

# Prayer

# January 5 & 8, 2012

## Forgetting to Pray

Before he was a church leader, Joel Virgo was a school teacher. Every once in awhile students would come to class without their homework and so Joel would ask them, "What happened? Why don't you have your homework?" And they would respond like most students, "I forgot." He would then ask them "Why didn't you forget your clothes?"

You see we don't forget what's important to us. You've never gone to work or school without your clothes, but for many of us prayer can be a lot like homework, we just forget. I'm not saying that you don't pray. Trust me I know we pray. We pray at meals, we pray when we drive by a cop, we pray before we take a test, or when we get called into the boss' office. but sometimes when it comes to prayer I think we simply forget to pray.

There's lots of reason we forget to pray. Maybe we don't pray because we're afraid. We're **afraid** that God won't listen to us or that because of our past God won't answer. What we've done is unforgivable and God would never listen to a sinner like me. Maybe we don't pray because of our **guilt** and it's just been so long since we've been honest with God that it just seems to hard to start now. Maybe it's just because we believe that pray **doesn't really work**. We know that God's word says things like "ask and it will be given" or "you can pray for anything, and if you believe that you've received it," but it just doesn't seem like that's really true. At least not in your life. And little by little we slowly start to forget to pray.

But then you hear stories. Things that make you wonder if maybe there's something you missed about prayer. Maybe you're a history buff and you heard the famous quote by Mary Queen of Scots when she said she "feared the prayers of John Knox more than all the armies of England." And you think, man, I wish I could pray like that. Or maybe you remember the story in the Bible of Elijah how he prayed for God to send fire from Heaven and it actually happened. Or how he prayed for the rain to stop and it didn't rain for three and a half years! I wish he would have prayed that it wouldn't snow.

It's not just stories in history or the Bible. Every once in awhile you hear stories in the church about someone who was seriously sick and someone prayed and they were healed or you hear about someone who talks about how prayer saved their marriage and you begin to wonder is there something to this whole prayer thing? Maybe you've met someone who's prayer life simply blows you away and you wonder how in the world did they become like that? The disciples did. After years of following Jesus, they only asked Him to teach them one thing, how to pray.

As we jump into this new series "Who do you Follow" we are going to start learning how to Follow Christ better by talking about Prayer. If you've got your Bibles we are going to

focus on one passage of Scripture. Hebrews chapter 4. Now there are a ton of passages on prayer. It's a huge topic so we are going to split it into two weeks. Today we are just going to stick with Hebrews chapter 4. Let's start in verse 16,

**4:16 So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most.**

I want to start off by looking at two ways we are supposed to approach God. We are called to approach him humbly and boldly.

## **Approach Changes Everything**

Have you ever noticed that what you approach changes how you approach it. You remember when you were a kid and you came home from school exhausted and tired. You walk in the door, kick off your shoes, collapse on the couch and can hear your mom's in the kitchen. So you yell out, "Mom!" And she responds, "Yes honey!" You don't even ask her how her day was you just yell, "Can you make me a sandwich?" But if you yell "Mom!" and she sticks her head around the corner and yells "What?" "Ughh, is there something I can clean?"

What you approach changes how you approach it and I think the same is true with prayer. What we approach changes how we approach it. Look at what verse 16 says, **let us come boldly to the throne of our "gracious" God.** Other translations may say, let us boldly approach the throne of grace. It's not a throne of a genie who grants wishes, it's not the throne of the lottery, it's not the throne of judgement or throne of wrath, it's the throne of grace. It's the throne of a gracious God and it should change how we approach Him.

If prayer is a conversation then we have to remember who's in the conversation. We are talking to GOD. That's why some people when they pray they start by telling God who they know Him to be. They are acknowledging who God is. They are changing their approach. God, our King of Kings, Creator of the Universe, My Lord and Savior, Gracious God. We have to change our approach based on who He is.

### **Humility**

We also have to remember who we are. If He's God then guess what? You aren't. There's only one way to approach a holy God, it's called humility. Psalm 18:27 says **"You rescue the humble, but you humiliate the proud."** Psalm 69:32 says **"The humble will see their God at work and be glad."** And what about this one, Psalm 138:6 **"Though the Lord is great, he cares for the humble, but he keeps his distance from the proud."** We have to approach the God of the universe with humility.

## **Boldly**

The first way to approach God is humbly, the second way is to approach Him boldly. Look at our verse again, **let us come boldly to the throne**. Some versions say let us approach the throne of grace with confidence. So how are you supposed to approach with humility and be bold and confident?

When I think approaching someone boldly I think about the time I stood toe to toe the school bully. He could have beaten me into a pulp, but I didn't care. I walked straight up to him, that's approaching boldly. Or what about confidence. You might think of the guy who isn't afraid to approach the pretty girl across the room. He just walks right up to her and starts talking. He's confident.

But I don't think that's what the writer of Hebrews had in mind. You aren't approaching a bully or a pretty girl, you are approaching God. I think it's a lot more like the story of Esther. Remember her in the Bible. The Jewish girl who approached the King without being summoned. He could have killed her right on the spot, but she went before him to plead for the lives of her people and he spared not only her life but all of the Jewish people. That's boldness, that's confidence. She wasn't approaching boldly because she didn't fear him. It was well within his right to have her executed. She wasn't confident because she was sure of herself. She knew she wasn't special or better than anyone else.

When you approach God boldly it's not because of who you are, but because of Christ is. If it weren't for Jesus' blood we could never have even set foot before God. We don't come to God with confidence in ourselves, we come confident that Jesus' blood covers over all of our sins. So when you pray, pray with boldness and confidence and humility.

## **What will God Give?**

If that's how we approach God, with humility and boldness, what happens next? What does God want to give to us? What is it that we can expect from Him? Let's look at Hebrews 4:16 again. **So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most.**

Mercy? Grace? They sound great, but what if that's not what you asked for? What if that's not what you were looking for when you prayed? You asked for your marriage to be restored, but he left. You asked for a job, but you're still unemployed. You asked for a true friend, but they stabbed you in the back. What do you do when you don't get what you asked for?

Three months ago I stood on this stage and talked about parenting and how we should prepare our kids for the Lord. I talked about how I was praying for the child we were going to adopt. A few days later we were supposed to meet with the birth mom but we got an email the day of saying she had to cancel. A few weeks later the adoption agency called and said that she decided not to go through the adoption.

I can remember making the phone call to Laura telling her the adoption wasn't going to happen and I can remember sitting on the couch that night together. This was our time of need. This is when we needed help the most. We have been praying for a child for over three years! We had begged God to be parents, we felt called to adopt and here we were sitting on a couch, alone, just the two of us. And you know what?

He gave us mercy and he gave us grace. I can remember my wife looking at me saying, I know I should be sad, but I'm not. I'm ok. Sure we were disappointed, but we felt this sense of peace that was simply unexplainable. I've never experienced anything like it. I'm not even really sure how to describe it, but we sat on the couch, no tears and we kind of laughed when one of us said. It's like that verse. **Philippians 4:7, Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.**

A couple of weeks later we got a paired with a new mom and she is due in a couple of weeks.

We didn't earn that. We didn't deserve it. It was a gift, it was mercy, it was grace and it was unbelievable. Right there in our time of need, God gave us exactly what we needed. It wasn't what we asked for, but we prayed and God gave us what we needed in our time of need. It wasn't a baby, but it was grace and peace and it was enough.

He wants to give you the same thing. His mercy and grace can show up in a million ways and it rarely looks the way we expect it, but when you ask and when He answers it's absolutely unbelievable. Do you believe that? That the God of the universe hears your prayers and wants to help you in your time of need? The truth is, the Bible says, He does.

So how we do it? How do we pray? I want to leave you with three ways to pray as we try and approach God humbly and boldly.

## **Pray with a Purpose**

When you pray, pray with a purpose. I love what Joel Virgo said about this. He said, *"There is a scatter-gun approach to praying which betrays a lack of any expectation. We talk, but we give the impression that God is probably not listening and definitely not very interested."* Jesus called out these types of prayers in Matthew 6:7 when He said, **7 "When you pray, don't babble on and on as people of other religions do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again.**

There have been two people who have totally changed the way I pray.

Todd Clark- Prayer club. Prayer requests change when you have to write them down. Expect God to move!

My wife- Prayer changes when the person you pray with knows when you aren't being real.

So my question is this, are you praying with purpose? How would you pray if you believed that God would answer? Would it be different if you thought that God could and would do something about what's going on in your life?

If you want to ask God for something, ask and ask Him specifically. What is it that you are expecting God to do? How do you want him to respond? How can He bring you mercy and grace in your time of need? **1 John 5:14 This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.** He hears your prayers and He wants to give you mercy and grace.

## Pray with the Word

I hear people say all the time, I don't know what to pray or I don't know if I'm praying the right thing. I don't know what to say. That's why praying with the Word is so great. He said! What better way to know you are praying the right thing than by praying the words of God Himself? It's always right. It's repeating back to Him His word.

You want to know the best part about praying scripture? His word is full of promises. God has made tons of promises and all you have to do is ask for them.

Do you want some wisdom? Pray this prayer.

God your word says in **James 1:5 If you do not have wisdom, ask God for it. He is always ready to give it to you and will never say you are wrong for asking.**

You want to know things only God knows? Everyone loves a secret right? Pray this.

God your word says in **Jeremiah 33:3 'Call to Me, and I will answer you. And I will show you great and wonderful things which you do not know.'**

How cool is that?

The Bible is full of amazing things to pray. Don't know where to start? Open up the book of Psalms. It's full of prayers to God. Just start praying a psalm a day and see if it doesn't change your prayer life. I know it will.

## Pray for things that matter

Have you ever asked someone for something huge? I mean something really important to you?

My first big ask was in the six grade when I asked to have my bed time moved to 9:30. I wrote it all out because I wanted to make sure I got it right. What I was asking was deeply important to me.

The second big ask was when I asked for my first raise. I was going to ask for \$.50 but Dad said I had to ask for \$1. My voice was shaking, but I did it.

My third big ask...when I called Laura's dad to ask if I could marry his daughter.

**Laura's Class**

My wife taught first grade at a Christian school this past semester. During the week the class would gather around for prayer time. All these little cute five and six year olds. Prayer time began with prayer requests and first graders have some pretty interesting request. One kid prayed for his birthday to be good, weird part, it was still six months away. One kid prayed to get to the next level on Mario. As a fellow gamer and someone who never beat Mario I hope that God answered his prayer. It also seems that the entire class caught the classic one-upper prayer disease. One student one pray for their mom who broke her leg. The next kid would start with, "ugh...I want to pray for my Mom, she has 2 broken legs!" My dog is sick was soon to be followed with ugh...my dog is dead!

Now they're five and six. They are still learning what it means to pray, but I wonder if sometimes our prayers don't seem just as silly.

The Bible says to pray about everything, so I don't want to belittle any prayer, but how can we pray to have a good day and not pray for the persecuted church? How can we pray for our food night after night and not pray the people starving to death around the world? How can we pray for our football team to get a win and not pray about winning our neighbors to Christ.

I'm not trying to give anyone a hard time. I'm just as guilty of this as anyone else, but as I prayed about this sermon and studied for it for the last few weeks it became painfully obvious that I've got a ton of room to grow in my prayer life.

I did learn this. I am absolutely convinced that if God is going to change our church and our city that it will start with prayer. D.L. Moody once said, "*Every great movement of God can be traced to a kneeling figure.*" And if the next generation is going to look back at us and be blown away by what God has done here, it's going to start with us coming humbly and boldly before God praying with a purpose, with the word of God for things that matter. Let's pray.