

Now is not a good time to give up!

Hebrews 6:10-12

We are about to enter a potentially exciting time in the recent ministry of God's church here at Maidstone Road. Now is the time to look afresh at reaching out into our neighbourhood in a Spirit led and people-relevant way.

There's always the tendency for God's people to be fatalistic about the speaking out gospel, particularly in tough conditions such as we experience in modern society where the younger generation in particular don't seem to be interested in the things of God. We see a generation who shuns the good news about Jesus and goes its own ways and run the danger of accepting that it is how things are.

It's easy to be depressed and negative but we can either be glass half empty or glass half full people. Do we look at our community as something that's dying of spiritual starvation, or a hungry community that is waiting to receive food that will feed their spiritual hunger?

A year or two back there was a drama documentary on the first medical staff that arrived at the Dachau concentration camp after the Allies liberated it in 1945. It was full of thousands of people who had been left to starve by the Nazis. Their first action was to supply the camp with as much food as they could possibly get there. But even though the food was of good quality, people continued to die in their hundreds day after day from malnutrition.

What was wrong? It was distressing for the people in the aid organisations and military who were committed to ending the nightmare for the poor ex-prisoners. Then it occurred to one of the doctors that the people were being fed the wrong food - their digestive systems couldn't handle the excellent meat and two veg they were being offered. In the end the solution he came up with was to give the starving people biscuits. Just biscuits, but ones which had been formulated with easily digestible high calorie components. The effects of the biscuits was fast: people stopped dying and started to put on weight and they were weaned on to more ordinary food. High energy biscuits are still today one of the most effective first foods to give people suffering severe malnutrition.

To ease spiritual starvation we must feed people right people the right food. Now by that I don't mean we should give them a different gospel or a different Jesus. There's only one. It's all about giving it in a form they are able to digest. How do we know who should get what? Our Father knows exactly what they need! Now that's where prayer comes in: in fact it's essential. If as a church (or as individuals for that matter), we want to see our fellowship grow, then we need to minister to them as God's people with what's right at that moment.

A couple of weeks back I played this clip of John Ortberg to the Women's Fellowship. It's about our attitude to one another and anyone in fact.

John Ortberg clip.

As we approach people in their difficulties and situations our words attitudes should bring them this question "can I help you". In the WF I spoke about it in a different context. But as we say "can I help you" we should also aim the question at God too "Lord how can I serve you best in regards to this person"?

It's a prayer issue which is why it's so important that we get prayer right as a church as well as individuals. If we are to help others, most importantly by bringing good news to them, then we should understand that prayer - our communication with God is fundamental to serving Him in a way that truly benefits others. It's a bit we often get the wrong way around. We see reaching out in terms of what we are able to do, or what seems sensible to us or what we have done in the past. Our communication is one-way with God - asking for His help rather than saying "can I help You?" Rachel Hickson uses the words we read in Hebrews 6 to illustrate this connection between serving Him and serving others.

Heb 6:10 God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. 11 We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. 12 We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.

As we serve others, we show how much we love God. But how should that service be carried out - with diligence because - we inherit what has been promised with faith and patience.

I could explore this in a number of ways, but tonight I want to look at it in terms of praying for and doing mission. The bottom line is that as a church we are here to share good news. But with whom - families, friends, neighbours, community? We often pray for a harvest don't we? We pray for the seed sown and we call for revival and whatever. Something Rachel Hickson wrote in her book about a few verses I was familiar struck me in a fresh way. It's John 4:30 *They came out of the town and made their way toward him. 31 Meanwhile his disciples urged him, "Rabbi, eat something." 32 But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about." 33 Then his disciples said to each other, "Could someone have brought him food?" 34 "My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. 35 Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.*

Here's the same words at a different time but with a few extra comments from Jesus: *Matt 9:35 Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. 36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. 37 Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. 38 Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."*

Here's something about food in a different context to earlier. Jesus' food was to do His Father's will and to finish His work. And what was that? To bring in the harvest. Jesus never prayed for a harvest. He didn't ask the disciples to do so either. What were they to pray for? Workers. Why? Because the harvest is there already because God produces it - what is needed are workers to bring it in. It's another glass half-full scenario. Stop thinking seeds and start thinking sheaves!

So how does bringing the harvest start? By developing mature prayers who intercede for others and seek before God to know how they may best serve Him, and those He puts across our path. Prayer is about being consistent and persistent. *12 We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.*

What do we mean by that. Prayer isn't about feeling, it's about obedience. We don't just pray when we get goose bumps about something, or feel anointed, we pray because we are commanded to pray.

We have a God who hears and answers prayer, but part of mature prayer is understanding that we need to work according to God's ways and that can be frustrating. But note this: *Luke 18:1 Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. 2 He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. 3 And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' 4 "For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'" 6 And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7 And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? 8 I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"*

Jesus is emphatic. God answers prayer. If an unjust judge will positively deal with someone is persistent, how much more will a righteous God? *7 And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? 8 I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.*

But God's timing isn't ours and His quickly isn't our quickly - but he does see that we get justice! This year is about starting with God and ending with people being drawn into the kingdom when we look at the mission of the church. But it's not something that will spring up overnight. We need to become consistent and persistent in praying for what God wants us to do, not being lazy about it or giving up when the going gets rough or prayers look unanswered.

Let me mention a couple of things to remember that struck me when we are persisting in prayer and nothing seems to be happening.

Rachel Hickson looks at unanswered prayer in two ways. Firstly "Unanswered prayer is not a wrong one, but an unfinished one" There is a gap in time between what God wants to do and what is happening. Not all works of God happen instantly, but in His time and often our pace. His kingdom will come but at His pace as He sees the wider picture, he knows men's hearts, He understands how everything works in the

physical and spiritual realms. We don't have complete knowledge. But we do have a Father who is completely trustworthy. So by faith, as we perceive how we should pray, we should take hold of what God is doing and wait expectantly and serve Him as He moves.

Don't abandon prayers. Our prayers are often unanswered because we've abandoned them - we gave up.
11 We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure.
12 We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.

What's interesting is that prayer that has not been answered - yet - is not just about patience, but about faith. When we are expectant of God, we'll be persistent. Persistence is a mark of faith.

Don't let the devil pickpocket your faith - he likes to separate the link between faith and prayer. He likes to place questions in our minds about how correct our understanding of what we're praying for is, and on the ability and willingness of God to answer prayer. God rewards those who earnestly seek Him.

Prayer

Preached by Mark Reid
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The book by Rachel Hickson is *Supernatural Communication: the privilege of prayer*, New Wine Press, 2006