

Lesson 7

They Devoted Themselves to Prayer

Acts 2.42d

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.

Introduction

The final characteristic that marked the spiritual activity of the first Christians is prayer. And while prayer might be the last thing Luke mentions in his summary, it is by no means least. The prayer of the early Christians is denoted by their eagerness, persistence, and how they saw it as critically important to the ongoing life of the congregation.

Luke liked to focus on prayer

Corporately

One third of all the references to prayer in the New Testament are found in Luke and Acts.³⁰ And as we observe the early church after the day of Pentecost, we see multiple occasions where it engaged God in prayer:

- Acts 4.31: When they had prayed, the place where they were assembled was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God boldly.
- Acts 6.4: But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”
- Acts 6.6: They had them stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.
- Acts 12.5: So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was praying fervently to God for him.
- Acts 12.12: As soon as he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was called Mark, where many had assembled and were praying.
- Acts 13.3: Then after they had fasted, prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them off.
- Acts 14.23: When they had appointed elders for them in every church and prayed with fasting, they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Individually

Luke points out the prayer life of:

- Stephen, 7.59
- Peter, 3.1; 9.40; 10.9; 11.5
- Cornelius, 10.4, 30-31
- Paul, 9.11; 16.25; 20.36; 21.5; 22.17; 28.8

³⁰ Osborne, Grant R. *Acts: Verse by Verse*. Osborne New Testament Commentaries. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019, p. 61.

Luke goes out of his way to point out the active prayer life of the early church in order to demonstrate the dynamic connection between God and the church. They realized they were participants *with God* in the divine mission of the gospel.

Patterned After Jesus

During his ministry Jesus was often found in prayer:

- Luke 3.21: When all the people were baptized, Jesus also was baptized. As he was praying, heaven opened,
- Luke 5.16: Yet he often withdrew to deserted places and prayed.
- Luke 6.12: During those days he went out to the mountain to pray and spent all night in prayer to God.
- Luke 10.21-22: At that time he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, because this was your good pleasure. All things have been entrusted to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son desires to reveal him.”
- Luke 11.1: He was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John also taught his disciples.”

See also Luke 9.18, 28-29; 22.31-32; 41-42; 23.34, 46.

What about our corporate devotion to prayer?

On the night before Jesus’ death, our Lord prayed:

Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it 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.

It can be said with certainty that the early church took these words to heart. They trusted that God would meet every need. Therefore, they relentlessly pursued God in prayer seeking divine assistance. The prayer Luke identifies in Acts 2.42 is more than just individual prayer (although it is certainly part of the picture), it is congregational prayer.

The early church most certainly believed in its power. In Acts 4 the apostles were meeting resistance from the religious establishment. Peter and John were strictly admonished not to *speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus*, Acts 4.18. After the apostles returned to the Jerusalem church and reported on these things, Acts 4.24-31 details a congregational prayer ... spelling out their problem ... and then praying for boldness to speak the gospel even more, with more signs and wonders and healings. God heard and answered their prayer, 4.31.

Could you identify your congregation as being devoted to prayer? How often are prayer meetings conducted? How well are they attended? Congregational prayer should be devoted to much more frequency than just a prayer of praise on Sunday morning and a traditional closing prayer to end the service. The congregation should be coming together regularly to pray for:

- Widows and widowers
- The sick and elderly
- Evangelism efforts, foreign and domestic
- Unity, boldness, and a willingness to work together
- Needy saints and how to help meet their needs
- Its children and young people growing up; teens and the issues they deal with
- For God to be involved in our work... guiding and directing according to His will

While this list is certainly not designed to be exhaustive, it certainly contains a few items that should be prayed for on a continual basis.

What are some things you could add to the list?

What about our individual devotion to prayer?

It has been said that prayer is like the air we breathe. Spiritually, we cannot live without it. And yet, many Christians when asked would say that one of their greatest challenges is becoming a more prayerful person. Many of our spiritual struggles may be a result of not praying as we should. Sometimes our lack of prayer results from our tendency to forget about our true need to depend on God.

Ephesians 6.18-19 contains instructions for our prayer life:

Pray at all times in the Spirit with every prayer and request, and stay alert with all perseverance and intercession for all the saints. Pray also for me, that the message may be given to me when I open my mouth to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel.

How Often Should We Pray?

Paul says we are to *pray at all times*. This simply means that we can pray at any occasion or time. Jesus told His disciples:

But be alert at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place and to stand before the Son of Man, Luke 21.36.

This also goes along with the teaching found in:

- Romans 12.12: *be persistent in prayer*. The word we use for “persistent” here has a powerful meaning in the original language, describing the action of being obstinate in our persistence on making time to pray.
- Philippians 4.6: we are instructed to pray about *everything*.
- 2 Timothy 1.3: Paul constantly remembered Timothy in his prayers, *night and day*.

Taking all of these passages together, we need to see a God-consciousness, where our entire life is offered to Him in communion and communication. Prayer involves everything we see and experience in life. It also involves our reaction to those things. We go to God during:

- Time of temptation: *Lord, here is what I'm facing. Please help me.*
- Good times: *Father, thank you for this moment. Your love and blessings are truly amazing.*
- Evil times: *Please God, make things right.*
- Times of trouble: *God, please deliver me.*
- Times when we're focused on the lost: *Lord, please draw them to yourself.*

All of life is to become as an ascending prayer. We include all of life's thoughts, deeds, circumstances.

Devote yourselves to prayer; stay alert in it with thanksgiving, Colossians 4.2.

This passage carries the idea of steadfastness and constancy. There is also an intensity to Paul's writing. It is as if Paul is saying, *hang in there with constant prayer.*

The Variety of Prayer

In Ephesians 6.18 Paul uses the term "prayer" to describe communication with God that can happen anywhere at any time. It could be while we are out walking, sitting in the office, or driving into work. It is always applicable, all situations, and under all circumstances.

Paul also mentions "requests." These are specific in nature. The same word is also used in Philippians 4.6. There Paul says these *requests* need to be made with a spirit of thanksgiving. Attitude is an essential in effective prayer.

How to Pray

In Watchfulness

Going back to our passage in Ephesians 6.18, Paul says that we must *stay alert with all perseverance*. We *watch and pray*, Luke 21.36.

What are we to watch for:

- Needs for prayer. How can I pray for my spouse? Parents? Kids? Shepherds? Ministers? Brethren?
- Those in your prayer list. Check out your church's prayer list. There is always someone you can be praying for.

In Perseverance

The idea Paul has in mind in Ephesians 6.18 is that we stick to it, stay at it, and persevere. We are praying, while we are watching. This is why our involvement in the church is so important. We need to be connected for ourselves, but also for the opportunity to comfort and uplift others through prayer. Do you know what is going on in your congregation? The needs people have? You certainly do if you are watching.

The Object of Prayer

We make *intercession for all the saints*. It is hard to pray for people you don't have a connection with. We need to be serious about getting to know others and thinking about ways we can pray specifically for them.

We also pray for spiritual needs, Ephesians 6.19. Paul specifically asked for help in his ministry. The teaching here is that we are to be persevering, intense, continuing, steadfastly, watching and praying, being alert to the **spiritual** needs of others:

- Those that aren't experiencing spiritual victory or seeing God do His mighty work.
- Those that are struggling ... and being bombarded by Satan.

Offering up:

- Prayers for strength and determination to see the battle through.
- Prayers for them to win in the struggle with temptation.
- Prayers for them not to get discouraged and give up.

Concluding Thoughts

Are you:

- God conscious?
- Selfless?
- Watchful?
- Persistent?
- Praying for the spiritual needs of others?