



*Pursuing Holiness, Part 6
Powerful Lives of Prayer
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For the reader: As we started our time of corporate worship today, we read the Palm Sunday narrative from Luke 19:28-48.

“²⁸ After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. ²⁹ As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, ³⁰ “Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹ If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it.’” ³² Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” ³⁴ They replied, “The Lord needs it.” ³⁵ They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. ³⁶ As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road. ³⁷ When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: ³⁸ “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” ³⁹ “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” ⁴⁰ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!” ⁴¹ “I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.” ⁴² As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it ⁴³ and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. ⁴⁴ The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. ⁴⁵ They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you.” ⁴⁶ When Jesus entered the temple courts, he began to drive out those who were selling. ⁴⁷ “It is written,” he said to them, “My house will be a house of prayer; but you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’” ⁴⁸ Every day he was teaching at the temple. But the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him. ⁴⁹ Yet they could not find any way to do it, because all the people hung on his words.”

Let us pray: Thank you, Heavenly Father, for your presence with us always. Thank you for your promise that you are enthroned on the praises of your people. We are here to praise you. We are here to thank you. We are here to worship you by listening to and submitting to your Word. I pray that the words of my mouth now and the meditations of our hearts would be pleasing to you – for you are why we are here. You are our Rock and you are our Redeemer. Thank you for all you have done for us through Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.

We have come to the end of the book of James today. Some of you might be glad about that, because he’s been pretty hard on us. But that’s ok. In fact, that’s what we want if we want to grow in maturity as disciples of Jesus. No real athlete wants a coach who doesn’t challenge and push them to help them improve as individuals and as a team. And that should be the case for us as disciples of Jesus too. We need to be challenged and pushed to help us passionately live out our faith as individuals and as a church body. If your goal is to get comfortable and coast in

your faith journey, I dare say you need a new goal. So, to James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, we say a hearty thank you for this important teaching that has called us to pursue holiness in every area of our lives. Next Sunday I'm going to stay with this theme, and then we will move on to our next challenge. But let's remember, pursuing holiness is a lifelong individual and corporate adventure for the disciple of Jesus Christ! Amen?

Let's listen to how James concludes his letter to the church in James 5:13-20. I'm reading from *The Message* which is entitled, "Prayer to Be Reckoned With."

13-15 Are you hurting? Pray. Do you feel great? Sing. Are you sick? Call the church leaders together to pray and anoint you with oil in the name of the Master. Believing-prayer will heal you, and Jesus will put you on your feet. And if you've sinned, you'll be forgiven—healed inside and out. 16-18 Make this your common practice: Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you can live together whole and healed. The prayer of a person living right with God is something powerful to be reckoned with. Elijah, for instance, human just like us, prayed hard that it wouldn't rain, and it didn't—not a drop for three and a half years. Then he prayed that it would rain, and it did. The showers came and everything started growing again. 19-20 My dear friends, if you know people who have wandered off from God's truth, don't write them off. Go after them. Get them back and you will have rescued precious lives from destruction and prevented an epidemic of wandering away from God."

There's a common theme here as James concludes his letter to the church. Pray! Pray when you're up and pray when you're down. Pray when you're sick and pray when you're well. Pray for yourself and pray for others. Pray for your brothers and sisters in the faith and pray for those who are not here yet. Pray! Talk to God about whatever is on your heart and listen to God talk to you about whatever is on his heart. Pray! And then wait and watch and testify about what God is doing in your life!

Some of you undoubtedly have seen the advertisements for the movie coming out this week called *Breakthrough*. It is the true story of a young boy and his friends who fell through the ice one winter day in January of 2015 in Missouri. The friends were rescued alive. John, however, went down into the water and wasn't brought out until over 15 minutes had passed. When he was brought out he was stiff, blue, not breathing, with icicles in his hair. CPR was administered for 43 minutes while he was transported to the hospital and while in the ER. It's a long and amazing story, but bottom line, God brought this 14-year-old boy back to life. I think it was 19 days after he entered the hospital that he walked out with no physical or cognitive impairment. A true miracle. What changed things? God changed things as a result of a mother's prayer when all the doctors and nurses had all but given up. Listen to these words from John's mom as she reflects.

"A few weeks after John was released from the hospital, we were at the doctor's office for a checkup. As we sat in the waiting room a woman walked in. I have to admit, by this point, we'd been in front of so many cameras and talked to so many people, all those faces just started to fade in and out. So, when she saw me and smiled brightly, I flung open my mental filing cabinet and started flipping through every file trying to figure out if and how I knew this person. "Hi!" she said to me as she headed toward the sign-in-desk. "How are you? And how are you doing, John?" I just could not summon up how I was supposed to know her. "I know you don't know me," she said, smiling. "But I want you to know this. I live across the street from where they pulled John out of the water. When I came outside and saw what was happening with John, I knew things were desperate. I'm a believer, and I want you to know that I went back into my house, got on my knees, and started intercessory prayer for John." I was stunned and so grateful to know that prayers were already going up to God before I even entered the ER room and prayed my own desperate prayer.

Often, God asks us to partner with Him in making miracles happen. In what way? Through prayer. Too many of us turn to prayer as a last resort. "Well, we've tried everything, so let's pray." Recently I was watching the movie *The List* and heard a quote that sums up our all-too-often problem with prayer: "God's children and his enemies both make the same mistake. They both underestimate the power of prayer." Can God heal completely with just one prayer? Absolutely. But often, for whatever sovereign reason, He wants us to be active participants in His work. He wants us to pray and keep praying. He

wants us to consider prayer as the first resort – and the continual resort. It's all about God's perfect timing and purpose. Just as He did with Lazarus, He does with us. He wants us to pray and pray and then pray some more – “without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17). He wants us not just to pray crisis prayers – but to pray, as the apostle Paul told us, “On all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests” (Eph. 6:18).

I discovered why that's so important. Because if I make prayer a habit, then I see God at work all the time. If I see God at work all the time, that builds my trust in Him, so that when the crisis comes, my faith is already strong, my trust is already solid, and I have no need to doubt. I can much more easily believe that God is who He says He is, because I've experienced it over and over. And in turn, my prayers become filled with worship and thanksgiving, not just asking for things.”

I bookmarked that part of the story when I read it because it underlines not just the healing power that prayer (communication and communion with God) has for us as individual children of God, but it also highlights the healing power that our prayers have in the lives of the people around us. Our pursuit of holiness, which of course includes a prayer relationship with our Heavenly Father, is not just for the one praying but it is for the greater work of God. It is for the gospel influence in the communities in which we live, it is for everyone living in your household, it is for your co-workers, it is for your neighbors, it is for your teammates. Your pursuit of holiness is for everyone around you - and I'm telling you that when this is real, it changes lives. How do I know? Because since the beginning of January I had the privilege of watching it happen with the 12 people whom God brought together in our Covenant Partner class. They started as couples and individuals from Doylesburg, Dry Run, Spring Run, Orrstown, Manheim, Blairs Mills, Willow Hill, and Rockhill Furnace. That's how they started. But since January, they became family. How did that happen?

Prayer. Prayers prayed on the spot every Sunday as they gathered. Prayers prayed before the class began in January. Prayers prayed by the elders over a year ago for those who were here but not fully committed to the church family. Prayers undoubtedly prayed by mothers and fathers, by grandmothers and grandfathers. Prayers prayed by people we don't even know just like the lady who prayed for the boy across the street in the water. Prayers prayed for each other in between Sundays. What we are seeing and hearing today as these 12 people stand and profess their faith and make a commitment to this congregation is the result of innumerable prayers prayed – and God alone knows how what has happened here with them and with us through them will impact others for the Kingdom of God today, next week, next year, and yes, even generations from today.

In my nearly 17 years here as your pastor, I have never had a class take so long to get through the curriculum. So far, they hold the record. But it wasn't the content of the curriculum that slowed things down. The work of the Holy Spirit slowed things down as a result of the thousands of prayers that had been prayed by and for these 12 people who brought with them 12 stories filled with joys and deep pain, sorrows, & regrets just like you and me. All I ever ask as we start a class is “Please share with the others how you came to be sitting around this table today.” And 4 weeks, several boxes of Kleenexes, lots of laughter, and lots of calories later from the delicious treats Tana & Tina brought to the class, we started Lesson One of the curriculum.

Jesus wept over Jerusalem, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace.” He came right through the city and they missed him. Oh, they saw him, but they missed who he really was. They didn't want to know. They wanted a conquering King and so that's what they saw – even though he was riding a donkey not a stallion! They missed the truth as it passed by them, a truth that would have brought them the kind of peace all of our souls long for – the peace of knowing Jesus Christ and the transformation he can make in our lives – Jesus Christ who said, “Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” (John 14:27).

As we continue on our journey of pursuing holiness, may our public lives reflect our deep private lives of prayer. Because who knows what hurting hearts might be healed and what precious souls may be saved through the prayers God leads you to pray. Amen.