

Strengthening Prayer – Mark 1:21-39

Mark 1:21-39 (NIV)

²¹ They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach.

²² The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.

²³ Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out,

²⁴ "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are--the Holy One of God!"

²⁵ "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!"

²⁶ The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

²⁷ The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching--and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him."

²⁸ News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

²⁹ As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew.

³⁰ Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her.

³¹ So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them.

³² That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed.

³³ The whole town gathered at the door,

³⁴ and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.

³⁵ Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.

³⁶ Simon and his companions went to look for him,

³⁷ and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!"

³⁸ Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else--to the nearby villages--so I can preach there also. That is why I have come."

³⁹ So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.

Don't tell me you are too busy to pray, don't even think it. Were you listening to Marks' description of a day in the life of Jesus of Nazareth? Now that was busy, I felt exhausted just listening to it. In the town of Capernaum Jesus spends the morning teaching in the synagogue with a little bit of freeing a man from an evil spirit to spice things up. In the afternoon Jesus makes a house call on his disciple's mothers in law who is sick in bed with a fever and he heals her. In the evening Mark tells us that just about the whole town turned up and Jesus spent the evening healing many people and delivering people from evil spirits. That's a really busy day, that's an exhausting day and tomorrow is going to be exactly the same. So what does Jesus do to further his urgent mission, with such a busy program, with such limited time and with growing tiredness?

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. (Mark 1:35)

Praying very early in the morning, while it's still dark, when you are tired and pressured is a serious commitment to prayer and if we are to do serious things for God, if we are to have serious power of God in our life then we simply must have a serious prayer life. The Bible is so clear about this. While the gospel writers don't tell us much about Jesus' spiritual practices, - we don't know if he had a Bible study plan or if he signed up for any courses at the synagogue, what they did want us to know is that Jesus prayed, as busy as he was, Jesus demonstrated that prayer fuelled his life.

The equation is pretty simple:

More prayer = more God

More God = more guidance, strength and peace

Now I have preached about prayer a fair bit over the years, and I undoubtedly will again, but this is more than just getting on my hobby horse, I believe that we are entering into a particular season in this church where God is calling us to be passionate and diligent in prayer more than ever before because God wants to do some things here in this church and in our community. God wants to save some souls, He wants to see a whole bunch of young people come into a living knowledge of him, He wants to grow some disciples, he wants to lift up the broken hearted, he wants to see His Kingdom come and he chooses to begin all this by partnering us in prayer. So in terms of this I want to leave you with two things today. Firstly, a crystal clear picture of how vital prayer is to the work of God and secondly a prayer plan.

If you were to work your way from one end of the Bible to the other looking for all the times that prayer figures in the biblical story you would be amazed at how often and how crucial prayer is to the whole Bible story.

The importance of prayer in the Bible

Luke 22:32, James 4:7 Prayer defeats the devil

Luke 18:13 Prayer is how the lost are saved

James 1:5, Prayer is how you acquire wisdom

James 5:16-20, struggling Christians are restored through prayer

Jude 20, Matthew 26:41, how Christians are strengthened through prayer

Matthew 9:38, Prayer is how we get people to serve on the mission field

James 5:13-15, Prayer is how we cure the sick

Mark 11:23-24, Prayer is how we accomplish the impossible

Luke particularly took pains to illustrate how important prayer had been to the growth and vitality of the early church.

Luke illustrating the importance of prayer to the early church

Acts: 1:14, 1:24, 2:42, 3:1, 4:24, 4:31, 6:4, 6:6, 7:59, 8:15, 8:22, 8:24, 9:40, 10:2, 10:9, 10:31, 13:3, 14:23, 16:26, 16:16, 20:36, 21:5, 26:29, 27:29, 16:16, 28:8.

Throughout the history of the church it is very hard to find any great movement of God that has not had prayer at its heart

Prayer has always been central to the vitality of the church

Concerts of Prayer: David Bryant, chairman of America's National Prayer Committee, documented every great awakening, the growth of monastic orders, the reformation, revivals and explosions of missionary outreach and he concluded that *Prayer is the most important element in every movement of God.*

When you look at all the great leaders and preachers, revivalists and missionaries – you quickly recognise that they were all serious prayers.

E.M. Bounds, who was born in 1835 and led a spiritual revival in war ravaged Missouri after the American civil war, began his three-hour prayer routine at 4:00am. To him, prayer was not a prelude; it was a priority.

Edward Payson, who ministered during the Second Great American Awakening, was said to have worn grooves into his hardwood floors as a result of prayer.

It was said of John Hyde, a Presbyterian missionary who did much to bring the gospel to India; that he would stay on his face before God until the answer came.

William Bramwell, a powerful Methodist circuit rider, often spent hours a day on his knees until his death in 1818.

Adoniram Judson attributed his success in Burma as a missionary to a life of prayer – Speaking of Judson the leader of the Myanmar Evangelical Fellowship stated in 1993: “Today, there are 6 million Christians in Myanmar, and every one of us trace our spiritual heritage to one man – the Reverend Adoniram Judson.”,

J. Hudson Taylor, founder of the China Inland Mission also attributed everything he accomplished to prayer.

George Mueller, an amazing man who founded 117 schools and orphanages, never asked anyone for any money he simply prayed and asked God to fund his orphanages. George Mueller kept a diary of what he was praying for and asked God for 50,000 requests, 5,000 were answered on the same day! He prayed for 5 friends to become Christians and the last friend did, at his funeral!

It was not uncommon for the great Scottish preacher, John Welch, who died in 1622, to spend four to six hours in prayer.

John Fletcher, one of the leaders of the Methodist movement, “stained the walls of his room with the breath of his prayers” until his death in 1785.

So this is something of a call to arms, prayer is far too important not to be a serious part of our lives. But secondly I want to give you a prayer plan for strengthening your prayer life. I call it the pinky prayer plan – there are five pinkies on your hand, and five important perspectives that will help to strengthen your prayer life.

Pursue

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. (Ephesians 6:18)

It needs to be our intention to pray, because prayer is far too important to wait until we feel like it. We need to decide to pray. The Bible says as we draw near to God, he will draw near to us (James 4:8). That as we pursue prayer we meet God and not the other way around. Sometimes we are looking for God to fill us with a passion for prayer before we pursue prayer, and occasionally it works that way, occasionally God does call us to pray and gives us a desire or a burden to pray. But more often than not it is the decision to pray which opens up our lives to the Holy Spirit's touch which ignites passion within us. So decide to pray, as Paul says:

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. (Ephesians 6:18)

Plan

Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and your plans will succeed. (Proverbs 16:3)

Prayer is far too important to be left to the mercy of our good intentions. Or in other words if I don't plan to pray I don't end up doing much praying. When Jesus went out to pray early in the morning while it was still dark, he had a plan. When he went to bed he planned to get up early in the morning and spend time with God. What's your prayer plan? It simply needs to be something that works for you. What helps me is to have regularly scheduled prayer times with other people. Each week I have a two sessions with single prayer partners, two sessions with small prayer groups and a session with a large group and I'm telling you this not to demonstrate how spiritual I am, but because I'm not that spiritual. Without the decision to pursue prayer and without a plan and the way it keeps me accountable, I'll choose to sleep in rather than pray, I'll choose to eat rather than pray, I'll choose to watch TV rather than pray. Which is weird because when I get there, when I rub the sleep out of my eyes and begin to pray, I begin to come alive to the presence of God and I think why would I do anything else, why would I be anywhere else? So what's your prayer plan?

Persist

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. (Romans 12:12)

On a number of occasions Jesus taught his disciples to persist in prayer (Luke 18:1-8, Luke 11:5-13) because Jesus knows that prayer needs to be more than just a once in a while activity but a life-long choice. All those remarkable church leaders and missionaries we looked at earlier persisted in prayer and made prayer a life-long

choice. The truth is that many of us blow hot and cold on just about everything. One moment we love sushi and the next we have a yearning for Brazilian barbeque. We love romantic comedies but then we feel like an action movie. Yes, Mad Men is amazing but I can't get enough of Billions! Don't let prayer fall victim to fickleness, make persisting in prayer a life- long choice.

Push through

"Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak." (Matthew 26:41)

Be prepared for times when prayer is a struggle and you will have to push through. Sometimes this happens because we're just tired. Think about the garden of Gethsemane, it's late, the disciples are tired but Jesus needs them to push through and pray so that they will get through this next really difficult period (Matthew 26:36-46). They didn't, If only they had pushed through the tiredness and kept praying then perhaps that particular night may not have been as traumatic (Mark 14:50). Sometimes we need to push through because of spiritual warfare (Ephesians 6:12), because our enemy the devil does not like us praying, and will do everything in his power to derail our prayer life. This is what was happening during the forty days that Jesus was praying and fasting in the desert, the devil personally and deliberately, tried to derail Jesus prayer with some pretty powerful mind games, but Jesus pushed through and it is very worth noting that Jesus pushed through by the power of the word of God (Matthew 4:1-11).

Press in

O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.(Psalms 63:1)

Ultimately, the secret of prayer is not about the thing we do but about the one who we do it with. Prayer is about God, about pressing in to God. We have to be like Jacob who wrestled with God and would not let go until God had blessed him (Genesis 32:26). We need to move past our lists of things we want from God and press into God Himself, this is where the power of prayer truly lies.

"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me-- just as the Father knows me and I know the Father--and I lay down my life for the sheep. (John 10:14-15)

As John Chrysostom a fourth century bishop notes:

Prayer is a precious way of communicating with God, it gladdens the soul and gives repose to its affections. You should not think of prayer as being a matter of words. It is a desire of God, for an indescribable devotion, not of human origin, but the gift of God's grace. (John Chrysostom: Homily 6 on prayer)

So that's the Pinkie Prayer Plan

Pursue, Plan, Persist, Push through, Press in

We want to encourage you in your prayer adventure wherever you pursue it and wherever it takes you. Join us in our weekly prayer time every Wednesday, but note that after this month we will be moving the time around from 7:00am in the morning to 12:00 mid-day to 8:00pm in the evening to give more people an opportunity to pray with us.

For the Timothy prayer challenge, the challenge to pray for our youth every Friday evening at 7pm, we have had a wonderful response and I want to thank everyone who has been praying with us. We believe that God is already doing wonderful things through this prayer.