

The Prayer Meeting and Corporate Prayer

The following is from a class taught at Immanuel Presbyterian Church, Norfolk, VA on March 28, 2007. (<http://www.ipcnorfolk.org>)

Introduction

In tonight's class we are going to look at the topic of corporate prayer. We're going to look at what the Bible says about praying with other believers—whether at a congregational prayer meeting, or informally with just two or three believers.

I want to convince you that you need to be praying regularly with other believers. I want you to be concerned if you don't see believers engaged in prayer with one another. Many people feel that "religion" is something private and personal. Tonight we will show that praying with other believers is not optional. Rather, it is essential.

Let me define prayer: Prayer occurs when a Christian approaches God—communicating requests to God, expressing praise and worship of God, confessing sin, or thanking God.

Now let me define corporate prayer: Corporate prayer is the scheduled or unscheduled gathering of two or more Christians where those Christians approach God, communicating requests to God, expressing praise and worship of God, confessing sin, or thanking God. Here are some examples: Corporate prayer occurs when we gather to worship the Lord on the Lord's Day, and the pastor leads us in prayer.

Corporate prayer occurs when we gather at the congregational prayer meeting and take turns speaking together to the Lord. A form of corporate prayer occurs when two believers are discussing a problem—perhaps a family issue, or a financial issue—and in the midst of their discussion they stop and pray together about their problem. These are all examples of corporate prayer.

As we begin, let me give you the outline for tonight's class. We will first look at examples of corporate prayer in the Bible. After that, I will outline seven reasons for why we must pray together. And finally, if time permits, we will look at objections to corporate prayer.

So then, let us begin with...

Examples of Corporate Prayer

We're now going to look at a number of passages. As we go through them, I want you to note the existence of group prayer in each passage.

In Temple Worship

The tabernacle and then the temple were the special place where God chose to let His glory dwell. In all of the whole world, He commanded that people bring their offerings and sacrifices to this one location. When you picture the activity around the tabernacle and around the temple, you probably imagine the constant activity of people coming and going, bring animals, bringing offerings. You probably also imagine the constantly ascending smoke, coming from the altar. The sounds of the animals and the people would have been constant throughout the day.

It's odd, but we don't often associate *prayer* with the tabernacle and the temple. Yet God Himself calls this place a house of prayer. The constantly burning incense symbolizes prayer rising up to heaven. The temple is called a house of sacrifice. But it is *also* called a house of prayer:

Isaiah 56:7 ⁷ Even them 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 nations."

Here we see God Himself characterizing the House of God as a house of *prayer*. It was a place where individual prayer was offered up (as Hannah offered up private, unspoken prayers). But it was also a place where the people prayed *together*, corporately.

Luke 1:10 ¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense.

Here, while Zacharias offers one of the daily incense offerings, a *group* of God's people is gathered outside of the house of the Lord—and they are praying together. This is a picture of corporate prayer.

When Needing God's Protection

Now let's look at another example of corporate prayer. This is found in Ezra. Can you think of the incident I'm thinking of? Let's look at Ezra 8:21-23. Here King Artaxerxes is sending Ezra from Babylon to Jerusalem. The Temple has been rebuilt, and the king is sending Ezra back with the Temple utensils, as well as much silver and gold.

Now with these great treasures, the people are ready to begin their journey from Babylon to Jerusalem:

Ezra 8:21-23 ²¹ Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions. ²² For I was ashamed to request of the king an escort of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy on the road, because we had spoken to the king, saying, "The hand of our God *is* upon all those for good who seek Him, but His power and His wrath *are* against all those who forsake Him." ²³ So we fasted and entreated our God for this, and He answered our prayer.

You see what is happening? The king has granted Ezra's many requests for treasures and riches to re-establish Temple worship in Jerusalem. Now they were ready to make the journey, but they knew that it was a dangerous journey, especially if they were transporting so much treasure. Why not ask the king for an armed escort? Ezra was too ashamed to ask, for he had declared to the king that the Lord would protect them.

So what do Ezra and the people do? What is their natural response when faced with great need? They go to the Lord in prayer, asking Him to supply their needs according to His riches and great mercy. Notice here that they prayed together for this need. It was a corporate prayer meeting, held on the bank of the river.

With Christ in the Garden

Now let's jump ahead to the New Testament. It's just after the last supper and the upper room discourse. It's just before Christ is captured and taken away to be tried, mocked, and crucified. It is late at night. The men are tired. Here we find Christ asking his disciples to pray corporately, though He Himself prays apart from them.

Matthew 26:36-46 ³⁶ Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to the disciples, "Sit here while I go and pray over there." ³⁷ And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed. ³⁸ Then He said to them, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with Me." [Luke 22:40 When He came to the place, He said to them, "Pray that you may not enter into temptation."]

³⁹ He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You *will*." ⁴⁰ Then He came to the disciples and found them asleep, and said to Peter, "What? Could you not watch with Me one hour? [Mark 14:38 **"Keep watching and praying,**] ⁴¹ **"Watch and pray,** lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed *is* willing, but the flesh *is* weak." [Luke 22:46 Then He said to them, "Why do you sleep? **Rise and pray,** lest you enter into temptation."]

⁴² Again, a second time, He went away and prayed, saying, "O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done." ⁴³ And He came and found them asleep again, for their eyes were heavy. ⁴⁴ So He left them, went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words.

The point to note here is that Jesus commanded *them* to watch and pray together in a time of corporate prayer, while He went apart and prayed.

In Response to the Resurrection and Ascension of Christ

For our next example of corporate prayer, let's look at the book of Acts. Here we see that corporate prayer is one natural way to respond to the resurrection and ascension of Christ.

Acts 1:4-14 And being assembled together with *them*, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the

Promise of the Father...⁷ And He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority."⁸ "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

⁹ Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.¹⁰ And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel,¹¹ who also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This *same* Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven."

¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey.¹³ And when they had entered, they went up into the upper room where they were staying: Peter, James, John, and Andrew; Philip and Thomas; Bartholomew and Matthew; James *the son of Alphaeus* and Simon the Zealot; and Judas *the son of James*.¹⁴ **These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication**, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

So here we have a New Testament prayer meeting, with the men and the women. They see Jesus resurrected, they see him taken up to heaven... what do they do? Make a book and start a national tour doing interviews and seminars to plug the book? No. They first go back to Jerusalem to wait, and while they wait, they *pray together*. They could have gone to their homes and waited, praying individually, couldn't they? But instead they prayed *together*.

Natural activity of early church

In our next example, we see that praying together with one another was a normal part of church life in the early church.

We see they do it when they need wisdom from God:

Acts 1:15-26¹⁵ And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples (altogether the number of names was about a hundred and twenty), and said,¹⁶ "Men *and* brethren, this Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke before by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus..."

²³ And they proposed two: Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias.²⁴ **And they prayed and said**, "You, O Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which of these two You have chosen²⁵ "to take part in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place."²⁶ And they cast their lots, and the lot fell on Matthias. And he was numbered with the eleven apostles.

Here they need direction from the Lord. Who will replace Judas Iscariot? They cast lots. Couldn't they have just cast lots? No, instead they pray together (here's our corporate prayer), asking the Lord to guide and direct them.

Recall what the believers were doing when Peter was released from prison. When he was miraculously delivered from prison at night, he goes to the place where the believers are meeting. What does he find them doing?

Acts 12:10-12¹⁰ When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord; and they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him.¹¹ And when Peter had come to himself, he said, "Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and *from* all the expectation of the Jewish people."¹² So, when he had considered *this*, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where **many were gathered together praying**.

They are engaging in corporate prayer: "Many were gathered together praying."

Not only is corporate prayer something that came naturally to the early church. We see that it is a core activity of early church:

Acts 2:42 And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Here, when it says that they "continued steadfastly...in... prayers", it's referring to the previous examples that we cited. The "they" in that verse is speaking of the believers, the church members. They were committed to preaching and teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer. All these things were done together—teaching the Word requires multiple believers to be present, fellowship involves

multiple believers being present, the breaking of bread requires multiple believers to be present. And so we rightly adduce that the “prayers” here speaks of the corporate prayer illustrated in the previous verses.

Note that it says they “continued steadfastly” in these things. These were primary activities in the church—not just a fad like so many things that come and go in the American church today.

Precedes Great Works of God

In our next example of corporate prayer, we see that corporate prayer precedes great works of God. Here, the Council has commanded that Peter and John stop speaking about Jesus. They are seized and threatened and then released. Then the believers gather together:

Acts 4:24-31 ²⁴ So when they heard that, **they raised their voice to God with one accord** and said: "Lord, You *are* God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them, ²⁵ who by the mouth of Your servant David have said: 'Why did the nations rage, And the people plot vain things? ²⁶ The kings of the earth took their stand, And the rulers were gathered together against the LORD and against His Christ.' ²⁷ For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together ²⁸ to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done. ²⁹ Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, ³⁰ by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus."

³¹ **And when they had prayed**, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.

Here we have corporate prayer—believers praying together. In verse 24, *they* raised their voice to God with one accord. In verse 31 *they* prayed. And what is the result? They are filled with the Holy Spirit. They are given boldness. They perform miracles. They asked great things of God; God granted great things to them.

One other thing. All of these things immediately precede Pentecost, where the fullness of the Holy Spirit is poured out on God’s people. Pentecost is one of the most pivotal incidents in the entire Bible. If you

were to pick the ten most significant events in all of the Bible, I think this would be one of them. What do we see the believers doing before and after Pentecost? What is the preparatory activity that comes before and after this time of great spiritual blessing and health? We see the teaching and preaching of the Word, we see fellowship, we see the sacraments, and we see corporate prayer. It’s an indicator—to the extent that these things are sincerely present in a church, it is an indicator of spiritual health. The extent that these things are absent in a church... is an indicator of spiritual sickness and weakness.

A Normal Part of Their Lives

In our final example, we look at an example of believers praying together spontaneously, in a very informal setting.

Acts 20:17-36 ¹⁷ From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church... ²² "And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, ²³ except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me... ³⁶ And when he had said these things, **he knelt down and prayed with them all.** ³⁷ Then they all wept freely, and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him, ³⁸ sorrowing most of all for the words which he spoke, that they would see his face no more. And they accompanied him to the ship.

Here we have Paul leaving the Ephesians, perhaps never to see them again on earth. When leaving, he prays with them all. This is an example of believers, praying together in an informal setting.

Let’s look at another similar example. Here Paul is with the believers at Tyre:

Acts 21:4-6 ⁴ And finding disciples, we stayed there seven days. They told Paul through the Spirit not to go up to Jerusalem. ⁵ When we had come to the end of those days, we departed and went on our way; and they all accompanied us, with wives and children, till we *were* out of the city. And **we knelt down on the shore and prayed.** ⁶ When we had taken our leave of one another, we boarded the ship, and they returned home.

Here again, we have the believers parting from one another. These Christians, they can’t just say good-bye. When parting from one

another, they very naturally pray together. It is spontaneous and informal. Praying together is a normal part of their lives.

What a sad thing it is when people who call themselves Christians are uncomfortable praying with one another!

Why We Must Pray Together

Having looked at these examples of believers praying together, let me present you with seven reasons for why we must pray *together*—both corporately in congregational meetings, and informally in other settings. So, why must we pray with one another?

First of all, the example of the believers in the Old and New Testaments obligates us to pray together. Their examples—praying together at the Temple, praying together in the garden, praying together in the early church—are sufficient to obligate us. No further reasons are needed. Paul and the apostles and the early elder are an example for us. We are commanded to imitate them.

Philippians 3:17 ¹⁷ Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us.

Philippians 4:9 The things which ye both learned and received and heard and saw in me, these things do: and the God of peace shall be with you.

1 Corinthians 11:1 Be ye imitators of me, even as I also am of Christ.

Because they prayed with one another, so we also must pray with one another.

The **second** reason for why we must pray together is this: Corporate prayer is to be a *primary* activity of the gathered church. Corporate prayer is more important than many other activities. How was God's house characterized in the Old Testament? Was it a house of sacrifice? Was it a house of priestly service? Yes, but it was also called a house of *prayer*. And in the New Testament, what do we primarily see the believers doing when they are *together*? We see the teaching and preaching of the Word, we see observance of the Lord's Supper, and we see prayer. When the believers are together, we do not often see evangelism or mercy ministries. Those things are important, but they

are primarily done *outside* of the church. When the believers are *together*, as the gathered church, we find them much in prayer together. Corporate prayer is to be a primary activity of the gathered church.

The **third** reason for why we must pray together: Prayer must characterize our corporate posture and corporate attitude towards the Lord. Sometimes churches can look successful—the building is large, the attendance is high, the number of ministries is great. But sometimes, in spite of all outward appearance, there are two fatal mistakes: We don't think we *need* God, and we don't think *about* God. That is to say, we have the people, we've hit the formula that seems to work, the fruits seem to prove that we're right, but there is no sincere dependence upon God in the work. We would never say it out loud, but in our hearts, we see everything working and prospering, and we think we know how to make it work without God. We've *done* it, without needing God.

Prayer, private prayer and corporate prayer, is a curb against independence. Prayer is an expression of our weakness and need for God, We tend towards self-reliance and self-praise. We tend towards arrogance. This is true individually as well as corporately. Corporate prayer, done *rightly and sincerely*, keeps this in check. No wonder Jesus tell us as a people, as a group of disciples, “watch and prayer lest you enter into temptation.” Remember...

Deuteronomy 6:10-12 ¹⁰ "Then it shall come about when the LORD your God brings you into the land which He swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you, great and splendid cities which you did not build, ¹¹ and houses full of all good things which you did not fill, and hewn cisterns which you did not dig, vineyards and olive trees which you did not plant, and you shall eat and be satisfied, ¹² then watch yourself, lest you forget the LORD who brought you from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

Deuteronomy 8:11-14 ¹¹ "Beware lest you forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes which I am commanding you today; ¹² lest, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived *in them*, ¹³ and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies, ¹⁴ then your

heart becomes proud, and you forget the LORD your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

What a curse it would be, should we as a local assembly become large in number, and prosperous in our finances, and should we then forget the Lord. May it never be that the membership here swells larger and larger, while the congregational meeting grows smaller and smaller in attendance. What would that say about us, brethren?

So, we see that the example of the believers in the Old and New Testaments obligates us to pray together. We see that we must pray together because corporate prayer is to be a *primary* activity of the gathered church. We see that prayer must characterize our corporate posture and corporate attitude towards the Lord.

The **fourth** reason we must pray together: We must pray together because of the *impossibility* of our greatest desires. Brothers and sisters, let me remind you of the impossibility of our greatest desires. We desire to see the children of this Church savingly united to Christ. *Can you make that happen?* We desire to see them born again, walking faithfully with the Lord, all the days of their lives. *Can you make that happen?* We desire to see revival in this land—to see hordes of people pressing in asking “what must I do to be saved?” We desire to see the hard-hearted man or woman next door coming to church with us and hearing the preaching of the word and receiving a new heart and receiving salvation from the Lord. *Can you make that happen?* We desire to see the Church, built up and perfected in Christ, made complete. We desire to see our brothers and sisters walking in obedience, in holiness, in righteousness, in love. *Can you make that happen?* You cannot. These desires... are *impossible* for us to accomplish, in the flesh.

And if we truly see how unattainable they are, humanly speaking, it *will* drive us to regular prayer. What a tragedy to have a church which is *outwardly* successful, but as a people, they do not rely upon the Lord for success.

The things we *don't* pray for... show where we think we are strong. For example, if we don't pray for wisdom, it's usually because we think we have enough wisdom. If we don't pray for humility and a

greater fear of God, it's usually because we think we have enough humility and enough fear of the Lord. The things we *do* pray for... show where we realize we are weak.

The things we *don't* pray for show what is *not* important to us. The things we *do* pray for show what is important to us. For example, if we don't find ourselves praying for the salvation of the lost, it's probably because the salvation of the lost isn't that important to us.

The **fifth** reason we must pray together: Praying together makes us fit to go out and serve. It makes us fit to go out and evangelize. We need boldness; we need God's blessing. Remember Acts 4:24ff. They gathered to pray; God gave them great boldness; God did great things. Think about it. What will happen if we do not have boldness? What will happen if He does not bless us? Consider carefully, how much do you attempt without seeking God to bless it? How many church activities to you embark on without relying on God? How many family problems or family projects do you address without relying on God? How many informal activities, whether it is fellowship, encouraging, helping, inquiring after another believer, do you do without dependence on God?

I tell you, if you launch out to do great or small things, without relying upon the Lord, you are not fit to be used by the Lord. He may use you, but that is His grace. But when you prepare yourself for a work by committing it to Him in prayer, He may use you, and if He does, you will be all the more aware that it is of His grace.

We spend much of the Christian life *doing*, but much of the time we should be asking and seeking.

And so we must pray together because of the impossibility of our greatest desires. We must also pray together to be made fit to serve.

Sixthly, corporate prayer precedes great works of God. Consider the disciples in the garden with Christ. Perhaps we could liken this to a sessional prayer meeting. When was this? On the eve of great affliction. Christ was to take the fullness of the punishment of the sins of His people. He was to face the wrath of God. He was to die.

God's people pray on the eve of attempting a great work. Consider Ezra and the people gathering to pray for safety and success. They pray... and God hears them.

Can corporate prayer be done insincerely? Yes, and God will judge. But what does it say when *no* corporate prayer is being done at all? How I shudder when I see good and great things being attempted—church plantings, calling of new ministers and officers, great evangelistic and mission works—without any foundation of regular prayer. What must God think of us? But when His people prayed together, look at what He did! Corporate prayer precedes great works of God.

Seventh, we must pray together because God specially attends to corporate prayers. Corporate prayers are seen differently by God.

Matthew 18:19-20 "Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."

You know, some people are worldlings. They have no spiritual desires. They have no goals higher than the dust of the earth. But for those of you who are believers, you *have* great longings to see God doing great and mighty things. You *have* prayers that you want to see answered. Here is something for the Christian's arsenal. How can you seemingly overcome God and wrestle from Him the answer you seek? He says, "If". *If* two of you agree on earth... it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. There you have a *carte blanche* promise from God: "Anything that they ask, it will be done for them."

How does this work? Why is God more inclined to hear the prayers of believers gathered together? According to this passage, this is how it works: When we gather, we express something of the body of Christ, more so than when we pray separately. And so Jesus the Son says when two or three are gathered in His name, He is there with His body. He is there with them. And if He is there when you pray to the Father, it is as if the Son is praying *with us*, pleading with us to the Father. And if the Son is making request of the Father, the Father never denies His Son.

This is potent. It is only to be used for holy purposes. But it is to be used *frequently*.

Objections

Objection: Why corporately? Why not just privately? I've met few if any who *do* it privately who aren't zealous also to do it corporately.

Objection: What about works? We need to get out there and do good works! Yes, that is true. How can there be *acceptable* works without dependence in prayer?

Objection: I'm too tired to meet together to pray. But prayer is work! Prayer is not a leisure activity. Sometimes I come to the prayer meeting, and I am very drowsy. But this is not a uncommon state for believers who gather to pray.

Mark 14:32-42 ³² And they came to a place named Gethsemane; and He said to His disciples, "Sit here until I have prayed."... ³⁷ And He came and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? ³⁸ **Keep watching and praying**, that you may not come into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."... ⁴⁰ And again He came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and **they did not know what to answer Him**.

There is a tenderness in this passage. The disciples should have been praying, they should have stayed awake. But even in Christ's rebuke, we see gentleness. He comes to them again and again, awakening them from their sleep, urging them to watch and pray. So, too, I believe, Christ is tender with us when we come to pray, but are overcome by sleep. He knows that the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.

Conclusion

As we conclude tonight's class, I want to encourage you brethren. I don't know how much you pray with other believers. But as you pray together with other Christians, both at the congregational prayer meetings and in your regular personal interactions with believers, let me encourage you to continue in that.

May the Lord keep you sincere and dependent upon Him as you pray together. May it never become rote, formal, or even work, a way to

look “spiritual”. May it become increasingly natural for you to pray together with your brethren. And when you depart from one another, may it be the most normal thing in the world for you to commit each other to the Lord in prayer.