

This series of sermons is about growing strong in Jesus. In order to grow strong we have been studying the four things that the first Christians devoted themselves to. The Holy Spirit led them to do these four things after they had put their faith in Jesus, started repenting of their sins, and were baptized. These four things helped them begin to grow strong in Jesus.

Our key verse is Acts 2:42. Here we see these four devotions.

Acts 2:42 (NIV) They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

(Romans 12:12; Acts 1:14, 6:4; Colossians 4:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:17)

The first devotion was a devotion to learning the faith. These new followers of Jesus knew next to nothing about what Jesus expected of them now. So they turned to Jesus' apprentices whom we call apostles. Can you imagine what it must have been like for those 12 apostles? They were suddenly responsible for 3,000 converts. They had to do some quick organization. I imagine someone spoke up and said, "Okay, guys, there are 12 of us and 3,000 of them. Let's divide them up into groups of about 250 each. Spread out around the courtyard (temple colonnade) and start teaching them all we know about Jesus." Now 250 people is one big Sunday School class. We don't know how they did it, but they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching.

Secondly they devoted themselves to each other. They recognized that God had created something new in Jesus. They saw themselves as partners in Jesus. They knew they needed to stick together. They gave sacrificially to make sure everyone's basic needs were met. They devoted themselves to their partnership in Christ Jesus.

The third devotion we looked at last week. They devoted themselves to the practice of the Lord's Supper. Jesus had introduced this new ritual to His followers the night before His death. And now the Holy Spirit reminded the apostles to remember Jesus' death in this manner. So it became a key part of their gatherings.

Today we are looking at that last devotion. They devoted themselves to prayer. They were the first to experience this new thing God was doing. It was all new to them also. Even the apostles were in over their heads. All of the Christians recognized their need for God's direction and help. They recognized their deep need to pray to God. They needed strength. They needed courage. They needed wisdom. So they needed to pray. And they devoted themselves to prayer.

That is the same reason we must devote ourselves to prayer. Our world is more complicated than ever. It is full of conflicting ideas and values. It is full of immorality and even evil. We need to pray. We need direction from God. We need instruction, wisdom, and courage. We need to know how to live in our world. We need to pray.

So let me ask you, are you devoted to prayer? That word devotion is a strong word. It implies a strong commitment. When you are devoted to something you give it special attention. What are you devoted to?

Maybe you are devoted to a TV show. You let nothing come between you and your show. You don't answer the phone. You ignore knocks at the door.

Maybe you are devoted to a special meal for your family each week. Or maybe you have a regular appointment with a friend and you let nothing interfere with it.

Maybe you are devoted to a hobby. You free up time to engage in this activity. You look forward to it all day long.

Maybe you are devoted to Facebook. Maybe you are devoted to video games or online games.

Maybe you are devoted to your boat, your bike, your car. You wash it, polish it, and vacuum it all the time. It is your baby and you baby it devotedly.

This is the kind of devotion we need towards prayer. You cannot grow strong in Jesus without prayer. Prayer connects us to God. Prayer moves us beyond knowing about God to knowing God. Prayer moves us beyond God as a generality to God as a specific person who is personal to us.

For example, we can speak of God, the creator of heaven and earth. That 's general. Speaking of the God who made ME. That is personal. Prayer takes us to that God.

Prayer takes us from God as the judge of all the earth to the God who I must confess my sins to. Prayer makes God personal.

Prayer takes us from God who possesses all knowledge and all power to the God who is the one who has what I need. Prayer makes God personal.

Lots of people know about God, but only in a general way. Christians too can drift into an impersonal relationship with God. Don't make yourself a stranger to God. Pray the real you to God, the you that you don't share with anyone else. Pray specific prayers about you. Be devoted to prayer.

We pray because the source of all power is God. We pray because the source of all knowledge is God. We pray because we need what only God can give. We pray because we need God's help, God's provision, God's presence. So be devoted to prayer.

We don't know what the devotion to prayer of these early disciples looked like. But here is some guidance for our devotion to prayer.

Devotion to prayer means you plan for it.

The things you are devoted to you don't approach haphazardly. If you are devoted to going to the beach this summer, you don't say, "Yeah, we'll get around to it." That won't get you to the beach. You know you have to pick a date. You have to arrange to get off work. You have to make reservations for a place to stay. You have to get your supplies together for the beach, the motel, the campsite, etc.

A devotion to prayer means to plan for it. You schedule it. You make appointments with God so that prayer becomes a priority. If someone wants you to do something at the time you are normally in prayer you look at your calendar and say, "Nope, I have an important appointment at that time." You don't want to miss your appointment with God, so you prioritize it. You plan for it.

Devotion to prayer means you sacrifice for it.

That means you give up something to make it happen. If your schedule is always full and you have no margin, no wiggle room, you have to drop something you are now doing so you can use that time for prayer. Except on special occasions, I don't think you should give up sleep. But you could give up a meal. You could give up some TV. You could give up some reading or hobby time. You could give up some phone time.

I was reading an article by a pastor who admitted that the first thing he and about 57% of most adults do is check their phone the first thing after they wake up. I was a little amused by that. I don't even turn mine on until I'm ready to head out the door for the day. You could give up some phone time in order to spend time with God in prayer.

In order to make prayer a priority you will have to sacrifice something else.

Devotion to prayer means you study it.

Become a student of prayer. Study prayer to become a more effective pray-er.

One of the workers at VBS shared that he had bowled a perfect 300 game the night before. That is pretty special. Now, you don't become that kind of bowler by just picking up a ball and rolling it down the lane at the pins. To become good enough to bowl a perfect game you have spent much time thinking about what your arm is doing when you roll the ball. What is my hand doing? Where are my fingers pointing when I release the ball. You have to study your own throw and feel with your mind what your body is doing when you roll it. You have to learn about bowling while you are bowling. You can approach prayer in somewhat the same way to learn about praying.

You could do a similar thing with prayer. You can keep track of what works for you and make that your regular habit. Then work to improve it.

You can also take a more systematic approach to learning about prayer. You might set yourself a course of study. For example, you could do a study of prayer through the Bible to learn more about prayer. I can give you a list of all the Bible passages that mention prayer. You can systematically study those to see what you can learn. (There are 371 occurrences of some form of the word pray in the NIV.)

Devotion to prayer means you defend it.

Others will not understand your devotion to prayer. They will not understand why you can't just pray at another time and meet them at your usual prayer time. But you will explain the benefits you have noticed from spending devoted time in prayer.

For example, when I take the time to pray as I should, I get more done in less time and it is of better quality. The same isn't true when I neglect prayer. The reason this is true is that spiritual things require spiritual resources.

Our work as a church is spiritual work. Things like preaching, teaching, caring, showing kindness are all designed to speak to people's hearts. But the real power in these things is the Holy Spirit. Only the Holy Spirit speaks to hearts. So spiritual activities require prayer. That is why those first Christians devoted themselves to prayer. It is why we should devote ourselves to prayer. So I encourage you to grow strong in Jesus by making prayer a priority.

Now it may be that these aspects of prayer are not new to you. Yet you are still not devoted to prayer. You pray now and then. You pray haphazardly. You pray shallowly. And if pushed, you likely have a reason for not being devoted to prayer. Maybe you don't devote yourself to prayer because of your pride. You don't like to humble yourself, even before God. It galls you to admit you can't do some things for yourself. So you avoid asking God for help. Your pride is keeping you from growing strong in Jesus.

Maybe you avoid prayer because you are angry at God. Your real prayer these days is, "Why, me, God? Why is my life like this. I expected a better life from you." Your anger is keeping you from growing strong in Jesus.

Maybe you avoid prayer because you are afraid. You are afraid of God. You don't really love God, you fear Him. You usually avoid unpleasant things or those who could make things unpleasant for you. You don't want people like police officers, judges, and the like to notice you. They might notice you doing something wrong. You avoid the doctor because he or she might discover something wrong with you. In that same vein, you avoid God. You are afraid of what God might say to you about you.

You don't know or haven't believed that God loves you tremendously. He wants to show you compassion, kindness, and mercy. He's not out to punish you, even when He corrects you. Your fear is keeping you from growing strong in Jesus.

Maybe you avoid prayer because of some sin in your life that you just don't want to admit to or give up. You know it is sin but you don't want to let go of it. You don't want this sin out in the open between you and God. You don't want to give God an opportunity to confront you about this. Your sin is keeping you from growing strong in Jesus.

Maybe you avoid prayer because you usually avoid things that are hard and you believe prayer to be hard. Listen, at its simplest, prayer is asking God for things. Yes, there are other kinds of prayer you might engage in, and you will learn those as you go on. But overall, at its simplest, prayer is asking for things. Jesus expressed this over and over in His teaching. Prayer is mostly asking for things.

Maybe you avoid prayer because you did ask, and God did not come through. A devotion to prayer will teach you that you have to ask for the right things. As we grow strong in Jesus we learn the right kinds of things to ask for. Jesus never said He would fulfill our selfish desires. But there are many things Jesus is eager to give if we will ask.

Prayer is connecting to God. Prayer connects you to the power and knowledge of God. Why would you keep yourself separate from those things? What is keeping you from God's help? Give it up. Give up your pride, your anger, your fear, your sin. Give up what is keeping you weak in Jesus. Devote yourself to prayer and find all that you need to live all that Jesus has for you to live.

If you want to be strong in Jesus, strong in faith, strong in obedience, strong in His grace, then devote yourself to prayer as one of the things that will contribute to your growth. Stop this week and evaluate your life as a Christian. Ask God if you are strong or weak in Jesus. Do the things that will strengthen you in Him. Here are some things **Next Steps** you might choose to take:

- > Establish a daily meeting with God.
- > Pray your To Do List.
- > Learn about different kinds of prayer.
- > Study all the passages in the Bible that mention prayer.
- > Learn to pray the Bible.
- > Ask yourself this question: *"If my highest priority is to be all that God wants me to be and do all that God wants me to do, what should I ask God for?"*
Then start praying for these things.

Invitation

Jesus was strong in God. He was strong in faith, in hope, in God's love. That is what enabled Him to give up His life for us. It is that kind of strength we need to have in Jesus.

Jesus gave His life for us. Jesus gave His life for you. If you are ready to believe, ready to receive Jesus as your Savior and Lord, pray the prayer of confession and commitment at the end of the sermon outline.

You who are already a follower of Jesus, what do you need to say to Jesus today? You pray too.