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Why Pray? 11.1.9

Why not pray?

I have seen prayer abused and therefore, I don't like it. Dave Ramsey told us this week at FPU about a car salesman who was pressing a young couple to buy, and they said, "We want to pray about it first", so the salesman, unwilling to let them leave the lot, said: "Let's consecrate this room and I'll leave and you pray about it for as long as you need to". When they called him back in, they said: "We're so glad we prayed about it. We don't think that God wants us to buy this car". The salesman said "Just a second" and bowed his head for a moment, then said: "God wants to talk to you again"!

More seriously, I have seen people abuse the idea of praying by telling me or others that God told them during their prayer time to break a promise they had made, or God gave them a peace about some act of theft they were committing, or some betrayal they were contemplating. Those things can sour you on the people of God, but don't let them sour you on prayer. After all, Jesus knew that people abused prayer. He's the one that told that story about a Pharisee who prayed: "**God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get**" (Luke 18:11-12). But he didn't give up on prayer.

I'm too busy. It's not that I don't consider it worthwhile, but it tends to take its place next to flossing my teeth and changing my oil, things I really ought to do more often, but don't get around to as often as I should. The urgent crowds out the important.

Some folks respond to that by saying: "Well, we find ways for what's really important to us! You find time to breathe, don't you? You find time to eat and to sleep." I'm not so sure that's very sound reasoning. Breathing doesn't take time, and I sometimes eat too fast or eat in my car, and I sometimes don't get enough sleep. I think we all struggle with doing some of the things that are very important to us, and prayer is one of them.

I don't think prayer works. Some people say that out of their **excessive skepticism**. They can't see any point in trying something or learning about something that they can't see or touch, or they just feel that God has more important things to do than listen to me.

Others say it out of their **misunderstandings about prayer and its purpose**. "I have prayed asking God to do all sorts of things, and he doesn't do many of them. The percentage is so low, that there must be a more efficient way to get what I want". I hope you know that prayer isn't just about getting what we want.

And then others say it out of **genuine disappointments** with prayer, with God. They prayed, and someone was not healed. Someone was not protected the way I would have done it. Financial problems did not end.

There are lots of reasons to not pray. So, why pray?

For the first reason, let me tell you about a Sunday awhile back when I walked into the Atrium on Sunday morning and immediately saw this woman running at me. It took a minute for my mind to process the situation, and I wasn't sure whether I should run or stand and fight, but

then I realized it was Mary Forrester. (I got her permission to tell about her experiences). Mary started attending here about five years ago due to the kindness and friendship of some fellow artists, and she was baptized by Jesse Rittenhouse on August 28, 2005 at the Gabbard's house. Now you'll notice in the picture that Mary is in a wheelchair, and she had been for some time, and she had to be carried into and out of the water that day. But one night at Bob Silvera's Tuesday night Bible study while they were praying, Mary felt a tingling in her back, and suddenly she could walk, and that's why she was running at me, and actually dancing a little jig in the Atrium! And after I told her that you're not supposed to dance in church, I realized that she is living proof that God answers prayer!

Her husband Paul is proof too. Paul accepted Christ several years ago – Bob baptized him here. A few years ago, he tested positive for cancer. Not just one test, but several showed that he has a cancerous spot. His brothers and sisters in Christ prayed and laid hands on him, and Paul went in for that final test, and the word that came back was that the spot had calcified and the cancer was no more.

Not long ago Paul came up to me in the Atrium (he didn't run at me!) and pointed out that he no longer had his ever-present oxygen tank with him. He and others had prayed about it, and God had answered. But even with that, he still had a persistent infection in his lungs that wouldn't clear up. Mary told me that they went to the Bible study at Bob's and heard about the man with leprosy who came to Jesus and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can heal me". And it says that **Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately he was cured of his leprosy (Matthew 8:2-3).** That night, Paul decided he should pray that prayer and he said, "Lord, I know that you can heal this infection, and if you are willing, I ask you to heal it". The next morning it was gone. God answers prayer.

Have Paul and Mary stand up and, if desired, say a few words.

So the first reason to pray is that God answers prayer. He answers it out of compassion. He answers it to give people a sign that the Kingdom of God is breaking in to this present reality. And he answers it to help us grow, which brings up something Chuck Swindoll said: God's answers to prayer are Yes, No, and Grow. Which is to say that he doesn't always give us what we ask for. Sometimes the healing doesn't come, the job doesn't last, the prodigal doesn't repent and return home. Jesus prayed for God to remove the cup of suffering and separation from him, if it was possible, and it wasn't possible and the cup was not removed. Paul prayed for his thorn in the flesh to be removed from him and it wasn't removed, but the answer he got, **"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9)** was an indication that this suffering was meant for Paul to grow.

I love that little verse that says: *God is too wise to be confused, too good to be unkind. If I cannot trace his hand, I can always trust his heart.* God answers prayer, but we still must trust him to direct the universe and direct our lives.

For the second reason, let's go to **Luke 6:12-13 - One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles.** Did Jesus NEED to do all that praying before he chose the disciples? "Need" is always a tricky word when dealing with God, but I mean of course from his human perspective. Did he need the Father's wisdom or guidance? Jesus was a pretty smart guy. He was wise. He knew the Scriptures. He could have applied his wisdom (SINLESS wisdom, I might add) and chosen some likely candidates. I figure that he had a pretty good idea who his apostles were going to be before he went up to pray. This was, by no means, the beginning of his relationship with these guys. In the previous chapter, he called Simon, Andrew, James, John and Matthew to follow him as

disciples, as learners. But that wasn't the first time he met them either. In the chapter before that, he went to Simon's house and healed Simon's mother-in-law. He knew these guys, and so he most likely didn't go up to pray expecting God to show him the faces of twelve men he had never met. So why pray?

When MHCC decided we needed to build some new space, we did a lot of research about it, but we also did a lot of praying. We actually got serious about it, and began the process that led us to this building back in 1997, and we didn't move into this building until 2006. We actually drew up and considered a couple different ideas during that time, but didn't move forward with them. But even that wasn't the beginning. I remember a plan we sketched up around 1990 of a gym and a few classrooms that we looked at and considered and then rejected.

A project with so many fits and starts may not sound like a very good representation of God's leading, but the fact is that not only did we study and draw up plans and survey the congregation during those years, we also prayed. My wife and Nicki B. were two people who stand out during those years who were diligently praying for us. Linda M. is another. Because of that prayer, we never fell in love with any of those building ideas, and when we ultimately rejected each one, we were able to move on quickly to the next phase in our education. Why was that?

Well, whether we're talking about Jesus choosing the 12 or MHCC waiting and then choosing to build, an important guiding principle was being proven:

Prayer connects us to God's power and God's plans. That happens to be one of our core values here at MHCC. Prayer connects us to God's power and God's plans. Our wisdom and knowledge about building was important, and God requires us to use it. But our wisdom and knowledge doesn't connect us to God's power and plans. Prayer does. Jesus' own personal experience with Peter and John and Nathaniel was vital and it was part of the process, but even for Jesus it wasn't his friendship with Peter that connected him with God's power and plans, it was prayer.

All of this is to say: If you're thinking about a new job; or considering getting serious about someone; or selecting your college, your life's work; or just facing another day...prayer connects you to God's power and God's plans. Do you want God to be part of your life? Do you want his power to make things happen that you cannot manufacture on your own? Do you want the story of your life to be a chapter in the story he is writing in history? Remember that prayer connects us to God's power and God's plans.

Let's move on to the third reason to pray. Years ago, there attended a man at MHCC who was old and cantankerous. If you think I'm divulging more information about someone than I should, well that could be a description of half the guys that attend here today (including the preacher, on some days!) I found this individual hard to deal with, and then someone told me a story about him. Another guy, about my age at the time, worked with this fellow in his business, and this younger guy had to deal with the older one every day and he got so fed up with his cantankerousness. But rather than react the way he wanted to, he prayed about it, and one day as he was looking at the older man on the job, the younger guy felt God say to his heart, "I LOVE that man". Hearing that changed his perspective. He no longer saw his boss as a cantankerous old crank (or not JUST as a cantankerous old crank) but as a child of God. The Father wasn't ready to toss this man aside because of his bad behavior, and neither could he.

In our church, we look to the NT for our pattern for building and governing the church, and we ought to. But we should never get the idea that the first century church was a paradise of perfection. Most of our precious NT letters would never had been written were it not for the many problems these first-century congregations had, not to mention the problems they caused Paul and Peter and John. The church in Corinth, if you want to be cynical about it, was practically one

stupid, immature problem after another. The church in Galatia practically made him want to tear his hair out. Many ministers today would have given up on them and gotten jobs building houses!

But the apostles were different, Paul in particular. Paul told them what they needed to hear, and by the wisdom and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he told us what we needed to hear too. How did he maintain that godly perspective?

Listen to how he begins **1 Corinthians**: **⁴I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. ⁵For in him you have been enriched in every way—in all your speaking and in all your knowledge— ⁶because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. ⁷Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. ⁸He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.**

Listen to how he begins **Philippians**: **³I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, ⁶being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.**

Listen to how he begins **Colossians**: **⁹For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. ¹⁰And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, ¹¹being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light.**

And when he wrote to **Philemon**, a friend to whom he had to write a tough letter about doing the right thing, listen to what he says: **⁴I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, ⁵because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. ⁶I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.**

I wish he had written something similar in **Galatians**, perhaps the most strongly-worded letter in the NT, but there are enough examples here to see the pattern of his life and apply it even there. The fact is, Paul's prayers changed the way he looked at people. God reminded him: "I LOVE these cantankerous saints". So Paul looked at them differently.

Prayer corrects our vision of life. I said that prayer connects us to God's power and plans. It also connects us to God's heart and mind. Prayer helps us obey **Romans 12:2** where it says to **be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.** When we pray, we connect to God's perspective and we no longer see the world like we used to see it. We can treat people with love, we can have faith that God is working even in rotten circumstances and we can tap into that hope for the future that is our birthright because prayer corrects our vision of life.

So: There are many reasons not to pray, but all of them are trumped by these three reasons TO pray. God answers prayer, and whether he says "yes", "no", or "grow", we can trust him to hear and answer – IF we actually pray, that is. We can have no confidence that he'll answer unprayed prayers.

And prayer connects us to God's power and God's plans. We miss this blessed truth if we think of prayer only as a means of getting answers. To be part of what God is doing in the world, pray!

And prayer corrects our vision of life. How can we hope to see people as God sees them, or to see God at work in the world around us, or to see (like the servant of Elisha in **2 Kings 6**) the hills filled with the horses and chariots of fire, the armies of God...without prayer?

So, pray! Pray without ceasing. Pray in the middle of your busy day. Get alone with God and pray. Pray at the beginning of your day and pray at the end. Pray.

In fact, let's pray now.