

*“Learning to Pray, and Doing It”!**Being a People Who Actually Pray**May 27, 2018*

Key Texts: II Chronicles 7:14-16

I. Introduction: “If”

“If my people will humble themselves and pray...”

What are the things you normally take time to pray about? We pray a lot about health issues, surgeries, recoveries. We pray about our work environment, and maybe career or job possibilities? Many seniors and their parents were likely praying about next steps from high school? Decisions about what college to attend, or trade school, or even a summer job. And parents, “Lord, please provide the resources to send them to school!”

We pray for people to find Jesus; for people’s marriages; for our schools and safety, for our first responders and safety for our military folks. We pray for our pets, we pray for our friends. We pray for family and whether you know it or not, it’s ok to pray for ourselves.

II. Too Much to Do Not to Pray

Too often we do allow “busyness” to take away the margins in our lives and what happens then is prayer gets marginalized. We think we have too much to do to pray, but the exact opposite is true: We have too much to do not to pray. The more we have to do the more we need to pray.

How do you start your day? Thinking about everything you have to do? Or, do you begin by thanking God for another day? Thanking God for who God is?

In reading II Chronicles I love how there is a refrain: “He is good: His love or His mercy endures forever.” (II Chron 5:13 & 7:3) Do we tell God, “God you’re good!” Do we believe God is good?

When we start our day with praise and thanksgiving our whole day will look different.

III. King Solomon’s Prayer

Our text today flows out of King Solomon’s prayer, where he and the people are dedicating the new temple that David gathered all the materials and resources for and his son, Solomon, built.

In that prayer of dedication, he starts, “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel who has fulfilled what He promised..., My father had it in his heart to build this temple and I have built this temple for the Name of the Lord.” (vs 10)

When we think about who God is, do we start out by wanting to give God our praise? Any style of worship, modern or traditional, runs along a similar pattern. Worship always begins with praise, a Call to Worship, Singing Songs to the Savior, Affirmations of Faith, Prayers acknowledging who God is and what God has done and who we want to be because of that. And over and over praising God, and praying with God comes back to the heart.

Last week, our guest preacher E.M. Bounds made that point over and over again. Prayer strengthens the heart. Prayer strengthens the will. Prayer strengthens our purpose. “We can never expect to grow in the likeness of our Lord unless we follow His example and give more time to communion with the Father.” Bounds says, “people in general have quit praying. They are too busy to pray. Time and strength and every faculty are given over to money, to business, to the affairs of the world. Few people expend themselves in great praying. The great business of praying is hurried, petty, starved, beggarly business with most people.” (p 55)

Now back to Solomon’s prayer.

IV. No Building Can Contain God

Solomon prays, “God, there is no building that can contain You;” we could say no temple, no church building, “even the highest heavens, cannot contain You. How much less this temple that I built!” (ch 6:18) “May You hear the prayer of Your servant from this place,” Solomon prayed while kneeling and with hands outstretched, “and when you hear, forgive. For there is no one who does not sin and if they have a change of heart, a change of heart and repent and turn back to You with all their heart and soul, then God hear their prayers and pleas. Uphold their cause and forgive your people.” (vs 36-39)

Friends, that is pertinent, powerful, life changing stuff. On the other hand, prayerlessness has become a fatal shame which has allured the church into worldly embraces, dazzled her leaders, weakened her foundations, and deprived her of her beauty and strength. Praying people pour into the church the original spiritual forces like those experienced on that first Pentecost when Peter could not have imagined his preaching and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit would result in 3000 souls being saved.

V. Praying People Help the Church

Praying people help the church lift off the sandbars of materialism and press it out into the ocean depths of spiritual power. Praying people keep the church in full force, invites God to keep His hand on the helm and trains the people, the church, in strength and trust.

“The world is coming into the church at many points and in many ways. It oozes in, it pours in, it comes in with brazen front or sometimes soft, insinuating disguise. It comes in at the top and at the bottom; it percolates in many hidden ways.” (p 58)

We are left with this: Only praying hands can build for God. God needs men, women, youth, children, and leaders of prayer.

“If my people will pray...”

“If.” What will it take us to be people of prayer? A church of prayer? As Jesus puts it, “A house of prayer?” “If my people will humble themselves and pray.”

Is it only busyness that holds us back? I challenged you 3 weeks ago to consider how many minutes you were spending in prayer, to jot that down and then to take a next step in the time you are spending in prayer.

So, how are you doing with that? I know I tend to do a little better when I am being encouraged and challenged to do so. I’ve been, like about 50 others here at CUMC, reading The Circle Maker 40 day devotional and circling a bunch of things in prayer. I’m circling my family. My wife and her work on her book. My son and daughter-in-law and their work and raising their children. My mother and her health. Jordan and his walk with God. I’m circling our church and our leaders for wisdom, direction and implementing the 3 ministry strategies focusing on our Pathway of Discipleship, Improved Congregational Care and Growing Stewardship. I circled families having babies and children being baptized this week. I’ve circled staff members and new staff members coming and Pastor Jessie for successful ministry in Rappahannock County.

VI. Waiting and Praying for 10 Days

In this season of Pentecost, after Jesus ascended, the disciples did not go immediately into all the world. Jesus told them to go and wait for power from on high. To wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit so Jesus’ presence would always be with them. So, they waited and while they waited they prayed. For 10 days they waited and prayed. They gathered in an upper room and prayed. “If my people will pray...” Those 10 days have paid dividends for 2000 years.

Church, what if we took God’s word to heart today? I mean, really took it to heart?

“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn, or repent from their wicked ways—just know all sin displeases God—then I will hear from heaven and forgive their sin and heal their land.”

Everything Solomon prays for God says He will do, if we will pray.

And in that temple Solomon built, God says this: “My eyes and my heart will always be there.”

The key to God’s favor in this place and with us, His people, is being a people who value prayer and take out the “if” equation and actually get down to the business of praying. I’m not sure what that will take, but I know we have some prayer warriors here. That’s good and thank you. Concerted and planned, carried out and coordinated prayer is a powerful weapon against the enemy who comes to seek, kill, and destroy. And make no mistake, that enemy is real. Even Satan caused David to count all his men which God did not want him to do. Why? Pride. And David repented.

VII. Pride Will Keep Us from Praying

Pride will keep us from prayer because we think, “I’ve got this.” “I don’t need any help.” “I know what I’m doing.” Pride will always take God out of the equation. Pride comes before a fall. The fall is a result of us not learning to pray and count on God, until when? After we fall and then it’s like, “Lord, can you help me here? Can you get me out of this mess?” If my people—If they what? Will humble themselves. Being humble means we admit we need God’s help and perspective. We realize we can’t do whatever God is asking us to do on our own. Albeit that’s a lesson many of us have to learn the hard way.

And then, after we pray like it depends on God, we need to work like it depends on us. If we don’t pray first, our work will be in vain. God wants to fill us with His Spirit, but we have to pray and humble ourselves first. Do you know from the depths of our hearts and minds and souls the Holy Spirit wants to fill every crevice, in order to prepare us for the work God has for us to do?

And when the Holy Spirit comes on us we will think new thoughts and feel new feelings. “They” and “Us” will turn into “We” and “Ours.” Unity will begin to grow and blossom.

VIII. The Story of the Jewish Teacher, Honi

What would happen if we humbled ourselves and prayed? What if, like Honi of Jewish legend in the First Century B.C., we circled ourselves, our families, our situations in prayer and said, “God I trust you and will not come out of this circle ‘til you answer my prayer.” Honi drew a circle in the sand during a long drought and asked God to make it rain asking God to show mercy to His children. And then it happened, rain drops began to fall and an audible gasp went up from the 1,000’s who gathered to watch this humble, prayerful man.

And he prayed again. “Not for this rain Lord, but a rain that will fill cisterns, pits, and caverns.” And it began to pour in torrents, kind of like a number of years ago on a Kelsey’s Big Give Day, I prayed a simple prayer, “God, hold off the rain this morning and after our projects are over, let it pour.” And it rained 8 inches that evening. Darryl Lam likes to remind me of that.

The people watching Honi fled to the temple, the one Solomon built, to escape the flash floods.

Honi stayed and prayed, “Not for such a rain have I prayed, but for rain of Thy favor, blessing, and graciousness.”

And then, suddenly, it began to rain calmly, peacefully and each raindrop was like a token of God’s grace. It did not just soak the skin, it soaked the Spirit with faith.

God says, “if my people will humble themselves and pray..., my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place.” This place in this text was the temple Solomon built, but remember

Solomon said no building, even the heavens cannot contain God—“For He is good and his mercy endures forever’ and everywhere including right here is this sanctuary, with you, God’s people. God hears “every prayer, every plea.” (ch 6:29)

IX. What Size Is God?

I think besides for busyness and pride standing in the way of us praying, we also have to see God as a big God. If we see God as a little God, we’ll pray little prayers. We’ll dream small dreams. If we see God as a big God we’ll pray big prayers and dream big dreams. How do you think Solomon saw God? Or the disciples, or Honi? How do you see God?

Let us never doubt the statement that God means what God says in all of God’s promises. God’s promises are for ordinary people and God means to do for all who pray just what He says He will do.

“If my people will humble themselves and pray, I will hear from heaven and forgive their sin and heal their land. My eyes and ears will be open and attentive to the prayers offered in this place.”

Let’s not be a people who know about prayer, who take the classes and read the books on prayer, who wish with little hope or assurance. Rather, let’s be a people who actually pray believing God will enter in anew and afresh as we humble ourselves and pray.

X. Closing Prayer

Let Us Pray:

God, you are an amazing God. A God who is good and whose mercy endures forever. A God who is so big and powerful and mighty that no building nor even the heavens can contain You. And Yet you say when we humble ourselves and pray you will forgive and heal, your eyes and ears will be open and attentive and Your heart will always be for us. We praise You, we thank You, we worship You, we trust You. We will draw some circles around our prayers for those people and circumstances near and dear to our hearts and we will commit to pray ‘til something happens. We pray for a fresh anointing of Your Holy Spirit to soak our spirits with your grace and healing.

In Jesus’ name, Amen.