

Prayer Week

*Unless the LORD builds the house,
those who build it labor in vain.
Unless the LORD watches over the city,
the watchman stays awake in vain.
(Psalm 127:1 ESV)*

Unless the Lord Builds the House

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Psalm 127:1

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Introduction:

Good morning and Happy New Year! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Psalm 127.

This is an optimistic time of the year, isn't it? All around us, people are reflecting on their lives and setting goals for the future. I used to look down my nose at New Years resolutions, as if setting goals was somehow beneath me. Not anymore. Not now that I feel that strong pull of apathy and leisure on my heart. I've come to learn that you're either growing or you're dying. Every Christian I've ever met who thinks he's simply "staying the course" is so obviously regressing that it's alarming! The Devil likes to whisper: "Settle down. Take a brake," but God made us to GROW! The Apostle Paul said:

¹² Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but **I press on** to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and **straining forward** to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ **I press on** toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:12-14 ESV)

I hope that this is your desire as you enter into a New Year. I hope that you are hungry to grow in your faith and to move from one degree of glory to the next as you look more and more like Jesus. Today I want to invite you to press on with me in one particular area: Prayer.

We have to start here. If we want to do great things for the Lord then we cannot run in our own strength. We will need great *help* from the Lord. Anything that we accomplish of lasting value – any ground that we make in the South Ward – will begin first and foremost on our knees.

That is exactly what we find in our text this morning. Look with me now at Psalm 127:1-2. Hear now God's Holy, inspired, life-giving word to us:

Unless the LORD builds the house,
those who build it labor in vain.
Unless the LORD watches over the city,
the watchman stays awake in vain. (Psalm 127:1 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

I want to take a different approach to the text this morning than we typically would. We would usually spend a good deal of time wrestling through the meaning of the text, after which we would turn to application. The meaning of the text before us is remarkably clear:

If you're not surrendering your plans to God then your plans are useless. If you're trying to navigate through life by your own strength then you are wasting your time and exhausting yourself. God is God. You are not.

The application is also very clear: Pray!

So the explanation is clear, and the application is clear. And yet, how many of us fail to live this out? Why can't we seem to figure this out? Why don't we pray as we should? Today, I want to spend our time wrestling through that question:

Why Don't We Pray As We Should?

Why is it that, year after year, I have to make a resolution to spend more time in prayer? Why is it that prayer groups aren't bursting at the seams? Why do Christians spend so much time striving in their own strength and so little time asking God to do what only He can do?

Why don't we pray as we should?

I would like to suggest three reasons why most Christians don't pray as we should. The first reason is nothing more than ignorance.

1. Ignorance

This is found most commonly in new believers and I think it's one of the reasons why most prayer groups are championed by elder saints. Think of it this way: Perhaps you just became a Christian this year, and all that you know about the Christian life is what you've heard in our series through 1 Peter. That could pose a challenge because 1 Peter hasn't had a lot to say about prayer. Perhaps, as a result, you've never really thought much about prayer at all.

If that's you, I want to briefly attempt to bring you up to speed. We could preach ten sermons on prayer and barely skim the surface, but as your pastor I want to make sure that you at least know these three things. First:

i. God invites us to pray

We see this all over the Bible but perhaps nowhere more clearly than in Matthew 7:

⁷“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. ⁹Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? ¹¹If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:7-11 ESV)

Isn't that amazing? Jesus asks: “Do you really think that you are a better parent than God? Are you more benevolent than He is?”

I love when Luke runs up to me with a transformer toy that he can't figure out, or a lid he can't open. I LOVE helping my kids. I love that they feel safe enough to ask. Even when they ask for things that they shouldn't ask for – things that reveal their ignorance or their sinful hearts – I am still glad that they know that they can come to me.

Jesus tells us that God is like that. He invites us to come. He invites us to ask. He delights to give generously to His children.

Hear that this morning. God invites you to surrender every single issue that you are currently wrestling through to Him. Bring him every broken relationship, every financial stress, and every health concern. He doesn't simply tolerate our prayers – he DELIGHTS in them. When we pray we say to God: “I know you hear me, I know you love me and I know you can handle this better than I can.”

The second thing you need to know is that God answers prayer!

ii. God answers prayer

We saw that in Matthew 7. Jesus said:

If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:7-11 ESV)

Likewise, the Apostle James writes:

You do not have, because you do not ask. (James 4:2b ESV)

God is active! He does not simply sit back and listen idly as His people pour their hearts out before Him. He hears, He cares and He responds! Now, there are times when His response doesn't seem to line up exactly with our request. In fact, that passage we read in James goes on to say:

³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. (James 4:3 ESV)

Sometimes we ask God for things that we think we need but that would actually be bad for us. Sometimes we plead with God to take an illness from us, only to find out that there was a lesson in our sickness that we really needed to learn. Sometimes we plead with God for a spouse only to find out that He has plans for our singleness. Using the parenting analogy that Jesus put forward,

isn't it true that there are often times when the most loving thing that we can say to our kids is no?

So it is with God. He knows what's best for us. He doesn't always answer our prayers in the way that we expected. But He does answer us. Every time.

Finally, I want you to know that:

iii. **God perfects our prayers**

Perhaps you might be thinking: "Well what if I mess everything up by asking for the wrong thing?" Let me encourage you with one of my favourite verses in all of Scripture:

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, **but the Spirit himself intercedes for us** with groanings too deep for words.
(Romans 8:26 ESV)

Do you hear what Paul is saying? It's true that we are weak – it's true that we oftentimes don't even know what we should be asking for from God – but God helps us in our weakness. His Holy Spirit is taking our prayers and perfecting them as they go to the Father!

Have you ever played the game telephone? In that game, you whisper a message to the person next to you in the circle and, by the time it gets back to you, the message is jumbled and hilarity ensues. Well, Romans 8 tells us that prayer is the exact opposite of that! You whisper your prayer into the ear of the Holy Spirit and the message is all jumbled. There are hints of selfishness in there along with some vindictiveness and a sprinkle of heresy for good measure... Let's be honest, this is a common prayer from the new believer. You're still growing!

But the Holy Spirit receives that jumbled message and He brings it to Jesus who is seated at the right hand of the Father. Then Jesus presents your request and, do you know what happens to your confusing, ill-advised, semi-heretical prayer? The Father hears it as a perfect request. It is in exact alignment with His will. It is in exact alignment with what is ultimately best for you and those around you.

Don't believe for a second that you need to achieve a certain level of knowledge before you can pray to God. He delights in our childlike faith.

Now, this doesn't mean that there is no need for us to grow! I should hope that, on this side of the telephone line, your prayers would become more and more refined. You're going to read your Bible and you are going to learn more about God and His character. You'll have a better grasp of the will of God and you'll learn to ask for better things. But, even as we strive to grow, I want you to know this truth: On the other end of the line **your prayers are already perfect**.

Don't allow ignorance to hinder your prayer life. Come to Him today. Approach Him with childlike faith. He delights to answer our prayers – even the prayers that feel bumbled and embarrassing.

But what about those of us who don't struggle with ignorance? What can be said for the mature believer? Knowing all that we know about our God: Knowing that He loves us, that He is powerful to save, that He wills that none should perish, that He owns the cattle on a thousand hills, that He delights to give good gifts to His children – knowing that Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father and that he is personally presenting our requests to Him – how could we ever hesitate in bringing our prayers before Him?

The sad reality is that many of us *know* all of the right answers and yet we have never really taken hold of them. Some of us don't pray as we should because we are plagued by unbelief.

2. Unbelief

We do not ask because we do not believe.

If we believe that God is who He says He is and that He does what He says He will do, then we will pray. Therefore, if we do not pray then we must not believe that God is who He says He is and we must not believe that God will do what He says He will do.

It's just that simple. It's just that tragic. We don't pray because we don't believe.

The great preacher Charles Spurgeon once said:

A prayerless soul is a Christless soul. Prayer is the lisping of the believing infant, the shout of the fighting believer, the requiem of the dying saint falling asleep in Jesus. It is the breath, the watchword, the comfort, the strength, the honour of a Christian.¹

When we preached through the Gospel of Mark, I remember feeling extremely challenged by the story of Jesus' visit to his hometown. He had grown up in Nazareth yet his return was met with a frosty reception. We read in verse 5:

And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. **6 And he marvelled because of their unbelief.** (Mark 6:5-6 ESV)

Just think about that. Here we have the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords – the author and perfecter of the universe – and what leaves him awestruck? Our puny, half-hearted faith. He simply marvels at our unbelief.

I wonder if you're willing to ask this question of yourself: Would Jesus marvel at my faith? Would my prayer life leave him in awe how little I actually expect from God?

What does he think about the faith of our church? What does he think of our prayer gatherings? What does he think of the prayers that we pray for the South Ward?

Do you really believe that you serve a God who answers prayer? Does your life bear that out?

I worry that we are creatures of our culture. I worry that we have surrendered too much ground to Darwin and that we have unthinkingly embraced a naturalistic view of the world that leaves no room for divine intervention. We need a fresh infusion of faith! I want us to have the kind of faith that Elijah had when he confronted the prophets of Baal. Do you remember that story?

¹ C.H. Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening Devotions*. (Lynchburg, Virginia: The Old-Time Gospel Hour), 4.

The Israelites had deserted God and had chosen to worship the idols. Elijah boldly challenged King Ahab – a king who wanted him dead – to assemble all of the people and all of the priests of Baal at Mount Carmel. There, he proposed a challenge: Let’s find out which god is the true God by asking them both to send fire from heaven.

The prophets of Baal danced around their altar and shouted until their voices were hoarse. They cut themselves with swords in an attempt to draw Baal’s attention. No fire.

Eventually it was Elijah’s turn to call on his God. But before he prayed, he dug a trench around the altar and proceeded to cover it with buckets and buckets of water until the altar was soaked and the trenches were full. Then this happened:

³⁶ And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, “O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. ³⁷ Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.” ³⁸ Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. ³⁹ And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, “The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God.” (1 Kings 18:36-39 ESV)

Isn’t that amazing? Don’t you want to pray like that? I want us to pray with the kind of confidence that isn’t afraid of a crowd of witnesses or a tyrannical king. I want us to pray like people who expect God’s fire to fall! There are thousands of people in this city who are worshipping idols! Let’s pray big prayers and ask God to glorify His name in our city!

Some of us need to pray this simple prayer that we find in Mark’s Gospel:

“I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24b ESV)

Ask Him again to change the heart of your loved one. Ask Him again to bring a revival in our city. Immediately after this encounter with the prophets of Baal Elijah asked God for rain. He sent his servant to look for rain clouds seven times! Six times it looked as if Elijah’s prayer was not being heard. Six times it looked like he was simply talking to himself in his prayers. But after the seventh prayer, God brought the rain.

He brought fire after the first prayer. He brought rain after the seventh. He might have you bring your request before Him 100 times. Keep asking. Keep believing.

Finally, we must turn our attention to the last symptom that keeps us from praying as we should:

3. Shame

Nothing propels us further from the presence of God than our sense of shame. We are descendants of our first father Adam and he modelled this for us so tragically in the garden. Do you remember what happened immediately after Adam and Eve had disobeyed God?

And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. (Genesis 3:8 ESV)

The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, does it? How often is this our response to God? How many times have you fallen back into some sin and, in response, distanced yourself from God? Like Adam and Eve, when we are made aware of our sin and shame our first response is to hide ourselves.

And it's not only the egregious sin that causes shame, is it?

Isn't it true that our shame is often the result of our prayerlessness? Perhaps you're feeling that shame right now. Consider whether or not this is true of you: Whenever you sit down to pray you are reminded of how little you pray and it makes you embarrassed before God. As a result you pray less and the cycle continues. You feel shame because you don't pray. You don't pray because you feel shame.

Some of the church staff renewed our first response training a few months ago and we were asked this question: Where do people most frequently choke to death? Answer: The bathroom. Apparently, when people begin to choke they often become embarrassed and retreat to the privacy of the bathroom – away from the only people who can save them!

We do the same thing with our spiritual lives. Something goes wrong – something enters into our

souls that threatens to choke out our faith – and instead of bringing our need to the Lord or confessing it to other believers we simply hide ourselves away. How many who thought themselves Christians have “died in the bathroom” spiritually speaking?

If your prayer life is being hindered by shame then I want to point you to the solution this morning. This is the same solution to all of the problems that plague our souls – it is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

You need to know that the devil is seeking to use guilt as a weapon against you. The reason why he is so dangerous is because he works with half-truths. He rightfully points at your sin and he rightfully reminds you that God is holy and that you are not. All of that is true. But the devil omits this important truth: You don't come before God clothed in your own righteousness – you come before God clothed in Jesus' righteousness!

That's why we end our prayers with the words: “In Jesus' name.” When we say those words, what we're saying to God is: “I know that I have no right to be heard by you. I know that I'm a sinner and I know that you are holy. But I also know that you sent your Son Jesus to live the perfect life that I could never live and then to die on the cross the death that I deserved to die. I know that he has removed my sins as far as the east is from the west and that he is now seated at your right hand bringing this request on my behalf. So I don't pray in my name or by my authority. I pray in JESUS' name based on **his** righteous life and **his** right to come before you and **his** authority! Amen!”

“In Jesus' name” is just a short form way of saying all of that, but maybe some of us need to pray that out in long form from time to time. Can I be candid with you this morning? I pray like that every Sunday morning! Every Sunday morning I sit in my office and I prepare to stand up and to explain the WORD of GOD and I become overwhelmingly aware of all of my sin. The devil draws up a laundry list of thoughts, deeds, words and attitudes that I am 100% guilty of and he stamps that list to the back of my eyelids. I try to pray for God's blessing on the sermon and I can see the list and I can hear shame whispering: “Who are you to ask for the Lord's blessing?”

But then I remind myself that my prayers are prayed in Jesus' name, not mine. I plant my flag there and I stay there until the accusations of the devil are buried in the gospel song.

When Satan tempts me to despair, and tells me of the guilt within
Upward I look and see him there, who made an end to all my sin
Because the sinless saviour died, my sinful soul is counted free
For God the Just is satisfied to look on him and pardon me²

We need to pray like people who believe the gospel! Are you allowing guilt and shame to drive you away from the One who has the remedy for your guilt and shame? Don't be a fool! Don't fall into the devil's trap. In the words of the old hymn writer: If you tarry till you're better, you will never come at all. The author to the Hebrews admonishes us:

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ **Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace**, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:15-16 ESV)

Come to Him. Cast your anxieties on Him. Confess your sins to Him. Study the Word and learn all that God has done for you. Ask Him to help your unbelief. Cast your sin and shame on the cross and draw near by the blood of Jesus. Let 2019 be the year that you become a person of prayer. Let this be the year that we become a church that unrelentingly knocks on Heaven's door on behalf of the lost.

Unless the LORD builds the house,
those who build it labor in vain.
Unless the LORD watches over the city,
the watchman stays awake in vain.
(Psalm 127:1 ESV)

By God's grace, let us resolve never again to labour in vain. Amen? Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

² Charitie Lees Bancroft, *Before the Throne of God Above*.
https://hymnary.org/text/before_the_throne_of_god_above_i_have_a accessed Jan. 2, 2019.