It is the enmity, the hatred itself. It hates God. It's at constant war with God.

And so every time it gets near to God, it has a violent, allergic reaction. Prayer is drawing close to God.

If you draw near to God, count on your flesh rising up with an allergic, violent reaction, doing everything it can to keep you from prayer.

[7:50] Prayer. Now, the flesh will let you do all sorts of things. It will allow you to come to church. It will allow you to sing absentmindedly. It will allow you to teach.

It will allow you to go over there and talk with your brothers and sisters. It will let you do all kinds of things, provided that God is not in the picture, that you aren't drawing close to God.

But the minute you sit down to prayer, and you know this, it's there. Coming up with every excuse why you should be doing something else, why you could be doing something else.

And then your thoughts are a mile away. Someone humorously, or not so humorously, said, if you're having trouble sleeping, you should just pray. And before you know it, you'll fall asleep.

And if you have not found that to be true, try it. Your flesh hates prayer. It hates God. And so we need to count on it. Prayer is going to be hard.

[8:50] It's not going to be impossible, though. Why? Well, because we aren't the old man anymore. We're the new man. And the new man is controlled by the Holy Spirit. We are new creatures.

The Spirit is living in you. And so the flesh isn't in control anymore. And so you can pray. The reality is, it is hard, but it is not impossible by God's grace.

Now, prayer will be hard because Satan will oppose you. Now, just think about how damaging to Satan's kingdom prayer is.

And you will see why he hates it so much and why he opposes it every chance he gets. People are snatched from Satan's hands when other people pray. Demons are driven out.

Nations living in darkness see a great light. Church after church is built. Sinner after sinner quits obeying Satan and starts obeying God.

[9:48] Now, Jesus Christ is exalted. Missionaries are raised up. Satan and his kingdom are driven back. When people pray, the bell, Satan's death toll, begins to ring.

He hates it. Prayer isn't going to be easy then. If you pray, Satan and all his minions will be there. But Christian friends, prayer is not impossible.

Because the one who is in us, he who is in us, is greater than he who is against us. And so, Jesus is the risen king.

He is exalted over everything, over every power, over Satan, and so Satan is on Jesus' leash. And will Satan oppose you? Yes.

Count on it. Depend on it. Will he overcome you? Not at all. Prayer will require work, it will require courage, it will require effort, but your policy must be to make, to wage war.

[10:53] On land and air and on sea, it must be total war. You will have to fight. It will not be an easy battle. But by God's grace, the victory will be yours. And you can count on that too.

So thankfully, we do not wage war in our own strength. We sang it this morning, if we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing. Every effort that we did would be a step backwards. We're not the right man on our side, the man of God's own choosing. His kingdom cannot end. Will never end. Prayer is hard, it is not impossible.

That's the first point. Now the second point is this. Prayer matters. Prayer matters. One reason we struggle to pray, one reason I struggle to pray, is we have a philosophical problem.

And it goes like this. If God has planned everything from the very beginning, from the foundations of the earth, and God does whatever pleases Him on heaven, or in heaven and on earth, then why pray?

[12:03] What's it matter? God's going to do what God's going to do, no matter what I do, then what's the point? Well, have you ever said that? Maybe not to your brothers and sisters.

We would be ashamed to say that. Sounds so terrible. But I know I've written it in my journal before. I've said it to myself. Now what is that?

It has lots of names. It's called fatalism. It's called determinism. But when it happens to people like you and me, it's called hyper-Calvinism. Hyper-Calvinism is the refusal to believe, to understand that God works through means, that God uses means to accomplish what He decrees.

And so the hyper-Calvinists, when they look at the light of life in this world, and they look at the Bible, they focus exclusively on an eternal perspective. And they don't see that the Bible doesn't only talk about the eternal perspective.

It talks about that. But it also talks about a temporal perspective. It operates on that level as well. And so hyper-Calvinism, it turns the perseverance of the saints, where the saints are going to persevere to the end and so be saved, it turns it into eternal security.

[13:26] It doesn't matter what you do. God will save you. It turns zeal into evangelistic deadness. God's going to save who God's going to save, so it doesn't matter what I do.

And it turns prayerfulness into prayerlessness, because what does it matter? God's going to do what God's going to do anyways. And that is perverted logic.

It's not true. Turn in your Bibles to 2 Kings 20. So turn back to 2 Kings 20, and we'll read a few verses here.

This is the story of Hezekiah becoming sick. And remember my point here is that prayer matters. It makes a difference. It really, really does matter. 2 Kings 20, let's read the first six verses. In those days, Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death.

[14:38] The prophet Isaiah, son of Amos, went to him and said, this is what the Lord says. Put your house in order, because you are going to die. You will not recover. Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord.

Remember, O Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion, and I have done what is good in your eyes. And Hezekiah wept bitterly.

Before Isaiah had left the middle court, the word of the Lord came to him. Go back and tell Hezekiah, the leader of my people, this is what the Lord, the God of your father David, says.

I have heard your prayer and seen your tears. I will heal you. On the third day from now, you will go up to the temple of the Lord, and I will add 15 years to your life.

Now let me ask you, why did Hezekiah get better and live 15 more years?

[15:43] What's your answer? Now the hyper-Calvinists would say, well, he got better because God planned for him to get better, and this was all a test to see if Hezekiah would pray.

And God knew really what Hezekiah would do, and this was so, he was just making sure that Hezekiah would pray and that he would get better, and God planned to heal him from the

beginning.

Is that true? Yeah, that's true. But let me ask you, is that what the text says? There's a different perspective here. Hezekiah, you will not recover.

Hezekiah prays. Hezekiah, I will heal you. Why did Hezekiah get better? Because Hezekiah prayed. Would God have healed Hezekiah if Hezekiah not prayed? The answer is no. Because if Hezekiah didn't use the means, God wouldn't have healed him.

[16 : 52] So listen to this next sentence. And listen to it all the way to the end before you tar and feather me as a heretic.

Okay? So listen to the whole sentence. Prayer changes God's mind. At least that's what it looks like to us.

Prayer changes God's mind. At least that's what it looks like to us. You see, God exercises His sovereignty through means.

He providentially controls all of His creatures and all of their actions through means, through people. He doesn't have to. I'm not saying that. But He does work through prayer.

And so that means, under God, under God's sovereignty, under God's final control, we in prayer become God's co-workers for determining, for shaping the future.

[17 : 53] Now, am I saying that God is not ultimately in control? Not at all. I'm not saying that at all. Am I saying that God doesn't know the end from the beginning? Not at all. But I'm saying that God uses means.

He predestines the means as well as the ends. And so God uses our prayers sovereignly in accordance with His plan to shape the future.

So why is John the Baptist born? Zechariah prayed. Luke 1.13. John the Baptist was prophesied 700 years before.

And yet, Zechariah prayed. Why did God send an angel to set Peter free while he was in prison? The church prayed.

Acts 12.5. Why was Hezekiah healed and lived 15 more years? Hezekiah prayed. Why didn't God wipe out Israel and start all over again when they sinned at Mount Sinai with the golden calf?

[18 : 57] Well, you can read it in Exodus 32. Moses prayed. Moses' prayer saved Israel. And it shaped the rest of the history of that people.

Does that mean that God is at the mercy of our prayers? No. No, not at all. But prayer lays hold of God so that He works.

So that He works and He saves. Now, every day, I pray for a people group called the Jom. They are a tribe in Yemen. And I don't know hardly anything about them.

I can't find anything else about them. All I know is they don't have a Bible in their language. And they have no missionaries. Now, they are as lost as lost can be.

Will God say from every people, nation, tribe, language, tongue? Yes, He will. But God will do it through my prayer and through your prayers, through the prayers of His people.

[20 : 00] And that is exciting because God has chosen to include us in His evangelistic, His powerful saving of the peoples of the world.

God will hear our prayers and He will answer them. And so, in God's time, He will send a missionary because His people will pray. And He will send them a translation team because God's people are praying.

So prayer matters. Prayer changes the future. At least that's what it looks like for us. Now, prayer puts God to work.

No eye has seen any God besides you who acts on behalf of those who wait for Him. Who acts on behalf of those who wait for Him.

We wait for God in prayer. And so prayer matters. James says, you have not because you ask not. James does not say you have not because God wills not.

[21 : 00] Now, that might be true. That is true in an ultimate sense, in a very eternal, sovereign perspective. But, to get stuck there, to only see it from that level, is hyper-Calvinism.

And so, if I forget that God exercises His providence through means, through prayer, then I'm missing the biblical perspective.

Because everywhere in the Bible, the Bible is saying prayer matters. It makes a difference. And so, James is right. You have not because you ask not.

We don't have because we're not asking. Now, prayer is hard. It's not impossible. Prayer matters. And the third point is this, that prayer is learned.

Prayer is learned. Jesus' disciples came to Him and said, Lord, teach us to pray. Teach us to pray. Prayer is learned and that should be very liberating for all of you.

[22:04] It should be very liberating for me. There are some things that I can't do. You know what? I can't do. I cannot dunk a basketball. My weight to height to speed ratio makes it impossible for me to ever, ever dunk a basketball.

Now, you could make a YouTube video and you could say, how to dunk a basketball. And I could watch that thing and I could memorize it and I could practice and at the end of the day, I will not be able to dunk a basketball.

It's just not going to happen. Maybe you can't roll your tongue up into that tube shape. You know what I'm talking about? That's genetically determined. You cannot do it if you're not genetically wired to do that.

It might be impossible for you. Now, there are all sorts of things that are impossible for us, isn't there? But prayer isn't one of them. You can't say, it's impossible for me to pray because prayer is learned.

Everyone can learn to pray better and that should be very liberating because you know what? The only way you learn to do anything is by making mistakes and by going and working through those mistakes and as long as you keep trying, as long as you can, as you keep learning, go ahead, make mistakes.

[23:24] Now, if you're learning to play the piano and you're sitting there plucking out old McDonald's, right? And you make a mistake. Your piano teacher doesn't slam the door on the piano and say, get out of my sight.

You can never make that mistake. You're free to mess up, aren't you? If you're learning how to swim, it's okay if you can't make it all the way to the end. If you need a little help, you're learning. Now, prayer is something that is learned and you can make a mistake at it. And the only way that you can keep playing and swimming better is as long as you're playing right through your mistakes. And friends, prayer is learned. And the only way that you pray better is if you pray right through your mistakes. When you make a mistake, when you fall off, when you aren't doing it so well, you just keep learning and you keep going.

Now, what happens when you practice the piano? Day after day after day. Do you make mistakes every day? Yeah, you do. But if you keep doing that, if you keep learning how to play the piano, guess what happens?

[24:32] You move from Old MacDonald to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and you miss a few notes there. Wow. You've progressed, haven't you?

Still making mistakes, but things are a lot better now. You still mess up, but you're definitely not the pianist you used to be. Now, brothers and sisters, prayer is learned.

And so maybe right now you can't play Beethoven's Fifth. Maybe you're just plucking out Old MacDonald. And that is okay because prayer is learned. As long as you keep on going, keep on learning, keep giving yourself to learn more about it.

The disciples said, Jesus, teach us how to pray. And he did. And what happened? Well, those disciples who needed to learn how to pray, well, they got better and better and better until we find an axe.

They're laying hold of God and God is sending angels. They're laying hold of God and God is opening their mouths and giving them boldness to speak. They became better prayers.

[25:38] They learned and so can you. There's no reason that we can't pray with the same faith and vigor and violence as those disciples did.

Now, that's the third point. So, here's the fourth point. And this is for you who want to pray, but it's hard to know what to pray about.

You sit down and you're not sure what to say. There's a lot of things that we could say here about that. But, why don't you begin with the obvious? Why don't you begin with the obvious?

What kind of worship service do you think God wants here at Grace Fellowship Church? What kind of singing do you think God wants here at Grace Fellowship Church?

Well, I'm sure if you thought about that, you could think of a few answers. Why not pray about those things? What kind of hearing does God want?

[26:47] What kind of preaching does God want? You can think about those things and you can pray about them. How many people do you think God wants here on Wednesday night praying to Him?

And what kind of prayers does He want as you pray? Well, you know some of those answers too if you think about it. So, why don't you begin there?

Very obvious. Very easy. Let's go to your house. What kind of husbands does He want you to be?

What kind of wives does God want for you to be? What kind of moms and dads does God love?

Well, you know the answers. You could think about those.

Why not begin there? Now, go to your workplace. Now, what kind of work ethic does God approve of? What kind of work environment would be pleasing to God?

[27:50] Think about that and you could pray about that. Think of your street. So, there you are, your street. You're out your front door. Look down both ways.

What kind of neighbors does God love? What kind of marriages does God want your neighbors to have? What kind of parents does He want them to be? Does He love people that believe in Him and trust Him and pray about those things?

You know the answers. God's grace. Now, I think just with a little time and a little effort, we could come up with things that we should be praying about.

And with a little more time and just a little more effort, we really could begin praying for those things. prayer is hard. It's not impossible.

By God's grace, it's not impossible. Prayer matters. God uses your prayers. Prayer is learned and so you can begin praying boldly about all kinds of things, all kinds of obvious things.

[29:01] So, the only question left is, will you commit to pray? Will you commit to learn how to pray better? prayer. God hears prayer. God draws close to those who draw close to Him.

Jesus died to grant you access to the Father's ear. He died to grant you all kinds of promises and blessing and favor.

And so, will you commit to pray? Will you commit to pray? Well, let's turn in our hymnals to 531.

This song is full of encouragements to pray.

If God has told us to pray, will He really say no when we do pray? 531. Let's stand as we sing.

Father, thank You that You do sit on a throne of grace.

We tasted and saw something of that grace in the story of the prodigal son. And Lord, so we are encouraged to pray. If You've wrapped Your arms around us, if You've picked up Your skirts and ran to us, then Lord, will You not give us everything else that we need if we would pray?

[30:14] Father, give us boldness in prayer. Give us a faith that would lay a hold of You. Will You really teach us to pray? Will You clear the cobwebs of confusion and doubt out of our minds?

Will You put a spirit of work and of effort as opposed to laziness about prayer? Father, will You tempt us with answered prayer?

Encourage us to keep praying bigger and bigger things, things that are worthy of a king like Yourself. Lord Jesus, we do pray that You would come and save sinners.

Thank You that You will answer those prayers for forgiveness, for mercy. Thank You that You stand wide open, that You are so loving towards us.

I pray, Father, that You would build us up in this discipline of praying. For Jesus' sake, for Your glory, Father, will You help us to see the wonderful things that You do through answered prayer.

[31:26] In Jesus' name I pray. Amen. Amen.