

## The Key to Prayer

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Prayer: Father, I trust that you will mediate to them what is the key to their own prayer that they're praying now and to their prayer life so that Jesus would be glorified by the answers. Amen.

Do you know what your ministry as a Christian is? I think if you've been here the past few Sundays you have some idea. Your ministry as a Christian is not to serve society but to serve God. So your job here is not to go out and fix up all the ghettos and all the slums, that's your secondary job. Your primary job is to serve God.

Romans 1:9, also says you're to serve him not with your clever intellect and emotions. You're to serve him with Spirit. You are to allow God's Spirit to use that intellect and emotions so that you won't use it but God will use it. The Bible says you remember, in Romans 1:9 that the Christian's ministry is to serve God with his Spirit.

Now that is subservient to your work as a Christian. Your work as a Christian is more important than your ministry as a Christian. This is the meaning of the subordination that Paul shows us in the glamour of Romans 1:9 for he says, "For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit." No, "For God is my witness who incidentally I serve with my Spirit and the gospel of the son, that without ceasing I mention you all within my prayers." In other words Paul said the primary work of a Christian is to pray and we believe that is referring today to praying for others, to intercessory prayer.

That is your prime work as a Christian. You may come to me and say, "No, you're wrong. I have a stimulating personality that really gets people in touch with Jesus. Now that's my chief work. I am to keep on smiling so that people can see Jesus in me. That is my primary work. I can understand you saying that if someone doesn't have a personality. Then, they should pray for all their worth because that's all they're worth. But my job is to save them, or to smile, or to argue, or discuss."

Dear ones, it doesn't matter what talents you believe God has given you, your primary job as a Christian is to pray for others. There's a reason for this. Prayerless witnessing can be imitated by the world and by false religion. Prayerless churches can be imitated by the world and false religions. Prayerless healing can be imitated by the world and false religion. Prayerless counseling can be imitated by a non-Christian psychiatrist. But prayer filled witnessing, prayer filled churches, prayer filled counseling, prayer filled healing releases the unique and powerful work of God.

In other words, when you pray God does the unique work that no one can imitate and everyone knows it's of God. That's why your chief work as a Christian is to pray. Anything else you do as a Christian can be imitated by Buddha or imitated by Muhammad. You can bring great enthusiasm to someone with low enthusiasm for Jesus and you'll find a Buddhist that is equally enthusiastic. You bring healing into someone's mind by auto suggestion or by the power of the tranquility of your own life and you'll find that there's some psychiatrist who can imitate that.

But if you pray for a person, God can do such a miracle in their life regarding their healing, regarding a change in their morals, regarding a change in their personalities that no one else can

imitate. This is why the chief work of a Christian is to pray. It's because it brings forth a unique, inimitable work that cannot be imitated -- God alone can do it.

Here are some examples of it. Would you turn with me to Exodus 15:24? Now, I think you'll agree it would take a great deal to imitate this. It's in Exodus 15:24-25, and let's read verse 23 first.

"When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; therefore it was named Marah. And the people murmured against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" And he cried to the LORD; (prayed) and the LORD showed him a tree, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.

That is an inimitable work of God that you with 10,000 pounds of cash could not have imitated.

God wants to produce unique, inimitable works that people can attribute to no one but him. God wants us all to operate by the powers of the Holy Spirit. He wants the whole world to run by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Devil wants to find substitutes. That's why a tranquilizer is a substitute for the peace of God. It's why the nonconformist life that has become the conformist life of the hippy is an imitation of the free exciting life that you get when you really go out on limbs with God. The Devil is anxious to suggest substitutes for the power of the Holy Spirit. Prayer brings forth the unique work of God for which there can be no substitute. That's why prayer in Christian's life is his primary work.

Let us look at some of the other examples, though the Bible is full of them. Judges 6:39-40, "Then Gideon said to God, 'Let not thy anger burn against me, let me speak but this once; pray, let me make trial only this once with the fleece; pray, let it be dry only on the fleece, and on all the ground let there be dew.' And God did so that night; for it was dry on the fleece only and on all the ground there was dew."

We keep trying to substitute other methods of guidance. We sum up all the advantages we have in our education, we sum up all the particular abilities of our personality and we put them all into this brilliant computer and turn out six possible different ways to do something. Eventually we take the one that leads us to the girl that we like or that we happened up against that day. Now God has a way of making decisions that comes through prayer that is inimitably his work and we can experience that also.

Let us look at just one more example in 2 Chronicles 18:31. "And when the captains of the chariots saw Jehoshaphat, they said, 'It is the king of Israel.' So they turned to fight against him; and Jehoshaphat cried out, and the LORD helped him. God drew them away from him."

The Bible is full of that kind of instance. The only way you get rid of it is by an inconsistent, higher textual, liberal attitude to the Bible by which you go back and say those things that were said to happen by the historians 1900 years ago did not happen. I say this because I know I've lived a whole 30 years and have full knowledge of the past 1900 years. Well, you take that kind of unintellectual, proud attitude.

If you accept at its face value the history of the Bible you have to see that it is full of situations where God does a unique work of delivering people in answer to prayer. What we need in our lives is more of this kind of unique work, not our own substitutes for it. This is why prayer is important in the lives of all the people that God has used mightily.

Here are some of them. One of holiest and most gifted of Scottish creatures says, "I ought to spend

the best hours in communion with God. It is my noblest and most fruitful employment and is not to be thrust into a corner. The morning hours from six to eight are the most uninterrupted and should be thus employed. Six until eight. After tea is my best hour and that should be solemnly dedicated to God. I ought not to give up the old habit of prayer before going to bed but God must be kept against sleep. When I awaken in the night I ought to rise and pray. A little time after breakfast might be given to intercession.” This was the praying plan of Murray, (Robert Murray McCheyne) a man that was used most mightily by God in his time.

This memorable Methodist man was praying shamelessly from four or five in the morning at private prayer. From five to six in the evening he also had private prayer. Dear ones, the reason why your study life is not successful, the reason why your witnessing life is not successful in college is because you will not put prayer first in your life. You give all the arguments that I used at the same time. We say we don't waken up quickly enough in the morning. We pray better at night so we leave it to night time and we pray on our way into bed. We argue, “Prayer isn't necessary for my type. I'm the kind that can pray as I walk along the street.” But people have to concentrate.

We use all the arguments that the devil gives us to stop us praying. And those are all the reasons why our life is fruitless in God, and why we're not seeing miracles performed in our families. Why we're not seeing miracles performed in our own student life. John Welsh, the holy Scottish man, thought the day ill spent if he did not spend eight or 10 hours in prayer. He set the blanket so that he might wrap himself when he arose to pray at night. His wife would complain when she would find him laying on the ground weeping. He would reply, “Woman I have the souls of 3,000 to answer for and I know not how it is with many of them.”

Every time God has used a man or woman mightily in this world it has been because that man or woman regarded his chief work as the work of prayer. Is this why the apostles said, “We must give ourselves to administration, to taking telephone calls in the office, and to counseling?” No, it's, “So that we might give ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

It was this giving of themselves to prayer that enabled the Holy Spirit to start the church in the first place. It was this giving of themselves to prayer that dominated Jesus' life. You and I so often say you, “Jesus didn't have to pray because he was the son of God. He knew what God wanted him to do. He didn't need to ask him for direction.”

Well let's look at Jesus' own life dear ones. Look at Mark 1:35 and see the part that prayer plays even in the life of the one who was God and man. Mark 1:35, “And in the morning, a great while before day, he rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed.” Do you see that Jesus needed to rise way before the dawn broke in order to pray?

Dear ones, you know I love you because I know that so many of you are stumbling over the same hills that I stumbled over when I was at college. But that's why your lives are not fruitful. You who believe that Christianity is all up there – in the mind-- you're right, it is all up there. It's all bluff without prayer. I agree with you. All this is just bluff without prayer. All this is a joke if there is no prayer. I agree with you, it's meaningless.

But with prayer, it is the very power of God to change the world, to change the campus, to change your whole life, and to change the lives of your people at home. Dear ones, the reasons you have not power in your witnessing, the reason you have not victory and success in your life as a student is because you will not pray. It's still a litany of “God bless this, God bless that, and God bless

the brothers and the sisters.” And then, “Holy Jesus meek and mild....” and then the Lord’s Prayer.

Dear ones, that isn’t prayer. It’s mumbling like the Buddhist and the followers of Muhammad do but it isn’t prayer. The reason why you’re not having victory in your lives is because you won’t pray. The reason why the churches are not successful in the way God wants them to be is because they won’t pray. Prayer is hard work. It’s two or three hours of hard work a day. It’s certainly not less than a half an hour.

Dear ones, you’re not a Christian if you’re praying less than half an hour a day. Alright, you can say you’re a Christian but you know the results in your own life. How many healings have you seen in your family? Dear ones, “these signs will follow them that believe”, it’s God’s promise. How many have been converted in response to your witnessing? It’s because you’re doing too much talking to them and too little praying.

Dear ones, the secret is prayer. Jesus’ life was full of these records. Here’s another one you can check in the gospel of Mark. It the time you remember, where the disciples attempted to cast out the demon from the boy and they couldn’t do it. They asked Jesus why and he said, in Mark 9:29, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer." And he implied to them that the reason they had no power over the demon was that they did not pray.

We get around it another way when we say, “That’s out of date. There are no demons today. There are only psychological problems and we send those to psychologists. We give them medications, meaningful work and other things to do and we give them shock treatments. You don’t need to be able to cast out demons today.” You won’t set face to the fact that we don’t pray sufficiently to be able to cast out demons. That’s what our problem is.

Throughout Jesus’ life, prayer was the main work that he had to do. Now, there are many things that we could talk about today. We could talk about the times for praying, the method of prayer, and the different levels of prayer. I would like to talk about those in the mid week services on witnessing starting the following Wednesday. But for today I’d like just for a few minutes to deal with what is probably our main problem.

You say to me, “Listen, I agree with what you say and I pray. I prayed for my mother for three years and nothing happened.” Or you fathers say, “I prayed for my daughter for a year and nothing has happened.” Or you dear ones say, “I prayed for someone time, after time, and nothing has happened.” Now dear ones, it’s not because God won’t answer it. You may say, “They’re just unanswered prayers.” There aren’t. There is no such thing as unanswered prayer. God may answer yes, he may answer no, or he may answer wait but he will answer one of them to you and he’ll explain it to you.

How many of us take the attitude, “I haven’t gotten some answers to prayer before so God must have answered no.” If God is not going to answer, he’ll explain to you that you ought to change your prayer or change yourself, but he will answer. There is no such thing as unanswered prayer because the Bible is full of promises that when you cry to him he will answer you.

Look at Psalms 91:15. “When he calls to me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will rescue him and honor him.” Now we cannot set our faulty experiences up against a promise of God and say, “No, I found that when I call to him he doesn’t answer me. He is not with me in trouble, he

does not rescue me, and he does not honor me.” You see, we’re pitting our own faulty personal experience against the promises of God.

The answer when we come up against a promise of God that is not applying to us at the moment is to find out why it doesn’t apply. In other words, why is God not answering your prayers?

What is the key to prayer? The key to prayer is this; God wants to reveal himself to you and he wants you to become like him. That is the true full key to prayer. God wants to show himself to you and he wants you to become like him. He wants to reveal his own nature to you and he wants your nature to change and become like his.

Now what I’d like to do in the few minutes that are left is to take the second part of that key and explain it briefly to you. Then next Sunday I’ll explain the main part of the key, how God wants to reveal his nature to you. First of all, God wants our nature to change. So whenever there’s something in our nature that is not like his that prevents our prayers being heard.

Will you look with me first of all at James 4:3? This is part of the key to prayer that concerns the need for our own nature to change and become like his. So whenever God comes up against something in our own natures that is not like his own nature then he refuses to answer our prayers. James 4:3, “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. “ And I believe the King James’ version explains it, “To spend it on your own selfish passion or your own selfish desires.”

Often God does not answer our prayers because we’re asking from the wrong motive. We’re asking for success in the examination so that we will become successful people, and financially prosperous. Or, we’re asking that God would lead some guy to Jesus so that we can marry him. Or, we’re asking that God will lead some girl closer to Jesus so that we can marry her. Or, we’re asking God to make us more like Jesus so that we’ll be more attractive in other people’s eyes.

Here’s a hard one dear ones, because I came up against this myself in Ireland last year. We’re asking that God will deliver our mother from cancer so that we will have her to be with us for more years to come. That’s a selfish reason. Or, we’re asking that God will heal our dear ones so that we will not lose their company, their friendship, and their love. Those are selfish reasons. Or, we’re asking God to bring revival to the campus so we Christians will no longer be in this terrible minority that we’re in and we’ll be part of the popular.

But the Bible says, “Whenever your prayer is dominated by a selfish motive God is unable to answer that prayer. That’s because he knows it will only encourage you in your own selfish nature.” He’d be encouraging you to develop that selfish nature further. His desire is to make your nature like his. That’s one of the reasons why God won’t answer our prayers.

Would you like to look at Isaiah 59:1-2? This is another instance that occurs in many of our lives and prevents God from answering our prayers. Isaiah was answering people that were saying, “God is no longer answering prayers these days.” And Isaiah says, Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you so that he does not hear.”

Would you look at that second verse, “But your iniquities have made a separation between you and

your God, and your sins have hid his face from you so that he does not hear.” If there is some sin in your life that you are not prepared to have done with, that sin will prevent God from answering your prayer.

So our first responsibility when we begin to pray for someone that we love dearly is to say, “Lord, show me if there’s anything in my life that is disobedient to you.” Dear ones, God will not answer your prayer while you’re still walking in disobedience. Do you see why? It’s because you get all proud when he answers your prayer. You get all proud and you think, “I must be dead right with God. I must be right in the center of his will.” And you keep walking that way. If you regard iniquity in your heart, that is, if you look at something that God shows you is wrong in your life and you keep it there, God will not answer your prayers.

Do you see why a preacher cannot be powerful in the things of the spirit unless his life is consistent with what he preaches and what he prays? God will not answer your prayers unless your life is clear from the sins that God has shown you. First, you have to get rid of the sins in your life.

Would you stop saying, “Lord, you’re no longer answering prayer.” And would you start saying, “Lord, what in my life is preventing you answering my prayers?” All God’s promises to answer prayers are conditional on these things here that we’re reading about.

Let’s look just at one more and you’ll find it in 1 Peter 3:7. It applies particularly to those among us who are married. 1 Peter 3:7, “Likewise you husbands live considerately with your wives, bestowing honor on the woman as the weaker sex, since you are joint heirs of the grace of life, in order that your prayers may not be hindered.”

Many mothers and fathers are praying for their sons and daughters but their prayers are not answered because their own home life is not in harmony. It’s because the man lords it over the woman or because the woman uses her stronger emotional apparatus to run cold wars on the man and keep him under control. And God is not able to answer a prayer because their own married life is not right. Now dear ones, as many of us that are married, let us examine our own relationships together that we may be sure that there is nothing there that is preventing God answering our prayers.

In other words, God will answer our prayers if our own natures are free from any stain or sin that he has revealed to us. But if we are walking in known sin God will not answer our prayers. That’s the first part of the key to prayer, that God answers our prayers according to his purpose which is first to show us his own nature and that we’ll deal with next Sunday. Secondly, it’s to make our own natures like his. In accordance to his purpose, God will answer every prayer.

God still answers prayer and he is witnessing to this. So, let’s begin to pray without ceasing. Let’s give up this whole business of sending up prayers because we’re supposed to and let’s start expecting the answers this very week. Let us pray.

Father, we trust you by your Holy Spirit to work this into the very heart of our lives and to enable us to go to our knees today with new excitement and new anticipation knowing that you are going to answer the prayers that we pray in your name and according to your will. Amen.

