

The Purpose and Power of Prayer

Scripture: Luk 11: 1-13

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Morning Service**

People of God: The Annual Day of Prayer Service has long been part of the tradition of the CRC. The official date is in March, but local churches can move the date to suit its need, as we have done. Tonight, we have our Annual Prayer Day Service.

But it always stuck me as odd that we call it a “Day of Prayer”, when in reality it was only a worship service focused on prayer. What made it a Day of Prayer? Nothing that I could tell. Except for today. Today, we have a full day focused on prayer. Someone in the worship committee proposed that we set up a prayer vigil this afternoon and that’s what we have done. Then it turned out that the GEMS theme this year dealt with prayer. And so, finally, after nearly twenty years in ministry, I get to participate in a “Day” of prayer.

To be honest, I was a little bit concerned about how this afternoon prayer vigil would work. It’s something new and we’re not always good at doing something new. It forces us to actually pray, in small groups, and we’re not always comfortable in praying with others. And so there was a hesitancy to sign up. Many weren’t sure what it’s all about. Because we haven’t done this before. But we can learn.

I think we always need a reminder about prayer. Prayer does not come easy, at least for most Christians. As Jesus needed to teach the disciples about prayer, so we too need to be taught about prayer. That’s what I want to do this morning and tonight. I want to touch upon the four "p's" of prayer. They are: the purpose of prayer, the power of prayer, the pattern of prayer, and the practice of prayer. This morning we’ll deal with the first two, the purpose and power of prayer and tonight the last two, the pattern and practice of prayer.

First of all, let us look at the purpose of prayer. Now it might seem as if this is such an obvious thing. Prayer is talking to God. It's as simple as that. But why are we talking to God? Why do we open up our hearts to the Lord? We need to know the purpose of prayer because it is so easy for our communication with God to be distorted and abused. There are a variety of ways this can happen.

The purpose of prayer can be distorted when we think we talk to God in order to bring before the Lord a wish list of things we want God to do for us. Is that what prayer is for: getting God to provide us things. Lord, I want this. Lord, I need this. Now, of course, prayer involves petitions. It includes asking God for his blessing. But the primary purpose of prayer is not to present before God a wish list.

We are not to treat God as if he is Santa Claus. You know how that goes at Christmas time. Many children will write to Santa Claus. In their letter, they will write: Dear Santa, I have been good this year. For Christmas I would like to have my own cell phone, a Wii, and a computer in my own room. Are our prayers like letters to Santa Claus? Are they just after getting things from God? If that's the case it would be a distortion of the purpose of prayer. Prayer is not a wish list presented to God.

Another distorted view of prayer is to see prayer as a last resort. When everything else fails, you can turn to God in prayer. When there is nothing else to do, as a last resort you can pray. Consider, for example, a ship caught in the midst of a hurricane. The captain says to the passengers: "We've done everything possible to escape the fury of the storm. There's nothing more we can do. The only thing we can do now is to pray." On hearing this, one of the passengers says, "Has it come to that." Prayer is viewed here as a last resort. It's not something you turn to first. It's only something you use when everything else fails.

There are many people who will pray in emergency situations who do not otherwise pray. Now of course, in an emergency we can plead before God. But if that is the only time you pray, then you have a distorted view of the purpose of prayer. Prayer is not intended to be used only as a last resort. Prayer is not like a fire extinguisher used only if there is a fire. Instead, prayer is to be a continual part of your life.

There is another distorted way in which prayer can be used. It is to view prayer as a form of self-therapy—to make us feel good. It's when a person does not really know whether or not there is a God, or if there is, whether or not he will listen and answer. But that really doesn't matter. It's the process of praying that is important, not the person to whom one speaks.

Because just praying makes one feel good. It helps a person sort through questions and concerns. It helps a person come to terms with what is happening.

Now again, we can admit that praying can make us feel good. Through prayer we can achieve a sense of peace within ourselves. But if we think it is the process of praying which achieves these goals, rather than the One to whom we are praying, then we have a distorted view of prayer. The purpose of prayer is not another form of self-help. Prayer is looking to God for help.

Distortions concerning the purpose of prayer can easily creep into our thinking. Let us not view prayer as a wish list, as if God was Santa Claus. Let us not use prayer only as a means of last resort. Let us not twist prayer into a self-help therapy. Instead, let us keep the simple primary purpose of prayer in mind. Prayer is a believer's conversation with God. The purpose of prayer is to talk to our God; to open up our hearts to him.

That means our prayers must be directed to God, the God of the Scriptures, our Creator, Redeemer and Comforter. Prayer requires a heart in tune with the Lord. The person who prays must believe in the God in whom he cries out to. Prayer assumes trust and confidence in the Lord. A heart hardened in sin will not turn to God in prayer. A heart in rebellion against the Lord cannot speak to God in love. What prayer needs is a living relationship to God through Jesus Christ.

In prayer a believer talks with his God, both orally and silently. At times, there can be an advantage in saying our prayers aloud, even when we are praying in the privacy of our home. Because when we pray aloud, there can be a better focus to what we want to say. By praying aloud, there can be less danger of having our minds wander away--our thoughts drift to some other concerns. But no matter whether we pray in silence or out loud, in prayer we talk with God.

The purpose of prayer is simple enough: it is for us to speak to our God. That's the first "p" of prayer. We now turn to the second "p" of prayer. Its power.

There is power in prayer. Let there be no mistake about it. Prayer is a powerful tool in the life of a Christian and in the life of the church. Prayer is powerful because it connects us to God. Prayer is powerful because God responds to prayer. He responds by giving us the gifts and the abilities we need to live as Christians. He responds by answering our requests.

Prayer changes things. Prayer makes a difference. Consider, for example, how Moses intervened on behalf of the people of Israel, after they

worshipped the golden calf. God wanted to destroy the people. But Moses spoke to God, he pleaded with God, not to do this. This was a form of prayer. God heard Moses pleas and responded by not destroying the people. Prayer makes a difference. Therefore, it is powerful.

But do not think that the source of this power rests in us. Yes, we pray. But the power of prayer rests upon God, not me. The solid foundation of prayer lies in our Triune God--Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All three persons of the Trinity are involved in prayer. We pray to our heavenly Father, we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, we pray by the strength of the Holy Spirit. This is what gives prayer its power.

Prayer is powerful because we are addressing our heavenly Father. We are talking to the Creator of the heavens and the earth. We know that and yet, I wonder do we really comprehend what that means. Do we really understand what it is when we start talking to the Almighty Lord? He is all-powerful. He is all-knowing. He is all-wise. He is holy and majestic. He is the Creator. We have only the slightest idea of what that all means. We have only a tiny fraction of an understanding of what this all entails. It is so overwhelming.

Yet we can and do pray to this God. We can open up our hearts to him. This gives our prayers power. Because we are talking to a God who is able to hear. The prophets of the OT often made fun of the idols that were worshipped. Those stone images had feet but could not walk; they had eyes but could not see; they had ears but could not hear. So it is with the gods of our time. But the God of Scripture is able to hear our prayers.

Not only that, he is able to act on our prayers. God is not helpless. He does not have his hands tied behind his back. Oh yes, there are times when we prayed for God to produce a certain effect, such as healing, but he didn't. But that's not because God was not able to answer those requests. He is able. It's just that in his wisdom, he decided to respond in a different way. But let there be no mistake about it, our God is able to answer our prayers. He is the creator. That makes our prayers powerful.

Our prayers are powerful because we pray them in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. We do not come before our God on our own strength and ability. We should not dare approach the throne of God on our own merits. Because we have sinned. We are not worthy to come before God. Yet we can because we come in the name of Jesus.

It is Jesus who has opened up this communication line with God. Sin blocked our talking to God. Sin prevented us from opening our hearts to the Lord. Sin distorts what we should say. But Christ clears up the distortion.

Christ opens the communication. He makes it possible for us to talk to God. He makes it possible for unworthy sinners to speak to a holy and majestic God. Our prayers depend upon the work of Jesus Christ. That makes them powerful.

More than that, we should realize that Christ continues to intercede for us. Christ in heaven, reigns at the right hand of God the Father. There he pleads our cause. He re-issues our prayers. As the Lord of Lords, he too is willing and able to answer our prayers. That makes them powerful.

Finally, we must see how our prayers depend upon the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God takes our prayers to heaven and perfects them. If we compare prayer to the process of using a telephone to talk to another person; the Spirit is like the telephone line that makes the connection between the parties. The Spirit is what connects us to God. The Spirit takes our prayers and even perfects them. When at times words escape us, the Spirit intervenes. Paul writes in Romans 8: "We do not know what to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express."

The Spirit is at work when we pray. The Spirit helps us in our prayers, guiding and directing us in what we should say. When we are in tune with the Spirit, we are able to pray with power.

Prayer, therefore, rests upon a solid foundation. We pray to the Almighty Creator. We pray in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ. We pray through the strength of the Spirit. This makes our prayers very powerful indeed. This makes it possible to fulfill the purpose of prayer: to talk to our God.

Let us then, on this day of prayer, let us every day, come to God in prayer. Amen.