

Heavenly Father, we praise and glorify your name, because you are the God who stoops down to be near to us, and you meet us in these quiet times. And we thank you that you are not a God who is distant and detached, you are not a God who has set us adrift and walked away, but you are a God who is with us and involved with us every moment of the day. I ask now Lord that you will place your words in my mouth and confirm in the hearts of my brothers and sisters anything that I say that is from you. I ask in Jesus name, amen.

Well, so, I have more to say on Little Foxes this week. If you've been with us either of the last two weeks, we've been talking about how we want to be prepared to receive our new pastor. And when he gets here we don't want him to walk into a bunch of baggage and problems that need to be dealt with. We want to try and deal with as much as we can before he gets here so that he can hit the ground running and lead us to where God is leading this church.

And so we've been dealing with the Little Foxes in our lives, which is a reference to Song of Songs 2:15, which says, "Catch for us the little foxes, the little foxes that spoil the vines." And so we are dealing with the little things in our life that destroy our fruitfulness. So two weeks ago we talked about gossip, and last week we talked about pride. This week our Little Fox is prayerlessness, and prayerlessness is often connected to pride, which is why I think it's a good transition.

So what is prayerlessness? Prayerlessness is to neglect the very real, active presence of God in your life. It can be - just like it sounds - not praying, but it can also be neglecting devotion time, Bible time, quiet time - anything where you are not conscious and aware and operating in the power of the Holy Spirit that is with you every moment of the day. We talked about during Christmas, how one of Jesus's names is Immanuel. Immanuel means "God with us". We talked about how Jesus came, not only to be "God with us" (because He was God), but he came to re-establish "God with us": His death on the cross allowed - repaired the separation between God and His people. And when He died on the cross, the veil that was in temple that separated the Holy of Holies - the place where God's presence was - from the people, that veil was ripped in two, signifying that that which separated us from God had been destroyed because of Jesus's sacrifice on the cross.

So all of Christianity hinges around this idea that God wants to be with His people. So to neglect that, to neglect God being here with us right now, is a big deal, and yet it seems like such a little feeling, when you forget to - when you oversleep and don't do your devotions, it just seems like such a little thing, and yet it is the whole crux of Christianity.

So, when you overcome prayerlessness, you'll spend more time - not only just having request prayers - but you will have more time listening in prayer. You will also have more time in what I call "chat prayer", which is just where you talk with God. It's very casual, and yet, it's something that you carry on ... throughout the whole day, because He's your friend and He wants to be with you throughout the whole day. There will also be more Bible time and meditation.

Well, what causes prayerlessness? Well, it can come, first of all, from ignorance. It could be that I think, "I don't have God" or "He is not here with me." Or I could think that I don't have a need to be with God. But this is definitely not true, and to prove that point, we are going to look at several Bible verses. We're going to be reading - these are all in your bulletin, we're going to go through all of them except the last one, and we're going to go through them pretty quick:

Mark 1:35 - Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed.

Mark 6:45-46 - Immediately He made His disciples get into the boat and go before Him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while He sent the multitude away. And when He had sent them away, He departed to the mountain to pray.

Mark 14:32-35 - Then they came to a place which was named Gethsemane; and He said to His disciples, "Sit here while I pray." And He took Peter, James, and John with Him, and He began to be troubled and deeply distressed. Then He said to them, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, [even] to death. Stay here and watch." He went a little farther, and fell on the ground, and prayed that if it were possible, the hour might pass from Him.

Luke 4:42 - Now when it was day, He departed and went into a deserted place. And the crowd sought Him and came to Him, and tried to keep Him from leaving them;

Luke 5:16 - So He Himself [often] withdrew into the wilderness and prayed.

Luke 6:12 - Now it came to pass in those days the He went out to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God.

I hope you see the recurring theme of what I was trying to get at here: Jesus was constantly getting away to spend time in prayer. He was constantly seeking time alone with God. Now if there was ever, in the history of all human-kind, someone who was capable of getting through their day and through their life without spending time in prayer, it would've been Jesus. He was the son of God - he was God, and if it was possible to live your life without prayer and devotion and quiet time, then Jesus could've done it. And yet we see Him setting the example of finding as much time as He possibly could, "often withdrawing into the wilderness to pray." We are not greater than our master. We are not stronger than Jesus. And if Jesus needs to spend as much time in prayer as He possibly can, then we need to spend as much time in prayer as we possibly can. So if you have the idea in your head that you don't need to spend prayer time or quiet time or reading your Bible, then you need to re-think that, because you are not greater or stronger than Jesus. Jesus set a very good example. No matter how long you've been a Christian, no matter how much ministry work - if you become a missionary or a pastor or whatever - you still, as long as you're on this earth, have flesh infected with sin and you can stumble. You can always be drug down by the sin that is in you. So you need to constantly, constantly be seeking God in prayer.

Another thing that can cause prayerlessness is pride, which we talked about last week. That's the idea that, "I don't need God. I don't need to spend time with Him." But if you remember the story about the wise man who built his house upon the rock and the foolish man who built his house upon the sand, in both stories Jesus said, "The rains came down and the floods came up." There was no one in that story who did not experience the storms of life. At some point or another we will all be faced with difficulties and trials and you need to be planted on the rock.

And finally, I think, for all of us, the thing that gets in the way of our prayer is business. We get busy. We talk about how there is sin in our flesh and - when you eat, and when you sleep, and when you do many of the things you do, this nourishes your body, it nourishes your flesh, and we sense this. We can feel this. But when you are spending your time in prayer and quiet time, it doesn't nourish your flesh, it kills the sin in your flesh and nourishes your spirit, and it's not as easy to detect until you get used to it. I recently started doing this pushup program where you do this many pushups, this many days, over this many weeks. And at first you don't notice the difference - you feel tired, but you don't feel like you're getting stronger, you don't look like you're getting stronger, anything like that. It feels like you're doing this work and not getting anything out of it. And that's how it is if you have not been a prayerful person, is that you start getting into some devotions, and you think, "Well, I read some verses, and I said some prayers, and I felt nothing." And that's because we're so used to living in that flesh, in this bondage to the things that satisfy our flesh, - eat, sleep, watch television - that we [aren't sensitive]

the things that nourish our spirit. But we need to believe what the Bible says is true and stop just believing everything that our body tells us. We need to believe the Bible when it says that time in prayer - time with God - is helpful, is nourishing, and we need to follow Jesus's example. And so, we get busy, we oversleep, and we have to choose: are we going to skip breakfast or skip devotion time, and it's usually devotion time. So, business is the third things that leads to prayerlessness.

What are the effects of prayerlessness? First of all, we begin to lack fruit. We talked about how the Little Foxes spoil our fruitfulness. But specifically, prayerlessness causes the fruit of the Spirit in our lives to begin to shrivel up. As you recall, the fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And if you begin neglecting your Bible time and your prayer time, it will become harder for you to love people. You will experience less joy throughout your day, less peace throughout your day. You will have less patience with the people you deal with. You will have less kindness in difficult situations. You will have less goodness when you need to do the right thing. You will have less faithfulness when it's time to honor your commitments. You will have less gentleness in delicate situations, and you will lose your self-control. That's what happens when [you neglect prayerfulness]. And without those fruits you begin to just kinda feel burnt out and run down. And if you find yourself right now constantly feeling burnt out and run down, I would ask yourself

that: are you neglecting your time with God? Are you neglecting time reading the Bible and in prayer and listening to the Holy Spirit? Because those things almost always go hand-in-hand.

As the fruit of the Spirit shrivels up in your [life], what happens is that you begin to become weak to temptation. I have good prayer partners. And they come to me and they say, "Matt, how are you doing? What are you struggling with? How can I pray for you?" Stuff like that. And we have good prayer times. But when they get busy, and I don't have a chance to get together with them in those prayer times, that's when I find the subtleties of my struggles are jacked way up. That's when life becomes a lot more difficult. That's because prayerlessness leads to temptation.

So what can we do about it? Well, number one, you need to plan for it. You will never accidentally stumble into doing the right thing. You will never - until you develop a habit, anyways - you will never wake up accidentally 30 minutes early and say, "Ah! Well, I'm going to spend this time in prayer!" That's not something that we by default will do. Now, some of you who have good prayer lives cultivated, if you wake up 30 minutes early, say, "Alright! 30 more minutes of prayer!" Good for you, because that's a good attitude! But that's the result of a life that's been planning to make time for prayer and devotion. Maybe you need to cut out your morning television. Maybe you need to turn off the radio on the way to work and spend that time in prayer. But whatever you do, you need to specifically make plans. A lot of you have commented that I've lost some weight, and that's because I'm dieting. It's something that I had to plan for. When I go grocery shopping - usually on Sunday - I go through the store and say, "Here's what I'm going to eat Monday lunch, Monday dinner, Tuesday lunch, Tuesday dinner..." and that's how I do my shopping: I plan out every meal I'm going to have that week. And then, an hour before lunch on Wednesday, when everyone says, "Okay! We're going out to Culver's for ice cream!" or whatever, and I'm hungry because lunch is around the corner, I can say, "Sorry, I already have plans, and my plans are to eat this healthy meal I brought." Or I can say, "Well, I've planned this many calories for the day, I've got about 300 calories left, so... alright, I can have 300 calories worth of ice cream." But I've made those plans, and that is how I've been able to stick to my diet, and it's the same thing that's helped me in my devotional life. Last January, it was kind of my New Year's Resolution, I was going to start keeping a journal - a log - of all the time I spent in prayer and in Bible reading. And it was nothing fancy, I just wrote down the date and wrote down the Bible verse I read, and if I had some idea of a youth lesson or something, I would write that in the notes. But

for the most part it was just a log, it's nothing fancy. But just having that log sitting there on the dining room table when I come downstairs in the morning, it reminds me, "Oh, yeah, gotta do my devotions here now." So if you want to cultivate prayerfulness, you need to make plans for it, you need to schedule time for it.

Another thing you can do to become more prayerful is to keep the conversation going with God. If you started the day with prayer, that's good. If you missed it, that's okay. What you need to do is, as you go throughout your day, constantly offer up little prayer strikes. Like I said, in your car, flip off the radio, say some prayer. Walking here to there, just say a prayer on the way. Constantly remember that God is with you. You gotta switch your mind to remember He is always with you, He is always interested in whatever you're doing right now. I'm not a chatty person, but I've learned to be chatty with God. I've learned that if no one else is around, that's a great time for me to just say, "God, I'm thinking about buying this new board game, and I hope that the letter I'm waiting for arrives in the mail today..." and I just start talking to God. And doing that helps my brain learn to realize that God is always with me, and the more you practice it, the more you always remember, and the more ready you are to jump into prayer whenever the need may arise. So we can plan to be prayerful, and we can also keep the conversation going, because you have lots of little in-between chunks throughout the day, and those are great times to spend with God. You don't need to use fancy words, He does not need to hear some eloquent speech, or whatever. He just wants you. A lot of you have kids who have left home, and I'm sure you love getting a call from your kids. And it can be about nothing other than some deal they just found at Kroger, or whatever, you just love getting a call from your kids. Our heavenly Father is the same way: He loves getting a call from His kids. So anytime you can, give God a call. He will always answer.

Finally, one thing you can do - even if you aren't separate and you don't have time to devote to having a conversation with God, or there's other people around, one last thing you can do to cultivate a prayerful life is to constantly worship. This can be something as simple as humming one of the songs we sing on Sunday, or whistling, or singing - whatever. Constantly be teaching your heart, not just to talk to God, but to love God and to worship Him and to thank Him for the good things in your life. You should have good things in your life, and you should constantly be reminding yourself of these good things, and you should be thanking God and praising Him for these good things. A lot of you... well, not a lot of you, but probably some of you have noticed that a lot of my prayers start with, "God thank you for..." and that's because constantly, throughout my day, I'm trying to remember all of the good things God has done for me, and constantly thank Him and worship Him. It's an easy thing to do, because even if you're sitting there talking to someone, you can be (in your head) singing a hymn, a song, or whatever. And so, worship throughout the day, cultivate a heart of worship that is constantly expressing its love towards God. And if you have something blocking that, if you're angry or disappointed with God, or something, then take that to Him. Just say, "God, I'm struggling here, and I need an explanation or something because I'm frustrated" and He's okay with you saying that to Him. But don't just express it to Him like you're angry and venting, express it to Him like expecting an answer.

And finally one last thing to mention: remember we talked last week about finding the balance between remembering our sinfulness, and remembering the love God has for us, and keeping those things in balance. There's one more balance we need to remember with this, and that is the balance between being spiritually minded, but not neglecting our outward life of good works. Some people take everything we just talked about to the extreme, and lock themselves in a monastery, and do nothing but pray and read the Bible all day. That's good for them, but it's completely wasting your life. You want to spend time with God to cultivate fruit - Holy Spirit fruit - within you, so you can take that for God

out into the world and share it. So spend time with God. Cultivate a prayerful life.

Finally we're going to read the last verse in our bulletin. It says Psalm 1:1, but it's actually Psalm 1:1-3

Blessed [is] the man Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, Nor stands in the path of sinners, Nor sits in the seat of the scornful; But his delight [is] in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree Planted by the rivers of water, That brings forth its fruit in its season, Whose leaf also shall not wither; And whatever he does shall prosper.

Do you want to be like that tree planted by streams of water, whose leaf does not wither, which brings forth its fruit in season, and whatever it does prospers? You wanna be like that? I do. Well, the first part says what kind of person is that: someone who does not walk in the ways of the wicked, but delights in the law of the Lord, and meditates on that law day and night. If we cultivate a prayerful, meditative mindset throughout our day, then we will be like that tree that yields its fruit. So, walk with God. That's what I want to send you away with: walk with God, every moment of every day.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you will walk with us if we will approach you, that you will hear our cries and our prayers, and you will come to us and will lead us. You are a God who loves us. You are a God who does not want to make it difficult for us, but you do want us to learn how to walk. So we say that we will trust in you, we will walk with you, to follow wherever you lead. We ask that you will teach us the places in our lives where we can be more prayerful and spend more time with you. We ask that as we seek you in those times that you would pour out your Spirit, that you would confirm in us that you are working in us, that you would help us to see the fruit you have produced within us. We pray this all in Jesus name, amen.