

Prayer

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 March 2020

Preacher: Nick Louw

[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. Well, some of you may have heard of a guy called Charles Haddon Spurgeon. Put up your hand if you've heard of Charles Spurgeon. Yeah, quite a famous guy.

He lived, he was a preacher, lived in 19th century England, and he was one of the most successful preachers England had ever seen. Some of his services were attended by over 10,000 people at one time in this big place called the Metropolitan Tappernacle in London.

You can still go there and visit it today. And, of course, through his ministry, because he preached so well to so many people, so many people were saved, came into the kingdom through his ministry.

It was a hugely successful ministry by any measure. Now, let's be honest. We here at St. Mark's would love to have just a fraction of the success that Charles Spurgeon saw in his lifetime, wouldn't we?

Because that's what we're about. That's what we're doing here. We want people to come into the kingdom. We want people to be saved from their sins and from the wrath of God when Jesus comes to judge. And we want people to be the people God made them to be through coming into the kingdom, finding forgiveness, finding redemption for their sins.

[1 : 13] And that's why we're here, to make disciples of Christ. And so if we're serious about that mission, we should be asking, what was Spurgeon's secret? You know, what can we learn from him?

Or was it his eloquence in preaching? And he was a very eloquent preacher. He told a lot of interesting stories, used great illustrations, engaged people where they were at.

He was quite controversial as well. And he was famous for that, for his preaching style. Was that the key to his success? Is that why so many people were saved through his ministry? Maybe it was his leadership team, their processes and their church structures.

Maybe the leadership team working behind the scenes, that was the secret to his ministry. Or maybe it was the building. Maybe it was just a great building. Maybe it had good air conditioning and people just loved to come and sit in it.

Was that the secret of his success? What made his ministry so effective? Well, someone once asked him. In fact, lots of ministers came in the height of his success and asked him for his secrets.

[2 : 19] And it turns out he didn't attribute his success to any of these things I mentioned. In fact, when these visitors from other churches came to see his ministry at the Metropolitan Tabernacle and ask him the secrets of his success, you know what he did?

He would say, follow me. And then he would lead them down a long flight of stairs to the basement of the church where they would find hundreds of his people on their knees praying for the church service happening above.

And he would turn around and say, this, this here is the powerhouse of this church. He called it the church's boiler room. In fact, back in those days, of course, you didn't have ESCOM.

They had something much more reliable, in fact. Steam power. And steam power was generated in these boiler rooms that most buildings would have in their basement.

And they would power almost everything from the vast machines of industry to the heating of family homes. And they would be there hot and smelly, but essential for everything that's going on above.

[3 : 26] And Spurgeon saw the prayers of his people as the unseen boiler room behind all the ministry of his church that was happening above.

Even if the prayers were difficult, even if the prayer meeting wasn't the most attractive place to be, that's where the power was. And he knew it. Because he knew prayer is what really makes things

happen.

It's what taps into the resources of heaven to do things here on earth. And that's also why he said this quote, Brothers, we shall never see much change for the better in our churches until the prayer meeting occupies a higher place in the esteem of Christians.

Thing is, though, it wasn't only Spurgeon who believed this about prayer. It was also the Apostle Paul when we turn to his letters and we see how much he spoke about prayer as we see in this letter to the Thessalonians.

So why don't you open there in your Bibles to 1 Thessalonians. You can actually go right to the beginning. We're going to look at chapter 5. But before we get there, just have an idea of what this letter is about.

[4 : 38] So Paul starts the letter by saying what an example the Thessalonians had set in Christian living. So have a look at chapter 1 from verse 4.

Follow along with me from verse 4. For we know, brothers and sisters, loved by God, that he has chosen you because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.

So you know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia. Your faith in God has become known everywhere.

Therefore, we do not need to say anything about it for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell you, they tell how you turn to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his Son from heaven who he raised from the dead, Jesus who rescues us from the coming wrath.

[5 : 46] Okay, so if we read this about the Thessalonian church, we discover this was a solid Christian church. This is the kind of church we want to be, right? In fact, that's what Paul says.

It's a model to other believers, other churches of what a church should be. They believed in Christ firmly. They believed in his resurrection and therefore the hope of their own resurrection from the dead one day when he returns to judge and they believed in their salvation through the blood that he shared on the cross.

And not only did they sit and listen to sermons and believe that, but they also went out into the world and lived it out. They lived this hope out in their daily lives. They shared this hope with others. They loved their neighbors.

They were an example to all Christians in the area. And so Paul says he knows that God has chosen them because of this fruit that they were showing. Great church.

Great group of Christians. But then we read on in the letter and we find out what's really interesting is that Paul is under no illusions that they will stay this way.

[6 : 48] He is very aware of the many dangers the church faces which he goes on to write about in the coming chapters. Persecution which he warns might cause them to compromise their convictions.

He talks about temptation in chapter 3 verse 5 which he feared would take them away from the faith and that his labor would have been for nothing. That's what he says.

And then in chapter 4 even after affirming all this good work that he's been seeing in the Thessalonians and stating that he knew that they were chosen by God even though he knew that he still insists that they stay away from sexual immorality knowing full well that they could still fall away from the good place that they were in.

Much like the Christian life today. You can never take your salvation for granted. And you can't be blase about sin because of the very real danger you could slip back into it.

Just as much as if imagine you were rescued out of the ocean by a rescue helicopter. You know those big orange rescue helicopters they pull people out of the ocean when a ship has sank or something. Imagine you you were about to drown and then a rescuer comes in and dives into the water swims over to you and grabs you and then the winch lifts you up to the helicopter and you feel so amazingly relieved that they saw you that the helicopter went to you chose you picked you up out of the water and then you're sitting in the helicopter and it's flying over the sea back to land.

[8 : 21] Now what are you going to do sitting in that helicopter with that blanket around you? You're not going to start playing on the edge of the helicopter going I wonder if I can touch the sea as we

fly over it. No. You're going to stay as much in the helicopter as you can.

You're not going to toy with possibly falling back in the water and the reason is because you know the danger of falling out of the helicopter if you don't take it seriously that you've been rescued. Well in the same way Paul knew the Thessalonians couldn't take their progress in the faith and the fact that they had been chosen and saved by God they couldn't take that for granted and that's why he writes this letter to them this letter to this great example of a church he still warns them he still writes and tells them the great danger that they must avoid and he also knew that there is more work to be done that's the thing as you read this letter you see the stress on Paul telling all the Thessalonians what they still need to be doing what they still need to work on and that's what the rest of the letter to them is about and that's why this letter as well as all the other letters Paul wrote in the Bible is so important for us to read today because in our Christian walks we never arrive this side of the resurrection and I'll say that again we never arrive we can never get to the point we say I'm everything I want to be now I'm the Christian I want to be now I can just you know settle down no we never arrive this side of the resurrection there's always more work to be done in our own lives and in our church as a church we never arrive we can never say okay we're doing what we need to do now and we can just settle down no of course God gives us all that we need in order to grow and develop as Christians and as churches but we need to make sure we keep doing that and using what God has given us we need to make sure we keep growing and keep going forwards otherwise we will slip backwards there's no level you're either going up or you're going down and so Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians he then goes on to describe all the work that still needs to be done and the habits that need to be formed to make sure that the Thessalonians kept going up kept moving forward and one of the things as he puts us central to that is the place of prayer like Spurgeon

Paul knew that regular specific and consistent prayer among the ordinary Christians in the church was the vital powerhouse that would make everything else work and keep going forward so look at the last chapter look at how he mentions prayer twice in his closing instructions that Penny read for us earlier verse from verse 16 he says rejoice always pray continually give thanks which is also prayer give thanks in all circumstances for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus and then down to 25 again brothers and sisters pray for us so Paul knows that amongst all that still needs to be done for the Thessalonians to keep growing and not take for granted this great place that they're in to keep being effective for the kingdom prayer had to be the key and they needed to work on that well if the

Thessalonians that great example of a church needed to pray more I can assure you we do here at St. Mark's if we want to grow and be more effective for the kingdom we need to get our boiler room fired up as well and be productive now firstly I want to tell you why that's so important why we must do that secondly I want to tell you how I think at St.

[12 : 25] Mark's we can do that so firstly why the why of prayer is very simple to understand but very difficult to believe and that is that we must pray because prayer actually works it actually works now the reason that's difficult to believe is because we also believe in a sovereign God who ordains all things according to the purpose of his will and has decided ahead of time what he's going to do and if that is the case then how can our prayers possibly make any difference if God is sovereign and he's already decided what he's going to do I think that is the major reason Christians don't pray more ironically because of their good theology in a sovereign God because they understand the sovereignty and the control of events before time even began God already has laid out what he's going to do and what his plan was and they know that so well that prayer seems unnecessary let's admit that's often one of the reasons if you've been a

Christian for a long time at least and you understand that about God that's often one of the reasons that we don't have the motivation to pray like we should and therefore one of the main reasons if not the only reason we end up praying is because it makes us feel good and it brings us closer to God which by the way it does and it is great to pray for that reason alone I mean it's one of the most epic and greatest human experiences to actually communicate with our creator and know that he hears us one of I can tell you one of my highlights of my week is after Thursday night Bible study after the sun is set I go sit outside in the back garden and I look up at the stars and I get on my knees and I pray and it's an amazing experience to know that the creator of this is hearing me and that he's listening and so you can commune with God through Jesus

Christ as a Christian it's the greatest gift that we've been given other than salvation the fact that we can in fact it's all part and parcel of salvation that we have now open access to God and the same open access to God which will allow us not to stand on God's judgment for our sins when Jesus returns one day and will allow us to be resurrected and live in the new creation that same open access to God that Jesus has earned by his death on the cross is the same thing that allows us now today open access to God through prayer and that is an amazing reason to pray and prayer does all that it brings us into the real presence of God that we can almost feel tangibly but that's not all it does and we mustn't stop there because prayer actually also makes things happen it moves the hand of God to do things that he wouldn't have done if we didn't pray for them prayer moves the hand of God to do things that he wouldn't have done if we didn't pray for them and unless you believe that you will not pray properly but Paul believed that and Jesus believed that and they taught us to believe that too you know throughout

Paul's letters if you read them you see that he's desperately asking the people he was writing to for prayer in his ministry he wasn't just asking them to pray because he was wanting them to feel closer to God he was asking them to pray because he knew their prayers were going to have real effects in his ministry and his mission you know the woman's world day of prayer that Jenny told us about earlier the reason that so much organization is put into that is because those women aren't just coming together to feel closer to God much as that will be the case but they're also coming together because they know their prayers actually do things in this world and Paul knew that you see if Paul believed that well because God's already decided what he's going to do prayer doesn't really change anything he wouldn't have said these words he wouldn't have said to the Colossians pray for us too that God may open a door for our message he wouldn't have said to the Corinthians help us by your prayers then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted to us in answer to the prayers of many he wouldn't have said to the

Philippians I know that through your prayers what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance and he wouldn't have said to Philemon I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers if all Paul was concerned about here in his letter to the Thessalonians was them growing closer to God he would have said yeah pray continuously and he would have left it there he wouldn't have added a few verses later that they specifically need to be praying for him as well or he needs them to be praying for him but he did he added no actually don't just pray pray for me I need your prayers and he did that because he knew their prayers were going to make a difference he knew their prayers were going to move the hand of God to do things which he wouldn't have done if they didn't pray for them now does that mean that Paul didn't really believe in the sovereignty of God does that mean Paul didn't really believe that

[18:05] God had already ordained what he's going to do no of course he believed in the sovereignty of God and that's what he teaches but Paul also knew God doesn't only determine what he's going to do he also determines how he's going to do it and he knew that God has unexpectedly made the prayers of his faithful people the effectual means by which he's going to do his work in this world and that's why Paul is so adamant that these Christians be praying every time he writes a letter he says guys you need to be praying for me for the kingdom for the work that's going on because he knew those prayers were actually going to work because he knew God had determined the means by which God's going to carry out his sovereign will and that is my prayers and your prayers it's kind of like I was thinking of how to illustrate this it's kind of like the queen of England catching an uber to go to go to an important royal event now she could arrive by any means she wanted right she's got to go to this important royal visit she could go there with her personal helicopter she could go there with a convoy of armed vehicles she could get there any way she wanted but no she decides to catch an uber she gets on her cell phone in buckingham palace and she goes on uber and she doesn't know not one of the fancy uber blacks just a normal toyota right she decides no this is the way I want to get to this engagement she determines the means now tell me what does the uber driver do when he gets this request buckingham palace what does he feel does he go you know the queen could choose any way she wanted to get there and the queen's definitely going to get there so it's pointless for me to go pick her up right no of course he doesn't he goes wow what an honor what an honor that I can be the means by which the queen goes about her business and does her work and so what does he do he makes sure that he does it to the best of his ability and he makes he takes it more seriously than he's taken any fear before and he puts away all distractions so he can focus on this task he's been given well that needs to be our attitude when it comes to prayer because if

God has chosen us ordinary Christians and our prayers to be the means by which he's going to do his work in this world and in people's lives we should never think that our prayers aren't necessary for those things to happen in fact we should take the job of prayer more seriously than any other job we've been given we should prioritize it in our daily lives and do it with more focus and determination and devotion than anything else in our day I wonder if that's the case though for most Christians it's not even the Thessalonians who are necessarily doing that to the best of their ability that's why Paul tells them to pray more and he exhorts them into more continual prayer and so how are we going to do that here if that's the case if that's how important it is which I hope you see it is how are we going to be praying better at St.

Mark's this year how can we make sure we carry out that huge responsibility to the best of our ability well three things there's more but I think these three are good start firstly Paul says we should pray continually literally pray without ceasing now we like taking breaks from certain things in life and they're good it's good to take breaks from certain things in life right from work can't work continuously you've got to take breaks from that rich food you can't eat rich food all the time you've got to take a break from that and eat some healthy food and sometimes you've got to go on a diet to undo some of the rich food you've been taking you can't do that continually if you're an introvert you need breaks from people every now and again you just need to close your door and be by yourself right these are good things food and work and people but we can't have them continuously but there are also there's another category of things that not only can we have continuously but we must have continuously oxygen is a great example of that right now that doesn't mean you can't hold your breath for a minute or two but your body is designed to keep going on a continual supply of oxygen water as well now it doesn't mean we have to have a tank with like a lion that's constantly dripping water into us but the idea of having water continually is that it's part of a regular pattern of life every day on a regular basis our bodies need hydration you know it's not like you're going to give up water for Lent anybody giving up water for Lent

I don't think so so certain things in life certain things in life you should take breaks from but there's another category of things in life that you must have continuously that you can't do without well prayer for a Christian is in that second category Paul is saying here things that you can't take a break from as Christians we need to consider prayer as vital as air and water just as much as our bodies need water to stay alive our souls our entire beings need prayer as creatures we need communication with our creator constantly to live the psalmist in Psalm 63 says oh God you are my God earnestly I seek you my soul thirsts for you and how is this thirst quenched will you go a few verses later to verse four so I will bless you as long as I live in your name

I will lift up my hands that's the language of prayer communication with God so the psalmist knew that his thirst his deep continual need for God was satisfied through prayer and so that's the first thing we need to do in order to pray better we need to do it regularly we need to consider it as one of the things in life we can't do without we need to thirst for it as the psalmist says but what if we don't what if we don't thirst for prayer because let's be honest I think that's the psalmist and his thirst for God and prayer is not the experience of most Christians I think a lot of us think we can do without prayer in fact a lot of us see it as a chore so what if we don't thirst for prayer because we're sinners and our natural inclination as sinners is away from God not towards him and so prayer is not something that is natural for us as sinners but if we don't thirst for prayer like the psalmist does first I think we need to ask God to give us a thirst for prayer you know that's one of the things if you're reading examples of

[25 : 38] Christian living of people in relationship with God and you read about how they live and that's not how you live and you go oh man I wish I could be like the psalmist instead of feeling sorry for yourself and being depressed pray for it because God is willing to give you the things that he wants you to be right he's not going to say no when you pray to become the person he wants you to be and one of the things he wants you to do is thirst for prayer and so pray for it pray for God to give you a thirst for prayer but also some very practical advice from the Puritans in fact you need to pray until you pray that's what they said now that's not it's not quite the same as fake it until you make it because all your prayers through Christ whether you feel like doing them or not all of them are heard all of them are affected they're not fake prayers even if you don't feel like praying your prayers are heard and your prayers have an effect it's like drinking water

I went through a phase years ago in fact when I was at varsity that I realized I needed to drink more water I just wasn't disciplined enough to drink water I just wasn't thirsty for it oddly you know I didn't

feel like it I just drank in the water or something but I realized I need water every day on a regular basis to be hydrated but what I discovered and you might have done this too if you've gone into the habit of drinking what is it eight glasses a day or something that you've got to drink and if you've ever decided I'm going to set this habit and you do it for a few weeks or a few months you actually this is what happened with me I started to want water more the more I drank the more my body actually expected it and I developed a thirst for water and water became more satisfying for me well I think prayer works in the same way at least in my experience we don't naturally feel like praying we tend to only pray when we need something from

God but the more we actually build a habit of prayer the more we'll find we want to pray and in every season as well we'll want to pray not just when things are bad but when things are good as well because it's a habit we'll want to keep praying we won't just wait for the bad times when we pray and then wonder why things are falling apart and we go oh it's because we are not spending time with the Lord we're not training our perspectives to think on God and to pray to God and we're not praying for the things we need and so what we need to do is we need to plan to pray as well not just make it a thing that we want to do but it's a thing that we plan to do I planned to drink water you it lasts a day so

I will make sure that I have a bottle and I went and bought a nice bottle from the shop with one of those flip things that you can easily drink it I wanted to make it easy for me I wanted to have the water accessible I wanted to remove any excuses that I would have not to drink water and then I would make sure in my the things in our life that are going to get in the way we have to use whatever tools we can to make prayer easier and more accessible and we have to schedule it into our day because no one drifts into disciplined prayer just as much as you don't drift into a disciplined exercise routine you don't find yourself all of a sudden at five o'clock in the morning in the gym and go wow I just felt like that this morning no that comes through discipline right Adrian and I go running on Wednesday morning not once have I gone oh I can't wait to wake up early in the morning and go running but it's a discipline and it's good well Jesus and Paul and Daniel and many great characters in the Bible and the believers in the early church they all clearly set aside specific times and places to pray we see that in scripture there's a time Jesus disciples were looking for him because there was so much work to be doing in Capernaum the town there was so many people that needed healing and things and they couldn't find him because it was his prayer time and he went up to the mountains alone to pray and we see the same in the early church in Acts we see the believers often getting together closing the door so they can be praying one of the ways we're going to be doing that here at St.

[30 : 54] Mark's is in our monthly prayer meetings I'm going to call them boiler rooms in fact that was Naomi's idea because she was reading Spurgeon and going wow that's a great name so we're going to call those prayer meetings boiler rooms our first week of the month prayers and growth focus on prayer that week being the main thing so that's this Wednesday 7pm but we need that regular prayer time not just 630 ok 630 yes thank you we need monthly prayer but we also need weekly prayer and daily prayer we need to have schedules where you know when you've decided to pray now that doesn't mean you can't pray at other times you should but the habit should be structured there so that you can get into get this thirst for prayer and if you can't attend for example our monthly prayer meeting because there are more important things to do well I want to say as lovingly as I can that is evidence prayer is not the priority that it should be in your life as a

Christian and maybe you need to look at your schedule and reorder your priorities a little bit but then the final prayer tip before we finish this morning is pray specifically so as you read in Paul's letters he gives the people he's writing to specific prayer requests regarding his work and the kingdom things that were going on in the same way we need to be intentional to pray for specific things not just start and go okay well what what do I feel like praying for what am I going to pray for today and you sit there half the time wondering what to pray but you don't want to waste valuable prayer time trying to come up with things to pray for do that beforehand develop a prayer list system with different categories in it a list of unbelievers to pray for a list of believers to pray for use a prayer book like our denominations prayer book that has set prayers for different occasions and different times of the year and different things that might come up that you can have a set prayer for like the

COVID-19 virus there's a great prayer in the old 1662 prayer book for to be prayed in times of common plague or sickness I've put it on our Facebook page have a look it's a great prayer prayer

when we don't know what to pray when things happen have a list of missionaries to pray for we've got a list of missionaries on your bulletins there's prayer requests for our missionaries you can incorporate that into your daily or weekly prayers because what you pray for in your lounge at home actually has effects on the other side of the planet in Iraq and Japan and China you need to believe that the prayer made app that Naomi mentioned that we've introduced is a great way to have a prayer list to have a tool that's going to help you to pray in a more disciplined way so our feed our St. Mark's feed on the prayer made app has a weekly prayer the collect from the prayer book for that week every week you'll get a missionary to pray for on a particular day you'll get different prayer requests from different areas of this church that need your prayers you can sign up for global organizations that give you prayer requests every day I've signed up for the open doors organization which helps persecuted Christians around the globe and every day there's a prayer request for a particular persecuted Christian often by name that's that's needing prayer for a particular thing that I would have never known about have I not had this tool so yesterday I was praying for a woman called Sabah in India who's trying to open a cafeteria which is going to help she's a Christian help share the gospel with Hindus and other people who come in and she's having all kinds of problems from the government and other areas that are trying to persecute her so I was praying for her knowing that my prayers are actually going to make a difference it's an amazing privilege that we get and tools like the prayer made app can help us to do that but whatever way you use whether it's an app on your phone or whether it's a book that you have that you write a list plan what to pray before you pray and then one more thing actually I said that was the last thing it wasn't spouses and families pray together spouses you'll be surprised how good it is for your marriage to get together with your husband or wife and pray for things together it might be awkward at first but but that'll soon be overcome when you make it a habit and it actually it is it is a meeting of minds it is it is praying for important things together is a great way to bring you together as well now I've always found it fascinating how

Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 in the passage where he talks about conjugal rights of Christian married couples the duties they have intimately to each other if you're a grown up you'll know what I mean but I always find it fascinating that he says one exception to regular intimacy is when you both decide to pray basically he's saying that's a great alternative to the other thing of course when it's mutually agreed don't use it as an excuse you know your husband comes along how are you doing tonight why I'm praying no it's mutually agreed right but also family prayers pray with your children parents because they need especially in this post Christian secular world your kids need to see examples of Christians communing with God they need to see their parents doing that that is better for them than even education and a roof over their heads which you work so hard to give them those things are important and they set them up for this life but prayers set them up for eternity and helping them to observe and develop a prayer habit sets them up for eternity it is your responsibility parents to show your children how to pray well so in closing let's make sure our homes and our churches are constantly well powered not by electricity like that's going to happen but by prayer let's allow prayer as Spurgeon said and specifically meeting together for prayer to occupy a higher place in our esteem and let's get excited when we start to see God answer those prayers and grow his kingdom from this church in

[38 : 10] Plumstead and beyond well let's pray now Lord we do our mind boggles when we think that you have condescended to decide that the way you're going to do your work in this world is through our prayers Lord help us not to think that our prayers aren't important but help us to realize the great honor and privilege we have and help us to take that honor seriously to be focused and devoted to regular habits of prayer and would you then as you develop us to be better prayers here at St.

Mark's would you use our prayers to do great things things that we could never have imagined things that we know only can happen if you do them would you do those things and would you give us the joy of seeing our prayers answered in Jesus name amen