

Prayer is our greatest work

Nov. 27, 2016

Brian R. Wipf

It's always great hearing people say "thank you!" to the Lord. I know it's a great encouragement to me; in fact, that's why we are supposed to do this together. Our expression of thanks to God before each other serves as a way of worship and encouragement to one another. But notice what we're praising: we're praising *God's* work. We're thanking *God* for what he did. We're recognizing *God* as the giver of these good gifts. And even when we say thank you to each other for the way we serve and help one another, right thinking (right theology) still sees God as the true worker in it all.

We're in a sermon series about our heart statements, the guiding beliefs of our church family. And the third heart statement reads like this: *Prayer is our greatest work*. Obviously, the focus of this heart statement is our collective belief that prayer should be at the heart of our communal life. But the way our statement reads puts a focus on our work. Prayer is our greatest work; it's the greatest way we can accomplish the work that needs to be done.

I think one of the reasons why FBC has been such a perfect for me and the Wipf family is because we share the value of hard work. We are hard workers; I love that about our church family. There's work to do; God made us to do work. So, we work hard for our children (especially) in Awana, at the Youth Center, in SS, Beginners Church, Nursery, VBS and even more than that. We prepare lessons, we make food, we hold babies, we practice and sing songs and so much more. We work a lot so that others can hear the good news of Jesus, so they might know the wonder of being adopted into God's family. And someday, when all of God's children are together before him, there will be a Thanksgiving feast every day that celebrates the way God worked in and us through us - it's going to be great!

But our heart statement says *prayer* is our *greatest* work; prayer is the most important activity we can do to help as many people realize that day as possible. Prayer. Does prayer always feel like the most productive thing you can do? Does it even feel like a good use of time and energy? Sometimes, I wonder: is anything happening, is anything changing as a result of my prayers?

On December 2, 2015, 14 people were killed and 22 seriously injured in San Bernardino, CA, by Syed Farook and Tashfeen Malik in a terrorist attack; I'm sure many of you remember this. Many leaders and politicians sent out press releases and tweets offering prayers. The next day on December 3, The Daily News had this on their front page (PIC). The article began with this sentence: Prayers aren't working. It's not every day headlines make the headlines, but this one did. As the subheading says, these prayers are "meaningless platitudes" in the face of horrific suffering. Non-religious people celebrated; finally, someone said it. Believers were angry at the mockery of prayer.

I'm wondering though: is this what many of us really think? We'd never say it, of course. We're supposed to say that prayer is really important; that it works. But do we really believe it? And if we did, wouldn't we pray more? I don't automatically believe that prayer works. One of the reasons is that it *seems* like my prayers don't make a difference. One of the things I love about God is that he gives me reasons to believe. He doesn't just tell me to pray; he gives me reasons why I should and why it makes a difference. God also corrects me when my thoughts on prayer lead me to wrong conclusions. And he shows me not to trust and evaluate his work merely with these eyes.

My goal this morning is to show you from the scriptures why prayer is our greatest work. I'm also going to try and show you that working in prayer and working through teaching, or hospitality, or serving, or holding babies are not mutually exclusive. Just because we are to work hard in prayer doesn't mean can't or shouldn't work hard in other activities of faith. They go together. Hopefully, of course, as a result we will become more prayerful and effective as a church family.

The scriptures teach us that the true work that must be done is only done by God. I have two principal passages to use to demonstrate this, one from the OT and the other from the NT. First, take your Bibles and turn to Psalm 127 (READ vs. 1).

This Psalm is pretty straight forward. The two images are one and the same. The builder, the watchman are both doing tasks. They are both working to accomplish something. The builder is constructing a structure. The watchman is staying up late at night trying to keep the city safe. But Psalm says there is a more critical actor, another worker - the primary one. And who is that? The verse tells us it's the Lord. And the Psalmist is telling us that even if the builder builds and the watchman guards, unless the Lord builds or guards their work is useless. That's what vain means. Their work is vain, in that it's not going to accomplish anything. Because the decisive work isn't done by the builder or the guard, the decisive work is done by the Lord.

Like some of you when you study your Bibles, I will sometimes consult a commentary to see if some bible men or women are seeing what I see. I try and pick authors who seem to respect the scriptures and are looking to serve the church's faith in Jesus) there are tons who don't, so don't think every bible commentary is from a man or a woman who believes in Jesus). When I read what my trusty Psalmist commentator wrote about Psalm 127 I first scratched my head, I then studied more, and was left thoroughly discouraged. He missed the point. Or did he just not want to say it. Listen to what he says the point of Vs. 1 is: "We can plan something carefully, work hard at it, and be responsible and creative in implementing our plans, and everything can go wrong in a way we could never have foreseen." You see, he's saying, things just don't work out all the time. He doubles down on that explanation a few sentences later by saying, "But the psalm's polemic [argument] is not attacking human carelessness that evades taking responsibility but again noting that the best human carefulness cannot guarantee results."

Now, for the sake of argument, I'm not going to disagree with that. Those things are true; sometimes, things don't work out like we plan. But that's not the point of Psalm 127:1 at all. This verse isn't saying, "You know, you can try really hard to do the best job you can and sometimes it just doesn't work out." Look at vs. 1, friends: Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. This verse isn't teaching the sometimes life is unpredictable; it's teaching that the Lord's work is the only power sufficient to build a house, to guard a city, to unite a church, to save the lost or to sanctify a believer. This just goes to show you, friends, how important it is for you to think when you read the scriptures. Pray that God will give you understanding. Yes, seek help. But when something doesn't fit with what seems to be obvious from the text (from the text, not what's obvious based on your own feelings), seek more help. Why must we pray for God to work and to act? Because unless God is working underneath our work, the work is not going to get done.

Next, turn to 1 Cor. 3. We've been studying 1 Corinthians in men's bible study and we've learned that there were divisions in the church due to the pride of many of its members. And in their pride they exalted themselves in the name of various church teachers and preachers. They would say, "I am of Paul" and "well, I am of Apollos" as if they were smarter or better for following one instead of the other. So, Paul corrects this pride and he says this in vs. 5-7 (READ).

Why, Paul says, would you form little factions around the various teachers of the Lord when the true factor is God who causes the growth? Paul doesn't cause growth; neither does Apollos or Peter for that matter. We're just servants, Paul says. Some of us plant; others of us water. The one who matters is God because he is the one who causes the growth. The power of God, the work of God is the sole deciding factor that he's able to say in vs. 7, "So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth."

This is very reminiscent of Psalm 127. Planting and watering are important, just like constructing or standing guard are important, too. But the true work that must be done can only be done by the Lord. God must accomplish his work.

I don't think this is very hard to apply to our communal life as a church family. We can all work really hard in our service, in our teaching, in our acts of kindness and in everything else we do here to love other people (and we should), which is our greatest expression of our love for God, but if God's not in it, if he's not working behind our work, if he's not effecting the change we so desperately want to see in us and in our community, we labor in vain. He's the worker.

I find it very interesting that at the close of the first 3 chapters in Ephesians, after Paul recounts all the glorious works God has done on behalf of his people, Paul bows his knees in prayer. It's almost this worshipful response that's quite similar to the end of Romans 11 where Paul can't help but give praise to God, but his praise in Eph. 3 is one where he asks God to do more. He says in vs. 14, "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father." So he begins to

pray that all that he said God did in chapters 1-3 God *would now* do in the Ephesian church. You've done it already, God; now do it in them and for them. We know this is a prayer because in vs. 20 he says, "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all we *ask* or think." He's asking and he's confident that God will do it and so much more. And if that is the case, our prayers are not a waste of time; they are not platitudes. Jesus says (John 16:24), "Ask, and you will receive that your joy may be full." Now, there are conditions in prayer and for our prayers to be answered, but what's true is the power of God to do the work and his desire for us to ask him to do it.

The third heart statement in full reads this way:

- Since prayer is our greatest work
 - We will pray regularly - corporately and individually - and saturate every work in prayer so that God has ownership and receives glory in our effort.
 - This means we will approach every aspect of our lives through prayer and will not seek ownership of the results from the labor.

Can you see the truth we talked about from our passages this morning? God has the ownership in all that gets done; he receives the glory. We make an effort, we make an effort in our activities, but our prayer time is an effort in itself, but God does the work.

Now, I do want to address the conundrum that we face: well, why do anything then? If God does the work, what role do we truly play? Shouldn't we, then, just stay locked in our houses, our church facilities, and just pray? Well, to answer that question, first, just consider the example of the NT church. Was that the example of Peter, of James or of Paul? Did they all just hang out in their homes and do nothing, but pray? No, they didn't. That alone should rebuke these kinds of thoughts. But, why not? Let me show you two verses.

First, turn to 1 Corinthians 15. In describing his ministry of preaching the gospel in vs. 10 he says (READ). Two things: First, he says, "I worked harder than any of them." Oh, Paul must have been a hard worker. He labored so hard in all that he did. He's not lying here. But then look what he says next, "though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me." It wasn't me. I worked hard, but there was something working underneath me; the grace of God was at work in me. That's why I did what I did and why I accomplished what I accomplished. Do you see the connection? I work, but underneath my work is God's work and that's the determining factor.

Turn to Col. 1. Again, he's talking about his ministry and he says this in vs. 29 (READ). Same thing, right? I'm working so hard, but my struggles are fueled by the energy that God works within me. God's work in me and through me.

Here's one of the keys to understanding effective prayer. So oftentimes we pray for God to change the circumstances that surround us. And why wouldn't we, right? Cancer stinks. Depression is oppressive. Parenting is hard. It seems so obvious that if we could get into that school, get that job or that promotion our lives would change for the better. So we pray for God

to work and change the circumstances of our life. But the change that God often wants to make isn't so much out there, but instead, it's in here. In me. I'm convinced that some of the trials God gives us are meant to drive us to our knees, but not so that the trials would vanish and go away, but for God to change you and me to honor him in the midst of the trial. When we get that, our lives will change quite drastically.

So, friends, do indeed make prayer your greatest work. As so many of you serve within the ministries here at FBC, saturate your efforts with prayer. When you hold babies in the nursery, pray for them. Pray that they would always love gathering with their brothers and sisters to worship King Jesus. Pray that you would persist in the work when it's hard and when I preach too long and the children get fussy. SS teachers, pray that God would cause the growth as you plant and water the seed of the gospel in the children's lives. If you work on our facilities, if you fold bulletins, pray that God would powerfully work his energy in your work and that the ministries of the word would be more successful because of what you do.

If you're like me, you're going to grow discouraged in prayer. It's going to feel like nothing is happening. When we pastors pray every week for the prayer requests in our prayer box that you give us, we will often say, "God, work faith in us right now to believe you hear and you work. Make us watchful in our prayers believing they make a difference." We have to ask for that, too. And do you know what, I believe God loves when we pray such prayers admitting our weakness and his supreme power. He's a good God who loves to give good gifts to his children when we ask. So, don't stop asking, FBC.