

# If My People - 14

## *A Call to Prayer (2)*

In our last sermon we began to look at what I believe to be one of the most important words in this verse: PRAY. We cannot even begin to understand the essence of this exhortation and promise unless we look at the subject of prayer.

However, I want to say something that may sound contradictory, but bear with me and you will soon understand what I mean. As I said in the last sermon, like the word HUMILITY, I believe the word PRAY is a key word in this whole verse and indeed our whole Christian life, and yet this verse is not about prayer as such. When understood correctly, prayer is actually a means by which we develop something far greater: RELATIONSHIP.

Now listen carefully, I am not playing word games here. Prayer is a vehicle which takes us somewhere. Prayer is a means by which we develop something else. It doesn't take a high IQ to work that out from reading the Bible. Prayer is not the end in itself - it is a means to greater end.

Yet there are millions of Christians all over the world who have been subtly coerced into making prayer some kind of end in itself. Prayer becomes a destination. Thousands of books have been written about prayer - teaching us how to have a good prayer life as though a 'prayer life' is the goal. Prayer is the means by which we have intimate communion with God. Therefore, prayer is a means to a far greater end: a meaningful, fruitful relationship with God. This is so simple that I am almost embarrassed to point it out, but I fear that it's a simple truth that has somehow been lost in the middle of a whole mass of teaching about prayer.

We need to realise just how subtle the enemy of God is and how easy it is for him to twist things God has given us in a way that turns them into religion and surely by now we are aware that Satan will replace relationship with religion at every possible point. We don't have to open that door very far before the enemy is through it in a flash.

Prayer is one of those precious, beautiful, personal, powerful gifts which God has bestowed upon His children. Have you ever thought about the privilege of prayer? How incredible this gift is? The God Who created this universe and keeps the earth spinning on its axis; the God Who holds all of creation together and keeps you breathing - actually invites you to come into His presence, relax and chat about life and the universe and anything else you want to talk about. Prayer is a wonderful gift - it is not a method to be used to get something from God. Sadly, however, in so many ways over the years, we have allowed Satan to turn prayer into a dry, cold, calculating religious work.

Some of us may have come out of traditional, religious Church backgrounds where prayers were prayed in Latin or such old-style English no one could relate to them anyway. Some of us grew up thinking that prayers were the things printed in a green book you read from each Sunday or someone up front did, and you said amen. Don't get me wrong - God can still move through liturgy and formal prayers - but only if people have the ability to connect to the heart of those prayers. Then it is their hearts God moves through - not the prayers.

At some point we left that world and came to a Church where people talk to God personally and intimately and prayer took on whole new meaning and power. Praise God for such a revelation. However, the danger remains high, for there is a new kind of religion emerging. This brand of religion is far more powerful and far more pervasive and destructive and far harder to fight than anything in the past. It is not the religion of the dead, cold, orthodox Church. It is a religion that has sprung up in the middle of the most dynamic, active, alive and 'successful' sections of the Church. That is why it is so hard to fight.

It is so difficult to stand up in the midst of a crowd of happy, fulfilled, excited, productive, positive people and issue a warning about religion. That is why Satan is having such a great time, because very few people are brave enough (or suicidal enough) to stand up and say anything and the few that do, may have personal axes to grind which cause them to become critical and they attack personalities rather than issues and false teaching.

I don't want to attack anyone, much less a fellow believer who is preaching what they think to be the Word of Truth. However, I do need to ring some alarm bells because some of the most influential teachers in the Church today, some of whom you will see on television if you wake early enough, are marketing a gospel which is contrary to what is clearly taught in the New Testament and that particularly applies to the issue of prayer, which is our primary focus today.

Every day, right across the world, millions of people are told that prayer has power. Actually, they are told that the 'right kind of prayer' has power. In fact, as I began to research for this teaching on prayer, I encountered people over and over and over again who spoke of the power of prayer and gave all the tips and principles and techniques so that we can be sure we are using the right words and praying the right way. I have whole books that deal with the issue of prayer - books by world-renown authors - and they are full of teaching which portrays prayer as this highly technical, complicated activity that only the spiritually elite can do really well. What utter nonsense!

Prayer does not protect us - God protects us. Prayer does not heal us - God heals us. Prayer is not an exact science which we need to learn to do a certain way for it to work. Saturating yourself with Scriptures about healing in order to build your faith before you pray to God to heal someone sounds harmless enough. But just analyse what is happening there. Who are you trying to convince, yourself or God? When I hear some people pray I am sure they are trying to convince God that He wants to heal, can heal and will heal. Prayer is communication and like all communication we can certainly get better at it - but when we are talking about communicating with God, we need to be careful we don't slip into the trap of thinking that it was our prayer that healed someone or not.

I have a powerful memory of a ministry time in a conference in Sydney when Dr. Ken Blue was here in 1993. Michelle and I were in the middle of a three-week intensive Pastors school, and this was a weekend conference we were running. One of the Pastors at the conference was being prayed for - he had suffered a chronic lung condition for many years. Ken and a few others were gathered around this brother at the end. A few people prayed and then Ken prayed. It was a passionate prayer, a confident prayer. Ken obviously knew that God could heal, and he was believing that for this brother at that moment. He didn't need more faith or the right words - he had seen God heal thousands of times in situations like this - and he had seen Him not heal too. At the end of the prayer, it was clear that nothing had happened right there and then. So, Ken said "Amen" ... pushed his chair back and stood up and said, "Well, that's my best prayer. Bless you brother. Maybe next time." With that he slapped his brother on the back and left. I remember thinking how pastorally insensitive, even arrogant that was to say to someone who had just not been healed.

But I came to realise that it was the most honest and God-honouring thing I have ever heard someone say. In his own abrupt manner, Ken was reminding us, *“If God isn’t doing it tonight, then He isn’t doing it. No amount of naming, claiming, ranting or raving is going to change that. Our job is to pray, believing. God’s job is to heal when He chooses.”*

Would he pray again for this man, if asked? Absolutely, and he did, the day before he left Australia - standing outside a public toilet in fact. No conference; no music in the background; no faith-building sermon; no witnesses; just a simple prayer - and God healed this brother on the spot - right there and then, of a condition that he had suffered for 15 years.

I will never forget that night when Ken said, *“Well, that’s my best prayer!”* Whenever I start down the road of thinking that the quality of my prayer or the words I use or the methods I employ is what moves the hand of God ... the Holy Spirit reminds me of that night, and I laugh and realise how arrogant and proud we can be sometimes. I only wish all believers would understand this same truth.

That is not the case I am afraid, for there is a whole school of teaching now, under the banner of the ‘word of faith’ movement which stretches the bounds of the New Testament even further and tells us how vitally important the actual spoken word is and that we need to learn all this stuff before we can pray powerfully and effectively because we might be using the wrong words. We also have people telling us how important it is to ‘pray the Word of God’ so they’ve got people all over the world memorising Scriptures and quoting them back to God every day in prayers reminding this forgetful old Father in heaven of the things He may have said in the past.

This teaching leads to memorised prayers and Scriptures becoming daily rituals. Not too different to the incantations of the occult, in fact. That’s not a relationship – that’s witchcraft. That kind of prayer is no longer a spontaneous, intimate, personal dialogue between two personalities - it becomes a tool, a formula or a weapon.

*“But,”* I hear someone protest, *“Didn’t Jesus use Scripture this way?”* Good question. Did He? The answer is simple: absolutely not. So many people have taken Jesus’ encounter with Satan in the wilderness and built all kinds of interesting and complicated theologies from a simple story. To begin with, Jesus was not using the Scriptures in some magical way like a sorcerer uses an incantation. He was simply reminding the prince of demons of truths which Satan already knew. Do you think that was the first encounter Satan had with the Scriptures? Not at all. He knew all those Scriptures as well as Jesus. That’s why Jesus quoted them - he was giving His adversary a touch of reality - reminding him of some facts of life which Satan already knew.

Now, as for this being used as a model for praying the Scriptures or quoting the Bible in prayer, that is nonsense. Jesus was not praying. Jesus was not talking to His father. There is no evidence at all that Jesus quoted Scriptures back to God in prayer. Yet there are thousands of people who have developed elaborate methods of praying and standing on certain Scriptures in prayer which they claim has Biblical precedent. I’m afraid I can’t see that.

Not only is this kind of prayer wrong and impersonal and an abuse of the privilege of prayer, it is also boring in the extreme. Can you imagine the quality of your relationship with your wife or husband or best friend if every time you saw them they recited the same words over and over again to you. Or read from a book which you actually wrote and already know off by heart? This is how many people talk to God. If it wasn’t so sad, it would be really funny.

What all that kind of teaching does, apart from lead millions of people astray, is create an elite group within the Church. The ones who supposedly know how to pray and how get God to do things. They become separated from the rest of the Church who are the boring masses who don't know much at all and have no power.

**2 Chronicles 7:14** *"If my people who are called my name will HUMBLE THEMSELVES AND PRAY AND SEEK MY FACE ..."*

Read it again! This is ALL about relationship! Prayer is a means by which we communicate with a personal, living, all-powerful God. Our position in prayer is always humility. We humble ourselves before the One Who holds all the power and all the answers and all the keys to the Kingdom of God. He is God and we are not. That is as true the first day we journey as a Christian as it is the last day. It doesn't matter how much we learn and know about God. It doesn't matter how many prayer seminars we attend. It doesn't matter how strong our faith is and what we are 'believing God for' today - He is still God, and we are not, and at times He will act in ways which we neither like nor understand.

Yes, I know all the positive affirmation stuff. I know how important it is for us to know who we are in Christ. I have preached that to thousands of people for over 40 years. We are not to have a spirit of fear and timidity. We are children of the King and we do have the presence of the Lord Himself in us. All that is true. Yet none of that changes the fact that when we come to God in prayer, we come as broken, contrite, humble servants, always acknowledging Him to be our sovereign God and confessing our total dependence upon Him every moment.

Humility is the key to the throne room, always has been, always will be. We can claim all the promises we like; we can quote Scripture till the cows come home; it won't change the fact the God is God, and we are not, and we must approach Him in humility.

**People seem to confuse being bold for God with being bold in the presence of God.** Being bold for God is wonderful and we have hundreds of exhortations in the Bible to do just that as we forcefully lay hold of the Kingdom of God and march against the enemy. But where does it say that we are to be bold in the presence of God? Nowhere. We are to bow in awe and humility and submission and reverence before our sovereign God and in His grace and mercy He exalts us in Christ and empowers us to be His bold warriors in His army. We are to be humble in the presence of God and bold in our ministry for God.

Yet there is a strand of teaching which is growing rapidly across the world which effectively says that we are to be bold in the presence of God too. It effectively makes us like God, in fact, if only we have the faith to believe and if only we learn how to pray the right prayers and use the right words and stand on the right Scriptures.

What did Jesus have to say to the people who prayed the right prayers and had the right brand of faith and heard from God in a special way that no one else could hear? Read Matthew 23 and find out. He called them *'a brood of vipers.'* He said they were like *'white-washed tombs'* ... looking great on the outside but full of death on the inside. That elitist spirit of the Pharisee is still alive and well today.

It is so hard for us to remain humble when we are given such a wonderful gift from God. When He pours out His love and grace and mercy and wisdom upon us, it is so easy for us to start thinking we did something to make this happen. This all comes back to an understanding of the partnership into which God has called us.

I know that even I have been exhorting you to do your part so God can do His. We have explored the various 'if ... then' scenarios and have been reminded of our responsibility in helping to advance the Kingdom of God. It is vitally important for us to know that God has called us and equipped us to minister in His power and strength and to have faith in His ability to work through us. So, aren't I saying the same thing as the word of faith teachers when I say if we do something then God will do something and if we don't then He won't? Good question.

The simplest answer I can give is this and I want you to listen very carefully: there is a huge difference between saying, "If I don't do this then God **won't** do that ..." and saying, "If I don't do this then God **can't** do that."

We need to allow the Holy Spirit to reveal to our hearts that God is sovereign and yet He is committed to a partnership and that is why He chooses to work through us. That is an awesome privilege and responsibility and there will be heaps of things that God will not do without us. But to take that truth one step further and say that He is unable to do it without us ... is to venture into heresy. The difference, in what you hear preached here and what is being preached under the word of faith banner all over the world is that everything taught here is built upon the foundation of God's grace and a constant recognition of His sovereignty. We must never forget those powerful words of the Apostle Paul:

**1 Corinthians 15:10** *"By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them - yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me."*

As I warned at the beginning of this series, unless we have a firm grasp on the grace of God and the sovereignty of God then any exhortation concerning our place in the scheme of things is open to being distorted into a religious work. This verse is as true the first day we stumbled to walk in the kingdom of God as it is 40 years later when we have grown in our faith and our understanding of God. Understanding the truth of that verse will help keep us humble in the presence of God. So too with this powerful verse:

**Zechariah 4:6** *"Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the LORD Almighty.*

In essence, this verse says that nothing is accomplished by human effort - nothing of any significance, anyway. It is only that which the Spirit of God instigates and empowers that is effective in God's kingdom. Even Jesus Himself when He ministered among us as a man said, "I only do what I see the Father doing." He also said, "I only speak the words he gives me." What an incredible picture of humility, submission, surrender, dependence, and accountability. What a great role-model for us.

I want to leave it here for now and encourage you to sit with this sermon for the next week before I continue expanding this important point. Ask God to show you what He wants to teach you and discard the rest. There is so much false teaching out there about prayer and I am convinced the enemy of God is behind it all because I see the result: frustrated, defeated, discouraged disciples who pray less and less because the 'results' don't match what so many preachers are shouting at them every week!

Let those who have ears to hear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the Church this day.