

Acid Test Series 1 of 8 - the Priority of Prayer

by Al Whittinghill

Prayer is God's priority, and it's the most important ingredient in any Christian's life.

Duration: 1:02:27

Scripture: Exodus 25:9, Matthew 26:41, Luke 11:1, Acts 6:4, Romans 8:26, Philippians 4:6, James 1:27

Topics: "Christian Life"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of prayer in the life of a believer. He uses a story of a little boy who boldly approaches a king covered in mud to illustrate how we can come boldly to the throne of grace through prayer. The speaker also highlights the connection between prayer and spiritual vitality, stating that neglecting prayer is the chief cause of backsliding. He encourages believers to watch and pray so that they do not fall into temptation, as the flesh is weak but the spirit is willing. The sermon emphasizes the need for habitual prayer and dialogue with God to stay spiritually strong and discerning.

Transcript

There's no question in our minds that God wants to make it very clear to us that prayer is his priority. In fact, prayer is the most important ingredient in any Christian's life. I think that's true.

As we look at the Bible, it's so obvious, we can see it so clearly. Prayer is the surest indication of whether your life or your church or anything is truly spiritual or not. The level and degree of prayer reveals where a thing really is.

Prayer is the greatest possible blessing that you could give to your family or your friends, no question about it. You can't do anything better for someone than pray. It's the most effective way to strengthen you when you're in trial or when you're in temptation.

There's no greater way for strength. It's the single thing that the devil fears more than anything else. He hated it a while ago, when we all prayed in small groups like that.

It's the thing that God wants to do in your life more than anything else, prayer. It's the thing that is the greatest thing you can do for God or man is pray. So I want to go, first of all, to a little beginning diving board of Luke chapter 11.

And we want to look at Luke chapter 11, verse 1. And here we see the disciples making a request of the Lord Jesus. Luke chapter 11, verse 1. You know, Romans 8, 26 says that we don't know how to pray as

we ought. And all of us that are gathered here obviously have gathered because we feel that we don't know how to pray as we ought.

But that verse also says that God's spirit will himself make a intercession within us, that he himself will look in our hearts and the spirit will give us words. And in fact, that's what it says here in Luke 11, verse 1. It came to pass that as he was praying in a certain place, when he stopped, one of his disciples said unto him, Lord, teach us to pray, as John Baptist also taught his disciples. And so that's why we're here.

The same thing they wanted is what we want. We want the Lord Jesus to teach us how to pray. And it's really true that prayer is learned not so much in the classroom as in the closet.

Prayer is really its own definition. You can have all the definitions you want, and you can have your notebooks and cassettes full of information, but really learning to pray involves an act of our will as the spirit of God gives us the power to respond to revelation. So we need to be taught to pray as far as Jesus to teach them.

They didn't say teach us to preach. They didn't say teach us to raise the dead or do miracles or even teach us to worship. In the fullest sense, they said teach us to pray.

Perhaps that was because that prayer was the most conspicuous thing about Jesus' life. We may talk about that before the weekend's over, but if you consider not only was it the most conspicuous thing when his ministry was going on, it's still the most conspicuous thing about him. Just think of it.

For 30 years, Jesus prepared for his ministry as he was a carpenter and a son and a brother and a student of God's Word in the truest sense of the word. And for 30 years, he prayed. And then we have three years of ministry, again, where prayer was the most conspicuous thing.

One great act of dying on the cross and raising from the dead, and then 1,900-plus years of prayer. That's what he's been doing, seated at the right hand of the Father. He's been ever living to pray for you and me, those who belong to him.

He's a priest of heaven, the high priest, who's in continual intercession. And what an obvious emphasis on prayer in the Lord Jesus Christ. So to pray as God would have us is surely the greatest achievement of any human being on earth.

It's the most complex assignment, but yet the simplest thing of all. It's a great mystery. So how easy it is to faint when it comes to prayer.

Obviously, we all have struggled with this fainting. In Luke 18, verse 1, we see the words of our Lord Jesus again. As he says in verse 1, he spoke a parable to them, to this end, that men ought always to pray and not to faint.

In every circumstance, we are to pray. Now, if you're like me, it is very easy to let prayer get crowded out. I know when I was first saved, it was through prayer that I came to the Lord Jesus.

So obviously, if you've been saved, it was when you prayed and welcomed him into your life as your King and as your sin forgiver and blood cleanser. And he came in, and you knew by instinct of birth that prayer was your native breath. You just knew it.

And you began to pray. It was a joy. If you've been born again, that's what happens.

And so as you began to pray, soon as, if you're like me, there were more and more things to pray for. And people might come and say, brother, would you pray for this? And as I prayed for that, I found I could remember everything. So I heard someone say, try a prayer list.

And I tried a prayer list. And it got longer and longer and longer. And soon I was late for my prayer meeting because my wheelbarrow with my prayer list broke down.

And I found myself when I would pray for something, God necessarily wouldn't do what I told him to do. And then when I forgot to pray, it seems as if his mercy and grace were so great that he would do it anyway. And so, you know, more practical things became the pressing urgency as I began involved in witnessing and so many things that are all good.

And prayer was placed back into the back burner in many cases. And I became discouraged. The whole time I would say, you need to pray.

Does that ever happen to you? And then along would come someone and say, you must pray or you'd come to a conference like this. And you'd get, oh no. And you'd recommit.

You'd rededicate your life to prayer. And then you'd become discouraged. And you'd discontinue it again.

And it was a cycle of discouragement and determination and then defeat over and over and over again. We let prayer get crowded out and it ceases to become a delight. It's a duty.

It's a duty. It's a routine instead of a romance. Well, I want to say tonight that God wants to bring back to us the spirit of prayer, not just the knowledge.

But I believe to every man in this room, he wants to send us home with a desire birthed from God to pray and the equipment to do it. Not only to pray yourself, but to lead your family and to be a catalyst in your congregation of fellow Christians to bring them to the same understanding and desire. Well, first of all tonight then, prayer is God's priority.

That's the first area that I'm really going to zero in on. Prayer is God's priority. That's the theme of our conference, the priority of prayer.

But I want to share, first of all, about the priority of prayer under two headings. First of all, prayer is priority for the individual. And then we'll talk about prayer being priority for the church as a whole, your church, my church.

Prayer is a priority for the individual. Well, the Bible makes it very clear that prayer is God's priority for every single person in this room. There are no exceptions.

Each one of us have a common calling. We've been called to pray. Without any exception, nothing else will take the place of prayer in your life.

Infinite Bible study will never take the place of prayer. Much service, knocking on doors, even what's soul winning, or being a deacon, or taking the offering, or preaching will never take the place of prayer. Nothing else can substitute what will come only through prayer.

In fact, all success in spiritual work can be traced to prayer. Dwight Moody used to say that every work of God can be traced to a kneeling form. Wherever you see a soul saved, you can be sure someone,

somewhere has saved.

There's another explanation besides what we see. Someone has prayed and wrestled and fought hell's legions on their knees. Prayer really then is the gauge of our spirituality.

Spiritual health can be discerned by the prayer in our life. Not by the knowledge of the Bible, although it's good to know the Bible. Not by your service.

Not by your Bible study, because all those things you see are man to man. You can go right on with service and Bible study and going to church and being recognized as a Christian while being prayerless. You see, all those things are man to man, but prayer is God to man, and it makes it totally the real place where spirituality is determined.

We can be very busy in Christian service while we're very sick spiritually, like the businessman who works himself into a state of heart disease while he doesn't even feel it or know it. But the symptoms are there, and the doctor says, you're a sick man. Well, prayerlessness shows our heart is ill, and it shows that we need to have the great physician work on it.

The acid test of devotion is prayer. And I can make this disgusting statement, it's true though for each of us, that the priority that we place upon prayer in our lives is in reality the priority that we really place upon God. It really is true, because prayer is dependent on God in action, and it gives Him all the credit.

So, if prayer is meager or if it's weak, it is because one reason we consider it supplementary instead of foundational. It is something that we think may be an addendum. Have you ever heard anybody say, you're going to church tonight? No, brother, it's only a prayer meeting.

Well, Charles Spurgeon wrote a book called Only a Prayer Meeting. Only a prayer meeting. Well, we'll talk more about that.

But prayer is the place of reality. Robert Murray McChain, that saint in Scotland who died at the ripe old age of 29, who affected so many men of God, he made this statement that what a man is on his knees before God, that's what he is and nothing more. What a man is when he gets to his closet and goes down to his knees in the presence of God alone, that is who he really is when all the masks come off and God sees us as we are.

You see, credentials of man mean nothing in prayer. A holy life is not made in the closet alone, but there's no question that it's certainly not made without the closet. It takes more than the closet, but it certainly takes the closet.

There has never been a man used in the Bible mightily of God. There's never been a man in church history that's been used mightily by God, who also was not also mighty in prayer. He knew that to be much for God, you're going to have to be much with God, and that to stand on your feet before men, you're going to have to spend time on your knees before God.

There's just no other way around it. There's a lot of things we can do and succeed on a visible level that are prayerless. But if you're going to affect eternity and be effective in the spirit realm and see real results that can't be explained any other way but God, it's going to have to be through prayer.

Someone says one time, all these coincidences, they're just coincidences when you pray. Well, I'll tell you something, brother, when I pray, coincidences happen, and when I don't pray, they don't seem to happen. You ever notice that? Absence of prayer in a person's life is proof that you've been trampled on by the devil.

It really is. And we've got to get serious about it this weekend. The demons never fear prayerless lives or prayerless ministries.

S. D. Gordon once said, and I'm sure if my brother, probably, I'm going to quote a lot of things before him. That's an advantage of going first, rob him of all these quotes. S. D. Gordon once said, Satan laughs at our toil, he mocks at our preaching this weekend, but he trembles when we pray together.

He trembles when we pray. That's why, you see, he fights prayer more than anything else. That's why person after person who's come this weekend has come to me and said, boy, did I have a hard time getting here.

Anybody have a hard time getting here? Anybody think they were sick all week? I know people on their back, they hurt their back, they have squabbles, they have financial upheaval. I mean, I'm telling you what, distraction, disturbance, disaster, trying to keep us from focusing in on the one thing we really need in our lives, a renewed vision for prayer. Well, the devil knows, you see, that for some of us, a recovery of the vision of prayer, one good weekend of real prayer could undo years of his planning for your family and your life.

In fact, it could just ruin what he's got planned for your children if you become a praying father. And if you really get the vision again, it could turn whole families around and renew marriages and restore families to God's order. You see, the devil has some men that he fears.

Remember in Acts chapter 19 when those seven sons of Sceva, vagabond Jews, were going to cast out demons out of this one particular individual, and they went over and said, come out of him in the name of Jesus, the one who Paul is preaching. You see, that's second-hand authority. And the demons did come out because they got mad like a hornet's nest, and they jumped all over those men, and these men learned not to try second-hand authority.

They ran away naked and bleeding. The demons tore their clothes off and cut them to shreds. And as they fell upon those men and tormented them, they said these words, Jesus we know.

Of course the demons know Jesus. But then they added a high compliment, and Paul we know. I can almost hear them, oh, we hate him.

Oh, he's so effective. But who are you, they said. Who are you? Brother, does Satan know you? Or, you know, some people say, oh, the devil gave me such a hard time today.

Well, you know, most, the devil's not infinite. He only goes to those that are effectively used in prayer. He might send a little bitty old spot of darkness out against some of us, but most guys are not even deterring the devil.

And he doesn't have to put any big guns out. He has to only go to those who are praying. The reason Paul was known in hell was the first thing God ever said about him after he was saved.

You know what it was? God said it in Acts 9-11. He says, behold, he is praying. And it's a term of astonishment.

God is astonished. Paul had prayed all his life. I mean, with many prayers as a Pharisee, but now it's as if God says, behold, he's praying.

He's really got it. He's on his knees in the place called straight. He's really praying.

And from that day on, Paul would never let a breath come out without praying, without ceasing. Everything he did, he said in everything by prayer. The little scripture verse in Philippians 4-6 at the bottom of our program here that we have out.

Jesus said, you see, watch and pray in Matthew 26 so that you enter not into temptation. Watch and pray so that you don't enter into temptation, because you see, the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. Inherent in that statement is that if you don't pray, your flesh will overwhelm your spirit.

If you want to stay strong spiritually, keen in discernment, acute in hearing, then you must become a person of habitual prayer who's used to listening and used to dialogue in the heavenly realm. If you do not, then you will become dull spiritually, and you will begin to walk empty and dull and not hot but cold. And the bad thing is, if you're busy in a Christian church, you'll have to be a deacon in the flesh.

You'll have to be a preacher in the flesh. You'll have to be a father in the flesh, because your responsibilities go right along. They don't stop when you stop praying.

We must pray, watch and pray. Prayer strengthens our spirit, and when we pray, it sets the Word of God in our heart on fire, and fire takes charge in our bones. So we could sooner expect, says John Wesley, a baby to grow without food than for a human soul to grow without prayer.

Think about that, those of you who have children. You could sooner expect your kids to grow without feeding them than you could your own soul to grow without prayer. Priority for the individual.

You see, that's why it's going to be amazing when God opens His who's who one day. He has a who's who, you know it? He has what He calls a book of remembrance of prayer. In fact, He keeps our tears in a bottle, it says in Psalm 56.

Tears, I believe, of repentance and prayer and sympathy along with God. He keeps them in a bottle. I often kid my wife, saying, she's got this giant bottle, this angel's carrying it, and my little angel's just tossing it around like that.

She is, she has liquid prayer, as Spurgeon would say. The book of remembrance, many who look like they're first in our day, friends, will be last at the back of the line, and many who look like they're last will be first at the front of all because they're famous with God. You know, there's some people in this room that I can tell you, when I consider their lives, I'm humbled by their prayer life.

You don't know them, they'll never have a great ministry, perhaps it's known, but they're famous with God. Some of you, I'm telling you, some of you put us in the dirt when it comes to our prayer life. I could tell you about a little man in Chicago who died 12 years ago.

His name was Rex. I won't tell you his last name. He wouldn't even let you take his picture.

He came home from the land of Israel as a missionary 30 years before that. See, 12 years ago he died. They carried him out of his house on a stretcher.

He'd come home 30 years before that from the mission field because his health wouldn't let him stay there, and so he came and he didn't retire. You know what he did? He had an all-night ministry of intercession continually for 30 years, 30 years. He never slept through the night.

In fact, when he left his house on the stretcher, it was the first time he'd been out of his house in eight years. You say, well, did he sleep? Of course he slept. He slept in the daytime.

He prayed through the night, and when he died and he was carried out of that stretcher, out of that house on a stretcher, I believe it was as great a loss to our country as if you'd shot the president because men like that are rare. One of God's hidden ones, one of his people who see the priority, one of those ones who pray in secret. You know, it says, let every man take heed how he builds on that foundation that's laid, which is Jesus.

In 1 Corinthians 3, it says it's possible to build upon what God's given you with wood, hay, or stubble, or gold, silver, and precious stone. What does that mean? Well, a lot of things, I suppose, but one of them surely is this. Wood, hay, and stubble are those things that are the result of public ministry, I believe.

They're visual. They're out on top of the ground. It's what you get when men are through.

But gold, silver, and precious stones are formed in secret, in secret, under heat and under pressure, and I believe it's as sure as I can just stand up here that those gold, silver, and precious stones is that hidden life before God that stands before him in the holy place by night and lifts up holy hands. Priority for the individual, God's priority, prayer. But not only for the individual, but priority for his church.

That's the second thing about prayer being priority. When Jesus built his church, he wanted prayer to be its priority. In fact, he said, my father's house shall be called a house of fellowship.

Did he say that? My father's house will be called a house that sings without ceasing. No. That builds buildings that are splendid.

No. My father's house shall be called the house of prayer for all the nations. And he's talking about living stones, not bricks and mortar.

He's talking about you are the temple of God, a holy habitation. When we gather together, we are a holy habitation for God's spirit of prayer, and we are to pray together. We are a house of prayer, a praying congregation.

You see, in the book of Acts, you see them all, those first five chapters, over and over and over again that the first public assembly recorded was for prayer. And over and over, prayer is mentioned over 30 times in the book of Acts. That's why it's the acts of the Holy Spirit, not the apostles.

They were vessels of what they received through him, channels of life, riverbeds of blessing, number one priority. And I believe just like when Moses built the tabernacle, God said, Moses, make the tabernacle like the original in heaven, the one you saw in the spirit. God says to the churches in our day, see that you make my church according to the pattern showed to you in the original.

Look back into the book of Acts and see the praying congregation and make the pattern of the church like that. I believe it's true that God actually intended for prayer to be the greatest way through which the church would do her greatest work. Not through outward service, but through prayer.

Service was intended to be picking up the spoils of war through victorious prayer. As we on our knees lay the foundations of the earth and plant the very heavens, God would give us the power of prayer. In fact, he says right in John 14, right after he talks about the greater works, people always say, what are the greater works that Jesus said we would do? Do you know what the next verse is? After Jesus talks about greater works, he says, and whatsoever you ask in my name, that will I do so that the father may be glorified in the son.

If you ask anything in my name, I will do it. I think the greatest works the church can ever do are done in the place of prayer. And when we go out, it's simply picking up the spoils of victorious prayer.

The early church understood that the real battle was in prayer, that they didn't wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities and against powers. Over and over it says, against, in Ephesians 6, 12, against, against a spiritual agonizing and wrestling and laboring in the real place of true battle in the spirit. I think that we ought to put that over our prayer rooms.

We wrestle not against flesh and blood. Maybe in some places we could just leave it at, we wrestle not, and it'd be more true and appropriate. We don't get to that point.

We just come with our soliloquies of religion, with all of our pet prayers that have been taught us by those who've taken up the offering that we've heard and rehearsed. And so we repeat the same thing. I'm telling you, that's how too much of our praying really is, taught by man instead of learned from God.

You see, one old saint said, God has chosen in his sovereignty to limit his workings on the earth to the level of the church's prayer. Let me say that again. It's kind of tough.

God has chosen in his sovereignty to limit his working on this earth to the degree and level of the church's prayer. He's given the church the privilege and the honor of standing on earth for his will. And we are to be like a bridge as we pray for his mercies and his grace.

God will faithfully burden the church, but the church must pray. And so as we gather together, we are like an outlet of a pipe that we gather and we vocalize from a point of unity and faith what God intends to do. We decree it.

We reign in life through Christ Jesus in prayer. You see, that is why it may be said, I believe, that prayer is not just a ministry of the church. Prayer could really be considered the ministry of the church, the ministry, because it has such priority in the word of God.

But yet we call it only a prayer meeting. I've said this a lot of times, and you've probably heard me say it before, but if you want to see how popular your church is, come on Sunday morning. If you want to see how popular your preacher is, you come on Sunday night.

If you want to see how popular Jesus is, come to prayer meeting. The devil was absolutely hysterical in those early days when 3,000 were saved and then 5,000 were saved, and he wanted to stop this power of the church. So what did he do? He went for the jugular vein of the power.

How did he do that? Did he come with an onslaught? Not at first. He came and he attacked the prayer meeting. What weapons did he use? Well, the same ones he does today.

He came to the church that was thriving in resurrection power, and in Acts chapter 6, he comes with disunity. He fills the heart of Ananias and Sapphira to lie to the Holy Spirit, and they said they gave all that they had when they kept back some for themselves. Now, God wouldn't judge them for not giving all they had.

What he judged them for was trying to appear to be more spiritual than they really were, trying to make a mask or a pretense and be honored for their sacrifice when there was none. If God did that today, half our churches would drop dead. Because, you see, God struck them dead, Ananias and Sapphira, and instead of that disunity, that breach in the spirit like the devil had planned, it says in Acts 6, verse 14 or 12, somewhere right in there, it says that great fear came upon the whole church and nobody dared join themselves.

No halfway people, boy. They just said, we're not getting near them. And so, the devil's plan failed.

Disunity failed, and the church kept thriving. Well, when disunity failed, in, uh, excuse me, that's Acts chapter 5, not chapter 6, Acts 5. In Acts chapter 6, he tried his second, uh, method. In Acts chapter 6, the first four verses, we read that the church began to multiply, and widows and orphans were needing attention.

Now, in James chapter 1, it says that's the best thing you can do. You can't be any more pure in your religion than to minister to widows and orphans in their affliction. If you want to be right with God and please him, minister to widows and orphans.

But yet it said in Acts chapter 6, verse 4, that the, that the distraction that they realized that was happening to them was grievous. And they said, we've got to find holy men of God, full of the faith and the Holy Spirit to appoint to this good thing, because the good is the enemy of the best. We've got to give ourselves continually to the prayer and the ministry of God's word.

You see, they were trying to be distracted by the devil, but, uh, they saw through it. In our day, busy, busy, busy. I'll tell you, a lot of Christians have buried their spirituality in the graves of their Christian activities.

No time for holiness. So busy. Well, that failed.

Disunity failed. Distraction failed. And so in Acts chapter 8, the devil comes with the fierce persecution of the apostle Paul, who was Saul at that time, destruction, disunity, distraction, and then destruction.

And it didn't work because as Saul came and tried to throw every little group of people meeting for prayer or fellowship in the jail, they went around spreading even more the gospel, gossiping the gospel and prayer spread instead of being diminished. And so he failed. The devil failed, but his methods are the same today.

He wants to cut off our supply lines. Now, suppose we're like an army going out to battle. Suppose there's a giant warfare in World War II, and we're going out to fight.

And just before a strategic conflict, the army stops and waits and waits. And you say, what are you waiting for? We're waiting for supplies. Well, suddenly their waiting doesn't seem ridiculous, does it? Because

you'd be a fool to go into a crucial conflict without supply.

Well, the church of our day comes to a crucial conflict, and we need to wait upon the Lord for supply, because He wants us to receive from Him. You know, if you want to have victory, you've got to attack. You'll never have victory just being passive.

You've got to attack. One great general said that. In warfare, you'll hardly ever see victory without an assault.

And the church of Jesus Christ must make an attack. We're on the defensive in our day. We've got to get on the attack.

We've got to wait for supplies and then attack. I believe that the neglect of prayer as a church is the reason why the church is being laughed at in America. And they find us amusing instead of amazing.

They found the early church amazing. They find us amusing. Let me ask you, has the committee meeting replaced the prayer meeting? Has it? I believe it has.

Have we let fasting be replaced by feasting, potluck, dinners, and all the rest? They're great. But we feast instead of fast. And we organize instead of agonize.

And we have brilliance stressed instead of brokenness. And we have activities, activities instead of obedience. And whereas the early church was led by men of kneeling, today it's led by men of standing, president of the bank, whoever else is there that's important.

We allow fashion to be more important than passion in the churches. Well, without prayer, the glow is gone. The fire goes out in the church.

And there's no life in the congregation. You know why there's so few souls being saved in our churches? We hear about a half a million baptisms in one great denomination. And we say, glory to God.

But you see, I want to just challenge you to figure out the number of weeks in a year and figure out the number of churches. There's 33,000 churches in that denomination, half a million baptisms a year, 52 Sundays in a year. You figure that out.

I'm going to tell you that's an average of over 400 people in each congregation out of 13 million people. And if you figure that out, that's less than one and a half converts every month. God doesn't take newborn babies and put them in the arms of a corpse.

At the hospital, they don't do that. They don't take a newborn baby to the morgue. They put it in the arms of someone who cares.

And we need to teach people to pray. The priority of prayer. But secondly, tonight, the power of prayer.

One day we're going to see that prayer is the greatest factor in human history. When it's all said and done, nothing's had a greater effect on human history than prayer. I'm sure my brother will take us to James chapter 5, 16 before the weekend is over.

But I want to read in James chapter 5 and I want to read verse 16 and 17. Confess your faults one to another and pray for one another that you might be healed. The effectual, fervent prayer, the boiling

prayer of a righteous man avails much.

Elijah was a man subject to like passions like we are, just like you or me, brother. An example of a righteous man who prayed. It says, he prayed earnestly.

He prayed in his praying that it might not rain. And it rained not on the earth for the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again and the heavens gave forth rain and the earth brought forth her fruit.

Well, there's an example, Elijah, of a man who has more power in prayer. One man than a hundred preachers. You could take a hundred preachers and they could all preach at the sky and it would still never make it rain or stop raining.

Prayer is greater than preaching. It's greater to talk to God for man than to talk to men for God. They're both necessary.

I'm not minimizing preaching, but one old missionary said, Jawed, one old missionary named Jawed said, I would rather teach one man to pray than ten men to preach. And someone said, why is that, brother? That's a strange statement. You'd rather teach one man to pray than ten men to preach.

Well, because of this. Preaching and teaching are vital. They reveal the will of God.

But once the will of God is revealed, only prayer can lay hold of it. Only prayer can secure it. Only prayer can make it real in the life.

Without prayer, we become what America has become, brothers and sisters, but there's no sisters here. We become people that are just wishers and hopers and theorists. We have a form of godliness, but no power.

And we're like the people at the mall that are habitual shoppers that go and look and admire and long for and dream of, but there's an invisible barrier called glass between them and that desired thing. And as we're there and we hear the word of God and we understand it and we want it in our families, we understand what it means to be a man of God and a godly father, we can never lay hold of it without prayer. Frustrated Christianity without prayer.

Master, why could we not cast out this demon? Simple, said Jesus in Matthew 17, 19. This kind cometh out but by prayer and fasting. If you've lost the glow, if you've lost the vitality, if you've lost the power, prayer and fasting, brother, prayer and fasting.

The neglect of prayer is the chief cause of backsliding. It's the reason we're reading headlines in the paper about the church. All failure begins at the closet door.

I believe that's a safe statement. If it's not, then it's close to the truth. All failure begins at the closet door.

And I can say this, and I believe it's true again, that men fall in public only long after they've failed in private. They fail in private long before they fall in public. Perhaps the secret of all failure is the failure of secret prayer.

Satan doesn't care how much a Christian has prayed in the past if he can only get you to stop praying. You stop praying, you see. The Bible says pray without ceasing and in everything by prayer.

So God, I believe, will not do the things He longs to do in our lives. He won't do those things apart from prayer, which He promises He will do through prayer. He will wait for us to pray and wait upon Him that He might have mercy upon us.

He burdens us. But desire is not necessarily prayer, brothers. You've come here with desire.

Let it be channeled into a God-given act of will, in a fact of prayer. We need to face it, that prayerlessness is not just a mistake. Prayerlessness for you and for me is sin.

And until we call it that, until we really deal with it as that, there's little hope for us. But if we will deal with it as sin, God has promised in 1 John 1.9, He said, if we confess our sins, if we call it what He calls it, then He is faithful and just to forgive us of that sin and to clean us from it. He will correct your life.

There's nothing more He wants to do than give us a deep, meaningful life of prayer. Perhaps this is the greatest sin of the church in America, prayerlessness. Prayerlessness.

So we have the priority of prayer for individual and for church. We have the power of prayer. Apart from prayer, God will not do what He would otherwise do.

It's His ordained way to bring blessings to earth through the church as we gather together as a sacrifice. Why do we always have to do things that we want to do? I was in a prayer meeting once, and I don't usually interrupt people, but there was this brother who had been constantly down and up and down and up, and he was so dependent on having the desire to do things to do them. He was saying, Oh Lord, give me a desire to pray more.

I just stopped and I said, Why do you need a desire? In America, we think we have to want to do something to do it, and we don't do it. But not in the kingdom of God. Sacrifice.

Sacrifice of praise. Sacrifice of prayer. If you walk in the Spirit, if you please God, you cannot do the things that you would normally do.

You're going to have to do the things you wouldn't desire to do, which means spirit discipline of prayer. Well, the last subject for tonight is the privilege of prayer. The privilege of prayer, we've seen the priority, we've seen the power, but lastly, and I believe that that which will give us breath to pray is the privilege of prayer.

You see, prayer is a father and his children. Someone said once that prayer is the arm of the child, is the hand of the child on the arm of the father. John Bassanio tells about once how he was preparing a message, and he was involved in a good book, and his daughter came and said, Daddy, would you build a dollhouse for me? And looked up with these sweet blue eyes, and he said, he kind of nodded and went right back to his book.

And a little later, he looked out the window and saw his little girl out in the backyard putting her dolls in a certain kind of arrangement and out by the corner. And he watched her with curiosity, and finally he went to his wife and said, What is, what is she doing? And his wife said, She's out there ready for the dollhouse. She's asking for a dollhouse, and she's getting her dolls ready to go in that dollhouse right out there where you're going to build it.

And he promptly went back and put down his books and went to the store and got wood and built that little dollhouse for the dolls, because you see, prayer laid hold of, in that fullest sense, that father's heart. You see, we're different from the rest of the world. Christians that are born again with God's Spirit in them, washed in the blood, with that family likeness, that chromosome linkage in the Holy Ghost to Him, when we come to Him, it says His ears are open to their cry.

All the world is praying. I mean, the Buddhists are praying, the Muslims are praying, but a real Christian's prayer is different because it's familial. It is in the Father's power in Jesus' name.

The Muslims have 99 names for God, but not one of them is Father. Jesus introduced the word Father. What a privilege, intimate communion.

But brothers, tonight not everybody in the church is a Christian. Not everybody in this room, perhaps, is a Christian. And you've prayed, and you've wondered why things aren't happening.

And tonight, first base for you might be to be born again. We've been praying over in the place where we're staying that God would include in this unction call to prayer, a call to salvation for those of you that truly need it, that need to be born again. So, as we come to our Father, we are actually welcomed into the throne room of the universe.

You know, that's a staggering thought. I heard it said once that President Reagan came to town and said, calling up and says, Fred, would you meet me tomorrow morning at the corner of the street at the old swing there on the step? I'd like to get your advice on some things. I'd like to share some things with you.

Would you meet me there alone? I don't know if Fred would show up, but he probably would. We probably would. Even if you don't agree with the man, it's the office.

You'd respect to go and call. You'd be honored. Well, we have a call from the King of the universe, and we come boldly by invitation where angels fall.

I heard a story that really moved me one time about, as I thought about angels crying out, holy, holy, holy, and covering themselves with their wings, and lest they detract from that glory in the awesome white light of the throne room. God says, come right there and stand, for angels fear to tread. I heard about a man in England who was a great king, and he was temperamental, and if he was in a bad mood, if you came into his throne room without him inviting you, it was all over but the shouting.

I mean, off with your head. The guards would be told to take you out, and they'd cut your head off right there. One day, he was in an absolutely vile mood, and in his splendid throne room, there was only one door in the back and two on the side.

The guards were there. They were trying to keep people out because they knew heads would roll as this man was in a vile mood, and all of a sudden, they heard as they walked around with their itching necks, guarding their own heads, you know, they heard this running of feet, and the doors burst open in the back of the room, and they saw this little kid with mud all over him come running in right across the marble floor, splatting mud everywhere, and they said, oh no, we can't bear to watch, and this little kid ran right up to the throne and splatters mud and slop everywhere, mud all over him, right up the king's leg, up his ermine coat, plops down with mud all over him in the king's lap, and they're all just covering their eyes like, oh, what a slaughter this is going to be, and the king puts his arms around that little boy and says, oh son, have you had a good day? Tell me how you've been doing today. Daddy is so glad you've come.

You see, he was the prince, and when you're the prince, it changes everything in how you relate to the king. We come in boldly where angels fear to tread. It says we come boldly, telling everything, saying all, to the throne of grace, to obtain mercy and grace in a time of need.

Clay feet and all. I mean, it's a true picture with muddy feet, stained by the world and hurt by circumstance. We come right in and get right up on our father's bosom and tell him exactly what we have need of, and he already knows.

He understands our frame. And the angels, the angels look at us. They're like those guards.

They are absolutely astounded to see us people, we people who are so needy and weak, come right up to our father in heaven and pour out our hearts before him. They stand amazed. I believe they're just in awe.

The only thing that surprises them and amazes them more than that, I'm sure, is that with such infinite privilege and absolute perpetual audience that we come so little. God says, learn to pray as a way of life. In season, out of season, happy we are when prayer ceases to be a duty and becomes a delight.

What a privilege it is when we, we call upon Jesus as if he's asleep. Have you noticed that? I'm telling you, people can die in prayer meetings. There's two kinds of silence, one killing and one's creative.

I hope we don't have any of that killing kind. I mean, I'm in a prayer meeting and I hate to pray so much sometimes, but I'm telling you, sometimes people just kind of, oh, they're so afraid. If brother, if you can't pray with other Christians, only one of two things is possible.

You're either lost and not born again, or you either bound by pride. One of those two things. We need to be able to pray together according to the Father's will.

We, we pray to Jesus. We call upon the Lord as if he were asleep, as if we had to awaken him to our needs so he can meet it. But the truth is, brothers, we are asleep and he is awake, and he sends those needs into our life to awaken us to our need to him.

He's not asleep. He doesn't slumber. He's not even tired.

So he yearns to spend time with you tonight. He yearns to give you what you've long needed and I've needed. I need more prayer in my life.

I'm telling you, I want prayer in my life. More, more, without ceasing. So as our Father, we come to our Heavenly Father.

I don't have to impress him. When my children come to me, they don't have to impress me. Once I was under such pressure for a message, nothing's worse than getting up and not having something to say when you're supposed to be talking on God's behalf.

People come to hear God and you know it's just, man, if you open your mouth and something comes out that's not like God, shut up. And I was sitting there under real pressure. I was just, I mean, I was, I was nervous, actually.

And my son comes in. I've read about this happening, but it happened to me. My son comes in and says, Dad, what is it, son? Oh, nothing.

He just sits down, starts drawing on the floor and says, I just want to be with you. Man, I had to put my books down. I had to go over there, put my arms around him and cuddle him and say, you know, Dad sure loves you.

Because you see, my Father in heaven's just like that. He's not busy like that. He's not anxious, but he longs for me to come and spend time in his presence.

And he already knows my needs. I don't have to impress him. It's not like making a shopping list.

You know, I have this prayer list and plop it down. It's not like preparing a speech coming in before God with eloquent words. You know, you don't have to know a lot of scripture verses to pray.

You just have to come and pour your heart out before him and get honest. He already knows your faults and your needs and your desires and where you're hurting. It's not a monologue.

It's a dialogue. I'm going to call my wife tonight and tell her after God blesses like, like mad tonight, I'm going to tell her the glory of God we're going to see tonight. And I'm going to share with her.

But how do you think it would bless her? If I call, or bless me, I want to talk to my wife. Honey, praise God. God really met us tonight.

We're all here safe and sound. Boy, what a great group of men. I love you.

Hope the kids are all right. I'm praying for you. See you when I get home.

Click. Boy, would that be a blessing? No, not at all. Because you see, it's not a monologue.

It's a dialogue. That really is the flow. And that's why when we come into the place of God, God gives us two ears and one mouth.

He says, you need to spend time listening, listening, because listening is the key part of prayer. I need to listen. When I come before him, fall on my knees before him and say, Father, what is it that you want me to pray for today? What is it you want me to pray for tonight as you've wakened me from sleep? Where do you want me to go in prayer? To India, to Egypt, to Afghanistan, across the street.

Be specific, because nothing is too great for his power and nothing is too small for his love. And so God listens to the language of my heart. As I come before him, he says, when you come before your father, which is in secret, enter into your closet and shut the door behind you so that your father, who lives and dwells in secret, will be able to hear you and that which you say to him in private, whispering in the ear.

He tells you back. You go out and say, and he'll reward you openly. He'll come and he'll share secrets with you.

But when you come before your father, don't use vain repetitions like the heathen do. You know what a vain repetition is? Prayer beads, brother. You know what a vain repetition is or can be? Now, I believe that God can use prayer beads.

God can use prayer beads as long as the Holy Ghost is behind every word you say and you're conscious and it's not just habit like blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Like so many people think it's the volume of words. It says, don't be like them.

That could be one of the themes in the Sermon on the Mount. Don't be like them. When you come before your father, which is in heaven, don't use empty, meaningless phrases and words like the nations do.

They think they'll be heard because of their moving of their lips and empty words. I'll never forget when we were learning to pray as a family, Elizabeth, my little seven-year-old now, was only about four, and we would gather for prayer. She didn't know how to string sentences together and not a lot of scripture, but I'm telling you what, God loves to hear the prayers of children.

And she would follow in on the train of mom's and dad's prayers and we would pray, but I could hear the Holy Ghost in her prayers. She had truly been saved. Just before she turned four, I mean, you can argue with me if you want to, but I've seen God in her life and I've seen fruit.

And she's really a little Christian. She has quiet time in the morning. She's had it for a couple of years now.

And as she was just learning, she didn't know how to even say a sentence really well. She'd get down there after we would, and she'd say people's names. She'd say like, mommy, and she did her lips a funny way.

You know, she was deconcentrating, so kids are funny. She'd go, mommy, church, you know, and she would do her lips funny and I could hear God in her prayers. And I saw God answering her prayers over those months.

And it frightened me sometimes just to see how God would answer her prayers. And I said, I wonder if there's any, no, but I tried it. I got alone and I went, father.

You know, how quickly prayer degenerates into a form. You know, you laugh so hard brothers, but I'm going to tell you how many of us think that God hears our prayers just because we move our lips. I mean, we just go, father, it's so good to be in your house today.

I want you to bless the gift and the giver, lead God and direct us, forgive us of our many, many sins. And you know, you know how it is. That's the baddest one.

I'll give you the Presbyterian one if you'd like, or the Methodist one. I don't think I will, but they're there, brother. Those vain repetitions.

Now I'm not saying God can't bless the prayer like that. The Holy Ghost can breathe right into a prayer like that. In fact, he loves to do it just to mess up us who think that he can't.

He loves to do it. He'll do that to show us that he doesn't need creativity. You know, he can use forms as long as the Holy Spirit is in it.

Not vain repetitions, which is empty words. The Holy Ghost has got to be in it full. And so as we come together, he will bless, not just this verbal barrage, but a heart pouring out before him.

You see, when you come before your Heavenly Father, friends, you may have no words at all. The time you feel like praying the least is the time you need to the most. And you should, by an act of will, by need, not desire, come before him.

Father, I'm here. I'm angry with you, but I know I need to be here. I want to be honest.

I'm upset by the way that I've been disappointed in this. Pour your heart out before him. Get honest with him.

I'll tell you, he'll get real with you. When you're honest with him like that, I don't like what you just did, Father. I don't like the way they treated me, and I'm chapped.

Well, he may discipline you a little bit for talking to him like that, but I'll tell you what, he'll be real to you. He'll be real, and you come and be honest with him, and he will allow our needs to bring us to him in reality. Maybe you can't say anything, listen, but it's more important when you come before him that your heart have no words than your words have no heart.

And when you come before him, let me tell you, a sob can say it all. And beyond a sob is a moan. Let me tell you, when a little child gets too sick to even cry, they just moan.

It gets the dad's attention right quick. And when a little kid is moaning, when a child is sobbing, it's eloquent. A cry is mightier than a polished phrase.

You know, all these, O thou God of Rehoboam, Jehoboam, and Jehoshaphat, O thou God that hung the heavens on nothing and inhabits the presence of his people. You know how we can do that. We know how to do that.

Open the window. But let me tell you, if it's a cry from the heart, God hears the heart. Suppose I'm out in the woods with my son.

We're walking out there, and we're at a little outing, and my son and I are walking. He's on the other side of a little gully, and all of a sudden, he says, Daddy, Daddy, help, help. And there's a big snake right there, ready to strike him any moment, a deadly snake.

He says, Daddy, come help me. And I said, Son, do you believe that I will come to help you when you call me? Can you imagine anything so ridiculous? Son, I've told you over and over again how to call upon me when you're in trouble. Remember how I told you to ask me to say it this way.

A cry is mightier than a polished phrase. Come before your Father, which is in heaven. His ear is open to their cry.

I have five kids. Some of you don't know that since last time you didn't know that. But I know their cry.

I know if they need a whipping. I know if they need feeding. I know if they need cuddling, because I know them.

And how much more my Heavenly Father knows me. Lord, teach me to pray. Is that your prayer tonight? One last story, and then I'm through.

I'll never forget when Jonathan was learning how... I may tell two more stories. I got five minutes. Same little Elizabeth.

I'll tell you, God loves simple things. He loves just honesty. He loves a little simple faith.

You know, we sometimes get that O.M. map that you should buy. Did you bring some of those, Andrew? They got a great map of the world with the countries there. We'd spit it out on the floor.

We'd lay our fingers on a country one night, like we pray. We all get around the world map. Put our finger, boy, it just blesses me to think about it.

On Afghanistan or something, you know. And here's my little kindergarten girl, and we've been praying for Afghanistan. She can't hardly say it, but it feels good.

She tries. Can you imagine her going in? They have a little prayer in her kindergarten, and she's praying. And her teacher told me, it just blew her mind.

A little kid can barely talk, say, and Father, bless Afghanistan. Can you imagine? You know that somebody's up to something when that happens. Well, here's Elizabeth, and it was back when Ethiopia was having a famine a couple years ago, another one before this one.

And we had our fingers on Ethiopia that night, and little Elizabeth had heard about the people were hungry there and didn't have bread. And she began to pray. She said, Father, I've heard they don't have any bread in Ethiopia, and that's really bad.

And Father, I want you to send them some bread. As a matter of fact, Father God, you promised you would if I asked you, and I'm just claiming from you that you'll send them some bread right now. And as she was praying there, I could feel my insides drawing back, saying, no, no, don't do that, darling, don't.

Oh, Lord, don't let her little face get hurt. Lord Jesus, don't let her little face get hurt, because she doesn't understand how to pray for such audacity. I remember thinking that.

Let me tell you, about three days later, I saw it. You say coincidence. Maybe so.

But I'll tell you what I saw in the paper. It says this massive shipment of bread had come through to Afghanistan, and I figured it out, I mean, to Ethiopia about that time when she said, right now. And I remember thinking, I said, no, it couldn't be.

And the Holy Spirit says, exactly. And except you become as that little child, you're not going to get the first base when it comes to prayer. One of the characteristics of a little child is utter confidence.

I'll tell you, our Heavenly Father loves it when we learn how to pray. When Jonathan was learning how to pray, we lived up in Chattanooga at a wonderful ministry up there called Precept, and there's a conference center there. And at lunchtime, all of us would gather for lunch.

We'd all eat together. And it's a ministry where there was a training program, and people would come from all over for a year. And they had duties like mow the grass or do the printing.

And all morning, the trainees, we called them, would work. And then we'd all meet for lunch, including the staff. And one of my son's favorite babysitters named Lori, precious woman, her job was printing.

And Jonathan loved Lori. They prayed together. When we were gone, she would babysit them.

And this particular day, I was out of town, and my wife told me later about it, that Lori was upstairs printing. And just before lunch, when everybody converged in the cafeteria for lunch, a piece of paper started to go kind of crooked into that offset press. And Lori, knowing what would happen, she tried to grab it like you can do, but she grabbed it just a little late.

And as the press caught her hand, it went and pulled her hand right in up to here into that offset press. It didn't cut her, there was no blood, but it smashed her hand almost as flat as a pencil. And she couldn't get it out.

She reversed those gears and began to pull the hand out, and it was stained with ink, and it was horrible looking, red with shock. And she was in absolute hysteric pain, running down the hall downstairs at that time that everyone was coming and converging for lunch. Well, Jonathan was with his mother and Elizabeth, and Lori came down the stairs crying hysterically, and everyone ran over to her and said, Lori, Lori.

And Jonathan looked at her, and Mary Madeline said, my wife said, that a look of alarm came into his eyes. And then like a kind of a look of realization, and instead of running over to Lori like everyone else, he ran over into the other room and got down on his knees and put his head in his hands and began to pray. When I heard that, I remember going to my knees in thanksgiving and saying, Father, that brings me such joy.

My son is learning how to pray. He's learning how to pray, and if he can learn how to pray, life will be his in the fullest sense before you. And I'll never forget what the Holy Spirit said to me, Al, does that bring you joy when your son is learning how to pray? I said, Father, I have no greater joy, like John said, if when my children walk in the truth, it blesses me.

I can't even tell you, Father. And the Father says, Al, think how much joy it brings me when I see my children beginning to learn how to pray. Even though they don't know how, they're beginning to learn.

It brings joy to the heart of God, just even beginning. So I'm asking you tonight, brothers, are you willing to fall at his feet? Are you willing to really open up at all these days and hours together and truly say, Lord, teach me to pray? Well, I trust that the Holy Spirit will honor what you're saying to him right now in your heart and that you will be able to bring him joy. Well, let's pray together.

Father, we thank you tonight for the call to prayer. We sense it in the Holy Spirit and our hearts yearn to say yes, but may it be more than a sentimental longing. May it be more than an emotional persuasion.

May it be enlivened by the Holy Spirit's willful choice to place ourselves in the place of blessing. Thank you for what you're going to share with us during these sessions about the practicalities, but we know that practicalities mean nothing without dynamic. We ask you to put into our hearts the desire and the unction and the passion and the awareness that prayer is God's priority and that it's a real privilege and it is a delight indeed to the heart of God.

There are some men in this room, Father, the prayer altar of their heart is cold. Tonight you're not condemning them for that, but you want to encourage them to truly let the fire of God fall upon the sacrifice as it's placed upon the altar of prayer. May we give ourselves to prayer, as the Bible says, a living sacrifice, coming to this house of prayer, the sacrifice of prayer.

May we see from your perspective, Lord, you can change a man's life in a moment, in one second, of realization and recognition. And may it be so that in this moment, this second, this right now, on this date of April 15th, may we render to God the things that are God's. And so many are preparing to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's.

Oh God, may we give to you what you long for, which is not just anything, but everything, everything. Seal these words to our hearts, Lord, in Jesus' name. Amen.

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