

The Sin of Prayerlessness

By Dave Butts

I remember as a young man reading the classic by E.M. Bounds, *The Power of Prayer*. The author told story after story of great men and women of prayer who would often spend hours and hours in prayer each day. I was excited about the prayer lives of these amazing prayer warriors, yet something that so intrigued me, also disturbed me. These great prayers, after spending hours praying, would often cry over their prayerlessness and lack of devotion to prayer. I remember thinking, "If these people are guilty of prayerlessness, then who would not be guilty of such a sin?"

Most of us feel as though we do not pray enough. Whether we are praying for five minutes a day or an hour, it is not unusual to feel terribly inadequate in this vital part of our Christian life. But is prayerlessness sin? Though it is not listed specifically as such in Scripture, James, the brother of Jesus, said, "*Anyone , then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins*" (James 4:17). An argument may be made then that prayerlessness, as a lack of action, could indeed be considered a sin of omission.

Without a doubt we are commanded to pray. Jesus told His disciples to pray and not give up (Luke 18:1-8). Paul commanded us to "*pray continually*" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Peter wrote that we are to be self-controlled so that we can pray (1 Peter 4:7). James commanded us to pray for each other (James 5:16). If failing to do something we are commanded to do is sin, then prayerlessness is surely a major sin for believers.

There are some very specific ways to help us move away from this sin and into greater praying. Perhaps the most

foundational issue here is that prayerlessness is a declaration that we do not need God. Ronnie Floyd, in his great book, *How to Pray*, said there are two critical statements about prayer that we must understand: "Prayer occurs when you depend on God" and "Prayerlessness occurs when you depend on yourself."

Failing to pray is also an indicator of a lack of love for the Lord. Prayer, at its heart, is communicating with God. What does it say to Him when we fail to find time to talk with Him? Do we say by our lack of prayer that we are not at all interested in spending time with the Lord or hearing anything from Him? When we do not pray, we move away from any possibility of intimacy with Christ.

When prayerlessness is prevalent in our lives, we are also guilty of failure to love one another. There is scarcely any greater way to demonstrate love than to pray for someone. In godly intercession, we lift the needs of another to God and watch as He moves to meet needs and provide for the one we are praying for. Through prayer, bodies are healed, families are knit together, individuals are saved, and churches are revived. When we withhold prayer on behalf of others, we demonstrate hardened hearts and a failure to love them enough to bring their needs before a loving Father.

Failing to pray is an indicator of our lack of concern for the advancement of Christ's Kingdom on earth. Throughout Scripture and church history, spiritual breakthroughs occurred when the Lord's people got serious about prayer. From the days of Moses standing on a hill interceding for Israel as they fought in the valley below, to the focused intercession in Romania that brought down the dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and opened the door for the free proclamation of the Gospel, prayer has been the weapon that God has placed in the hands of His people to advance His purposes. When we refuse to pray, and that is what prayerlessness is, we turn our backs on what God desires to do on planet earth in our day.

The prophet Samuel certainly viewed prayerlessness as a sin. When he confronted the people of Israel with their sin of rejecting the leadership of God by wanting a king, they cried out under conviction, "Please pray for us." His response is compelling for us today: *"As for me, far be it from me that I sin against God by failing to pray for you"* (1Sam.12:23). Samuel's responsibility as a leader of the Lord's people required that he shepherd them through prayer. Failing to do so was sin for him.

Is it not so for Christians today as we consider those whom God has placed around us, either in close relationship, or as those for whom we are responsible? Pastors and church leaders must take seriously the call to pray for their flocks. Fathers and mothers must pray for their children. Children must be taught to pray for their siblings as well as their friends. Christian employers must be challenged to pray for their employees. Church members must pray for others in their congregation. *"Pray for one another."*

Brother or sister, are you convinced yet that to fail to pray is a grievous sin against the Holy Spirit, who *"...Himself intercedes for us with groans that words can not express"* (Romans 8:26)? Can we look to the Scriptures that point us to the Savior who is even now interceding for us (Hebrews 7:25) and fail to see that He is calling us to join Him in this priestly ministry of prayer? We are never closer to the heart of the Father than when we have joined Him in prayer.

How much should we pray to avoid the sin of prayerlessness? Here is where it becomes most difficult because we all want someone to give us a specific guideline such as, "Pray for fifteen minutes a day and you are okay." The trouble with such a statement is that someone else will come along and say, "Oh no....fifteen minutes is completely inadequate. You must pray at least an hour a day." And then someone else will say...well, you get my meaning. Prayer is not measured by minutes or hours, but by the attitude of the heart. We are not

responsible in this matter to another Christian with a stopwatch, but to the Father who knows our hearts and the depths of our desires.

The young believer may need to simply begin a regular daily time of prayer, even if just for five minutes a day. The saint who has walked with the Lord for 50 years should far exceed this mark, simply because of a deepened level of intimacy with Jesus. The issue for most of us is to take another step forward along the journey of prayer. Whether it is adding several minutes a day, or beginning to pray for those you have never considered praying for, you can begin to respond to the stirring of the Holy Spirit within you to become a person of prayer.

Ultimately, God is calling us all to a life of prayer. It is a life lived in close proximity to God. We learn to “pray as we go,” whether we are driving a car or studying in school. As we learn to live out the truth of Colossians 1:27, “*Christ in you, the hope of glory,*” we will begin to understand more how the Apostle could command us to “*pray without ceasing.*”

—Dave Butts was the co-founder and President of Harvest Prayer Ministries until his death in 2022.

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