

EASTSIDE COMMUNITY BAPTIST CHURCH

SUNDAY, JUNE 20, 2021

SERMON: PRIORITY OF PRAYER

TEXT: ACTS 2:42-47

Did you know that at one point in the history of the world there were actually very few atheists! Most people believed in the divine. You had those who worshipped God (the God of Israel) and you had those who worshipped many gods.

Then something happened to change the belief in the divine! Humans became “enlightened.” We entered a period in our cultural development that saw the divine pushed out of the way for the ingenuity and wisdom of humankind. Earlier, humankind saw the necessity of approaching God (the gods) for every aspect of life. It was the general thought that the divine oversaw the happenings on earth. Now the idea of the divine has been put on the back burner of life. It wasn’t that the people didn’t believe in them, they just didn’t matter as much anymore. We humans had decided that we could do pretty much what we set our minds on to do, under our own wisdom and cleverness.

The period of Enlightenment really seemed to propel the human race forward with many wonderful advancements, but there was a major casualty along the way. Spirituality took a big hit! Before the Enlightenment, our ancestors lived in a praying world. Whether they were praying to Yahweh, the God of Israel, or to any number of pagan gods that were believed in, people prayed...a lot! As we became more “me” centered, praying reduced drastically. In our modern world, we live in a non-praying world. Most of our time is spent interacting with each other rather than communing with our heavenly Father.

You might have guessed that today we will start looking at prayer. As we understand what prayer is, I encourage you to look at your own prayer life. Is it as deep as what you would like? Do you find yourself questioning if it is worth the time and effort or even if it really makes a difference? May the Holy Spirit use our time together to draw us closer to the One who loved us first and loves us best!

Let's begin with our scripture reading from Acts 2:42-47:

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Our passage today picks up from the recounting of Pentecost – the promised day that saw the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus' followers. What strikes me is how prayer was a major part of the follower's lives. In Acts 1 we have the story of Jesus' ascension to heaven. Before Jesus leaves he commands the followers to "not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift from the Father..." As they waited in Jerusalem, we read in Acts 1:14:

¹⁴ They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

Prayer was central to the work of the gospel then, and it is still the foundation of and work done in the name of Jesus today!

Many years ago in a church that I pastored, I felt the real conviction that our congregation needed to pray more. I started a "prayer meeting" but I did not want it to follow what had become a traditional pattern in many churches. I was not interested in having a time where you began with two or three songs, followed by a bible study, and then in the last 5-10 minutes spend some time in prayer. If we were going to pray – I wanted the prayer meeting to be solely about that ...PRAYER. The day came and we had a great attendance. I had decided to allow the participation of the group to dictate the length of the prayer meeting. We began and the Spirit moved. People were sharing, crying, laughing, and we

were praying. The evening went on for 2 hours. Afterwards I thought to myself, “that is exactly what we need as a church!” and I looked forward to our next prayer time. Then something happened. The next time we had about half the attendance of the first. Very quickly, over the next month or two, we dwindled down to myself and a couple church leaders. To this day, I have no understanding as to why the enthusiasm burned out? It did show me that prayer needs to be intentional and that many people have a misunderstanding of what it means to pray. We are living in a time when many churches are floundering and even more are closing. I found statistics from 2019 that said 9000 churches and worship structures were expected to close that year. Within our own denomination we see a number of churches struggle and close each year. It is one of the most depressing parts of the Annual Assembly when we are told which churches closed their doors.

The church, the gathered body of Christ, finds its power and purpose clarified, encouraged, and empowered when the people of God are engaged in sincere, honest, fervent prayer. With that being said, we must ask the question, “Are we truly succeeding at prayer or are we merely stumbling through the darkness trying to pray?”

Stanley Grenz, was an influential theologian for Canadian Baptists as he taught theology at our denominational seminary Carrey Theological College in Vancouver, until his sudden passing in 2005 at the age of 55. In his book “Prayer: the Cry for the Kingdom” he offers four suggestions for us to consider as we examine the challenge today of engaging in true, sincere, effective prayer.

LOOKING TO THE PAST

Often times you hear pastors and laypeople alike say something like, “We are New Testament Christians!” or “Our church is a New Testament Church!” What does that mean and are we succeeding in this. Many times people are referring to the Acts 2 scripture we used as our scripture lesson today. If we want to be an Acts 2 church then we need to look at their prayer life.

When we read the New Testament, we see that prayer dominated the early church. We have already mentioned how the followers of Jesus prayed constantly together waiting for the Holy Spirit to come (Acts 1:14) and our Acts 2 passage tells us that they gathered “daily to pray.” The end of our Acts 2 scripture lesson tells us the results of their spiritual practices that the Lord **“added to their number daily those who were being saved”** (Acts 2:47). When the disciples of Jesus faced uncertainty and danger, what did they do? They prayed! When Peter and John were told by the religious leaders to stop preaching...the people prayed! When Herod persecuted the newly formed church and had James (John’s brother) put to death...the people prayed! We are told that Peter would stop and pray at noon every day and we see Paul continually praying and in an attitude of prayer throughout his epistles. A great example of Paul praying is when he and Silas are beaten and thrown in a Philippian jail... even though they would have been in great pain, they prayed and sang hymns of praise to God into the late evening.

Why did the early church prosper? It is because they were people of prayer. As Paul wrote in 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.

Prayer was at the foundation of the success of the early church. Is there any reason that God would not want to add to the 21st century church’s numbers daily just as He did for the Acts church? Prayer opens doors for ministry. Prayer softens the hearts of those who are searching for God. Prayer grants us the boldness we need to fulfill our role in the growth of the kingdom of God.

IS THE MODERN CHURCH SICK?

Dr. Grenz’s second consideration regarding prayer as the greatest challenge for the church today can be found by a sincere examination of the health and state of our churches today. Nobody likes to be told they are ineffective. We hate criticism, especially when we are sincerely trying to achieve good in the name of

Jesus! The reality is that the best intentions can lead to lackluster results because we have lost the tools needed to be effective. A thriving business will often brutally critique themselves to stay current, relevant, and effective. Sadly, many churches would rather rest on and relive the laurels of past success than admit that they have become ineffective to the communities and times they live in. The hard question to ask (and often harder to answer honestly!) is ***“Is prayer a priority!”*** In all the good works, events, and activities that we find ourselves participating in, ***when was the last time prayer was given TOP priority?*** These questions are pertinent to the individual, the gathered body, the association, and the national denomination. If we are honest we would admit that for many individuals and churches, prayer has become a lost art!

RENEWAL AND PRAYER

But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint. (Is. 40:31)

As a pastor, I can easily get despondent when things don't go as planned or it seems like the ministry is taking two steps back for everyone taken forward. It is hard not to seek out and dissect any story you hear about revival breaking out in this church or that church. I want to know why, how, what can we do to have the same result? I think that this is why “church growth” materials sell like hotcakes! I remember hearing about a church in our denomination that suddenly entered a period of unprecedented revival. One Sunday visitors started attending and staying! What did they do and can we reproduce it? One of the interesting details that made me do a doubletake is the fact that the Sunday revival broke out was a Sunday that the pastor was away of vacation.

Prayer and renewal or revival go hand-in-hand. There have been times in our history which have been called “Great Awakenings.” Where it was during the time of the Wesley brothers in England, Jonathan Edwards in New England, or any of the other times when renewal and revival broke out, it started with prayer being the basis for all that happened. Billy Graham said in 1949 'I'm praying for an old-fashioned, Holy Spirit, Heaven-sent revival in America from coast to coast,'" He prayed that prayer right up to the day he died.

Do we want to change the world for God? It begins with prayer! God is the author of renewal and revival, but we have been invited to participate and do our part, in the name of Jesus, as ambassadors for our heavenly Father.

EVERYONE CAN PARTICIPATE!

I have had people debate with me over the years whether all Christians should be willing to pray out loud. I truly believe most prayers are meant to be spoken audibly. The spoken word is a powerful tool. Have you ever been struggling with a problem and heard someone pray and they address your problem without knowing it. Hearing others pray allows us to recognize that we are not alone in our trials, struggles, and tribulations. The temptation is to think that we are somehow unique and all alone in our problems. Hearing others pray often show us that we are doing this thing called life together and we can take heart. Hearing the prayers of others also allow us to pray more specifically. When was the last time that, as the gospel hymn says, you took it “to the Lord in prayer...”? Do you pray specifically and purposefully? There is a great scene in the movie “Bruce Almighty” where God (Morgan Freeman) asks Bruce (Jim Carrey) to pray. Bruce starts tentatively and awkwardly:

“Lord, feed the hungry and bring peace to all of mankind.” He turns to God and asks, “How was that?” God replies, “Great...if you want to be Miss America. Now come on now. What do you really care about?”

Pray specifically and intentionally! All Christians can and really are required to be people of prayer. It is not an option. It is not a choice to be made between being an usher, singing in the choir, teaching Sunday school, or pray.

Dr. Grenz reminds us that prayer is “perhaps the only task of the church in which everyone can participate. A person does not need special status, financial resources, or flashy special gifts to be involved in this endeavor. On the contrary, any Christian – including the simplest and seemingly most insignificant saint – can become a giant of prayer.”

Do you want to grow deeper in your relationship with Jesus...pray! Do you want to see your church grow and thrive and become a tool for change in your community, county, even world? Pray!

CONCLUSION

Why are we not people of prayer or churches of prayer? Often it is because we have forgotten how. You might say, "But I pray every day!" I am here to encourage you to keep doing what you are doing, but now it is time to take it to a deeper level and that takes study and practice. Many never get passed the basic pattern that they learned as children. A prayer for a meal might still be **"God is great, God is good, let us thank Him for our food"** or it might have progressed to "Thank you God for our food!" As we are honest with ourselves, ask the question, **"Do I generally say the same thing every time I pray?"** We are creatures of habit and routine. When we say the same prayer every time we pray...we run the risk of not thinking and participating but rather we just rattle off words we no longer think about and this can happen to the most well meaning of us.

My goal with this series on prayer is to challenge us to examine our hearts and minds and see if we need to make prayer a priority. To possibly answer some questions about prayer...the purpose, practicality, and benefits of being people of prayer. I hope to encourage you to pray more specifically and truly understand that prayer is far more than a bunch of requests made for ourselves and for others, but it is the primary way to draw closer to Jesus, hear His voice, and deepen our relationship with Him. It is the very foundation and power that drives the Christians and the church.

May we humbly go together on this journey as we repeat the request of Jesus' disciples... **"Lord, teach us to pray!"** (Luke 11:1).

Let's pray...