

“Prayer That’s Heard”

Mark 1:35-45

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX
Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • September 30, 2018

Last week as we finished our study of Ephesians we learned that prayer is the key to God’s armory. Prayer is the way we unlock all of the armor of God. Without prayer, none of the rest of it is of any benefit to you or to me. But how are we to pray? What kind of prayer gets heard by God?

A pastor and his wife had been invited to have dinner with a family in his congregation. While this family attended worship from time to time, they weren’t all that involved in the church so the pastor thought this would be a good opportunity to get to know them a little better.

When it came time for them to sit down to eat, the pastor asked the couple’s six-year-old daughter if she would ask the blessing. The child said, “I don’t really know what to say.” So the pastor told her, “just say what you’ve heard your mother say when she talks to God.” So the little girl bowed her head and said, “Dear God, why on earth did I invite these people over for dinner?”

Maybe, like this child’s parents at that moment, you feel like there is room for some improvement in your prayer life. You’re not alone. According to a recent Pew Forum study, about 75% of Americans claim to pray at least once a week. Among Protestants, that number jumps to 86% and among Evangelical Christians, 92% pray at least once a week. One of the surprising results of this survey is that 10% of atheists and 18% of agnostics claim to pray at least weekly. It makes you wonder who, exactly, they are praying to, but it illustrates just how powerful the idea of prayer is.

The problem is that only about 58% of Americans report praying every day, and those who do pray every day pray for less than 10 minutes per day. But as we saw in Ephesians, the Apostle Paul says, “pray at all times.” In 1 Thessalonians he also says, “pray without ceasing.” Ten minutes is a long way from “all the time.” How much should you pray? Martin Luther said, “I have so much business I cannot get on without spending three hours daily in

prayer.” In other words, he had so much to do that he couldn’t get it all done if he didn’t spend three hours a day in prayer. John Wesley prayed for two hours a day. In fact, all those who have been truly serious about walking with God have understood prayer as the main business of their lives. As we learned last week, prayer really is an ongoing conversation with God all throughout the day.

The question, then, becomes, “what is prayer?” Chances are that your first response is that prayer is talking to God, and it is. It’s amazing to think that we have access through prayer directly to the creator of the universe. It’s humbling to think that the God who is, was and forever shall be, who is involved in every detail of our world, would also be able to listen to me.

But clearly if we are to pray “without ceasing,” if we are to pray continuously, it must mean more than just talking to God. Richard Foster, in his book *Celebration of Discipline*, says, “Of all the Spiritual Disciplines, prayer is the most central because it ushers us into perpetual communion with the Father.” John Calvin called prayer the “chief exercise of faith,” and went on to say that prayer is how we daily receive God’s benefits. But it’s one thing to talk to God, but it’s another thing to *listen*. Prayer is more than talking. Prayer is about fellowship or relationship. In prayer, God draws us into communion with himself and through this communion with Him we come into true communion or fellowship with each other.

If prayer is so important, what is it that keeps us from praying more often and more effectively? One problem is simply a lack of discipline – we just don’t plan times of prayer into our day and other urgent matters fill our time. Another problem is that we may doubt that anything will really happen as a result of our prayers. When we don’t see tangible evidence of our prayers we are tempted to doubt the power of God through prayer.

But the Bible assures us over and over again that God does answer prayer. Many of us have

witnessed firsthand the answers to prayer. Several years ago the American Heart Association published the results of a scientific study of 393 coronary care patients at Duke University Hospital. Without their knowing, the patients were divided into two groups and for one of the groups people were asked to pray for the patients. They were given the names and medical diagnosis and asked to pray every day for healing and recovery. When the results were compared, the people who were being prayed for did better in every category: recovery rate, length of hospital stay, number of procedures needed, and length of medication. God answers prayer!

Other reasons why we don't pray as we should are that we don't sense the nearness of God or we aren't aware of the needs of others that could benefit from prayer. You see, just as fellowship is created by prayer, so also prayer flows out of fellowship.

But there's one other thing that gets in the way of praying – we don't know how. In one sense praying to our Heavenly Father comes naturally to us, just as an infant naturally cries to have its' needs met. But just as that child must be taught to speak in order to better communicate with its' parents, we must learn to communicate with God. Prayer is a learned skill and many people simply have not learned how to pray effectively.

Near the beginning of Jesus' ministry, in the first chapter of Mark's gospel, we have the two short passages we just heard. The first one is about Jesus getting away from the crowds and spending time in prayer. If Jesus, who is fully God, needed to spend time with God the Father in prayer, we certainly do as well. At first the next section doesn't seem to relate to the first one. But they are related. The story of the leper coming to Jesus to be healed can help teach US how to pray.

Verse 40 says, "And a leper came to Jesus, begging him, and kneeling said to him, 'If you are willing, I know you have the power to make me clean.'" The first thing we learn is *urgent prayer*. In the Bible, leprosy includes a number

of different skin conditions. But the consequences were the same. They were forced to live outside the city gates. Lepers were not permitted to get close to anyone without the disease. In fact, if the wind was blowing they had to stay roughly 150 feet away. But this man came to Jesus with urgency. He violated the rules to get close to Jesus. Do your prayers have that kind of urgency? Are you willing to do whatever is necessary to get close to God? As one pastor said, "Your prayers will not mean anything to God until they mean everything to you."

The next thing we learn is *humble reverent prayer*. We're told that the man fell to his knees and "implored" Jesus. That literally means he begged. He didn't worry about being embarrassed or saying the wrong thing. He didn't care what other people would think of him. And most importantly he didn't come trying to impress Jesus or anyone else. He also didn't demand anything. And he didn't have a long, elaborate, written prayer. He came to Jesus in great humility, sincerely asking for help.

Third, we learn *believing prayer*. The man came to Jesus with great faith. He did not doubt at all that Jesus could heal him. He said, "If you are willing you have the power to make me clean." This leper probably didn't know any lepers who had been cleansed. But he believed that Jesus had the power to heal him. And he was right. Jesus has the power to heal you as well, whatever it is you're going through. Most importantly, Jesus is able to cleanse you of the sin that separates you from God. He is able and willing to restore our broken relationship with Him and with each other.

So how do we go about learning to pray? The best way to learn is by actually praying. If you've ever learned a foreign language, you know that the best way to learn is to actually speak the language. It's no different with the language of prayer. The Holy Spirit teaches praying people how to pray better.

But we also learn by praying with other people who can model true prayer for us. Let me caution you, though, that we are trying to learn the *principles* of prayer from others, not just

phrases of prayer. Praying with other people can be one of the most powerful and enriching adventures of your Christian life. Jesus promised us that whenever two or more were gathered in His name that He would be present with us and so the best way to experience Christ's presence is by gathering with other Christians for the purpose of praying.

So what about you? How can you become better at praying? By praying urgently, reverently, and believing God is willing and able to help. But most importantly you can become better by praying often.

Amen.