

Series: Prayer: Does It Matter?

June 27, 2010

“Prayer-Blockers”

Nancy Ortberg

We are right in the very middle of a six-week series on prayer. This is an important series because if you're like me, I never feel like my prayer life is where I'd like it to be, and we have six weeks together to look at the value of prayer. The first week we talked about...*What does it mean to spend an ordinary day with Jesus?* How do we let things like the alarm clock and our driving and our computer and our coffee mug remind us to take a minute and pray and stay connected with Jesus? We got a pebble. I put it in my shoe one day just to remind me to pray continually throughout the day every time I felt that pebble.

Last week, we learned about a Father who is able, not just powerful and competent, but Paul said, "Able to do immeasurably beyond what we can even imagine." We got the picture of the little bear cub with the daddy bear behind him, and the reminder that God is so powerful. One of the challenges we had was to pray for our neighborhood. If you went onto our website and clicked under *prayer*, you could sign up for praying for your neighborhood. This is what the peninsula now looks like as a result of that experiment where for the remainder of this series, we're going to be praying for our neighborhoods.

If you pull it back a little bit, you can see the people who are listening to our podcasts all across the country have joined in, and if you pull back even farther, you can see there are places all around the world...in Europe. We showed this in a staff meeting this week, and there was a little ripple throughout the room, "What about Greenland? There is nobody in Greenland." So if anybody from Greenland is listening, please go onto the website and click on, "We want to pray for those neighborhoods as well."

Then next week, Blues, our new Directional Leader is going to be talking about *Adventures in Prayer*, how he became a Christ follower as a young adult. The next two weeks...*How do we listen in prayer?* Then Kevin Kim is going to finish off by teaching us...*What does it mean to use that dangerous prayer, "God, use me?"*

Here's why this week is so important, and why I think we need to stop right in the middle of the series and consider what the Bible says are impediments to our prayer. There are a lot of things that prayer does in our life that are magnificent. There are ways in which prayer can connect us to God in ways we wouldn't have imagined. It can answer our prayers, and give us a kind of peace we haven't had for a long time, fill us with gratitude, which is one of the most powerful forces God uses to connect us with Him. We're all excited about six weeks to learn more about prayer, but there are other issues.

Doubt creeps in, and anxiety, and selfishness, and all kinds of prayer-blockers that keep us from doing the one thing God asks us to do, and that is to pray with Him. In James, the author of the book gives a number of prayer blockers. There are many of them throughout Scripture, but we're just going to focus very briefly this morning on three of them.

In James, chapter 4, verse 2, James says one of the reasons why prayer gets blocked and you don't have

things is because you don't even ask for them. Your life gets so busy, and you think about prayer more than you actually do it. You let the business of your life just completely crowd out the act of prayer. In the verse right next to it, verse 3, James goes on to say another reason why you pray but you don't receive what you want is you have selfish motives when you pray. You want what you want, not necessarily what God wants.

Then over at the beginning of the book, he says in chapter 1, verses 5 and 6, that when we ask in prayer, we need to believe and not doubt. Our doubt can actually get in the way of our prayers being answered. If we don't stop in the middle of this series, what I'm afraid will happen is we'll go through six weeks learning about prayer, and we'll emerge unscathed, and our prayer life no less frustrating than you find it now.

When I was a little girl, I had an Uncle Bill. He was probably the single most important person in my life in regards to cultivating inside of me a sort of insatiable curiosity. He was a civil engineer. He lived on the 110 Freeway (yes, *the* 110 Freeway) overlooking the LA Basin. He was in a house on stilts, and so he would often take me downstairs, and show me the poles, and explain to me from an engineering perspective how the house stayed on top of that hill, way beyond my eight-year-old ability to understand, but definitely created in me this curiosity.

He would dig up (in his back yard) trap-door spiders and show me how the lid would lift and how the spider would catch its prey. He taught me what a cyclotron was. And he taught me not only how to spell, pronounce, but what it meant...*antidisestablishmentarianism*. He was just a remarkable uncle in so many ways.

Because he was a civil engineer, one of the things he did a lot was he would join with neighbors and help them on some of their building projects. I have a vivid memory of being eight years old, and going with my uncle to one of his neighbor's houses. In the backyard, on some project that was being built, the neighbor was out there laying some brick. My uncle looked puzzled, and got the plans out and laid them out on a table and kept going over them. Finally, he said in deep frustration, "You have the plans upside down. You are building a wall where there ought to be a door." Not great news for that guy.

But a phrase in my eight-year-old brain that stuck there, and interestingly enough as I grew up, that phrase came back to me a lot when it came to prayer. I don't know about you, your prayer life may be fabulous. I struggle with prayer. Sometimes I think I work harder on the prayer blockers than I actually do on prayer. So I want to show you the wall that I'm building where there should be a door. I'm pretty proud of this wall because I've worked very hard on it. I spend a lot of time on this wall.

Just for those of you sitting in the back, some guy came up to me after the last service and said, "Those are cardboard bricks, right?" No, these are real bricks. This is real mortar. You have to have good stuff to build a prayer-blocker wall. James talks, in chapter 4, about us not even asking God for things because we get so busy. I don't know about you, but I'm a busy person, and I have a lot of stuff going on in my life. I'm busy with projects, and meetings, and phone calls, and writing projects.

In fact, one day last week, I had a meeting up in San Mateo in the morning; I had to be in Berkley in the afternoon, and then was back down here late in the afternoon in Menlo for another meeting. I have a lot of things to do when I get home. Fair enough, I have a husband who shares in a lot of the household chores, which is great, but there are still bills to be paid, and laundry to be done, and groceries to be gotten. You have to floss. That becomes very important. There are just a lot of things to do, and as it has been brought

to my attention, I've also signed up for an online class at Stanford on correct methods for cutting bananas. Who knew?

So I'm busy. It's true that sometimes in my busyness I crowd out prayer. I feel like maybe someday when my life settles down, I'll be able to have that kind of prayer life that I want to have. Because one thing I know about prayer is it has to be for a long time, and you have to be on your knees with your head bowed, and you have to be in front of a big, overstuffed chair, and you need to have a journal. I'm really, really busy, and I can't always get to that. I want it to be perfect and right, and so I'm going to wait for some day when I'm not quite so busy.

It's not just my life that is busy. My mind is busy. I get distracted when I'm praying. I get two sentences into a prayer, and I start thinking about something I need to write down, or I see a bird that is flying by. My mind just gets so distracted, and then I get overwhelmed. I think about all the things I need prayer for in my life, and then I remember there are issues over in East Palo Alto, and Ethiopia, and Darfur. There are earthquakes. I just found out my aunt is sick. It's just too much. So I think someday, I hope someday doesn't mean never, but someday, I'll get it right. In the meantime, I'll just put this brick in here.

Now James also says that we don't get what we're looking for when we pray, and we don't have a good prayer life sometimes because we're selfish. I'm a lot of things, but I'm not a selfish person. Although I would have to admit that sometimes, my prayer list looks a little bit more like I'm telling God what to do, rather than asking Him. But here's what I've found, that works much better. It really does.

God is busy. He is running the universe. I know my kids better than He does. I know surely what my husband needs to do to change. He is a busy God. He has a lot going on. I think He is kind of grateful that I take responsibility for my share of the universe. I mean there is a verse somewhere in the Bible that says the Lord helps those who help themselves, and I believe it. I live my life by that. So sometimes, my list really does look more like I'm telling God. I'm not really sure I want to give up control. I know that those prayers that are more open-ended that say, "God, use me. God, change me..." Don't pray those prayers because God answers them. They hurt, and they're hard, and I'd really rather not go there.

In fact, this has happened to me a number of times in my life, but this last year has been one of the hardest years of my life. There has been something in my life that I care more about than I care about myself that's not going well, that's really difficult. It's so difficult that I wake up in the middle of the night and my heart is thumping. I can hardly breathe. It has affected my appetite. I find myself so preoccupied by it, and I feel like, at one point this past summer, God told me to stop praying for a month. I felt like He said to me, "Your prayers are more about control and anxiety than they are about the situation." He was right.

Then sometime a couple of months ago, Scott Scruggs preached a sermon and said, "Do you trust God with what you love?" I wrote it in my Bible. I realized that my answer was, "No, I don't." I didn't. It was too scary to imagine what might happen. So I spent a month with silence as my prayer. I didn't pray for a month. My silence was my prayer.

When I look back on that time, and it's still that time, but when I looked back on that month, the best I could do when I came out of that month was what I call dandelion prayers. Remember when you were a kid and you would pluck them and blow on them, and they'd scatter? The coming out of that silence, the very best I could do was to say that person's name aloud with maybe a sentence behind it. Sometimes, physically I would blow on my hands a sign, "I have to let this prayer go because if I pray one more minute, it will turn into 20 minutes of insisting that God do what I want."

I would say, "Sure, as a result of that time, I felt stripped down, completely bare, totally vulnerable, and experienced a kind of surrender the likes of which I had never known." That part was good. I felt like I connected with God eventually because of fighting through it on a deep, bedrock level. But you know how that goes. When that feeling is gone, all I can remember is the fear, and the pain, and the anxiety, and I don't want to go back there. So I'd much rather tell God what to do, rather than ask.

Then James talks about how our doubts get in the way of our prayer. I'll let you in on a little secret; probably about two-thirds of these bricks up here are bricks of doubt. I doubt a lot. I doubt God will listen to me. I doubt God really hears me. I doubt that I'm good enough for God to pay attention to me. So when I said a few minutes ago I'm not selfish, that's not really true. I've been a Christian long enough to know that when somebody accuses you of something, if you say, "Well, I might be a lot of things, but I'm not that," it lets you off the hook. Then they think you're not that, and you came across as really owning your brokenness and being a sinner, but you still look good.

I know what's inside of me. I know my mixed motives. I know my impatient spirit and I could go on and on, but I have to make this a short message because we have communion today, so I don't have time to go into all of them, but I know them very well. Sometimes when I pray, I feel like such a phony. I feel like there are only certain kinds of people who get their prayers answered, and I'm not one of them.

I doubt a lot. I think probably one of the things I doubt the most is that all the ways in which I do pray during the day, in the car, in the shower, quick reminder when I see somebody, that they don't really count. I have this voice inside my head. It's a small, still voice. It's quiet, but it whispers to me often, at the end of the day, "You think all that stuff was prayer? That wasn't prayer. It wasn't an hour long. It wasn't on your knees. That didn't count." Even though that voice is really quiet, and I try to turn the volume down on it, it is deafening.

Richard Foster said one time, "We have too stained-glass an image of prayer. So we dismiss our experiences of prayer, and then condemn ourselves for not praying." I think he is right. It's really hard not to let that voice be the loudest thing you hear. So I think I'm just as happy to keep building my wall.

Somebody told me one time that you should never doubt in the darkness what God showed you in the light. Every once in a while, I'll let that affect my prayer life, but the problem is when you're in the light, that sounds really good. But when the period of life that you're in is dark, and everything is upside down, *everything*, and you don't even know if you believe anymore, it's really hard to live by.

Some people would say that I spend more time building my wall, than actually praying. They might be right, but someday I'll stop. For right now, I think I'll keep building my wall.