Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia, on Sunday, January 6, 1991, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

## **JOHN 15:5**

"I am the Vine, you are the branches.... apart from Me you can't do a thing."

## PRAYER CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE (1) THE FOUR PURPOSES OF PRAYER

If I told you that you were going to have the opportunity to talk to Jesus Christ for 15 minutes this afternoon, and you could make one request of Him, what would that request be? Would you ask for protection, or a new job, or money? The disciples got this opportunity one day, and Luke tells us that they made one specific request. Do you know what it was? It was, "Lord, teach us to pray" (11:1).

Now why, of all the other things they could have asked the Master for, did they make that request? I think it was because they saw the results of prayer in His life. They saw Him pray, and they saw what happened. They had watched Him preach His fabulous sermons; they had seen Him heal people and do miracles; they had even been present when He raised people from the dead; but never once did they say to Him, "Lord, teach us to preach"; "Lord, teach us to do miracles"; "Lord, teach us how to raise dead people to life." Instead, they said, "Lord, teach us how to pray."

Why did they do that? Because they saw that prayer was their Master's life—support system; that was the key to His life and ministry. Folks, there's nothing more vital to your Christian life than prayer.

So, our series of messages for January is entitled "Prayer can change your life." Why? Because the average Christian knows more about Ann Landers than he does about prayer.

Now there are a lot of unfortunate misconceptions about prayer, and a lot of ignorance about how prayer works.

- Some people think prayer is <u>a magic wand</u> that you wave at God and He gives you what you want. It is a superstitious approach. God is like the Genie in the bottle.
- Some people think prayer is a <u>First Aid Kit</u>. For them, prayer is an act of desperation. I saw a fire extinguisher the other day, and on the front of the bottle it said, "Use only in an emergency." For a lot of people prayer is like that. It is a last resort. A deacon came to his pastor with a problem, and the pastor said, "I guess all we can do is pray." And the deacon said, "Has it come to that?!" You do everything you can, and then you pray!

- For some people prayer is <u>a tug-of-war</u> a religious con game that you play with God, where you try to convince God to do something nice for you. The idea is that you have to beg and plead, and God is some cold-hearted Monarch a million miles out in space, and you have to implore Him to do something good for you. It's like a sales pitch, and you keep pestering God until He is so irritated that reluctantly He says, "OK, I'll give it to you."
- But perhaps the worst misconception about prayer is the idea that prayer is simply  $\underline{a}$  religious duty, and the basic motivation behind it is guilt: "I know I should pray more." It's something you ought to do. "If I don't pray, I'll be on God's bad list." And the result is you go through a meaningless ritual; you use memorized phrases and religious cliches, and it is totally meaningless to you; and you think, "Why do I have to pray?" and it becomes something you endure rather than something you enjoy.

Now let me say just this: if prayer is a duty for you, then you have missed the total point of prayer. You don't understand prayer in the slightest.

So, in this series we're going to demolish some of these misconceptions, and today I want to do just one thing -- talk to you about the four purposes of prayer. In the Gospel according to John, chapters 13—16 we find Jesus' last words to His disciples before His death. He is telling them, "I'm going to die, be resurrected, and then return to heaven; and I'll give you the Holy Spirit to empower you. But even though I won't be here physically with you, you can still talk to Me through prayer." And He gives us the four reasons for prayer:

1. Prayer is an act of Dedication. What does that mean? It is an opportunity to express: (a) our devotion to God, and (b) our dependence upon God. Basically we're saying, "God, I need You!" Do you know what our biggest problem in prayer is? It is that we don't feel a dependence upon God. We think that we can make it on our own. We vastly overestimate our own abilities. We think, "I don't need to pray, because this project I have in mind is something I'll just do." And the biggest problem in prayer is just admitting that we need God's help.

And the reason many people don't pray is because it costs. What does it cost? It costs honesty. You have to be honest with God, and say to Him, "I admit I am inadequate and helpless. I need Your help in this situation." So long as you think yourself self-sufficient, prayer can have no meaning for you because you think you have it all together.

So, prayer is an act of dedication. It is a declaration of dependence upon God.

Look at John 15:5 where Jesus uses the illustration of the grapevine. He says, "I am the Vine, and you (Christians) are the branches. If a man remains in Me and I in him, he will bear much fruit. But apart from Me, you can't do a thing!" We don't act as if we believe that, do we? And then in verse 7, Jesus says, "If you remain dependent on Me... you may ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you." It's like a blank check! It's an unbelievable promise! As the branch is cut off from the main stem, it loses all its power; likewise, if a Christian is cut off from God, he withers.

I read recently about some deep-sea divers who were seeking to retrieve gold from a sunken ship in the North Atlantic. They were lowered 800 feet in a diving bell, and their vital link with the surface was their air hose. That hose was their life line, their indispensable support system. And in the same way, prayer is our support system. If you cut it off, you run out of spiritual air. Until we realize we need God, we can't pray. But it's more than that.

2. Prayer is an act of Communication. We all know how important communication is. Most of our problems in life are communication problems - communication with your wife, your husband, your children, your business associates. You can't understand your spouse in marriage unless you have open and unimpeded lines of communication. And you can't understand God and His will for your life unless you communicate with Him.

In 1962 there was that famous international incident -- the Cuban missile crisis. It was a standoff between President Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev of the Soviet Union; and we almost went to war over it. But we didn't, because of good communication between the two great powers. There was one positive benefit that came out of that crisis. They established a communications link called "the hot line;" and they put a red telephone on the desk of our president, and they put one on the desk of the Soviet leader, and they said, "This line will always be open." So, if at any time a grave crisis arises, President Bush can lift the phone and say, "Hey, Gorby, what's going on?" Communication is vital on the international scene, and it's vital in the Christian life.

Now you can't communicate with someone unless you know your relationship to that person. What is our relationship to God if we're born again? Look at John 15:15,16: Jesus says, "I no longer will call you servants... Instead, I have called you friends... Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in My name." Jesus is saying, "The reason you can ask anything in prayer is because we're friends!" Isn't that amazing? Do you know why we seldom pray? It's because we fail to recognize what a privilege it is to have God as our Friend to Whom we may speak at any moment of the day or night!

If I told you that tomorrow I had arranged for you a 20-minute personal interview with the President of the United States, and you were to meet him at 7:30 a.m. at a restaurant in Washington, D.C., and you could talk to him about anything at all, what would you do? Probably you wouldn't sleep very well, you'd be so nervous! You'd probably go out and buy some new clothes, get a hairdo, and write out some questions you wanted to ask, so that you wouldn't waste his time. You'd really get prepared.

Folks, we have an even greater invitation than that. You are invited to converse with the Creator; and that's going to the top! You're not dealing with some little bureaucrat. You don't need to know the key man if you know the man who holds the keys. God says, "I am the King of kings and Lord of lords, but I am your Friend, and I want to have fellowship with you in prayer." That's what prayer is -- communication. Do you know what our problem in prayer is? We just have a hard time believing that God is really interested in us -- interested in our house payments, our car payments, buying new clothes for the children, and the guy at work who irritates you; the fact that you have back problems or arthritic hands and knees, and everything else.

Let me just say this -- when you fully discover how much God really loves you, prayer will no longer be a problem for you. We love to talk to the people who love us the most, don't we? And if you regard prayer as a duty and. a ritual and a routine, it just means you don't understand how much God loves you, and how much He is interested in everything that's of interest to you.

**3. Prayer is an act of Supplication.** That's a big word that simply means "request." In Philippians 4:6 Paul says, "Don't worry about anything; but in everything, with your prayers and your supplications, make your requests known to God; and the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Paul is saying, "the result of your asking in prayer will be peace of mind."

Look at John 16:23,24: Jesus is speaking and saying, "I tell you the truth, My Father will give you whatever you ask in My name. Until now, you have not asked for anything in My name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete." He says, "You're going to ask, and I'm going to answer, and, you're going to be happy." Prayer, you see, is God's chosen method of meeting your needs; and the Bible teaches that there are some things that God has planned to do only if we pray. Some people say, "God knows what I need, so I don't need to ask. He'll just give it when I need it." No. That's not true. God has set it up in His plan that there are some things that He will do only if you ask and pray.

When we read the New Testament, we read things about those early Christians that are almost unbelievable. They were happy, joyful, their faith was contagious, and they were enthusiastic about life. They had power in their lives. They saw miracles happen on a regular basis. If you asked a New Testament Christian how things were going, he'd say, "Oh, business as usual: one miracle after another!"

And we say, "How come I don't have that kind of power?" It's simple -- we don't ask. James says, "You have not because you ask not" (4:2). Over 20 times in the New Testament we are told to "ask," and "keep on asking."

I told you not too long ago in a sermon about the fellow who died and went to heaven, and all over heaven there were these warehouses filled with fabulous gifts - homes, nice jobs, happy families, and all kinds of fantastic gifts. And this man said, "Lord, what are all these gifts?" And Jesus said, "There's a tag on every one of these gifts, and the tag says the same thing on every gift." So he went over to look, and he picked up one of the tags, and it said, "Never asked for." You have to ask. Prayer is an act of supplication.

Tell me -- what are you lacking right now in your life simply because you've never asked God for it? You've tried half a dozen other methods, but you've never asked God for it! You say, "What do I ask for?" It's simple -- "Ask for what you want." Psalm 145:19 says, "He will fulfill the desires of those who reverence Him" — not just the needs, but the desires. Why? Because if you are reverencing God, your desires are going to be right. Psalm 37:4: "Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart." If you're delighting yourself in God, if God's Spirit is living in your life, then your desires are not going to be wrong. Psalm 84:11: "No

good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly." God is not up there saying, "You've got to convince Me to give good things to you!" He simply says, "Ask!"

Always remember this — God is intensely interested in every single detail of your life! He says, "You are My friends, and I'm interested in everything about you!" So you ask.

Now, why does God want us to ask in prayer? Well, for one thing, if He just gave us our blessings without our asking, we might be tempted to take them for granted. But the main reason we are to ask is the reason Jesus gives -- "Ask, so that your joy may be complete!" You see, when you ask, everybody gets blessed! God gets blessed because He is the ever-willing Giver; and you get blessed because you get the answer to your request; and the world gets blessed because all of a sudden, you've got a testimony! One thing about people who have answered prayer is that they can't keep it to themselves. God delights in answering our requests.

**4. Prayer is an act of Cooperation.** And this is exciting, because, you see, God has sovereignly chosen in His plan that we can cooperate with Him by praying so that His work on earth gets done. When we pray for others we are cooperating with God. Prayer is God's way of getting His work done on earth. Prayer is God saying, "I have chosen to limit Myself to what I accomplish on earth simply by limiting Myself to the faith of My children on the earth; and what they believe Me for, I will do." So, when we pray for other people, we are teaming up with God to accomplish God's work in the world.

Perhaps the most amazing verse in the Bible is John 14:12 where Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in Me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father." I just can't see myself doing greater things than Jesus! How about you? But Jesus says it! Look at verses 13 and 14 because they enable you to make sense of verse 12: "And I will do whatever you ask in My name... You may ask Me for anything in My name, and I will do it."

How can we do greater things than Jesus? -- through prayer. How is that possible? Because prayer is not limited by time nor by space. Prayer is limitless in its scope. When Jesus was here on earth He voluntarily limited Himself by becoming a human being. He could only be in one place at a time. So, He was limited to do miracles only in the place where He was. But prayer is not limited by time nor space. The prayers you offer today may be answered a year from now. And I can pray for a missionary in South America or Africa or Southeast Asia, and it is like launching a missile to reach that person's heart. So we can pray for people all over the world! Prayer penetrates behind every geographical curtain. It is limitless in its power. And people may reject your appeals, but they are totally defenseless against your prayers! Remember that if you have unsaved relatives and friends for whom you're praying.

God can change the course of history through the prayer of His people. Six times in this passage Jesus says, "If you ask I will answer." He says, "Your part is the asking; My part is the doing." Now that's great because He's in a much better position to "do" than you or I. He has infinitely more resources at His command. And our part in cooperating with God's plan for the world is prayer. So the most important thing you can do in your Christian life is to pray. D. L.

Moody, the famous 19th century evangelist, once said that "every great movement of God can be traced to a single praying kneeling figure."

Now today I've simply introduced this great subject of prayer. In coming messages, we will talk about how to pray specifically and get answers; and how do you pray for other people; how do you pray for "impossible" situations; and what do you do when the answer isn't coming through?

And I'm doing this because I want our church to be a praying church. Why? Because

- 1. A praying church is a holy church. It is a committed church. When you pray, it makes you sensitive to God and to other people. It sensitizes your life.
- 2. A praying church is an enthusiastic church. People are excited! Why? Because churches that pray see miracles, and that gets people excited. And we need some miracles in our church. Many of you have made a sacrificial commitment to our building program; and it may take a miracle or two for us to fulfill our commitment. We need a miracle for buildings. We need lots of miracles. Some of you need personal miracles. You may need a miracle in your marriage, or in your health. Some need a miracle in your job, or your finances. A growing, praying church is a church that sees God act; and God acts according to prayer.
- **3.** A praying church is a happy church. Why? Because when you pray, you get answers, and your joy is full! There is no greater joy than to see answers to prayer. And you get excited, and people want to get involved.

So begin 1991 on your knees!

AMEN.