

BGO Sermon for 2-5-17 –Prayer: The Power, The Purpose and The Payoff



So how about this: you go to a vending machine, you put in your money, you make your selection - your Fritos, your Cheetos, your Doritos, whatever “toe’s” you want, you push the buttons to get what you want... and your selection gets stuck. What do you do? A show of hands here: how many shake the machine to get it loose? Ever broken one by doing that? (I almost had one fall on me from rocking it too much) How many put in more pocket change to try and get it out...and

ended up with even more stuck? How many try to find the manager of the place to report it ...and then be told it’s not their machine, somebody else owns it? How many just give up and go on?

I am afraid that sometimes we can be that same way... with prayer. We’ll lift up our concerns and desires to the God-O-Matic. Then if we don’t get the result we want in the right amount of time, we’ll shake our fist at God, hoping to shake loose what we want.

We’ll try to put more pocket change in our lives, thinking that if we do the things God wants us to do, He’ll give us what we want. And if those don’t work, we’ll go to the manager - the pastor - to get some results; and believe you me, folks, I may have contact with the main office, but I sure ain’t the owner.



1. Pray 10 Minutes Every Day	February
2. Read 10 Books or 10 Minutes Every Day	March
3. Connect 10 Times in Conversation	April
4. Share 10 Meals	May
5. Tell Your Faith Story 10 Times	June
6. Invite 10 People	July

We’re taking the month of February to focus on prayer, as part of our year-long journey to draw closer to Christ and each other, and to bring more people into the Kingdom of God. And a reminder of our challenge for this month: to pray 10 more minutes every day, that we might see the miracles God does through that.



I think all of us here believe in the necessity of prayer; after all, Jesus says to his followers “WHEN you pray”, not IF you pray. And I think all us here believe in the power of prayer. The disciples did too. An insight from author Max Lucado: “*prayer was the only thing that the disciples asked Jesus to teach*

them - no lessons in wine-making or bread-multiplying, but it was “Teach us to pray”. Maybe it was the promises that Jesus put with prayer, telling the disciples things like “*whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.*”

And it isn't just with Jesus or in the New Testament that we see prayer power at work. Take a look at that story in the bulletin from 2nd Chronicles 20. Even with the combined forces of Judah and Israel, King Jehoshaphat's army was vastly outnumbered. He and the people knew they needed God's power to intervene. So



they went to prayer, bowing low before God, then to praise, lifting God up ahead of them. And God did provide: it wasn't that the enemy weakened themselves by infighting; they wiped

each other out. As Scripture tells us later in that chapter, “*Not a single one of the enemy had escaped.*”

Prayer and praise are two sides of the same coin. As we praise God for whom God is – loving, gracious, all-powerful, holy, righteous and merciful for just a few – it helps us see that God wants us to bring our prayers and lay them at Heaven's Throne. And as our prayers are lifted and we sense God's presence in our lives, it leads us into praise.

I've told people that prayer really can be easy; just this last week at the Oquawka administrative board meeting, I shared the words of Eugene Peterson from the Message paraphrase: “Prayer is elemental, not advanced, language.” I've even told people that however you pray is fine, you can't get prayer wrong. Then I heard about a town where the city council was changing from having an opening prayer to

a minute of silent reflection - because a group of Satanists had signed up to lead the prayer. So obviously, if you're praying to the wrong being, you're praying wrong. (and after having been at more than a few city council meetings, I'm still not sure how a Devil worshipper would pray at a council meeting. Would it be like: "*Devil, thank you for the potholes on 1st Street - could you please give us a water main break so we're really miserable.*" ?)

Even the Bible, even Jesus, tells his followers that you can pray the wrong way. We see it in our Gospel passage from Matthew. *When you pray* (again WHEN not IF), *don't be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them.* Prayer is not a theatrical performance, or a demonstration to others of how holy and pious we are; if we treat prayer that way, Jesus tells us the truth: it's all the reward we will ever get.

And prayer isn't trying to find magical formulas or mushy flattery to try to wheedle what we want out of God. "*When you pray,* Jesus says, *don't babble on & on as people of other religions do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again.* We don't have to play games in our prayers with God, like he is some greedy hoarder of blessings. He's a good Father, and he knows exactly what we need before we even ask Him.



So it seems that Jesus would say if we pray with the wrong motives, we might be doing prayer wrong. So what should be our motives, our reasons for prayer? What is the purpose of prayer?

We see some of it in both the Colossians and Philippians readings from that prayer warrior the Apostle Paul. He reminds the Colossians and us to **Build Our Devotion** to God through Jesus Christ: *Devote yourselves to prayer*, he tells them. It echoes the letter to the Philippians: to pray in every situation

He also tells the Colossians to be watchful, so we **See God's Work**. Folks, that is so important! Being able to see God's good gifts, even in the midst of struggle, brings peace and comfort.

It also brings out prayers to **Express Our Gratitude** for all that God does, as we remain thankful. As Paul tells the Philippians, pray with thanksgiving.

Prayer leads us to **Focus On Others**, not just ourselves. It turns our eyes to the open doors we might see, seeking clarity for ourselves when we witness, seeking the same for our brothers and sisters in Christ.

As we see God work in our lives and in others, prayer helps us **Live In The Mystery**, the incredible ways that God works.

Living that way brings us confidence to **Lay Our Needs** before God - presenting our requests, as Paul tells the Philippians.

And with all of that, prayer leads us to **Live In The Peace** of Christ, that peace that passes all understanding.

With all of that being part of God's purpose for prayer, what does it mean for us? What's the payoff? Don't fall into the trap that Jesus warns us about. The payoff isn't that we get what we want, turning God into a vending machine. As we give our hearts to God in prayer, God does give us blessings in spirit and in substance that provide us with added resources for living. But the payoff isn't receiving the gifts of God, even though we are blessed in that.



The real payoff is that our hearts and minds become more in tune with God's heart and God's will. Prayer equips us to sync up our lives to God's plans for us, so we might become what God designed us to be. Ultimately, prayer isn't about changing God, or changing our circumstances: prayer is about changing US.

So there's the challenge: to pray more, better, deeper, with more fire, faith & fervency - to pray FOR God to change us, & pray SO THAT God will change us. My prayer will be that through this Journey of prayer, God will do just that.

I want to close with a story I was reminded of recently, a story that shows the power, purpose and payoff of prayer. *It's the story of a missionary nurse in the Congo, trying to save the life of a premature baby whose mother had died in childbirth. The baby needed to be kept warm, but they had no incubator. In desperation, they boiled water for the only thing they had, an old hot-water bottle,*



but the bottle burst. As others tried what they could to keep the baby warm, the nurse went to have prayers with some children in the orphanage she helped run. The nurse shared the problem with the children, and also told them about the two-year-old sister, crying because her mother had died. During the prayer time, one ten-year-old girl, Ruth, prayed "Please, God, send us a water bottle. It'll be no good tomorrow, God, the baby'll be dead; so, please

send it this afternoon." While the nurse gasped inwardly at the audacity of the prayer, Ruth added "and while You are about it, would You please send a dolly for the little girl so she'll know You really love her?" That very afternoon, the nurse received a 22 pound package from her home church, the first one since she'd been there. In amongst the other items there was a hot-water bottle, and a small, beautifully dressed doll. That parcel had been on the way for 5 whole months, packed up by the nurse's former Sunday School class, whose leader had heard and obeyed God's prompting to send a hot water bottle, even to the equator. One of the girls had put in a dolly for an African child — five months earlier in answer to the believing prayer of a ten-year-old to bring it "That afternoon!"



On the night he was betrayed, centuries ahead of our need here, Jesus prayed for us: that we might be saved, that we might be one, that we might know God's love. The power of that prayer took him to the cross as a sacrifice for our sins, that the purpose of the prayer might be fulfilled. The payoff for us was forgiveness of sin and eternal life. May we continue to go to God in prayer, with fire, faith & fervency, that God's purpose in us might be fulfilled. AMEN.

2 CHRONICLES 7:14 (NIV)

If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

2 CHRONICLES 20:18-22 (NLT)

¹⁸ Then King Jehoshaphat bowed low with his face to the ground. And all the people of Judah and Jerusalem did the same, worshiping the Lord. ¹⁹ Then the Levites from the clans of Kohath and Korah stood to praise the Lord, the God of Israel, with a very loud shout.

²⁰ Early the next morning the army of Judah went out into the wilderness of Tekoa. On the way Jehoshaphat stopped and said, “Listen to me, all you people of Judah and Jerusalem! Believe in the Lord your God, and you will be able to stand firm. Believe in his prophets, and you will succeed.”

²¹ After consulting the people, the king appointed singers to walk ahead of the army, singing to the Lord and praising him for his holy splendor. This is what they sang: “*Give thanks to the Lord; his faithful love endures forever!*”

²² At the very moment they began to sing and give praise, the Lord caused the armies of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir to start fighting among themselves.

JOHN 17:20-24 (NLT)

²⁰ “I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. ²¹ I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me.

²² “I have given them the glory you gave me, so they may be one as we are one.

²³ I am in them and you are in me. May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me.

²⁴ Father, I want these whom you have given me to be with me where I am. Then they can see all the glory you gave me because you loved me even before the world began!

EPHESIANS 1:15-19 (Message)

¹⁵⁻¹⁹ That's why, when I heard of the solid trust you have in the Master Jesus and your outpouring of love to all the followers of Jesus, I couldn't stop thanking God for you—every time I prayed, I'd think of you and give thanks. But I do more than thank. I ask—ask the God of our Master, Jesus Christ, the God of glory—to make you intelligent and discerning in knowing him personally, your eyes focused and clear, so that you can see exactly what it is he is calling you to do, grasp the

immensity of this glorious way of life he has for his followers, oh, the utter extravagance of his work in us who trust him—endless energy, boundless strength!

MATTHEW 6:5-8 (NLT)

⁵“When you pray, don’t be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get.

⁶But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

⁷“When you pray, don’t babble on and on as the Gentiles do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. ⁸Don’t be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him!

COLOSSIANS 4:2-6 (NIV)

²Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. ³And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. ⁴Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.

⁵Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.

⁶Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

PHILIPPIANS 4:6-7 (NIV)

⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.