

January 31, 2010

The Blessings to a Church That Prays

The outstanding characteristic about God's house is that it is a house of prayer. When Jesus entered the temple the week before He was nailed to the cross, He was on a mission: *And He entered the temple and began to drive out those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves; and He would not permit anyone to carry merchandise through the temple. And He began to teach and say to them, 'Is it not written, 'MY HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL THE NATIONS'? But you have made it a ROBBERS' DEN.'* Mark 11:15-17

He was quoting Isaiah 56:7, which says: *'Even those I will bring to My holy mountain And make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar; For My house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples.'* And then He added His own commentary: *But you have made it a ROBBERS' DEN.* Whatever was going on had the effect of robbing God of His glory and honor. The original intent and purpose of God's house was for prayer – they had made it something else. Whenever we pervert the purpose of God in our worship, He'll likely show up with a whip in hand. Jesus said My House is a house of prayer. **My house is a house of prayer – don't try to make it anything else.** Prayer is the first thing, the last thing and everything in between.

The fragrance of prayer ought to fill and permeate the house of God. The reason the temple existed was so that the people could offer their burnt offerings and sacrifices – which the Lord calls **'prayer'**. *Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar; For My house will be called a house of prayer for all the nations.'* Burnt offerings and sacrifices meant that as these prayers were going up, the temple was filled with smoke. **That is, the aroma of offerings and incense was continually present in the house of God.** In the Old Testament, the way into the Holy of Holies, the place where God met and spoke with men, was preceded by a small table, called the table of incense. Day and night on this table incense was burned and the aroma and fragrance filled the tabernacle. Incense and sacrifices of burnt offerings in the Bible speak about prayer – and emphasizes that the way into God's very presence is through prayer.

Much prayer – all kinds of prayer. Prayer in the morning. Prayer at noon. Prayer at night. Private prayer – corporate prayer – prayer meetings and concerts of prayer. Short prayer, long prayer, and everything in between. **The house of God should be filled with the aroma and atmosphere of prayer, and the people of God ought to smell like prayer. When people smell us they ought to smell heaven.** And because God's House is a house of prayer, and God promises to bless His House, that means that the more we pray, the more God blesses. **Much prayer – much blessing. Little prayer – little blessing. No prayer – no blessing.** And this morning I would like to share with you some of the blessings that come to a church that prays.

The more praying that is done by a church the more unity and singleness of purpose will exist.

A major premise is that when there is a *great deal* of prayer in a church, there will be a *great deal* of unity; and if there is not much prayer there will not be much unity. As we pray, our hearts are knit together with a common purpose and unity by the Holy Spirit. In Acts we read about the church coming together for prayer and the Bible says, *And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness. And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them.* Acts 4:32

I don't believe this was an isolated incident where the saints just got energized to pray – in fact we read in chapter 2 where they were **continually** devoting themselves to prayer. I believe they were continually gathering together for prayer as a church, and God was continually blessing them. And the first blessing was unity and singleness of purpose - *one heart and soul.*

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul told them, *you also joining in helping us through your prayers, so that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed on us through the prayers of many.* 2 Corinthians 1:11 Paul made it clear that it was not just the prayers of some – but the prayers of many – many people – many prayers – a great deal of prayer. And I think the principle he outlines in chapter 9 of that book, applies as well to prayer. In that chapter Paul is encouraging them to give bountifully for the relief of the saints in Jerusalem and he says, *Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.* 2 Corinthians 9:6 And I think that same principle applies to prayer – the more we pray – the more we will see God do in our lives and in the world – and the more we will be united in purpose for the cause of Christ.

The number 1 requirement for God to bless a church so that it will grow in maturity (*the people are becoming more like Jesus*) and so that it will grow in size, (*the lost are being saved*) **is unity**. Psalm 133 says, *Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!...for there the LORD commanded the blessing-- life forever.* In John 17:11 Jesus prayed to the Father for unity for His people: *keep them in Your name, the name which You have given Me, that they may be one even as We are.*

And in Acts, we see the life of unity in the early church and the results: *They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.* Acts 2:41-47 Unity and singleness of purpose characterized the church and the blessings of favor and growth were the result.

The more praying that is done by a church the more genuine love the people will have for God, for each other, and for the lost.

Jesus prayed that we would have this love in John 17:26 *and I have made Your name known to them, and will make it known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them."* The apostle Paul was always praying that the saints would have this love: *And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment,* Philippians 1:9 *and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you;* 1 Thessalonians 3:12 And the more we pray, the more we love God –the more we love one another with the love of God and the more we love the lost.

"There is nothing that makes us love a man so much as prayer for him." William Law

The more praying that a church does the more people in the church will begin to expect great things from God.

And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness. Acts 4:31 Great things happen when the people of God pray – In Isaiah 64 we read this prayer: *Oh, that You would rend the heavens {and} come down, That the mountains might quake at Your presence-- As fire kindles the brushwood, {as} fire causes water to boil-- To make Your name known to Your adversaries, {That} the nations may tremble at Your presence! When You did awesome things which we did not expect, You came down, the mountains quaked at Your presence. For from days of old they have not heard or perceived by ear, Nor has the eye seen a God besides You, Who acts in behalf of the one who waits for Him.* Those who wait for Him are those who pray – and those who pray are those who can expect great things of God

The more praying that a church does, the more passion and zeal for God and His purpose will exist among the members.

In the book of the Revelation the angel of the Lord tells the church in Laodecia there that they have a name that they are living, but they are really dead. That is they look like a church, talk like a church but they are not the church and that since they have neither the healing properties of a hot springs or the refreshing qualities of an artesian spring, but rather like lukewarm spit that He will vomit them up. *because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth.* Revelation 3:15-16 And the reason they are lukewarm and without passion or zeal for God is their self-satisfied attitude: *Because you say, "I - am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing..."* People that do not think they need anything are people that do not pray. I do not believe the church in Laodecia were praying. Perhaps they had a Tuesday night prayer meeting at one time – but over the years they lost their passion and need to pray and eventually nobody prayed.

In a scene from Shadowlands, a film based on the life of C.S. Lewis, Lewis has returned to Oxford from London, where he has just been married to Joy Gresham, an American woman, in a private Episcopal ceremony performed at her hospital bedside. She is dying from cancer, and, through the struggle with her illness, she and Lewis have been discovering the depth of their love for each other. As Lewis arrives at the college where he teaches, he is met by Harry Harrington, an Episcopal priest, who asks what news there is. Lewis hesitates; then, deciding to speak of the marriage and not the cancer, he says, "Ah, good news, I think, Harry. Yes, good news."

Harrington, not aware of the marriage and thinking that Lewis is referring to Joy's medical situation, replies, "I know how hard you've been praying Now, God is answering your prayer."

That's not why I pray, Harry," Lewis responds. "I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God; it changes me." God forbid that we should ever fail to sense our need before God. When we pray we recognize both our helplessness and God's transcendent wisdom. It is through surrender to His power that we yield ourselves to His will and His passion for His purpose in the world becomes ours.

May Psalm 42 be true of us: *As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs after You.* And Psalm 73:25 *I desire You more than anything on earth* – and Psalm 143:6: *I thirst for You as parched land for rain* – and Isaiah 26:9: *all night I search for you, earnestly.* **Without this kind of need and passion for God we won't pray; without prayer we will have no passion for God.** The desire for other things overwhelms our need of God and destroys our passion for Him. In Mark 4 the Lord relates the parable of the sower and tells the disciples that the worries of the world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things choke out the desire for God.

Thomas Chalmers wrote: *The love of the world cannot be removed by a mere demonstration of the world's worthlessness. The only way to dispossess the heart of an old affection is by the expulsive power of a new affection. We know of no other way by which to keep the love of the world out of our hearts than to keep in our hearts the love of God. We must fuel our passion for God.* Psalm 37:4 says: *Delight yourself in the Lord* – that is spend time in His presence – stay there till you get a glow on your face like Moses when he spoke to the Lord face to face – let heaven fill your thoughts as Paul urged the Colossians. Someone once said: *The core problem is not that we are too passionate about bad things, but that we are not passionate enough about good things.* Nothing fuels your passion for God like prayer.

The more praying that is done by a church the more boldness, courage and passion the people will have to reach their lost friends, neighbors and relatives for Christ.

Praying for the lost is one of our primary jobs. Paul tells Timothy: *First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men,* 1 Timothy 2:1 First of all – not last of all. One of the reasons we do not witness to our friends, neighbors and relatives is that we have not been in prayer. Nothing fuels our passion for the gospel like time spent in prayer. When we pray Matthew 9:38 – **'O Lord of the harvest, send out workers into the fields ripe for harvest'** something stirs in our own hearts that says **'Here am I, send me!'** When we pray Luke 12:32 **'Father it is Your good pleasure to give the kingdom'** our own hearts are filled with the certain confidence of the triumph of God in the world and His willingness to save. When we pray for the Holy Spirit to convict them of sin, righteousness and the coming judgment, when we pray for God to open the eyes of their heart, to grant them an earnest seeking after Him – we are reminded that in order to believe they must hear, and in order for them to hear we must preach, and as our hearts are filled with prayer our mouths must be filled with the gospel.

The more praying that is done by a church the more joy, confidence, security, faith and peace they will experience.

You will make known to me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; In Your right hand there are pleasures forever. Psalm 16:11

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. Ephesians 1:18-23

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:6-7

The more praying that is done by a church, the more God will work through the preaching of the pastor.

He will become a powerful preacher – instead of criticizing; pray – some people would rather have roast pastor for Sunday dinner; some would rather just complain; some churches would rather handle it with a chain letter. *"If you are tired of your old pastor and want to find a new one, simply send a copy of this letter to six other churches who are tired of their pastors. Then bundle up your pastor and send him to the church at the top of the list. Add your name to the bottom of the list. In one week you will receive 16,436 pastors, and one of them should be a dandy. But don't break the chain. One church broke the chain and got their old pastor back."*

Pray for my protection from the temptations of the devil - nothing makes him happier than a pastor who falls. Once a church begins to make an impact – that pastor is a prime target. **Pray for my family.** If the devil can't get me, he'll work on them. **Pray for my insight,** my wisdom, the ability to make the right decisions in all situations. **Pray for my passion.** Discouragement, depression, and emotional exhaustion can be serious problems. **Pray for perseverance and endurance,** physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. **Pray for my priorities** – putting first things first. **Pray for my preaching** - God has chosen that the preaching of His word be a significant key to your growth; and my preaching will never rise above the level of your praying. If my preaching is poor, you got what you prayed for. **When you pray, and I preach, God moves.**

"Mind how you pray. Make real business of it. Let it never be a dead formality...plead the promise in a truthful, business-like way...Ask for what you want, because the Lord has promised it. Believe that you have the blessing, and go forth to your work in full assurance of it. Go from your knees singing, because the promise is fulfilled: thus will your prayer be answered...the strength [not length] of your prayer...wins...God; and the strength of prayer lies in your faith in the promise which you pleaded before the Lord." C.H. Spurgeon

I am praying, and I want you to join me in praying:
that our hearts together would be ignited with a passion for the triumph of God in the world
that everything in our lives would testify that Jesus is more precious than life
that our lives would not be wasted in trivial pursuits and prove to be a tragedy and not a triumph
that we would be those who cultivate a lifestyle that risks temporal loss for eternal gain.
that we who have been made glad in God would live to make others glad in Him too.

Heavenly Father,

God of all mercy and grace, move our hearts to pray. Pour out a spirit of prayer and supplication upon us Your church. Let Your House be filled with the aroma of prayer and petition for Your kingdom to come and Your will to be done. Fill us with a passion to pray for Your saving power among the nations and our neighbors. Forgive us, oh Lord, for our carelessness and apathy in prayer. Forgive us for weak and insipid prayers that do not presume on Your great power and might, and expect even less. Remind us that You hear and bring answers to our prayers far and above anything we could ask or even think. Forgive us too for those hasty and even casual moments we indulge in and call it prayer. Teach us to know Your throne of grace as the pleasure ground of our souls and storehouse of mercy and grace; the place where we sharpen the sword of the Spirit – anoint the shield of faith – put on the helmet of salvation and the shoes of the gospel – the place where we are strengthened for each conflict – encouraged for the upward race – and empowered to conquer every foe. May we bow our hearts and bend our knees morning, noon and night, in sacrificial prayer for the purpose of God in the earth. Grant that we would pray God-sized, Scripture-saturated prayers that would call Your sheep from every people on the earth, for the glory of Christ and in His name we pray, Amen.