

When it comes to teaching on prayer, it always feels a bit awkward. It's not that the Bible doesn't have a lot to say about prayer. It's just that we already know we should and are frustrated that we don't do it enough. Am I right? So it becomes difficult to teach on, because I don't want to do a drive-by guilt trip. I don't want to get up here and tell you what you already know, that the Bible says that we should be doing this, we should be engaging in this and we should be walking like this.

I don't feel like I could teach on prayer in such a way that anyone would go, "You mean we're supposed to talk to God?" I just don't know that that would happen. Maybe that's true for some of you, but for most of us, that's not surprising. We know. In fact, as long as we have been coming to church, we have known that we are to pray, and we have been frustrated at some level at our level of prayer.

So let me tell you my hope. My hope is to try to move us a little bit away from discipline and into delight. Because I think the best motivator out there isn't discipline, but rather it's delight. If you delight in something, you will be far more apt to be disciplined at something rather than just trying to create discipline in your life in the hope that it will bring about delight. If you love something, if you love doing something, you're much more apt to do it and actually build things into your life that enable and empower it. If you don't delight in it, then regardless of what kind of discipline you put in place, you're going to stumble, fall, fail and give up.

If you made resolutions this year, how different are they than last year's? Some of you erased the 1 in 2011 and just put a 2 in its place. You have the same resolutions and same goals. Because if discipline is driving the ship, you're going to fall short. But if delight is driving the ship, you'll do what you delight in. You'll chase what you delight in. You'll walk in what you delight in. The things that stir up your affections and stir up your heart, you have filled your life with them.

So the goal today is at one level pretty epic and impossible for me to do, but I have earnestly prayed that the Holy Spirit would do a work among us. And I want to try to move us a little bit out of discipline and into delight. Delight doesn't take the place of discipline; it just empowers it. So it's not that we aren't disciplined people. You're not going to accidentally grow in godliness. So discipline is going to be there, but the fuel in discipline has to be delight or you're simply not going to make it. So I want to try to move a major obstacle of delight in the hope that our discipline in prayer will grow.

I was in a Chattanooga, Tennessee this last week. It was kind of nice. It's not awesome, but it's not Dallas. I was teaching a bunch of college students and hopped on a flight very early yesterday morning. In fact, Shea Sumlin and I got up at 4:00AM to catch our flight, and we landed at 8:15AM. I walk into my home and hear stomp, stomp, stomp, stomp. My oldest daughter ran and leapt like some sort of monkey into my arms. She wrapped her arms around me, gave me a hug and began to verbally vomit onto me all that had occurred while I had been gone. So I ask her about what she did, and we had this great little conversation there as I came home. I know some of you who have teenagers are going, "Drink deeply at that well, bro. It's about to dry up."

And here's what I thought. Knowing it was going to be preaching this and having my mind on the texts that we were going to be in, I was struck by the fact that my daughter, who I believe is spectacular, has never had a day of her life where she has obeyed all of the rules of our household and all the expectations of our household to the tee. She has

never made it a day without falling short of our expectations a mom and dad and the rules we have set forth in our family. And yet, when I come home, she runs down the stairs and leaps into my arms.

So I contend that my daughter still wants to hang around, still wants to talk, still wants to play, still wants to jump up into my arms even in the midst of her shortcoming. Because she can feel and she knows that I delight, love, enjoy and am so glad that she's my daughter. She can feel it. So do I get grumpy? Yes. Sometimes do I just want to be left alone? Do I just want to close my eyes for a second? Yes. But can she feel overall that I have a legitimate and honest delight in her? Absolutely. So she wants to come, she wants to talk, she wants to play and she wants to be around because she can feel the delight.

The main issue in our prayerlessness is we have a problem believing and grasping that God likes us, enjoys us and delights in us. I don't think we have any problem at all with the high-level idea that God loves us. If I were to sit down with you and ask you, "Do you think that God loves us?" I think you would go, "Yes, I think He loves us." But if I could drill down a bit and start to ask about you, if I could start to ask about you right now (not you years from now), if I could sit down across from you and ask you, "Do you think God delights in, rejoices in and enjoys you right now?" I think if you were honest that one would be harder to answer.

I do not think that you struggle with believing that God likes you ten years from now. Because you ten years from now is awesome. You ten years from now are not struggling with the same things you struggle with today. You ten years from now are bold in evangelism and passionate in prayer, and you have memorized the Torah. You ten years from now are legit. But you today, surely God's not delighted in you today. Surely if God does love you today, it's only because He knows what you're going to be ten years from now. So He'll put up with it like a parent changes a diaper. "I know one day you won't do this, so I'll deal with it." Surely at best that's how God feels about you today.

I believe that there are multiple reasons for our prayerlessness, but I think the predominant one is in the deepest part of our being. We just can't imagine that He delights in us, rejoices in us and loves us. It's just hard, and I'll tell you why. If you have ever betrayed someone, if you have ever lied to someone and they know, if you have ever fallen short of someone's expectation of you, what's our response? Avoidance. So if I fail you, if I let you down, if it becomes public between you and me that I have wronged you, then I'm going to avoid you. If you're going to the 9:00 service, I'm going to the 11:15 service. If you're going to this spin class, I'm not going to the gym anymore. This is the game we play. We play a game of avoidance, because I am ashamed that I have fallen short of whatever I have promised to do or whatever your expectations were of me to accomplish. I have fallen short of that, so I'm just going to avoid you.

Can I tell you my great fear for all of us? It's that we would love the idea of Jesus but not really love Jesus. I fear that we would love the idea of grace, the idea of worship and the idea of intimacy with God but we wouldn't actually love God.

Now if you took that grid and put it on any other area of life, you would see how silly it is. It's like if you love the idea of food and I were to offer to buy you a steak, but you go, "No, I don't really ever eat. I love the idea of food, and I love the idea of tastes and flavors that collide. I love all that stuff, but I just don't eat. I just drink protein shakes." This would be that kind of foolish. "I love the idea of relationships and intimacy, but I'm not in a relationship. I just like to read about them, study them, think about them and wish I had them. But that's risky and I could get into an intimate relationship that went wrong."

I think this is where some of us are. We love the idea, but we don't love Jesus. It's a miserable exchange. So my hope is to try to remove this question of, "Are you and God cool?" from the equation in the hopes that, by biblically seeing God's delight in you and His invitation for you to come, the barrier of just doing what God wants you to do and leave Him alone

might be removed. Because Jesus has not come so that you would do what He says and not walk with Him and know Him. In fact, some of you are exhausted and weary because this is the type of faith you're trying to live out, and it's not Christianity.

So let me try to deconstruct this idea that God doesn't delight in you, doesn't delight in you and just wants you to do what He says and stay out of His way. Let's just start out with the obvious one. He saved you.

Now, it's really important that you understand how salvation occurs. Because if salvation occurs because you did it, then that has no implications on God's affection or love for you. It puts all the weight of the exchange on you. "Yeah, Jesus died, but I'm the one who put my faith in Jesus." That's a great idea that just lacks a lot of biblical credibility. In other words, that would be a great idea if it wasn't for what the Bible actually teaches.

So if you are a believer in Christ, if you've been given a new heart, if you are regenerate, born again, God did that. You didn't do that. God did that. Now you can say, "No, I clearly got out of my pew, I walked down, I shook the pastor's hand and repeated after him." But I will contend until the return of Christ or my death that it was God who gave you faith in your chair which lead you to get out of your chair. You walking the aisle and praying that prayer didn't save you. The act of salvation occurred and got you out of your chair. That was what moved you. Because death doesn't choose life. It's dead. So God saved you.

What makes it even more astonishing is when all of that took place. I'll give you some of my favorites. Ephesians 1:4-5 talk about how God chose us before the foundation of the earth was laid. So before the earth was, God chose us in Him (Jesus) to be holy and blameless in His sight. So let's do a little bit of work here. God, all-knowing, omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent, before He created the foundation of the earth, knows you. Not just us, but you. And before the foundation of the earth was laid, He decided that in Jesus Christ you were going to be holy and blameless in His sight. To question the affection of God for you is to question the cross of Jesus Christ.

Romans 8:29 is another great text that talks about just how thick God's love is for you. It says, "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son." So before anything was, God had decided that in His fore-loving, predetermining plan, He was going to rescue you, save you and conform you to the image of Jesus Christ. Now that is profound, because all of that is taking place in light of a knowledge of every act of rebellion, every wayward thought and every God-belittling moment of your life. And still He says, "No, I love him/her. I'm going to rescue them. I'm going to make a way for them." And God Himself puts on flesh and blood, empties Himself and comes like a servant to save and seek out those who are His children. Throughout the Scriptures, the Scriptures want to communicate for us God's deep and unshakable love for those of us who have been called according to His purposes.

Through the prophet Zechariah, God says of the covenant community, "Those who touch you touch the apple of My eye." I don't know if you use that phrase or not. I don't. This is this idea of delight. God is saying, "You are My covenant people. You are as My adopted sons and daughters the apple of My eye." Do you hear the rejoicing in that? Do you hear the delighting in that? Again, what you need to be thinking on this entire time is that this isn't "we're the apple of His eye." It's "you're the apple of His eye."

So you've got this evidence that He came and rescued you. He didn't have to do that. How many people simply don't care? How many people are completely indifferent? How many people do you know who are completely indifferent to the claims of Jesus Christ? How many people do you know who are completely indifferent to the things of God? Like it's not even on their radar and they couldn't care less. They have no idea of their need, have no desire to know any different and are not aware of whether or not they're living fulfilled lives or not. They're just day in and day out checking

their Facebook, doing their job, trying to be good people and are just completely unaware of the heights of Christian delight in God.

But not you. You know. Even in your frustration of being all that God would have you be and not being there yet, you know. And God did that. God turned on your heart to that. He turned on your mind to that. The evidence of God's delight in you is seen most clearly and most perfectly in your salvation because of the work and person of Jesus Christ.

So I know some in here are going, "Yeah, I get all of that, but I am a mess. I even feel awkward being here. I just know who I am, and I'm looking around and just really doubt that the other people in this room have the kind of marriage that I have, have the kind of secrets that I have or have the kind of issues that I have." I'm glad that you're thinking that, because it leads me to the next text.

I've loved this text for a long time, but always for different reasons than you might think. Matthew 11:28 is a well known text for those of you who have church backgrounds. In it Jesus says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Some of you have the version that says, "Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden." "Weary" and "labor" are kind of the same word. "Labor" is the idea that you worked so hard you're exhausted. "Weary" is that exhaustion that comes from the labor. So don't get confused about, "How can the Bible say 'labor' and 'weary' and still be the Bible?" It's the same idea and same word. This is a uncommon invitation. Jesus Christ says, "Hey, if you're exhausted, if you're bitter, if you're lonely, if you're angry, if you struggle, if you are socially inept, if you have no people skills, if you can't figure it out, come here." What an invitation!

Sometimes I have loved this verse because I've grown weary. Sometimes I've loved this verse because I've been tired. Now, when God put me together in my mother's womb, He put an inordinate amount of optimism in me. So I'm a hopeless optimist. "It will work out. It will be fine. It will be great." I'm intrinsically wired that way, but I have had seasons where I've just grown extremely weary. In those times, I've loved this invitation.

But the invitation itself is profound, because what we do in our culture, more often than not, is go, "Look bro, you've got some people skills issues. Go to some sort of program, go to some sort of group, go to some sort of place and figure out how to interact on a level that's acceptable. And then you and I are cool." Or there's, "You're just a little too bitter for me. You're always complaining, always pointing out what's wrong and unable to rejoice in what's right. Why don't you go get better at that, and then we can do life." But that's not what Jesus is doing here. No, it's, "Come to Me. Are you a train wreck? Come here. Are you broken? Are you stuck in lust? Are you stuck in anger? Are you stuck in fear? Get over here."

And then there's this great exchange occurring. "You come to Me with your weariness, you come to Me with your labor and I will give to you in turn rest. I will give to you peace. You give to Me the struggle, and I'll give to you rest. Get in here. Come over here."

You've got to hear this invitation as it relates to prayer. Because the invitation isn't, "Start doing what's right." The invitation is, "Come to Me. You're not doing what's right." So the solution to what ails us, what weighs heavy on us and what exhausts us is not us trying harder at overcoming those things, but it's rather us coming to Jesus, walking with Jesus, being in a relationship with Jesus that overpowers our affection for the struggle.

So I think it's really important for you to dial in and understand that, when it comes to sin, loneliness and despair, the way we get out from under those things isn't to work really hard to not be struggling with those things anymore. But we really need to use our energy and vitality to chase after, to know and to see Jesus as more lovely than those things. And then as Jesus becomes more lovely, these things lose their power. As Jesus becomes more spectacular, why would you choose a lesser joy over a greater joy? It becomes a delight issue. "Come to Me," He says. "Are you busted up? Are you broken? Get in here. Get over here."

So if you're here today and you're just like, "Man, I just don't know if church is for me, because of this, because of this, because of this. . ." Jesus is going, "Oh, you're all jacked up? Oh it's for you. You're a mess and can't figure it out? Come on in here. Give it to Me, and I'll give you rest. Give it to Me, and I'll give you peace. Give it to Me, and I'll soothe your soul. Get in here." And that brings us to the absurdity of Luke 18. We'll pick it up in verse 1. The Scriptures are going to be clear why Jesus is telling this parable. You don't have to do a lot of work. This is not one of those texts that you need commentary on or you need to know the Greek or figure out some sort of culturally relevant 1<sup>st</sup> century fact to understand. There will be some of that that I'm going to unpack, but right out of the gate he's going to go, "This is why I'm telling you this. This is what the story is about."

So let's look at it. "And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart." So on your little prayer guide, it says, "A Season of Prayer." Now that was poorly worded – my fault. Because you don't walk into a season of prayer. The Scriptures are clear (1 Thessalonians 5:17) that we are to pray without ceasing and that we are to continually pray. So if all of this month is us going, "This is the month we pray as a church," then we are way off the rails.

So my hope for January is to try to remove obstacles and get us focused on prayer in the hopes and earnest expectation that it would overflow out of this month and go well past a Wednesday night at Bent Tree, where all the campuses come together. My hope is that it would train you and teach you to consistently and constantly come before the God who delights in you so much. So Jesus says, "Hey, I'm telling this parable so you know you ought to pray always and not lose hope.

Now, let's look at the story. Verse 2, "He said, 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man.'" I've known people who haven't feared God and I have known people who have no respect for other people but themselves, but the combination of those two is something quite spectacular.

Verse 3, "And there was a widow in that city. . ." Now let's contrast these. A woman in the 1<sup>st</sup> century was viewed as below a second class citizen. A widow was even lower than that. A widow could die. Her means of work, her means of gathering food are all removed from her when the husband dies. If the husband doesn't die with quite a bit of resources to extend to his widow or if the eldest son doesn't like her, she's in a lot of trouble. Which is why you've got the biblical command to care for widows and orphans in their distress. It's a legitimate distress. So now you've got a woman, who is a widow, who is now engaging a judge who has no respect for man and no fear of God. So you've got a gnat and a lion.

Let's keep reading. "'And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'" And the Lord said, 'Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?'"

Now, you've got this invitation to the children of God that no father on earth ever extends to his own biological children. The invitation to this story to us as children of God is this. "Pester Me. Bother Me. Don't quit asking. Don't quit coming. I'm not like this unrighteous judge. If he can be pestered into doing something and yet I delight in you, why would you think twice about continually coming before Me." No father has ever said that to his children. No father has gone, "You know, I haven't answered yet, but just keep asking me. Just bombard me day and night and never get off of it." Don't we as fathers go the opposite way? "Just ask me one more time and see what happens." We absolutely go the other way.

But that's not the way that Jesus is trying to get our minds around God's delight in us. In fact, you heard once again that term that so many people get frustrated by. He's like, "No, you're God's elect. Why would God, after electing you, after saving you, after rescuing you, then want to render you outside of His presence?" "Get in here," is the invitation once again. "Pester, bother, never let up and keep asking. If that works on an unrighteous, disrespectful pagan, how will it play out with Me, who delights so much in you?" Now there's another piece here, and we have to talk about it, because it's real life. He says he tells the parable for two reasons. He tells the parable so that we know we could always pray and should always pray, but He also says that we would pray and not lose heart.

Everyone of you would have a story where you really prayed, you really cried out to God and there was this thing that you wanted. It wasn't a bad thing, it wasn't selfish and it wasn't, "Please God, let the Cowboys win tonight." It wasn't that kind of thing, but it was rich, weighty and it looked like it was tied to things that God would like. So we've prayed for a family member. We have prayed for the salvation of a friend. We have prayed for a sick loved one. We have cried out and asked God to work, and it just seems like it just hasn't been answered and that He's not listening. So we have a tendency to lose heart, we're confused and maybe we even feel betrayed by God.

I think the reason that Jesus ends this text with "never the less will the Son of Man find faith on earth" is because we're being let in on some really deep waters here. Here are the deep waters. We are simply far too ignorant to understand the will of God. We don't have enough information and don't have enough facts, so our role as children of God is to trust the sovereignty of God as it expands out so much farther than our own understanding.

Now can I unpack for you why certain things happen and certain things don't? I have warred on my knees, fasted, cried out and begged for the lives of certain people who are sick, and they went on home. And then I have plead, asked God and fasted for Him to rescue others, and He has healed them outright. Did I pray harder on one than the other? No. Did I want one more than the other? Not that I can think of. Were there just not enough people with me when I was praying? No, it was very similar.

So there is a mystery to prayer that we're going to have to grow comfortable with. Is God sovereign? Over every cell in the universe. Over every atom that exists, He is sovereign. So why pray? Because God has ordained to accomplish His will through the prayers of the saints. So we join God and the work of God by asking God for what God has asked us to ask of Him.

So we come, and we come boldly to the throne of grace, confidently. Why? Because we're loved, we're delighted in and we are His children. He has commanded us to bother Him, to keep asking, to keep pestering, to keep pressing in and pleading and trust Him. We are to trust that He's working, trust Him that He's doing things and trust Him that He is accomplishing things for our joy and His glory that go far beyond our understanding or reach.

I don't know how you work. I don't know what your hopes are for you in 2012. I don't know what your hopes are for your family. Here's what I can tell you at the age of 36 that I'm very confident in. Some of you are about to have a great year. Some of you are about to have the worst year of your life. Some of you are going to have really high highs and really low lows this year. Most of us are just going to have kind of that year where there are good times, bad times, good seasons and difficult seasons.

But my hope for you isn't that you get into the gym. The gym will be miserable this week. The irony is just give it a month. Because unless delight is driving the discipline, it doesn't last. So you might go to the gym or you might eat a little better over the next week or so. I don't know what your dreams are for 2012, but I can tell you where my heart is for you. My heart for you, for me and for us as a covenant community is that understanding the delight God has in us based

and built on Jesus Christ would lead us to boldly approach Him and saturate our lives with glad submission to our good God and that we would be a place marked by our fervency in prayer and our absorption in regards to trusting Him. May we be marked by that. When people ask, "What are the people at the Village like?" my hope is that people would say, "They are in love with the God who loves them, and they pray. It's crazy how they pray." And my hope is that we might join God in the work of God for our delight and for His glory. That we might spend our lives to that end would be spectacular.

Now, I'd like us to close out our time here today maybe with some practice. So for some of us today, the things we need to pray about right now are the reality that we don't delight in God. We have a hard time believing that He delights in us, that He loves us. So why don't you spend just a minute or two here asking God, asking the Holy Spirit to move in your heart and move in your mind. Ask that the reality of His love for you, the reality of His delight in you that is seen so clearly in the cross might be awakened in the deepest parts of your being.

Maybe others of you are walking in ongoing, unconfessed, secret sin. You have not confessed to God your rebellion against Him. So maybe you take this moment just to ask for forgiveness and ask that the Lord would restore to you the joy of your salvation.

Maybe you've just refused to accept His forgiveness. Maybe you would just spend a moment or two asking the Holy Spirit to stir up your heart, to stir up your mind and that God would grant you belief and ignite in you a passion. I pray that you might get to look at these next few weeks as a moment where God did a significant work in your life.

If you're unsatisfied in your relationship with Jesus Christ, that's something to really cry out about. That's something to really plead with the Lord about and ask Him to increase your affection for Him, to increase your delight in Him.

Ask Him. This doesn't bother Him. This isn't like a game you have to play with some other human. He already knows your heart. To be honest about your heart is of no offense to a God who already knows your heart. Secrecy is a myth when it comes to God. So why don't you spend the next few moments just pouring your heart out, wherever you are, to the Lord?

Let's pray. "Holy Spirit, will You move among us? For some of us, like the disciples did, we're just crying out to you just to pray. I pray there be an honesty, grittiness and openness for You to just stir up in our hearts legitimate praises for what You have done, legitimate desires to grow more fully and delight and love for You. I personally pray for an awareness of our rebellion and sinfulness that leads to a deep delight in Your forgiveness and grace. I just don't know that you can delight in forgiveness and grace if you don't know that you're guilty to begin with. So would You do that work in us? Where there is no salvation, I pray that You would grant salvation. Help us, Holy Spirit. It's for Your beautiful name I pray. Amen."