

14. The Book of Acts—2:42

(8/5/26)

We are currently in the third major section of chapter 2 which runs from verses 42-47, a section we're calling—"The Practice of the Early Church":

Acts 2:42 (NKJV)

⁴² And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.

"And they continued steadfastly...in prayer."

This was the fourth pillar of practice that the early church was built upon.

When we talk about prayer—no subject in the Christian life is more important while at the same time more neglected than is prayer.

John Bunyan—"You can do more than pray after you've prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed."

"If ever there was a time to pray, it is when you don't feel like praying."

"All of our failures are prayer failures." – John R. Rice

"Those who have left the deepest impression on this sin-cursed earth have been men and women of prayer." – D.L. Moody

One pastor—

"It is not hard to find great quotes on prayer. Read E.M. Bounds. Read Leonard Ravenhill. It is hard to live those truths. May God raise up an army of true pray-ers in our generation. May God help me to be one of them.

In the end, my favorite prayer quote comes straight from the mind and mouth of God, "Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and shew thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest

not” (*Jeremiah 33:3*). *It doesn’t get any better than that! A divine principle and a divine promise. Let’s do more than quote it. Let’s live it.*”

Fortunately (for all of you) you don’t need me to teach you *how* to pray—Jesus did that for us!

In the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus’ disciples asked Him to teach them to pray, before He taught them the right way to pray—He first warned them against the wrong way to pray.

Matthew 6:5–8 (NKJV)

⁵ “And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. ⁶ But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who *is* in the secret *place*; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. ⁷ And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen *do*. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸ “Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.

Now before we actually get into the text which talks about the right and wrong ways to pray—I want to take a minute to talk about prayer itself.

For most Christians prayer is a little confusing.

For those in the church who have a hyper-view of God’s sovereignty they believe that our prayers really don’t change anything because God, in His sovereignty, is going to do whatever He wants to do whether we pray or not.

They claim that prayer may change us but not circumstances.

And yet to those who hold to this view the Bible says things like—

James 5:16 (NLT)

¹⁶ Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results.

Ezekiel 22:30-31 (NKJV)

³⁰ So I sought for a man among them who would make a wall, and stand in the gap before Me on behalf of the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found no one. ³¹ Therefore I have poured out My indignation on them; I have consumed them with the fire of My wrath; and I have recompensed their deeds on their own heads," says the Lord GOD.

And then at the other end of the prayer spectrum, you have those who believe that everything that God does is contingent upon our prayers and that a lack of prayer ‘handcuffs’ God so that if we don’t pray—He can’t work!

These folks hyper-emphasize man’s responsibility when it comes to people getting saved or the work of God being done. (Explain)

And yet to those who hold to this view God’s Word says things like this—

Deuteronomy 32:39 (NKJV)

³⁹ Now see that I, *even I, am* He, And *there is* no God besides Me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; Nor *is there any* who can deliver from My hand.

Ezekiel 24:14 (NKJV)

¹⁴ I, the LORD, have spoken *it*; It shall come to pass, and I will do *it*...

Do you see the absolute sovereignty of God in those passages? God does what He wants and no one can stop Him!

Now Christians for centuries have gravitated to either end of the spectrum on this issue either emphasizing God’s sovereignty over man’s responsibility or vice versa.

One author demonstrated this in the following true story:

“Some time ago I heard a story that illustrates how some of these questions trouble even very mature Christians. At one point in the course of their very influential ministries, George Whitefield, the Calvinistic evangelist, and John Wesley, the Arminian evangelist, were preaching together in the daytime and rooming together in the same boarding house each night. One evening after a particularly strenuous day the two of them returned to the boarding house exhausted and prepared for bed.

When they were ready each knelt beside the bed to pray. Whitefield, the Calvinist, prayed like this: “Lord, we thank Thee for all those with whom we spoke today, and we rejoice that their lives and destinies are entirely in Thy hand. Honor our efforts according to Thy perfect will. Amen.” He rose from his knees and got into bed. Wesley, who had hardly gotten past the invocation of his prayer in this length of time, looked up from his side of the bed and said, “Mr. Whitefield, is this where your Calvinism leads you?” Then he put his head down and went on praying. Whitefield stayed in bed and went to sleep. About two hours later Whitefield woke up, and there was Wesley still on his knees beside the bed. So Whitefield got up and went around the bed to where Wesley was kneeling. When he got there he found Wesley asleep. He shook him by the shoulder and said to him, “Mr. Wesley, is this where your Arminianism leads you?”

Now that’s humorous but which of these godly men was right?

Well, you’ll find that the truth often lies in the middle of the two extremes.

Is God sovereign? The answer is “yes”. Is man responsible? The answer is also “yes”.

“Yes but how do we reconcile those two?”

God hasn’t called us to reconcile them just to believe that He teaches both in His Word and so both are true—and therefore I’m to believe in both His sovereignty and my responsibility.

As someone has suggested, *“Pray as if everything depended upon God; and work as if everything depended upon you.”*

Alright let’s first look at the **wrong way** to pray as taught by Jesus—

The wrong way to pray—v.5-8

1. “To be seen by men”—v.5

Matthew 6:5 (NKJV)

⁵ "And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.

The word ‘hypocrite’ comes from the Greek word *hupokrites* which literally meant “*mask wearer*”.

It was used of an actor on stage playing a part—and so it came to mean “*putting on an act and pretending to be something you’re not.*”

Why did Jesus refer to the Scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites when they prayed—well He tells us in the beginning part of verse 5: “*For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men.*” (v.5a)

The Pharisees designated the third hour, the sixth hour, and the ninth hour as times of prayer—in other words, at 9am, 12 noon and at 3pm, they would faithfully gather in the synagogues or in the Temple to offer prayers.

Now there was nothing wrong with that for we are told that Daniel, who was a godly man and no hypocrite, while in captivity in Babylon opened his windows towards Jerusalem and prayed three times a day—and that he had done this from his youth.

But the Pharisees were doing it, not to seek the Lord but rather, to be seen by men—how do we know that?

Because on their way to prayer meetings, the Pharisees would stop on the corner of the street and begin to offer long, ostentatious prayers.

In so doing, they were saying, “*We are so eager to pray, we can’t wait to get to the Temple or synagogue—we can’t wait to get to church we’re such men of prayer!*”

The Greek word used here for '*street*' refers to a wide, major street, and therefore to a major street corner, where a crowd was most likely to be.

And that was their goal, to make as many people as possible say, "*Oh, wow! Look how righteous they are!*"

One author said,

"We still do that in our own subtle ways, don't we? "Yes, as I was praying this morning at three o'clock, the Lord brought you to my heart." And we subtly let people know we are in a place of continual prayer. Jesus said, "Don't do it. That's hypocrisy."

The prayers in the synagogues were led by a member who was invited by the leader of the synagogue to come up front and lead the congregation in prayer.

To be invited to do so was considered to be an honor only bestowed upon the most "spiritual" members of the congregation.

And again, this was nothing more than "*Showtime spirituality.*"

In response to this Jesus said, "*Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.*"

Matthew 6:6 (NKJV)

⁶ But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who *is* in the secret *place*; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

Jesus isn't prohibiting all public prayers—many times in the O.T. God's people gathered together and prayed publicly. (2Chron. 20:4)

The Church itself was born in a prayer meeting (Acts 1 & 2) and they practiced corporate prayer as we read in Acts 2:42; 12:12; 13:3; 14:23; 20:36.

Once again, the issue isn't public prayer but hypocrisy in prayer.

And then in verse 7 Jesus condemns another wrong practice of the Scribes and Pharisees when it came to the way they prayed—

2. “Vain repetitions”—v.7

Matthew 6:7 (NKJV)

⁷ And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen *do*. For they think that they will be heard for their many words.

The first-century Greeks and Romans believed in a pantheon of gods—gods who, for the most part, were indifferent to the problems and prayers of men.

And because these gods were so apathetic to their worshipper’s needs the pagan believed he needed to pray repetitively to get their attention.

Once a worshiper got a god’s attention, he continued to pray repetitively to ensure that he was heard correctly and to convince the god that his request was worth granting.

Worshippers of these pagan gods also believed that the words they used carried some kind of magical power—thus, the more often these words were used, the more powerful was the prayer.

The Jews had picked up the practice from the Gentiles and came to believe that the true value and power of prayer was found in the *quantity* instead of in the quality of their prayers.

In other words, when it came to prayer they believed, “*The longer the better.*”

They supposed that their prayers would only be heard by God “*for their many words*” like the heathens believed. (v.7)

The Jewish rabbis of Jesus' day said things like: "*Whoever is long in prayer is heard*" and "*Whenever the righteous make their prayer long, their prayer is heard.*"

Somehow this whole idea has crept into our thinking process where we believe that the longest prayers are the most effective prayers, and it's the *length* of the prayer that creates the effectiveness rather than the *earnestness* of the prayer or the faith by which we pray.

Matthew 6:8 (NKJV)

⁸ Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.

Prayer is not for the purpose of informing God.

We don't need to go into great detail in our prayers spelling out every little detail of the situation to the Lord so that He understands what's going on—He knows exactly what the situation is and what we need.

So be brief and get to the point—Please!

(Mention D. L. Moody's situation with a long-winded pray-er)

Now don't confuse "*vain repetitious prayers*" with persistent prayers.

Vain repetition is mindlessly repeating the same prayer over and over again as I was taught to do growing up in the Roman Catholic Church.

But this kind of thing is practiced in Protestant circles where some charismatics practice repeating, what they call "*power words*" that they believe induces the Lord to act on their behalf—which is nothing more than a Christianized version of Hindu mantra prayer.

This is vain repetition that the Lord was condemning.

But again, don't confuse vain repetitious prayers with persistent prayer—because persistent prayer is something altogether different.

(Mindless autopilot prayers vs. Heartfelt engagement)

In Luke 11 Jesus is teaching about prayer to His disciples and starting in verse 5 He starts teaching them the importance of persistence in prayer—

Luke 11:5-10 (NKJV)

⁵ And He said to them, "Which of you shall have a friend, and go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; ⁶ for a friend of mine has come to me on his journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; ⁷ and he will answer from within and say, 'Do not trouble me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give to you'? ⁸ I say to you, though he will not rise and give to him because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will rise and give him as many as he needs. ⁹ "So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.

The literal Greek is: *"Ask, please ask and keep on asking, and it will be given to you; Seek, please seek and keep on seeking, and you will find; Knock, please knock and keep on knocking, and it will be opened to you."*

One author—

"This is not the taunt of an indifferent God playing hard to get, treating us like puppies, trying to teach us to beg—and if we stand up on our hind legs and yap loud enough, He'll drop a biscuit in our mouth. No this is the heart of a loving Father exhorting us, even pleading with us to stay in constant communion with Him because He loves us so much."

Prayer is not something we do once a year on a retreat or once a week at church or even once a day as we're dropping off to sleep.

Prayer should be as common to the spiritual life of a Christian as breathing is to our physical body—almost involuntary. (Explain)

The essence of our prayers should be as a little child lifting up their arms to their father and expressing their desire and dependance upon that parent to fulfill a need—something like:

“Father, I need Your help. I am totally dependent on You for everything. I want to be used by You. Give me sensitivity to Your Spirit...etc.”

Jesus called this “*abiding*” (John 15:1ff), and Paul exhorted, “*Pray without ceasing*” (1 Thes. 5:17).

As we pray, God will either answer our prayers with a “*yes*” or a “*no*” or a “*not now*.”

If He answers *yes*, make sure you thank Him—if He says *no* be mature enough to accept it and say, “*not my will but Yours be done*.”

And if He doesn’t answer He may be saying, “*Yes, but not right now*” so keep on asking, and seeking and knocking.

Pray that a spirit of prayer would be poured out on our lives and on our church.

(Talk about my experience with this)

➔ Talk about our church desperately needing prayer warriors to step up