

BIBLICAL CHALLENGES 2007 (07).

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Introduction

The gravity of the sin of prayerlessness is exceedingly great and must grip our souls. Prayerlessness is atheism. Prayerlessness is a declaration of our independence from God. Prayerlessness is arrogance. The prayerless man's attitude is that he does not need God. He can live without God. The problem with the sin of prayerlessness is that you can be a praying person and at the same time be a prayerless person.

The classic example of this is the Pharisee we meet in Jesus' parable in *Lk.18:9-14*. Jesus said, "The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself." By his words and actions, he seemed to show that he was praying to God, that he was a man devoted to prayer. But the reality was that he was a prayerless man because, for all his show, he was not praying to God but to himself. When prayer descends into being a form, it is prayerlessness. When prayer descends into being a ritual exercise, it is meaninglessness and prayerlessness. Prayer must be the sincere cry of the humbled heart to God. This is the picture of prayer that we find again and again in the Psalms.

When it comes to the ministries of the church, prayerlessness is a serious problem. Prayer for the church and its ministries is not the responsibility of only the pastors. Church members must understand that prayer for the ministries of the church is the daily responsibility of every member of the church. There is no substitute for this. Failure here at the individual level and the corporate level brings to the fore the problem of prayerlessness for the ministries of the church. Today, with the Lord's help, I want to begin to deal with this matter of prayer and the ministries of the church. Let us turn our attention to the word of God and see what it has to say to us.

Not By Might.

In *Zech.4:6* the angel said to Zerubbabel, “This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel, saying, ‘Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,’ says the Lord of hosts.” The context of this verse is the rebuilding of the temple. This context is described for us in *Ezra 5:1-2*. (**read**). Many enemies were opposing the rebuilding of the temple.

The temple will be rebuilt, but “not by might”, that is, not by military strength and not by superior ability, skill or wisdom. The temple will be rebuilt but not “by power”, that is, not by an army of workers such as Solomon had when he built the first temple. The word “**power**” is found in *Neh.4:10* where it is used to describe the “**strength**” of the laborers who carried away the loads rubbish as the walls of Jerusalem were being rebuilt.

The temple will be rebuilt, but it will be “by My Spirit, says the Lord of hosts.” It will be rebuilt by the Spirit who was at work when the world was created. (*Gen.1:2*). The working of the Spirit among the Israelites assured them of the presence of God with them in the rebuilding project before them. This was in keeping with the Lord’s promise in *Haggai 2:5*, “My Spirit is abiding in your midst; do not fear!”

One commentator noted, *“Because God’s Spirit was actively present among the people, the success of their work did not depend on their feeble strength. Without God’s active presence in history, they could not overcome the powerful forces that opposed them nor move the hearts of kings to help them.”* (**McComiskey**).

Now, lest you misunderstand the point that is being made, let me clarify it. In creation, the Spirit of God worked without the help of man. The Spirit of God brought the universe into being out of nothing. This is not the point that is being made to Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel and his fellow Israelites were not to stand back and watch the Spirit of God miraculously bring the temple into being out of the rubble of the previous temple.

Zerubbabel and his fellow Israelites must get ready to work and to work hard in the rebuilding of the temple. But they must understand that they must trust the Spirit of God to provide for them the wisdom, the ability, the skill, and the strength they would need for rebuilding the temple. They must trust the Spirit of God for the protection they would need from their enemies as they set about the task of rebuilding the temple.

The principle at work here is what was seen earlier in Israel's history. The first example is that of Bezalel who was chosen to build the ark and everything associated with the ark. The Lord said, "I have filled [Bezalel] with the Spirit of God in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all kinds of craftsmanship." (*Exod.31:3*). The Lord did the same also for Bezalel's co-workers. These were men of skill. But note what the Lord said. He said, "in the hearts of all who are skillful I have put skill, that they make all that I have commanded." (*vs.6*).

In *Deut.8:14, 17-18* the Lord warned the Israelites that they must never allow their heart to become proud say, "My power and the strength of my hand made me this wealth." Instead, they must "remember the Lord [their] God, for it is He who is giving [them] power to make wealth." They did the work. But God worked through them, giving to them the wisdom, the ability, the skill and the strength. And God prospered what they did. And all the glory must be given to God.

Let me take a moment to point out that this is the same principle we find in the N.T. for living the Christian life. In *Gal.2:20* Paul wrote, "I am crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loves me and gave Himself for me." And in *Phil.2:12-13* Paul said to the Philippian Christians, "work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure." Back to the Israelites now.

In trusting the Holy Spirit for the work they had to do, the Israelites must also pray and be united. The temple and the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt because Ezra and

Nehemiah were men of prayer. But the temple and the walls were rebuilt in record time because there was also unity among the people. *Neh.3* details for us the unity of the people in their work. This unity was combined with another fact. *Neh.4:6* says, “the people had a mind to work.” They were clearly committed to the work.

One group tried to break the unity that existed among the people. *Neh.3:5* says the nobles did not support the work. How sad! Who were these “nobles”? They were the leaders in Israel. They were the well-born who belonged to the upper level in Israel’s society. But the people did not allow this act of disunity to create a breach for them and hinder or stop the work. They stepped in and closed ranks before the breach could be formed.

There are always those arrogant people, especially those who see themselves as leaders, who, if they did not plan something or if they were not consulted and made a part of the planning process, they would step back and refuse to support and / or get involved. That is a wrong you must allow God to deal with in His own time and way and in the meantime, you must press on in the good work you are doing. Maintaining the unity of the church in order to effectively do the work God has given to us and build up the body of Christ is a non-negotiable. Lord willing, we shall return to this subject.

The Principle Is Unchanged.

Now Brethren, I want you to clearly understand that the principle of the message given to Zerubbabel, the practical outworking of that principle, and the promise given through the prophet Haggai apply to us today when it comes to the ministries of the church. The Holy Spirit is with the church today. And the church is being built, “not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,” says the Lord of hosts.” The church is not being built by superior human wisdom, ability and skill. The church is not being built because it has an army of workers devoted to the labors of building the church. As a matter of fact the very opposite is true.

The Lord Jesus stated very plainly that when it comes to the work of the church, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.” (*Matt.9:37*). The church does not have an army of workers. The Bible makes it clear that every member is gifted “for the work of service to the building up of the body of Christ.” (*Eph.4:12*).

Eph.4:7 says, “But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift.” *1Cor.12:7* says, “But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” *Vs.11* says, “But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills.” Note carefully the emphatic three-fold repetition of the words : “to each one.” In other words, the Holy Spirit did not give service gifts to a select few. He gave service gifts to each one in the church.

Yet, in any given evangelical or reformed church less than **10%** of its members are **actively** involved in building up the body of Christ. In the face of all the Bible has to say about gifts and serving and building up the body of Christ, the other **90%** have chosen to walk in disobedience to Christ and not get actively involved in building up the church. The excuses for not getting actively involved are many and manifold. But in the final analysis there is absolutely no excuse that can be put forward to justify disobedience to the Lord Jesus Christ. And the question you face this morning is : which group do you belong to – the **10%** who are actively involved in building up the body of Christ or the **90%** who are not involved in building up the body of Christ?

When it comes to serving as pastors and deacons the percentage is miniscule. People say they are afraid of failing and being judged. The responsibility, they say, is too great and too burdensome. And yet they do not pause to consider for one moment that the very judgment they are afraid of and that keeps them from serving is the very judgment they must face for refusing to serve. The man with the one talent and who did not get involved said to his master, “I was afraid.” But fear and the refusal to get involved brought upon him the very judgment he was afraid of. (*Matt.25:24-30*).

Finally, when it comes to serving as full-time pastors, the percentage is even less than miniscule. Every church should have a plurality of pastors watching over and caring for your souls. Far too many churches have just one or two greatly over-worked pastors because men, both young and old, do not want to take up this responsibility.

Christ's army is small and the number of His actively involved soldiers is even smaller. And the picture does not get better. Note now what the Holy Spirit said about this army through the apostle Paul. Please turn to *1Cor.1:26-30*. Paul wrote, "For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus."

The army is not wise, not mighty, not noble. "Not noble" means "**not well-born**", that is, we do not come from the upper strata of society. The army is foolish, weak, base and despised. This army is also described of consisting of "things that are not", that is, of things which do not exist. In other words, in the eyes of the world, we are not even at the lowest rung of the ladder. In the eyes of the world we do not exist. This is as low as it gets. In the Greek culture, the expression, "things that are not", was the most contemptible description anyone could have made of a person or a group of people.

If ever you hope to find a pathetic rag-tag cowardly bunch of people, they are the people in Christ's church. They are Christ's army. But it is this bunch of people Christ is going to use to conquer the world and build His church. The book of Acts and history has shown us that this pathetic rag-tag cowardly bunch of people, when filled with the Spirit, become an unstoppable force that has conquered empires. They become fearless in the face of the greatest sufferings and even death. Peter, that sniveling coward who denied the Lord three times, when filled with the Holy Spirit, became a bold and fearless

preacher before the very people who crucified the Lord. And this is how it is because all the glory must go to God.

So often you hear people say, “*Who me? What can I do? I am weak. I am unlearned. I am unskilled. I am a coward.*” H-e-l-l-o! Pay attention! We know all that already. And you are the person the Lord wants to use because this work is not being done by your might, your power, your wisdom, your ability, your skill and your bravery. This work is being done by the Spirit of God filling a nobody like you and equipping you and giving you all that you need to do this work.

The Lord Jesus promised, “I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.” (*Matt.16:18*). There is no denying the fact that the Lord needs workers through whom He will build His church. This is why Paul said in *1Cor.3:9* that “we are God’s fellow workers.” There is no denying the fact that the Lord will use a variety of means in the building of His church. But the primary and underlying point is this, as expressed by the psalmist, “Unless the Lord builds the house, They labor in vain who build it.” (*Psa.127:1*).

The key person here is not the worker with his wisdom, ability, skill and means. The key person here is the Lord Jesus who declared in *Jn.15:5*, “apart from Me you can do nothing.” A literal translation of what Jesus said is : “apart from Me you are not able to do anything.” You have a double negative here for emphasis. The word “**anything**” is negative and actually means “*not even one thing; not even the least thing.*”

The larger context of *Jn.15* is the work of missions, that is, the work of building the church. The Lord Jesus has chosen us to go and bear fruit. (*vs.16*). Commenting on *vs.8*, **Bruce Milne** wrote, “*The fruitfulness of believers is part and parcel of the way the Son glorifies the Father. To seek the glory of God will therefore imply a commitment to mission....*” But Jesus’ point is that the believer cannot even do the least part of this work apart from Him. One aspect of doing this work is being Jesus’ witnesses. But *Acts 1:8* shows us that we need the power of the Holy Spirit to be the

kind of witness that Jesus wants us to be. And apart from that power which the Holy Spirit gives we will never be the kind of witnesses that Jesus wants us to be.

The point is this, Brethren : unless we are truly gripped with the reality that this work is not done by human might or by human power but by the might and power of the Spirit, we will never accomplish anything in this work. This is what gripped the apostles and this is what drove them to prayer. Prayer is the means God has given to us to bring into reality the promises He has made to His people.

The Apostolic Approach.

Let us turn to the book of Acts to examine the approach of the apostles to the work of the ministry. In *Acts 1:9-11* Jesus ascended into heaven. The apostles returned to Jerusalem and gathered the disciples together. In that gathering there were about **120** persons. Having gathered, they gave themselves to prayer. *Vs.14* says, “These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer.” Note the verb “continually devoting”. It also means to continue steadfastly in, to cleave faithfully to. Note also their unity. They were of “**one mind**”.

When faced with threat from the Jewish religious leaders, the apostles, together with the rest of the church, turned to prayer. (*Acts 4:24ff.*) In their prayers they asked the Lord to “grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence” or boldness. *Vs.31* tells us, “And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness.” May it please the Lord, in His gracious dealings with us, to give a prayer meeting like this some day, very soon.

In *Acts 6* there is the crisis that led to the choosing and ordaining of deacons. In dealing with the problem that arose, the apostles made it clear that their primary responsibility is to devote themselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. (*vs.4*). They had no

intention of relegating this primary responsibility to a secondary level or neglecting it. The process of choosing and ordaining the deacons also involved prayer. (*vs.6*).

The apostle Paul had a similar approach to the work of the ministry. He began his Christian life with prayer. The Lord told Ananias in *Acts 9:11* that Paul is in the house of Judas and “he is praying.” Paul testified to a life of praying day and night. It is believed that Paul’s epistle to the Romans was written coming to the end of his third missionary journey. This is somewhere between **A.D.56-57**. There are those who believe it was written as early as **A.D.54**. In *Rom.1:9-10* Paul told the Romans, “God ... is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you, always in prayers making request.”

In his second epistle to Timothy Paul wrote, “I constantly remember you in my prayers night and day.” (*2Tim.1:3*). This epistle was written during Paul’s second imprisonment and when he knew he was facing certain execution. Paul was executed between **A.D.67 – 68**. This is the same Paul who exhorted us to pray without ceasing (*1Thess.5:17*), and to be devoted to prayer (*Col.4:2*).

Paul fully recognized that the ministries of the church were not done by might nor by power but by the Spirit. He said to the Corinthians that his preaching to them was “not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men but on the power of God.” (*1Cor.2:4-5*). Note that carefully. The one doing the work was Paul. But the One doing the work through Paul was the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was giving to Paul the wisdom and the power he needed. Bear in mind that Paul was not a dunce. Paul was an accomplished intellectual and as a Pharisee, a man of power and influence. He was also a very zealous self-motivated man. But Paul recognized that what he needed for the work of the ministry must not be human based but Spirit based and Spirit supplied.

And so, concerning his labors in the ministry, Paul would plead with the churches to pray for him. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “With all prayer and petition pray at all times

in the Spirit, ... and pray on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, ... that in proclaiming it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.” (*Eph.6:18-20*).

Paul wrote to the Colossians and the churches in the Lycus Valley, “Devote yourselves to prayer, ... praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, ... that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak.” (*Col.4:2-4*). Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, “Brethren, pray for us that the word of the Lord will spread rapidly and be glorified, just as it did also with you.” (*2Thess.3:1*).

The Realities Of The Ministry.

I want to take some time now to sum up for you the realities we must face in the ministries of the church. We have seen already that this work cannot be done by human might or human power. This work cannot be done by human wisdom, ability and skill. We have seen Jesus’ emphatic declaration, “apart from Me you are not able to do anything.” (*Jn.15:5*).

The Bible makes it clear that from a human standpoint, the salvation of the sinner is literally mission impossible. When the disciples asked Jesus, “Then who can be saved?”, Jesus’ answer was, “with men this is impossible.” (*Matt.19:25-26*). Note the word “**impossible**”. It is the Greek word *adunatos* and its literal meaning is, “*without or no ability; without or no power; no can-do.*” In other words, apart from Christ we are the “*no-can-do-crew*”.

Why it is that human ability, power, wisdom and skill cannot save the sinner? The primary answer is in *Eph.2:1*, “And you were dead in your trespasses and sins.” The sinner is dead, spiritually dead. And unless you have the ability to bring the sinner to life so that the sinner can respond to the things of God, the sinner will never be saved.

Now, Brethren, if I work out for you from God's word all that this spiritual deadness means, the picture will only get worse. *Eph.2:1-3* tells us that the sinner is dead, dominated by the world, a slave of Satan, and dedicated to fulfilling the works or lusts of the flesh. *2Cor.4:4* says "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving."

1Cor.2:14 tells us that the sinner "does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them because they are spiritually appraised." Jesus said in *Matt.13:13*, "seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand." In *Jn.8:43* Jesus said to the Jews, "Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear My word."

Let me put it this way : if you can take a dead person who was completely illiterate, bring that dead person to life and teach that person to read, you can take a spiritually dead person, help him / her to understand the gospel and save that person.

Let us go further. Jesus said in *Jn.6:37*, "All that the Father gives to Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out." ("**I will not not cast out.**") The promise is clear and certain. But there is a two-fold problem. The *first* is the sinner's lack of ability and power to come to Christ for salvation. Jesus said in *vs.44*, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him." In other words, the only sinner who comes to Christ for salvation is the sinner who is irresistibly drawn to Christ by the Father.

And in *vs.65* Jesus confirmed this truth. He said, "no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father." Note in passing the verb "**granted**". It is a Greek perfect tense which tells us that when the Father grants you the privilege and ability to go to the Son for salvation, that privilege and ability are never withdrawn. The granting is a permanent granting.

The *second* problem is the sinner's deliberate refusal to go to Jesus for salvation. In *Jn.5:40* Jesus said to the Jews, "you do not will to come to Me, that you may have life." Here is a deliberate act of the will in refusing to go to Jesus for life. "You do not will" describes that which is characteristic of every sinner. And there are no exceptions here.

Eph.2:4-5 tells us that it is God alone who can make the spiritually dead sinner alive and save the sinner. And God does this because He is rich in mercy and He loves us with His great love. *Jn.5:25* shows us that the sinner's salvation in Christ is a spiritual resurrection. Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live." In other words, the power the Lord Jesus exerted in raising Lazarus from the dead is the same resurrection power He must exert in saving the sinner. *2Cor.5:17* calls the conversion of the sinner to Christ a work of "**new creation**" in Christ. Once again, note the power God exerts in saving the sinner is akin to the power He exerted in creating the world.

Brethren, the clear and astounding fact is that for a sinner to become a Christian, it requires that God perform in the sinner a most amazing and stupendous miracle, a resurrection miracle, a creation miracle. Most sadly, so often we do not understand the utterly amazing and most gracious miracle God had to perform in order to save us. We were dead. We were a spiritual corpse. We were in Satan's graveyard. God had to call into being in us that which did not exist in us. There was no spiritual life in us. Just as God said, "Let there be light" and there was light, in the same manner God had to say, "Let there be life" in us. With this life came spiritual sight, spiritual hearing, and spiritual understanding. With this life we were able to see the wisdom of God in the gospel. With this life we were able to see the glory of Christ our Savior.

The problem is : we have not taken the time to come to a clear and proper understanding of all that God did for us in Christ when He saved us. And the fault is ours. And so, we do not appreciate what God has done to save us. We are not as thankful as we ought to

be to God for saving us. And we do not show the kind of gratitude we ought to show to God for saving us.

Isaac Watts wrote, *“Were the whole realm of nature mine, That were a present far too small; Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul, my life, my all.”*

Isaac Watts understood the astounding miracle of his salvation in Christ. Do you understand the astounding miracle of your salvation in Christ? **Isaac Watts** understood the astounding cost of his salvation in Christ. Do you understand the astounding cost of your salvation in Christ? If you do, you will say with **Watts**, *“Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul, my life, my all.”* And without hesitation, you would give to Christ your soul, your life, your all.