

Turn on Timer!

[Slide 1] Last Sunday, we kicked off a new series on prayer entitled, **A Prayer-FULL Life**. This series will be both theological and practical. The goal of this series is to lead us to experience a Prayer-FULL life, a broader, deeper, and consistent prayer life.

Last Sunday, I shared a vision of The Praying Church. The early church was a praying church, and I believe God is calling us to be a praying church. Every movement of the revival of the heart, the church, and the nation always came through a movement of prayer. One historian said, “There has never been a spiritual awakening in any country or locality that did not begin in united prayer.” That’s not just in the history of revivals, it is also biblical. I mentioned, in Revelation 8, when the final seventh seal is open, there is silence for about a half an hour. It wasn’t just for dramatic effect, or a silence before the storm. It was because God would not act until his people prayed. Once their prayers had risen to the throne, God poured out his fire from the altar upon the earth. The fire of the Spirit comes in answer to prayer. We have to realize that we have an awesome power as we pray in the Spirit.

God’s action, the revival of the heart, the revival of the church, and the revival of the world will not happen until our prayers rise to the throne.

But, this raises an interesting question. Why is that? Why couldn’t God who is all wise, power and good just act on his own regardless of our prayers? Why do we have to pray for revival to happen? In fact, this is a part of the bigger question. Why do we need to pray at all?

[Slide 2] **“Does Prayer Really Change Things?”** That’s our sermon title today. This is going to be a little heady today. So, put on your thinking cap. **[Slide 3]** *If you have any questions, please text 213-935-0007 or submit your question on the attendance card. If we have time after the sermon, I will try to answer it.*

When I talk about prayer, most of us believe that it’s good to pray. In fact, I am willing to bet that most of you want to pray more this year. If you still make New Year resolution, this might be one of the things on the list. But, it’s difficult to actually do. You might think that since I am a pastor, I am natural with prayer. Actually, that’s not

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true. I have a very activist personality. I rather be out there doing stuff. It's very difficult for me to sit down and pray. In fact, even when I pray, I tend to walk around.

I think there are several reasons you and I don't pray as much we want to pray. It might be our time management. But, we often make time for things we believe are really important. The reality is that underneath of neatly packaged thought about prayer, there is something that says, it's a waste of time. We need just do stuff. We live in a very practical culture. If we are not out there doing stuff, we don't think it is valuable. We think prayer is something that we can push aside. I am the first sinner on this. I want to spend more time in the morning in prayer, but we have to get ready, take the kids to school, go to meetings, people to see, there are things to do, emails to catch up on, phone calls to return, text messages to return, news to read, FB message to return, FB post to catch up on and post. Where is the time for prayer in the morning?? Is that just me or do you struggle with this as well?

The point is that we have time to do stuff we think is important but somewhere in our brain, we don't really think prayer is important. God will still be there if we miss a prayer or two.

The real problem is that we are not sure if prayer really changes things. We don't believe in the power of prayer to change things. About a month ago right after the San Bernardino massacre, **[Slide 4]** Daily News ran a cover that said: **“God Isn't Fixing This”** and said this: “As latest batch of innocent Americans are left lying in pools of blood, cowards who could truly end gun scourge continue to hide behind meaningless platitudes prayer.” I understand the sentiment regarding inaction related to gun control, but is prayer just meaningless platitudes?

Of course, you and I believe it is not. But, do we really? If God is all-powerful and loving and he is sovereign, what can we do to change anything? God's got everything planned and everything in control; so, why should we pray? Is our prayer actually going to change God's mind? Why should we pray for a revival? Doesn't God do what he is going to do even if I don't pray? If someone is ill, why should we pray for that person to get well? Doesn't God have a loving plan for that person already? Why

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should our prayer matter to God? Some of us have prayed for something very intently. We prayed for a certain relationship to work out. We prayed for someone’s healing. We prayed and prayed but God didn’t answer our prayers. Does prayer really change things?

I heard some people say that we don’t pray to change God or the situation, we pray to change ourselves. That’s true that prayer changes us. Prayer is not just a petition to God. It is also embracing God and his presence and listening to him. We are going to talk a lot about that in this sermon series. But, does that mean our prayers don’t change God or the situation?

Origen, a second century theologian struggled with this issue: “First, if God foreknows what will come to be and if it must happen, then prayer is in vain. Second, if everything happens according to God’s will and if what He wills is fixed and none of the things He wills can be changed, then prayer is in vain.” Immanuel Kant also struggled with this issue. He called it “an absurd and presumptuous delusion” to think that one person’s prayer might change God’s plans.

So, how do we deal with this? Let’s go to the Scriptures.

[Slide 5] Let’s go to James 5:16:

¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

[Slide 6] I. Here is the first point: the Scriptures are clear that prayer is powerful and effective and actually changes things.

[Slide 7] Jesus said, “Ask and you will receive.” (John 16:24) “⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” (John 15:7) Peter said, “¹² For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer.” (1 Peter 3:12) James said, “You do not have because you do not ask God.” (James 4:2)

There are so many stories in the Bible where prophets and apostles prayed for physical healing and even resuscitation of dead bodies. Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah, and Elizabeth prayed against their infertility and God answered. Daniel prayed in a den

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of lions even as his three friends prayed in the midst of fire, and God answered. When God sent the prophet Isaiah to inform King Hezekiah of his imminent death, Hezekiah prayed for more time, and God granted him 15 more years. In that story, Isaiah came in and told King Hezekiah in absolute terms: “Thus says the Lord, you will die imminently,” and before Isaiah left, Hezekiah prays bitterly to the Lord, and while Isaiah is leaving, the word of the Lord came upon Isaiah again, and he told to go back to Hezekiah and tell him that he will live for 15 more years. Four times, OT reports that God “relented” or “changed his mind” in response to human request.

Throughout the Bible, there is more if/then statement related to prayer than any other. Here is a classic example: **[Slide 8]** 2 Chronicles 7:14 says:

¹⁴ if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

If my people pray, then... Things hang on balance. That’s why people need to pray. It permeates the very fabric of Scripture.

Paul regularly commanded people to devote themselves to prayer. **[Slide 9]** Colossians 4:2-4

² Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. ³ And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. ⁴ Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.

(Skipping to 12)

****[Slide 10]** ¹² Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.**

He constantly asked people to pray for him. He started most of his letters with what he prays for them about and ended his letters with instructions to devote to prayer. The assumption every time is that he believes that prayer changes things. It’s not just about feeling good about ourselves.

[Slide 11] II. Let's go the second point: how do we reconcile these clear biblical teachings about the power of prayer with the sovereignty of God (the question about why we prayer should matter when God has everything planned already)?

Let me give you a few thoughts to help you understand this better.

First thing that helps us understand why prayer matters so much is God's love. God is all-powerful, but he is a relational God. In order to have a real relationship with those he has created, he has to give away power. He does this every time he creates free agents, meaning people with free will. He wants a love relationship with us. Let me give you an example. If I am controlling Grace, I can't have a love relationship with her. She has to have independent autonomous say so. If not, she is just my ventriloquist. God didn't create bunch of puppets. We are not robots. We are free beings created in the image of God. This means that this is a risky world. God shares his power with others.

That's the God that is revealed in the Scriptures: God who gives his power away. So, prayer is a critical part of that love relationship. God wants us to agree with him, and partner with him. The groom does not just go off by himself without talking to the bride. Our groom Jesus Christ wants his Bride, the church, to agree with him in our conversation with him before he does things.

Here is the second thought that might be helpful. Yes, God is all-powerful. But, here is what the Bible teaches us about this all-powerful God. God gives away his power to us, and the way we exercise that power is through prayer. We have to keep in mind that that's not how the world defines power. God does not wheel power the way we humans do. Rulers and Kings try to control things. We have a picture of God who is like the almighty Super-Zeus, super ruler, super-king who controls everything. We have to in all thing allow God to let us know who he is. He gives us who he looks like. Jesus is the greatest revelation of God. All of our thinking about God must be from Jesus. God almighty gave away power and became one of us. Not only that, God sacrificed even his own life on the cross for us. God continues to give away. But, here is really an important

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teaching. You have to listen to this carefully. This is what power of God looks like. Listen carefully to this passage about what it says God’s power looks like [Slide 12] (1 Corinthians 1:23):

“²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

Paul says we preach the crucified Messiah. He is stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to gentiles. **But, he says crucified Christ is God’s power and is God’s wisdom!** Nothing could look more foolish and weaker. It is outrageous from a natural perspective to say that is the power and the wisdom of God. But, the kingdom of God reverses everything. This crucified messiah is the power of God. When God flexes his muscle, it does not look at muscle man. He looks like the crucified God. That’s the omnipotence of God. It is the face of love. He is God who gives and shares. It is the only force that can change the hardened heart of human beings. That’s the power of God. If we submit to Christ, we realize that God’s omnipotence is not the kind of omnipotence is not like super-Zeus. A petty Zues God is threatened by others having power. But, the true God that is revealed in Jesus, this is the God who reigns by giving himself away. His very nature is sacrificial. He shares his power. He even shares his glory. In John, Jesus invites to the glory that is between the Father and himself. He wants to share even his glory with us. This God, when he created human being, he shared his power and glory with human beings. That is a part of what it means to be created in his image. This means you have say so. We are not a puppet in God’s hand. God puts himself in the position of need. He gives say so. That’s why prayer is important. That’s why God needs for you and me to pray to get things done.

Even though God is all-powerful, and he can do everything. But, we wants to partner up with us to do his will and bring the Kingdom of God down here. The call to partner with God is all over the Scriptures. He commissioned us to the Great Commission of making disciples of all nations. God wants to do this together. He wants to do it in partnership with us. Of course, he could have brought proclaimed the gospel

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without human help, but he doesn't. He calls the church to be his Body, his representatives to bring his love about in this world. Of course, he could reduce suffering all by himself, but he calls us to be his Body, his agents to bring about reduction of suffering in this world. Of course, God could have created a world in which our prayers didn't do anything to change things, and he could have just taken care of everything on his own, but he has not. He calls us to pray and partner with him and unleashing power from on high.

Here is how C.S. Lewis responded to the argument that because God is all-wise and good, we don't really have to pray because God will do it anyway. He said you could use the same argument against any human activity, not just prayer. "Why wash your hands? If God intends them to be clean, they'll come clean without your washing them. . . . Why ask for the salt? Why put on your boots? Why do anything?" In explaining C.S. Lewis' argument, here is what Philip Yancey said: "God could have arranged things so that our bodies nourished themselves miraculously without food, knowledge entered our brains without studying, umbrellas magically appeared to protect us from rainstorms. God chose a different style of governing the world, a partnership which relies on human agency and choice."

Look, if you are objecting to the idea of partnership between God and human beings, you are objecting not only to prayer but to the basic rules of how God approaches the world. God works in and through human beings to get things done, and that includes even the unleashing of his power through prayer.

We are to partner with him. He has shared his power with us through the Holy Spirit. Prayer is one of the primary ways in which we exercise our power. Because God authentically invests us in power, he needs us to cooperate with him. God, out of love, puts himself in the position of need. God needs us to get things done. The Bible talks that way.

In 1 Corinthians 3:9 and 2 Corinthians 6:1, Paul says that we are God's co-workers. I thought he meant that you and I are God's workers together. But, most commentators say that grammatically, he is saying that we are God's co-workers.

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Literally, it says we are we are God’s *synergois*—syn means “co” or “united as one” ergois is where we get the word energy. So, in a way, it is saying, **we are God’s synergy**. You know what this means? God has empowered us by the Holy Spirit so much that when we work together with God, there is synergy. We are God’s co-workers when we pray. We are God’s partners when we pray. There is a very real sense in which God does not act unless we raise up our prayers to him.

This makes our prayers urgent. It’s not just about changing us. It is about changing things and even God as God hears us relationally. It is about the synergy between God and us as we work together in prayer. There is power in prayer!

God has set aside a reservoir of power for his bride, the church. And the way we exercise this power and authority is through prayer. He has given us the Holy Spirit who helps us to pray.

Imagine if we take the authority and power through the Holy Spirit seriously.

What if we take prayer more seriously?

What if we come before our God and ask him to heal knowing that God needs for us to agree in prayer for healing? How much more healing could there be? I know sometimes, God does not answer our prayers in the way we ask him. We will talk about that in another sermon. However, if we don’t ask, we don’t get.

What if we come before God and prayed for a revival? Your hearts are cold and you want to be fired up for Jesus. What if you put things on the line and pray.

What if we come before God and prayed for the revival of our church? What if people from the neighborhood and from all over the city came to Christ through New City? If we synergois with God, how much more people can be saved?

Let’s pray.

Invite Prayer team.