



Praying Together in Unity

Ephesians 6:10-20

A drunk was rolling around in the street when the local minister came up to him. "I'm so glad that you're starting to turn over a new leaf" said the minister. "Me?" the drunk said, amazed. "Yes, I was so thrilled to see you at the prayer meeting last night." "Oh" said the drunk, slowly remembering, "so that's where I was!"

By the way that some Christians talk, you'd think that a prayer meeting is probably about the last place you'd ever see them at. The words that usually follow are something like "I pray at home in private. Jesus commands that. As long as I pray it doesn't matter where I do it."

Prayer meetings and prayer events are often the least attended events in most churches. In order to get people praying, most churches mix prayer with something else.

Last week we looked at the way in which Jesus encouraged His disciples to pray to God personally, taking themselves to a quiet place so that they could commune with God. This was in contrast to the "religious" people of the time who were praying their personal prayers in public. What Jesus was saying there was that the most important thing about prayer was that we spend time with God personally for His sake and not for the try to impress anyone else how spiritual we are.

In the end, your private prayer life is your business as mine is mine – the only person either of us are responsible to is God Himself – and He knows only too well exactly what our prayer life is. No hiding. No excuses. But it's between us and Him.

Right from the very start of the history of the church, the disciples prayed together – it was a natural part of the life of the early church in Jerusalem – Acts 2:42 They spent their time in learning from the apostles, taking part in the fellowship, and sharing in the fellowship meals and the prayers. **Or It's commanded by Paul in 1 Tim 2:1 2:1 (C) *First of all, then, I urge that entreaties [and] prayers, petitions [and] thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, 2 (C) for kings and all who are in authority, in order that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. 3 (C) This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.***

Go through the Acts and you'll find Christians praying together. Corporate prayer is a fundamental part of the life of the church which is no surprise because it is a fundamental part of worship – which is again corporate and personal. Private and corporate prayer are both there in the New Testament. Not one – or the other. Both. And we need to be doing both in order to be a spiritually healthy church with spiritually healthy believers. Both are in the NT and it's taken for granted that it happens – that's normal and anything else is exceptional.

I wasn't originally going to speak on a completely different passage to the one I had planned. It's a familiar passage about the armour of God in Ephesians 6. I'm not going to go into the armour tonight – we'll save that for another time. It's a passage that mixes the corporate and the individual well – both are for granted here and inseparable. First we are shown that we are in a battle – its a battle not against flesh and blood *the wicked spiritual forces in the heavenly world, the rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers of this dark age.*

What are they? Well, they are spiritual powers which can damage us as individuals and as a church. Our knowledge of them is limited – we know they are evil and we know satan and his forces – his demons - have a lot to do. We might not know everything about them but we are commanded to battle against them

– or more precisely, they are out to get us whether we like it or not. Actually, in every army, foot-soldiers never know what the strength and disposition of enemy forces are. They trust that their commanders do know and have equipped them so they could effectively resist the enemy. But in any army, it doesn't matter how well equipped soldiers are made, they are only effective if soldiers fight together as a team.

That's why the context for Christian life, growth and witness is as part of a church fellowship. Personal prayer is vital as we saw last week – but God has called us to be part of His team – His body with Jesus as its head.

That you may have heard of when you have had sermons on the armour of God before. What's also said is that all the armour described is defensive except the sword of the Spirit, the word of God, which is used to attack. Not so, because most sermons I have heard and books I have read miss the other one. Look to verse *17 And accept salvation as a helmet, and the word of God as the sword which the Spirit gives you. 18 Do all this in prayer, asking for God's help. Pray on every occasion, as the Spirit leads. For this reason keep alert and never give up; pray always for all God's people.*

Do you see it. Pray. It's obvious. If we are to move forward, we do it in God's power, by the Spirit's leading and we need to be doing it always.

I think modern warfare better helps us understand the role of prayer. You see armour protects us from the enemy (verse 17 says that we should even do this in prayer) and the sword can help us hit out at the enemy, but it is when we contact HQ that the big guns and reinforcements arrive.

Yes, if we are under attack; we call the cavalry. And over the ridge it comes – to the rescue. Perhaps a better illustration is something I saw on the News one evening. It was a video from Afghanistan about a British position coming under attack from Taliban snipers about 200 yards away. The British soldiers could have attacked it and taken the snipers out but they might have lost men in the process. They radioed for close air support and within minutes an American aircraft came over and bombed the Taliban position. And that was the end of them.

That's what prayer does to the enemy. Prayer is our cavalry and close air support. You can't go into battle unless you are in constant touch with HQ and you know what your orders are and what forces are available to you.

Yet week after week, most churches do ministry without equipping themselves. Each time we come together for worship, do children's work, have a Ladies Meeting, have house groups, do any form of mission – the enemy will try to undermine it. And many churches don't even recognise the spiritual battle of it. If we want to function as believers, we WILL be attacked by an enemy we can't see but whom we can prepare against. It's not people who are our enemies – our task is to rescue them. Our true enemies are *the wicked spiritual forces in the heavenly world, the rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers of this dark age* and they are the ones who are most dangerous and require most preparation to encounter and have victory against.

Apart from the fact of asking ourselves if we have got the correct armour on (which I've not covered tonight – don't worry we'll get to it!) how much have we checked into HQ? Have we listened to the orders? Do we understand them? Do we understand the mission? What support can we call upon from HQ. It's no use asking for the cavalry when God has allocated helicopter gunships to us. We should know the orders and resources. *12 For we are not fighting against human beings but against the wicked spiritual forces in the heavenly world, the rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers of this dark age.*

And the only way we can do that is to pray. Not just the odd prayer here and there: *Pray on every occasion, as the Spirit leads. For this reason keep alert and never give up; pray always for all God's people.*

For most churches who have difficulty growing, it usually comes down to this. You can't fight powers you barely understand unless you are equipped and empowered by the Spirit and to do that the church needs to develop a dynamic prayer life – and for that matter a dynamic worship life.

I'd say that some of the most profound, uplifting and exciting things I've been at in the last few years have

been prayer meetings – usually ones where Christians from a variety of backgrounds have come aside for worship and prayer. And it does make a difference.

I've been fortunate enough in the last ten years or so to have been associated with some exciting growing churches. Yes they do all the good practice that we are encouraged to do and I will encourage you to do. But the thing that characterises them is that they have developed a prayer life that connects prayer with every aspect of the life of the church and people in it.

Let me take you back to the year 1747 – just over 250 years ago. The great American revivalist Jonathan Edwards wrote a pamphlet which was widely circulated in America. It came on the heels of a revival known as the Great Awakening in the 1730s which had George Whitefield and John Wesley at its centre. By 1747 things had started to get quiet and it gave time for Edwards to reflect on what had happened and he saw that at its heart had been people who had been praying. His pamphlet was an opportunity to encourage God's people to pray in more revival based on Zechariah 8:20-22 which says *Zech 8:20 (TEV) The LORD Almighty says, "The time is coming when people from many cities will come to Jerusalem. 21 Those from one city will say to those from another, "We are going to worship the LORD Almighty and pray for his blessing. Come with us!" 22 Many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to worship the LORD Almighty and to pray for his blessing.*

From the whole of this prophecy we may infer that it is well pleasing to God for many people, in different parts of the world, to voluntarily come into a visible union to pray in an extraordinary way for those great outpourings of the Holy Spirit which shall advance the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ that God has so often promised shall be in the latter ages of the world.

Interestingly, the awakening of the 1830s had largely passed the Baptists by but by the early 1850s there were several younger men in Baptist circles who began to take what Edwards said seriously and started to pray and encourage others to pray. What came out of it was a huge surge for mission in the late 18th Century, which continued into the early nineteenth. Our own church was a product of that push for mission. All because people started to pray together in a way they hadn't done so before.

And you will find that true today, in fact I'm going to explore this more on the next evening service I do because dynamic prayer releases churches into productive mission.

You've listened to what I've said this evening. Hopefully makes sense. It's obvious and basic. But it's what's so obvious and basic that it's an ingredient that's so often missed in the life of the church.

Some of you I know place prayer as a high priority – but it should be our ultimate priority if we're going to change and grow here. It makes the difference. We win battles and score victories.

Someone once said "every great move of God can be traced back to a kneeling figure". Let's pray!

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