

THE POWER OF CHRIST

SERMONS BY TEXAS BAPTIST PASTORS

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SERMON THREE

THE MINISTRY OF PRAYER

By

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“**Lord teach us to pray**” (Luke 11:1).

There are many things which are vital to victorious Christian living. One such is worship. Another is Bible study. Vital, also, beyond words is the practice of faithful stewardship of life and possessions. None, however, is more vital than the ministry of a faithful, earnest prayer life. No doubt, this is the most important of all for in prayer are the dynamic springs of power and leadership for all the rest. Without prayer these springs are dried up and no divine unction is available for life's claimant demands.

Many things are also valuable for the building of great churches, and, through them, the advancement of God's Kingdom around the world. A great spirit of evangelism is absolutely necessary. Coupled with this in the local community must be a missionary zeal which feels the heartthrob of the race, darkened and defeated by sin, and does something about it.

- Adequate buildings are necessary.
- Hilarious, unselfish giving of self and money is indispensable.
- Devout worship and sweet Christian fellowship must not be overlooked.

But, for loosing the waiting Holy Spirit which will make possible all of these, our churches must be praying churches. The ministry of prayer is necessary to the proper spiritual strength and growth of either the individual or church. This is why Jesus said, “**Men ought always to pray,**” and is the reason for Paul saying, “**Pray without ceasing.**”

I. As we think of this matter which is of such primary and vital importance it is well that we should understand its nature

What is prayer? The answer to this question is so simple that it fairly startles us. No doubt, much of the failure in prayer is due to the false idea that such is dependent upon some elaborate ritual or an intricate operation which only the clergy or highly trained laity can perform.

Instead, prayer is as simple as a child's request to its mother for food, and anyone who will humble himself and become as a little child before God can pray effectively and victoriously.

- A little child of tender years toddles in from a morning of play and says to his mother, "I'se hungry—give me some milk." That is prayer.

- A publican smites his breast and says, "**God be merciful to me a sinner.**" That is prayer.

- David, crying, "**As the hart panteth after the water brook, so panteth my soul after Thee, O God,**" was performing the ministry of prayer.

- When a centurion met Jesus and said, "**Lord, my servant lieth at home sick of the palsy, grievously tormented,**" Jesus recognized it as prayer and said, "**I will go and heal him.**"

Someone has well described prayer as "the soul's outreach to God," and another said: "Prayer is the soul's sincere desire, Unuttered or expressed."

Certainly, prayer is not dependent on words. It may be expressed in words and should be on many occasions. However, many of the so-called prayers we hear are nothing more than speeches to God or the audience which listens. Prayer is like love—words are its expression and not its essence.

A lad and lassie go the romantic trail of courtship. With words which only lovers can use, they tell each other of their love, but each waits for evidence of love longed for deeper than words. Such evidence is given when soul is pledged to soul in the engagement; and love is proved when soul is knit to soul at the marriage altar.

We are reminded of a couple who came at the Christmas season some years ago to be married. As usual, we asked if they had a ring, and, instead of answering directly, the groom simply said, "We will not have a ring ceremony."

The wedding was over and this groom turned to me with a twinkle in his eye and said, "Now, I'm going to surprise her." He drew from his pocket a diamond ring, which sparkled like the stars, and placed it upon her finger. She was surprised, and, leaping into his arms, womanlike, began to cry. He wept for joy with her and the preacher could not hold back his tears.

Yes! She had told him of her love and there was no reason for him to doubt it. But he had chosen to wait until the silent unseen soul of her had made the surrender which words could not describe to give visible answer to his own love. So with prayer.

Words may be spoken. Sobs may choke words away. Tears may be the only outward evidence of inward yearning. Imperious tasks and pressing crowds may make words impossible. But Jesus said, "**Your father knoweth what ye have need of before ye ask him**"; and he listens not to the language of the lips but to the language of the soul.

Of the many words in the Hebrew of the Old Testament for prayer, one comes from the word which means "*incense*" and shows prayer to be "*sweet incense*" to God.

The aged John, on Patmos, comforted the persecuted saints of the seven churches by telling them that he saw their prayers as sweet incense before God and the Lamb. Verily, the prayers of His children please God. This is the antithesis of a Hebrew word for sin which comes from the word that means to smell bad, showing sin as a stench, repulsive to God.

This idea of prayer as sweet incense is significantly in line with Dr. Hallesby's statement that "prayer is simply opening the door of our hearts and affairs and letting God in to do His will."

Another Hebrew word for prayer shows it to be a bombardment of the throne of God with our petitions and faith. Jesus taught this element in prayer in the parable of the man who went to the house of his friend at midnight for bread and received, not because he was his friend, "**but because of his importunity.**"

II. With this brief thought about the nature of prayer we turn to consider the ministry of prayer

If prayer is of primary importance, if it is pleasing to God, if it is the key which unlocks our hearts and affairs to let God do His will and work in and through us, then, there must be a poignantly significant ministry for us to perform through prayer. Certainly there is such ministry and with it a privilege, a responsibility, a clamant stewardship. This is the reason for Samuel saying to Israel, "**God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you,**" and a further reason for Paul's exhortation "**pray without ceasing.**"

We are first reminded of a ministry in our own behalf through prayer.

James tells us, "**Ye have not because ye ask not.**" We trudge our pilgrim way, much of the time, distraught, burdened, defeated and in despair because we fail to pray. From a purely selfish standpoint, we are foolish beyond words if we fail to stay in touch with the God of protection and abundant supply through prayer. It is through prayer that life's problems are solved and its crises met.

Those who pray will never know, until they are with Jesus in Heaven's land, how much of tragedy and suffering they and their loved ones have been spared because God threw a cordon of protecting angels about them in answer to their prayers. Those who do not open their hearts to God in humble prayer cannot know how much of loss and heartache, suffering and sorrow they and theirs could have been spared had they not failed in the ministry of prayer. This is preventive prayer and is like a mighty army which fights our battles, and wins them for us, before we are forced to bare our backs to the lash.

In spite of the fact that God shields us from many tragedies in answer to our prayer for guidance and safekeeping, we still come to the times of crisis and need. Such is inevitable with us in our frailty and weakness. Young and old must make decisions of eternal import. Both, alike, will feel the pull and sway of overmastering temptations. For some the burdens will be too heavy and for others the problems too difficult to solve. For all, will come the time in the valley of the shadows when the home shall have its hush and, for each, the contemplation of entrance upon that journey from whose borne there is no returning.

In all of these, when dearest friends and keenest skill are impotent, man can be his own helper and priest through the ministry of prayer, which opens the flood gates of divine power and love in his behalf.

- When the good king Hezekiah lay at the gates of death his life was lengthened through prayer.
- When Gideon faced the task of delivering Israel from overwhelming numbers of the Midianites, through prayer, courage and victory were gained.
- So, also, Elijah when faced with a challenge to himself and God, won through simple and faithful prayer as did Paul and Silas in the inner prison of the Philippian jail.

The same God and the same privilege of approaching him is ours today.

Not only are life's problems solved by prayer but through prayer great spiritual sinews are built in the Christian life. I, verily, believe that it is impossible to grow a great Christian life without much prayer. Failing here the gates are closed through which God enters to master and strengthen and shape our souls. Without it the spiritual exercise necessary to gain strength unto Christlikeness is neglected.

David had many faults but because of his humility and prayer it could be said of him that he **“was a man after God's own heart.”**

Peter, on one side of Pentecost, was a cowardly, slinking denier of his Lord. On the other side he preached the mighty Pentecostal sermon, told the lame man to rise up and walk, told the snarling Jews that they denied the Holy One and killed the Prince of life and answered their threats by saying, **“We must obey God rather than man.”**

Yes, prayer transforms weaklings into mighty spiritual giants. How the world needs such transformed men today!

Besides the transforming power of prayer in our own lives we are not to forget the ministry of our prayer on behalf of others. We are enjoined in the Bible to pray for each other. This blessed ministry of intercession is the means by which we can link the omnipotent, omnipresent God with absent friends or needs. By this means we, in the homeland, can have a part in the march of the Gospel in foreign fields. Through this glorious ministry the shut-in saint can help in gaining victories in his church. Christ instructed us to pray **“the Lord of the Harvest to send laborers into the harvest.”**

If this is done there will be no dearth of missionaries. If our churches will pray more for the Holy Spirit to move upon the workers needed in their organizations God will burn their consciences with a zeal that will not let them refuse when called upon to serve. Those fitted to teach would, more and more, respond to calls to serve if such calls were made in an atmosphere of prayer. Deacons would accept their tasks more readily. New power would be given to those who do serve and the barriers of sin would be broken in the lives of the lost, if our churches were great dynamos of prayer and faith.

III. Now comes the natural and poignant question of the “how” of prayer

“How can one perform this far-reaching, blessed ministry of prayer?” “How can one be victorious in prayer?” It would certainly seem presumptuous for anyone to claim to be expert in prayer. While as simple as a child’s unstudied plea, prayer is so dependent upon attributes peculiar to the Divine nature that when one feels that he is adept in it he may well fear that he stands at the gates of defeat. In this regard, at least, we are all like the mighty Paul who said, **“When I am weak, then am I strong.”** Breathing the prayer of the disciples, for ourself and for everyone, namely: **“Lord teach us to pray,”** we make some suggestions which we trust will be helpful.

First, we must keep our prayer windows open at all times.

The lanes of approach to God’s throne must be kept clear. Prayers which are hindered by barriers of sin and neglect are of little avail. Those whose prayer sinews have become flabby through misuse are never ready for the battles which hurl themselves at them.

Daniel, the slave lad, was offered riches and position by the heathen king, but refused, and became the mightiest man of the empire and had God himself as his companion in the lion’s den. The secret of it all is found in the fact that he rested his life and future in God’s hand and kept his prayer-window open toward the city of God. Here is the secret for us all if we would go from the slavery of things to mastery over all circumstance.

We must not allow the prayer-windows to be closed by sin. Isaiah explained Israel’s tragic plight by saying, **“Your iniquities have separated between you and your God and your sins have hid his face from you that he will not hear.”** David said, **“If I regard iniquity in my heart the Lord will not hear me.”**

On the other hand, when the good king, Hezekiah, faced death and could say to the Lord, **“Remember now how I have walked before thee in truth and with a perfect heart and have done that which was good in thy sight”** his prayer was answered. He challenged God with a righteous, obedient life and that was prayer enough. Loose, worldly, sinful living will choke the avenues of approach to God. Righteous, devout living will break down the barriers and swing wide the windows toward God who answers prayer.

Again, prayer-windows are kept open, as they will be by no other means, by regular and constant exercise in prayer.

Our teachers in college and theological seminary used to say, with evident exactness, that nothing, not even scholarship which they emphasized very much, was as essential to the making of an effective preacher as preaching. The young preacher was counseled to preach at every opportunity. On the streets, at the crossroads, in a school house, in the obscure country church, anywhere any group would let the student preacher exercise on them, he was to preach, preach, preach.

The same is true of prayer. Nothing will make one an effective prayer without much praying.

Just as the member of the body which is unused will wither away, so one's prayer life which is neglected will fade and become powerless. The little streams which crawl around the hills and over the meadow lands become choked with debris or stagnant, with animals dying on their banks of thirst, in the dry season, but when rains of winter and spring come they are swept clean and made fountains of life-giving water. So the neglect of prayer will leave our lives choked with sins and cares and without a blessing for the thirsty world about us, but constant prayer will make the floods of spiritual power and blessing to flow in us and through us.

Another suggestion regarding the "How" of prayer is that prayer must be in earnestness.

The mere rattling of words, the passive breathing of requests, the mechanical observance of ritual which do not come from a burdened soul which sincerely seeks rapport with God is little, if any, better than no pretense at prayer at all.

Prayer without earnestness borders close on mockery; and earnestness in prayer makes the heaviest possible demands on all of one's being. We have heard devout men of great prayer lives say that prayer is the hardest work in the world. There must be a willingness to pay the price of victory.

Listen to Isaiah saying, "**When Israel travailed she brought forth her children.**" This is the word in the Hebrew which means to travail in child-birth. When Israel was earnest enough that she was willing to go down into the valley of price-paying, as a mother is thus willing in order to bring her baby into the world, she won her victory.

It was by such travail in the garden that Christ said, "**Not my will but thine be done**"; and marched on to the cross through which sons and daughters are born unto God. This earnestness calls for a willingness to keep on praying until the victory comes. Yonder on the banks of the Jabbok is Jacob wrestling with God in prayer. He is wounded in the struggle. He, with whom he wrestles, asks him to let him go but Jacob replies, "**I will not let thee go, except thou bless me,**" He did bless him and he changed his name to Israel which means, "*A Prince of God,*" for, said he, "**Thou hast power with God and with men and hast prevailed.**"

Still another essential to victorious praying is faith. "Without faith it is impossible to please God."

- By faith Enoch was translated.
- By faith Noah built an ark to the saving of his house.
- By faith Abraham went out into a strange land.
- By faith Moses chose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the pleasures of a Godless nation.

And what shall we say of the great army of overcomers who have followed unto this day? It is, only, by faith that they have marched from obscure cradles, from dungeons, from pits of sin, from jails, and from blighting doubt to be they through whom God has guided the courses of history to glorify his name.

All of God's promises for answered prayer are based on the faith of the one who prays. Our prayers will go unanswered if there is not faith. Peter walked on the water so long as he kept his eyes on Jesus, but when his faith wavered and he looked at the raging storm in fear he began to sink. So are we defeated when our faith is gone. One constant prayer that we should all pray is, "**Lord increase our faith.**"

A final requisite for victorious prayer and one which we must not, we dare not, forget is that prayer must be according to the will of God.

The most significant thing about the prayer which Jesus gave as a model to his disciples is that therein, he taught that when we pray we must first pray for God himself. Looking to God for help, "**Hallowed be thy name, Thy Kingdom come . . . Thy will be done**" must be our first desire.

Standing in the dark hour, face to face with some great challenge, and needing God to help we must have a loyalty to Him which desires His greatest glory, a humility which is willing for His will to be done and a faith which knows that His will, whatever it be, is best.

Someone asks, "Do you mean to say that when I stand beside the bed of my loved one, who is sick unto death, and pray for him I must be willing for God to take him if He wills such?"

Yes, I mean exactly that; and in every crisis in which we pause to pray there must be this willingness, even a sincere desire, for God's will to be done.

Let me repeat, there must be in prayer a loyalty to God which is willing for God to glorify Himself at any cost to us and there must be a faith which is satisfied that God's will is better than ours. This is the only kind of prayer God can, and will, always answer.

Someone has well said that it would not do for God to answer all of our prayers because we are so blind we cannot see the consequences of them.

I once heard of a woman of great sorrow who said that her grief was due to the fact that she had insisted in prayer that her will be done without regard to God's will and God answered her prayer. She had dreamed of and yearned for a baby, even beyond the usual for womankind. When it came it was injured in birth and the doctor said it could not live. She prayed and told God that she couldn't, she wouldn't, give it up. The baby lived but to be a sufferer every day of its life, afflicted in body and mind. When she spoke of it she would say, "I was not willing for God's will to be done. He did mine and see what I have done."

Whether this is a true story or not, it illustrates many experiences which might come to us if the great God, who knows the future as the past, should answer all the prayers we pray in our blindness, instead of following His own loving way on our behalf.

Let us remember, again, with Dr. Hallesby, that prayer is opening our hearts and letting God come in and do His will in us and through us.

We are taught to pray in Christ's name. Such praying is according to His will. When our own wills are between our prayers and God we need not expect an answer.

When we can live in the unclouded assurance that God knows what is best for us in every condition, and that He is able and willing to do what is best, it becomes easy to get our wills out of the way.

- However great our need we know He is able to overcome on our behalf.
- However passionate our desire for a particular way, or however clouded the way before us, we know He knows the right way and that His love will lead us in it.

We are like the visitors to the workshop of the tapestry weavers. They saw the wrong side with its ragged ends and inharmonious colors—its disappointing, grating ugliness. When they complained of their dissatisfaction the guide showed them the other side where the weavers worked with skill and design; and at whose magic touch the unraveled skein was transformed into tapestry of glorious harmony and beauty.

We see the wrong side with human eyes and fret and toss and are disappointed because of its seeming disharmony. God sees the right side and weaves the thread of our lives into the pattern of His eternal and perfect plan. The span of our years are but a speck on the long stretch of eternity and we see only a part of the relations of that tiny speck.

God, the eternal Now, knows the unborn future as He does the unfolded past and fits our lives, and that of the peoples of our day, into the weaving of His perfect plan for all ages.

“Careless seems the great Avenger,
History's pages but record
One death grapple in the darkness,
‘Twixt old systems and the Word.
Truth forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne;
But that scaffold sways the future,
And behind the dark unknown
Standeth God within the shadows,
Keeping watch above His own.”

With assurance of His presence, His power, His wisdom and His love we can march on, unafraid, having “**the shield of faith**” in the ministry of prayer for ourselves and on behalf of others.

In a world which seems, in many respects, to have turned the clock of time back to a medieval paganism, and fraught with problems, multitudinous, in our own lives, the best and wisest often know not what to do. There is only one thing to do and that one thing is sure.

Through this gracious ministry we can place our hands in the nail-scarred hand and say with another:

“The steps of the way I know not,
But my Leader I know full well,
My hand is in His, I fear not—
In the depths of His peace I dwell.

“He knows where He leads; I know not,
But I trust in His love each day;
My heart is His own; I fear not
For the way is my Lord’s highway”

Dr. Hubbard Hoyt Hargrove was born at Shubuta, Mississippi, July 27, 1895. Education, Mississippi College, U. of Colo., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (B.S., M.S., TH.M. and Th.D.). Ordained, 1917. Pastorates: Utica, Miss., 1920-23; Johnston, Colo., 1923-24; Alvord, Texas, 1925-26; Moody, Texas, 1926-28; Grand Prairie, Texas, 1928-32; Hillcrest Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas, 1932-36; Vernon, Texas, 1936-37; Columbus Ave. Baptist Church, Waco, Texas, June 1, 1937 to date.

Columbus Ave. Baptist Church, Waco, has 2,200 members. There have been over 100 additions since June 1, 1937 under Dr. Hargrove’s ministry, and contributions have been \$15,000. Their record S. S. attendance is 950. The total value of all their church property is \$143,000 (All statistics as of Dec. 15, 1937).

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