

If My People - 15

A Call to Prayer (3)

If you have stumbled onto this sermon and have not seen the previous one, I want to exhort you to stop reading and go to last week's sermon first. This is the second half of that sermon, and it is really important you work through them together. However, even for those who have worked through that sermon, let me just recap briefly.

Last week I stressed that 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 an end in itself - it is a means to greater end. When understood correctly, prayer is actually a means by which we develop something far greater: RELATIONSHIP.

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 study, sit down 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.

For many years now the 'word-of-faith' movement has been convincing millions of people that prayer has power. Actually, they tell us 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, incredibly complicated activity that only the spiritually elite can do really well.

What all this 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 to 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.

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.

Friend, if you are one who has been influenced by teaching which encourages you to be bold in the presence of God; to claim that which is yours; to pray the promises of God back to Him as some kind of inducement to force His hand because He has to honour His Word - please stop - lest you fall head long into the enemy's snare and find yourself struggling against the chains of religion again.

If you are one who has enjoyed the blessings of God in answer to prayer in some area of your life and you want to tell the whole world about it - please be careful what you say and to whom - lest you take your personal encounter with God and make it prescriptive for all people. There are certainly times when you should declare the wonderful works of God to all who want to hear. But then there are those times, like Mary, the mother of Jesus, when you should just "ponder these things in your heart." Either way, just be careful that you don't try to take credit for something God has done.

If God says 'yes' to a prayer you pray, it was not the quality of your prayer that brought the answer; it was not the words you used or the Scriptures you prayed and stood on; it was not your boldness or passion or volume or the language with which you prayed. It was the grace of God in harmony with the will of God which brought the answer to that prayer and that is a very special and very personal encounter for which you should be incredibly grateful and humbled.

In Jesus name, I beg you not to race out to a brother or sister and tell them that if they do what you just did – they too can experience the same answer to prayer. **Prayer is not the currency with which we buy something from God.** There is no money-back guarantee that God will answer you the same way every time. He will always answer ... I guarantee that ... 'yes', 'no' or 'wait' are His usual answers in simple terms, but there is nothing we can do to guarantee a 'yes' every time.

Prayer is not a 'method' we learn to extract the blessings of God. Prayer is not a program or tool. Prayer is not even a ministry in and of itself. In fact, even the term 'Prayer Meeting' is a very misleading term. It conjures up the idea that prayer is the purpose of the meeting, the end result. That is like coming together as leaders of a Church or Directors of a company and looking at the agenda and finding only one word there: TALK. That isn't an agenda. You don't gather to talk. Talking is not the purpose of the meeting. What a waste of time. You talk *about* something. There is another purpose to be achieved and talking is a means by which you achieve that purpose.

The same is true of prayer. Prayer is not the focus of any meeting. We don't meet for prayer. Prayer is not the goal. Prayer is not the end. Prayer is the means to a far greater end: The Transformation of this city, and this nation, through the transformation of our lives, which produces a burden to pray more!

Now I don't want us all changing our vocabulary and terms because of this: but I do want us to realise the importance of what I am saying and heed the warning that prayer can become an end in itself, and even an idol. Of course, there are a few things we can learn about prayer which may help us understand this wonderful gift. But as with human speech, the only way we really learn anything is by doing it. You cannot learn to speak by looking at pictures in a book or by attending a seminar. You learn to speak by speaking.

The best way to learn to pray is by praying and, like the disciples, we too will ask the Lord to '*teach us to pray.*' In response to that question Jesus uttered those precious words which we later named The Lord's Prayer and one of the most important and foundational statements in that prayer are the words, "*Thy will be done ...*" That must be our attitude from beginning to end in our prayer times.

Even our most passionate, faith-fuelled prayers must, in the final analysis, be laid on the altar of *"Your will, O Lord, not mine be done."* Those are the words which Jesus Himself cried out to the Father in the garden of tears and pain before going to His death and it's that same broken, contrite, submissive spirit which should permeate all that we say and do and pray. Was Jesus a wimp with no faith in God? I think not. In fact, often it is those with the most faith who can accept God's will even when it is the exact opposite to what they may have prayed.

Some would suggest that you cannot entertain the idea of God saying no when you pray because that will rob you of your faith. In fact, the morning I was preparing this message I clicked on a video on Facebook of one of these word of faith preachers, just out of curiosity ... only to hear this brother yelling at me and pointing his finger at the camera as he said these exact words with incredible passion:

"If you want God to do something you have to visualise the outcome ... focus on the reality of that for which you are praying ... and don't allow anything or anyone to stop you from believing for that which you pray. Don't let those wishy-washy 'if it be thy will' people sap you of your faith. You enter that throne room by the blood of Jesus, and you look your Father in the eye and you claim that which belongs to you with confidence, with boldness and with the assurance it will come to pass!"

I confess I was caught off-guard because I became quite upset by this brief video - especially when I noticed it had over 2 million views around the world! I wasn't just upset that someone would preach that, I think I was recalling all the times I had cried out to God, and He said 'no.'

I think I was recalling the people who had died right before my eyes whilst I was praying for their healing. I think I was recalling how I felt the day I saw that tiny white coffin lowered into the ground during my first funeral for a baby born dead - at the end of a text-book pregnancy - and nine months of sincere prayer; I am sure I was remembering the 30,000 people around the world who were praying for healing for our baby granddaughter Lyla, only to see her earthly journey end at 14 months.

I was upset on behalf of the millions of people who were listening to this well-meaning brother who may follow his advice now and barge into the throne room of God like he suggested and demand things from our heavenly Father which, in His grace He may just give them, but I know that to many of them the answer will be 'no.' My heart ached for those people.

I grieved for the ones who had nowhere to go when God said 'no' because their theology and their understanding of prayer did not allow room for God to say 'no.' I have sat with brothers and sisters like that who are broken and destitute because their faith in God's ability to answer their prayer had become greater than their faith in God Himself. Did you hear that? Let me say it again ... but to you this time.

It is possible for you to have more faith in God's ability to answer your prayer than you have in God Himself.

You see, this really is about relationship, not results. It is about trusting a person Whom we know really well. It is about coming before a loving, gracious, but sovereign God with the kind of faith that can on the one hand ask for everything and yet be satisfied with nothing, if that is what God gives. It seems incredibly complex, yet it's incredibly simple. We cannot understand the spiritual realm and the true purpose of prayer, so we race off into false teaching. Prayer is so important, but it is God who works to perform His will, and so we get the idea that we must generate enough prayer to get Him going and we make up theories as to why this prayer didn't produce the answer, but the next one might.

I don't believe the word of faith people have much faith at all because they are not willing to even entertain the idea that God would not want to give them what they are praying for. They would say that as soon as you think about God not answering your prayer with a resounding 'Yes!' ... you cut off the force behind your faith. That is not faith. That is blind, stubborn determination to get your own way. We discipline our children for such arrogance but exalt supposedly mature Christians to the status of super-saint when they exhibit the same arrogance in the presence of God.

In Jesus name, listen to what I am really saying. I think we all need more faith. I think we settle for far less than God wants for us. I think unbelief is a huge problem among Christians today. I think we need to stand on the rock and proclaim the truth of who we are in Christ. All this is true. However, our position before God is ALWAYS one of humility, servitude, submission, obedience, and trust.

We are told to ask God for anything, and He will grant it according to His will. He is sovereign and He knows best and there will be times when we must wait a long time for Him to grant our request. There will be other times He will grant it as soon as we pray. Then there are the times when He clearly says 'no' and often without any reason or explanation. He is able to do that, you know, because He is God, and we are not.

By all means, let's ask God to increase our faith. Let's be more diligent in seeking the face of God in prayer. Let's ask the Lord to help us in our unbelief. But let's ask Him for the kind of faith that can handle the times He says 'no.' That is the real test of faith.

Think about it. Anyone can believe in a God who always says 'yes.' How easy is that? Only those who have taken the time in prayer to build a close, intimate relationship with God; only those who really know Him, will remain strong in their faith when the answer is to their prayer is not what they hoped for. When we know Him and trust Him, His 'no' is as powerful as His 'yes.'

I plead with you, don't sit there saying "*Amen! Preach it, brother!*" accepting everything I say just because it resonates with your anti 'word of faith' theology. Or don't sit there with a fire in your belly because I have just trampled all over your faith and your beliefs, as you race home and gather all the references and material you can to prove me wrong and ease your conscience. Regardless of how you respond to what I have said here ... you need to go to God and no one else. Seek His face alone and ask Him to confirm His Word in what I preach - and remove everything else. Just make sure you are ready to receive whatever He gives you at that point. Don't ask Him to confirm His Word if you are not willing to accept it and act on it.

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