

Let's continue our study of the Early Church as described in the second chapter of Acts, verses 42 through 47. Each Sunday during Lent we have been looking at one of the key characteristics of the Early Church to see what we can learn and apply here at High Desert in order to be the church that God calls us to be. Over the past two Sundays we have learned that the Early Church was devoted to reading and studying God's Word and gathering together for worship. Let's look at this passage again from the second chapter of Acts to see what we can learn this morning.

Read Acts 2:42-47

This morning let's focus on verse 42: "The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers." So far, we have discussed their devotion to the apostles' teaching and worshipping; now let's focus on their devotion to their prayers. The Early Church was a praying church. When we fail to be a praying church, we cease to exist. These early Christians knew that they could not meet the demands and problems of everyday life by relying solely on their own abilities; they needed help from God. They prayed in order to seek God's will and to ask for God's power and help.

They always went to God before they went out into the world; they were able to meet the daily demands of life because they had first met with God in prayer. They did not neglect daily communication with God. Their prayer life represented a dependence on the Lord. Both Saint Augustine and Martin Luther understood this when they adopted this prayer: "I shall work as if everything depends on me, and I'll pray as if everything depends on God." Luther also said: "I have so much to do today that I must set aside more time than usual to pray."

Prayer was the lifeline of the Early Church. They practiced what the Apostle Paul later advised the Thessalonians – to pray without ceasing. They knew what it meant to remain in a spirit of prayer and openness before God. Praying together regularly contributed to the powerful witness of their lives and the dynamic nature of the Early Church. It empowered them to make a difference in the lives of others. For the Christian praying should be like breathing. Just as breathing is the response of physical life to the presence of air, so prayer should be the response of our spiritual life to the very presence of God. We must never underestimate the power of prayer in the life of the church and in our individual lives. It binds us together through both the good and bad times of life. If the church is ever to get on its feet, it must first get on its knees.

Prayer is at the very heart of religion. For in prayer, we stop talking about religion and enter into a personal one-on-one relationship with God. Prayer is our highest privilege, our gravest responsibility, and greatest power God has put into our hands. When we pray, we sense the

very presence of God in our lives. Through prayer God meets us where we are and summons us to a new life; to move on to become the person that He created us to be. Prayer is a personal relationship in which you and God move from a polite hello to an embrace of love.

Now we could spend hours and weeks discussing prayer and its power; but in the time we have remaining this morning, let's review a few of basic principles of prayer. First, what is prayer? We will all have different definitions based upon our personal experiences and religious upbringing. I like to think of prayer as communicating with God one-on-one. It's a dialogue, not a monologue. Sometimes we are guilty, I know that I am, of doing all the talking and not simply being quiet and listening to God.

In our Responsive Reading from Psalm 46:10, God tells us: "Be still, and know that I am God." If we are to truly communicate with God, encounter Him and ask Him into our lives, then we must be still, clear our minds of all the distracting thoughts, be quiet, listen, and let Him fill our minds with His message for us. That's why seeking and having a daily quiet time alone with God is so essential to our spiritual journey. Let's face it, our lives today are so full of noise and activity that we normally can't hear or sense God's presence. I like the way that the *Message* paraphrases Psalm 46:10 - "Step out of the traffic! Take a long, loving look at me, your God."

Now one of the most frequently asked questions is: does God answer all our prayers. I truly believe that He does, but as I have said before, His response can come in four different ways: yes, no, wait, and the one that I don't like; I have a better idea. This last one means that things will not work out the way that I planned or wanted. It may also mean that I may have to make some major changes in my life.

Also, remember that sometimes God's no simply means not yet. Some prayers are not answered right away, but in God's time, not ours. God is never early; God is never late; God is always right on time. One little girl in an attempt to make sure that God answered her prayers told her mother: "I'm not going to say 'Amen' to my prayers anymore. I'm going to say 'RSVP.'"

In addition, we often forget that the unanswered prayer is still heard by God, and that His silence may be for a purpose. Perhaps He wishes to do more than simply supply our requests. Perhaps He wishes to draw us closer to Him, test the maturity of our faith, or force us to re-evaluate our request. Prayer may not get us what we want, but it will teach us to want what we need.

We often don't get what we ask for because our motives are wrong or selfish. We may be like the little boy whose pastor asked him: "Son, do you pray every day?" "Not every day," was his response, "some days I don't want anything." A woman prayed: "Lord, I am not going to pray for myself today; I'm going to pray for others." But at the end of her prayer, she added: "And Lord, please give my mother a handsome son-in-law."

In addition, remember what Jesus said in John 14:14 – “You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.” Now in a way, that sound like Jesus is Santa Claus, granting our every wish. However, there is a deeper meaning here. In the Jewish culture at this time, a person’s name had a significant meaning. It was not only how you were addressed, but also represented who you were; your character and your personality. Therefore, when we ask for something in Jesus’ name, we are making our request in accordance with Jesus’ character; something that represents His life and teaching; something that He would want in our lives and the lives of others. This is not a prayer simply mentioning Jesus’ name, but a prayer that is in accordance with who Jesus is. The *Message* paraphrases John 14:14 as follows: “From now on whatever you request along the lines of who I am and what I am doing, I’ll do it.”

We must also remember another basic law of prayer: that in prayer we receive, not the answer which we desire, but the answer which God as our Heavenly Father in His wisdom and His love knows is best for us. Because of our human desires and needs, most of our prayers are prayers of escape. We pray to be saved from some trial, some sorrow, some disappointment, and some hurt or difficult situation. And always God’s answer is not of escape, but of victory. God does not give us escape from our situation. Instead, He enables us to accept what we cannot understand; He enables us to endure what without Him would be unbearable. Sometimes God delivers us from our problems; and sometimes God delivers us through our problems, promising to be with us throughout the situation.

The perfect example of this is when Jesus was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night that He was arrested. He prayed to be released from the suffering and the cross which lay ahead of Him, if it was God’s will; however, He was not released from it, but instead He was given the power to meet it head-on, to endure it, and to conquer it. With God’s help, He defeated the cross and the powers of evil. When we pray, God sends His answer, but the answer is always His answer and not necessarily ours.

Another key question is: what is the proper way to pray. Consider this piece of “country poetry.” “The proper way for a man to pray,” said Deacon Keys, “and the proper attitude is down on his knees.” “No, I should say the way to pray,” said the Reverend Doctor Wise, “is standing straight with outstretched arms and upturned eyes.” “Oh, no, no,” said Elder Snow “such posture is too proud; a man should pray with eyes closed and head bowed.” “It seems to me his hands should be clasped in front with both thumbs pointed towards heaven,” said Reverend Doctor Blunt. “Last year I fell in Hidgin’s well head first,” said Cyrus Brown. “With both my heels a-stickin’ up, my head a-pointin’ down; and I made a prayer right then and there – best prayer I ever said, the prayingest prayer I ever prayed was a-standin’ on my head.” What makes the difference is why we pray, our motive and desire, not how we pray or even our words.

With respect to words, some of us are hesitant to pray because we don't know the right words or are not as gifted speakers as others. The elders of a certain church once came up to a young man and criticized the theology and words that he used in the morning prayer. After they dumped their criticism on him, he turned to them and said: "Are you gentlemen finished? I have just one thing to say: I wasn't speaking to you!" Don't worry about the words; just say what is on your heart. John Bunyan said: "In prayer it is better to have a heart without words than words without a heart." Talk to God like you are talking to a friend over coffee. God is more pleased with the time that you spend with Him than the quality or quantity of your words. If you can't pray like you want to, pray as you can. God knows what you mean.

While it is extremely important that we each have our individual prayer time and that daily prayer be an essential part of our lives, it is equally important that we pray as a body of believers. In James 5:16, it states: "The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective."

In his book, *Hope for the Troubled Heart*, Billy Graham tells the story of a missionary family in a far-off dangerous land who were forced to camp outside on a hillside. They were fearful of being attacked by roving bandits. After praying, they went to sleep. Months later an injured man was brought to their mission hospital. He asked the missionary if he had soldiers guarding his family on that special night. "We intended to rob you," he said, "but were afraid of the 27 soldiers."

When the missionary returned to his home church, he relayed this strange story, and a church member said: "We had a prayer meeting that very same night, and we prayed for you and your family. I took roll that night; there were 27 of us in attendance." Prayers have no boundaries. They can leap miles and even continents where 2 or 3 are gathered together in Jesus' name and pray with the right motive.

Five young college students were visiting London one Sunday and decided to go hear the famous Charles Spurgeon preach. While waiting for the doors to open, the students were greeted by a man who asked: "Would you like for me to show you around the church?" Of course, they agreed. He said: "First, let me show you the heating plant of the church." Now it was a hot summer day and they were not really interested in seeing that part of the church, but didn't want to offend the gentleman. He led them down a stairway, quietly opened the door, and whispered: "This is our heating plant." Surprised, the students saw 700 people bowed in prayer, seeking a blessing on the service that was about to begin in the sanctuary above. Softly closing the door, the gentleman introduced himself; he was none other than the great preacher Charles Spurgeon.

Every church needs its "heating plant;" the Early Church needed it; Charles Spurgeon's church needed it; Billy Graham's revivals needed it; and we need it. The thermometer of a church is its

prayer ministry. While we have a wonderful prayer chain, we need to be more devoted to prayer as a church. I would ask that each of us commit to praying for our church each and every day, and praying for those of our congregation who are ill or have special needs. When you come for worship each Sunday, use the time as Eileen and Lori play the prelude to pray for the service. There is a special quality of fellowship and power when Christians gather together and pray.

As we sang in our opening hymn: "What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear! What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer! O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer."

Remember God is never more than a prayer away, and prayers can't be answered unless they are prayed! It is my hope and prayer that we as individuals and a congregation will continue to grow in our prayer life so that High Desert will continue to be known as a praying church. So, let's turn up the heat here at High Desert! Amen