

Prayer 1 - Prayer and Proximity

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Introduction (Connection):

[Invite to Isaiah 56]

Let's see if I can remember how to do this thing called preaching.

Didn't God use Colin's message last week in a pretty powerful way in your life? He sure used Colin in mine!

Tension:

To tell you all where we're going, I want to recap where we've been, because, if you can remember, we've tracked a specific theme for all of last year.

We got to our Advent season, where we were in a series called *God With Us*, because of how we see and enjoy God's glory is through his manifest presence.

And one of the last concepts we talked about in 2019 and where we left this conversation was the truth that Proximity precedes proclamation and power... that witness leads to a life of proclaiming the gospel and power over sin and evil.

In other words, it is impossible to do life FOR God without doing life WITH God.

This means that our nearness to God, our proximity, must be the prioritized pursuit of our lives.

But how? What does that even look like? What does it mean to be near God, do my devotions? Come to church?

Today, I've been praying that God would clear this up for us; we're going to find out how much prayer is integrated into proximity.

Let me start off by asking this: How many of you would, by show of hands, say your prayer life couldn't be better; it is exactly where you want it to be?

Keep your hands up: look around. No one... which means what? Everyone in here believes their prayer life could stand some polishing up.

You know what's amazing? My four and five year old daughters are even wanting their prayer lives to grow too.

For several months now, the only prayer Joelle has prayed is, "May Papa and Mimi drive safely home, Amen."

2-3 times a day... Every day... and guess what; my in-laws haven't gotten in a single wreck!

During devotions a few nights ago, Hadlee and Joelle were wanting to learn new ways to pray and they asked, "Are there prayers in the bible we can learn to pray?"

"Why yes my beautiful darling amazing girls, there are; let me show you!"

So this series simply called Prayer is a bit of an overflow from my own personal journey with Christ.

And we're going to spend as long as it takes in this series until I see the culture of our church's prayer life shift.

Don't worry, this won't be me guilt tripping us, "Oh, don't you know how Jesus was beaten and whipped and crucified for you and you can't even spend 5 minutes a day talking to him?"

That won't be this series.

By now you should be in Isaiah 56, and we're going to look at one verse that has transformed my thoughts behind prayer in a pretty radical way.

Exposition:

We're in the part of Isaiah where God is speaking about the coming kingdom of God after their exile and return.

Isaiah 56:1-8 — "Thus says the Lord:

***'Keep justice, and do righteousness,
for soon my salvation will come,
and my righteousness be revealed.***

***2 Blessed is the man who does this,
and the son of man who holds it fast,
who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it,
and keeps his hand from doing any evil.'***

***3 Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say,
"The Lord will surely separate me from his people";
and let not the eunuch say,
"Behold, I am a dry tree."***

4 For thus says the Lord:

- “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,
5 I will give in my house and within my walls
a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off.***
- 6 “And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord,
to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord,
and to be his servants,
everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it,
and holds fast my covenant—
7 these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples.”***
- 8 The Lord God,
who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares,
“I will gather yet others to him
besides those already gathered.”¹***

There’s so much to talk through here, although I’m sure some of you won’t mind skipping the Eunuch’s part.

The main point of this text is that in God’s kingdom legacy and welcome are available for all who keep his covenant.

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Is 56:1–8.

There's another truth that is proven in this text that I want to focus in on.

This house that all nations and backgrounds are brought into through keeping God's covenant is called a house of prayer twice in v. 7.

It's an IHOP: International House of Prayer.

This text should ring some bells, right?

This is the passage Jesus quotes when he flips the tables.

He walks into the temple of God only to find money changers and religious leaders selling temple approved sacrifices, effacing the experience of atoning for sin, diminishing the intensity of it while accommodating consumeristic mindsets.

Jesus makes a whip and starts Indiana Jonesing the traders and salesmen out of the temple, flipping tables, setting the animals free (and all the PETA people said AMEN).

And he says to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations,'"?

A house of prayer... one for all nations.

In this one comment, Jesus takes an Old Testament truth and affirms it will be a part of the New Covenant that he is establishing between God and man.

The truth is: whatever God dwells in is to be a house of prayer.

Whether it was the Tabernacle in the wilderness, or the Temple built and rebuilt in Jerusalem, God's presence there would make that space a house of prayer.

Remember, the purpose of God's house, the temple, was for atonement for sin and access to God's presence because he filled the temple's space called the holy of holies.

God says, that house, where he dwells, is a house of prayer.

He characterizes his house as a house of prayer.

Not a house of sacrifice.

Not a house of guilt and shame.

Not a house of good works and measuring up.

Not a house of worship and praise.

Not a house of lament and grief.

Not a house of boredom or relaxation.

but a house of prayer.

You remember prayer, right? That thing you do when you drive by a police officer and you weren't sure if you were going too fast or if he caught you.

That thing you do when you're looking for a parking spot close to the front door?

God says his house is to be characterized by **personal, communicative responses to the knowledge of God.**²

That's our working definition of prayer by the way: Prayer is the **personal**, meaning between you as a person and the persons of the Godhead,

² Definition by Tim Keller, *Prayer; Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York: NY: Penguin Books, 2014), 45.

communicative, meaning spoken using language, **response**, meaning the reaction to, the knowledge of God.

In other words, as God reveals truths about his nature, will, and mission, we dialogue back with him in response.

This shows just how critical prayer is in the life of the Church because he says God's house is to be characterized by prayer, personal, communicative, response to knowing God.

Just a quick side now: guess what is God's house now... you and me.

1 Corinthians 6:19 — "do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?"³

We who are in Christ, under the New Covenant in his blood, are now the dwelling places of God, we are his house on earth right now, and we are to be characterized as a house of prayer.

Now, keep in mind that the two main purposes of the temple were atonement for sin and access to God.

"[Jesus Christ] entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption."⁴

Therefore, if wherever God dwells is designed to be an access point to God, and if God says that access point is to be characterized by prayer, then here is the truth that ought to blow us away.

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 6:19.

⁴ Hebrews 9:12 ESV.

Prayer, then, is how we engage in witness with God.

This is the main point that I want to get after today to start us all off on this series...

Prayer is seeking and finding proximity

When David himself says, "One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple,"⁵ that isn't just a cute way to talk about desiring God... He wants to be able to see God and ask him things.

Even Spurgeon said we come near to God in prayer... even the very term we use for prayer is, "Let us draw near to God."⁶

Prayer is seeking and finding proximity.

If you want to be close to God, if you want intimacy with God, it is going to be in the arena of prayer.

Application/Challenge:

I'd like to argue for this as truth in three different ways.

Proof 1: Joy in proximity

Psalm 16:11 — "In your presence there is fullness of joy.,,"

If joy is found in God's presence and prayer is seeking and finding proximity to God's presence, then through prayer is how you find joy.

⁵ Ps 27:4 ESV.

⁶ Charles Spurgeon, "Nearness to God" (sermon, The Metropolitan, Jan. 17, 1869) accessed February 1, 2020, <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/nearness-to-god#flipbook/>.

That's why God promises in v. 7, "I will make them joyful in my house of prayer."

So then this must mean that our joy is directly connected to our prayer life.

That has been my experience for the 15 years that I've followed Jesus.

Those seasons when I have an anemic prayer life, I question where my joy went; things change about me.

I've been called brooding Brodd by those who spend enough time to see the change happen in my disposition, and I know its directly related to the fact I didn't seek the Lord that morning.

If all people see in you or all you see in yourself is bitterness and distance and a weakness overall, perhaps you need to have your prayer life examined.

God makes us joyful in his IHOP: international house of prayer.

Proof 2: Faith's Chief Expression

Paul himself says that "the righteous shall live by faith," meaning faith isn't just a one time event at the beginning of our journey with Christ, it characterizes the whole life of the believer.

With that verse in mind, John Calvin described the relationship between faith and prayer in this way:

"Prayer is the chief exercise of faith." — John Calvin

This is one of the key ways we live a life of faith in God; it manifests our humility before God and our dependency on the Lord.

Prayerlessness reflects a self-sufficiency, a pride, and an arrogance that we can do this thing called life on our own.

Prayerfulness shows that you have truly grasped the fact that Jesus reconciled us back to the Father through His blood, and that we now have free, unhindered access to God by faith alone.

Prayerfulness proves that you understand the most costly blessing Jesus won for us... communion with God!

And there's a third proof that may take a little longer to articulate but we'll land it.

Proof 3: Proximity isn't just known but felt

Being near to the Lord isn't determined by physical space any more, it is determined by the inner relationship and intimate fellowship we have with Him in our souls.

For example: My wife and I have spent hundreds of hours on the road with our kids, sitting two feet apart from one another for hours.

I know I am physically close to her, I have access to her, but when our three kids are in the car, I don't often leave that drive time feeling close to her.

Why, you ask? Well... because half the time the kids are crying for snacks, yelling because they want a movie, throwing shoes at me, playing games, fighting because one took the toy from another.

Earlier this week I had to attend a meeting with the conference.

We left the kids with her parents in south central PA... and I got to sit two feet away from my wife for four hours in one day; radio off, no kids... just me and my wife.

Would you say that if I sat next to her for four hours and didn't say a word to her, I'd feel close to her?

No... I got to talk to my wife for four hours straight, and we talked about everything, and I left that time feeling closer to my wife.

You can build an intellectually known theological proof that you get to be near God... you can spend hours reading God's word, studying massive textbooks on doctrine and christian living, and yet you can still feel thousands of miles away from God, can't you?

That's because reading and studying about God wasn't designed to stop at just mere knowledge.

The bible says that kind of knowledge puffs up.

Prayer, on the other hand, is meant to engage your whole person; in fact the Bible encourages us that prayer is supposed to engage our emotions, how we feel.

That's why God warns in Isaiah 29 that we're not to honor God with our lips if our hearts are far from him.

Prayer is meant to be emotive.

"But what about the truth!? Of course emotional Scott is going to talk about emotions. Ugh."

Truth is primary, of course. Truth informs how we pray and what we pray.

Truth guides our knowledge of God, which prayer responds to.

But if all we do is intake truth with no prayerful expression or response to that truth, we become spiritually overweight and unstirred in our affections.

Truth is meant to lead our affections to God.

I may have said this before: you can only be intimate with someone you trust.

Truth builds trust, which then leads to intimacy, nearness, proximity.

This is why God promises to be close to those who call upon him in truth, who seek him with their whole heart.

We are to pray according to the truth and we seek him with all of our affections.

We can't just be "people of the book" who love and do what the Lord reveals in the Bible.

We must also be "people of prayer" who seek to be near the Lord.

That's because prayer is seeking and finding proximity.

Conclusion (Cast Vision):

I wish I could say more but I want to wrap this up with something I'm guessing many of you are thinking right about now.

You may be thinking, "Well I pray pretty often Scotty boy and yet I still feel far from the Lord. What about that?"

I would just ask you, is the sum of your prayer life requests for healings like for your Great Aunt's twice removed niece to heal from her surgery to remove the mole on her back?

Out of all the 150 Psalms, do you know how many have to do with healing sickness? Two. Psalm 41 and Psalm 38.

Prayer ought to be praise, it ought to be thanksgiving, confession, remorse and lamenting, supplication and yielding, not just asking for physical healing.

“Trust in him at all times you people; pour out your hearts before Him. God is our refuge.”⁷

Francis Fenelon said this and with this I will close:

“Tell God all that is in your heart, as one unloads one’s heart, its pleasures and its pains, to a dear friend.

Tell Him your troubles, that He may comfort you;

Tell Him your joys, that He may sober them;

Tell Him your longings, that He may purify them;

Tell Him your dislikes, that He may help you to conquer them;

Talk to Him of your temptations, that He may shield you from them;

Show Him the wounds of your heart, that He may heal them;

Lay bare your indifference to good, your depraved tastes for evil, your instability.

Tell Him how self-love makes you unjust to others, how vanity tempts you to be insincere, how pride disguises you to yourself and others.

If you thus pour out all your weakness, needs, troubles, there will be no lack of what to say. You will never exhaust the subject. It is continually being renewed.”⁸

Will you pour out your heart before God this week?

⁷ Psalm 62:8 CSB

⁸ Francois Fenelon, quoted by Charles R. Swindoll in *The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 1998), 309.

Will you pray to draw near?

Out of that will overflow proclamation and power. Don't believe me? Read through the book of Acts; every powerful advance in the church was preceded by prayer.

Last week, Colin challenged us with the question: do we want to look good on the outside, or do we actually want God?

If you want God, this is it... prayer.

Draw near to the Lord this week through prayer.

[Invite people to pray]