

Sermon – Constant Prayer
Sunday October 16, 2022

How many of you would say, I believe in prayer but don't pray as much as I should - if that's you, raise your hand.

If you're like most people, prayer probably brings up different feelings. On the one hand, you know that prayer is important. But on the other hand, you feel guilty. You know you don't pray as much as you should and your prayer life often feels like a bore.

How many of you can relate? If you do, you're not alone.

In a recent survey, 14,000 people were asked about their prayer lives. Almost 70 percent of them said they pray every day but only 2 percent said they feel very satisfied with their prayer life.

Why is it that we know prayer is important but we don't have the prayer lives we would love to have? I think there are several reasons for this.

One reason is we get distracted. It's just hard to stay focused when we pray.

Have you ever made time to pray - you were ready, you had good intentions but then you got distracted? You're sitting in your kitchen about to start to pray when you notice the dirty dishes in the sink. So you go clean them. But then you think, I haven't taken food out for dinner. So you start looking for food in your fridge but then you realize there's nothing to eat in the house. So you go to the grocery store and before you know it, you don't get around to praying because you got distracted.

Another reason we don't pray is we get busy. There's so much going on and our schedules are over crowded.

How many of you are thinking right now about all the things you have to do? We're busy people. We have tests to study for, people to meet up with, work to do, kids to drive to their programs, errands to run, meals to cook.

Some days you're so busy you don't even have time to eat, let alone pray.

Another reason we don't pray is we just don't know how to pray. Maybe some of us never learned. We just don't know what we're supposed to say or what we're supposed to do.

And then there are those people who are really good at prayer. Their prayers always sound so beautiful and eloquent. They're quoting scripture, they're claiming God's promises. And when they pray, everyone around is saying mmm hmm and Amen.

And you feel so inadequate because you could never pray like that.

There are many reasons we don't have the prayer lives we would love to have. So how do we overcome these challenges so that we can pray with confidence and effectiveness?

We're in a series these days called *Marks of a Thriving Church*. We're looking at how the early church was devoted to Jesus, to one another as well as to several core practices. These practices helped them grow deeper in their faith and in their mission effectiveness.

Each week we're looking at one of these practices to learn how we can flourish as God intends us to, both individually and as a church.

Today we're going to talk about Prayer.

In the book of Acts, the church was not only in constant prayer, the church was actually born out of prayer!

Before ascending to heaven, Jesus gave his followers a mission: to make disciples of all nations. Jesus called his followers to continue the kingdom movement he started to restore this broken world.

But how would this rag-tag bunch of misfits continue this world-changing movement?

Jesus says, Here's the plan. Stay in Jerusalem and wait. In a few days the Holy Spirit will come and give you power. Then you'll be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

So after receiving these instructions, what do the disciples do?

Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem... When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying.... They all joined together constantly in prayer (Acts 1:12-14)

The disciples don't get overwhelmed. They don't try to do it on their own. What do they do? They pray.

And on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit comes. It pours out God's power on them and on that very day, the church is born and the world hasn't been the same since.

What I want to do today is look at 3 characteristics of how the early church prayed and I want to share 3 lessons we can learn from them. Along the way, I'll share tips and resources to help us in our prayer life.

Sound like a plan?

Our Bible passage for this series is Acts 2:42-47.

42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

Healing, miracles, life transformation. All this happened because the early church prayed. So how did they pray?

The early church prayed instinctively.

What's your knee-jerk response when you face a challenge?

- Do you worry?
- Do you complain?
- Do you give up and lose hope?
- Do you try to do it on your own?

When faced with challenges, the early church's knee-jerk response was to pray.

In Act 12, the early church was being persecuted. King Herod was looking for Christians to arrest. He had already killed James, the brother of John and wanted to arrest more Christians to make the Jews happy.

So he seizes Peter and puts him in prison.

Now here's the church. They're being persecuted. Their leader has just been arrested.

What do they do? Do they picket outside the jail? Do they start a letter writing campaign?

Verse 5 says, **So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. (Acts 12:5)**

When they faced adversity, the church's knee-jerk reaction was to pray.

In Acts 4, the religious leaders were threatening the church. Peter and John were preaching in public. They had just healed a man who was lame. The religious leaders saw this and didn't like it so they had them arrested.

But before they let them go, they warn them not to preach anymore.

So here's the church, watching Christians get arrested and even killed for preaching the gospel. They're warned not to preach anymore or else they'll be arrested and killed as well.

So what do they do? Do they run and hide? Do they keep their mouths quiet?

Verse 24 says, **When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. (Acts 4:24)**

When threatened with their lives, the church's knee-jerk reaction was to pray.

And what do they pray for? Do they pray for God to keep them safe. No, they pray for God to make them bold! To be even more bold and effective for him!

In Acts 1, the apostles have a hard decision to make. There were 12 who had followed Jesus but one of them, Judas betrayed Jesus and later commits suicide.

Here's the church. They need to find someone to take over this important leadership position and they're not sure what to do.

So what do they do? Do they post an ad on Indeed? Do they ask their friends for referrals?

Verse 23 says, **So they nominated two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. ²⁴Then they prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen... (Acts 1:23-24)**

When faced with a big decision, the church's knee-jerk reaction was to pray.

Whether the early church was persecuted, threatened or didn't know what to do, their first instinct was to pray.

Prayer is the first thing we should do but it's often the last thing we try. For many of us, our first instinct is to do it on our own.

We'll try everything we can think of. We'll exhaust all of our options. And if after all that we still haven't figured it out, we'll throw up our hands and say, Well I guess all I can do now is pray. Only then do we turn to prayer as a last resort.

This brings us to our first lesson, **Make prayer your first response.**

God never intended prayer to be your last resort. He wants it to be your first response.

You don't have to wait til you're persecuted or imprisoned before you pray.

You could be:

- Struggling to pay the bills.
- Looking for a job.
- Dealing with a difficult person.
- Supporting someone in their mental health.
- Recovering from a relationship breakdown.

Whenever you're in a situation like this, make prayer your first response.

God says, **Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you..." (Psalm 50:15)**

The Apostle Paul says to the Philippians, **in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. (Philippians 4:6)**

Make prayer your first response. It won't feel natural at first. Our instinct is to do it ourselves.

But take something that you're dealing with right now and pray about it. Give it up to God. Ask him to guide you and lead you. Ask him to show you how he's working in the situation. Ask him to give you everything you need.

And then when the next situation comes, do it again. Give it up to God. And over time, prayer will become more of a knee-jerk reaction for you.

Corrie Ten Boom says: **Is prayer your steering wheel or is it your spare tire?**

Make prayer your steering wheel not your spare tire. Make prayer your first response.

This brings us to the second characteristic of the early church at prayer: **The early church prayed regularly.**

We see this throughout the book of Acts.

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

They all joined together constantly in prayer (Acts 1:14)

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. (Acts 3:1)

Yes, the early church prayed instinctively. They prayed when faced with adversity. They prayed when faced with threats. They prayed when they didn't know what to do.

But they didn't just pray when they were in crisis. They prayed regularly and constantly.

Many of you know the verse in Thessalonians where Paul says to pray without what? Ceasing.

Have you ever heard that and wondered, how do I do that? When I'm driving, am I supposed to drive with my eyes closed? When I'm eating, am I supposed to pray with my mouth full? What does it mean to pray without ceasing?

To pray without ceasing means praying regularly. This leads to our second prayer lesson. **Make prayer a regular part of your daily life.**

How do you do that? Here are three simple tips.

The first tip is to have a regular prayer time.

Now this doesn't mean you can only pray during your designated prayer time. It's not like God looks at his watch and says, It's after your prayer time, I'm not listening to your prayers anymore! Of course, God loves to listen to your prayers at all times.

So why is it important to have a regular prayer time?

Having a regular prayer time forces you to commit to making time during the day to stop and pray. It could be first thing in the morning, during your lunch break or in the evening before you go to bed.

Of course, life happens and you will miss your prayer time from time to time, and that's okay. Because the idea isn't to be rigid and legalistic. It's to commit a regular time during the day for prayer, so that prayer becomes a priority and not an afterthought. You might even block it off in your calendar and protect that time just like you would any other important appointment.

The second tip is to have a regular prayer place.

Sometimes half the battle is finding a quiet space to pray. Free of distractions and interruptions so that you can focus on God.

That's why it's helpful to have a regular prayer place. There's something about a familiar space that helps you focus. Having a regular prayer place makes it easier to settle into God's presence and focus on him in prayer.

I have a sofa in my family room where I pray every morning. I'll also go for prayer walks to a nearby park in my neighbourhood.

For you it could be a certain chair in your house, a bench overlooking your garden, the toilet in your bathroom or a street you like to walk down.

The place itself isn't important. What's important is finding a regular prayer place so that when you pray, you can focus on God more easily.

The third tip is to have a regular prayer plan.

Have you ever been all ready to pray but when it came to praying you didn't know what to do? Praying conversationally is good but it can be helpful to add a little structure to your prayer time as well. For example, you can:

- Pray the scriptures.
- Pray the psalms.
- Take a psalm and personalize it for yourself.
- Pray as you listen to worship songs.
- Write down your prayers in a journal.
- Express your prayers through a drawing or a painting.
- Take a written prayer and pray it for yourself.

For example, How many of you know the Serenity Prayer? Did you know that there's a longer version of it?

Serenity Prayer

God grant me the serenity
 To accept the things I cannot change,
 Courage to change the things I can,
 And the wisdom to know the difference.
 Living one day at a time,
 Enjoying one moment at a time.
 Accepting hardship as the pathway to peace.
 Taking as Jesus did, this world as it is and not as I would have it,
 Trusting that You will make all things right if I surrender to Your will.
 That I may be reasonably happy in this life
 And supremely happy with You forever in the next.
 Amen.

Isn't that a great prayer? I've been praying this prayer every day since the summer. Praying written and meaningful prayers can be a great way to connect to God.

Another resource I recommend is **Lectio 365** – many of you are using it already. Lectio 365 is a daily devotional that helps you pray the Bible every day. Each day, there's a morning prayer and nighttime prayer. You can read it, or you can listen to it. There's great content that helps you meditate on God's word and questions that prompt you to reflect.

Lectio 365

<https://www.24-7prayer.com/resource/lectio-365/>

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And on top of that it's free to download on your iPhone or Android.

And finally, Cornerstone has developed some really great **prayer resources** to help you grow in your prayer life. There are Prayer Guides that take you through different prayers in the Bible. There are Prayer Sheets that give you practical guidance, ideas and exercises.

You can find these resources on our webpage and download them for free.

Cornerstone Prayer Resources

<https://cornerstonechurch.ca/embody-the-jesus-way-of-life/>

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Check out these resources to help you make prayer a regular part of your daily life.

The early church prayed instinctively. They prayed regularly. **And they prayed together.**

According to a survey, when Christians pray, 96 percent of the time, they pray by themselves. Only 4 percent of the time do they pray with another person or in a group.

But in the book of Acts, that's flipped. We get glimpses of the prayer lives of individual Christians like Stephen, Peter and Paul. But the book of Acts mainly depicts the church praying together.

They all joined together constantly in prayer (Acts 1:14)

As important as it is to pray on your own, there are many reasons you also need to pray with others. When we pray together:

- We build each other's faith,
- we learn how to pray from other people
- we grow in our unity,
- we experience more of God's presence
- we release more of God's power.

Which leads us to our third prayer lesson: **Pray together with others.**

Because great things happen when you pray with others! What are some ways you can do that?

If you're in a small group, you already have people to pray with. But what often happens is you do your Bible study, you share your prayer requests then you look at the time. You realize you don't have any time left to actually pray. So you ask someone to close off in a quick prayer and you're done.

But what if the agenda isn't to get through the curriculum? What if the agenda is just to pray? Every once in awhile, you could take your whole small group time to just pray.

Sometimes the way we pray in our groups can also become boring and tedious. But what if there were fun and creative ways you could pray together?

We've put together some resources that can help your group pray in fun and meaningful ways. You can find these resources on our **Small Group Better Together Resource page.**

Better Together Resource Page

<https://cornerstonechurch.ca/bettertogether/grow-with-god/>

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Check out the page and try some of the ideas at your next group meeting.

Another way you can pray with others is by checking out our **Monthly Prayer Meetings.**

Monthly Prayer Meetings

<https://cornerstonechurch.ca/prayer>

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We meet online on the first Tuesday of every month. You can check out our Prayer Page for more information and to get a Zoom link.

And finally, another way to pray with others is to **Pray With A Prayer Partner**. A prayer partner is someone usually of the same gender, who's committed to praying with you.

If you don't have a prayer partner, ask God to show you someone you could pray with. Then ask them if they'd be interested in meeting up with you to pray. You would discuss how often and where you would pray. But the point is to talk about how you're doing and to pray together with another person.

Today, we looked at how the early church prayed.

- They prayed instinctively
- They prayed regularly
- They prayed together

We talked about how we can grow in our prayer life.

- Make prayer a first response
- Make prayer a regular part of our daily life
- Pray together with others.

We all have different personalities and schedules so prayer will look different for each one of us. But here's a challenge I have for all of you – are you ready for it? This week try one thing that can help you grow in your prayer life. Deal?

Now before closing this message, there is one final thing I want to say about prayer and it's this.

The focus of prayer isn't on the methods.

We don't pray so that we can check it off our list and feel good about ourselves. The Pharisees were great at that and Jesus criticized them for their hypocrisy.

Because **The focus of prayer isn't on the methods, it's on God.**

The God who created the universe.

The God who created people and gave them a mission to take care of his creation.

The God who grieved when his people rejected his rule and went their own way.

Because of our sin, we were separated from God. We were lost and didn't know how to find our way back.

So what did God do? He sent Jesus into the world.

- To show us God's love.

- To teach us about his kingdom and how to live as his people.
- To go to the cross and die for our sins so that you and I could be forgiven, so that our relationship with God could be restored.

And now because of Jesus, because of what he did for us on the cross, we have a new power. We have a new identity. We have a new purpose.

So if you want to grow in prayer, don't focus on the methods, focus on God. Think about Jesus and what he's done for you on the cross. Let his love soften your heart, stir your imagination and deepen your intimacy with him in prayer.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for Jesus and for what he did for us on the cross. Thank you that in him, we have new life, a new hope, and a new power to live for you.

Just as the early church was in constant in prayer, may we be a people of constant prayer. Pour out your healing, your encouragement and your power upon us so that we can share your love and proclaim the name of Jesus in our homes, in our schools, in our workplaces and in our neighbourhoods.

Help us as a church to be bold in extending your love in our community and in our world – all for the sake of Jesus and his mission.

Amen.