



## Obstacles to Prayer

### Five obstacles to faith-filled praying

When I preached last Sunday's message, there was a certain point in the sermon when I asked, "What if 2021 is just a repeat of 2020?" I went on to say that you might have various feelings well up inside of you at that thought. You could immediately have ideas of how you would respond if that were the case. But I said that I hope that we would all say that we will pray more. I genuinely hope and pray that we all of Ventura would more immediately turn to communion with God in prayer before other things. If Jesus is right (and he is), we will accomplish nothing of eternal value if we're not abiding and communing with him.

Well, this past week, we had a clear opportunity to put last Sunday's statement into practice. The events in Washington, D.C. were a culmination of dynamics over the months and years that revealed humanity's sinfulness, the fallenness of our nation, and people's need for our Savior and King Jesus. My heart has been so burdened and is breaking for those who put their hope in "chariots and horses" (see Ps. 20:7) and political parties and even in the USA. I'm grateful to be in this country, but oh how I long for Jesus and his Kingdom.

Now, let me ask you a question. With the events that unfolded this past week, when did you (or, did you) turn to God in prayer? Was your immediate response like what mine has often been? You do something, you attack, you try to figure out what needs to happen? Or, did you lay yourself before the Lord and plead for wisdom, mercy and grace?

You know, many of us are part of the men's and women's discipleship groups, and right now we're just beginning to go through 1 Timothy. Paul speaks to Timothy about people who are prideful and creeping into the church. He contrasts the prideful people by telling Timothy that men ought to instead be "lifting up holy hands." Meaning, instead of pride-filled people who destroy the church through focusing pursuits on other earthly matters, God calls his children to humility and prayer. Prayer will build up the church. But Paul starts chapter 2 by saying, "First of all. . . ." And he calls the people to pray for all people, including rulers and authorities. It's not that we don't care about what happens on this earth. But in the context, Paul is most concerned about the salvation of people and that the gospel is spread.

When Paul says "first of all," Paul is showing Timothy that the main mission of the church is gospel witness – that we as a church are a people who are communing with God and also calling people to commune with God, with us! Honestly, we can't be faithful to this call without consistently lifting up our hands before God and asking for his grace and mercy.

Ventura, I imagine we all confess that we live in a broken world. We all confess our own brokenness. We see the chaos around us. What do we do? First of all, we pray. But what does that look like? You may say today, "Pastor Timothy, I struggle so badly with prayer." Honestly, that's a common statement I receive from Christians. And, the struggle goes back to the first disciples. What I want to do today is help us to see the obstacles that may keep us from prayer. **My hope today is that we will see our obstacles to prayer, and then address them, so that we can daily draw nearer in prayerful communion with God.**

So, I'm going to share with you five obstacles that we often bring upon ourselves, and thus tempt us to prayerlessness:

- 1) You are harboring unbelief.
- 2) You don't know what to pray about.
- 3) You don't have time.
- 4) You have unrealistic expectations for prayer.
- 5) You don't believe Jesus' promises.

Let's start with the first one:

### 1) You are harboring unbelief.

This is a very broad category, but let me start with this: you may not pray because you are not a Christian.

Romans 10:9-10 says, **“if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.”**<sup>1</sup> Here Paul connects faith and prayer. You believe and you confess with your mouth. And then Paul later says “whoever calls on the name of the Lord,” which is a reference to prayer. Faith and prayer are interlinked in the Scriptures. Now, of course, prayer doesn't have to be spoken out loud, but the point is that if you have faith, you will pray.

Let's go to one other passage that makes this point even clearer. In the parable of the persistent widow in Luke 18, Luke begins by saying, **“And he [Jesus] told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.”**<sup>2</sup> Then Jesus describes a widow who begs for justice from a judge. Because this widow believes that only the judge can grant her request, she persists in asking for justice. Finally, the judge grants her request. Jesus contrasts the unrighteous judge with God and essentially says Christians can have more confidence that our God will answer those of us who persist in prayer. But I think many people stop the parable here. This is not the final point of Jesus' statement. The point isn't only on God answering prayer. The final sentence Luke records is Jesus saying, **“Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”**<sup>3</sup> Wait a second, I thought Jesus was talking about prayer, not faith! The whole parable talks about persistent prayer. Then Jesus ends by saying, “Will he find faith on the earth?” In other words, persistent, dependent prayers are the clear fruit of faith. And I can't help but let that question bore into me. Will Jesus find faith not just on this earth, but in me?

These two passages cause me to ask the question to all of us here, or anyone listening online. First, based on Romans 10 and since prayer is the first expression of faith, I think I must ask this, “Are you a follower of Jesus?” Have you ever seen yourself as a sinner against God and that you have no hope in yourself to appease God's justice? Do you know your guilt? Do you also know that Jesus came to this earth to live the perfect life you could never live and that he died the death that sinners deserved to die? Now, you could say, “What does that mean for me then?” The answer is that the Bible says to simply turn to God in your neediness and trust Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ro 10:9–10.

<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Lk 18:1.

<sup>3</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Lk 18:8.

as your Savior. There's nothing in your hands you bring. Simply turn to God for forgiveness on the basis of Jesus! Call on his name and be saved.

There's a second group of people I want to talk to. Based on Jesus' parable, he asks, "Will he find faith on the earth?" What about us who profess faith in Jesus. Is our faith acting out in prayer? If we're not praying, we're actually declaring that we trust ourselves. We're not growing in relationship with God. We're deceiving ourselves that we can do something apart from Christ. Imagine if I told you that I study things about my wife, Tracy. I've listened to many of the things she's said and written. But I never talk to her. I never bare my heart out before her. I never state a need for help or assistance or anything at all. Is that a relationship? Would you be concerned? How much more with God who created us for him and created us to know that our everything depends on him! When Jesus returns, will he find people who know their desperate need for God and thus persistently pray to the only One who can work in and through us the things that matter for eternity?

Even this past week, I've been graced by God as he led me to immense comfort as I've been repenting of the pride of prayerlessness and lack of rest in the Lord. I have seen certain ways in which I've trusted in me and not trusted the Lord, and I've found amazing freedom in confessing that pride and then in resting my heart in the all-sufficiency of my Lord. Will we all confess this? This reminds me of the apostle James who confronts the believers and says that we have not because we ask not, but then when we ask, we ask simply to spend it on our own passions. That's not dependence on the Lord. That's not genuine prayer. That's self-centered words directed to the sky. Therefore, James says God doesn't answer that. What's the solution? James calls the people to humble themselves and to lament and mourn! Maybe some of you here need to join me in mourning over our pride of prayerlessness, which is faithlessness. When Jesus returns, whenever that may be, may he find believers in Holland who are repenting and are utterly dependent on the Lord.

Now, we can move on to the second point. You might say, "I have faith, but..."

## **2) You don't know what to pray about.**

This is a genuine concern that I think every Christian wonders about – whether old or young. You might think, "I pray for a couple minutes and I'm at a loss!" I've felt that many times in my life – as a child and as an adult. When I was younger, I remember sitting at the table for family devotions, and we would all have to pray. I was the shortest. Then my sisters (who were older) were a little longer. Then there was my mom, and *then there was daaaaad!* How in the world could he pray *that* long?! As I grew in my knowledge of God in the Word in my teen years, I remember my prayers increased in depth and breadth. I woke up in the morning for focused prayer. I ended my nights with focused prayer. I tried to get up around 5:30 as a teen to go on a prayer walk. It worked once, but still, I look back and see the discipline the Lord gave, and I was getting up an hour before I needed to in order to pray and get into the Word! But then, God brought testing in my life, and I faltered. I didn't know what to pray. I was at a loss. My prayers have ebbed and flowed through the years, and I can even remember one very difficult season of life where all I did was sit in my car for a lengthy drive, and I simply repeated the phrase, "Help me." I honestly didn't know what else to say. I had no more words.

Now, why do I share that with you? Because whatever season we're in, we don't take confidence in our many or few words. And, we shouldn't let our lack of knowing what to pray to keep us from praying. I'm encouraged by the disciples who asked Jesus to teach them to pray. They who walked with Jesus didn't know how they ought to pray. I'm also encouraged by

Romans 8, which says, “**the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.**”<sup>27</sup> **And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.**”<sup>4</sup> For we don’t know what to pray as we ought. For many of us, we think, “I don’t have the right words, so I can’t pray. Wait a second! That’s not biblical logic. Paul makes a blanket statement that we don’t know how to pray as we ought, but that shouldn’t keep us from praying because as we pray, the Spirit perfects the prayers. The reality is that even when we think we know what to pray, our prayers probably have imperfections. Paul says “we don’t know how to pray as we ought” in this fallen world. Yet, the Spirit always intercedes for us during our prayers.

The reality is that when we don’t pray simply because we don’t know what to say, we’re actually depending on us and not on the Lord. The Bible clearly teaches us to not depend on our prayers or on our many words. Jesus commands us to pray in his name – meaning we pray on the basis of him. God hears us because of Christ, not me or my righteousness. So, we pray because we depend on our Triune God who listens, mediates and prays for us. Therefore, prayer completely rests on the mercy and grace of the Father!

I hope this is a tremendous encouragement to all of you. Whether you have many words or few words, the point is relationship and communion with the Lord. The perfection of your words isn’t the point. God is calling you to his loving arms. Will you enter? Will you put yourself in the position of him picking you up and putting you on his lap so-to-speak.

Thank God he tells us that our prayers are imperfect, but that he also tells us that Savior Jesus is perfect! God will answer our prayers according to Christ and he will even train us in prayer as we pray. But the training isn’t simply that we would have the “right words.” The training in prayer is that we would love him more and in loving him more our hearts align to his ways. This reminds me of the psalmist’s prayer, “**Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth; unite my heart to fear your name.**”<sup>5</sup> While the psalmist wants to obey him, and know how to live and act rightly, the greater desire is that his heart (the core of his being) is in awe of God. Without awe of God and fellowship with him, he will accomplish nothing of eternal value because eternal life is *knowing* him. So, listen, don’t let not knowing what to pray keep you from praying. Your sporadic prayers, when looking to the Lord and wanting him, are prayers! Your repetitive, dependent pleadings are heard. Not one prayer goes unnoticed by our loving Father.

This leads me to the third obstacle:

### 3) **You don’t have time.**

The fact of the matter is that we have all been given the same amount of hours in a day. But I will say that we all have different things going on in our day. If you’re in a coma, you might not have ability to pray! If you wake up in the morning to a sick child, you probably won’t have focused communion with God in prayer. But just because it’s not as focused, does that mean you’re not communing with God? As human beings, many of our relationships are developed in the normal, mundane affairs. We converse while making a meal or cleaning the garage or doing other tasks. Yes, we also need focused times in order to develop a relationship, but sometimes I think we automatically guilt ourselves and say we’re failures because we aren’t like Martin

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<sup>4</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ro 8:26–27.

<sup>5</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ps 86:11.

Luther who focused in prayer for three hours a day. God hasn't called us to be Martin Luther. He's called us to commune with him, which will conform us more to the image of Jesus.

Therefore, our prayers will look different from each other because God is calling each ONE of us to himself to *know* him and to be known by him. So, our prayers will look and sound different, but we all can pray. We live in time in which God created us to pray. When we look at Scripture, we see snippet prayers and we see lengthy prayers. Both are appropriate and we shouldn't feel guilty for any prayers that are offered. Also, Paul says "**pray without ceasing.**" Prayer is to be a way of life, like breathing. If we walk by the Spirit, then as Jude says, we are to pray in the Spirit. So, we are to be a praying people all the time. We do have time to pray, but we may be shooting ourselves in the foot by forcing us to a certain way of praying. More accurately, maybe we should say, "I don't have time to pray the way that I think is most spiritual." Let me encourage you to wipe that out of your mind! Don't focus on amount of time. Focus on the Lord and ask him to develop your desires of prayer. Ask him to grow you. Each day, start small and direct your heart to him. Seek to live each day recognizing you are always in the presence of the Lord. Therefore, talk to him. This is a relationship. Honestly, I don't know what might be most helpful for you to keep this in mind for you, but pray and ask the Lord to increase your awareness of your need for him and your privilege to love him and relate with him. Keep this habit going and seek to grow more and more in prayer. I hope and pray that the Spirit empowers us all to see the many opportunities we have to pray.

Let's get into the fourth one now.

#### **4) You have unrealistic expectations for prayer.**

First, let me talk about the unrealistic expectations regarding our demeanor in prayer. Meaning, we think our emotions or mind or will has to essentially be firing on all cylinders to be a valuable prayer. So, you could think, "I need to pray a long period of time" or else it doesn't count. Or, "I need to have amazing feelings" to know that I've prayed correctly. These are unrealistic expectations. I love the story of a pastor in the 1920's who was convicted of his prayerlessness, and he decided he was going to discipline himself to focused prayer for an hour a day. He said when he began and completed his first day of prayer, he felt his mind wander and his emotions pull him away. This went on for a while. He was discouraged by how much of a painful struggle prayer was until one day, he said that during his focused time of prayer that his mouth said, "Amen," and his emotions said, "Hallelujah!" His heart united with the reality of God's will.

The point I'm trying to make with this story is that our emotions don't always follow our will – even in prayer. But we don't say the prayers are unvaluable, unnecessary or worthless because our emotions don't align. The same is true if our minds feel hazy and we don't have many words. Or, maybe our emotions are high, but we aren't able to have focused time because of the various things coming at us in a given day. Does prayer not matter in any of those scenarios? No!

Now, let me talk about another common unrealistic expectation with prayer: a bad definition of faith. I'm sure you've heard people say, "You have to pray in faith!" And by faith they mean "belief that it's going to happen." But, listen carefully, that's not the biblical definition of faith. Faith is trust, dependence, reliance. I don't pray knowing that all I ask for is right. In fact, Paul said in Romans 8 that we don't know how to pray as we ought. Our prayers aren't perfect because we're not perfect, and because we're not perfect, we look (in dependence) to the One who is!

To pray in faith is to pray in dependence on the Lord. I may not get what I want the way I want it. But here's what I do know: **God promises he can give exceeding abundantly above all that I can ask or think to ask!** How do I know this? Because of Jesus. No matter how many or few words, no matter where my emotional or mental struggles are, God hears the dependent prayers of his children because of Jesus! Even in the bleakest of times *when* God seems silent, let's remind ourselves of God's faithfulness to never reject us. Instead, *when* Jesus was forsaken, the Father heard and answered the Son's prayers. Because the Father heard and answered the Son, now all our prayers (the prayers of God's children) are heard and answered by God himself!

Please hear this: Prayer is about expressing and even increasing our dependence on him. Or, as James and Peter say it, prayer is a revelation of our humility before God. We are needy. We believe. Help our unbelief. We are weak. He is strong! He's the Savior. So, let's not lay unrealistic expectations of on ourselves. Our weakness should drive us to the Lord – not cause us to turn away. Praise God for our Mediator, Jesus, on whom we depend in prayer.

This now leads me to the final obstacle.

### 5) You don't take God at his word.

I mentioned one promise already: God promises to give exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think. The phrase indicates that God gives gloriously glorious things. There are no words to describe how wondrously our prayers work in God's plan. But we can believe that God hears and answers. In addition, the Bible tells us that **God holds our tears in a bottle** (see Ps. 56:8) - meaning even our tears are a form of prayer to God. The book of Revelation indicates that God stores believer's prayers and then pours them out in his timing. No Jesus-based, God-focused, Spirit-dependent prayer is wasted at the feet of our Sovereign Lord. Do you believe that?

In addition, we're told that **we have not because we ask not** (see Jas. 4:2). And while we could argue over precisely what that means (and we may need to study more to discover its meaning), the basic gist is that James is clearly saying that there are many things that haven't happened because we haven't prayed about it. Also, the writer of Hebrews calls the Christians to pray for him, and then says, **"I urge you the more earnestly to do this in order that I may be restored to you the sooner."**<sup>6</sup> Somehow, prayer can not only affect what happens, but the writer of Hebrews talks about our communion with God in prayer affecting the timetables of history! How that works with the sovereignty of God is an utter mystery to me. My mind is blown! But if we take God at his word, then why not pray? And, ultimately, if Jesus died for us and rose again to restore us in this communal relationship with God, why would we not want to pray boldly and ask for his glory to be seen on this earth?

In conclusion, I want to read from Psalm 66:20. The psalmist wrote, **"Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me!"**<sup>7</sup> Are you God's child? Meditate on these kind words. Because Jesus was rejected in our place (and then raised up and accepted on his ascension), all who trust him are heard by God. And anytime God hears from us, we know his love surrounds us. **Christian, do not delay to pray. As we look around at our lives, our families, our community, our world, may we find rest, comfort, zeal, joy, perseverance in our communion with and dependence on God through prayer!**

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<sup>6</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Heb 13:19.

<sup>7</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ps 66:20.