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The Church's Core Activities, Pt 5

Acts 2:41-42

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SermonAudio Blurb: As we look at the final core activity of the gathered church we come to a oft-misunderstood subject, prayer. In this sermon we learn the why, what and how of corporate prayer. This is not an examination of how believers ought to pray as individuals; rather it is how the church should pray when they are gathered as a body.

I. Introduction.

- A. Read Acts 2:41-42.
- B. We come to the final core activity of the Church today, prayer.
 - 1. So far we examined baptism, membership, devotion to apostolic teaching, fellowship and Lord's Supper.
 - 2. By way of reminder the idea of fellowship was defined by these last two activities— Lord's Supper and prayer.
- C. Few things seem to create more guilt in Christians than the subject of prayer.
 - 1. Few believe they pray enough or well.
 - 2. It produces a lot of excuse-making and promises to do better. But seldom do sermons on prayer actually help people in praying.
 - 3. The pragmatics, or practical aspects, of prayer are usually the focus of these sort of sermons but in the end most are no closer to praying well than at the beginning.
- D. But improving your prayer life is not the focus of this message. The assumption built into our passage is that the people prayed when they gathered.
 - 1. The focus for us over these last several weeks is to examine what the church does when it gathers. In other words, what does a church service look like?
 - 2. As we consider the place of prayer in the service I hope to encourage you about prayer, clarify prayer a bit for some of you and even give you some resources to help in your private prayers.
 - 3. Two details left out in most translations.

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- a. “The” and “prayers” plural.
 - b. Fellowship is defined here as “the breaking of bread and **the** prayers.”
 - c. Specific prayers. So we are not looking at a prayer meeting or a time of private prayers.
- E. This is what we will focus on in the first part of this message and then consider the how and why of corporate prayers. In the end I will give you a couple of resources that can help you in your private prayers.

II. Corporate Prayer—A Core Activity of The Church.

- A. The idea of corporate prayer.
- 1. The people who made up the early Church were Jews. Because they were present at the Temple for Pentecost they showed themselves to be rather devout as well.
 - 2. The synagogue rose up during the exiles we read about in the prophets and the latter chapters of 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles. It became the way the people would gather to worship.
 - a. All of these new Christians were raised in that world of the synagogue and there was a clear liturgy in place.
 - b. One key part of the synagogue would be the prayers. But a normal service would involve praise through the singing of Psalms, prayers, scripture reading and homilies/messages.
(https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/53/53-2/JETS_53-2_243-267_Osborne.pdf)
 - c. You may recall that when Jesus cleared out the Temple He quoted Isaiah where it is written that God’s house was be a house of prayer. Why?
 - (1) Prayer was a response to God through the hearing of the Word.
 - (2) Throughout the service there would be prayers given, the first starting after the opening song of praise.
 - (3) The imagery is simple but profound. They praised God through speaking of God’s excellencies. This led to prayer, then more song, then prayer, then scripture reading, then prayer, then a message or two, then prayer. Sound familiar?

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3. This is the world and practice of these people and it is likely that they continued this practice, only now as Jews who had come to see and believe in Jesus as the Christ/Messiah.
 - a. This is why a devotion to apostolic teaching became so important because now they were learning to rethink so much of what they believed and understood about the work and plan of God.
 - b. Prior to their conversion, they completely oriented their lives around the rabbinic teachings and opinions along with the many burdens of law-keeping and the Old Covenant.
 - c. Now they were partakers of the promises of the New Covenant. They were no longer under the Law as Jesus Christ fulfilled the Law. And instead of the opinions of rabbis they had the certainty of the Apostles who instructed them.
 - d. The prayers were good already for they were scripture infused, they simply continued in those prayers as well as adding to them the new truth of Jesus Christ.
 4. This is not to say that we should then find all those prayers and pray them in our service. The point is that there was a time and place for carefully constructed prayers that would be prayed by memory.
 - a. Similar to following a lectionary calendar.
 - b. Or specific points in a service where prayer is offered to God.
- B. A brief look at corporate prayer in Acts:
1. This started with the original group in 1:14.
 - a. We see this in a slightly different way than in 2:42. Here it is a singular prayer and literally it is “devoting themselves to the prayer.”
 - b. What was the prayer? Well it was in response to what Jesus taught them in vs 7-8.
 - c. The Word of God prompted and defined the prayer. So they were not merely praying whatever came to their mind, but they focused on the task of waiting for the promise of the Holy Spirit and the resulting consequence of becoming missionaries.
 2. In 1:24 they prayed for guidance and discernment before choosing Matthias as the new Apostle.

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3. 3:1.
 4. 4:23-31.
 - a. Note that this is a corporate prayer (23-24). It says that “they lifted their voices to God with one accord. . .” But this is not everyone praying at the same time; rather, it is likely it is one praying and the others being of one mind about the prayer.
 - b. Brutal honesty.
 - c. Scripture infused.
 - d. Theological.
 - e. But also the result is not planned or even expected. That was a sovereign act of God.
 5. Acts 6:4, 6.
 - a. The Apostles knew their priorities and they could not let those be threatened by other details. Prayer and teaching the Word were their primary functions.
 - b. In vs 6 there is the idea of the church corporately setting these people apart for this important work. Again though it is a group, one or two likely did the actual praying.
 6. 12:5.
 - a. Here again we have the church praying. But it is worth noting that though the whole church is praying, the term itself is singular.
 - b. This simply shows that though many were praying, much like if we sent out a prayer request, that the prayers were really one prayer. A unified prayer of the Body of Christ is what takes place.
- C. Corporate prayer is a vital part of the church, even if we do not always treasure it as we ought.
1. It is another way we share in the fellowship of our triune God.
 2. We all bow our heads because we have the same Father.
 3. We all enter into the presence of our Father because we share the same Mediator and Savior.
 4. We all effectively offer our prayer because we share the same life in the Holy Spirit.

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5. One person praying, but actually the whole congregation praying.

D. Thoughts regarding the art and act of corporate prayer.

1. Prayer is much more loose than some specific method. Like singing, it is also teaching. And in a similar way singing can be prayer.

a. We make it harder than we ought. We make it an individual issue rather than a corporate issue.

b. The purpose of corporate prayer is to pray for the Body of Christ and on behalf of the Body.

2. Corporate prayer, by its very nature, instructs those who listen.

a. It should be expressed carefully, just as songs and sermons/teaching should be done with care.

b. It has the ability to help people learn to pray better on their own when they are unsure how to pray regarding some situation

c. It should be Trinitarian.

d. It should be for the whole church more than the individual, though not exclusively.

3. A good prayer is one in line with God's character and purposes.

a. At the core of this point is the tendency for us to want to pray with ourselves at the center. And this is idolatry.

b. A typical prayer often reflects a self-centered focus. We pray —> God hears ----> God answers. Now think about this, what is wrong with it?

c. Before I answer let me give you a better way to pray and you see if you can discern the difference. God reveals His will —> We pray in light of that will —> God answers in accordance to His will.

d. One starts with us and our will and the other starts with the Word. One starts in our imagination and wants and the other starts with the mind of God.

e. This means we pray in Jesus' name.

(1) *Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it. (John 14:13-14)*

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- (2) But this is not something that you stick at the end of a sermon to make it “Christian.” Nor is it merely to signal that the prayer is ending.
 - (3) To pray in the name of Jesus is to come to the Father in the name of Jesus. Example is if I were a very important businessman and you came to me for something I may not even talk to you. But if you came in the name of my son and I knew my son had sent you, then I would receive you and give heed to your requests.
 - (4) But this means that when we pray in the name of Jesus that we are praying for what Jesus would pray for. We have that confidence that we are praying rightly.
 - (5) And this again takes us back to knowing the will of God in the bible.
 - (6) It is no wonder we struggle to simply read through the bible. It is the sole place to know God’s will and therefore to pray well. So Satan throws up any and every reason for us to not know and read it.
 - (7) It is similar to taking the Lord’s Name in vain. This is not using it as a swear word so much as it is claiming God as your God and then living and speaking contrary to who He is.
 - (8) When you say, “I pray this in the name of Jesus,” you should be confident that what you prayed is consistent with Jesus’ character, will and mission. That means you must know Christ.
4. Prayer has never been a direct connection to God. It is always mediated.
- a. For us the Mediator is Christ. If anyone rejects Jesus then he has no mediator and therefore cannot pray in truth.
 - b. This is the great problem for the unbeliever. They pray to the big guy upstairs or something. But it is all done in arrogance of heart.
 - c. None of us are worthy to enter into the presence of God in prayer without the righteousness of Jesus Christ covering us.

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- d. But as believers, when we all bow in prayer as a body we are ushered into the very presence of our Father because of Jesus Christ and together we offer our prayer. That is powerful.
5. Examples from Paul:
- a. Ephesians 1:15-22.
 - (1) Born out of praise to the Father, Son and Spirit in vss 3-14.
 - (2) “for this reason.” Prayer should be motivated by who God is and what He is doing.
 - (3) vss 15-16 is thanksgiving to God for their salvation. They possess all the blessings he just listed. He therefore is thankful for how God is working in their lives.
 - (4) vs 17 “that,” which speaks to purpose:
 - (a) They may know God better (pretty sure God wants that).
 - (b) They may understand and know the hope we have in our calling to Christ (18a). To be called by God is to be saved. To be saved means that we shall be forever present with God.
 - (c) That they may grasp the fulness of who they are in Christ.
 - i) You and I are Christ’s inheritance, His treasure. Jesus tells us this in John 6, all that the Father gives to Him shall be saved.
 - ii) Do you know that? Well you need to. Not to be proud but to be struck with awe. We are counted as our Savior’s inheritance.
 - (d) vs 19 Paul therefore wants us to grasp the level of power that God’s exerts toward us.
 - (5) Finally in 19b-23 he then tells us what it looks like for that power to be exerted on our behalf.
 - b. Ephesians 3:14-19.
 - (1) “I bow” is the main verb.
 - (2) “that” in vs 16 gives us the reason he prays.

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- (3) Then in vs 18 is another “that” or reason to be able to comprehend the love of Christ.
 - (4) Finally in vs 19 a “so that” which gives purpose.
 - (5) Note how God centered and corporate-oriented this prayer is. This is a kind of prayer for the gathered church.
- c. Do you see how these prayers are unique compared to how we tend to pray? These are prayers for the gathered saints. They are prayers that instruct us and move us to say “amen” with the one who prays.

III. Conclusion.

- A. For private praying two books I would recommend.
 1. *A Praying Life: Connecting with God in a Distracting World*, by Paul Miller. Very helpful and encouraging book.
 2. *Praying the Bible*, by Donald Whitney. This is something a parent can do with the family and help them literally learn to pray.
- B. For corporate praying I would recommend the following:
 1. *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers & Devotions*, edited by Arthur Bennett.
 2. *At the Throne of Grace: A Book of Prayers*, by John MacArthur
- C. A few final words.
 1. The weekly service is not merely an activity that one can take or leave. It is a time where the whole Body comes together to be one, corporate voice.
 2. We sing, pray, break bread and hear the Word of God together. It is not merely an exercise of the intellect. It is a spiritual work where we affirm again that this is my true family. And we have one Father and one Mediator, Christ Jesus our Lord.
 3. It is through the work of the Holy Spirit that we are then nourished, corrected, strengthened and equipped to go back into the world for the week. What we sing, prayer and hear are to permeate our private prayers and songs and, even, our preaching to ourselves.
 4. As the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, so our corporate prayers should instruct each of you on how to pray and for what to pray.
- D. Some thoughts regarding our private prayers.

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1. As long as we will not submit our will under the will of our Father in heaven we will pray poorly. E.g. Peter warns husbands that if they do not live with their wives properly and without granting them honor, that their prayers shall be hindered by God.
2. To pray well requires that we keep short accounts of others. Forgiving as we have been forgiven is grease to our interceding. This is part of the evil of a culture of victimhood.
3. Pray that people will stand in the time of adversity. That the people of God will press on.
4. Give thanks to God and give thanks for the people of God.
5. Do not be a narcissist in your prayers. Pray that you might be a faithful servant of others. We are to be a people who serve others, not those who will promote you.
6. Write out your prayers with the Word open. Do this for awhile and you will become better at praying extemporaneously over time.

Benediction

May our merciful God and Father open our eyes to the glory and vastness of His love toward us through Jesus His Son. May we see ourselves seated with Him in heaven as recipients of His grace. And may God grant us through the Spirit, eyes to grasp the many good works He has called us to love and do. Amen