

Encounter Church  
Sunday September 10, 2023

When the Church Prays  
Believing Better than Behaving

John 15:5- “Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing.”

John 15:7- “But if you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for anything you want, and it will be granted!”

Now I have a question: 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?

***Why is prayer often an extra-curricular in the church?***

The Bible tells us that the last command of Jesus before He ascended was that His followers go to a prayer meeting together.

Acts 1:4-“....“Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you the gift he promised, as I told you before.”

They understood what He meant by that and gave themselves to praying together.

Acts 1:14- “They all met together and were constantly united in prayer, along with Mary the mother of Jesus, several other women, and the brothers of Jesus.”

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?

Why do so few who are in leadership in the church attend Prayer Meetings or join a Prayer Team?

The answer is obvious: We believe better than we behave when it comes to praying together.

I want to give you five reasons why our stated belief and behavior don't match.

**1. We Do Not See Prayer as Relational.**

Suppose you talked with your spouse the way you talk to God?

There he or she is in the room with you, but the only thing you ever say is thin and repetitious. There's no heart in it. There's no getting connected, no caring about what your spouse cares about.

Have you ever seen a couple who will eat an entire meal and never truly look at one another, never speak a word to each other.

Hey, that's not a marriage. That's not even a friendship. It's two strangers linked by a vow sharing the same space. It is profoundly sad to see.

Let me tell something even sadder: we treat God that way. We live our lives with God on 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.

**GET THIS:** God makes relational prayer a condition of His response to us.

Jeremiah 29:13 - "You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart."

Until you make your communion with God a priority that calls for stillness and time and energy and focus, you will never know Him.

## **2. We Don't Perceive the Separating Power of Tolerated Sin**

Isaiah 59:1-2 Listen! The Lord's arm is not too weak to save you, nor is his ear too deaf to hear you call. It's your sins that have cut you off from God. Because of your sins, he has turned away and will not listen anymore."

Like sinful Samson, about whom the Bible says he did not know that the Lord had left him.

Judges 16:20- ".....When he woke up, he thought, "I will do as before and shake myself free." But he didn't realize the Lord had left him."

We go on doing our little religious acts, but there is no power, no effectiveness, and desire for Him wanes.

Here's a second reason why we believe better than we behave when it comes to prayer: ***we're justifying our sins while they are corrupting our lives.***

## **3. We do not understand that prayer prepares us for spiritual warfare**

When the NT talks about the Christian life, it uses words like fight, warfare, armor, weapons, sword, soldier, and so on.

In Eph. 6, Paul even lists the spiritual equipment we are issued by God for the spiritual battles.

Ephesians 6:18- "Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere."

When British fleet faced off with the Germans during the Battle of Jutland, the largest naval battle of WW1, 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 vulnerable spot in your armor.

#### **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 10:41-42”But the Lord said to her, “My dear Martha, you are worried and upset over all these details! There is only one thing worth being concerned about. Mary has discovered it, 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.***

## **5. We think we can handle things 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.***

James 4:1-2 What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Don't they come from the evil desires at war within you? You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can't get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them. Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it.”

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

You don't have a failure in your life that's not a prayer failure. You don't have a sin in your life but what prayer could have prevented that sin.

You don't have a genuine need in your life but that that need cannot usher you into a manifestation of the glory of God through fervent believing prayer.

***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."

2 Chronicles 16:9- "For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him..."

God is scanning this room, His eyes roaming down these rows of chairs, looking for a person who will passionately and persistently seek Him. His search never ceases and therefore He never misses one single opportunity any time, 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!***

Conclusion:

I close with a challenge from a praying pastor named Jim Cymbala: "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."

Hebrews 11:6- "But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him."

What is the Holy Spirit saying to you through this message?