

A Role Model for Prayer

Acts 1:12-14

Our emphasis for the Season of Lent this year. . .

Whenever you are learning a skill, it always helps to have a good model to follow. If we as Christians are looking for a role model for prayer, there is no better example than the early followers of Jesus in the book of Acts.

- In his book *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*, Jim Cymbala reminds us that the church in the book of Acts was born out of a prayer meeting, and there are more than 30 references to prayer in Acts.
- In Acts, we see four key features of the early church at prayer, and recognize those as a model for the effective church in our day.

I. THE EFFECTIVE CHURCH PRAYS DEPENDENTLY. Jesus told His disciples to go from Jerusalem to the remotest parts of the world as His witnesses. If twelve apostles and a hundred or so disciples are going to reach the world, they had better get busy. But the first thing they do when Jesus ascends back to heaven is lock themselves up in a room, shut themselves off from everything, and pray for ten days for the power of the Holy Spirit. They understood that they needed supernatural power for a superhuman work.

1) The most important lesson we can ever learn about prayer is that we are absolutely dependent on God. Jesus tells us in John 15, **"Apart from me, you can do nothing."** (John 15:5)

2) The tricky part is that we can do lots of things on our own, but the impact and fruit of our work is "nothing" unless Jesus empowers us. The Psalmist understood this. He says,

"As the eyes of a slave look to the hand of their master. . . so our eyes look to the Lord our God till he shows us mercy." (Psalm 123:2)

A slave is completely dependent on his master, and that's where we stand in our need for the Lord.

3) Ever notice how many professional football players lose their helmets after a violent collision on the field? It seems to happen more today than it used to. A football player on the field without his helmet is as out of place as a Christian facing life or attempting some ministry without prayer underlying everything we do.

4) Jim Cymbala says something that at first sounds odd. He says, "God is attracted to weakness. He can't resist those who humbly and honestly admit how desperately they need him." You see it is the recognition of our weakness that makes room for God's power.

II. THE EFFECTIVE CHURCH PRAYS CORPORATELY. In the book of Acts, the disciples didn't go their own way and pray for the Holy Spirit to come down.

Notice carefully, in Acts 1 –

"They gathered frequently to pray as a group, together with the women and with Mary the mother of Jesus and with his brothers." (Acts 1:14)

In Acts chapter 2 we read that they met daily in their homes and were devoted to prayer.

In chapter 3 they gathered at the Temple and later in the synagogues at the regular times of prayer, not just as a testimony to their Jewish neighbors but because they needed those times together for their own survival.

2) Today, it's the Korean Church that place a premium on corporate prayer. In America, the concept of corporate prayer clashes with our independence and individualism.

- We are all a little like the guy who had to dress up a mannequin with a baseball cap so he could drive in the high occupancy vehicle land during rush hour. We prefer to do things alone and by ourselves.

3) Fred Craddock recalls doing a baptism down at the river and being reminded by one of his parishioners beside the campfire that "folks don't ever get any closer than this."

- We feel that way about the people we have prayed with through the struggles of life.
- We don't have time for those kinds of experiences today and we're missing something when our busyness and isolation keeps us from experiencing real community and fellowship in prayer.

III. THE EFFECTIVE CHURCH PRAYS POWERFULLY. When the early church prayed, powerful things happened. Jesus told His disciples that their prayers of faith could move mountains.

"If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

(Matthew 17:20b)

We never see mountains moving in Acts, but we do see a couple of buildings shaken on their foundations.

1) In Acts 4, the disciples get their first real taste of persecution. When the authorities commanded them to stop preaching, the church started praying. Verse 31 gives us a series of cause and effect statements about what happened when they prayed.

"When they finished praying, the place where they were meeting was shaken. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to proclaim God's message with boldness." (Acts 4:31)

They prayed and the building was shaken. They prayed and they were filled with the Holy Spirit. They were filled with the Spirit and they preached the gospel with even greater power.

- If we had a building move at one of our prayer meetings, we would either have a lot more or a lot less people at the next meeting.

2) Incredibly, Acts 4 is not the only place in the book where prayer is more powerful than a building. Paul and Silas are having a midnight prayer meeting in the prison at Philippi in chapter 16 when an earthquake shook open the cell doors.

3) There are more than a dozen times in Acts where it tells us that people were amazed, in awe, or in fear of what God was doing in and through His Church. Outsiders today are more likely to yawn and stretch when they think of what goes on in the church. But, the power to leave even unbelievers amazed at what God is doing is still there – if we ask for it.

- Mother Theresa was once crossing the border into Israel when a guard asked her if she was carrying any weapons. That was a pretty strange question for a nun wearing a habit, but she looked the guard in the eyes and defiantly said, "Yes, I have my prayer books."

4) We want the power of God, but sometimes we forget where the power comes from.

- We think it comes from the pastor's preaching, from our strategies and purpose statements, or from our new buildings and facilities.
- We are deluded into thinking that we can change the culture if we elect the right people to political office.

Those types of power are pretend power compared to what the followers of Jesus have in the book of Acts.

5) I've heard that the NBC comedy *Scrubs* is filmed at a real hospital that closed down several years ago, but so many patients have showed up at the hospital for medical treatment when they see the actors dressed up as doctors and nurses that the network had to put a sign out front that said, "Attention: This hospital is closed to the public." How would you like to have an actor set your broken arm or take out your appendix?

- It's far more serious when people with broken lives and hurting hearts come to churches that have turned away from their real source of power.

IV. THE EFFECTIVE CHURCH PRAYS IMPERFECTLY. This final point of the message may seem anti-climatic, but it may be the most important thing we talk about today. There is a great reminder in Acts chapter 12 that God not only answers prayer – He answers imperfect prayers.

1) (my barber during my teens)

2) We tend to idealize the early church in Acts, but here's a well-kept secret: the first Christians were not perfect.

- They argued over whose widows got the better food service and whom to take or not take on their mission trips.
- They fell asleep in church windows and were distracted by the weighty issues of circumcision and kosher foods.

Their faith wasn't perfect, either.

- You have to admire that the disciples were committed enough to have an all-night prayer meeting for Peter's release from prison, but the reaction when their prayers are answered is priceless. When Rhoda, the slave girl, reports that Peter is at the front door – do you know what their response was?

"You are crazy!" (Acts 12:15a)

3) They can't compute that God might have actually done the very thing they were asking for. They were devoted enough to pray all night but doubting enough to not believe that their prayers would really make a difference.

- We pray that way all the time – believing one moment and doubting the next. At least I do.
- (organ)

4) Let me give you a challenge – if you only have enough faith to pray and there is nothing left over to believe that God will answer, then pray anyway and see if God does something to surprise you.

We don't need to time-travel back to the first century to become the people that God wants us to be, but we do need to learn to pray like the early church prayed. When we follow their example in prayer, God will work powerfully – even when our prayers are less than perfect.