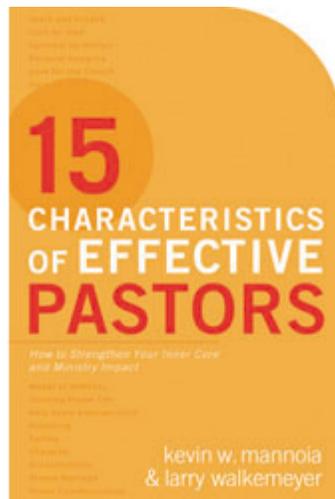


# Praying Pastor Blog

Encouraging & Equipping Pastors' Prayer Lives

Models an effective, regular, growing prayer life



## Chapter 8

### Prayer Life:

*Models an effective, regular, growing prayer life*

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“Prayer is the key to growing your church!”

“If your church isn’t growing, it’s because you’re not praying!”

A quick and unanimous “Amen” must be given to the idea that effective ministry flows from effective prayer, but for many pastors, statements like these hang around their necks like ill-fitting neckties. Even the most pragmatic, culturally relevant Christian leaders dare not disagree with such clear spiritual truth, but instead of prayer being a life-giving relationship that fortifies their

lives and ministries, it becomes a means to image enhancement, a choking experience of spiritual duty. “Expert” pastors sell us a formula for how to “pray so your church will grow.” Such pragmatism can turn the beauty of prayer into a burden.

The distance between prayer as a method and prayer as a lifestyle is deceptive – it’s like the mirage that seems so near and satisfying, yet is never reached. When pastors treat prayer as a means to an end, it degenerates into self-serving spiritual speech that leaves them spiritually thirsty.

The pastor’s prayer time often takes one of five forms:

1. *Be-good prayers*: “Lord, I’m trying to be a good boy/girl and do my duty for You.”
2. *Bargaining prayers*: “Lord, I’m putting in my time here and I expect some results in return for this effort.”
3. *Bellyache prayers*: “Lord, I’m here to tell You how I really feel about the deacon board and especially John Big-Yap.”
4. *Bless me prayers*: “Lord, I’m going to give You a 20-minute speech with words I’ve learned from someone who seems to get results from You.”
5. *Battle-on prayers*: “Lord, I’m going to scream at some demons for the next hour to help me feel better about the spiritual scene in my church.”

Such prayers lack power because they lack either authenticity or accuracy. They may soothe the conscience of a pastor who is trying hard, but they fail to bring genuine help to him or his church.

Effective pastors have moved beyond prayer as a means – they have grown beyond the emptiness of ritual. They model a life of effective, regular, growing prayer that is relational at its core and believe in the power of prayer to influence their lives, the life of the Church and the world around them. This life of prayer permeates all aspects of the pastor’s private and public life.

## **Lifting Hands to Heaven**

Pastor Harold Taves was stricken with polio at a young age. For the rest of his life, he was unable to lift his left arm more than a few inches. Harold was a

simple man of faith who responded to God's call, and over the course of his life, was a pastor in a few small Midwestern towns.

Few people will remember his name, except for those who had the joy of being in one of his little churches. Harold was an effective pastor because he was a pastor who had tapped into a relationship with God through prayer.

People frequently came into the church office to find Harold in prayer, often at the altar with tears streaming down his face. To this day I can see him, his good arm extended toward heaven, lifting the burden of one of his people before the Lord.

This life of prayer sustained Harold through challenges and disappointments. It altered the spiritual atmosphere of the worship services. It changed homiletically weak sermons into curiously compelling insights that reverberated in the hearts of those who listened.

Although I don't remember one sermon he ever preached on prayer, Harold taught me to pray. His anticipation of what God could do through prayer lifted me above my pathetic process of giving a wish list to God. He and God were friends, and it showed in their conversations.

Effective pastors understand the priority, the power and the privilege of stretching out their entire being to God in prayer. As David cried out in Psalm 141:2, they long for their prayers to be pleasing to God: "May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice."

This picture of hands spread out to heaven carries with it a gripping engagement for the heart of the effective pastor. Paul knew the power of being a leader who lives with a hands-to-heaven approach. While writing to his son in the faith, he challenged all believers: "I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing" (1 Tim. 2:8).

Hands lifted to the sky are an almost universal sign of surrender, indicating "yieldedness" and the need for help. Understood in this way, lifted hands are the ultimate symbol for true prayer, which is predicated on self-surrender. It is empowered only by throwing oneself fully onto the mercy of God and then boldly requesting His assistance.

Pastor Moses is our instructive example of this characteristic. Exodus 17:11 says, "As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning." Moses' staff was his emblem of leadership – it was the outward symbol of his call, authority and ability. As he lifted his staff to heaven in an act of dependency, surrender and intercession, victory for the people of God was connected to the act of Moses remaining in a posture of prayer – hands to heaven, leadership offered to God. There is something powerful and effective when a leader lifts hands to heaven on behalf of God's people.

This is the posture that effective pastors live in. One of the most powerful things a pastor can do for her church is to surrender herself to God in a relationship of prayer, interceding for the victory of her people. Prayer alone is not enough, but if you don't start and continue in prayer, whatever else you do will never be enough.

The hands-to-heaven mind-set is characterized by three dimensions of a thriving prayer life: Identity, Integration and Intervention. Effective pastors, in their own language and means, progress in these three dimensions of prayer.

## **Identity Prayer**

Hands-to-heaven prayer opens us to the deep work of God of forming our hearts. Identity prayer reveals, shapes, secures and sustains the pastor. It invites the searchlight of the Holy Spirit in so that any sin lurking at the corners of our lives is exposed. Identity prayer is communion that reveals God's delight in us, God's fresh grace for the day and God's powerful presence within us. This is prayer that shapes not only our self-image but also our self-reality.

Identity prayer is summed up in the words of a fellow pastor who daily prayed, "Lord, put Your fingers deep into the clay of my life today. Shape me so that others see more of You in me today."

Lloyd Ogilvie was the one who introduced me to Identity prayer. At a college chapel, Ogilvie said, "Allow me to share my life's prayer with you: 'Lord, make my life as beautiful as it was when You first thought about me!'" To be shaped

through prayer into the original design God intended is a journey that leads to increasing and true effectiveness.

In 1996, nearly 40,000 pastors gathered in the Superdome in Atlanta for the clergy event “Fan Into Flame.” When veteran pastor Charles Swindoll stepped to the microphone, they were not prepared for his first sentence: “When God wants to use a person greatly, He crushes them deeply.”

Swindoll went on to highlight the call of Isaiah, with all of its pain, surrender and power (see Isa. 6). The prophet was before the Lord when the revelation of his own uncleanness came crushing down on him – and he was completely undone. As he stayed before the Lord, however, his sinful lips were not only cleansed, but they were also changed, empowered and commissioned into ministry. Pastors have the same opportunity as Isaiah to be humbled before the Lord to see a fresh revelation of their God, themselves and their call.

Jacob had the quintessential prayer encounter when he wrestled with God through the night (see Gen. 32:22-32). Holding on to God in the middle of the night is never fun – and often causes a limp – but it is the kind of praying that has life-shaping power. From that day forward, Jacob was known as *Israel*, which means “he struggles with God.”

Almost every pastor wants to be known as one of God’s best, a significant influence, a real prince or princess of God. But who wants to limp? We want to avoid the painful shaping of our inner selves, yet wrestling through the night is the way we fall into the greatness that God calls us to. An effective, growing prayer life is one that moves us past our defenses, beyond our fears and deeper than our self-deception. The journey of “Jacob” to “Israel,” from “deceiver” to “prevailer” can only be taken through Identity prayer.

This kind of prayer happens primarily in times of aloneness and especially in times of pain. We first confess all known sin and ask for the root of such sins to be revealed, which puts us in a position for deeper shaping. Then we wait in the presence of God with an ear tuned to His voice. We come as we are – no pretense, agenda, façade or guardedness. Openness, transparency and vulnerability invite engagement and intimacy with the Father.

Eighteenth-century mystic and poet Archbishop François Fénelon described prayer this way:

Tell God all that is in your heart, as one unloads one's heart, its pleasures and its pains, to a dear friend. Tell God your troubles, that God may comfort you; tell God your joys, that God may sober them; tell God your longings, that God may purify them; tell God your dislikes, that God may help you conquer them; talk to God of your temptations, that God may shield you from them; show God the wounds of your heart, that God may heal them. If you thus pour out all your weaknesses, needs, troubles, there will be no lack of what to say. Talk out of the abundance of the heart, without consideration say just what you think. Blessed are they who attain to such familiar, unreserved intercourse with God.<sup>1</sup>

Many pastors have found that establishing an altar place is helpful. This is a sacred space conducive to helping you focus and listen, an environment that is dedicated to interacting with God over matters of life and ministry. My first such place was a closet under the basement stairs, where I positioned a kneeling pad, a bench, a Bible and a small lamp. I didn't go into that closet except to seek God. I expected God to meet me there. I can remember crying, laughing, singing, reading, confessing and listening at that altar. I envisioned the backside of those stairs leading heavenward to God's throne. Perhaps they did.

Identity prayer is not a monologue about my sin or needs. It is, instead, an active dialogue, with times of listening for the thoughts of God. As we learn to hear the voice of the Spirit, we receive the communion that builds the interior resiliency that ministry demands. Henri Nouwen captured this necessity:

Why is it so important that you are with God and God alone on the mountain top? It's important because it's the place in which you can listen to the voice of the One who calls you the beloved. To pray is to listen to the One who calls you "my beloved daughter," "my beloved son," "my beloved child."<sup>2</sup>

To pray is to let God's voice speak to the center of who you are—to your guts—and let it resound in your whole being.

How many pastors have their effectiveness undermined by giving too much weight to the words of their critics? Or by dwelling on the injustices of the ministry? How often does the burden of unreciprocated love hobble the spirit of the pastor? David knew this kind of heartache, and his response should become our testimony: "In return for my friendship they accuse me, but I am a man of

prayer” (Ps. 109:4). His resiliency was nurtured through his dialogue with God. His identity was well-formed through a life of prayer.

## **Integrating Prayer**

For prayer to shape a pastor’s life and ministry, it must be woven into daily life. Prayer is not something the effective pastor does in order to prepare *for* the day – it is the means by which he or she travels *through* the day. Integrating prayer is a running conversation with God that begins on waking and ends on the pillow at night. It is conformity to Paul’s admonition, “Don’t worry about anything, instead pray about everything” (Phil. 4:6).

Prayer must be integrated into the moments of ministry and become the natural reflex to whatever the day hands us. The conversation with the staff member who shares a concern elicits a moment of prayer. Caller ID showing a board member on the line is met with prayer. The offering report, the nursery problem, the hospital visit, the lunch with a new attendee, the new volunteer for Sunday School, the website layout . . . are all tackled with an under-the-breath conversation with the Father.

Archbishop Fénelon understood integrated prayer when he wrote, “Accustom yourself gradually to carry prayer into all your daily occupation—speak, act, work in peace, as if you were in prayer, as indeed you ought to be.”<sup>3</sup> He knew that this attitude of prayer has transforming power. Integrating prayer into the minutia of life brings a sense of significance, satisfaction and holiness to the most humdrum tasks of ministry.

Many pastors enter ministry with unrealistic expectations of world-changing influence and weeks filled with study, prayer and teaching. Upon arrival at their first post, however, they can relate to Brother Lawrence, the sixteenth-century monk who found that peeling potatoes and washing dirty dishes were the unsavory realities of his weekly ministry chores. Brother Lawrence complained for an entire decade before beginning to “practice the presence of God.” Four centuries later, we are still buying his book.<sup>4</sup> Why? As Brother Lawrence himself said, “There is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful than that of a continual conversation with God.” Effectiveness is not measured by how fast a pastor can escape ministry tasks that seem below his expensive seminary

training, but by how thoroughly he can integrate prayer into the unpleasant or mundane chores of ministry.

Integrating prayer ties the loose ends of ministry together – it gives some order to the chaos of ministry. It brings together seemingly unrelated events and identifies common threads so that spiritual understanding results. We lay the variety of puzzle pieces before God and say, “Lord, You make sense of it all.”

Integrating prayer operates like a gyroscope, which is a device for maintaining orientation: It continuously revolves around every circumstance to keep the pastor centered and stabilized. When journeying in prayer, the pastor can keep his or her bearings while navigating the maze of ministry.

## **Intervening Prayer**

The privilege of prayer is a delegated authority for the disciples of Jesus to interrupt the reign of evil and extend the kingdom of God. The ability of the pastor to change the spiritual atmosphere of a congregation or a community through prayer must never be underestimated.

When the spiritual leaders of the new Church in Jerusalem were confronted with the choice of administration or intercession, their priority was clear: “We will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). That intersection between the spirit of prayer and the truth of the Word is the sweet spot from which a pastor can truly *preach*. The power of a sermon arises from careful attention to both intervening prayer and accurate preparation of the Word.

The old cartoon showing a pastor on his knees in prayer and a secretary opening his door to say, “Good, I am glad you’re not busy,” is all too common. Either the church people have shaped their priorities around practical service instead of the spiritual power of intercession, or the pastor is too busy serving the church to spend time intervening in prayer. But the apostle James reminds us that “the prayers of a righteous man are powerful and effective” (Jas. 5:16). A prayer of faith impacts the spiritual realm in heaven and the reality on Earth, and results in increased effectiveness.

Pastors sometimes pray as thermometers instead of thermostats. Like thermometers, their prayers reflect the reality of life in their congregation—they praise God for what is or they complain to God about what is not. Thermostats, on the other hand, monitor the temperature *and intervene*. They draw on the power of the furnace to heat the room. They change the atmosphere.

One National Day of Prayer, I felt directed by the Holy Spirit to do something totally uncharacteristic of my usual pattern. A busy intersection near our urban church had been the site of four robbery-homicides over the previous year, and the Lord prompted me to spend the day prayer-walking that corner, carrying a sign that read “National Day of Prayer: Praying for Peace in our Neighborhood.”

I got everything from honks of support to mock drive-by shootings, but I sensed the Spirit changing the atmosphere through my prayers and the prayers of others. A year later, three new businesses had opened, the closed business had reopened and there had not been even one robbery or murder. God lovingly chided me about my small faith that prayer could change the atmosphere of a street corner.

Intervening prayers that are effective emanate from a friendship with God, not from the ego of an aspiring pastor—it is out of Identity and Integrating prayers that effective Intervening prayers arise. As a son or daughter of God learns his or her identity and walks through his or her days in conversation with God, he or she is prepared to intervene with accuracy and boldness. He or she begins to pray in the name of Jesus instead of in the name of his or her own small-minded desires.

Abraham is a biblical model on this point. Abram had his identity transformed by God to Abraham, and had traveled without knowing where he was headed, yet walked with God as he went. Abraham and God were friends. It was out of this relationship that Abraham prayed his powerful prayers of intervention, actually bargaining with God for Sodom (see Gen. 18:16-32). Abraham stood in the gap for Sodom, negotiating a deal with God to spare the city if even 10 righteous people could be found there.

Effective pastors journey into friendship with God and learn to exercise the power of prayer to intervene on behalf of their people. Their prayers push back principalities and powers, releasing spiritual gifts and blessings. Such a prayer

life demonstrates beyond debate that the pastor's dependency rests on God instead of self.

Effective pastors call their community of faith to join them in wielding such a dynamic force, and their invitation rings with integrity because people know the pastor is praying in the closet before calling for them to prayer in the sanctuary. As the pastor models this priority on prayer and calls the congregation to follow, results attributable only to God begin to occur in ministry.

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I remember asking God to heal Pastor Harold of his polio injury so that he could lift both of his hands to heaven in prayer. It never happened. But Harold had already taught me that my responsibility was not to figure God out, but simply to pray in faith, allowing God to shape my identity, walking with God throughout the highs and lows of my days and intervening on behalf of His people.

Harold was immersed in a life of prayer and it produced effective results: His churches never grew beyond 100 people—but of those 100, more than a dozen went into full-time ministry, influencing thousands for Christ.

## Notes

1. James Mudge, "Fénelon the Mystic," 1906. Online version available at the Christian History Institute online. <http://chi.gospelcom.net/pastwords/ch1175.shtml> (accessed February 2007).
2. Henri Nouwen, "Moving from Solitude to Community to Ministry," Leadership Journal, Spring 1995. Online version available at Fellowship Bible Church of Colorado Springs [http://www.fbccs.org/resources/papers/soli\\_comm\\_mini.asp](http://www.fbccs.org/resources/papers/soli_comm_mini.asp) (accessed March 2007).
2. James Mudge, "Fénelon the Mystic," 1906.
3. Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2005).

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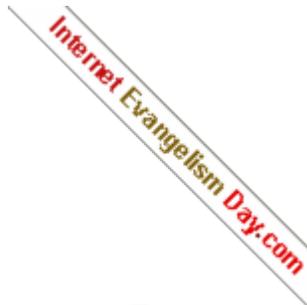
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