

Approaching the Throne of Grace

Heb. 10:19-22

Intro. On an episode of the TV show called Shark Tank, a young man from NC introduced a product he developed. The Sharks immediately recognized the value and market. To make the venture profitable, Mr. Wonderful, aka Kevin O'Leary, insisted the young man turn to offshore manufacturers to produce his product at a lower cost. Despite the protests, the young man rejected their counsel. He explained he had vowed his product be "made in the USA"...specifically in his hometown. Produced there, it could benefit his community by bringing jobs to many who were unemployed. In the end, the young man walked away from big money the sharks offered.

That young man operates by a core value he refused to compromise. For the sake of a bigger profit margin, he refused to trade away the commitment he made to himself and his community. It didn't matter what the sharks said...he'd driven a stake in the ground. That's what a core value is and how we operate when we have one. A core value is a deeply held principle or belief. Core values are guiding principles that direct our behavior and support our purpose and vision. Like our doctrinal statement, these values are also derived from Scripture. Let me simply mention the first four and ask you to respond to each one with a hearty "AMEN" if you agree.

1. Biblical Foundation – *God's Word is the basis for our lives and ministries.*

2. The Centrality of the Church – *The Church is the center of Christ's ongoing redemptive activity in the world.*

3. Corporate Worship - *God created us to encounter Him in worship as we exalt Him through music, His Word, prayer and testimony.*

4. Servant-Leadership - *The church must be led by those who see themselves as servants.*

This morning we come to the **5th Core Value** which is stated this way...*Prayer is the believer's means to connect with God.*

Let me begin with a disclaimer. The order in which these core values are stated is not intended to establish a hierarchy of importance. Each core value is essential. But if an order or hierarchy was intended, we could easily rank the 5th core value alongside the first because prayer is just that significant and essential! In fact, Christians are identified by prayer. As Jesus said, in **Mk. 11:17**, this assembly we call MB, should be known as a "**house of prayer.**"

Prayer is more than a Christian discipline or aspect of Christian worship. Prayer is the visible way we declare that nothing of eternal significance happens apart from prayer! Prayer declares that we are weak but God is strong. Prayer declares that we acknowledge our character will not mature unless we are being refined / reprov'd / and transformed by God's Word and the voice of prayer. Prayer declares that our lives and ministries will be fruitless and our brothers and sisters will struggle unless we pray. Prayer declares that our marriages / our families / our church / and our communities can only be helped as we pray. Prayer declares that we believe we need the super-natural power of God's presence to see things changed for his glory and good. Prayer declares all this because we believe the unseen but essential battle raging around us is spiritual, not just material. A battle like this requires spiritual weapons. **II Cor. 10:3-5 - For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.**

We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

During the past several months we viewed the challenging film entitled, War Room. As a follow up to that film Tom Rensch's SS class and several Life Groups have benefitted from the series entitled, The Battle Plan for Prayer. That series is being shared again on Wednesday nights, and it's not too late to join that group. Then, about a month ago, we heard from Pastor Rick Cross who spoke to us on the matter of corporate prayer. Through all these different voices we sense God leading us to go deeper in our prayer lives as individuals and as a church family. So in concert with all these efforts, we come to this 5th core value which doesn't declare something we do perfectly...instead, it declares what we should do and desire to do better.

The verses chosen to support this 5th core value are **Heb. 10:19-22**. Let's read them together out loud. **Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.**

For the sake of an outline, I've called the first point ***The Boldness of the believer's Prayer***. Here's what I want to do, I want to take a few moments to unpack these four verses and then pause to celebrate the Lord's Table. But don't grab your coats right away. After communion, I want to briefly consider the three remaining points.

The Boldness of the Believer's Prayer is based entirely on the finished work of Jesus Christ. What I mean is this...as sinners we had no right to approach God. God is holy and separate from sin and sinners. It would be infinitely easier to burst into the Oval Office and chat with the President than be heard by the God who is holy. In the OT, sinners could only approach God by way of sacrifice and by means of a high priest who served as a mediator. The OT Temple was a place of barriers designed to keep sinners from intruding into the Holy Place where God resided. Even the Levites were barred from the Holy of Holies. The only one authorized to enter that Holy Place was the High Priest who could enter only once a year...on the Day of Atonement. Even then, the priest went in with a rope tied to his ankle because if he died in there...even the most sanctified EMT's would perish if they dared to go in to drag him out.

This most sacred center of the Jewish Temple symbolized Heaven, the residence of God. This is confirmed by **Heb. 9:24** which says, **For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence.** So what we're talking about is the right to approach and converse with the God of Heaven. That's basically what prayer is though we tend to make it so much more complicated. Prayer is conversation with God...it's talking to our Heavenly Father and listening for His answers.

Notice the boldness of the believer's prayer as it appears in **Heb.10:19-22**. As you can see, these words are addressed to **brothers**...to those who by trusting Christ have participated in the new birth and have the same spiritual father! The conjunction, **Therefore**, looks back on the rich doctrinal lessons of the preceding chapters where Christ is exalted / where His priesthood / and the New Covenant are shown to be superior in every way to Judaism and the Old Covenant. Notice what we have that those under the Law never had...**we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus**... Do you know what that means?

The word **confidence** (Grk. *parresian*) or boldness (KJV) implies *freedom, fearlessness, a cheerful courage and assurance*. The etymology of the Greek word relates to *freedom of speech*. This is what we have as believers who have been cleansed by the blood of Christ. All barriers have been removed completely and forever. We should never wonder if God will accept us. We should never feel we have to perform a certain way for God to hear us. We should never feel we're too sinful or too unfaithful for God to listen. God doesn't hold His forgiven children at arm's length. We're left without excuse for not praying!

Remember the prodigal and the welcome he received when he came to his senses and returned to his father? Did his father hold him off? Was he forced to remain outside until he cleaned up his act? Was he put on probation and asked to prove himself before his father would accept him? Listen to **Lk.15:22-24 - "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.** This is the sort of welcome every sinner receives who turns to Christ for salvation. Our acceptance is immediate and complete because the sin that separated us from God has been removed forever!

The next clause further explains how we have this boldness to approach God. First it's by **the blood of Jesus**, but second, it's **by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body**. The holy of holies was protected by a curtain that was 3 feet thick and was draped from ceiling to floor. Other translations refer to this **curtain** as **the veil**. Only on the Annual Day of Atonement could the High Priest go behind the curtain to approach the holy place. But something truly supernatural happened when Jesus died on the cross. **Matt. 27:50, 51** say, **And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, He gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.** The God of heaven tore open that barrier. It happened precisely at the moment when Jesus gave up His Spirit. The **curtain** represents Christ's body which was beaten and torn to open the way for sinners to approach the Lord. According to these verses, we have **confidence** to approach God on the basis of Christ's shed blood, His torn body, and His great priesthood.

Much more could be said, but let's transition from the doctrinal to the practical side of these verses. **Therefore**, or since these things are true, **v.22** says, **let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.** This encouragement to draw near has to do with worship of which prayer is one aspect. With **confidence** we are privileged to draw near to God in prayer because of what Jesus has done for us. The accomplishment belongs to Jesus alone. Our entire responsibility is summarized in four words...**full assurance of faith**. In other words, **the confidence to enter, the new and living way** and the privilege of **drawing near to God** hinge on one thing...do we believe it? Do we believe the way has been opened? Without qualifications or provisos, and based entirely on what Christ has done, the verse says, **let us draw near to God. Let us** take God at His Word. **Let us** believe that what Jesus did for us on the cross cleanses us from a guilty conscience and washes our bodies with pure water.

At this point, before we continue, I want to pause to celebrate the boldness which is granted to us on the basis of the sacrifice of Jesus. The sin-barriers have been removed. We who believe stand cleansed, washed, forgiven and accepted. This is what Paul declared in **Rom. 5:1, 2 - Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.**

<Prayers of thanksgiving / Communion / song >

Now at this point, you're worried the remaining points will keep us here until noon or later. No worries! With the remaining minutes, let's quickly consider the last three points...***the burden of prayer / the barometer of prayer / the blessings of answered prayer.***

2. The Burden of Prayer

By burden, I'm talking about responsibility / obligation / or Christian duty. Along with the great privilege of free access to God, we've been entrusted with a great responsibility...the responsibility to actually pray. I say "actually," because evangelicals are notorious for saying, *"I'll pray for you" / or "our prayers are with you."* Megan Kelly and Shawn Hannity say it all the time. I'm sure there has been hundreds of times when I've told people I would pray for them and then forgotten or neglected to actually pray. Say "boo" only if you've never done that.

Do you want to hear a real burner? I'll share it with you anyway. In 1971 Dr. Francis Shaeffer wrote the book entitled, True Spirituality. In that book he wrote this... *"If I woke up tomorrow morning and found that all the Bible teaches concerning prayer and the Holy Spirit were removed (not as a liberal would remove it by misinterpretation, but really removed) what difference would it make in practice from the way we are functioning today? The simple tragic fact is that in much of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ – the evangelical church – there would be no difference whatsoever. We function as though the supernatural were not there."*

The fact is, many Christians neglect prayer. Prayer is not given the essential place it must have in a life surrendered to the Lord. But here's the thing. Prayer takes effort. We must train ourselves to pray regularly and faithfully. If you imagined prayer would automatically claim a primary place in your schedule after you prayed the sinner's prayer, you were mistaken. Why is effort required?...because our sinful flesh and the Satanic Adversary are so opposed to prayer. Our flesh continuously defaults to doubts and an "I can do this myself" mentality. Our family is continually amused by our youngest grand daughter. At 2 yrs. of age, Bailey regularly insists, *"I do it myself."* But we can be so much like that 2 yr. old! Prayer is an expression of our dependence on God. But prayerlessness sends the foolish message, *"God I can handle this...I don't need you."*

Along with fleshly resistance is the Adversary who is defeated when believers pray. Write this down somewhere... *"the devil doesn't want me to pray, but to stumble along life's merry way!"* This is why it takes discipline and effort to pray as we ought. Samuel took prayer so seriously, he believed it was a sin if he failed to pray for King Saul. **As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by failing to pray for you. - I Sam. 12:23 Acts 2:42** says the first believers were **devoted to prayer** and the same responsibility has been entrusted to every believer. **Col. 4:2 - Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.** So this is the burden of prayer. Prayer is a responsibility entrusted to us...a test of faith. This leads to the third point...

3. The Barometer of Prayer

Let me list four ways our walk with the Lord is tested or proven by our prayer lives. First, prayer tests our faith and our fellowship with God. We see that in **Lk. 18** where Jesus gave a parable with this purpose in mind. **Lk. 18:1 - Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.** After telling the story about a widow who pestered a judge until she finally got justice, Jesus assured them justice is coming...but added this... **However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" – v.8**

You see, our prayer life tests the genuineness of our faith on a number of levels. It tests what we believe about ourselves and what we believe about God. Since prayer is essentially conversation with God, our prayer life is a barometer of the fellowship we enjoy with Him. Suppose I said, *“Peggy is my life partner and best friend, but we rarely speak.”* There would be some raised eyebrows! How can Jesus be our *“first love”* if we only speak to Him occasionally...like when a crisis arises?

Second, prayer is a barometer of our love for each other. The greatest command instructs us to love God and to love each other. Love is the mark of the Christian. (**Jn. 13:35**) One way our love is expressed is through the sacrifice of time and effort required to uphold each other in prayer.

Third, prayer is a barometer of our concern for the lost. If we really want to see people saved, we'll pray for them. I mean, we can't save them. We can't love them into heaven. It takes a miracle of God's grace to save sinners. So we must pray for God to open their eyes and draw them to Himself. Each of us should have a prayer list, whether written or mental, of friends who need Christ.

Finally, prayer is a barometer of our confidence in God's ability. We pray because we believe our **is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine...- Eph. 3:20** Prayer tests whether we really believe this is true. But more than a burden and more than a barometer, an active life of prayer leads to blessing and with this we close.

4. The Blessing of Answered Prayer

Answered prayer is first of all, a blessing to God Himself. God is glorified whenever we ask and He answers. Listen to the way Jesus affirmed this in **Matt. 7:11 - If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!** As a giver and the perfect Father, the Lord delights to give us our heart's desires when our hearts are in tune with His

Second, prayer brings the blessing of joy to the believer who prays. In **Jn. 16:24** Jesus told His disciples, **Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.** Few things subjectively affirm and strengthen our faith more than answered prayer. George Mueller wrote, *“The joy which answers to prayer give cannot be described; and the impetus which they afford to the spiritual life is exceedingly great.”*

Third, answered prayer is a great blessing to God's people. Together we rejoice when specific prayer has been answered...a need is met...a healing has taken place...a marriage restored...a friend is saved. We ought to carve out some time to remember and reflect on the specific and unexpected ways God answered prayer in the construction and financing of this building.

Fourth, answered prayer adds God's blessing to the success of our ministries and the power of our testimony. Nothing of eternal consequence happens apart from prayer. Yet as we pray together as a body, we give a powerful testimony to our faith in the Risen Savior and the Living God. In the context of **I Cor.14** Paul was talking about the superiority of speaking in a known language as opposed to speaking in an unknown tongue. Though the example is prophesying, the same impact accompanies corporate prayer. Here's what Paul wrote, **But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying (or praying), he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!"** This is what prayers and answers to prayer demonstrate. They prove that God is real and that He really is among us.

Let me finish by challenging us all to go deeper with regard to this essential core value of prayer. Remember the boldness / the burden / the barometer / and the blessing of answered prayer. As we learned in the Battle Plan series, we should practice scheduled prayer as well as spontaneous prayer. And don't forget the value of corporate prayer. Consider joining those who gather to pray on Wednesday nights and those who pray around the church one Saturday a month. Let's stop diminishing the value of prayer by just tacking it on the end of SS classes, Bible Studies and Life Group meetings. Let's stop telling people we'll pray for them and then setting ourselves up to forget. Whenever possible, try this instead...pray for them then and there. Whether talking on the phone or conversing in the grocery store...pray on the spot. And let's not dash for coffee after worship, but let's linger in this room in search of someone to pray with. Though these are small steps, I'm certain God will reward them in a big way! May God help us be known again as a **"house of prayer."**