

## Fervent Prayer

I Thessalonians 5:16-24

### Sermon Notes /Life Group Questions

No prayer, no power. Little prayer, little power. Some prayer, some power. Much prayer, much power.

On the summer after my sixteenth birthday my parents took our family on a month long around the country National Parks vacation. It was awesome. A real gift. I have honestly forgotten how many miles we drove that month but it was a bunch. We enjoyed so many of our National Parks and the beauty of our nation.

I remember one afternoon we were in Arizona at the Hoover Dam. Those of you who have been there know that the Dam is so large that there is a narrow two lane road that runs across the top of the span. There is a small parking lot at the west end of the Dam that has been closed to the public since 9/11, but thirty-six years ago it was still open. As I remember, I was walking back to the car to meet up with our family and I saw another family trying to push an RV up off of the two-lane road into this parking lot. They were almost all of the way up the small incline but seemingly “frozen” there unable to push it up and over that little bluff. So I instinctively ran over and joined them and pushed for all I was worth. To my, and their, amazement my little push was just what was needed. As soon as I put my skinny little back into that RV with them it provided just enough extra “power” to push it over the incline and safely into the parking lot. As the RV safely coasted to a stop in one of the parking spaces, they all turned to me and said thanks and introduced themselves and then began to make jokes about how strong I was. It really was a joke because of how skinny I was.

It wasn't my strength by itself. It was the extra that I added to the combined force of our pushing together. It became a lesson I have not forgotten. How important is one more prayer? How important is one more person who prays? I want to suggest to you this

morning that it is more important than we realize. You may think that you are small and insignificant. The devil may want you to believe that you have little worth and value, but God has a history of doing great things when we give Him the little that we have.

As we come to understand and embrace who we are and why we are here we realize that a part of our calling as a Deer Flat family is to keep the pioneering spirit alive. I am so grateful for this wagon that we have had on our platform for the last few weeks. It has great symbolic meaning to our Deer Flat family. Our shared desire is to keep the wheels on the wagons and then to keep the wagons rolling forward.

Imagine for a moment, the difficulty we would have trying to push or pull or drag this wagon around if it had no wheels. Friends, that is what happens in so many churches when there is little or no prayer. It is as if they want the “God things” that we spoke of last week to happen to them and for them, but there is no prayer. It begins to feel almost as if they are trying to drag around a big old wagon that somehow lost its wheels. No, we want to keep the wheels on the wagon.

But we also want more than that. We want to keep the wagon rolling forward. And where is forward? Rolling where? We don’t want to go just anywhere. We don’t want to be carried along by the whims of culture or the selfish desires of the world. Perhaps the most important role of the old wagon masters on the Oregon Trail was to get up each morning and as the wagons lined to stand before them and say “This way is west”. They needed someone to point the direction. Some one who would know which way was west and to then point out the best trail headed west.

One of the most important roles of a pastor and the lay leaders of the church, is to get up each morning and spend time alone before God so that we can then stand before God’s people and say this is where God is leading us. And as we begin to move in obedience to the leading of God, we do not travel in our own strength. The prophet Zechariah (4:6) wrote the word of the Lord as God said, “Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit”.

It is important that we remember that a church does not grow simply because of our good ideas or hard work. It is important that we remember that lives are not transformed by God's grace simply because of the excellence of our programs and events. Our neighbors do not become more like Jesus simply because they find us to be friendly. No, we need the power and presence of God at work in our hearts and in our relationships. But how is that power and presence unleashed? God said that it does not happen by our might or power, but by his Spirit.

So, one of our primary commitments as the Deer Flat family is to be a people and a place of fervent prayer. Now, what does that mean? Let's go back to the Bible to find our answers.

What does "fervent" prayer mean? If we go to the dictionary and look up fervent we find some definitions that begin to help us: ardent prayer, eager prayer, enthusiastic prayer, passionate prayer, and burning prayer. This is helpful but we want more spiritual authority and meaning than what Webster's has to offer.

The use of the word "fervent" to describe prayer is found in James 5:16 and in the old King James Version. Let me read it for us: "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man (or woman) availeth much." In the New International Version, it simply says "The prayer of a righteous man (or woman) is powerful and effective".

It might help us to have a brief explanation of the use of the word "man" – a righteous man. The context here does not refer only to males, as if to say that only the fervent prayers of those of the male gender who are righteous are effective and powerful. The use of the word "man" here refers to mankind. The fervent prayers of righteous mankind – of men and women – are effective and powerful.

The NIV (the New International Version) is not the most accurate translation of the original language for James 5:16. There is a meaning in the original language that is not

as clear in the NIV. Let me try to draw it out for us. The word used in the Greek that we translate as “fervent” is from the same root as our word “energy”. Since the beginning of civilization, mankind has tried to find ways to create and harness energy. Physicists speak of kinetic energy, potential energy, thermal energy, electromagnetic energy, chemical energy, nuclear energy, and mass energy. And if you ask me to explain the physics of energy you and I are in big trouble. I can hardly spell physics so I am not the one to explain it.

But we live with energy all around us. Water has been used to create and harness energy for centuries. Water has been used to drive a water wheel which created energy and power for industrial purposes. Ellen’s father worked on the Niagara Power Project that harnessed the water from Niagara Falls to produce electrical energy that is still used for residential and commercial and industrial purposes.

What does fervent prayer mean? The most accurate understanding of fervent prayer as taken from the Greek is prayer with energy. This describes prayer that has a power source. Okay, but what is the source of power for this kind of prayer? James 5:16 identifies the source of power for us – the prayer of a righteous man (or woman).

Okay – what does righteous mean? Some of you enjoyed the sound of The Righteous Brothers – Bill Medley’s bass and Bobby Hatfield’s tenor as their voices put out one great hit after another in the 60’s. “You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feeling” is a timeless hit still played on radio stations across America and honored in countless karaoke renditions.

In the 60’s “righteous” was slang for some thing good. A later expression was to call it “cool”. Isn’t it ironic that there was a time when the slang for something good was “righteous” and now in some places the slang for the same thing is “wicked good”. But again let’s not let society and slang identify “righteous” for us. How does the Bible identify righteous?

To be righteous means to live a “right life”, a life that is right before God – a life that pleases God. Let’s keep going ... where in the Bible can we find a definition of a righteous life? Our text for this morning offers us a definition. We can find it as we look at 1 Thessalonians and ask what does it mean to pray fervently? I Thessalonians 5:16-24 (Read).

Verse 16 is clear: Be joyful – always? Be joyful. That makes sense. Christians have many reasons to be joyful. In the King James Version the word “rejoice” is used. When all of the world is frowning we can smile. God’s people are a people with hope. God’s people are a set free people. In our understanding we do not teach a theology of sin management. Our understanding of the Word of God is that we don’t have to learn how to manage the sin in our lives. We believe that the Word of God tells us we can be set free from the guilt of sin and the power of sin. In 1 John 1:9 the Bible says that “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness”. It is not inevitable that we will sin in thought, word and deed every day. It is possible not to have to sin. But when we sin and then confess our sin, God is faithful. We can be forgiven. Jesus said that He was the way the truth and the life (John 14:6). Jesus said that The Truth would set us free (John 8:32). Jesus said that the Holy Spirit – a Spirit of Truth – would guide us into all truth.

As a set free people, we are a people of joy. But the word of God says that we should be joyful “always”. Always? In sickness? In suffering? In persecution? When facing injustice? In death?

Nineteen years ago Ellen lost her father to cancer. He fought valiantly for a year and a half and then the cancer seemingly won and my father-in-law passed away. But our pain brought Dad the healing that he had longed for as he was welcomed into the presence of Jesus. Were we sad at his loss? Yes, we still are in some ways. I miss my father-in-law. So many times I wished I could have sat down with him or called him to talk about what God was doing. We grieved his loss. My bride cried herself to sleep for many nights after his death. But our pain and our tears were always tempered because we knew that

he was now with Jesus. That his body was now free of this awful cancer and he was free to sing and dance before the throne of Jesus. Yes, we miss him, but would we ask him to leave the glory of heaven and life with Jesus to come back? No.

(Tina Stattner)

And so as God's people even in the worst of life's situations, we live with joy because nothing can separate us from the love of God. What is the worst that can happen? Whatever it is, we know that it cannot separate us from the love of God and so we live with joy. We may have tears in our eyes and grief in our heart but we have an inward joy because of the presence and promises of Jesus.

Verse 17 is just as clear - Pray – continually? What is prayer? It is a conversation with God. It involves talking and listening. Sometimes Jesus invites us to do most of the talking and sometimes Jesus wants us to do most of the listening. Prayer as a conversation requires time spent together. I can talk with my friends by e-mail and by phone, but we look forward to those times when we can talk face to face.

But this verse calls us to more than prayer; it calls us to pray continually. Throughout the day. As I am in the car driving to work I can turn off the radio and pray. As I take time for lunch, I can pull away to a quiet place for a few minutes to pray. In the evening I can turn off the television and sit quietly in God's presence to listen for His voice. As I am busy at work or at home I can be talking to the Lord. If couples or families work together in the kitchen after the evening meal they can take time to pray with and for one another as they clean up the table and the kitchen. The call is to pray continually.

Verse 18 adds another element – Give thanks – in all circumstances? Some one has said that the primary motivation for love is gratitude. Why do we love God? Out of gratitude to Him for all He has done and is doing for us. Why do we love Jesus? Out of gratitude for His sacrifice that takes away our sins and allows us to be blameless before Him. Gratitude is such an important concept in our world today. Gratitude is a primary

motivation in our stewardship as Christians. We realize that all we have is from the hand of God. If it wasn't for the daily blessing of life and health and strength we wouldn't be able to work and earn our paycheck. Christian stewardship is formed out of a sense of gratitude that all we have belongs to God. He calls us to a level of generosity that begins by giving him a tenth of what we have and then He generously allows us to keep the rest and use it in ways that bring glory to Him as we care for our own needs. Our world would be a different place if gratitude became a dominant motive in our relationships with one another.

But the Apostle Paul goes on – he says that we should give thanks in all circumstances. Wow! When I get a flat tire? When the relationships that mean the most to us are strained and even breaking? When people we love are suffering unjustly and unfairly? When loved ones we would give our very life for are sick and even dying and there is nothing that we can do? How is it that the Bible calls us to be thankful in all circumstances?

In Romans 5 the Apostle Paul said "... We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us."

James wrote (1:2-4) "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

No, we don't say "Yea God!" when we get a flat tire. But when life gives us a flat tire we turn to God and give thanks because He is with us. We give thanks in all circumstances because in any circumstance as we turn to Him He will reveal more of Himself to us. When we turn to God and give thanks in all circumstances, God will continue His work in our lives that allows us to become more and more like Jesus.

How do we know that giving thanks in all circumstances is important? At the end of verse 18 it specifically says “this is God’s will for you”. Have you ever said, “if I only knew what God’s will was for me?”. Well, now we do. God’s will for each of us is to give thanks – in all circumstances.

Have you ever prayed with someone and it was as if they had a depth to their prayers that you too wish you had in your prayers? How do we add depth to our prayers? These next few verses give us some answers. In verse 19 we are told not to put out the Spirit’s fire. Why would Paul give us such a warning? What is the importance of the “Spirit’s fire”? Let’s go back to the Bible for some answers.

In Matthew 3:11 John the Baptist said that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. In Acts 2 as the disciples were all together the Holy Spirit filled the room they were in and they heard the sound of violent wind that came from heaven and they saw what seemed to be tongues of fire and it says that they were filled with the Holy Spirit.

Here is the basic meaning of this verse: don’t walk around with a fire extinguisher and put out the spiritual fires that God is starting. Henry Blackaby’s study on Experiencing God is now a classic. His basic premise is that we should prayerfully discern what God is doing, and then look for ways to join in with God. But that requires spiritual discernment. When you find yourself faced with an interruption or a surprise or a conflict or a challenging word from a godly friend, stop and pray and ask God if He is at work in what you see or hear unfolding before you. And if you find that God is at work, don’t get out the fire extinguisher. We want to instead keep in step with the Spirit of God.

There is one more lesson here for us on how to develop depth to our prayers. It is in verse 21: “Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.” This verse speaks for itself and is quite clear. Test everything. Will this help me to be more like Jesus? If it will, hold onto it. And if it doesn’t, leave it alone. Don’t see how close you

can get to it without being bitten. Just avoid it. Stay away from it. When you see a guard dog on a chain you can see how close you can get to it before it can reach you and bite you. But let's be honest – that's not a very smart thing to do. And if you are not careful that dog just might surprise you and bite you good. Leave the dog alone. Just avoid the evil in this world that does nothing to help us be more like Jesus.

Now, what is the point to all of this? How will this kind of prayer affect us? Verse 23 says that Our whole spirit, soul and body (may be) kept blameless at the coming of Jesus! Wow – what a promise. Here is the reality. One day each of are going to see Jesus. It will happen in one of two ways. We may die and be taken into His presence, and if that is what happens in death we should have no fear of death. Or before we die, Jesus returns to this earth (and by the way the Bible says that when Jesus returns to earth the dead in Christ will rise first (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)). When we see Jesus in His glorious return, we will see our loved ones and friends who died believing in Jesus. They will be together with Jesus in the clouds of glory as He returns to earth for us.

When that happens life on this earth as we have known it will be over. There will be no time to go back and apologize and make things right. We will all stand before Jesus to give an account for the life we have lived. But my friends, hear again the words of verse 23 ... it is possible to live in such a way in this life that when we do stand before Jesus our conscience can be clear. We can be blameless before Jesus. We can be ready to meet him with no fear.

Verse 24 tells us that God is faithful! “The One who calls you is faithful and He will do it.” We don't save ourselves – Jesus saves. We don't pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. God is faithful. He will do it.

Are you ready to meet Jesus? Is your conscience clear? Do want to know that your heart is free and that you are blameless before Jesus? This morning I am inviting you to get up and leave your seat now as I am speaking and come to the cross. Come down here to the

front and kneel before the cross. In just moments there will be friends who will be kneeling at your side to pray with you.

Perhaps some of you thank God that your conscience is clear and that you have no fear of meeting Jesus, but you would love to have more power and depth in your prayer life. No prayer, no power. Little prayer, little power. Some prayer, some power. Much prayer, much power.

May I ask you some questions? As you consider your prayer life, how strong a charge is in your “spiritual batteries”? When is it most difficult for you to be joyful? When is it most difficult for you to be thankful? Are there any ways that we are putting out the spiritual fires that the Holy Spirit is trying to ignite in our Deer Flat family? I also want to open our altar to you this morning. Perhaps you don’t want or need anyone to come and pray with you this morning. Perhaps you just want a place to be alone with Jesus. In Jesus Name, I invite you to stand now and come as I am speaking and kneel at this altar. We will not interrupt you . . .we will give you time and space to be alone with Jesus. But if you hear the voice of Jesus, come now . . . come to the altar . . . talk to Jesus.

Continued Invitation/Closing Prayer/Benediction