

PRAY AT ALL TIMES

We're going to start this morning with a clip from Groundhog Day.

At this point in the movie,

Phil realizes that he is repeating the same day over and over –
and that he cannot die.

That comes to impact how he thinks about following the rules.

Clip: Groundhog Day

As we have talked about The Rules and when To Break Them,

I have told you that I'm a rule follower.

That's my nature.

I was the good boy growing up.

My brother was the rascal who broke the rules and got into trouble.

It was a win-win for me.

I got all his stories to tell,

but didn't get yelled at, grounded or sent to the principal's office.

That doesn't mean I don't like pushing things a bit,

especially when it's more about etiquette and being polite
than what's moral and ethical.

Story about balancing weight on airplane.

This semester we are looking at the rules that Christians are expected to follow
and when to break them.

So far, we have looked at two rules you'd think Christians should always follow.

1. Always put others first.

And

2. Always be humble.

Well, I got you out of those.

Let's see what I can do with this one.

Pray at all times.

Ok, no one really prays all the time,
 but certainly we would never tell people
 there's a time when they shouldn't pray, would we?
 Especially in light of what the Bible teaches.

1 Thessalonians 5.17: Pray without ceasing.

That's pretty strong.

Ephesians 6.18: With all prayer and petition **pray at all times** in the Spirit ...

Pray at all times.

Philippians 4.6: Do not worry about anything, but **in everything** by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

Romans 12.12: Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, **persevere** in prayer.

In everything, at all times persevere and pray without ceasing.

How can I possibly think there are times when we should break this rule?

Like we've done before,
 let's first look at why we should obey this rule.

We've talked about prayer a good deal over the years.
 And much of it has been very practical,
 a sort of how-to approach to prayer.
 I'm not going to do any of that this evening.

In the first part of this talk
 we are going to look at why we should pray –
 and probably why we should be praying more than we are.

I want us to take this part of my talk as just as seriously
 as the second half when I talk about when we should break the rule
 of praying without ceasing.

WE SHOULD CONSTANTLY BE IN PRAYER BECAUSE

1. The goal of our lives is to become more like Jesus.

I say this all the time,
but it's important.

Our goal in life, more than anything else,
is what was stated in the simple Gospel hymn
that many of us sang growing up.

Lord, I want to be like Jesus,
in my heart, in my heart:
Lord, I want to be like Jesus, in my heart.

That's the goal of our lives – more than
doing great things for God,
building the church, or
changing the world –
our goal is to become like Jesus.

When we think about our lives,
where we need help,
where we experience pain and discomfort,
often we think about our emotional issues.

I'm anxious all the time.
I'm unhappy.
I'm depressed.
I'm impulsive.

Sometimes we think about our self-defeating tendencies and traits.
I'm too negative.
I procrastinate.
I'm too picky.
I tend to be too critical.
I'm lacking in confidence.
I'm dependent on alcohol, drugs, pornography, the praise of others.

And sometimes when we think about our lives and
where we need help
we go deeper and we get to our character defects,
I'm self-absorbed and oblivious to the needs of others,
I'm dishonest with myself and with others,
I'm proud,
I'm lustful,
I have an angry spirit.

And we can focus on any of those things –
our emotional issues,
our self-defeating tendencies, or
our character defects and our sins.
and make a plan to get better.

But the real problem is what?
We are not yet conformed to the image of Jesus.

Jesus wasn't anxious, unhappy or depressed.
Jesus wasn't negative, critical or lacking in confidence.
Jesus wasn't dishonest, proud or lustful.

And if we were conformed to his image,
if we –
thought like he thought,
wanted what he wanted,
loved like he loved,
trusted the Father the way he did, and
served others Like Jesus served,
we wouldn't have these other issues.
That's the root problem of our lives.
We need to be transformed.
We need to be changed from the inside out.
We need a deep spiritual work to be done within us.

Listen: the kind of spiritual work we need performed in our lives,
is not something we can do in the flesh.
We cannot transform ourselves.

It's going to take more than
 our willpower, and
 our determination, and
 our trying really hard
 to turn us into a new and different kind of person –
 a Jesus kind of person.

It's going to take the Spirit of God working in us,
 and that's one reason why we pray.
 And that's why we need to pray continuously –
 what we need and what God wants for us more than anything else,
 we cannot do for ourselves or in our own power.
 God must do it in us and for us.

Remember what Jesus said?

Matthew 15.19: For **out of the heart** come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.

And as long as our hearts are wrong,
 our lives will be wrong,
 no matter how strong our willpower.
 As long as our hearts are anxious or angry or lustful or greedy or negative
 or insecure or self-centered –
 we'll continue to struggle with anxiety, immorality, dishonesty, judgmentalism
 and pride.
 And no matter how hard we try,
 we'll continue to experience pain and guilt and do damage to the
 people we love.

Why?

Because all our will does is express what's in our hearts.

The good that's in our hearts,
 the will expresses it.
 The evil that's in our hearts,
 the will expresses it.
 But what the will cannot do is change itself;
 it cannot change what's in our hearts.

Other than the church,
 no other movement in our time has transformed as many lives
 as the 12 Step Recovery Movement.
 All twelve steps are built on biblical principles.

Here's the first step:

Step 1: We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had
 become unmanageable.

Step 1 is not: we determined to become powerful over alcohol –
 that's how alcoholics who never recover handle their addiction.
 I'll try harder this time.
 I won't give in this time.
 I'll gut it up and through the power of my will,
 I'll beat the power of my addiction.

Step 1 is just the opposite:

 We admitted we were powerless.
 We admitted that willpower alone would never change our lives.

You know the saying: the rhythm method is an excellent method
 for getting pregnant.
 Well, the willpower method for sobriety is excellent method
 for getting drunk again.

And the willpower method of becoming like Jesus
 is an excellent method for staying spiritually frustrated and defeated.
 But it's a terrible method for becoming more like Christ.

Prayer is a confession that we are powerless
 over the issues that keep us from being more like Jesus.

Prayer is an admission that we need more done in our lives
 than willpower can do.

Prayer is humbling ourselves
 and crying out to God to come and do in us
 what we cannot do ourselves.

Prayer is how we get our egos out of the way, and
 make room for God to do his work in us.

Why do we pray?

Because the goal of our lives is to become like Jesus.

And we cannot do that through willpower or by being really determined
and working really hard at it.

It's a spiritual work that only God can do.

As an aside,

when God shows you how far from being like Jesus you are,
when you see the ugliness and the depravity in your heart
and your spirit is crushed,

do not despair.

Matthew 5.3: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

That moment of being driven to your knees because of your sin and your
selfishness – that can be the beginning of your transformation.

It's when we are poor in spirit that we are forced

to fall on our faces, humble ourselves and pray,

really pray for God to do in us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Do not despair,

your redemption is drawing nigh.

2. Prayer Stills our Spirits and Opens our Minds to the Wisdom of God

After the Kansas City Tennessee championship game,

I saw some commentators discussing what happened.

Tennessee goes up 17-7

with six and a half minutes left in the second quarter.

And they don't score again until there are four minutes left in the 4th

when the Chiefs are ahead 35-17.

What happened?

Patrick Mahomes went to work.

Passing, running,

he took over the game.

And one of the commentators said,
 You come out with a plan,
 but Mahomes makes you panic.
And when you panic, you're dead.

It's like what Mike Tyson said,
 when he was told that a fighter had a plan for taking him on.

Mike Tyson: Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.

Life has a way of punching us in the mouth.
It has way of going to work on us,
 running over us and our plans.
And in that moment, it's easy to panic.

And when we panic,
 we're dead:
 we don't make good choices or perform very well.

Look at this quote.

“No man can think clearly when his fists are clinched.”

What makes us clench our fists?
Anger and fear.

When our spirits become anxious and overwhelmed,
 we become afraid.
When we can't see a way out and we can't think of a plan to overcome,
 we start to panic.

And then we're dead.

Do you know what command we are given in the Bible more than any other?

Fear not.

Do not be afraid,
 do not panic,
 do not be anxious.

Why?

One reason is because when we're anxious,
we will not make good decisions,
we are likely to treat others badly, and
we will have a hard time hearing God's voice about how to move forward.

And in those moments,
the most important thing we can do is –
what does God tell us?

Psalm 46.10: Be still and know that I am God.

In the next verse we read

Psalm 46.11: The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

When we still our fearful spirits,
remember who is God, and
trust God to be our almighty fortress,
faith replaces fear,
confidence replaces confusion, and
peace replaces panic

And this is what prayer does.
It takes our eyes off ourselves and our problems,
and focuses our hearts on God and his power.

And our spirits become still,
our fists become unclenched,
our anxiety is lessened,
and our minds can hear from God and make good decisions.

Philippians 4. 6-7: Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Now, it's possible to pray and come away more anxious.

That's what happens

when we think prayer is telling God
 how bad the problem is,
 how much worse it could get,
 how he needs to handle the situation, and
 how soon it needs to be done by.

That's not prayer, not really.

That's just worrying in the presence of God.

Philippians 4.6b: In every situation, by prayer and petition, **with thanksgiving**, present your requests to God.

When you pray and tell God what you're facing, thank him
 that he has been faithful in the past,
 that he is bigger than your problems,
 that he has promised to be at work for your good in all situations, and
 that he is going to give you the strength and the wisdom
 to handle what you're facing.

Spend as much time praising God for who he is and
 thanking him for what he has done and for what he will do,
 and you will find your spirit becoming peaceful
 and your strength and your confidence growing within you.

3. Your Battle to Change the World is a Spiritual Battle

First thing I told you about why we need to pray is because
 the battle for you to become more like Jesus
 is a spiritual battle.

You can't win it in the flesh or through the power of your will.
 It's a work that God must perform.

Same is true about your external battles
 for God and his kingdom.

Let's say you really get it.
 You figure out that you're not living for yourself anymore.
 There's a calling on your life.

And some of you have gotten it.
 And I'm grateful for you and proud of you.

You want to be a world changer, a history maker and a kingdom builder.
 Good for you.

But do not make the mistake of thinking,
 you will accomplish the work of God
 in your strength or through your wisdom.

When Zerubbabel was rebuilding the temple,
 he faced all kinds of opposition from those who opposed him and Israel.
 In the book of Zechariah the opposition is described as a mighty mountain,
 and God tells Zerubbabel that he (Zerubbabel) will overcome
 and he will finish the temple.

And here's the promise.

Zechariah 4.6: This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the Lord Almighty.

Your kingdom work –
 whether it's beginning a prison ministry that's now in 20 prisons,
 like some of our guys did,
 or developing a ministry in Honduras that has completed a hospital,
 expanded a school and is transforming a community through capital
 investment like some of our guys are doing,
 or working an Emmaus walk, teaching a Sunday school class, or leading
 one of your children to Christ –
 it's spiritual work.

And it will not be accomplished not by the might of your flesh or the power of
 your will – but only by his Spirit.

And so we pray.

God – do what we cannot do.

God – give us your wisdom and your power.

God – be gracious and use us for your kingdom.

God – I'll show up, but send your Spirit to be at work
and achieve all that you desire.

Ephesians 6.10-12: Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Real spiritual work is a real spiritual battle.

There are dark spiritual forces that want to keep people
away from God and

enslaved to what is base and corrupt and leads to death.

And it will take the power of God to liberate people and bring them into his
kingdom.

And so we pray.

We pray for God's Spirit to be at work in the lives of people
and in the projects he has called us to do.

We pray,

God, not by might nor by power, but by your Spirit.

You are the one who saves and delivers.

Send your Spirit and do your work.

I could give you many others,

but there are three good reasons why we should pray at all times.

So, when do we not pray?

I mean who would ever tell anyone not to pray?

How about God?

Here's a passage you may have read,

but it's possible you missed something.

The Israelites go jailbreak on Egypt,
 Pharaoh realizes they are escaping, and
 he sends his army after them to bring them back into slavery.

Exodus 14.10-16: As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord. ... Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today ...” Then the Lord said to Moses, “**Why are you crying out to me?** Tell the Israelites to go forward. But you lift up your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground.”

“Why are you crying out to me?”
 Moses has a huge problem.

He’s been praying about it –
 and so have the Israelites.
 And God says,
 “Dude, why are you still talking?
 Stop praying, and
 get those Israelites moving, for crying out loud.”

Charles Spurgeon commented on this verse

C. H. Spurgeon: There is a time for praying, but there is also a time for holy activity. Prayer is adapted for almost every season, yet not prayer alone, for there comes, every now and then, a time when even prayer must take a secondary place.

When do we stop praying?
 When it’s time for action.

Of course, you can pray as you act.
 But the point is sometimes we continue to pray
 when we should be acting.
 And at that point we should get moving and start doing.

**Here are times when we need to stop praying
and start doing.**

1. When God has already given us his answer in the Bible.

The Bible is God's word.

It doesn't always address a situation you're facing,
but when it does,
that's God's answer for you.

You don't need to pray about it,
ask God if it applies to you, or
inquire about whether he really meant it when he wrote it.

2 Timothy 3.16-17: All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

The Bible reveals God's will to us –
how he wants us to live.
So, if it applies to your situation,
you can stop praying about it and
just do what it says.

Exodus 20.16: You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

That's God's will for you.
You don't need to pray about it.

Romans 12.17: Do not repay anyone evil for evil.

You don't need to ask God if in this once instance,
you can hurt someone who has hurt you or someone you love.
You've already have his answer – it's no.
And that applies to Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Colossians 3.13: Forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone.
forgive as the Lord forgave you.

You may need to pray and ask God to help you forgive someone who has hurt you,
 but you don't need to pray about whether you need to forgive.
 You do – it's right there.

Exodus 20.14: Do not commit adultery.

You don't need to pray about knocking boots with a chick that's not your wife.
 And you sure as heck, don't need to call me up,
 tell me that you and your wife have grown apart,
 but you met this amazing Christian woman who gets you,
 that y'all are having an affair,
 and you wonder if just maybe this is God's will for you.

This is an actual conversation I have had several times in my ministry.
 The answer is no –
 God did not bring a Christian woman into your life
 who has no trouble sleeping with a married man
 so you could break your marriage vows to your wife.

How do I know?
 Because I read it in his word.

I don't need to think about it
 and you don't need to pray about it.
 We already have his answer.

Pray at all times?
 Sure.

But pray about something that God has revealed in the Bible to be his word?
 Only if you're praying, "God help me to do what you have commanded."
 Other than that,
 stop praying and start doing.

2. When We Need to Repent.

2 Corinthians 7.10: Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.

When we have done wrong and God convicts us,
 the right response is what Paul refers to in this verse as godly sorrow.

He contrasts godly sorrow with worldly sorrow.
 And the difference is that godly sorrow brings about repentance.
 Repentance means literally to have a change of mind.
 To see what we have done differently –
 to see that it was wrong,
 to see that it was harmful
 and that it offended the holiness of God.

But it's more than a new way of seeing a wrong act.
 It involves a turning away from that act,
 going in a different direction and
 living a different way.

J. Murray in the New Bible Dictionary: Repentance consists in a radical transformation of thought, attitude, outlook and direction.

Worldly sorrow is a sorrow that feels bad,
 but never translates into doing good.
 It's the kind of sorrow that tells God
 that we are sorry for what we did,
 but does not lead to a changed life.
 And Paul says that kind of sorrow leads to death.

At some point if we are to experience forgiveness and life,
 we must stop praying and telling God how bad we feel, and
 we must start doing what God has called us to do.

Why do we pray instead of repent?
 Because often praying is easier.
 Wallowing in our guilt,
 convincing ourselves we're really good people because we feel so bad
 about what we did,
 requires no courage, no discipline, no sacrifice.

Changing our lives,
 saying goodbye to things we enjoy doing but that don't please God –
 that's hard.

Prayer was never meant to be the easy way out.

Yes, confess your sin.
 Ask for forgiveness.
 Ask for God's help,
 and then turn from your sin and begin a new way of living.

3. When We Need to Be Reconciled to Someone

Matthew 5.23-24: Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

Here's the background.

A Jewish man would come to the Temple grounds,
 pass through the Court of the Gentiles,
 then through the Court of the Women,
 then he comes to the inner border of the Court of the Men
 with his sacrifice.

The next court, The Court of the Priests,
 he could not enter.

So he would pass the animal over a rail to a priest
 who would sacrifice the animal.

And as he made the transfer,
 he would confess his sins.

And Jesus says, if in that moment you remember you have done someone wrong, stop praying and go make things right with him or her.

Look, I'll say this upfront so you can hear the rest of what I have to say.

You can apologize.

You can ask for forgiveness.

You can make amends.

And that's no guarantee the other person will be reconciled to you.

You don't stay away from the altar and stop praying
 until her or she accepts your apology and forgives you.
 You do what you can do,
 and then it's up to the other person.

But that's the point:

You do what you can do.

Trying to get right with your brother is as important as prayer.

When we need to pray, we pray.

But when we need to make things right,
 that's what we do.

We don't just pray –

God, help that person forgive me,

God, soften her heart towards me,

God, please heal the damage I've done.

You can pray that way but

do not substitute prayer or going to church

for doing the hard, humbling work of making things right
 with someone you have hurt.

4. When We Need to Seek Help from Others.

Last week we talked about the benefits of being humble.

We said that humility opens us to correction, curiosity and counsel.

In other words, humility allows us to receive help from others.

I don't know why sometimes God will speak to us directly
 and why other times he speaks to us through other people.

I don't know why he sometimes comforts us and strengthens us
 through his Spirit with no one else involve,
 and why other times he does that work through others.

But there are times when we need to stop praying
 and go to a trusted friend for advice and counsel.

From last week.

Proverbs 12.15: The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to counsel.

Asking for help is humbling.
And sometimes we'd rather keep praying
and not tell anyone else about our problems or our failures or
our weaknesses.

But there are times when we are going to get the help we need
only if we get out of our prayer closets,
stop hiding our problems, and
ask for help.

If you are struggling emotionally or spiritually and
you have prayed for a while,
go see a counselor,
open up to a trusted friend,
tell your small group.

If you struggle with an addiction –
alcohol, drugs, porn, gambling –
yes, pray,
but there comes a time when you've got to get into a program.
Sure it's embarrassing to tell someone.
That's why you're more likely to
keep praying about it,
asking God to deliver you, and
failing over and over.

At some point, you've got to do something about your problem.
Prayer is no substitute for action.

See, we want God to be our problem fixer.

God, my finances are a mess.
My marriage is on the rocks.
I'm anxious all the time.
I'm addicted.

Please, answer my prayer,
wave your magic wand, and
make my problems and my issues go away.

And if God does that –
 you don't learn,
 you don't grow,
 you don't get better, and
 you'll end up in the same place again.

God does not want to be your Ray Donovan.
He is not your problem fixer,
 he is your life changer.

He wants you to learn a new way of thinking, acting and being.
He wants you to become a person of character and strength.
And for that to happen,
 usually you have to look at your life and your problems,
 understand why you do what you do, and
 develop new ways of relating to people and handling your problems.
And that is almost always done best
 with other people –
 with people who love you and will walk with you.

Of course, pray about who to see.
But do not use prayer as an excuse not to see somebody
 and get the counsel and the advice and the support you need.
That doesn't make us godly.
 It makes us cowards.

Stop praying for God to fix your problems.
Start praying that God will change your life.

Agee – prayer group