

Together We...Pray
A Praying Church is a Healthy Church

John 15:1-8

Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on October 29th, 2023

(Read Text)

The Native Language of Faith

Several decades ago, when the Pew Research Center began polling data about religious activity in America, 77% of American adults identified as “Christian” and 6% identified as no religious affiliation. They were called the “nones,” none meaning zero or nothing, not the Catholic institution for ladies to enter into for service and mission work.

Over the past few decades, things have changed. The most recent Pew Research from 2021 reveals that 30% of American adults identify in the “religious nones” category and adults who identify as Christian is now closer to 60%. This is a seismic shift in the past ten years. It means that as younger, emerging generations grow up, they are not growing into the faith institutions of their parents and grandparents. Which also means that the spiritual habits or disciplines practiced by religious people are in sharp decline too.

Consider prayer. I don’t know a church or a pastor who would ever say or even imply that prayer is not one of the most important aspects of Christianity. Prayer in the life of a believer is so crucial, that the Lord Jesus literally taught us “how to pray.”

One third of the adult population says they never pray. It is not a part of their life – even in the generic “thoughts and prayers” category. Prayerlessness is not just an issue with those outside the church. Why would we ever expect lost people to act like saved people? The issue is that churches are dealing with the issue of prayerlessness. It is rare to find families in which the adult children of Christian parents are committed Christians themselves. Churches have lost so much ground and have lost generations to a seductive culture.

Prayerlessness in churches is a significant problem. Which is why it is the second core value we are focusing on in this vision series called Together We. Together We pray. Because a praying church is a healthy church.

Focus on the Family did some extensive surveying throughout the past few years of their work and seminars and what they have found in these anonymous surveys is startling: 85% of church attenders don't have much of a prayer life.

Now consider this further: how many people are coming to worship effectively by themselves. They don't really have much family who believe in Christ. They don't have many friends who believe in Christ. And then they come to church and if the church is not praying together, who is going to pray for God's power to work through this person? Who is going to pray for God's will to come to bear on their life? Prayerlessness in the church is a significant issue. It is why we program so many opportunities to pray in each worship service. We want to share an example on how to pray. We are going to pray prayers of invocation, enlightenment, forgiveness, devotion, dedication, thanksgiving, praise and worship and benediction.

We've all heard lessons about what happens when we pray. Well, let's focus this morning on what we lose when we don't pray.

Abide in the True Vine

Jesus's theme in John 15 is "remaining," or "abiding." He paints a picture of a vine being trimmed by a gardener that produces generous fruit. And Jesus applies this image to his disciples, charging and challenging us to remain vitally connected to Him so that we may produce the fruit produced through love and obedience.

The vineyard and vine were old and sacred images in Judaism, as in most Mediterranean societies. The vine the covenant people of God, planted and tended to by the Lord. In the Old Testament, whenever God used that imagery of the Israelites each being depicted as a vine or a vineyard, the nation of Israel was being chastised by God for not bearing fruit, such as in Psalm 80 or Isaiah 5.

Vineyards were popular imagery, even appearing on Jewish coins. Jesus repeatedly used it as a teaching device (Matt. 20:1-7. 21:28; Mark 12:1-11, Luke 13:6-7). But here we see a distinction in how the Lord uses it. This is the last "I Am" statement of Jesus. Jesus declares that *He* is the *true vine*. This new concept is that God's vineyard holds one vine and people must figure out if they are attached to Him.

The Jews are no longer automatically seen as vines growing in God's vineyard. Men and women are new branches growing from one stock.

One consistent expectation continues here from the Old Testament to the New. God expects to see fruit coming from his work in tending the vines. Jesus pursues this idea by detailing the process. Vine dressers both trim branches so that they will produce more fruit and cut away dead branches that have no life in them. In each case, the assumption is that fruit-bearing is the test of life-giving attachment to the vine. You can tell if a branch is attached to the vine by its bearing fruit.

This understanding is a picture of the sense of constant attachment that Jesus has been teaching about in John. There is an interior spiritual life through which each believer must be connect to Christ. And Jesus provides the key word in how that is to happen. The branch – the believer – is to be “remain” or “abide” in the vine. If you are a growing disciple, through whom the Father and the Son and the Spirit live, your life is completely dependent on Christ. Discipleship is not simply claiming to belong to Jesus. Discipleship is remaining spiritually connected to Christ.

For a believer, this abiding in His presence happens through our prayer life. No wonder so many churches are struggling and dying. How often have believers become prayerless? Consider yourself. If you held up a spiritual mirror and looked at your prayer health, what would you see?

In John 15, there is this idea of pruning going on. This means that through our prayer lives, we are to be further prepared, being prepared by the Lord, for even more fruit-bearing. Which leads us to the warning in the text. Failure to abide in the presence of the true Vine, the Lord, means risking separation from the vineyard and consequent destruction. If the branch isn't alive, truly, honestly alive, it gets removed and destroyed. There is only one evidence of the branch being alive: does it produce clusters of grapes, fruit? (v.5)

And look further. Fruit-bearing is not some spiritual test – meaning you don't have to produce some level of fruit-bearing to be safe from destruction. Fruit-bearing is a byproduct. “You can do nothing without me,” said the Lord Jesus. Being connected to the vine means that the life of Jesus is flowing through us, and this leads to fruitfulness.

Prayer will engage us to the true Vine. It is the process of abiding or remaining in his presence. You have probably heard several sermons about what happens to a person when they pray – about the promised good things we receive. But today, we need to talk about what we lose when we DO NOT pray. This is not some not zero-sum gain (if I don't pray, I don't get these things – which is true – James says you don't have because you don't ask). If you don't pray, there are things that you lose. When we are not engaged in the presence of the Lord, we will lose or forfeit some staggeringly important things.

First of all, *our evangelistic work is hindered*. Matthew 9:37-38 tells us to “PRAY to the Lord of the harvest to send laborers out into His harvest.” We cannot be effective in evangelism outside of the power of the Spirit of God. If we go week after week, month after month, and we are not having any gospel conversations, no gospel engagement, no impact on lost people, the first place to start is our prayer life. We don't start with learning the Four Spiritual Laws or Evangelistic Explosion of the Faith Method or Three Circles (as great as those programs truly are). We begin with our prayer life. Everywhere you go, there should be a simple prayer you pray: “Lord, open my eyes to see people who need you. Give me eyes to see. Let me see people through your eyes.” When you go to work, to school, to the store, anywhere, you should be asking the Lord to help you see things through His perspective.

You never know what you will be sensitive to. Perhaps you will see a single mom crying trying to hold the kids together at Aldi. Your kindness asking them if there is something you can pray for them about, or help them with, or even simple encouragement could go a long, long way.

A second thing you will lose if you don't pray; *You will be more inclined to enter into temptation*. That is a familiar prayer that many believers pray often through recitation: Matthew 6:13 “Do NOT lead us into temptation but deliver us from the Evil one.” If only it was our heart's desire and not something that we committed to memory but not our souls.

It is hard hunger after sin if you are on your knees. On your knees in prayer, you are pursuing a joy that is far superior to sin. Only the Lord can give you the power that makes sin stink in your heart. It is imperative that we spend time in prayer dealing with temptation.

Number three on the list of things you lose when you don't pray; *You will not get what you want*. If you don't pray, you will not get what you want. Psalm 37:4 says, "Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you your heart's desires." Great! Pray every day and God will give you a new car and a vacation home and...no. That is not what that means.

God will put HIS desires in YOUR heart through prayer. If you're not praying, if you're not seeking the Lord, then you WILL get what you want: which is not the will of God. When God changes your heart, you will want what He wants.

The fourth thing is tied back to the text today. If you don't pray, *you cannot successfully prove you are his disciple*. If you are not seeing fruit, not seeing personal evangelism, not being a disciple, then you need to start with your prayer life. Because apart from the true Vine, you can do nothing. It starts with abiding in Christ. You cannot prove you are a disciple in your flesh. You cannot prove you are a disciple without a prayer life.

Number five. Without prayer, *You will not have all the joy you could possibly have*. Nehemiah 8 tells us that "The JOY of the Lord is our strength." Being in the presence of the Lord means being full of the supernatural joy of the Lord.

Prayer and praise are the FUEL of the joy of the Lord. If you are not praying and if you are not in worship, joy will be absent from your life.

The sixth thing you will lose without prayer; *You will FORFEIT some of God's protection and deliverance*. In his model prayer, Jesus taught us to pray, "Deliver me from evil." Why did Jesus tell us to pray that? What do you risk if you are not praying that prayer for yourself daily? What about praying that prayer for your family and friends?

2 Cor 1:10-11 says, "He has delivered us from such a terrible death, and he will deliver us. We have put our hope in him that he will deliver us again while you join in helping us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gift that came to us through the prayers of many."

When we pray for one another, favor is bestowed on us. God's gracious protection covers us. If we do NOT pray, we will forfeit some of God's protection and deliverance.

John Piper calls prayer “wartime communication.” Imagine being a soldier and having someone in your foxhole with a working radio. That person could radio back to someone and provide details and working of the enemy and have artillery ordered in or air support or some destroyer close to land can take a pillbox out. Now imagine having a working radio in the foxhole and saying, “I don’t need that radio. I don’t need any extra help. I will take care of this all by myself.” We must be praying for God’s protection and deliverance every day and praying that for those that we love and care about.

A seventh loss when you don’t pray: *You will often misunderstand God’s ways.* In Exodus 33:13, Moses says, “Now, if I have indeed found favor with you, please teach me your ways, and I will know you, so that I may find favor with you.” How many times have people in church responded to something in a completely secular, cultural way. Without faith, with emotion, with anger, in selfishness and sinfulness. How will we ever respond in Godly ways if we don’t comprehend them or have an idea of how God is moving and working.

There is an old Rich Mullins song in which he sings that God’s ways are just plain hard to get.” And without prayerfully abiding in God’s presence, you will continue to respond to life’s challenges and disappointments in ways that are not at all God’s ways. And further, how often do you tell God what his ways should be?

Methodology is NOT doctrine. Just because you prefer something to work out some particular way, you don’t get to tell God how to handle something. Remember what God said to Job when Job began to question the wisdom and working of God? “Where were you when I created the world?”

Psalm 86:11 is a great prayer to memorize. “Teach me your way, Lord, that I may walk in your truth. Give me an undivided heart, so I may fear your name.”

The eighth thing that you lose when you don’t pray: *You will continue to be worried.* The Bible says in Philippians 4:6-7, “Don’t worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”

1 Peter 5:7 tells us to cast all of our cares on the Lord because he cares for us. Through prayer we can absolutely battle with worry. When you don't pray, worry wins.

The ninth loss when we don't pray; *Some may not be healed*. What are you *not* availing in the lives of other people when you don't pray. James 5:14-16 teaches, "Is anyone among you sick? He should call for the elders of the church, and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up...the prayer of a righteous person is very powerful in its effect."

There is a difference that could be made in the lives of your children, grandchildren, friends, neighbors, and co-workers through prayer. Without prayer, there is a difference that COULD have been made that is NOT being made. God uses our prayers as a means to bring healing to the sick and hurting, both physically and spiritually. James says that the fervent prayer of a righteous man is powerful and RIGHTEOUS is critical key word.

Without the righteousness of Christ covering and guarding my heart and mind, I can repeat prayers over and over and over about something, without any power or any consequence or any result. When we are not praying with righteousness, we are wasting a lot of words.

And finally, the tenth loss from prayerlessness; *You will NOT glorify God as much as you could*. You were created to glorify God! So many people are seeking something that might bring joy or even momentary distractions. They find things that are shallow and hollow. Isaiah 43 tells us that we were all created for one purpose – to glorify God. The circumstances in your life are secondary to that. Meaning, you can be happy, sad, sick, healthy, lonely, comforted, and STILL glorify God.

These are ten things that we lose, that we forfeit, when we are not abiding in the presence of the Lord. These are powerful areas that could bear much fruit if we would pray and remain in God's presence. But prayer, of all the disciplines, is so difficult for believers.

Don Whitney once said: "There is NOTHING about prayer that appeals to our flesh." Church architecture can appeal to our flesh. Music can appeal to our flesh. Even good preaching can appeal to our flesh.

There is nothing about prayer that appeals to our flesh. We must DISCIPLINE ourselves to pray. Protect that time in which we connect to the presence of the Lord. We may not be able to do much concerning the growing trends of non-religious people doing non-religious things. But in your life and in this church, we will pray. And we will pray together.