

THE P IN ROPES: FIRST OF ALL, PRAY!**ACTS 4:23-35**

How many of you believe prayer works? Jeanne Olson, a mother of five, took her daughter, Kirsten, out for a mother-daughter breakfast one morning. During the meal, Jeanne courageously asked her daughter, “How do you think I could be a better mom?” Kirsten, aged 9, thought for a moment and then said, “Well, you do yell a lot, Mom. I know you’ve been praying about that, but it isn’t really working yet.” Ouch! Well, here’s hoping that prayer eventually helped Jeanne with that yelling a lot issue.

Prayer is one of the most important parts of following Jesus. We all need to pray more. We all need to learn how to pray more effectively. We could all benefit from fresh insights into and – most importantly – fresh power in our praying. Prayer is an essential part of what it means to be a disciple here at KRBC. We use an acronym to remind ourselves of our church’s definition of a disciple. It’s ROPES. The R stands for relationships. Discipleship requires developing both a relationship with God and with those who also want to follow Jesus – so a vertical relationship with God and a horizontal relationship with Jesus’ followers. Following Jesus also requires obedience. That’s the O. In other words, it’s not about stuffing our brains with as many spiritual facts as possible. It’s not about observing rituals. It’s about inner transformation. We are becoming more like Jesus in our attitudes and behavior. The P in ROPES stands for prayer - the aspect of discipleship we want to drill down on today. E stands for evangelism. Pointing people to Jesus with our lips and our lives. Valuing and building relationship with lost people. Looking for opportunities to have faith conversations. If we don’t evangelize, pretty soon we won’t have anyone to disciple. S stands for Scripture. Regular, intentional, personal interaction with the Bible is the tool the Holy Spirit uses most often to promote ongoing transformation.

Now today I want you to see with me how foundational prayer happened to be among the very first followers of Jesus – ordinary people who put their faith and trust in Him just a few weeks and months after Jesus was crucified, resurrected, and then ascended back to Heaven. Let’s consider one example. Here’s a couple of observations about prayer and what makes it effective based on what we just read.

THE CHARACTER OF EFFECTIVE PRAYERS.

The very first church was just a few weeks old. Soon after Jesus ascended back to Heaven, the Holy Spirit came down in a miraculous way upon a group of about 120 followers of Jesus in the city of Jerusalem. That very same day an additional 3,000 people put their faith and trust in Jesus for salvation. That’s what I call “church growth”! Sometime later, Peter and John, two of Jesus’ original group of twelve disciples, healed a lame man through God’s power. The Jewish religious leaders at the time – a group called the Sanhedrin – hauled Peter and John in for questioning. It was a very powerful group. The Sanhedrin was the same group who’d successfully convinced the Romans to kill Jesus. The Sanhedrin questioned Peter and John intently about Jesus and their part in healing the lame man. They threatened Peter and John and told them to stop preaching and teaching in Jesus’ name. Peter and John refused. Finally the Sanhedrin

released them because they couldn't reach a consensus on how to punish them. So, Peter and John went back to their church and told them all about it.

I believe what happened next is important and instructive. It underlines something of the character of how these first followers of Jesus prayed. Notice, please, that they made prayer their first response. The news from Peter and John was disturbing to say the least. The Sanhedrin was no group to mess around with, ignore, or hope they'd just go away. They'd persecuted Jesus and were successful in getting Him killed. What's the first thing these first followers of Jesus did? They didn't form a committee to study the issue. They didn't select a leadership group to negotiate with the Sanhedrin. No, instead, they began to pray. When a problem surfaced, what was their initial response, immediate response, and instinctive response? Pray!

I'm challenged by just that insight itself. I know that prayer isn't always my first response when confronting a problem. Yes, it should be, but it isn't always. When you get challenging news of some kind, is prayer your very first response? My first response all too often is to worry rather than to pray, or to get depressed rather than to pray, or to get angry rather than to pray. Or, it's easy - to make as my first response - to analyze the situation and try to resolve it using my own wits and wisdom. When the very first followers of Jesus hit a major roadblock, their first response was prayer. You and I can learn much from that simple behavior. Make prayer your first response.

Something else was meaningful to me about the prayers of these first Christians. Their prayers were a communal, shared experience. Once Peter and John gave their report, that first group of believers didn't all head off to their own private prayer closets to pray individually about these dire threats. They stayed together and then prayed together. That's a principle about prayer we can so easily forget in a culture that glorifies individuality. Jesus said, "I also tell you this: If two of you agree here on earth concerning anything you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you. For where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them." (Matt. 18:19-20 NLT) Are individual prayers bad or ineffective? Of course not! But doesn't Jesus appear to assume there is more power in the prayers of several of His followers than in the prayers of just one? In other words, shared prayer is more than a one plus one equals two equation when it comes to being spiritually effective. Shared prayer is more like one plus one equals ten or a hundred in terms of its effectiveness. I don't know why that's the case, but right there is a spiritual principle regarding prayer and what makes it effective that we'd be wise to accept and practice.

Shared prayers just seem to carry more weight with God than individual prayers. Without neglecting your individual prayers, pursue intentionally any and every opportunity to pray with others. Huddle with your spouse or family. Grab two or three other followers of Jesus before or after a worship service to pray about a matter. That's one reason we invite people to come forward to pray with our prayer team after the service. Shared prayer is to be preferred. A greater degree of spiritual power is released. A greater spiritual effect can be expected. I don't know why it's that way; it just is. Now consider the example of these first followers of Jesus in another way.

THE CONTENT OF EFFECTIVE PRAYERS.

Who all prayed the prayer we read in Acts 4 today? How long did it last? We're not told specifically. I suspect what we read there is a brief summary of many prayers that were offered by many people on that occasion over a considerable period of time. Notice, they began with the worship of God. They recognized His power and greatness when they called Him Sovereign Lord. They acknowledged Him as the Creator of all things. They delighted in Him, honored Him, and glorified Him. Do you remember how Jesus began what we now call "The Lord's Prayer"? He said, "Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy" (Matt. 6:9 NLT) or "Hallowed be Thy name."

Any time you pray, take a moment to begin with worship. Simply enjoy, remember, and acknowledge God for who He is. It's not just a mechanical, mindless way to introduce a prayer. It provides the appropriate orientation for any and all prayer. I've come back to that simple truth often in my own spiritual journey. Slow down, Rick, and enjoy being with God intentionally. Before I even thank Him what He's done for me or ask Him to do something for me, I simply delight in Him, appreciate Him, and acknowledge His greatness. There's real joy in relaxing and being with God before you ask Him to do anything for you. Learn not to begin your prayers with telling God all your troubles or bringing all your needs to Him right away. When you love someone, you just want to be with that person. You want to hang out with him or her. You don't usually start out that together time asking the person to do something for you, do you? You're just delighted to be with the person you love. God is a Person. You and I need to cultivate the habit of coming into God's presence with the intent of worshiping Him first. Acknowledge God. Appreciate God. Enjoy God. Begin with worship.

Notice something else about the content of the prayers of these first believers. They recognized the sovereignty of God. That's clearly revealed in how they prayed about their situation. Observe how they prayed about their enemies. On the one hand, they knew they were no match for the power of the Sanhedrin in their own strength. On the other hand, they knew the Sanhedrin was no match for the power of the one, true, living God. In other words, they never denied the power of their enemies, but they trusted completely in God's limitless power. But notice also that they recognized that even their enemies' opposition could be used in a positive way to accomplish God's purposes. That was certainly true in Jesus' case. The Sanhedrin thought they'd gotten rid of a dangerous heretic and troublemaker when Jesus died on the cross. But, in fact, they unintentionally helped fulfill God's plan and purpose. He'd already determined that Jesus would die on the cross for our sins before the world was even created. Jesus Himself submitted to His Father's sovereignty. During His trial, Jesus said to Pontius Pilate, "You would have no power over me at all unless it were given to you from above." (Jo. 19:11 NLT) History tells us that the persecution of those very first followers of Jesus was so intense that most of them fled the city of Jerusalem to save their lives. Even that was part of God's sovereign plan. He wanted the message of Jesus to get out and beyond Jerusalem. God used even His enemies to fulfill His sovereign will.

You and I have enemies. Hopefully, no one is actually seeking to kill you or persecute you because of your loyalty to Jesus, although that's true in many parts of the world today – especially predominately Muslim countries. Nevertheless, we all have enemies that threaten us – our own sinful nature, temptations the world throws at us, the devil and his demons – just to name some of them. There is much opposition to God and anyone who wants to serve God. When you pray and as you pray, recognize God's in control all the time. He's sovereign. Nothing can happen to you or me that God has not allowed or that He cannot use for good purposes in His ultimate plan for our lives. That doesn't mean everything that happens to us is good in itself or that it feels good. Believing in God's sovereignty seems means that I recognize no one and nothing can frustrate ultimately God's plans and purposes. God can bring good out of evil, blessing out of pain, and triumph out of tragedy. Look what He did through the death of Jesus on the cross! Look what happened when those first followers of Jesus were dispersed throughout the Roman Empire as a result of persecution! You can't judge the effect of a challenging or painful event in your life when it first happens to you. It's usually too soon then. And our understanding is too limited. That's when you and I must trust God and submit to His sovereignty. Sometimes God, in His grace, will let you and I see something of His good purposes in allowing a tragic or even an evil event to enter our lives. Not always, but sometimes. The question that hangs in the air is this one: "Will I continue to trust God even in the midst of this unexplained, difficult experience?"

Back in June 2002, Filipino government commandoes ambushed a group of Muslim terrorists, Abu Sayyaf, who had kidnapped two missionaries and held them as hostages for a year. Their names were Martin and Gracia Burnham. Tragically, in a two-hour exchange of gunfire, Martin Burnham was killed. Gracia suffered a gunshot wound in her leg, but survived because her husband's lifeless body had rolled over on top of her in the chaos. Her captors thought she was dead, too. She wrote these words after that terrifying event, "Sometimes I wonder, Why did Martin die when everyone was praying he wouldn't? Why does Scripture lead you to believe that if you pray a certain way, you'll get what you pray for? People all over the world were praying that we'd both get out alive, but we didn't. I used to have this concept of what God is like, and how life's supposed to be because of that. But in the jungle, I learned I don't know as much about God as I thought I did. I don't have Him in a theological box anymore. What I do know is that God is God – and I'm not. The world's in a mess because of sin, not God. Some awful things may happen to me, but God does what is right. And He makes good out of bad situations." Sometimes all we can do is submit to God's sovereignty.

There's a least a third characteristic to effective prayers when it comes to content. Those first believers asked God for boldness. That's remarkable! Just think of all the things they could have prayed for. "Lord, please protect us and keep us safe. Lord, please destroy our enemies. Lord, give us peace in this anxious time." Amazingly, we have no record that these followers of Jesus prayed for safety, protection, destruction of their enemies, or even for inner peace. Instead, they prayed God would make them bold. The biggest temptation at that point in time was to become fearful and timid. Very powerful forces wanted them to shut up about Jesus. Instead, they prayed for boldness

in their witness, because there was enormous pressure to give in, to compromise, to blend in, and not to create too many waves.

I was interested to learn the word translated “boldness” here was often used to describe how Jesus taught or spoke. Jesus was always clear and authoritative. He was never rude, but He had no desire to be politically correct or tolerant of what was wrong. Spiritual boldness is never arrogance, pride, or some kind of belligerent “in your face” attitude. It’s simply the ability to speak plainly, clearly, and openly about Jesus and truth. Spiritual boldness is humble, but never timid. Spiritual boldness is about putting my confidence in God, not in myself. Because of what you’ve come to know about God through personal experience, you’re always on the lookout for ways to point other people to Jesus. You’re always gentle and respectful. But you’re also as clear and direct so there’s no question as to where you stand and what you believe.

God calls His people to be bold. That touches many areas of life. Yes, it can certainly mean standing up to our culture for what we know pleases God morally. Absolutely! But, most important of all, I believe this prayer for boldness means taking advantage of any and every opportunity to share the message of Jesus with someone. That’s what those first followers of Jesus prayed for. Even at the risk of persecution, they still wanted to tell others about Jesus. The fact is you and I let lots of opportunities pass. Why is that? We don’t want to offend people. We don’t want to be rejected. We don’t want to be thought of as weird. We’ve convinced ourselves that just living a godly life in front of lost people is all that God expects of us. In reality, we lack godly boldness. Here’s a final thought today about effective prayers.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF EFFECTIVE PRAYERS.

First of all, effective praying get answered. Those first followers of Jesus prayed that God would use them in spreading the good news about Jesus, and God honored that request. They were filled with the Holy Spirit who gave them the spiritual power to be all God wanted them to be. They were given boldness to keep on preaching and teaching about Jesus. Their prayers were effective and got answered, because they were only asking God to do what was already His will to do. Why God answers some of our prayers and not others can indeed be a mystery. But one simple answer to that question we have to grapple with is the fact sometimes we ask God to do things that aren’t His will. We need to get better at learning what is God’s will in given situations so we can ask Him to answer our prayers with greater confidence.

Secondly, effective praying results in unity. The Acts 4 story reveals that those first followers of Jesus were all on the same page. They were one in heart and mind. That’s a direct result of effective praying. They were focused on what God wanted to accomplish, not what they wanted God to do for them. Here is yet another reason prayer is so important in the life of our church and not just in our own individual lives. Prayer is like motor oil. In a church, each person is like a part of a car engine. People rub up against other people and it doesn’t take very long to create some heat and friction – just like with the different parts of an engine. God uses prayer to provide a

coating of spiritual oil to lubricate relationships. Prayer doesn't prevent every disagreement from occurring, but it softens disagreements and makes it much easier to keep God's people moving in the same direction together. More prayer yields more unity among God's people. Unity is a result – a consequence – of effective praying.

Finally, effective praying results in new power to meet needs. Did you catch the last few verses of what we read today? “There were no needy people among them, because those who owned land or houses would sell them and bring the money to the apostles to give to those in need.” (Acts 4:34-35 NLT) Some of those very first Christians were financially poor, but some of the wealthier followers of Jesus were moved by the Holy Spirit to sell assets in order to meet the material or physical needs of fellow Christians. That doesn't happen without the Holy Spirit. That doesn't happen without prayer. Prayer makes us aware of the needs in the lives of other believers – some of which we may be well positioned to meet or address. Prayer reveals needs and then can be used by the Holy Spirit to help us – to empower us - to meet the needs that get revealed.

Pastor and author, Ben Patterson, had suffered two ruptured lumbar discs in his back. His doctor prescribed six weeks of total rest. The acute pain prevented Ben from lying in bed. Instead, he spent most of those weeks on his back on the floor. Because of the pain killers and muscle relaxant medications he was on, Ben's eyes didn't focus well. So, reading anything was difficult. He couldn't perform any of his regular ministry tasks at church. So, Ben asked his wife to bring him the church's pictorial directory. He decided he'd pray for every member in his church every day. That took up about two hours of his day. Ben admits this was no great act of piety on his part. He was frustrated and incredibly bored. But toward the end of his recovery, Ben prayed, “You know, Lord, these times of prayer have been sweet. It's too bad I don't time to do this when I'm at work.” Ben said the Lord spoke into his spirit pleasantly and said – more or less, “You're stupid. You have the same 24 hours each day when you're well. The trouble with you, Ben, is when you're well, you think you're in charge. When you're sick, you know you're not.” The reason we don't pray much, the reason we don't give prayer a higher priority, and the reason our experience of prayer stays at a preschool level spiritually is because we believe we're still in charge. Maybe that's one reason God allows difficult, challenging things to come into our lives. We find out real quick who's really in charge. Do you want to follow Jesus better? Do you want your experience of being Jesus' follower to be more effective? Let's learn to pray. Let's learn to pray better. Let's learn to pray more.