

The Prayer-Filled Life

Mt 21:12-17

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After entering Jerusalem in triumph, Jesus goes into the temple and drives out the merchants and money changers there. He quotes two Old Testament prophets: "My house will be called a house of prayer" (Isaiah 56:7), "but you are making it a den of robbers" (Jeremiah 7:11). God's intention for the temple was that it would be a house of prayer for all nations, all people. The religious leaders in Jesus' day neglected this purpose of the temple and allowed injustice in the place of worship.

For the Jews, the temple was God's house. And God's house was to be a house of prayer—a place of prayer for all people. But in the New Testament, God's temple is the church, the people of God.

The church is God's house. The building's not the church. The people are the church. The community of faith is the house of God. If the original temple was to be a house of prayer, don't you think the church is to be a house of prayer? Part of God's call to us is to be a prayer-filled church.

Prayer, intimate communion and communication with God, is the church's priority. It's our life. Henri Nouwen says that praying is not one of many things the church does. Prayer is the church's very being. When prayer is no longer our primary concern, and when we fail to see our many activities as part of prayer itself, the church quickly declines into a club with a common cause but no common calling (*Reaching Out* 156).

Richard Foster, commenting on the church as a house of prayer, says that too often churches are places for anything but prayer. "True, we need to have our business meetings and our committee meetings and our Bible studies and our self-help groups and our worship services, but if the fire is not hot at the center, these things are only ashes in our hands" (*Prayer* 197).

Today we conclude our series on six core values of the church, six "streams" of Christian faith and life. This one is the Prayer-Filled Life. Foster calls it "the steady gaze of the soul upon the God who loves us." He says that we all hunger for a prayer-filled life. We want a richer and fuller

practice of God's presence. This stream can show us the way into such intimacy with God (*Streams of Living Water*, 49, 25).

In the prayer-filled life we seek to carry around within us an inner sanctuary where we're always looking to God and adoring God. We want to be aware of God's presence in every moment. We really want to follow the Apostle Paul's encouragement to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

When we are a prayer-filled church and each of us has a prayer-filled life, we'll experience God in amazing ways. Terry Teykl has spoken in our District several times. He has a strong prayer ministry. Through his workshops and books he encourages churches to be faithful in prayer. He's been promoting the idea of praying the Lord's Prayer each day at noon. His latest book is called *Praying the Lord's Prayer at Noon*. It's a fourteen day devotional. I just ordered a supply for us to hand out here.

Terry says that the idea of praying at noon isn't new. Many traditions include noonday prayers. At least one powerful move of God is related to a noon time prayer meeting. In 1857, in New York City, a man named Jeremiah Lampier started a noon prayer meeting in an abandoned church building on Fulton Street. Jeremiah was a tailor and he was also the care taker of the empty church building. Sitting on a park bench one day, he saw the depression on people's faces. So many in the city were barely getting by and struggling to care for their families. So on September 23, he decided to open the doors of the church at noon and welcome people to come and pray. After half an hour, six people wandered in. The next day twenty people showed up. Within months, at noon the church was full of people praying, and word began to spread all over the city and the east coast.

Some say that a million people across the U.S. came to Christ through the movement that started with that noon prayer meeting. Several ministries and missions developed out of it. The Fulton Street revival was a documented move of God that started because one person said simply, "Let's pray." Terry Teykl says that if God can start a revival in an abandoned church, surely God can move in our inhabited ones!

(Teykl, 7-8; also see

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2007/september/fulton-street-revival-anniversary.html>, accessed 3/17/16).

So how can we be a house of prayer? What's included in a prayer-filled life? To be full of prayer, we actually have to pray. We just start praying. That's probably easier said than done. Let's look to the Scripture for some help.

As I re-read the Palm Sunday account in Matthew, thinking about the church being a house of prayer, I started seeing aspects of prayer, lessons about prayer, in this story. I don't think I'm forcing something into the story, but drawing insights from the story that can help us pray.

Prayer recognizes Jesus as the true King. Palm Sunday is about Jesus entering Jerusalem as King. But, Jesus chooses to define the kind of king he is. By riding into the city on a donkey instead of a warhorse, Jesus shows that he comes in peace; he's the king of peace, not a warrior-king.

All through Matthew's Gospel we read that Jesus is King. Jesus talks a lot about the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God. The kingdom is at hand, it's available because Jesus the King is present. It's a kingdom of righteousness, peace, joy, and love. It's a kingdom that challenges the world's way of doing things and of determining greatness.

What does that tell us about prayer? Prayer is in the context of the rule and reign of Jesus. Through prayer, we access the kingdom of God and all its resources. In prayer, we submit to God's rule, we seek first God's kingdom and righteousness. Prayer is about aligning our heart with God's heart. It's about making God's intentions ours. We want to line up with God's rule and what God is doing. That's why we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done."

Prayer includes surrendering ourselves and what we have to the Lord. Jesus sends two disciples to fetch the donkey for him to ride. He may have made arrangements with the donkey's owner beforehand or he may have just known what would happen. Either way, the owner was willing to give what he had for the Lord to use.

In prayer, we surrender, we submit to God. We give ourselves to the Lord. We hold our possessions in open hands. Everything we have we've

received from God. Now we offer it back and commit to use it for God's purposes.

Scripture informs prayer. In this brief section of the Gospel (21:1-16), there are five quotations from the Old Testament Scriptures. Jesus fulfills what the prophets were talking about. He draws on the Scriptures to show the meaning of what he's doing. The crowd uses Scripture as they honor Jesus.

Reading and studying the Bible go along with prayer. The Word-Centered Life and the Prayer-Filled Life need each other. When I read the Bible and pray, I like to take an idea or a phrase that I've read in Scripture and turn into a prayer. I'll write a prayer, addressing God with the words of a Bible passage. That's one way to pray the Scriptures. Find a way that works for you.

Praise is a big part of prayer. The people in the crowd spread their cloaks on the road and cut branches to spread on the road as well. There's an account in the OT of the people acclaiming their king by spreading their cloaks on the steps for him (2 Kings 9:12-13). Tree branches, especially palm branches, were used during the Feast of Tabernacles. But it was also customary to wave palm branches as an expression of praise and victory (1 Maccabees 13:51; 2 Macc 10:7; Revelation 7:9).

"Hosanna" was a word that meant "save us now." But it came to be an expression of praise. To say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" comes from Psalm 118. To pronounce someone as blessed like that could also be an expression of praise.

In prayer, we acknowledge the Lord. We declare who God is and we declare that God is worthy of honor and glory and praise. When praise and adoration and worship are part of our praying, we experience God's presence in a powerful way. The Lord's Prayer begins and ends with praise: "Our Father in heaven, may your holy name be honored. ...For the kingdom and the power and the glory are yours, now and forever."

Prayer confronts injustice. Jesus goes into the temple and courageously confronts injustice there. The actions of Jesus that could be seen as political are most likely what led to his execution. It wasn't just buying and selling or exchanging currency in the temple that Jesus went

after. Possibly the ones selling and exchanging were cheating people. But mostly they were interfering with the prayer and worship of people the temple was intended to welcome.

In prayer we may get in touch with God's judgment on injustice and oppression. Prayer can lead us to confront wrongdoing—starting in our own lives. But we may be called to confront others as well. And that can lead to sacrifice, even to the cross.

Prayer is available to everyone. The part of the temple precinct where the merchants and moneychangers were set up was called the Court of the Gentiles. It was a place where non-Jewish people were supposed to be able to come and pray to the God of Israel. That may be why Jesus quotes Isaiah 56:7, "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations." In that chapter of Isaiah, God promises to accept as members of his people those who had previously been banned from even entering the temple.

Prayer teaches us to rely on God and obey God. Jesus also quotes Jeremiah 7:11 about the temple becoming a den of robbers. In that chapter, Jeremiah tells the people that just having the temple in their city doesn't guarantee their protection if they don't obey God. In line with that, Jesus declares God's judgment on the temple establishment that is rejecting him.

We can experience healing through prayer. The blind and the lame came to Jesus at the temple. Some Jewish traditions excluded the blind and the lame from the temple (see 2 Samuel 5:8). And yet, as these people came to Jesus, he healed them.

When we come to the Lord in prayer, we can experience healing of all kinds. And as a house of prayer, we need to be ready to welcome everyone who comes to Jesus. We need to be ready and willing to let him extend healing power through us.

Prayer involves being childlike. Children were shouting in the temple courts, "Hosanna to the Son of David." They were probably just repeating what they'd heard everyone else shouting earlier. But it irritated the religious leaders and they complained to Jesus. But he replied, "Remember what the Bible says? 'From the lips of children and infants you, Lord, have called forth your praise'" (Psalm 8:2).

You can pray and your prayers are important. The Lord God of the universe hears your prayers. Sometimes people talk about praying and feeling as if their prayers get no higher than the ceiling. You know what? Your prayers don't have to go higher than the ceiling! They don't even have to go that high because God is right here. He's closer to us than our own breath. He hears us.

Maybe you think you don't know how to pray. We don't have to know a lot about praying to do it. Of course, we can always grow and learn more about prayer, but God is pleased with our praying, no matter how feeble it is.

A man heard his granddaughter one night repeating the alphabet in an oddly reverent way. He asked her, "What on earth are you up to?" She explained, "I'm saying my prayers, but I can't think of exactly the right words tonight, so I'm just saying all the letters. God will put them together for me, because he knows what I'm thinking" (*Illustrations Unlimited* 424). Just offer to God your thoughts, desires, feelings, questions and thanks. He knows what you mean.

I like the illustration of little children coloring pictures for their parents. The sun may be black, the grass purple, and the sky green. But the parents will exclaim how beautiful it is and stick it on the refrigerator. "A little child cannot do a bad coloring; nor can a child of God do bad prayer" (Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel* 155).

There are many ways to pray and many kinds of prayer. The best way to have a prayer-filled life is to start praying. Set aside a little time each day to pray. Do some reading about prayer. Use *The Upper Room* devotional book. Pray the Lord's Prayer at noon each day. Try writing a prayer. Say a prayer of thanks for a meal. The important thing is to start. Ask God for guidance and help (you're already praying!). As you move into the Prayer-Filled Life, connect it with the Word-Centered Life, the Spirit-Empowered Life, the Compassionate Life, the Incarnational Life, and the Committed Life. Let all these "streams" of God's mercy flow in your living. Let them come together in the church and flow through us.

Core Values—Living the “Streams” of Christian Faith and Life

Word-Centered

Action: Consciously look to Jesus as the Center

Regular Bible reading; join a Bible study group

Pray for people in your sphere of influence, cultivate relationships, grasp opportunities

God gives for witness and invitation

Spirit-Empowered

Action: Consciously yield and open yourself to the Holy Spirit

Cultivate fruit of the Spirit

Explore gifts of the Spirit

<http://survey.ministrymatters.com/SpiritualGifts>

Compassionate

Action: Think about a need in the community you wish someone would do something about.

Find some others who are interested and look for ways to meet that need.

God in All of Life

Action: Do everything in the name of Jesus for the glory of God

Pay careful and prayerful attention to the sacraments, especially Holy Communion

Committed

Action: Develop “holy habits”—prayer, Scripture, Communion, fellowship, fasting, etc.

Seek to be entirely devoted to God

Be honest about sin—repent and believe

Prayer-Filled

Action: Set aside time each day to listen for God

Pray the Lord’s Prayer daily at noon

Dig deeper: <https://renovare.org/about/ideas/the-six-streams>

Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water*

Richard Foster and James Bryan Smith, *Devotional Classics*

James Bryan Smith and Lynda Graybeal, *A Spiritual Formation Workbook*