



PRA YER

CHANGES EVERYTHING

21 DAYS OF PRAYER, FASTING AND
PERSONAL DEVOTION

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INTROD UCTION

Dear Friends,

We are so glad you have decided to participate in an extended time of prayer, fasting and personal devotion. There really is no better way to reset our spiritual compass and bring about refreshing in every area of our lives than through prayer and fasting. Our hope is that this time of prayer and fasting will refresh us personally but also our church as we seek His blessing and direction.

The season was intentionally designed to be flexible so that you can participate at any level. Whether you have done a 21-day season of prayer and fasting before, or if this is your first time, you can start where you are and experience what God has in store for you in a powerful way. Daily devotions, scripture reading and suggested prayers are included in this devotional. Please commit to reading them each day.

We pray that you will experience the presence and power of God in an extraordinary way as you commit yourself to Him over the next 21 days. May you be closer to God than ever before as you seek Him first.

As you prepare for the next 21 days, think about why you are fasting. Is it for spiritual renewal, for guidance, for healing, for the resolution of problems, for special grace to handle a difficult situation, or for a major decision? Ask the Holy Spirit to clarify His leading and objectives for your fast. This will enable you to pray more specifically and strategically. Think about the top two or three most pressing issues on your heart and zone in on those with God. Write these down in the space provided below, and be open to hearing what God wants to show you in those areas.

When praying, make your primary goal to know Jesus more and experience Him. Focus first on what's right about Him, such as His goodness and His greatness, and see everything else through that filter.

Finally, make time to pray daily. Don't overcomplicate this! Just talk to God. Have that place and time where you can seek Him every day. If you don't plan to pray, you won't.

Together strength,

Pastor James and Agape Staff

PART I

HE'S A GOOD, GOOD FATHER (SO LEARN TO REST IN THE FATHER'S LOVE)

Max Lucado said, "The most important word in any prayer is the first one." Why? Because when we say, "Father" we acknowledge the very nature of our relationship with God. God is so much better than the best father. He is acquainted with us intimately, protects us fully, and favors us lavishly. And why? Because he loves us supremely.

We must believe that. We must rest in that before we will really pray.

“Prayer should not be regarded as a duty which must be performed, but rather as a privilege to be enjoyed, a rare delight that is always revealing some new beauty. - E.M. Bounds

A VERSE TO EXPLORE: 1 Peter 3:12

“The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are open to their prayer.”

President John F. Kennedy stood before a joint session of Congress on May 25, 1961 and made the announcement that would change the world:

“I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the Moon and returning him safely to the Earth.”

Kennedy's vision to put a man on the moon was dramatic and ambitious. But when Neil Armstrong stepped onto the surface of the moon, that was mind-boggling.

I was a ten-year-old boy when man touched the moon. On any other summer day, I would be swimming, playing a pick-up game of baseball, or dreaming up one of my crazy plans to “set sail” on the canal near our house. On this day, childish play gave way to celestial wonder. Glued to our black and white television, I witnessed the Eagle landing and the astronaut walking. Forty years later it is still a mind-boggling feat.

Webster tells me that mind-boggling is “that which is mentally or emotionally exciting or overwhelming.” What could possibly be more mind-boggling than walking on the moon? How about this: The God who created the moon has his eyes fixed on you and his ears tuned in to your prayers.

Peter wrote to Christians living in tough times. Suffering, slander, ill-treatment, and ill-tempers met them daily. Circumstantially, it looked like God didn't care. Many probably wondered if God was even listening. But God did care, and God was there, and God wanted them to know it. So, he sent a message through Peter to provide some ballast for their storm-tossed souls:

For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. 1 Peter 3:12 ESV

If there were ever a truth to calm the tempest raging inside me, this is it:

God sees . . . God cares . . . God hears. There is no asterisk attached to that verse, no explanatory footnote describing conditions that don't apply. God sees . . . God cares . . . God hears. This is true for every day no matter the circumstances you encounter. Our all-seeing, all-caring, ever-hearing, present God invites us to talk with him. Knowing this we can understand why E.M. Bounds tells us:

"Prayer should not be regarded as a duty which must be performed, but rather as a privilege to be enjoyed, a rare delight that is always revealing some new beauty."

This week we want to encourage you to rest in the Father's love. Prayer is one means God gives you to do just that.

Why not begin your week by making David's prayer your own:

God, hear my cry; pay attention to my prayer.

*I call to you from the ends of the earth
when my heart is without strength.*

*Lead me to a rock that is high above me,
for you have been a refuge for me,
a strong tower in the face of the enemy.*

*I will dwell in your tent forever
and take refuge under the shelter of your wings. Selah*

Psalm 61:1-4 CSB

Every gift of God is an invitation to claim a greater [gift]. But most men stop very quickly on this way; and thus they never reach the full blessing. - Frédéric Godet

A VERSE TO EXPLORE: John 1:16

"Indeed, we have all received grace upon grace from his fullness." CSB

Frédéric Godet's commentary on Luke is one of the oldest books in my library. An 1893 volume, the pages are brittle but the truth (like his quote above) is stout and durable.

Godet was commenting on Luke's post-resurrection account of Jesus' encounter with two men on the road to Emmaus. These two disciples urged Jesus, their unknown traveler, to stay with them. What Godet notes and we must grasp is this: "Had they not asked Jesus to tarry they would have missed the greater blessing."

You can begin to expect the blessings of God as you grasp the nature of God. God is one who gives grace upon grace (John 1:16). And because it is his nature to give, we are foolishness not to ask for his help. Joash discovered this the hard way when he encountered the prophet Elisha. Then Elisha said,

"Take the arrows!" So he took them. Then Elisha said to the king of Israel, "Strike the ground!" So he struck the ground three times and stopped. The man of God was angry with him and said, "You should have struck the ground five or six times. Then you would have struck down Aram until you had put an end to them, but now you will strike down Aram only three times." 2 Kings 13:18-19 CSB

The arrows were God's object lesson on prayer. Elisha was angry with Joash — not because he asked for too much — but because he asked for too little. There is a lesson here for us as well. We may come to God with empty hands, but we must always come with expectant hearts.

God is gracious. He blessed two insignificant travelers on an insignificant road walking toward an insignificant village. That's grace. Then they invited him to stay longer and he blessed them more. That's grace upon grace.

When God gives you a gift by all means say, "Thank You!" But don't stop there. That is what Joash did, and he missed the bigger blessing. Instead, be like the Emmaus travelers. Ask for a second helping of the gift of God. It is God's nature to be generous. So never demand things of God, but certainly don't be afraid to ask.

Every gift of God is an invitation to claim a greater gift. What will you ask God for today?

“Prayer is the nearest approach to God and the highest enjoyment of Him that we are capable of in this life. - William Law”

A VERSE TO EXPLORE: Psalm 4:7

“You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and new wine abound.” CSB

What is on your agenda today? Whether it is big or small, easy or hard, a mountain of pressure or “a piece of cake,” if you want to start it right listen to my friend, George.

George Müller provided orphan care for 10,000 children during his lifetime. Despite the millions of dollars it cost to clothe, feed, and house these children, Müller never asked for money. He simply prayed to the Lord and then waited for God to provide.

I am in awe. Müller was a man with 10,000 cares, but seemingly not a care in the world. In the pamphlet, “Soul Nourishment First” (1841), he unveils his secret:

“It has pleased the Lord to teach me a truth, the benefit of which I have not lost, for more than fourteen years. The point is this: I saw more clearly than ever that the first great and primary business to which I ought to attend every day was, to have my soul happy in the Lord.

“The first thing to be concerned about was not how much I might serve the Lord, or how I might glorify the Lord; but how I might get my soul into a happy state, and how my inner man might be nourished. For I might seek to set the truth before the unconverted, I might seek to benefit believers, I might seek to relieve the distressed, I might in other ways seek to behave myself as it becomes a child of God in this world; and yet, not being happy in the Lord, and not being nourished and strengthened in my inner man day by day, all this might not be attended to in a right spirit.

“Before this time my practice had been, at least for ten years previously, as an habitual thing, to give myself to prayer, after having dressed myself in the morning. Now, I saw that the most important thing I had to do was to give myself to the reading of the Word of God, and to meditation on it, that thus my heart might be comforted, encouraged, warned, reprov'd, instructed; and that thus, by means of the Word of God, while meditating on it, my heart might be brought into experiential communion with the Lord.”

You have a lot to do today, right? Don't rush off until you do your primary work. Make sure your soul is happy in the Lord.

How? Follow Müller’s lead. Take a few moments and dwell on the passage below. In what ways does God want to comfort, encourage, or instruct your heart? Thank him for what he teaches you.

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? . . . Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? . . . For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

How God wows me: _____

How God comforts me: _____

How God encourages me: _____

How God instructs me: _____

You will have many urgent things clamoring for your attention today. Müller helps you grasp the important thing: Keeping your soul “happy in the Lord.”

PART II

HE'S BIG ENOUGH

(SO PRAY BIG, AUDACIOUS PRAYERS)

When Jesus said, "Our Father in heaven," he was giving us significant insight into both the character and nature of God. God is the intimate loving Father. He is also the omnipotent (all-powerful) ruler of heaven and earth. He relates to us as both. Because God is all-powerful and our loving Father, we can pray big audacious prayers. Let's do that this week.

“Pray the largest prayers. You cannot think a prayer so large that God, in answering it, will not wish you had made it larger. Pray not for crutches but for wings. - Phillips Brooks”

A VERSE TO EXPLORE: Philippians 1:19

“I know this will lead to my salvation through your prayers.”

Do you ever wonder if your prayers really matter?

Have you ever prayed long and hard only to feel that your prayers never touched heaven? We know God is able. It's just that sometimes I feel the problem is sooooo big and the answer is sooooo long in coming:

- A church member is battling cancer. Do my prayers really matter?
- A friend needs direction. Do my prayers really matter?
- I want to see a God-honoring vision come to reality! Do my prayers really matter?

Of course they do! We know that, but at times we don't feel that.

When my head and heart go toe-to-toe over the matter of prayer, I need to listen to Paul. Stuck in prison, Paul looks to God for help — and to the prayers of God's people!

Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually advanced the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard, and to everyone else, that my imprisonment is because I am in Christ. Most of the brothers have gained confidence in the Lord from my imprisonment and dare even more to speak the word fearlessly. To be sure, some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of good will. These preach out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel; the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, thinking that they will cause me trouble in my imprisonment. What does it matter? Only that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is proclaimed, and in this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice because I know this will lead to my salvation through your prayers and help from the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Philippians 1:12-19 CSB

That phrase “through your prayers” wows me. I would think Paul would say, I know that through the help of the Spirit, and stop there. Certainly, the Spirit is the ultimate trump card. But Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, adds “through your prayers.” Wow!

No wonder Phillips Brooks wrote, “Pray the largest prayers. You cannot think a prayer so large that God, in answering it, will not wish that you had made it larger. Pray not for crutches, but for wings!” Yes, your prayers do matter! What big audacious prayer will you bring to God today?

SO PRAY BIG, AUDACIOUS PRAYERS

“Our prayers may be awkward. Our attempts may be feeble. But since the power of prayer is in the one who hears it and not in the one who says it, our prayers do make a difference. -Max Lucado”

A VERSE TO EXPLORE: Matthew 19:26

“With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

James Byrd's business card reads, “With God all things are possible.” It's not a slogan!

I met Mr. Byrd while driving Highway 49 in Mississippi. His business, Byrd's Antique Cars & Trucks, was on the opposite side of the four-lane divided highway.

I'm a car guy. In my book gazing at rusting Detroit metal trumps “making time.” I braked hard, cut across the median, and pulled into his lot. That was a good move.

Byrd's dog greeted me. He would have torn me to pieces were it not for the chain holding him back. Fortunately for me, the chain was in better shape than the cars lining the lot since most of them displayed their antique credentials rather well.

Mr. Byrd approached me a few minutes later with a slow and deliberate gait. Understandably so. James Byrd is blind! He wasn't always sightless. As we chatted I learned that the curtains were slowly drawn across his vision; progressive blindness the result of a degenerative condition.

Despite losing his sight, Byrd still pulls and installs engines, makes repairs, and tackles projects around his lot. Yes folks, it takes more than blindness to stop a car guy.

James got me a bottle of water and we walked and talked. He showed me two engines he had recently installed, a trailer he was building, and a high voltage electrical challenge he resolved (think about that one!).

I asked James how he still works when he can't see. His answer: memory and feel. This man understands cars. More importantly he understands life. Byrd said: “I just want fellers to understand that they can do things if they put their minds to it.”

If you think raw grit and determination drive him, think again. James' secret is inked on his business card and printed on his cap. The business card reads, “With God all things are possible.” His cap proclaims, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen.”

There you have it. God is the ultimate in salvage and restoration. James Byrd got this. The blind man selling aging antiques also knew that when we grasp the length to which God goes to save us, we will lean into the fact no one is beyond his reach. “With God all things are possible.”

Jesus said to his disciples:

"Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?" But Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Matthew 19:23-26 ESV

God wants us to know that his power to break through the impossible extends to hard-hearted people who seem about as far gone as any of those antiques collecting dust and growing rust.

This week we are praying big audacious prayers. Let's pray another today. Who is that person you think is "too far gone" to ever bow the knee to King Jesus? Pray that the God of the impossible draws saves that soul.

SO PRAY BIG AUDACIOUS PRAYERS

“ God is looking for people through whom He can do the impossible. What a pity that we plan only the things we can do by ourselves. - A.W. Tozer ”

A VERSE TO EXPLORE: Mark 19:23

“Everything is possible for one who believes.”

Paul Davidson taught me to love words. Jesus is teaching me to believe them! Davidson was the college professor our student body lovingly dubbed, “Brother D.” I knew him in his later years. His back was bent. He walked with a stoop, long arms dangling at his sides. His physical features were unimpressive, but his character was striking. Today, we would call Brother D an “authentic leader” and the moniker fits him well. Davidson had been a missionary in Brazil for twenty-five years before entering academia. He had lived on a little. He had seen a lot. He was way past pretension.

Brother D was quiet, but not shy. I can still see his diminutive, but commanding figure at the front of our class. In an aged voice that shook with conviction he would stand. Arms held high, he pleaded with us: “Fall in love with words brothers, fall in love with woocommerce!” as his passionate plea trailed off into a whispered prayer.

Brother D’s admonition stuck. I still read with a dictionary. I do this because I have learned to love words. I also do this because many words are difficult for me to understand. That is not the case with God. God understands everything. Right?

Actually, there is a word that even God does not understand. I found it in Mark’s gospel. Mark recounts a time when a distressed and perplexed father brought his demon-possessed son to Jesus’ disciples. Despite their best efforts, the disciples could not drive out the evil spirit.

The result? The father was frustrated, the disciples were frustrated, and Jesus was frustrated. Here is the account:

“You unbelieving generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.” So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the boy’s father, “How long has he been like this?” “From childhood,” he answered. “It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”

“If you can?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for one who believes.” Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” Mark 9:19-24 NIV

Do you ever find yourself like the father? Facing the impossible you plead, "Lord, if you can . . ."

- "If you can help my marriage . . ."
- "If you can solve this problem with my child . . ."
- "If you can help me beat this temptation . . ."
- "If you can meet my need . . ."
- "If you can change me . . ."

I love Jesus' response. To this faltering father and his helpless disciples he says, "Where is your so-called impossible situation, bring the boy to me."

Do we ever stop to think that Jesus implores us in the same way today?

- "Bring the broken marriage to me."
- "Bring the bad habit to me."
- "Bring the big problem to me."
- "Bring the fears to me."
- "Bring the doubts and worries to me."

I can hear our Lord say, "You call this 'Impossible?' I never heard of that word!" What audacious impossibility do you need to bring before God in prayer today?

SO PRAY BIG AUDACIOUS PRAYERS

“Prayer is the link that connects us with God. - A.B. Simpson”

A VERSE TO EXPLORE: John 20:27 **“Stop doubting and believe.”**

Sometimes I live like an atheist. Now before you write me off, before you label me a heretic, before you consign this post to “Trash,” let me suggest that you too might occasionally live like an atheist.

Think about it . . .

- We know God says, “Don’t be anxious” (Philippians 4:6), but we still get anxious.
- We know that God declares, “I can do the impossible” (Mark 10:27), yet we cower in the face of our impossibilities.
- We know God’s Word tastes better than honey (Psalm 119:103), but we’ll skip it to get to the gym.
- We know God’s wisdom is more precious than jewels (Proverbs 3:13), but we’ll trade it for the latest reality craze or “must see” game of the week.
- We know God answers prayer (James 5:16), but we really don’t expect him to.

Sometimes I think my “Just Do It” t-shirt should read, “I Doubt It.”

I feel a little better about myself when I open the pages of Scripture. There I find dejected kings, dumbfounded psalmists, sleeping disciples, and doubting Thomas. The reality is that walking with God is often living somewhere between certainty and skepticism. Such was the case of the early church.

Peter was in prison, the latest catch of the powerful and deadly Herod Agrippa I. Herod had just killed the apostle James. Now Peter was his next in line for the executioner’s sword. So the church got busy. Acts records that “earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.” Acts 12:5 ESV

Sitting on the sidelines, watching biblical history unfold, I shout: “Way to go church! You are believing God for the impossible.” Or are they?

As we read Luke’s account we discover that God miraculously intervenes on Peter’s behalf. He springs him from prison and saves him from certain death. Peter is stunned by what has transpired. It’s surreal. Finally, he gets his bearings and makes his way to Mary’s house where many believers are fervently praying for his release.

At this point the scene becomes comical:

When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. They said to her, "You are out of your mind." But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, "It is his angel!"

But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Tell these things to James and to the brothers." Then he departed and went to another place. Acts 12:5, 12-17 ESV

Oh, to be a fly on the wall. Rhoda shrieks, "Peter is here!" The group responds, "You are out of your mind! Now leave us alone so we can get back to praying."

The Greek construction is incredibly clear: She keeps insisting that it is Peter. They keep saying, "You're crazy!" And meanwhile, Peter just keeps knocking!

Classic! Do they really believe? Of course they do — and they don't.

I love the Word of God. I love that God doesn't take an airbrush and cover over the blemishes of his disciples. It's encouraging. Acts 12 is my reminder that my doubts don't diminish his truth:

- He still calms the anxious heart.
- He still performs the impossible.
- He still feeds the hungry soul with His Word.
- He still imparts wisdom.
- He still answers prayer.

Sure, there are times I don't really believe what I think I believe. My actions bear this out. But the lesson of Acts 12 bears repeating: My doubts don't diminish God's truth. So, I'll keep believing and I'll keep praying even when I act like I don't really believe what I know I believe.

What big audacious prayer have you given up on? Bring it back to God today.

SO PRAY BIG AUDACIOUS PRAYERS

“The little estimate we put on prayer is evidence from the little time we give it. - E. M. Bounds

A VERSE TO EXPLORE: Isaiah 37:21-22

“Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Because you have prayed to me concerning Sennacherib king of Assyria, this is the word that the Lord has spoken . . .”

What's the use of praying?

Have you ever asked yourself that question? I have. I have asked the question and I have felt the sentiment. That's why I love the prayer lesson I learned from Hezekiah.

Hezekiah was an ancient King in deep distress. Sennacherib was a ruthless conqueror, bold and brash.

The Assyrian King Sennacherib sent his highest-ranking general with an intimidating letter for Israel's King: "Give up!" it said. "Don't be so foolish to count on your allies and don't think you can count on your God – neither holds a candle to my power. Surrender, Hezekiah!"

Hezekiah felt utterly powerless. Hezekiah was unwilling to surrender. So Hezekiah prayed!

Read his prayer and pay very close attention to God's response:

Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers, and read it; and Hezekiah went up to the house of the Lord, and spread it before the Lord. And Hezekiah prayed to the Lord: "O Lord of hosts, God of Israel, enthroned above the cherubim, you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth. Incline your ear, O Lord, and hear; open your eyes, O Lord, and see; and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God. Truly, O Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations and their lands, and have cast their gods into the fire. For they were no gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone. Therefore they were destroyed. So now, O Lord our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are the Lord." Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent to Hezekiah, saying, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Because you have prayed to me concerning Sennacherib king of Assyria . . ." Isaiah 37:14-21 ESV

The first time I read the words, "Because you have prayed," they leaped off the page. God acted on Hezekiah's prayer. Amazing! Read the rest of the passage:

- God brought judgment on Assyria.
- God delivered the nation of Israel.
- God restored their hope.

Why? Because one person prayed!

One prayer can change a nation. For that matter, one prayer can change a spouse, or a wayward child, or a business, or a church, or a friendship.

I don't understand it. I don't get it. But I know God does it. God works through prayer.

Where are you struggling? Follow Hezekiah's example. Take your problem and spread it out before God in prayer.

This week we are encouraging you to pray five big audacious prayers. Today, spread out your biggest challenge before God. Ask him to do what you cannot do.

PART III

HE HAS A MISSION

(SO LEARN TO PRAY FOR KINGDOM ADVANCEMENT)

Jesus taught us to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." God's kingdom and God's will are top priority when it comes to prayer. This runs contrary to "Selfie Nation." Stop for just a moment and conduct a prayer audit. Do your prayers revolve around your kingdom or God's?

Our prayers will be self-centered until our lives are kingdom centered. This week we are learning to pray for kingdom advancement.

“Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tire? - Corrie ten Boom”

A VERSE TO EXPLORE: 1 Timothy 2:1-2

“First of all, then, I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all those who are in authority.”

Every day of every year half the country is unhappy with the President. Politics is not for the faint of heart. At this writing, North Korea threatens Guam with nuclear destruction. The President fires back with a promise to rain “fire and fury” on Kim Jong Un and North Korea. World tensions escalate. Journalists have a field day. Wall Street nervously bites its nails.

Facing world catastrophe with prayer seems an inept strategy. Paul argues differently. Writing in a day filled with as much uncertainty as our own, he tells church leaders to pray.

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. 1 Timothy 2:1-4 ESV

This is top priority. To borrow from Corrie ten Boom, prayer is your steering wheel not the spare tire you pull out when all else fails. Prayer is so important to God’s kingdom-building strategy that Paul uses four distinct words to instruct us as to how we should pray for leaders:

- **Supplications** -- This is asking God to do what only he can do. Presidents, like all leaders, face challenges that cannot be solved overnight. Every day the President faces congressional conflict, national debates, and world instability. Continual gridlock serves no one. So, we ask God to solve these issues that divide and separate us.
- **Prayers** -- This is talking with God about needs that are always present. Leaders always need wisdom and physical stamina. They always need wise and godly people around them. They always need tenacity to pursue justice and truth. Take time to name these needs and lift them to God.
- **Intercessions** -- This is petition on behalf of someone else. What a privilege. Leaders have real-life struggles, big-time hopes, long-standing conflicts, and hard-to-answer questions. Interceding is identifying these challenges and boldly going into the very presence of God to ask his help on behalf of their needs.
- **Thanksgivings** -- Taking time to say thanks is taking time to acknowledge that God is in control of it all. Thanksgiving is a tangible expression of our faith in God. So, thank God for the President and other leaders -- even if you didn’t vote for them. Why? Because God is using these leaders to accomplish his purposes.

Prayer is the steering wheel. We hang onto it at all times. We pray for our leaders so we can live in peace and so the gospel can go forward.

God is passionate about drawing people to himself. Your prayers are a part of his strategy. Today we can read the news, gripe and complain. Or we can read the news, pray and take action. I know that I've complained enough. It's time to pray!

“Talking to men for God is a great thing, but talking to God for men is greater still. - E.M. Bounds

A VERSE TO EXPLORE: Luke 4:18

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed.”

In our world injustice abounds. Consider just one example, sex trafficking. The International Justice Mission (IJM) reports that:

- Two million children are exploited in the global commercial sex trade.
- Human trafficking generates about \$150 billion a year — two-thirds from commercial sexual exploitation.
- Sex trafficking survivors have described being beaten, forcibly injected with narcotics and forced to watch their own children be physically abused.

Numbers give a picture, but real people tell a story. “Sani was drugged by a trafficker and sold to a brothel in one of India’s largest red-light districts, 600 miles from her home. Up to 25 men a night paid as little as \$5 to abuse and exploit her. She tried to run away, but every attempt failed. She was engulfed in the dark world of sex trafficking for three years.”

Praise God Sani was rescued, cared for, and provided therapy by IJM. Today she is studying nursing to help others.

In our world injustice abounds, but Jesus has inaugurated a new kingdom, a better kingdom that brings the good news of release, recovery, and freedom. The day will come when he will wipe injustice from the earth. Until that time, we pray . . . and we stand . . . and we work for justice in His name.

Today, pray the prayer of the psalmist and then ask God what step you should take to right wrong in Jesus name.

*Arise, Lord, in your anger; rise up against the rage of my enemies.
Awake, my God; decree justice.
Psalm 7:6*

“Where there is no vision of eternity, there is no prayer for the perishing.”
David Smithers

A VERSE TO EXPLORE: Romans 10:1

“Brothers and sisters, my heart’s desire and prayer to God concerning them is for their salvation.”

David Letterman is the longest-serving host in U.S. late-night TV history. Letterman helped to popularize the “Top 10” list, reading them on his late-night show since 1985.

The “Top 10” survives because we love it. We can find a list for every topic imaginable. In fact, there is even The Top 10 List That Nobody Should Write Anymore.

Awhile back I glanced at The Ultimate Book of Top 10 Lists. It includes the fun, the fascinating, and the bizarre. Here are ten of them:

- The Top 10 Unsolved Mysteries
- The Top 10 Unusual Uses for Peanut Butter
- The Top 10 Fascinating Secrets Taken to the Grave
- The Top 10 Worst Plagues in History
- The Top 10 Books That Changed the World
- The Top 10 Slang Words and Phrases Explained
- The Top 10 Fascinating “Facts” That Are Wrong
- The Top 10 Tips for Outrunning the Cops
- The Top 10 Most Returned Gifts
- The Top 10 Cool Facts About Space

Not all Top 10 lists are a hike up the Trivia Trail. Some carry real significance! Take this one: “The Top Ten Street Legal Fastest Cars in the World.” Now that is information worth sharing! Here is another: “The Top 10 People at Work I Pray for Every Day.”

Jesus people know that God has placed them where they work for a reason. Work provides a means of honoring God with skills he’s given us, provide for our families, serve others, and find joy in creative enterprise. He has also placed us there to help co-workers who are far away from God come to know Him.

Remind yourself of that truth often because it is easy to get jaded at work. Looking at a cantankerous co-worker we think, "There's no hope for that guy!" But that's not true. The grace of Jesus can bring anyone from death to life. You are there to help share that message. One of the best ways to get started is to pray for your unbelieving friends. This is what Paul did:

Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.
Romans 10:1 ESV

Paul longed for people who were far away from God to come to know Him -- to know his forgiveness, his peace, his power, and his love. Paul knew that only God could change the human heart, so he talked to God about his friends. We must do the same thing.

You need not start with a Top 10 list, make it your Top 3.

The Top 3 people at work I pray for every day.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Praying "Your kingdom come, your will be done" is praying for people who need to discover the love and grace of God. As you set that as your priority today, consider praying this prayer from Ephesians 6:19-20:

I pray that God gives you words to open your mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel. I am asking him that you would remember that you are an ambassador for Jesus right where you are, and that you would humbly and boldly serve and speak for God this week at your workplace.

“To get the nations back on their feet, we must first get down on our knees. - Billy Graham”

A VERSE TO EXPLORE: Colossians 4:23

“At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ.”

Every Sunday is a fresh reminder that I need Jesus. Standing to preach a sermon to hearts sometimes hungry and sometimes wandering and sometimes somewhere in between is intimidating. Preparing for Christmas Eve is even more challenging.

Staring down four services, making final tweaks on the message, and thinking about all the people who are coming (from so many places in their relationship with Christ) makes me realize how much pastors need people praying for them.

Paul had the same feeling:

- *I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf.* Romans 15:30 ESV
- *You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.* 2 Corinthians 1:11 ESV
- *For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance.* Philippians 1:19 ESV
- *At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison.* Colossians 4:3 ESV
- *Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you.* 2 Thessalonians 3:1 ESV
- *At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.* Philemon 1:22 ESV
- *Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things. I urge you the more earnestly to do this in order that I may be restored to you the sooner.* Hebrews 13:17-19 ESV

You get the picture. Every Sunday is a great opportunity to pray for your pastor, your church, and the people who will be gathering.

- Pray for your church.
- Pray that God would prepare the hearts of guests to hear the gospel.
- Pray that God would draw people to himself.
- Pray for your pastor. Pray for the power of the Holy Spirit upon him and on the entire church. Pray for a gospel-centered message. Pray God would give him favor with first-time visitors and special guests. Pray for health. Pray for peace and love and power.

Prayer is the best gift you can give your pastor every Sunday. Prayer is the best gift you can give your pastor every day of the year.

PART IV

HE NEVER TIRES OF HEARING FROM YOU

(SO PUT ALL OF YOUR LIFE BEFORE GOD)

Jesus taught us to pray, "Give us today our daily bread." "Bread" is Jesus' concise and compact term for everything we need to sustain our lives.¹ Our daily bread, our broken hearts, our pressing needs; God says, "Bring it!" This week we will be learning how to lay all of our lives before him.

SO PUT ALL OF YOUR LIFE BEFORE GOD

“Any concern too small to be turned into a prayer is too small to be made into a burden. - Corrie ten Boom”

A VERSE TO EXPLORE: Colossians 3:23**“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men.”**

Nicholas Herman was a poor man who lived in turbulent times. He served in the French Army for a season. It was during that time that he had a profound experience of God’s grace. Nicholas exited the army for a French monastery where he served as a cook’s aid and took the name Brother Lawrence.

You might be tempted to think, “What in the world can I learn from sous-chef?”

Hey, don’t walk out of the kitchen. This obscure “nobody” was actually a giant of the faith. His thoughts on walking with God are contained in the book *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Brother Lawrence said,

“In the way of God, thoughts count for little, love does everything. And it is not necessary to have great things to do. I turn my little omelet in the pan for the love of God; when it is finished, if I have nothing to do, I prostrate myself on the ground and adore my God, who gave me the grace to make it, after which I arise, more content than a king. When I cannot do anything else, it is enough for me to have lifted a straw from the earth for the love of God.”

When it came to his work, the difference maker for Brother Lawrence was not WHAT he did, but WHO he did it for. Brother Lawrence worked for God, specifically for the love of God. This is what Paul drives home to Christian slaves in the first century:

Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality. Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven. Colossians 3:22-4:1 ESV

Slaves and masters sat side-by-side in the church at Colossae. God had words for both. Paul wanted them to know that following Jesus at work is a game-changer. Jesus changes our thoughts about:

- WHO we work for — “work . . . as for the Lord”
- HOW we work — “work heartily,” i.e. “with soul”
- WHAT we are working for — “the [eternal] inheritance as your reward”
- WHY we work — “you are serving the Lord Christ himself” and he has your back

This is helpful, but how does one make Colossians 3:22-4:1 actionable? Simple. Turn Paul’s words into a prayer. Here is the employee’s prayer:

*Lord Christ, every square inch of my work is yours.
I serve you. I get my bonus from you.
You’ve got my back when things go wrong.*

Meditate on Paul’s words and you will agree that the worker’s prayer rises out of that letter. Pray it and you will discover a stronger motivation and a better attitude where you work today.

For more on Brother Lawrence read:

- The Practice Of The Presence Of God
- Brother Lawrence: Practitioner of God’s Presence
- 131 Christians Everyone Should Know

SO PUT ALL OF YOUR LIFE BEFORE GOD

“The Christian life is not a constant high. I have my moments of deep discouragement. I have to go to God in prayer with tears in my eyes, and say, ‘O God, forgive me,’ or ‘Help me.’ - Billy Graham”

A VERSE TO EXPLORE: Luke 11:13

“If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

Most folks have no problem praying for others, many have a problem praying for themselves. “Isn’t that selfish?” “No, it is not.” Christians should pray for themselves! Asking for things is how we receive things. I learned this lesson early in life.

I grew up in South Florida — without air conditioning and without a pool. There was no escaping the heat. It was hot in the daytime and hot in the nighttime. But I saw an oasis in this desert . . . our neighbor was getting a pool! Oh yes!

I watched the hole being dug. I saw gunite sprayed over the re-bar skeleton. I gazed longingly as the pool started to fill with water. I could feel the temperature dropping as the water rose! But there was a problem . . . this neighbor had not yet invited me to swim.

There I was, a little kid standing on the outside of the fence. I was a derby horse ready to break out of the gate. I wanted to soar off that diving board. I wanted to feel those cool waters. I began loitering. I tried wearing the wilted-flower look, just hoping she would invite me to “take a dip.” It wasn’t working.

One day as I patrolled her fence gazing at the cool blue waters, she spotted me and then she chided me: “Don’t just stand there like a puppy dog. Ask if you can come in.” I got the point — and I swam a lot!

Sometimes getting what we need (or want) is as simple as A-S-K-I-N-G for it. It is a lesson Jesus taught his disciples.

And he said to them, “Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him’; and he will answer from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything’? I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs. And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"
Luke 11:5-13 ESV

Jesus' words are clear. When it comes to prayer, keep on asking, keep on seeking and keep on knocking. Why? Because God has a big, big heart! He loves his children. And he is not stingy with his resources.

I appreciate the words of Norval Geldenhuys,

"No regenerate child of God should ever doubt that when he prays to God out of real need his prayer will be answered. He who doubts this does him the greatest dishonor, for by not believing that he will give what we really need we in fact appear to regard him as less than sympathetic and less faithful than an ordinary earthly father or even an ordinary earthly friend. Therefore, unbelief in relation to the answering of prayer is not only weakness, but a serious sin and utter folly."¹

Are you struggling? Things not going your way? Ask God for what you need — and don't be afraid to ask him again. What three needs should you be bringing to God today?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

SO PUT ALL OF YOUR LIFE BEFORE GOD

“If we do not abide in prayer, we will abide in temptation. - John Owen”

A VERSE TO EXPLORE: Proverbs 16:17**“The highway of the upright avoids evil; the one who guards his way protects his life.”**

No doubt you'll be on the road today. I suspect you're prepared:

- Seat belts
- Back-up camera
- Airbags
- Spare tire
- Security system
- Safety locks
- AAA Roadside Assistance
- Run flat tires
- Child safety seats

When it comes to our journey, we exhaust every means possible for our safety. Do we practice the same care with our hearts?

I am talking about sin, that cruel tyrant that crouches at your door, that wants to catch you off-guard, that wants to enslave you, that God says, “you must master” (Genesis 4:7).

I know, I'm meddling. I should be talking about work or goals or Dolphin Training Camp. But that's precisely why we need to talk about sin — because we'd rather not talk about it. I appreciate the words of Robert Murray McCheyne. He writes:

“I am tempted to think there are some sins for which I have no natural taste, such as strong drink, profane language, etc., so that I need not fear temptation to such sins. This is a lie — a proud presumptuous lie. The seeds of all sins are in my heart, and perhaps all the more dangerously that I do not see them.”

Did you catch that? My heart — your heart — is the soft warm soil that holds the sin that can ruin. And don't be so naive to think it can't happen to you:

- Others are narrow minded and bigoted, but never you? Think again.
- Greed can capture the Wall Street types, but you're beyond that? Not so fast.

- Adultery is the furthest thing from your mind? Better watch out.
- “Lazy” and “unproductive” can’t be found in your dictionary? You’ll learn to spell them.
- You love God and would never walk away from the faith? Hmmm!

Remember, Proverbs 16:17 flowed from the pen of Solomon, a man who knew a thing or two about temptation. So how does one “guard his (or her) way”? Let’s revisit McCheyne for a moment. As a 20-something young preacher, he said,

“I often pray, ‘Lord. make me as holy as a pardoned sinner can be made.’”

That is wisdom. You see, there are all kinds of safeguards against temptation: memorize Scripture, confess your sin struggle to a friend (a temptation named is a temptation cut in half), build moral fences, and the strategy Paul often employed, “Run baby run” (see 2 Timothy 2:22), but prayer must always be our starting place.

- **We pray because God alone enables us to overcome.**

Jude’s blessing to his readers is more than a hint to where our strength lies: “Now to him who is able to protect you from stumbling and to make you stand in the presence of his glory, without blemish and with great joy.” Jude 1:24 (CSB)

- **We pray because God alone knows the recesses of our hearts.**

The Psalmist said, “Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my concerns.” Psalm 139:23 (CSB). How can I avoid the evil “out there” if I don’t see the evil “in here”? I need God’s Spirit to shine the light on the hidden nastiness nesting under the motivations of my subconscious mind.

- **We pray because God alone provides the escape hatch we need.**

Paul writes: “But God is faithful; he will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation he will also provide a way out so that you may be able to bear it.” 1 Corinthians 10:13 (CSB)

- **We pray because God alone can align our wandering heart with his will.**

Jesus taught us to pray, “Thy will be done.” I pray that prayer because, quite frankly, I want the will of Tom far more often than I want the will of God.

I love what Frederick Buechner says about the Lord’s Prayer.

“In the Episcopal order of worship, the priest sometimes introduces the Lord’s Prayer with the words, ‘Now, as our Savior Christ hath taught us, we are bold to say . . .’ The word bold is worth thinking about. We do well not to pray the prayer lightly. It takes guts to pray it at all. We can pray it in the unthinking and perfunctory way we usually do only by disregarding what we are saying.

“‘Thy will be done’ is what we are saying . . . We are asking God to be God. We are asking God to do not what we want but what God wants . . . It takes guts to face the omnipotence that is God’s, it takes perhaps no less to face the impotence that is ours. We can do nothing without God. We can have nothing without God. Without God, we are nothing.”

It is going to be a beautiful drive today. Open roads. Amazing vistas. Fun places. New faces. But there will be potholes and detours and back alleys that would best be avoided. So before putting that key in the ignition, stop and pray about:

- The temptation you struggle to overcome:
- The area where you are slow to obey:
- The decision that has you confused:

Take a moment to lift these to God. Then from the heart say, “Your will be done!” Safe travels!

PART IV: HE NEVER TIRES OF HEARING FROM YOU

SO PUT ALL OF YOUR LIFE BEFORE GOD

“We must never wait until we feel like praying before we pray for others. Prayer is like any other work; we may not feel like working, but once we have been at it for a bit, we begin to feel like working. We may not feel like practicing the piano, but once we play for a while, we feel like doing it. In the same way, our prayer muscles need to be limbered up a bit and once the blood-flow of intercession begins, we will find that we feel like praying. - Richard Foster

”**A VERSE TO EXPLORE: James 5:16****“The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.”**

Dustin Johnson is the #1 ranked golfer in the world. He has a coach. Tom Brady is considered the best quarterback in the NFL. He has a coach. Eric Schmidt, billionaire and former Google CEO says every leader needs a coach.

Why do they each have a coach? More importantly, why should we? Because coaches help us get better. This is one of the reasons why I appreciate Jim Nicodem, the author of Prayer Coach. Jim helped me to “get better” at prayer. Jim provided tools for tackling prayer. Then, like a good coach, he asked a very penetrating question.

First the tools. Jim suggested the acronym C.H.A.T. as a prayer guide.

CONFESS: Acknowledge sin and ask the Lord for his forgiveness.

HONOR: Give God the praise he is due.

ASK: Boldly lay out our needs before the Lord.

THANK: Appreciate God for his goodness and for his work in our lives.

In addition to C.H.A.T., Jim recommended praising God using the alphabet. Just start with A and find a word that will launch you into praising God. “God, I praise you that you are ABLE, able to take care of my problem with . . .” Next, go to B and pick a word that will launch you into another chorus of thanksgiving or praise. “God, I praise you that you are BIGGER than anything that is coming my way today.” You get the point. Jim’s tools are invaluable.

Now for his penetrating question. Jim asked, “When it comes to praying for others, if you are not praying for them, who is?” Think about that.

- If you are not praying for your kids, who is?
- If you are not praying for your co-workers, who is?
- If you are not praying for your neighbors, who is?

This question has particular relevance for Agape Church. Our vision is to help people know God, find freedom, discover purpose and make a difference. Jim's question is a fresh reminder that we must intercede on behalf of others. God calls us to it. Besides, if we're not praying for them, who is? James writes:

Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

James 5:16-18 ESV

SO PUT ALL OF YOUR LIFE BEFORE GOD

“Prayer should not be regarded as a duty which must be performed, but rather as a privilege to be enjoyed, a rare delight that is always revealing some new beauty. - E.M. Bounds

”

A VERSE TO EXPLORE: 1 Thessalonians 5:17
“Pray without ceasing.”

What did you learn today?

That is a question that has poked its nose into my business for a long time. My parents asked me this question. I suspect yours conducted this grand inquisition as well.

The question, like an unwelcome guest, was a bit of a bother until I sat at Leo Buscaglia's dinner table.

Leo Buscaglia's father was intensely interested that his son lean into life. That meant nights at the dinner table always included the question, “What did you learn today?”

In *Papa, My Father* (a short and delightful read), Buscaglia recounts how knowing that question was coming often left him scampering for any piece of information he could share before he sat down to the table.

Were I asked that question at the dinner table last night, I would have said, “I learned what praying without ceasing looks like.”

I learned it from my friends and colleagues in ministry: Jon, Rodney, Jimmy, Casey, and Daniel. We had spent a day together mapping out a preaching/small group series for our churches entitled, “Famous Unbelievers.”

- We prayed before we started.
- We prayed when we hit a snag.
- We prayed when we took a break.
- We prayed to stop and give thanks to God for what he revealed to us in our discussions.
- At the end of our day we prayed over Daniel who, at that time, was leaving for a new role in California.

There was no fanfare to the praying. No holy jargon. No long-drawn out "Thees" and "Thous." No particular eloquence.

Prayers were simple, heartfelt, and to-the-point, praising, thanking, and asking. This "God conversation" was spontaneous and natural.

All of these prayers were initiated by my friends. That tells me that praying is obviously a part of their everyday walk with God. Their actions demonstrated what Paul meant when he wrote those words to the Thessalonian church.

"Pray without ceasing."

We prayed audibly, but you could just as well pray silently . . . at a meal, before you walk into a meeting, as you drop off a child at school, or walk into a difficult conversation.

Being in constant communication with God is not hard. Laying all of life before God means carrying on a conversation with God all day long. Why not take your planner and make the notation, "Pray" next to each item on your schedule and your "To Do" list today? Make today the day you pray without ceasing.

PART V

HIS ANSWERS ARE CONDITIONAL (SO WE LEARN TO MEET HIS CONDITIONS)

Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." "Debt" does not refer to financial indebtedness (though we do well to avoid that), but our sin debt to God. Gratefully, Jesus nailed that debt to the cross. He paid the full price. Because of Christ the believer stands before God, forgiven for sins past, present, and future. While the believer enjoys the reality of the permanently pardoned, ongoing sin can still disrupt our day-to-day relationship with God. That sin debt leaves us in the state of the disobedient child — until we "come clean" with God and ask his forgiveness. "Personal fellowship with God is in view in these verses . . . One cannot walk in fellowship with God if he refuses to forgive others."¹ This week we'll explore things that hinder our prayers and what we need to do clear the road blocks to communication with our Father.

SO PUT ALL OF YOUR LIFE BEFORE GOD

“To confess your sins to God is not to tell [God] anything [God] doesn't already know. Until you confess them, however, they are the abyss between you. When you confess them, they become the bridge.
- Frederick Buechner

”

A VERSE TO EXPLORE: 1 Corinthians 11:30

“This is why many are sick and ill among you, and many have fallen asleep.”

Sharing in communion without clearing the conscious is serious business. God is very clear — unconfessed sin hinders our walk with God and others. It can bring on sickness and even result in death.

If that seems extreme consider exhibits A, B, and C.

Exhibit A — Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10)

These two leaders approached God flippantly and irreverently. Not good. They died.

Exhibit B — Achan (Joshua 7)

Achan's disobedience cost his nation a victory and he and his family their lives.

Exhibit C — Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5)

This husband and wife duo thought they could lie to the Holy Spirit. Deadly mistake.

Sin is serious business.

That is why we must pay attention to sins big and small when conviction comes knocking. We must learn to lay them out before God in confession.

Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.
James 5:16

Confession is not just acknowledging the “big stuff.” It is coming clean about our “boutique sins” as well, so-called “lesser evils” such as criticism.

We all know critics. Some people find fault like there is a reward for it. Not Oswald Chambers (1874-1917). Chambers, whose devotional classic *My Utmost for His Highest* is available in forty languages, writes:

“When we discern that other people are not growing spiritually and allow that discernment to turn to criticism, we block our fellowship with God. God never gives us discernment so that we may criticize, but that we may intercede.”

Praying for one another is the Christian's duty. Criticism keeps us from that duty. If we are criticizing, we're not praying.

Perhaps someone has offended us (or others), is rude, ignorant, racist, touchy, picky, or impatient. Because of these grievances we feel the criticism justified. In fact, at times like these, prayer is the furthest thing from our minds. We don't feel like praying.

We must remember to never let our feelings dictate our fervor. We pray despite our feelings!

Richard Foster writes:

"We must never wait until we feel like praying before we pray for others. Prayer is like any other work; we may not feel like working, but once we have been at it for a bit, we begin to feel like working. We may not feel like practicing the piano, but once we play for a while, we feel like doing it. In the same way, our prayer muscles need to be limbered up a bit and once the blood-flow of intercession begins, we will find that we feel like praying." Celebration of Discipline

This week we are focusing on some of those things that damage our relationship with God and hinder our prayers. It's easy to think of the "big stuff" and forget so called "little things" like criticism.

How about it? Do you find yourself a little critical? Confess that to the Lord. Then offer up a prayer on behalf of that person instead.

SO PUT ALL OF YOUR LIFE BEFORE GOD

Prayer does not change God, but it changes him who prays.
- Soren Kierkegaard

A VERSE TO EXPLORE: Galatians 5:19**"Now the works of the flesh are obvious . . . "**

There is a monster at loose in the depths of my soul. Some days it hibernates . . . and some days it is on the prowl and growling loudly. I'm speaking of envy. Pastors are not supposed to be the envious type, so bear with my confession and contemplation.

William Barclay, the Scottish New Testament scholar, describes envy as begrudging the good others are experiencing. Envy is a devious devotion. I suspect that is why Francis Bacon commented: "There be none of the affections, which have been noted to fascinate or bewitch, but love and envy."

One does not have to look far in the Scriptures to find the "bewitched." Cain is the first to be bitten by envy. But there was also King Saul. Saul was the man with all the power, but you wouldn't know it. Envy had reduced him to a cantankerous critic.

As they were coming home, when David returned from striking down the Philistine, the women came out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments. And the women sang to one another as they celebrated,

"Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands."

And Saul was very angry, and this saying displeased him. He said, "They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed thousands, and what more can he have but the kingdom?" And Saul eyed David from that day on. 1 Samuel 18:6-9 ESV

I don't want to become a Saul! Deep down I want to rejoice at the blessings and successes of others. So, what's the secret? How does one drive out this evil monster? Henri Nouwen helps me with this:

"At issue here is the question: 'To whom do I belong? To God or to the world?' Many of my daily preoccupations suggest that I belong more to the world than to God. A little criticism makes me angry, and a little rejection makes me depressed. A little praise raises my spirits, and a little success excites me . . . Often I am like a small boat on the ocean, completely at the mercy of its waves."

Nouwen takes me to the heart of the gospel. Envy evaporates when I find my identity in Jesus. I don't need what you have because Christ gave me all I need. His death and resurrection secured pardon for my sin, a place in his family, a family on earth, and an inheritance in heaven. I'm OKAY.

Jesus is my "okayness"

- Not what the world thinks of me.
- Not how my friends measure me.
- Not how much I have achieved.
- Not how much I have.

When I get this — really get it — then I am free to rejoice with others because I stop comparing myself to others.

When I forget this, then I am on the path to self-destruction because envy blinds me. Let the truth of this story sink in:

"Envy and Greed, two of the seven deadly sins, were walking down a path one day when they were confronted by an angel. The angel offered one of them everything he could wish for. The other one would receive twice as much. Greed quickly asked Envy to choose first. After a little thought, Envy wished for one blind eye."

Don't let envy rob you of your sight. Confess it to God. Repent of it. Remember to whom you belong. Why not pray this prayer:

Lord forgive me for envying (fill in blank). You have given me all I need and more. Help me to rest in You.

SO PUT ALL OF YOUR LIFE BEFORE GOD

“To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you. - Lewis Smedes

A VERSE TO EXPLORE: Colossians 3:13**“As the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.”**

The Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy shares a gripping story that illustrates Smedes' words really well.

In the town of Vladímir lived a young merchant named Iván Dmítritch Aksyónof. He had two shops and a house of his own. Aksyónof was a “handsome, fair-haired, curly-headed fellow, full of fun, and very fond of singing.”

Tolstoy continues by telling us that though the young man had a checkered past, now he was married, honest, and hard-working. One day, in an attempt to advance his business, he left his wife and family whom he dearly loved to visit a fair for a few days and sell some of his goods.

As he traveled he met a merchant whom he knew. They journeyed together that day, stopped at the same inn for the night, shared a cup of tea, and then went to sleep in adjoining rooms. During that night a murderer crept into the other merchant's room, killed him, stole his money, and then placed the murder weapon in Aksyónof's bag while the young man slept.

Totally unaware of the crime, Aksyónof departed very early the next morning. Later that day the police caught up with him, found the murder weapon in his bag, and charged him with the crime. Aksyónof — falsely accused, tried, and condemned — was struck in prison for 26 years.

One day the real murderer was imprisoned with him and was soon charged with an escape attempt. He had been digging a tunnel that Aksyónof alone had witnessed. The prison warden interrogated the prisoners to determine who dug the hole. No one confessed knowledge of the crime. At last the warden turned to Aksyónof, whom after watching for 26 years, he knew and trusted:

“You are a truthful old man; tell me, before God, who dug the hole?”

At last, Aksyónof had opportunity for revenge. He knew this man to be the murderer. Not only had he taken the life of the merchant so many years ago, but he had robbed Aksyónof of his wife and family. Now all he had to do was point the finger and say, “He did it!” and his enemy would be flogged almost to death. Aksyónof was silent for a long time and then said,

“I cannot say, your honor. It is not God's will that I should tell. Do what you like with me; I am in your hands.”

Without a confession, the warden could not bring a charge and he let the matter drop. That night the guilty criminal made his way to the old man's bunk. Sobbing and on his knees, he confessed to the murder so long ago, and begged for forgiveness. Tolstoy writes:

"When Aksyónof heard him sobbing he, too, began to weep. 'God will forgive you!' he said. 'Maybe I am 100 times worse than you.' And at these words his heart grew light, and the longing for home left."

Like Aksyónof, our willingness to forgive changes when we really see ourselves . . . and Jesus wants us to see ourselves. Matthew records Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant, the story about a man who had been forgiven a debt that was beyond his ability to repay, but who was unwilling to forgive a much less minor offense from a fellow servant. The story is compelling and Jesus, who has the crowd in the palm of his hand, drives home his point:

Then his master summoned him and said to him, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" Matthew 18:31-32 ESV

Jesus is using this story to give us a picture of the gospel. God is the master. We are the servants in debt to him. Our wrongdoing (sin) is an insurmountable debt that we cannot pay. So, Jesus comes and pays it for us. Ellis Crum wrote a song that expresses the truth Jesus gives:

He paid a debt He did not owe,
I owed a debt I could not pay,
I needed someone to wash my sins away,
And now I sing a brand new song . . .
Amazing Grace
Christ Jesus paid a debt that I could never pay

Is your heart heavy? Is your disposition angry? Are you preoccupied with "what they have done to you"? Are you losing sleep? Are you missing joy in your soul? Maybe you are in the prison of unforgiveness. There is a way out.

As the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Colossians 3:13

While I tend to remember how much "they" have done to hurt me, Jesus tells me to remember how much God has done to forgive me. The motivation and power to forgive is the gospel.

Who should forgive but those who have been forgiven? Have you been forgiven? Who do you need to forgive?

SO PUT ALL OF YOUR LIFE BEFORE GOD

“Few things accelerate the peace process as much as humbly admitting our own wrongdoing and asking forgiveness. - Lee Strobel”

A VERSE TO EXPLORE: John 20:27
“Stop doubting and believe.”

Sometimes it’s the little things that stop us.

Awhile back I walked out by our pool to find Mr. Clean “dead in the water.” Before you start sending notes of condolence, let me clarify. Mr. Clean is not a person. It is the name we gave to our Hayward automatic pool cleaner.

When Mr. Clean stops scavenging the watery depths, I know there’s a reason. Something — usually something very small — has lodged in the simple gear mechanism that propels him along the pool floor.

That was the case this day. It was an easy fix. I grabbed a screwdriver, loosened one screw, and opened a little hatch that allowed me to “peer into his guts.” Sure enough, there was a tiny little rock wedged in tight. I removed it, closed him up, and Mr. Clean was once again making his rounds.

As I walked away, I couldn’t help but think about how often it is not the big sins, but the little things that trip us up in life.

- A simple click of the mouse . . .
- A little piece of my mind . . .
- A few more minutes in the sack . . .
- The “harmless” second look . . .
- The frivolous expenditure . . .
- The little white lie . . .

Like a pebble in our gears, the little things entangle us. Then they stop us. Before you know it, we are dead in the water! No wonder the writer of Hebrews urges us:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Hebrews 12:1-2 NIV

Is there a sin that regularly trips you up? Shake it off! Fix your eyes on Christ.

SO PUT ALL OF YOUR LIFE BEFORE GOD

“If I cast up a confessed, repented, and forsaken sin against another, and allow my remembrance of that sin to colour my thinking and feed my suspicions, then I know nothing of Calvary love. - Amy Carmichael

A VERSE TO EXPLORE: Psalm 103:12

“As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.”

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