

PRAYER

I want to share with you something that will change your life forever, if you let it. I don't say this as an idle claim or hype. I really believe it. Whether you put this lesson into practice in your life is entirely up to you. But if you do, you will change your life.

The point of this lesson is that there is something we need to do – it's not all that difficult to do and it's just one thing. If you listen to me and do this one thing you will see your life transformed. You will be well on the road to become the person God wants you want to become. You will see your marriage grow from strength to strength. You will see your children grow up spiritually. You will grow in your confidence, your courage, your conviction. You will grow in the Holy Spirit – if you do this one thing.

What is this thing that I believe will change our lives beyond measure? Pray and read the bible for one hour a day, every day. That's it.

One of the things about preaching to you is that there are people of many different backgrounds in the room.

- Some of you are thinking – I've heard this before, here comes a hearty dose of legalism. I urge you to please hear me out before you judge me.
- Some of you are thinking – an hour – that's huge, I can hardly manage 5 minutes. Please let me encourage you. You are a child of God. You can do more than you can imagine.

I have to confess I feel nervous about giving this sermon. I have been advised that I need to be careful of not alienating those of us who were exposed to a legalistic mindset to quiet times in the past and not calling people to change too much too soon.

This distresses me deeply because I can think of nothing more natural than for a sermon to be a call to grow in our walk with God.

Sometimes you have to take risks because the cost of doing nothing is too high. If I annoy you, please forgive me. My honest desire is that you have life to the full as Jesus promised you.

One hour a day of quality prayer and bible study used to be one of the defining characteristics of our movement. But today I strongly suspect that there are only a handful of people who truly do it. What is my hunch based on – my own life, conversations with brothers, the fact that on a show of hands only about half the church has even started reading the book on prayer.

My hunch is that many of us are like how I was two weeks ago – having a number of quiet times a week, but not every day.

I don't know what effect the month of prayer and fasting has had on you. On me, it has had two effects –

(a) daily bible study and prayer – I have long had decent quiet times Mon-Fri but taken weekends off,
(b) fasting comfort foods. Fasting coffee in particular has been very difficult.

I have one goal in mind today. I want to call everyone here to pray and read their bible for 1 hour a day, every day.

I am not going to give you amazing new insight. I am not going to dazzle you with theological knowledge. I am simply going to call you to pray and read your bible for 1 hour a day, every day.

The “Too Busy Not To Pray Book” is an excellent book filled with many tremendous insights.

My favourite is how God answers prayer:

- If the prayer is wrong, the answer is no.
- If the timing is wrong, the answer is slow.
- If you are wrong, the answer is grow.
- If the prayer is right, the timing is right and you are right the answer is go.

If you have not yet picked up the book I urge you to do so. It will teach you valuable lessons that you can take with you for the rest of your life.

Steve was sharing with some of the brothers that he had never heard of the ACTS prayer structure before and how it has dramatically changed the way he prays.

My wife Amanda was sharing with me how it has helped her to take note how God has answered her prayers for our children to grow through personal development issues.

If you already are having quality daily prayer and bible study I hope today’s message will deepen your convictions.

This message is specifically for those of us who need to get our house in order and have quality, consistent daily prayer and bible study.

Are you staggering along, lurching from one quick fix quiet time to the next? You are living on spiritual junk food. What happens when you live on junk food?

One man tried. Here’s an excerpt from a summary of the movie “Supersize Me”.

As the film begins, Spurlock, age 32 at the time the movie was filmed in 2003, is physically above average, as attested to by three doctors, as well as a nutritionist and a personal trainer. He enlists all three to track his health during the month-long binge. All of the health professionals predict the "McDiet" will have unwelcome effects on his body, but none expects anything too drastic, one citing the human body as being "extremely adaptable."

He must fully consume three McDonald's meals per day (at breakfast, lunch, and dinner time). It is not long before he finds himself with a feeling of depression, and he claims that his bouts of depression, lethargy, and headaches are relieved by a McDonald's meal. One doctor describes him as "addicted." By the end of the month he has an increased in weight 25 pounds.

In Day 21, Spurlock has heart palpitations. Consultation with his concerned doctor advises him to stop what he is doing immediately to avoid any serious health problems. Spurlock makes it to day 30 and achieves his goal.

All three doctors are surprised at the degree of deterioration in Spurlock's health. One of them states that the irreversible damage done to his heart could cause a heart attack even if he lost all the weight gained during the experiment.

This is what happens to you physically when you live on junk food. What do you think happens to you when you live on spiritual junk food?

Do you feel tired and flabby spiritually?

Reality check: if you keep doing the same things you will get the same results.

As Albert Einstein said, the definition of insanity is doing the same things over and over again and expecting different results.

Tell me about a strong spiritual person – you are telling me about a person with great daily prayer and bible study.

Tell me about a person struggling in their faith - you are telling me about a person struggling with daily prayer and bible study.

The importance of sustained, regular prayer and bible study cannot be overstated.

Prayer and bible study is the life blood coursing through your spiritual veins. Do you know what blood does? It is a supply mechanism. It supplies oxygen, nutrition, building materials, defences etc. it is what keeps your cells supplied with all the goodies they need to function. What is coursing through your spiritual veins?

Have you been starving yourself – it's called anorexia.

Have you been binging and then starving yourself – it's called bulimia.

Have you been living on junk food – its called obesity.

We all recognise the value of a healthy eating plan. The NHS makes it their life ambition to drum it into us – because they know the damage a poor diet does. Yet so many people don't follow one. Why not?

There are no good reasons. Anorexia and bulimia are generally because of mental health issues related to body image. Far more common is obesity due to junk food intake. Why do people live on junk food?

It's quick, easy to prepare, convenient, easily available, tastes good. And very importantly, one junk food meal does not kill you. The road to obesity is long and slow. It is the accumulation of months and years of unhealthy living.

The same is true of bible study and prayer. One missed quiet time, one hasty prayer, one flip the pages and read something quick to fix my conscience – what's the big deal?

It's a really big deal! Obesity leads to a host of problems including cancer, joint problems, self esteem issues – the list goes on.

Spiritual obesity makes you distant from God. I once saw a billboard that read, "If you feel far from God, guess who moved?"

Spiritual obesity makes you vulnerable. Satan tempts us all day, every day. Whatever your weakness is, Satan will exploit it. In fact, if you are spiritually obese my guess is that he already has.

- How's it going in your marriage? Is it becoming harder and harder to apologise to your spouse?
- How is to going with being a rock of integrity? Do you find it easy to bend the truth when you are in a tight spot, especially when the pressure is on at work?
- Do you find it more and more difficult to stay disciplined with your school work?

When your spiritual arteries are clogged you are heading for a heart attack.

I say again, the importance of sustained, regular prayer and bible study cannot be overstated. It is the difference between the healthy, happy spiritual life that is yours to claim in Christ and spiritual oblivion.

To a Christian, daily prayer and bible study are as necessary as breathing air. They are not a nicety. They are a necessity.

Let's talk about prayer specifically.

What does prayer mean to you?

Is it a chore kind of like brushing your teeth? You don't feel like doing but you do it anyway because otherwise your teeth will rot.

Why do you think God created prayer? Why does God want you to pray to him?

Prayer is a key part of our relationship with God. Relationships are two way affairs. We communicate with God through prayer. God communicates with us through his word. Of course we communicate with each other in other ways too, particularly through our actions.

Prayer is our lifeblood – when you run out of prayer you run out of all the things your spiritual body needs to keep going.

So how do you get good spiritual health?

1. Get the toxins out

It is time for a spiritual detox. Sin will block your prayers. Quite frankly, if you are under a burden of guilt I doubt you will be feeling inspired to pray in any event.

Isaiah 59: 1 Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save,
nor his ear too dull to hear.

2 But your iniquities have separated
you from your God;
your sins have hidden his face from you,
so that he will not hear.

1 Peter 3:12

For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, *but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.*"

1 Peter 3:7

Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, *so that nothing will hinder your prayers.*

Don't try to have a great prayer life if there is unresolved sin in your life. Get help today. Is there sin in your life? Deal with it! Learn from David, who after committing adultery and murder wrote psalm 51. He is a model of how we can reconcile with God even if we have sinned greatly.

2. Consistency is key

1 Thes 5:16

Be joyful always; *pray continually*; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Colossians 4: 2

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.

Ephesians 6:18

And pray in the Spirit on *all occasions* with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and *always keep on praying* for all the saints.

These scriptures have a common theme – we need to pray a lot! Prayer is not a once a week hobby. It is a daily habit.

As is up on a poster in this school, the great thinker Aristotle said:

"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit."

One off mountain top experiences will mean very little in the end.

What you need is a consistent heartbeat.

1 Peter 4:7

The end of all things is near. Therefore be *clear minded and self-controlled* so that you can pray.

Have a plan.

Get a private place to pray.

Work out what you want to grow in and study that out in your bible study.

Make a set time every day – preferably in the morning. Make your prayer and bible study part of your routine. A great idea is to make a pact with yourself that you won't eat physical food until you have had spiritual food.

What are the real reasons you don't have life changing quiet times. Is it really your schedule? Is it really the kids?

I suspect that for 90% of us the real issue is self discipline. If we got up an hour earlier we would be able to have excellent quality time with God. The key to getting up an hour earlier is to go to bed an hour earlier. This takes discipline. And that's exactly why Peter says you need to be self controlled to be able to pray. 2000 years later – nothing's changed. It took self control then and it will take self control now.

Jesus' example

Jesus was and is the son of God. If anyone could have had a reason to not need to pray it was him. What do we see in his life:

Matthew 14:23 After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone

Mark 1:35 Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.

Mark 6:46 After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray.

Luke 3:21 When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened

Luke 5: 15 Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus *often* withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

Luke 6:12 One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God.

Luke 9:18 Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say I am?"

Luke 9:28 About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray.

Luke 11:1 One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."

Luke 22:39 Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him. (praying on the Mount of Olives was *usual* for Jesus)

John 17:1 After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed

Jesus, was extremely busy – but he knew that his strength came from his relationship with God. Jesus practiced what he preached. He told us that apart from him we can do nothing.

John 15:5 "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. 'If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. 'If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.' This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

What we see in his life is that he never tried to do anything apart from his father. Don't try to live the Christian life on junk food! Jesus is our model – follow his example.

Get help. Junk food is addictive. Don't kid yourself as to just how difficult it is to break out of bad habits and develop good new habits. If change was easy people wouldn't break their new year resolutions.

Walk with God

I would like to share with you one of my favourite scriptures.

Micah 6: 3 "My people, what have I done to you?

How have I burdened you? Answer me.

4 I brought you up out of Egypt
and redeemed you from the land of slavery.

I sent Moses to lead you,
also Aaron and Miriam.

5 My people, remember
what Balak king of Moab counseled
and what Balaam son of Beor answered.
Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal,
that you may know the righteous acts of the LORD."

6 With what shall I come before the LORD
and bow down before the exalted God?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?

7 Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousand rivers of oil?
Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

8 He has showed you, O man, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.

Remember what God has done for you.

Understand what God wants from you.

A modern version of this passage:

Remember your baptism, how before you were lost in your sin with no hope and no future.

Remember how someone else paid the price for your redemption.

Remember those early morning prayer times. They were intimate and exciting. They were going to change the world. You could scale the heights. Nothing could stop you.

Remember those bible studies that changed your life. You were growing spiritually every week. Discarding your old self and taking on a new spiritually mature self.

Remember how nothing could get between you and me, your God?

With what shall I come before the Lord?

Shall I build great cathedrals, ornate and lofty?

Shall I build vast auditoriums complete with “super apostle” speakers?

Shall I compete to have the biggest mass choir?

Shall I fast for 40 days and deprive myself of all things I enjoy?

What does God want from me?

To act with integrity and righteousness in all of my dealings with other people

To love showing mercy to others – to help those in need both spiritually and physically

To humbly walk with him – recognising my need for him and that he is sovereign over my life

Prayer and bible study are key ingredients in our walk with God. If we walk humbly with God then we recognise our dependence on him.

Do you know the beatitudes in Matthew 5? There are 9 beatitudes. The very first is “blessed are the poor in spirit”. It’s about recognising our need for God and depending on him.

Some of you are thinking, this is all good – prayer and bible study for 1 hour a day is a great idea. In fact I have been doing it for years.

Some of you are thinking – you’ve got to be joking! An hour is huge. I struggle to read my devotional booklet for 5 minutes and you are saying I should pray and read my bible for an hour. Where do you get one hour from anyway? The bible doesn’t say I need to read and pray for an hour.

You would be quite right the bible doesn’t say you should read and pray for an hour.

What it says is that you should pray continually. What it says is that the word should be “upon your hearts.”⁷ Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home

and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. ⁸ Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. ⁹ Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Dt 6:6-9)

So why one hour? The point is not to be legalistic about one hour. The point is to have sustained, consistent quality time with God. In my experience as a Christian one hour is a good session. It's long enough that I can pray for 30 minutes and read my bible for 30 minutes. It's short enough that by getting up early in the morning I can fit it in before I go to work.

I beg you, don't listen to that voice that says it's too difficult, you can't do it. I would have to get up too early, the kids will distract me, I am too tired at night after the day's work. I plead with you, don't make excuses. This is just too important. I genuinely believe that your life depends on the choice you make.

Don't allow yourself to be trapped in spiritual lethargy. Don't let this just be another sermon. I've heard it all before yada yada yada. Act! Act now! If you are not having daily quality bible study and prayer I am telling you today that the enemy is upon you and he will have no mercy. He will destroy you.

I recognise that if you are not having daily quality bible study and prayer for an hour every day there may be reasons other than purely a lack of self discipline. Perhaps it's the kids, you work shifts, you don't have a private room to pray in... I am not going to pretend that you can wave a magic wand and wish those obstacles away.

But I do know that desperation is the mother of invention. As we say in the English language, "where there's a will there's a way." You don't have to figure it out all on your own. Get help – talk to a spiritual friend. But for goodness sake, I beg you – don't give in, don't settle for spiritual obesity. It's not an option.

I close with this thought:

What is your walk with God like now? One word answer. Weak/ burdensome/ neutral

What would you like your walk with God to be like? One word answer. Powerful/ exciting/ alive

What do you need to do to bridge the gap?

An inspiring, powerful, intimate, full life in Christ is yours for the taking. So take it!

I think you know what you need to do – and it starts with pray and read your bible for one hour a day, every day.

The power is in your hands.