

The Great Prayer Mystery  
***What Difference Does It Make?***  
April 23, 2017

**PRELUDE – Fierce**  
**Congregational Songs – Fierce / King of Love**  
**Congregational Song – Lord I Need You**

**Announcements – Video**

**Video – “Dear Lord Baby Jesus”**

Good morning everyone!

Nothing like starting a series on prayer with a vivid example of how *not* to pray.

One positive thing from that scene, I suppose, is that Ricky Bobby at least *feels good* about his prayer ... which, from my observations as a pastor and from my own personal experience, puts him in a different class from most of us. I say that because very few Christians I know of (including myself) feel all that positive about their practice

and pattern of prayer.

We know we're *supposed* to do it. And we know we're supposed to do it *a lot*.

- “Pray without ceasing!” the Apostle Paul exhorts us.
- “Don’t lose heart! Never give up!” Jesus challenges us.

But the truth is that most of us *don't* pray as often as we know we should. And we *don't* persevere.

Furthermore, in those times when we *do* pray (and I'm talking about something other than a desperation cry for help) ... we almost always feel inadequate.

- After all, what *does* a mortal say to the Supreme Being of the Universe that doesn't feel ultimately trivial and shallow?
- And if we're ever called on to pray aloud in

a group setting, our hope is to “just get through it” without saying something stupid and embarrassing ourselves.

Can you relate?

Bottom line, for most of us, prayer is a mystery; a practice that seems to be reserved for those who are more “spiritually attuned” than we’ll ever be.

*But it doesn’t have to be that way.*

Even though prayer will always be a challenge; even though you and I will never pray perfectly; and even though you and I will never fully solve the mystery of prayer, we *can* grow in our understanding of it and also in our skill.

And that’s the goal of this series: to *better understand* and also to *apply*. In other words, our purpose isn’t just to learn *about* prayer but to actually *pray* – and get better at it.

That's why, along with what we're going to talk about for the next three weeks (and if you miss any of these messages you can watch, listen to or read them later on our app, website or podcast) ... along with what we learn, we're also going to do an experiment which I'm calling, for lack of a better term, "The One-Month Prayer Experiment."

That might sound a little intimidating because it's going to last for a month (34 days actually) ... and it's about prayer which we're not very good at. But, I promise:

- This is not going to be super complex.
- You're not going to have to read a book.
- You're not going to have to be part of a small group or Bible study.

*All you need to do (and me, too) from now through the end of May - May 27<sup>th</sup> to be exact - is to pray for a minimum of five minutes every day. Just do it.*

And if you've never done that before, don't worry. As we go through this series, I'll give you specific things you can do as well as items you can put on your prayer list.

I'll say more about this experiment at the end of the message but the reason we need to do something like this – the reason I'm challenging you (and myself) to do it – is that getting better at prayer is just like getting better at anything else in life. Instruction alone doesn't cut it. You have to actually *do what you learn* to develop your skill and to improve.

Furthermore, there's something exciting about an experiment in something we're trying to get better at. It's not going to cost anything other than a few minutes each day and it might actually happen that we learn something about prayer and get better at it.

In fact, I believe this next month is a golden opportunity for many of us to experience a new

adventure with God because the truth is ...

**If you want God to do something new in you,  
you cannot keep doing the same old thing.  
You have to do something different.**

Let me say that again. *If you want God to do something new in you, you cannot keep doing the same old thing. You have to do something different.*<sup>i</sup>

Some of us are just in a spiritual rut right now. We don't see God at work. We don't sense God's presence in our lives. It's time to do something different and, dare I say it, *it's not changing churches.*

Now, you *might* need to do that at some point. We've never claimed that NHCC is the church for everyone. But more than likely, what you really need is to change something in your relationship with God. And this *One-Month Prayer Experiment* will help you do that.

## **Why We Don't Pray**

Of course that means you and I will have to overcome some of the reasons why we don't pray in the first place.

As I thought about my own life and my own struggles with prayer (and just to be honest, I'm doing this series as much for myself as I am for you all) ...

As I thought about my experience, I came up with a list of five problems in prayer which hinder me (and I'm pretty sure most of you) from praying as I know I should.

The first one I've already alluded to and that's the ...

**1. The knowledge problem: "I don't know how to pray or what to pray for."**

The second one is what I will call ...

**2. The comfort problem: "I already have**

**everything I need.”**

“I really don’t sense any need for God to give me anything else so it seems somewhat pointless to bother Him with any prayer request I might think of.”

You don’t need to raise your hands, but have you ever had that thought? If so, your level of comfort is a hindrance to prayer.

Now, these first two problems we’re going to look at in next week’s message: “What Should We Pray For?”

The third problem on the list ... a third reason that many of us don’t pray as we know we should is ...

**3. The measurement problem: “I keep praying but I’m not sure my prayers are accomplishing anything.”**

Again, no show of hands here, but have you ever had that thought? If so, good news – we’re going

to talk about it in the third message of this series.

And the final two problems on the list? That's what we're going to talk about this morning.

**4. The competency problem: “God helps those who help themselves and I *can* help myself.”**

Obviously, it would be nice if God would bless my efforts but, really, that's just icing on the cake. And if it turns out that I *do* need His help at some point, I'll be sure to ask for it.

Again, just curious, have you ever had that thought?

Finally, there's what I will call the ...

**5. The omnipotence problem: “Since God is ultimately in control (which is what we mean by ‘omnipotent’, my prayers don't really matter?”**

“God's going to do what God's going to do. Plus,

He already knows what I want and what I need. If He wanted me to have those things, He'd have already given them to me.”

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Now, this is important to notice: the knowledge problem, the comfort problem, the measurement problem, the competency problem and the omnipotence problem all combine in my life (and most likely in yours) to create a *discipline problem*: “I know I *should* pray but I don't. I just don't have the desire or the motivation.”

That's a discipline problem.

And that's worth pointing out, I think, because a lot of times what happens to those of us who are Christians when we hear teaching on things which we're not naturally good at – like prayer – what happens is that we beat ourselves up because “I'm just not disciplined enough. If I could just be more disciplined like she is or like he is.”

Now, I don't want to undersell the value of discipline but, in reality, the problem runs much deeper than that because, truth is, you and I can discipline ourselves do anything for a period of time.

**But here's the deal: unless you and I really see the value and benefit of whatever that discipline is, we won't stay with it.**

For example, if I don't see anything good happening to my body because I've decided to work out three times a week and give up sweets, eventually I'm going to stop doing those things.

On the other hand, if my blood sugar level is normalized, if I have more energy and if my clothes fit better, then I am much more motivated to be disciplined about those habits. They don't necessarily become any easier but they do become *life* to me. They add value to me in a way that nothing else does – at least, with regard to that part of my life.

The same principle applies to prayer ... which is why we're going to focus on those five problems and not just discipline ... though, at first, we'll all need to discipline ourselves for five minutes every day to participate in the experiment.

But, hopefully, eventually, we'll all see enough benefit that *prayer* will become *life* to us ... because we've seen and experienced the value it adds to our lives.

## **The Power of Prayer**

So, with all that said, let's get into the topic for today. What difference does it make that we pray?

Specifically ...

- If *I* can do something to help myself, then why do I need to ask *God* to do anything? That's the *competency* problem.

- And if *God* is ultimately in control, then why do *I* need to pray? That's the *omnipotence* problem.

What these two problems together are describing is something that has long perplexed philosophers, theologians and ordinary Christians like you and me: the intersection of our actions and God's actions.

**Specifically, how much of what happens in my life is because of me and what I do and how much is God's doing?**

For example – and for a lot of us this is a very pertinent and real-life example – when a person has cancer or some other deadly disease and they go through treatment and get better, how much of their healing is because of the *natural* power of good doctors and good drugs and how much is a result of the *supernatural* power of God, especially if they or others are praying for healing? Where's the line on that?

Most of you know that, early last December, my mom was diagnosed with stage four lung cancer. It was a shock to her and to all of us, especially when we were told that if she didn't begin chemo immediately, she wouldn't make it to Christmas.

Two things happened at that point: *she immediately began chemo and we all started praying.* Specifically, I prayed that not only would she make it past Christmas but that God would give her at least *one more.*

10 days later, after four days of chemo and a few days at home, she went back to the doctor. My dad and I went with her and I'll never forget the discussion that took place.

The doctor took one look at her and said, "Wow, you're so much better! I don't even need to do any tests to know that. Just looking at you, I can see it!"

And he was right. It was a remarkable transformation from “almost dead” to probably the best she’s been in the previous year; maybe even two.

So, my mother – who has been a Christian for a long, long time – says to him, “Doctor, you know why I’m doing so well? *Jesus Christ is healing me.* Do you believe in Him? Are you a Christian?”

The doctor says, “Now, Doris, I am your doctor. And I will handle your treatment to the best of my ability. But when you come into my office, you need to leave your religion out there.”

And he said just like that. He wasn’t angry and he wasn’t rude – at all.

**He just drew the line in a much different place than she did. In his mind, her healing was all because of good drugs (and, I’m sure, good doctoring on his part).**

**In my mom’s mind, it was *partly* because of the drugs but *more* because of God.**

Actually, to be more accurate, she – and the rest of us who were praying – would say it was partly supernatural and partly because God was working through the natural effect of good drugs and good doctors.

So, whose line is right?

I'm pretty sure that the doctor's line is not. But I'm just as sure that where I or my mom or my dad or any other Christian would put it isn't totally accurate either. There's just no way of knowing for sure unless God draws the picture with HIS LINE on it and, in my experience, that's never happened.

Furthermore – and this greatly complicates the issue – what about Christians with stage four cancer like my mom who believe and pray and who are *not* healed? (Sadly, I know of more folks in that situation than I ever wanted to know. And, if the doctor is right, my mom will one day be one

of those people unless Jesus comes back first).

Where do you draw the line for *those* people?

**The point I'm making is that, apart from Divine Revelation, an exact answer to the question of "what difference does it make in any given situation when we pray?" is unknowable.**

Unless God draws you the picture, you'll never know.

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Now, at this point, some of you are thinking, "Rick, I thought you were trying to convince us that we should pray and that there is power in prayer, but it sounds like you're making the opposite case!"

Not at all. Instead, what I'm trying to do is to help us move beyond the limitations imposed by the combination of the competency problem and the

omnipotence problem. And that is that *you and I are not God*. We can't see what He sees. We can't know what He knows.

And if that is a pre-condition for us to engage in prayer – to be able to put an accurate line somewhere on the continuum as to the effectiveness of our prayers – *then we will never pray like we know we should*.

**A better approach – instead of trying to solve the competency problem and the omnipotence problem – a better option is to simply trust what God says on the matter.**

And what He says is that we should pray ... without ceasing ... and without losing heart ... *because* prayer always accomplishes one of two things (and sometimes both). Two things can be said for sure about prayer in terms of its effect. Two things can be said about the power of prayer.

Matthew tells us that one day, Jesus' disciples came to Him and said, "Lord, teach us to pray."

And they said this because Jesus himself was a man of prayer and they had often seen him go off by himself to pray.

(By the way, I think it's important to notice that the Messiah, the Son of God in-the-flesh, would find it necessary to pray just like us. That's because, in becoming human, God laid aside the powers and privileges of being God which meant he had to live a life of faith just like we do. That's why one of the NT writers called Him "the author and finisher of our faith.")

Anyway, the disciples wanted to learn how to pray so Jesus taught them (and us) in what has come to be known as "The Lord's Prayer."

And we all know how it goes but what we probably don't know is that, in just a few short words – in two sentences – Jesus actually illustrates the power and effectiveness of prayer. He answers the question – indirectly – of "what difference does it make?"

**“This, then, is how you should pray,” He said.**

*“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”*                      *Matthew 6:9-10*  
*(NIV)*

Let’s all say that together, shall we?

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Now, what does that teach us about the power of prayer? About the difference it makes?

Two things.

**1. First of all, it teaches us that prayer deepens our relationship with God.**

Notice how Jesus addresses God? He doesn’t say

“Oh Eternal Supreme Being Who Created All That Is.” He doesn’t say, “Dear Divine Director of All That Happens.” And He doesn’t even say “Lord God of the Universe.”

Instead, he simply says “Our Father.” Actually, in the original Greek language, the word Jesus uses is “Abba” which would be more accurately translated as “papa” or “daddy.”

One of the things I have grown to love most about being a father is when my girls – who are all grown up now, some with kids of their own – one of the things I love most is when they call me “daddy.” They *still* call me that after all these years.

And I love it because, to me, it’s a term of endearment. It’s a term that signifies the closeness that they feel to me and desire to have with me.

And Jesus tells us that whenever we pray –

whenever we speak to the Eternal Supreme Being, the Divine Director and the God of the Universe – we’re to do the same thing. We’re to use a term of endearment to signify our desire for closeness and intimacy.

And when we do that, when we draw near to God like that ... when we speak to Him as our Father, guess what happens?

**James tells us.**

*Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. James 4:8 (ESV)*

When we pray – no matter what the result is; no matter where on the continuum the line goes – the result is a deepening of our relationship with God.

So, that’s one thing that happens when we pray. That’s one reason why we should pray.

And the more we deepen our relationship with

God, the more we will know what he wants and the more we will begin to pray in line with his desires ... which brings us to the second part of what Jesus taught us to pray in those first two sentences.

“Hallowed be your name. May your Kingdom come and your will be done on earth just like it is among the angels in Heaven.”

Now, why would Jesus tell us to pray that? I mean, if God is all-powerful and sovereign, why would we have to pray for his Kingdom and will to be established among humans? Why doesn't He just snap his Divine fingers (so to speak) and make it so?

I really don't know. *But He doesn't.* Instead, he tells us to pray for it because *it must matter* that we do. Some theologians have speculated that, in the same way that God sovereignly ordains certain things to happen, He also sovereignly ordains the

prayers we offer up that bring about those events.

That may be true and it certainly is interesting to think about. But let's just keep it simple and put it like this:

**2. Somehow, God really does use our prayers to impact spiritual, emotional and physical reality – we just don't know how or how much.**

This is why the Bible is filled with exhortations to pray and stories of answered prayer.

For example, James tells us ...

*The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*

He goes on to say that ...

*Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens*

*gave rain, and the earth produced its  
crops. James 5:16-18 (NIV)*

The prayer of a righteous person (which is what we are if we have received Christ as our savior – we are declared righteous in Him) ... the prayer of a righteous person – your prayer, my prayer – is powerful and effective ... even though we may never see how or how much.

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So, what difference does prayer make? It always accomplishes those two things.

- It deepens our relationship with God.
- It causes things to happen that otherwise would not.

In the end, as I said before, it comes down to trusting that God wouldn't tell us to do something if it doesn't matter.

# The One-Month Prayer Experiment

Ok, with all that said, let's talk about "The One-Month Prayer Experiment." And we'll be posting this information on our website and Facebook page by tomorrow so that you don't have to remember everything I'm about to tell you. 😊

**As I said before, all you need to do from now through May 27<sup>th</sup> (which is just a little over a month away) is to pray for at least five minutes every day.**

And this week, it's probably going to be even less since we haven't talked in depth about what to pray for, which we will do next week.

Of course, you can always pray longer – you can pray for more than I'm going to tell you to pray about this week – but, if you will pray only what I tell you for this one week, it might not even take five minutes. Ok?

**So, here's your assignment. It's very short.**

## **Just one thing is required.**

- (Required) Pray about praying. Every day this week. Pray about praying.
- (Bonus) Pray about one biblical promise OR one problem OR one person.

Let me explain.

The reason we're going to pray about praying this week is because *not praying as we know we should* is what we're struggling with most of all (at least as it concerns this issue). So, it only makes sense to ask God for help with *that* before anything else.

So, what does praying about praying look like? Well, in your daily time of prayer this week, you might say to God things like:

- Father in Heaven, I want to get better at praying. I know You want me to get better, too. Please help me.
- Lord, I confess my lack of understanding

about why I should pray. Help me to trust that You wouldn't tell me to do something that doesn't matter.

- Father, I confess my doubts about the power of prayer. Thank you that Jesus has already forgiven that sin on the cross. Please increase my faith.
- Lord, I confess my struggle with discipline. Thank you that Jesus has already forgiven that sin on the cross. Please increase my motivation.
- Father, I want to get to know You better so I can better know what to pray for. Please give me some ideas of what to pray about.

I like how Mark Batterson, in his book, *The Circle Maker*, explains that particular aspect of praying about praying.

**He writes:**

“One of the biggest misconceptions about prayer is that it means outlining our agenda to

God as a divine to-do list.”

However, he continues, “The true purpose of prayer is to get into God’s presence so *He* can outline *His* agenda for us.

Here’s my advice: pray about what to pray about. God will reveal a promise, a problem, or a person.”

... which leads to that bonus item on the list.

You don’t *have to do it* this upcoming week, but if God *does* reveal a promise from the Bible you need to claim for yourself or a problem or a person you should pray about, you *can* do that.

As to *what* you should pray, just do your best this week and next Sunday we’ll focus that a lot more – and expand the list a bit – but I think you’ll still be able to keep it to five minutes if that’s important to you.

So, that's the assignment for this week. Every day  
...

- Pray about praying.
- (Bonus) Pray about one biblical promise OR one problem OR one person.

Now, very quickly, I want to give you two pieces of advice about how to do this. They will help you to discipline yourself and also allow you to see results from the experiment, which is very important I think in building both our faith and our discipline.

**Here they are:**

- Set a time in advance to pray.
- Write your prayer.

There's no magic in the time you choose. Some people – those who are morning people – swear by the first part of the day. Others of us – night people – swear *at* the first part of the day, so for

us, in the evening after it gets quiet is probably the best time to pray. If it helps, put the appointment in your calendar or set an alarm.

As to writing your prayer, at the very least have a piece of paper with the words “pray about praying” written on it so that you are focused and your mind doesn’t wander.

But if you want to be able to see specific results, it will be helpful to have a more detailed list of requests such as the ones I just described. If you’re a writer (like I am), you might find it helpful to actually write your prayer in a paragraph form, sort of like a journal.

Whatever works best for you is how you should do it.

One more thing about this prayer experiment ... and I have to tell you that it makes me kind of nervous and also excited because it could be really, really great ... *or* it could be a big flop!

**On Sunday, May 28<sup>th</sup>, in place of the message, we're going to have an open mic time in the service to hear *your* stories of what has happened to *you* during the experiment.**

We're going to sing as usual. The band's going to do a feature song of some sort. But I'm not going to speak – you guys are.

*I hope.*

And now you can see why I'm both nervous and excited ... and why one of my prayers every day over these next 34 days will be for God to show up for you and for me in a new and different kind of way!

So, let's begin our experiment right now as I pray for us.

- Father, we want to get better at praying. We know You want us to get better at it, too.

Please help us.

- Lord, we confess our lack of understanding about why we should pray. Help us to trust that You wouldn't tell us to do something that doesn't matter.
- Father, we confess our doubts about the effective power of prayer. Thank you that Jesus has already forgiven that sin on the cross. Please increase our faith.
- Lord, we confess our struggle with discipline. Thank you that Jesus has already forgiven that sin on the cross, too. Please increase our motivation.
- Father we want to get to know You better so we can better know what to pray for. Please give us some ideas of what to pray about as we spend time together each week.

- Thank you for inviting us to be part of what You are accomplishing here on this earth. May your Kingdom come and Your will be done.

Amen.

## **Feature – That’s Why I Pray**

### **CLOSING COMMENTS**

1. Guys night at the K May 5<sup>th</sup> a week from this Friday ... HOWEVER this coming Wednesday is the deadline to sign up. You can pay your \$40 then or you can pay next Sunday when you pick up your tickets. I’m going and I hope you guys will join me.
2. Offering @door

Endnotes

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i From Draw The Circle prayer guide, Mark Batterson