

ECCLESIOLOGY 101

How the Local Church Lives and Breathes

Part 4: Praying Alone — Praying Together

This is our fourth installment of a series titled ECCLESIOLOGY 101.

AGAIN — The point of this series is not so much a to lay out a formal and systematic look at the nature of the church — but rather to get a street level, organic look at what the Bible has to say about the way the local church lives and breathes.

The springboard for the series is from the closing words of Paul in his first letter to the Christians in Thessalonica. There he addressed, not the leaders of the church — but the community of believers as a whole. He spoke to them about the way the local church lives and breathes as God’s witness and instrument in the world.

In our first study we looked at what Paul had to say about the way a community of believers is to relate to those who lead within a local church

***1 Thessalonians 5:12-13** ...respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you,*

and the ways each member of a of believers is to relates to others within that community.

***1 Thessalonians 5:13b-15** Be at peace among yourselves. ¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. ¹⁵ See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.*

In our second and third studies we zeroed in on two very direct and very important commands Paul gave to them. Both of them were DO NOTs

***1 Thessalonians 5:19** Do not quench the Spirit.
Stop stifling and suppressing the Spirit. (Wuest’s Expanded Translation of the N.T.)*

1 Thessalonians 5:20 Do not despise prophecies,

Those “DO NOTs” gives us a HUGE insight into the very **nature** and **essence** of authentic Christianity and authentic Christian community. The whole of the Christian life is something supernatural. It a life that begins by the Holy Spirit bringing us to an **inescapable awareness** that we are sinners — and then **revealing Jesus to us** as the sinless Son of God who died in our place and rose from the grave who alone can save us from our great enemies of sin and death. The moment we believe with our heart on the Lord Jesus we are **born again** — made alive to God — **by the power of the Holy Spirit**. That new life is **carried along** by the **indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit** who, day by day, is at work in the life of that man or woman *giving them the desire and the power to do what pleases God*.

Philippians 2:13 (NKJV) for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.

We walked around in the importance of the gift of prophecy is in the local church. What it is, how it operates, and how we should value it and desire it.

Last Monday we drilled down on what it means to be *led by the Spirit*. The big idea is that life of each and every believer will be a **reflection** and **expression** of the things the Holy Spirit is passionate about. The Holy Spirit is passionate about Jesus. He is always looking to reveal Jesus to us, exalt Jesus in our hearts, in our lives and in our world. And in that we discover that the Holy Spirit is humble, always pointing away from Himself to Jesus, always deferring to the Father and the Son. Because He is the **Holy Spirit** He is going to be passionate about holiness in our lives. He is the one who convicts us of sin, frees us from sin, leads us in sanctification, conforms us to the image of the Son. The Holy Spirit is passionate about mission. He is active and compassionate when it comes to the world. He cares about the plight of the world and the people in the world — He’s active in the world. The Book of Acts is the story of the Holy Spirit on mission in the world through the church.

The local church is the **collective expression** of the Holy Spirit’s passions. It’s a divine collection of individuals who **together** will live and breathe **in response** to the Holy Spirit’s passions.

A community of believers will **live and breathe** in a way that puts the beauty and grace and mercy and love of Jesus on display.

The way a community of believers lives and breathes in their personal relationships is based on a totally different operating system (if-you-would) — not rooted in self advancement at the expense of others — not rooted in self gain.

The local church will live and breathe mission! It will be lit up by the fire of the Holy Spirit's passion to make Jesus known to every man and woman in the world, beginning with the people that are in our world (where we live, where we work, where we go to school, where we shop, where we hang out, where we work out). But God's mission doesn't end there. He desires to make Jesus known everywhere, to everyone!

We learned that we need to be very intentional to hear from, and be led by, the Holy Spirit. And we learned that there are inherent challenges and messes that we face when a collection of men and women, none of whom are infallible, are endeavoring to **hear from** the Holy Spirit and **be led by** the Holy Spirit. Being led by the Holy Spirit **requires** humility and **creates** humility! (There was so much for us there — please get the resources)

Tonight, we're going to look at how the local church lives and breathes in relationship to prayer.

Let me start with this: I feel a great sense of lack in my own life in when it comes to prayer. Not so much in regard to spontaneous, on the spot, prayer; but in the realm of intentional, dedicated times of prayer. I am also coming to see that I have had an underdeveloped view of how important prayer is in the way Metro (and every local church) should live and breathe as a community. I'd like to ask you to raise your hand (elbow above ear) if you can identify me on either of those two points.

Prayer in its essence is man talking with God. We find that prayer — men and women talking to God — occupies a huge chunk of real estate in the landscape of the Bible. We find the first conversation between man and God in the Book of Beginnings — Genesis (Genesis 3). The last words of the last book of the Bible are a prayer.

Cover to cover the Bible is filled with different people, male and female, young and old, in different historical contexts, in different cultural contexts, in different personal contexts (rich, poor, sick, afraid, heartbroken, joyful, defeated, victorious, doubting, hopeful — talking to God. The fact that Scripture records prayer across the spectrum of history and life tells us the place prayer should occupy in the spectrum of the individual believer's life. But prayer isn't intended to stop there. We have been saved **from** our *kingdoms of one* — and saved to *ekklesia*. Prayer birthed in personal conversation with God should also connect us with the community of believers God has placed us in.

It's my prayer that we will at least scratch the surface on what this can look like. But before we get to how we pray together we need to start with how we pray alone.

PRAYING ALONE

Let's start with what prayer is — Prayer is the use of human language to talk to God. It is using words to express to God what we sense and feel. It is using words to express our needs to God. It's the use of words in responding to who God is, what God is doing, or what God has done.

If that is what prayer is, then the book of Psalms is God's text book on prayer. Though the Psalms have much to say **about God** — each author **prays** (talks to God) **in response** to what they know about God. That is the perquisite of prayer. It's the soil in which prayer grows.

The prayers recorded in the Psalms begin with God. The prayers of the psalms were not prayed by people trying to understand themselves or trying to diagnose and solve their predicament. Their human conditions might have provoked their prayers — but they were **praying to** the God who had revealed Himself to them in Scripture! They knew that God had invaded history — specifically the history of Israel. THAT was the soil in which their prayers and their prayer life were birthed and grew. For them, prayer was not an upward wishing. They had a **doctrine of God** that prayer was rooted in. Though there was much they didn't know about God (and there is much we don't know about God) they knew with tremendous clarity some things about God that were absolutely true. Creation, Abrahamic

Covenant, Exodus, salvation, the Mosaic commands. They knew that God was not arbitrary or indifferent. They knew God couldn't be manipulated.

When we read the psalms we can't miss the fact that those who penned their prayers and put them to song had taken the time to learn what God had revealed about Himself and then responded (prayed) in light of that revelation. Their circumstances were messy, their future was uncertain from their perspective, and quite often their heads and their hearts were murky waters. But the soil of the prayer — the climate that fostered their prayer, was not what they *felt* about God — it was what God had revealed about Himself.

QUOTE: Eugene Peterson — *They went to their knees in a pool of light — an illuminating word, two words, maybe even a few sentences that revealed God to them, and by which they courageously decided to live by faith.*

Guys — we have the canon of Scripture!

The Psalms are the response of the human heart to the personal revelation of God in the face of every possible circumstance of life in a world that's in the dark about God. THAT is what the Psalm are. THAT is what prayer is. Their prayers were shaped and informed by God's word, not their moods or their opinions about God.

How does the book of Psalms help us to pray alone?

QUOTE: Timothy Keller — *“We are, in a sense, to put them inside our own prayers, or perhaps to put our prayers inside them, and approach God in that way. In doing this the psalms involve the speaker directly in new attitudes, commitments, promises, and even emotions. When, for example, we do not merely read Psalm 139:23–24—“search me . . . test me . . . see if there is any offensive way in me”—but pray it, we invite God to test our motives and we give active assent to the way of life called for by the Bible”¹*

QUOTE: Eugene Peterson — *We don't make up original prayers that suit our private spiritual genius. Prayer is not an original language, but a received*

¹ Excerpt From: Timothy Keller & Kathy Keller. “The Songs of Jesus.”

language.... A millenium's experience of grace and judgment, creation and chaos, guilt and salvation, rebellion and obedience shapes the prayers that are the Psalms. When we pray the Psalms and are trained in prayer by them, we enter into this centuries-long experience of being a people of God.

FROM PRAYING ALONE TO PRAYING TOGETHER

In the psalms we find personal prayers, born in specific personal circumstances. They are the written form of the deepest, most personal communications with God.

The prayers of David are a great example of this.

Psalm 3 A Psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son.

- ¹ O Lord, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me;
- ² many are saying of my soul, "There is no salvation for him in God." *Selah*
- ³ But you, O Lord, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head.

- ⁵ I lay down and slept; I woke again, for the Lord sustained me.
- ⁶ I will not be afraid of many thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around.
- ⁷ Arise, O Lord! Save me, O my God! For you strike all my enemies on the cheek; you break the teeth of the wicked.
- ⁸ Salvation belongs to the Lord; your blessing be on your people!

Psalm 34 Of David, when he changed his behavior before Abimelech, so that he drove him out, and he went away.

- ¹ I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth.
- ² My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad.
- ³ Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together!
- ⁴ I sought the Lord, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears.
- ⁵ Those who look to him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed.
- ⁶ This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him and saved him out of all his troubles.
- ⁷ The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them.

⁸ Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!

Psalm 51 A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

They held back nothing from their intense, personal, in the moment prayers. They even made sure to write down the wrong attitudes and flawed passions that they spoke openly to God for us to see.

But what they PRAYED ALONE was also intended to be PRAYED TOGETHER

David clearly intended Psalm 3 to be read and prayed in community

⁴ I cried aloud to the Lord, and he answered me from his holy hill. *Selah*

⁸ Salvation belongs to the Lord; your blessing be on your people! *Selah*

David intended Psalm 34 to be prayed in community

⁹ Oh, fear the Lord, **you his saints**, for those who fear him have no lack!

¹¹ **Come, O children**, listen to me; **I will teach you** the fear of the Lord.

¹² **What man is there who desires** life and loves many days, that he may see good?

David intended that radical, intensely personal and brutally honest prayer of **Psalm 51** to be **sung** in community. The full title of **Psalm 51** is **To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.**

The book of Psalms became **the prayer book** of Israel. These prayers were prayed collectively when they gathered in the synagogue. They prayed these psalms as a community — knowing the needs of individuals in the synagogue — knowing who those prayers hit home with and knowing how those prayers resonated with the heart and spiritual state of the community as a whole.

Many of these prayers were put to music so they could be committed to memory. The Book of Psalms was the prayer book of Jesus — the Song Book of Jesus.

This “gathered” form of prayer continued in the new born church.

Acts 2:42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Acts 3:1 Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour.

Peter and John were on their way to **seek God in prayer with other believers**. They did this **together** on a **regular basis** — at a **regular time**.

AGAIN — For a community of believers to live and breathe in connection with prayer presumes that the individuals in that comprise that community pray.

Prayer **is** an incredibly personal and privileged vertical conversation between an individual child of God and his or her heavenly Father. Prayer does have a necessary private context. Jesus **modeled** this in His own prayer life. He would get up before it was light and find a deserted place to be alone in prayer with His Father. He would come forth from those times of prayer with marching orders (no I can’t stay and preach to the crowds in Capernaum; I have to go to the unwallied towns and villages — He chose the 12 after spending the night alone with His Father in prayer.)

Jesus **taught** about praying privately. In **Matthew 6:6** he taught about going into your own room and shutting the door behind you to pray. But the main point was not to encourage isolated prayer. That instruction was a warning against the temptation to pray publicly for wrong reasons.

YES — prayer often begins when we’re alone. We pray our guilt, our pain, our joy. We pray on our bed at night (as the psalmist did) We even pray privately when surrounded by unbelievers in our neighborhood or at work or in the classroom. But we can never be with others non-stop. And by the way — we should never be

with others non-stop. But we should always be aware of the fact that we are always with God.

HERE'S THE DEAL — God wants His children to have personal conversations with Him. Sometimes He demands them, right? But He also wants to have family conversations with His children. He wants us to call our friends into prayer. He knows that our prayers and our prayer life mature when they are integrated with the community of believers God has placed us in.

I really like how Eugene Peterson puts it: “By ourselves, we are not ourselves”. There is a very real way in which we are not fully ourselves until we are a part of a community of believers.

There is something extraordinary that happens when we pray with others who have prayed. There is something amazing when we put our knees on the ground together with others — we have the sense that we are on the same ground — our knees are level with their knees. (by the way — It's okay to get on your knees when we worship and pray together. I become more fully me when my hands are raised with your hands in praise and adoration; when my voice joins with your voices in praise and prayer, rejoicing or weeping. The point of worshipping and praying with all of you is not to express myself — but to become the person God saved me to be. By myself, I'm not really myself. By myself I am not really myself — I am not the man Jesus redeemed me to be!

We are NOT naturally good at this. It goes against the individualism of culture. It goes against the grain of how we are so very self-conscious about what others think or feel about us. It goes against the grain of how we would rather not be known. We would not have the psalms if that were the case. The psalms were self-disclosing! Those prayers made known the deepest needs, greatest failures and personal fears of the writer to the community of God's people. And as they were prayed in community people owned those same needs, those same failures and those same fears as **their** own. As individuals we are wonderfully and beyond comprehension the objects of God's grace and love. But when we pray in community — grace and love suddenly have objects outside of ourselves. And as we pray with others — praying about our needs and failures and fears — we also become the object of God's grace and love through His other children.

We do pray in song today. Sometimes we sing the lyrics of the psalms.

QUESTION — When we sing the psalms, are we singing them as OURS. DO we sing the words as OUR prayers — are we self-disclosing? When we do — we experience community! When we do, we actually become more of who Jesus saved us to be.

This is why I struggle so much with so much of what is called worship today. It is more about musicality — more about performance — more about vibe and production than **praying together**.

QUOTE: Jared Wilson (*Prodigal Church*)— *We call our worship “dynamic” or “exciting” or “engaging.” The unintended message is that worship is not for God — but really for the worshiper. Which raises the question, Who are we worshipping?*

QUOTE: Sally Morgenthaler — *Between 1995 and 2000 I’d traveled to a host of worship-driven churches — On the good occasions, the worship experience was transporting.....Too many times, I came away with an unnamed, uneasy feeling. Something was not quite right. The worship felt disconnected from real life. Then there were the services when the pathology ...came right over the platform and hit me in the face. It was unabashed self-absorption, a worship culture that screamed, “It’s all about us”.....*

If prayer is an integral part of how the local church lives and breathes, how do we get past our natural inclination towards individualism and self-consciousness? I believe it’s crucial to remember why find ourselves in a specific gathering of believers.

God **saved** you — **quarried** you out to **be** a building block — a living stone **built on** a the foundation of Jesus — **related to** the cornerstone and **fitted** along side of other living stones. All that You are in Jesus, all that He is desiring to do in and through you is inextricably tied to the fact that He places us next to a very specific collection of other living stones.

You will never be the living stone Jesus saved you to be until you do life with the other living stones around you — and a huge part of that life means that move

from PRAYING ALONE to PRAYING TOGETHER with and for these other living stones.