

A Church That Prays
Acts 4:23–31; Luke 11:1–13

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Many years ago, while serving as the pastor of another church, one of our church members came down with the flu. I phoned him to encourage him and to assure him that I would be praying for his recovery. I said to him, 'I'll remember you in my prayers.' Instead of saying thank you, he replied, 'Don't bother God about it. It's just the flu.' I knew he wasn't joking, and his reply dampened my spirit, because when someone tells you they are praying for you, even if your situation is not life-threatening, it is a kind and loving thing to do, and surely the natural response is simply to say thank you.

But there was another reason his words stayed with me. His response revealed something much deeper. It reflected a misunderstanding of both God and prayer. When he said, 'Don't bother God about it,' he was speaking as though God were someone who could be inconvenienced or annoyed. He spoke as though God were like us. We all know what it is like to need some quiet time. We become tired. We need a break. We need a holiday. Sometimes we simply don't want to be disturbed. But God is not like us. The Psalmist reminds us, 'He who watched over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep' (Psalm 124:1). God does not grow weary, he does not become overwhelmed, he does say, 'I'm too busy.' He is the infinite Creator who upholds the universe by his power, yet at the same time he knows every sparrow that falls to the ground and has numbered the hairs on our heads. Nothing is too great for him to accomplish, and nothing is too small for him to care about. So when we imagine that we can somehow 'bother' God with our prayers, we have forgotten who God truly is.

But the words of the man also revealed a misunderstanding about prayer itself. Implicitly he believed that prayer is only for major crises, for life-and-death situations, but not for something ordinary like the flu. Yet that idea does not come from the Bible. Scripture tells us that God delights in the prayers of his people. And the Bible doesn't teach that prayer is reserved only for emergencies. The apostle Paul says, 'In everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.'

That little conversation from many years ago has stayed with me because I think it exposes a misunderstanding that is much more common than we realise. Most Christians would never say, 'Don't bother God.' But sometimes we live as though we believe it. We may not say it with our lips, but we often say it with our lives. How often do we pray only when something goes terribly wrong, when someone receives a frightening diagnosis, when there is a family crisis? But when life is going well, when we are healthy, when work is steady and everything seems under control, prayer quietly slips into the background. It becomes something occasional rather than continual.

Could it be that one of the greatest causes of prayerlessness in the modern church is that many Christians have unconsciously reduced prayer to an emergency service? We treat prayer a little like calling 000. When there is a crisis, we call. But when life seems manageable, we carry on by ourselves. If that is our attitude, then we have misunderstood prayer, and we rob ourselves of the joy, strength and spiritual vitality that God intends us to experience through daily communion with him.

That is why our theme this morning is so important. As we come to the final message in our series, 'A Church for Others,' our subject is 'A Church that Prayers,' because a church can have good programs, good preaching, caring people and sound administration, but if it is not a praying church, something essential is missing. Prayer is not an optional extra in the Christian life. It is one of the chief ways in which we express our dependence and trust in God. If a church stops praying, it slowly begins to rely upon itself, and whenever God's people begin relying upon themselves, spiritual decline is never far behind.

Now, before we look at today's Bible readings, I want to mention a few other misunderstandings about prayer that can quietly find their way into our thinking. The first is the idea that prayer is simply asking God for things. For some people, prayer is presenting God with a shopping list. 'Lord, give me this.' 'Lord, give me that.' 'Lord, please solve this problem.' Of course, there is nothing wrong with asking God for our needs. Jesus himself teaches us to say, 'Give us today our daily bread.' But asking is only one part of prayer. Prayer is much more than making requests. Prayer is communion with God. It is drawing to him in worship, thanksgiving, confession, dependence and trust.

Another misunderstanding is the idea that prayer is persuading God to do what we want. Some people almost think of prayer as trying to convince a reluctant God, and if we pray long enough, or passionately enough, perhaps we can persuade him to change his mind, and convince him to do what we want. But prayer is not about bending God's will to ours. Rather it is bringing our hearts into submission to his perfect will. Yes, we bring our requests to him, we tell him our fears, our hopes and our needs. But we do so trusting that our Heavenly Father knows what is best and will always act according to his perfect will.

Still another misunderstanding is that prayer is simply giving God instructions, as though prayer were telling God what to do. If that were true, then we would effectively become the master and God would become our servant. But prayer is not giving orders to God. It is acknowledging that he is the sovereign Lord, and we are his children.

There are no doubt many other misunderstandings about prayer, but I'll limit myself to those I have mentioned.

So, what, then, is prayer. There are many good definitions. One of the simplest is, 'Prayer is talking with God.' That is certainly true. But it does not quite say enough.

One of the richest definitions I have ever read comes from John Bunyan, the author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. He described prayer as 'a sincere, sensible, affectionate pouring of the heart or soul to God, through Christ, in the strength and assistance of the Holy Spirit, for such things as

God has promised, or according to his Word, for the good of the church, with submission, in faith, to the will of God.'

That is a wonderfully rich definition. Notice that prayer is directed to God, it is offered through Christ, because Jesus alone has opened the way for sinners to come confidently into God's presence, it is made by the help of the Holy Spirit, who enables us to pray even when we do not know what we ought to pray for. It is shaped by God's Word, not merely by our feelings. It seeks the good of the church, not simply our own comfort. And throughout it all, prayer is marked by humble submission to the will of God.

Now, what does true prayer actually look like? Thankfully we do not have to invent our own answers. God himself teaches us. Our two Bible readings this morning complement one another beautifully. In Luke 11, Jesus teaches us how to pray. In Acts 4, we see what happens when a church actually does pray. One is our Lord's instruction; the other is the early church putting that instruction into practice. Together, they give us a wonderful picture of what it means to be a church that prays.

Jesus Teaches Us How to Pray - Luke 11:1–11

So let us begin with our Gospel reading.

Luke tells us that one day Jesus was praying, and when he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray.' I find that request remarkable. The disciples did not ask Jesus to teach them how to perform miracles or to preach. They asked him to teach them how to pray. And Jesus answered by giving them what we call the Lord's Prayer. This morning we can't explore every phrase in this prayer but let me know your attention to some important features. The prayer begins with, 'Father,' or as Matthew records it, 'Our Father in heaven.' It means that prayer begins with relationship. When we pray, we pray to and we come before God as children approach their loving Father.

And then notice the order of the prayer: 'Hallowed be your name,' 'Your kingdom come.' These are the parts of our prayer that focus on God's glory, on God's worship and on his kingdom. And this shows that it is important that our prayers don't only focus on our own personal needs, but that in our prayers we seek the worship of God and the coming of his kingdom.

Then comes the part of the prayer that focuses on our needs: 'Give us our daily bread,' 'Forgive us our sins,' and 'Lead us not into temptation.' These are all petitions, but notice that they are not all about our material needs. The first request, 'Give us each day our daily bread,' concerns our physical and material needs. We are invited to depend on God for our daily provision. But the next two petitions focus on our spiritual needs. 'Forgive us our sins' is a prayer of confession, acknowledging that we need God's mercy and forgiveness. It reminds us that we are merely physical beings who need food and material possessions. We are also spiritual beings who need healing, cleansing and forgiveness that only God can give. Then comes the prayer, 'Lead us not into temptation.' Here we ask for God's guidance and protection, that he would keep us from temptation, guard us from the power of evil, and strengthen us to remain faithful to him.

A Church that Actually Prays - Acts 4:23-31

Our second reading from Acts shows us what happens when a church puts Jesus' teaching into practice. In Acts 4, Peter and Jon have been arrested and threatened because they have been preaching about Jesus. When they are released, what is the very first thing the church does? They pray. Notice how their prayer begins: 'Sovereign Lord.' They remind themselves who God is. That is especially important because they are facing opposition and intimidation from the enemies of the gospel. They remind themselves that, however powerful their opponents may appear, they are not sovereign. They may be able to threaten, imprison or even inflict suffering on God's people, but they are not in control. God alone is sovereign, and in his perfect justice he will hold to account all who oppose and persecute his people.

Then notice what they ask for. They do not pray, 'Lord, remove the persecution.' Instead, they pray, 'Enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.' That reminds me of our persecuted brothers and sisters in countries such as Iran and North Korea. They rarely ask Christians in the West to pray that the persecution will end. Rather, they ask us to pray that God will give them courage, faithfulness and perseverance in the midst of suffering. Like the believers in Acts 4, their greatest concern is not their own comfort or safety, but that they would remain faithful to Christ and continue to bear bold witness to him.

And how does God answer their prayer? Luke tells us, 'They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.' God does not immediately remove their difficulties. Instead, he gives them the courage and strength they need to remain faithful in the midst of them. That is often how God answers our prayers today. Sometimes he changes our circumstances. But often he changes us, giving us the grace, courage and strength to endure faithfully. He may not always take away the trial, but he always gives his people what they need to trust him, obey him and persevere through it.

As we conclude our series, 'A Church for Others,' let me leave you with one simple question: *What kind of church do we want St Augustine's to be?* Surely we want to be a warm and welcoming church, a faithful church, and a church that reaches others with the good news of Jesus. But we will not become that kind of church unless we are also a praying church. So let us become people who pray, not only in times of crisis, but every day. Let us bring both the great and the small concerns of life before our Heavenly Father. Let us seek God's kingdom before our own comfort, and let us depend, not on our own strength, but on the power of the Holy Spirit. For when God's people pray, God is pleased to work in and through them for the glory of his name and the advance of his kingdom. May God make St Augustine's not simply a church that says prayers, but truly a church that prays. Amen.