Eager to Pray

Second in the series “Eager to Do What is Good” for May 2017

# Scripture: Luke 4:42-44; 5:15, 16; 6:12,13 also Matt. 6:5-15

# Key Thought: If we follow Jesus’ example we will be eager to pray.

# Intro:

Our theme for this month is “Eager to do what is good.” It is obviously a very biblical theme, since the phrase is taken directly out of Scripture. The phrase describes a characteristic that Paul said should define Christians. Yet, at the same time, there are a couple grave dangers for us with this theme.

## Need to start with believing

One danger is that we will focus on doing good deeds before we decide about believing, that is, before we confess faith in Jesus and trust him as our own Savior. Some of the people Jesus was teaching asked him about how to do good works. Listen to his reply.

They said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent."
John 6:28-29 NRSV

So we need to start there. We need to declare our own allegiance to Jesus, to accept his sacrifice on the cross as in our behalf, and open our hearts and minds to his Holy Spirit. That’s the spiritual starting point for Christians.

## Good works can’t replace praying

The second error we too easily make is to work hard at good things without praying. That is why we have this topic about prayer today early in this series. Listen to advice from the pastor of one of the largest churches in America, Bill Hybels.

Authentic Christianity is not learning a set of doctrines and then stepping in cadence with people all marching the same way. It is not simply humanitarian service to the less fortunate. It is a walk – a supernatural walk with a living, dynamic, communicating God. Thus the heart and soul of the Christian life is learning to hear God's voice and developing the courage to do what he tells us to do. (Too Busy Not to Pray by Bill Hybels P. 125)

The archenemy of spiritual authenticity is busyness, which is closely tied to something the Bible calls worldliness – getting caught up with this society’s agenda, objectives and activities to the neglect of walking with God.
(Too Busy Not to Pray by Bill Hybels p. 126)

Walking with God requires prayer. So we need to learn about and practice prayer as a faith discipline if we are to become effective servants of God.

“Those who move this age toward God have moved out of this age to the solitary places.
Then they come back with power."
E. Stanley Jones, The Christ of Every Road p. 249

But there is even more to our prayer motivation than just wanting to be effective. If that is the only reason we pray, we will probably not pray much. Our desire to pray needs to spring from deeper sources.

## We are following Jesus’ example.

*One deeper source of motivation is the sincere desire to follow Jesus. Jesus’ example of prayer is amazing and it is inspiring.*

In Luke 4:42-44 (parallel passage Mk 1:35) the Gospel writer relates one instance of something that Jesus did often – praying – spending time alone with God. Ministry was busy. People were demanding. But Jesus got up early to find time to pray.

In Luke 5:15,16, the pattern develops. The healing ministry is popular and because of it, Jesus is surrounded by crowds. To find the time to pray he must get alone. And that is exactly what he does -- often.

In Luke 6:12,13, we observe more of the same pattern. Before the most important decision of his ministry, the choosing of his disciples, Jesus spent the night in prayer.

So Jesus felt a great need to spend time with God in prayer to empower and guide his ministry. If Jesus needed that, how much more do we! So the example of Jesus motivates us to pray.

However, there are still many more reasons why we should be eager to pray.

# Eager for communion with God

I would like us to consider this. We need to be eager to pray because we deeply desire communion, friendship, a close relationship with God. God is not an impersonal force nor a disinterested spiritual influence. He is a person. In the story of Eden, God came into the garden looking for Adam and Eve. That is a picture for us of God desiring relationship with us.

God sought out Moses at the burning bush, creating something that God knew would cause Moses to turn aside to look and then listen. And thus, at God’s initiative, began a close relationship between God and Moses. It was a relationship so close that when Moses came away from speaking with God, Moses’ face would shine, would be so radiant that he had to put a veil over it until the next time he went into the Tent of Meeting” to speak with God. His fellow Israelites couldn’t handle looking at him without the veil. (Ex. 34:29-35).

In desiring communion and relationship with God, our attitude should mimic that of the Psalmist when he wrote words like these:

 As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? Ps 42:1-2 NIV

O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. Ps 63:1 ESV

*Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.
Ps 84:5 ESV*

I read the story about blind hymn writer, Fanny Crosby. By her own statement, she never tried to write a hymn without praying first. Yet she wrote over 8000 hymns. Once she was under a deadline to write a hymn to a tune given her by composer W. H. Doane. She couldn't write; words and rhyme would not come. But remembering that she had forgotten to pray, she knelt. Upon rising she dictated as fast as her assistant could write.

 Jesus keep me near the cross,
There a precious fountain
Free to all, a healing stream
Flows from Calv'ry's mountain.
In the cross, in the cross
Be my glory ever
Till my raptured soul shall find
Rest beyond the River.
(Illustration from 7700 # 4536)

That famous hymn captures the desire we need to have, an urgency to be in close communion with our Savior through prayer.

Mastering the art of prayer, like any other art, will take time, and the amount of time we allocate to it will be the true measure of our conception of its importance.
(J. Oswald Sanders)

# Eager for strength and guidance

Another reason that we should be eager to pray is because of the strength and guidance that we receive from God when we pray.

## Prayer brings us strength for our challenges

As one of my favorite Old Testament verses puts it

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.
 Therefore we will not fear. Ps 46:1,2 NRSV

Paul talked about the strength he received as he prayed for relief from a physical malady, a relief that did not come in the way that he desired. But what did come was strength to bear up under the trial. That is the way it often is. Here is the message that Paul received from God.

He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." 2 Cor 12:9 NIV

## Through prayer we receive guidance from God

Prayer is not a one-way street. Many people conceive of prayer as simply an exercise that we do where we rattle off to God all of our troubles or give him our wish list like a child presenting a Christmas list to Santa. Neither of those analogies even come close to a biblical concept of prayer.

In the Bible, prayer is a two-way communication. People like Moses, Samuel, Solomon, Peter, and Paul and John dialogued with their heavenly Father. They prayed to God and God communicated back to them guidance and direction.

So since prayer is intended to be two way communication, it involves listening for God too.

* In prayer that we learn to read the impressions which the still small voice of God makes upon our spirits. That is one way he speaks back to us.
* We learn to obey the blocks in our spirit- the check of God when we are planning to go one way and just feel it is not the right way to go. That is another way that God guides us.
* We learn to recognize the divine suggestion planted in our thoughts during prayer time or given to us by a friend just when we needed it in answer to a spoken or unspoken prayer.
* We read Scripture, listening for the Holy Spirit to lift out special verses that seem to mean more to us than the rest of the text on that particular day. A verse just seems meant for the occasion, meant for us, almost strangely applicable. This is another way that God speaks to us.
* We learn to notice when we hear the same message from reliable sources more than one time in a close time span. Is God trying to tell me something?

I like to plan my day in prayer, asking God to impress upon my heart what is really the most important thing on his agenda on a particular day. I always remember a quote that I received at a Christian time management seminar that I attended early in my ministry. The speaker said, “If you have more things on your to-do list than you can do today, then you have more things on your list than God plans for you to do today. You have some things on your list that are not God’s will for today.” One of the tasks of our time-alone-with-God is to ask God for his priorities for the day. He knows how much time you have. What’s really on the top of God’s to-do list for your day? And remember, sometimes, his list has people on it that we consider interruptions because God prioritizes people.

## Other gifts of prayer

I have used strength and guidance as examples of gifts that prayer provides. But, really, there are many other gifts that we receive from our prayer relationship with God. Let me name a few more without going into detail about them. Comfort, discernment, joy, wisdom, spiritual gifts, and knowledge of God come to mind.

# Eager for answers

Let’s go on to one more entity that should make us very eager to be people of prayer. It is the “elephant in the room” that sometimes people hesitate to talk about.

It is true that prayer changes us.

To pray is to change. Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us… Real prayer is life creating and life changing. (Richard Foster)

It is true that prayer brings us emotional peace. Prayer gives us a chance to unload the burdens of our hearts. Prayer comforts us and encourages us. Prayer is a beautiful practice for mental and spiritual health.

We also understand that, when we come to God, our desires fall in line with God’s will. We begin to discern what it is that God desires to do and wants to happen in a particular situation. Oftentimes that which we intended to pray for changes as we begin to pray because the Holy Spirit guides our prayer and changes our thinking. So it is certainly true that one of the great purposes of prayer is to bring us in line with the greater purposes of God. This is to guard against our prayers being selfish and self-centered and to line our prayers up with the way God is working in a particular situation.

However, unfortunately many people have used these great truth to deny that prayer is also established for the simple purpose of receiving answers. Can we hear these words of Jesus and think otherwise?

"Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. 9 Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? 10 Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? 11 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! Matt 7:7-11 NRSV

Some have been discouraged by the fact that some of our prayers seem not to be answered. Other people, because of this, have shied away from teaching that one purpose of prayer is to receive answers. But, there is no doubt that it is biblical to believe that one great purpose of prayer is that our prayers might be answered. There was a popular motto years ago. I have one of those plaques. “Prayer changes things.” Do we believe that? I do.

But much more crucially, Jesus did, and the leaders in the Bible did. We must get rid of the idea that everything is already set and nothing can change and that it doesn’t really matter whether we pray. God could have made the world that way, I suppose, but he did not. Somehow, in the mystery of his ways, He has chosen to factor in the prayers of the people of God.

* Remind yourself that Jesus believed in answered prayer. To name just one example, He prayed for Lazarus to rise from the dead and thanked God ahead of time that he had been heard (John 11:41).
* Moses believed that circumstances could be changed in answer to prayer. As a result of Moses intercession for the people of Israel, we read a mystifying line in the Old Testament after one of Moses prayers to God for Israel:

 And the Lord relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people. Ex 32:14 ESV

* Hezekiah believed that prayer changes things too. The prophet Isaiah had told him he would die from his illness (Isaiah 38:1). But Hezekiah cried out to God and God granted him 15 more years (Isaiah 38:2-5).
* The early church was not exactly faith-filled when they were praying for the release of Peter from jail. But God answered their prayers in a mighty way, sending angels to deliver Peter from Herod’s clutches (Acts 12:12-17).
* Think of the faith of a humble ordinary disciple named Ananias who God told to go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and pray for a man named Saul of Tarsus who had gone blind but had seen a vision. Ananias remonstrated that he had heard about Saul’s persecution of the church. But the dialogue continued as God encouraged Ananias, telling him that Saul was God’s chosen instrument to bring the Good News to the Gentiles. So Ananias went as instructed, laid his hands upon the blind man, and prayed that he would receive his sight and receive the Holy Spirit. Immediately, Saul who later was called Paul received his sight and desired to be baptized as a profession of his faith in Jesus.

Many of the promises of God pertain to answers to prayer. Hear Jesus again.

The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!”

He replied, “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you. Luke 17:5-6

The apostle John recorded more of Jesus’ teaching on prayer.

Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete. John 16:23-24 NRSV

The desire for answers should make us eager to pray, only let us be willing to listen for God’s reply as well.

# Conclusion

Closing story: from The Hidden Hand of God – Remarkable Answered Prayers p. 40 “Divine Calculation”

Avail yourself of the greatest privilege this side of heaven. Jesus Christ died to make this communion and communication with the Father possible. (Billy Graham)

Pray for great things, expect great things, work for great things, but above all, pray! (R. A. Torrey)