

WHY DOES THIS CHURCH NEED TO PRAY?

MATTHEW 18:15-20

There's a story of a nightclub that opened in a small town. There was only one church in that town and it was located on the same street. When the church members heard about this awful, godless club coming to town, they immediately organized an all night prayer meeting. They asked God to burn down this club. Within a few minutes, lightning struck the club and it burned to the ground. The owner of the club sued the church. The church denied any responsibility. After hearing both sides of the story, the judge said, "It seems to me that wherever the guilt may lie, the nightclub owner believes in prayer, while the church doesn't." We say we believe in prayer, but do we... really?

The single most important ministry of this church is prayer. Prayer is more important than preaching. Prayer is more important than evangelism. Prayer is more important than worship. Prayer is more important than education. Prayer is more important than student or children's ministry. Prayer is more important than long range planning, leadership or revising the constitution. Prayer is more important than "Outflow." Prayer is more important than missions. Prayer is more important than showing love or giving encouragement to others. Now everything I just mentioned is of vital importance to our church, but the ultimate success of any of those ministries depends on prayer.

"Hard Questions About Prayer" is the message series I'm concluding today. I want you to look with just now at a most interesting passage in God's Word about prayer and God's people. When I first studied this passage in its relation to prayer, it opened up some new ideas for me personally. It answers the question: "What's the value of my prayers? Why should this church pray?" The first principle I see in this passage is based on v. 18. This church must pray because...

OUR PRAYERS DETERMINE GOD'S INFLUENCE.

Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (Matthew 18:18 NIV) What's He talking about? The "you" in that verse is plural meaning that Jesus is referring apparently to those who would become His followers after His death and resurrection. But what's this about binding and loosing? What's that about? I believe it's a broad principle that applies to many things spiritually.

Interestingly, the verses proceeding v. 18 illustrate the principle in an actual, specific case. It's as if Jesus says, "OK, here's an example in v. 15-17 of a principle I'm laying down in v. 18." There, He's teaching on the proper approach to dealing with a fellow Christian who's fallen into some kind of sin. First, you go and talk to that person and encourage him or her to turn away from that sin and start living for the Lord again. If that approach gets rebuffed, then you're supposed to take along a Christian buddy and try again. If that gets rejected,

then you take the matter before the church. If there's still no good response, then you have the liberty, according to Jesus, to refuse to interact with that person. Now notice carefully what Jesus suggests here. This action taken by a group of believers will be honored and respected by God up in heaven. God will refuse to interact with a stubborn, stiff-necked person who constantly refuses loving attempts to get him or her to turn away from some kind of sinful activity. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven.

Now that opens up an extraordinary thought. To some degree what is done here on earth controls what is done up in heaven. You've probably always thought it was just the opposite. I know I did! Everything seems to happen from heaven to earth, doesn't it? God up in heaven wants something done. He tells us down here on earth and we do it. But, actually, it works a bit differently than that according to Jesus in v. 18. God wants something done. He then reveals that to you through the Holy Spirit. He then waits for you to begin to pray about that something He wants done. Only when you ask does He then actually do it. In fact, there's the suggestion that God will not do what He wants to do until and unless you ask for it in prayer. Isn't that fascinating? Could it be, then, that a lot of wonderful spiritual stuff could be "loosed" on this world and a lot of terrible spiritual stuff could be "bound" and taken out of this world, if only God's people began to ask for it? To some degree – only God knows the parameters – what happens here on earth actually controls what will happen in heaven.

Perhaps you're feeling right about now that this seems to deny the absolute power and sovereignty of God. I had to think that through for myself. I began to realize that, in reality, it doesn't deprive God of anything. God in His absolute, infinite, sovereign, almighty power made a decision to work on this earth primarily through human beings, not independently of us. The whole message of the Bible makes it quite clear that God has chosen to work through human beings when it comes to affairs on this His planet. That's His sovereign choice. The Bible itself is a record of this relationship. God chooses to work through prophets, judges, kings, disciples, and – most significantly – a human Messiah. He uses human feet to take the good news of Jesus to others and human voices to speak the good news of Jesus to others.

That's why I can say boldly that our prayers determine God's influence. That's not arrogance; it simply recognizes how God wants to accomplish His will. If God wants something done here on earth, He begins to speak to the hearts of His people. If we're obedient and ask God for what He desires, then He does it. But if we're disobedient and don't ask God for what He desires to do, He doesn't do it. One person put it like this: "We cannot make God do what He does not want to do, but we can hinder Him from doing what He does wish to do." Suppose you ask God to do something ridiculous – like killing off a person you don't like very much. Since God would never desire such a thing, He would never encourage you to pray that way. But when you ask God to do something He already desires to do and is just waiting for you to ask Him to do, then He's pleased to answer.

I find this both a disturbing and exciting concept. Why disturbing? Are there things that God wants to do in me and through me, but because I refuse to ask Him, He never does those things? I believe the answer is, "Yes!" Are there things that God longs to do in and through this church, but because enough of us never get around to really asking Him to do those things, He never does them? I believe the answer is, "Yes!" Now, here's the exciting part. If I ask God for something He already wants to do in and through me, then I know God will answer that prayer. If, as a church, we ask God for what He already longs to do in and through Karl Road Baptist, He will answer that prayer. In fact, this verse leads me to conclude that God won't answer until and unless we ask. This church must pray because our prayers determine God's influence. Here's a second thought. This church must pray because...

OUR PRAYERS RELEASE GOD'S WILL.

Look again at what Jesus says in v. 19, "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven." (Matthew 18:19 NIV) That statement suggests that God waits for us to pray before He actually acts. Here's an example. Most of us know the Lord's Prayer by heart. You'll recall where we ask God to let His Kingdom come and ask that His will be done on earth as it is heaven. Why does Jesus want us ask His Father to do something that's going to happen anyway? Why ask God to do what He already desires to do? Here's another example. The text we considered back on August 10th had the apostle Paul saying, "...pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored..." (2 Thessalonians 3:1 NIV) Wasn't that already God's desire? Certainly. Why ask those folk to pray for it, then? Why doesn't God just go ahead and do what He wants done without us having to pray about it and ask Him for it?

Our asking somehow releases God to do His will in this world. God wants you to share in His great work of salvation – I mean, really share in it! My asking somehow releases God to do what He wants to do in my life, in my church and in my world. It's as if God says to us, "Listen, I could have designed this to work another way, but I didn't. This is how it works. I decided that in response to your prayers, I will release My will. You pray what I desire and then My will is done on the earth. If you don't pray, then My will waits until someone asks." God invites you and me into an amazing partnership with Him, doesn't He? Here's another statement to ponder: "Prayer is entering into a relationship with God so we can determine His will in the matter and call His will into existence upon the earth."

God refuses to work alone or independently. Could He if He wanted to? Of course! He could design it any way He wants. He's decided to take action only when we take action through prayer and ask for His will to be done. Understood at this level, our ministry as a church is incredibly profound. Our ministry as a church includes bringing down to the earth God's will in heaven. How can that

happen? Through prayer. Prayer isn't some small, insignificant, sentimental, pious, but ultimately irrelevant piece of spirituality. Prayer is where the action is! Prayer is spiritual work of the highest order. We're saying, "God, we want Your will to be done. Please show us what it is." And then we ask for that will to be done. And in response God releases His will.

When Will Willimon was a professor and chaplain at Duke University, he spotted a young co-ed he knew personally walking with a handsome young man in the beautiful Duke Gardens. Willimon knew her to be a bright, personable student. The next time he saw her he asked, "So, are you in love?" She responded, "Why do you ask that?" Willimon answered, "Well, I saw you the other day in the gardens arm-in-arm with a young man. It's such a romantic place, so I was just wondering. Are you in love?" "No, I wasn't there because I am in love," she explained. "I was there because I want to be in love." In other words, she was putting herself in a place where love could happen. Prayer involves putting yourself into a place where God can happen to you, where God can get a hold of you, where God can release His will into your life.

I have this mental image of all sorts of wonderful, beautiful, spiritual stuff piled up high in heaven that God wants to release into this world, but we – His people – never spend enough time in prayer discerning what God wants to give and then asking Him to give it. All of this encourages me to pray bigger prayers. Meaning what? If my prayers are only about Aunt Sally's horrible hangnail, God help me! If my prayers are only about getting the right job, doing well on the next test, or getting a bill paid, God help me! If my prayers are just itty-bitty prayers in their scope – selfish, small, self-centered prayers, God help me! If the degree of God's work today on this earth is governed by the scope of my prayers, how much do I need to pray big prayers! If the manifestation of God's power here on earth is governed by my prayers, how much I need to pray bigger prayers! God help us to realize that the ultimate purpose of prayer is to change the world by releasing God's will into it. It's bigger than just changing my personal situation! God help me to see that prayer is something God has ordained to bring into being what is already in His heart. This church must pray because our prayers release God's will. Let me mention a third and final principle based on Matthew 18. This church must pray because ...

OUR PRAYERS INVITE GOD'S PRESENCE.

Jesus said, "For where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them." (Matthew 18:20 NIV) Isn't God present when you pray all by yourself? Of course He is. But this verse suggests that God's presence is somehow qualitatively superior when our prayers are collective. In other words, Jesus seems to suggest here that prayer offered by groups of Christians has more spiritual clout, more power and more influence with God than individual prayers. The word "exponential" comes to mind. I had to look that word up in the dictionary because I was a little vague on its meaning. It's a word used in

mathematics quite a bit which explains why I don't know much about it! Math was never my strong suit. In any case, "exponential" is an adjective usually applied to some kind of function that characterizes a very rapid increase or growth of some kind. For instance, the size of a population can grow exponentially, or a disease can spread exponentially or an investment can take off and multiply exponentially. Exponential growth means that a population, or a group of people getting a disease or an investment portfolio doubles in size at regular intervals. They just take off and grow expanding exponentially.

Prayer can become exponential. Individual prayer is great; don't dare stop! But when groups of God's people gather for prayer there is an exponential effect spiritually. The power and influence of those prayers just take off. It's far greater than individual prayers. That explains why we encourage groups of people to get together to pray. This week, Aimee begins offering a time of group prayer for the salvation of Muslims during the Muslim month of Ramadan. Next Sunday night, we encourage you to come to a time of group prayer at 6:00 in the chapel. Don't your individual prayers matter? Yes, they do! But when groups of Christians gather to pray, something exponential is released according to Jesus.

Getting two or three, or twenty or thirty, or 2,000 or 3,000 together for prayer is part of God's strategy. Certainly He wants us to bring our personal and individual needs before Him in prayer. But He also longs to see His people gather together for the purpose of praying down His will upon the earth. Since He Himself has ordained that through His people's prayers, He will have influence in the world and His will is released into the world, He greatly desires to see His people gather together to pray. And when His people do that – gather in groups to pray – Jesus is present in a way that's qualitatively superior. It's exponential! Someone has said, "God waits for the prayers of His children to bring in His Kingdom."

This church must pray if we're going to accomplish our greatest possible ministry. And what is that ministry? Being an outlet of God's love and grace to lost people in our community. Being a channel of God's power. Being a means by which God accomplishes His purposes in this world. If we pray, God will show us what He wants. Then, together we can ask God for that to happen. Then, God will act from heaven. This church must pray because our prayers invite the very presence of God.

David Howard is a well known evangelical Christian leader. He was a student at Wheaton College in the late 1940s. During his junior year, a German man who had spent time as a prisoner of war was now working as a janitor at the college. The students were curious about this German janitor, but since he spoke almost no English, they couldn't communicate well with him. One of Howard's close friends was fellow student Jim Elliot who would later be martyred along with four other missionaries in Ecuador. Elliot got the vision to pray for this German janitor. So he rounded up several other friends from time to time – including David Howard – and they would pray especially for this German who remained a

mystery to them. After a time, he left Wheaton and they lost track of him. Howard and his friends only hoped that somehow the Lord would be working in his heart to bring him to salvation. After a while he faded from their thoughts and memories.

Over thirty years later in 1979, David Howard was in Bermuda helping to organize and direct a consultation on world evangelization composed of Christian leaders from all over the world. One afternoon he and the group had some free time, so a number of them strolled around the streets of downtown Hamilton, Bermuda. Howard and another committee member were looking at a British submarine tied up in port. His companion, who was from Germany, commented, "I served in Hitler's submarine corps." Howard asked for more details, so the man explained how he was eventually pulled off the submarine, put on the front lines in Holland, wounded and captured by the British. After the war, he went on to the United States. He said his name was Peter Schneider and he was the chairman of the board of directors of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association in Germany. He spoke perfect English and had served as Graham's interpreter whenever Billy preached in Germany.

Suddenly David Howard's mind began to spin, dredging up memories of 30 years earlier. Peter Schneider? That was the name of the janitor at Wheaton College for whom we had prayed! He asked, "Peter, were you ever at Wheaton College in Illinois?" "Why yes," Peter replied. "I worked there as a janitor, sweeping the halls and cleaning the restrooms in the main administration building." Howard's heart leapt with joy, "Peter, were you a Christian at that time?" "No," he said. "I became a Christian later, at a YMCA camp in Wisconsin. When I was at Wheaton I knew almost nothing of the Gospel."

Howard's excitement continued: "Peter, you would have no way of knowing this, but I must tell you what happened during your time at Wheaton. Jim Elliot got a vision to pray for your salvation. He organized several other students, including me, to pray that you would come to know the Lord. We could not witness to you, because we spoke no German and you apparently had learned almost no English yet. But we prayed faithfully for you in those days." David Howard's exhilaration knew no bounds. Here he was, standing at the waterfront in Bermuda with a key evangelical leader from Germany who was committed to proclaiming the Gospel to the world—and for whose salvation he had prayed! Peter Schneider was equally moved and grateful as he realized how a few young men, whom he never really knew, had played a key role in his coming to salvation and to the profound ministry that he now had in sharing the good news of Jesus around the world.

Our prayers determine God's influence. Our prayers release God's will. Our prayers invite God's presence. That's why this church must pray!