

WHY BUSY BELIEVERS MUST PRAY

JOHN 15:1-8

The kindergarten Sunday School class was learning about how God cares for us in times of trouble. The teacher asked the class to draw pictures of things that make us afraid. After they finished drawing their pictures, each child explained to the others what he or she had drawn. Five-year-old Scott had created in vivid crayon colors a looming funnel cloud, a car, and a man inside of it. He described how the man couldn't get his car started and how the tornado was bearing down on him. Scott's teacher said, "That man really needs to pray, doesn't he?" Scott disagreed. "No. He really needs to RUN!" Scott's right. There's a time to pray and there's a time to run.

But right there is the trouble with you and me. We spend far more time and energy running and precious little time praying. Why is that? It's been rightly observed, "Prayer is an unnatural activity. From birth we are learning to be self-reliant and achieve self-sufficiency. Prayer flies in the face of these deep-seated values. It's an indictment of independent living. To people in the fast lane, determined to make it on their own, prayer is an embarrassing interruption." (Bill Hybels)

We're in the midst of a series of three messages on prayer entitled *You're Too Busy Not To Pray*. What's the number one reason Christians give for not praying often enough or at all? Busyness. We're just too busy, busy, busy! The lack of logic behind that lame excuse is pretty apparent. The Bible makes it clear prayer is the key to experiencing God in our lives constantly. Experiencing God is something none of us can afford to live without. So, the busy demands upon our lives should drive us to God all the more – not push us away. The fact is you and I can never be too busy to pray. Actually, you're too busy not to pray! Our busyness should drive us to God which means we will pray.

So, let's think together on why busy believers like you and me must still make the time and effort to pray. Here's three reasons why I want us to focus on prayer for three Sundays. The first reason is personal. I want to grow in my own prayer life. My own prayer life constantly needs improvement. Prayer doesn't come to me naturally either. I find lame excuses not to pray. I struggle with keeping prayer fresh and meaningful. Sometimes my prayer life becomes boring and ritualistic. I know intellectually and from experience that the key to a deeper, more meaningful relationship with God and a more successful Christian life is growth in prayer. So, I want to encourage myself to grow in prayer, absorb good teaching on prayer, and share some of those discoveries with you.

Second, prayer is an important part of our KRBC picture of a disciple. I remind you of that simple acrostic ROPES which identifies what we in this church believe to be essential in following Jesus. The R stands for relationships. Spiritual growth doesn't happen well in isolation. It's the result of intentionally relating to God Himself and with other followers of Jesus. O stands for obedience. As disciples of Jesus, we affirm He has the right to tell us how to live, what to think, and how to conduct our lives. E stands for evangelism. If Jesus said His mission was to seek and to save those who are spiritually lost, how can anyone who is His follower dismiss that task as unimportant? S stand for Scripture. Disciples of Jesus believe the Bible is God's Word and so we spend time meditating on it and figuring out how to apply it to our lives today. The P in

ROPES stands for prayer. Followers of Jesus make prayer an integral part of our everyday lives and we just seek to get better at it all the time.

There's a third reason why I want to emphasize prayer right now. We've begun the process of selecting a new pastoral leader for this congregation. I'm retiring next year – hopefully, just after you've selected a new pastor. This is a critical moment in the life of our church. We need to be praying for Jeff Lashley and the other members of the Pastoral Search Team – not just once, but often, regularly, consistently. Pray for great wisdom, supernatural unity, and Holy Spirit-inspired direction. Pray for your new pastor whoever that person is. What does a church in transition like KRBC need to do the most? PRAY! Let's reflect today on something Jesus said. I find two great truths about prayer in that passage. Here's the first one...

A BUSY LIFE DEMANDS THE PRESENCE OF GOD.

The whole imagery of the vine and the branches suggests prayer. Look again at v. 7 where Jesus said, “But if you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for anything you want, and it will be granted!” (Jo. 15:7 NLT) That's prayer. The vine is a symbol of Jesus and the branches of the vine represent us – followers of Jesus. In the natural world, the vine provides life to all the branches – all the water, nutrients, and chemicals necessary for the life of the branch to be sustained. Likewise, Jesus (the Vine) provides life to us, His followers (the branches). Essentially, Jesus is talking about God's presence in your life and mine. When you invite Jesus to be your Savior and Lord, He begins to live in your spirit. Before that you were just a dead old stick spiritually – to push the analogy. Understand the implication! If you've never done that – surrendered your life to Jesus – you're just a dead old stick - spiritually speaking - in God's eyes. But, when by God's grace you get grafted into Jesus (the Vine), you begin to live spiritually because His life flows into and through you.

How do you get close to God or how does God get close to you? Prayer. The most intimate communion you will ever have with God will be some kind of expression or experience of prayer. When you have a casual, shallow relationship with another person, you don't worry too much about getting together, talking, or relating to him or her very much. But when you seek an intimate, close, meaningful relationship with another person, there's got to be regular and substantial interaction with him or her. It doesn't just happen. It's intentional, purposeful, and effortful. Many people – some who consider themselves followers of Jesus – settle for a casual, shallow relationship with God when He seeks something far more meaningful. He wants to reveal and give more of Himself to you, but that's going to require some intentional effort on our part.

It's right there a choice has to be made. The busy demands of life suck the life right out of us. We feel overwhelmed, overrun, beaten down, pushed down, and defeated by our schedules. That's precisely why the busier you are, the more you need to pray, not less! If you don't pray, you'll get sucked dry and always live life with your spiritual, emotional, and physical tank running on empty. Awareness of God's presence through regular prayer gives God the opportunity to pour His life into you. What happens then?

Wonderful stuff like God's guidance, peace, confidence, relief, a sense of being safe and secure comes pouring into our lives. That's what God's presence brings with it.

Here's a few benefits of increasing our awareness of God's presence. One, there's a divine companionship for all of my life. Sadly, even the most wonderful spouse in all the world may die and leave you. Even the best possible friend can die, or move away, or you can lose touch with them. God never dies, never leaves, never moves away, and He never loses touch with us. Our friends and family don't always understand what's going on inside of us or the circumstances we're facing. But God always understands and His compassion is inexhaustible. Did you know God never gets tired of you? I even get tired of myself, but God never does! Other human beings aren't always available when we need them. God is always and instantly available.

Brother Lawrence, a cook in a 17th century French monastery, wrote a wonderful little classic entitled *Practicing the Presence of God*. As a monk who washed dishes and served food to his brother monks, he found ways to commune with God all day long. While performing the most menial, ordinary tasks day after day, He found God's presence rich and meaningful. God is near you every moment of every day and He wants us to enjoy a meaningful relationship with Him through His Son, Jesus. People fail. People falter. People aren't always dependable. But God is always faithful and always there even when we've ignored Him for days, months, and even years.

What's another benefit of increasing your awareness of God's presence? Two, a supernatural confidence enters every area of my life. The more you understand that the One who lives inside of you now is the Creator and Sustainer of the whole universe and that He can empower you to face anything that comes your way, the more it will change how you approach and live life. You can face every problem, every person, every obstacle life puts in your pathway with confidence in Him. This is new, supernatural confidence – not confidence in yourself, but confidence in the One who now lives in you.

Let me mention a third benefit. There's now an increased compassion for others in life. Why's that? Because people matter to Jesus. And what matters of Jesus matters to Jesus' followers. The more you experience the presence of God in your life, the more His compassion and concern for others begin to rub off on you. It's inevitable. It's one way God builds His Kingdom here on Earth – by instilling in you and me His great compassion for other people.

Some years ago, Mercedes Benz put out a TV commercial that shows a car colliding with a cement wall during a safety test. Someone then asks the company spokesman why they don't enforce its patent on the Mercedes Benz's unique, energy absorbing car body. Evidently, it was a design copied by other car companies because of its success in safety tests. The spokesman replied matter-of-factly, "Because some things in life are too important not to share." The message of Jesus is too important not to share. The love of God is too important not to share. When God is present and active in your life, you develop a God-inspired compassion for His greatest creation – human beings. So, a busy life demands the presence of God. A second truth...

A BUSY LIFE DEMANDS THE POWER OF GOD.

Back to the vine and branches imagery in John 15. The vine provides life to the branches. It does something else, too. It enables the branches to produce fruit. When there's a good connection between the vine and the branches, the inevitable result is luscious, plumb, beautiful grapes. Because of the vine, the branches receive an ability or power they didn't have before. They produce fruit. Here's Jesus' point. As the Vine, He enables the branches – you and me – to produce spiritual fruit or results. When you maintain a good connection between Jesus and yourself, your life will be fruitful. When you're fruitful, you have God's power working in and through you. Because you're connected to Jesus, you get a spiritual ability you could never possess on your own.

How does the Bible define spiritual fruit, spiritual results, or spiritual power? This might be the most concise definition, "But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!" (Gal. 5:22-23 NLT) Is that an exhaustive list? I don't think so. But, certainly, spiritual fruitfulness, spiritual power, and spiritual results are all about the formation of a godly character in you and me through the Holy Spirit. It's the demonstration of a Christ-like character in my life in every increasing ways. Spiritual power is all about treating people – all people - with dignity and respect. Spiritual power is running your business honestly, working at your job faithfully, keeping your word in personal relationships, practicing healthy self-discipline, and just becoming more and more a person of godly integrity and grace.

There are many additional ways to be spiritually fruitful. It's one thing to know facts about or in the Bible. It's quite another to take and apply the Word of God to my everyday decisions and issues wisely. It can mean treating a struggling person with compassion or helping someone to invite Jesus into his or her life. It can mean motivating someone to grow in the Lord – to be a better disciple of Jesus. The Bible says spiritual power involves the ability to face life's inevitable discouragements and challenges with faith, courage, and hope. We don't let anxiety or despair control us. We reject self-pity. We don't curse God and reject Him when trouble comes our way.

Spiritual power and fruitfulness also involves discovering how God has gifted you and then using those God-given abilities in some way to help build God's Kingdom here on Earth. I've been a pastor for over 40 years. I have yet to meet a Christian who is spiritually fruitful – a follower of Jesus who has any spiritual power – who is not also vitally plugged into a local church like ours and is using his or her spiritual gifts to touch the lives of other people. There's a growing number of so-called Christians out there who think you can be an authentic follower of Jesus, but have no relationship to a local church and who are not serving the Lord in any practical way. I've never seen it.

So, what does spiritual fruitfulness and spiritual power have to do with prayer? Being spiritually fruitful – possessing and demonstrating spiritual power – is never self-produced. What did Jesus say here again? "Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me." (John 15:4 NLT) Spiritual power is the result of God's

presence in your life. And that power is the direct result of prayer – a growing, faithful, expanding, persistent, consistent, developing experience of prayer. How can we possibly receive God's power when we're saying in effect, "I can handle life in general or this specific issue by myself"? If you want to experience something of God's presence and power on an everyday basis, you will find the time and make the effort to pray regardless of how busy you are. That's the promise Jesus gives us here. "Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5 NLT)

I love this old saying about prayer: "When we work, we work. When we pray, God works." Prayer is the key to unlocking and releasing God's power into your life. That's precisely why I can't afford to be too busy not to pray. You can't afford to be too busy not to pray. How many of you here today need God's power in your home? In your relationships? At your job? Just in your life in general? Why would any of us deny ourselves that kind of ability, that kind of power, and those kinds of resources with the lame excuse of being too busy? Why would we cut ourselves off from God's power?

Prayerlessness equals powerlessness. Plain and simple. Where the presence of God is not welcomed, not cultivated, and not maintained, in that person and in that place God's power is cut off. Eventually, if you don't pray or grow in prayer, you make yourself useless to God in this world. Isn't that Jesus' point when He said? "Anyone who does not remain in me is thrown away like a useless branch and withers. Such branches are gathered into a pile to be burned." (John 15:6 NLT)

Does it really matter to God all that much if you're spiritually fruitful or if I am? Well, consider what Jesus said here. "When you produce much fruit, you are my true disciples. This brings great glory to my Father." (John 15:8 NLT) When your life produces spiritual fruit, it demonstrates God's presence and God's power in you as a person. Of course, God cares about it a great deal. In fact, this is God's "bottom line." This is what He wants to see happen in us as a result of what Jesus did for us. This is precisely why He sent Jesus to die on a cross and be raised again. This proves we are actually disciples of Jesus. When you are fruitful spiritually, you bring glory to God. In addition, when you are fruitful spiritually, it brings joy to you personally. Why? Because now you're fulfilling your God-given destiny and your God-given potential.

God-empowered people come in many shapes and sizes. Sometimes they may even be disguised. Some years ago, there was a major evangelistic crusade in a large city in Latin America – somewhere in Central or South America. Before the crusade itself, a weeklong biblical counseling course was offered to any and all Christians on how to share the message of Jesus with others. At this weeklong course, an unlikely man showed up for training. He wore no shoes, and his face was unshaven. One look at him and you knew he was very poor economically. Now it was simply a fact that the Christians who attended this in-depth training course in evangelism were, by and large, the better educated, more socially established, and more spiritually mature believers from the local churches in the area. So, it was a bit unusual seeing this poor man participating – especially considering the fact he was illiterate. Although he attended every training session faithfully, no one expected him to do much counseling.

One day several weeks after the crusade concluded, every available counselor at the center was busy counseling people who wanted to know more about Jesus. Except this poor, illiterate man. Just then a man walked into the center and requested counseling. He was a doctor. In Latin America, most doctors are sophisticated, fashionable men. This doctor was no exception. Before anyone could stop him, this poor, shabbily dressed man took the doctor into a private room for counseling. When the director of the counseling ministry discovered what had happened, he was concerned. When the doctor emerged from the room, the director asked if he could help him in any way. The doctor replied, "No, thank you. This fellow (meaning the poor man) has helped me very much."

The next day, the same doctor returned with two other doctors. The director offered to talk with them, but the doctor refused and asked instead for counsel with the shoeless, illiterate man he had met with the day before. By the end of that week, that man had helped four doctors and their wives become followers of Jesus. He was poor. He couldn't read or write. He was shabbily dressed. But he was filled with God's power. As a result, he was spiritually fruitful. All too often we look on the outside of a person when measuring his or her spirituality. What really matters is the power of the living Lord Jesus within them. And you cannot have that power without prayer.

So, you think you're too busy to pray? Think again! The fact is you and I are too busy not to pray. A busy life demands the presence of God. And a busy life demands the power of God. "When we work, we work. When we pray, God works."