

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
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A Healthy Church 4: Fervent in Prayer

**Hymns: 255 – 409 – 412
Closing: 408**

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

Moved and directed by the Gospel, early converts to Christianity in Africa made private prayer a priority in life. From their dwellings, each would make his way to a solitary place in the African bushland, and there he would pour out his heart to the Father. Through the habit of this process, the paths to each of these places would become worn. If one of the believers began to neglect his talks with God, it soon became very apparent to his fellow believers. Based on the evidence, a loving admonition would soon come, "Brother, grass is growing over your path." As we consider prayer health today, perhaps those Christians give us a clever way to evaluate by asking, "How worn is my prayer path?"

From that cute way of considering our prayer lives, I now share more sobering words to aid your assessment. They come from a pastor making an assessment of his own church, and as you listen, I'd like you to ask this question of yourself, "Could he be speaking about me/us?" This man wrote, **"Prayer is no longer present in some Christian homes...even the table prayers have been discontinued in some families... What does this fact prove? It proves that the spiritual life, the faith, if it has not already died, is in the process of dying, is hardly a flickering light anymore and will soon be extinguished entirely. Prayer is the vital breath of faith, the pulse beat of the believing and God-fearing heart. Where breath and pulse beat cease, death sets in. Where there is no longer prayer, there is no spiritual life anymore... This much is certain: in a family in which there is no longer any family prayer, the spiritual life is at a very deplorable and dangerous low... A Christian who does not pray is a lung that does not breathe, a heart that does not beat, a body that does not live - a spiritual corpse. Where there is little prayer, where it is weak and weary and cold, or consists of feeble efforts and half-hearted sighs, there the life of faith is near extinction."**

(Sigh) I don't know about you, but those words take my lack of prayer life from something that I can smile sheepishly about to something that scares me

tremendously. Those words bring shocking insight to my spiritual health, and show a place where I need to make serious, drastic and immediate changes. If you are with me this morning in needing to address your prayer life, let's answer this serious question: "How do we become more fervent in prayer?"

I think a beneficial place to start as we consider ways to improve our prayer life is by remembering that prayer is a privilege. And it is a privilege that not every person has. Peter speaks these clear words in chapter three of his first letter, **"The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the LORD is against those who do evil" (1Peter 3:12).** It is only perfect people who have the privilege of prayer according to God's Word.

So let's assess your ability to pray; have you earned your right to go to God this past week? If you had judgmental thoughts this past week, you fell short of righteousness before God and have no right to pray. If you acted selfishly at work or at home, you fell short of perfection and have no right to pray. If you failed to trust God and worried about something in your life instead, if gossip or greed crept in your heart, if you fulfilled some sinful craving this past week, if we lied or we were lazy...if we failed to avoid all evil this past week then we have no right to pray. So if we all meant what we said in the beginning of the service about being sinners who deserve his punishment instead, then we also all admitted that we have no right to pray to God.

Yet, our service this morning has already been filled with prayer. How were we able to offer those prayers? Listen to what Paul says to us in Ephesians 2, **"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ...For through him we have access to the Father" (Ephesians 2:13, 18).** Prayer is a privilege that is ours by the grace of God and through the work of Jesus Christ! Christ died so that we could pray! That gives it new value, doesn't it? In him, through faith in him, we are the righteous ones that Peter was talking about. If we know the cross, we have the privilege. The cross breaks the barrier of our sin and gives us a line to our Father.

And that access to the Father reminds us of the 2nd reason to be fervent in prayer. It is something that James pointed to as he spoke about Elijah the prophet with these words, **"The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for**

three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops” (Jas 5:17–18). Wow! Control of the rain is powerful; it’s something I could’ve used yesterday for our Trunk or Treat event. Why was Elijah’s prayer so powerful and effective? Not because of Elijah. He was a human being, just like you and me. He had his share of problems and weaknesses, just like you and me. His prayer was powerful for the same reason our’s can be powerful.

Prayer is powerful for us because we have a powerful Father, the Almighty God of all. In a song of praise to God, the apostle Paul described him as the one **“who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us” (Eph. 3:20).** In prayer, the almighty God opens to us his power and encourages us to tap into it.

So why does our prayer often seem to be lacking in power? I prayed for no rain yesterday, and there was the rain! Maybe it’s because we doubt the promises attached to prayer.

Promises are kind of hard for us sometimes aren’t they? We’re so accustomed to promises being made and then broken. Politicians do it. Employers do it. Employees do it. Pastors do it. Teachers do it. Spouses do it. Parents do it. Children do it. We promise and then we go back on our word. We promise and then we find out we don’t have the means to keep it. We promise and then circumstances change making it impossible for us to keep it.

Do we sometimes color God and his promises with the marker of our life experiences with broken promises? If so, then we need this reminder, **“God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?” (Numbers 23:19).**

In view of that verse, listen to a few of the promises that God gives regarding prayer: **1) “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.” Luke 11:9** God always answers prayer...that’s his promise. He’ll say yes, let’s wait on it, or no here’s something better. **2) Which of you fathers, if your sons ask you for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you, then, though you are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him! (Luke 11:11-13)** **3) Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me (Psalm 50:15).** **4) If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given**

to him. (James 1:5) The powerful God who graciously gives us prayer also backs prayer with promises!

As we look at all the reasons that God gives us to pray; one thing is sure: God never wants a lack of confidence in prayer to be what keeps us being fervent in prayer.

He also never wants it to be from a lack of knowing how. There is a story about a man and his son who went to a diner for lunch. When the father and son sat down the father told the son that they’d just say a silent prayer before the meal. When dad got through praying he waited for his son to finish. Finally after a very long time the dad nudged his boy, “What in the world are you praying about?” he asked. With the innocence of a child he replied, “How do I know...it was a silent prayer?”

Do you ever feel like that? You bow your head after communion because other people seem to do it. You spend the silent prayer time wondering what to pray about or wondering how others could fill all that time. Do we sometimes fail to pray because we don’t know how? Or maybe you feel like every prayer you say is filled with the same rote words. Or perhaps you simply don’t know where to start.

How about some practical ways to pray: 1) For the model, you can’t go wrong with ACTS – Adoration: God, you are worthy of praise because... 2) Confession: I have sinned by... 3) Thanksgiving: I thank you for... 4) Then it is time for supplication: God, please fill this need in my life or the life of... That prayer outline will keep your prayers fresh; and it will keep them from being filled with requests that you make of God.

What about who to pray for? I’ll give two suggestions to help with that. 1) Keep a prayer list. When you say, “You are in my prayers” to someone who is struggling, add them to your list. Keep your list in a place where you will see it. On your night stand. On sticky notes on the bathroom mirror. On your phone. It will help your personal prayer life, and it will also help you be a more caring friend to others. 2) Church Directory: Imagine the improvement in your prayer life and in our congregational health when you could walk by someone you’ve never talked to and say, “Hey! I prayed for you this week! How’s it going?”

And finally, never be afraid to rely on those who have gone before you. The Book of Psalms are filled with prayers from Christians who went through a variety of situations. Find a prayer book or use p. 134 in the front of your hymnal. As we use those

prayers, we will also find encouragement that others have faced what we are facing.

Whatever you choose, just practice; use the special gift God has given.

So, how worn is your prayer path? If grass is growing over your path, recommit to a life of prayer as you have remembered all that God has given you in prayer. If your path is well-worn, keep it up. And may every one of us not just remember what God has given us in prayer, but may we be fervent in our practice of prayer as we strive for personal and congregational health. Amen