

INTRODUCTION

Today we're going to be talking about prayer, what I call "The MVP" that does not stand for "Most Valuable Player," I believe it stands for the "Most Valuable *Prayer*" of the Old Testament. My friends it is wonderful for you to go through the entire word of God and pick out all the prayers that are prayed in the Bible and learn how to pray. If you remember the disciples of Jesus did not say, "Lord, teach us to preach." or "teach us to heal" or "teach us to sing." They said was, "Lord, teach us to pray." Today I want to talk to you about what is the quality the depth of your personal prayer life. How many of you can remember the very first prayer you ever prayed? Believe it or not I can.

I must have been only about five years old. I learned something in Sunday School along the lines of "Ask and you shall receive." The Sunday School teacher said, "All you have to do is ask God for something and if you ask God to do it and you believe it, it'll happen!" I said, "Wow! This is a pretty good deal!" As a little kid I loved to watch television. I have always been fascinated with flight. I guess that's why I went ahead and got my pilot's license. There was a television show when I was a little kid called "Whirlybird." It was an old black and white show about a helicopter, the kind with the circular glass cockpit. In fact, anytime a helicopter flew over South Alabama—and we lived near where they trained helicopter pilots, I would run out and say, "Whirlybird. Come land and take me for a ride!" Well, I learned in Sunday School that all you had to do was ask God for something and he would give you something so one night I got on my knees beside my bed, folded my hands and said, "Dear God. I want to see if this thing really works. Tomorrow morning I want there to be a helicopter in my backyard my very own helicopter!" I went on and I described it. "God, you know the one with the little glass bubble and the long tail with the big blade on the top and the little blade on the bottom with sleds on the bottom. I want one of those tomorrow morning, right in my backyard. In Jesus name I pray. AMEN!" and I got in bed. I hardly slept that night. It was almost like the night before Christmas! I literally had faith that in the morning I would have my own personal helicopter in the backyard. I went out there the next morning fully expecting to see a helicopter there—and would you believe one of those guys made an emergency landing in the night in our backyard? Not really. I got out there and there was nothing there. I want you to know it really did a lot of damage to my prayer life at that age in my life, and maybe like some of you I said, "This doesn't work!"

Of course I came to realize and I am still learning that prayer is not trying to get God to give me everything I want. Prayer is not trying to bend God's will to my will. Prayer is a relationship to God in which we bend our will to meet his will and we don't spend as much time asking God for things as we do confessing our sins and praising God. Rather than praying for our own needs we need to pray for the needs of others. What we see tonight is I believe one of the greatest examples of how to pray and especially to confess your sins before the Lord. Tonight let's look at this prayer in three sections.

1. THE CONVICTION OF SIN

First of all I want us to talk about the Conviction of Sin. Sometimes it is the conviction of sin that drives us to pray. Our text today is after the Jews have returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon. They even rebuild the city and the temple. Everything seems to be doing okay. They're

back in the land.

Ezra 9:1-5. "After these things had been done, the leaders came to me [Ezra] and said, 'The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites. They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness.' When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled. Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel gathered around me because of this unfaithfulness of the exiles. And I sat there appalled until the evening sacrifice. Then, at the evening sacrifice, I rose from my self-abasement, with my tunic and cloak torn, and fell on my knees with my hands spread out to the Lord my God and prayed."

Now, this is an interesting passage of scripture. Sometimes when things are going well and seemingly all the circumstances around you are worked out, that is the time the devil slips in and tries to get you to sin in different ways. In this case they had intermarried with some of these other cultures. By the way, this is probably a good time to answer a question that I am often asked. "Pastor, what does the Bible say about interracial marriage?" "What does the Bible say about interracial dating?" That's kind of a tough question! All I can tell you is this God commanded the nation of Israel in verse 2, "Do not mingle your holy race." However, as I told you this morning, you have to understand that some of the Bible is addressed to *Israel*. What is addressed to Israel, you don't obey literally. I have found there is nothing in the New Testament that would prohibit interracial marriage or interracial dating. It's not always the wisest thing for everybody involved, but you cannot give scriptural identification to forbid it. What about these passages in the Old Testament? Go ahead and obey them, but if you are going to obey those, you also can't eat catfish, or eat pork. Men, you cannot cut the forelocks of your hair. You cannot ever cut your sideburns. You are going to have to obey all of the feasts. In other words, if you are going to obey that direct command to Israel, you must obey all those others too. But I want to tell you, in Colossians 2:14. It says Jesus nailed all of these rituals and ceremonial commandments to the nation of Israel to his cross, taking them out of the way, and we have been set free from that law.

But, at this time in the history of the nation of Israel, it was wrong for them to do it, because it was a direct command to the Israelites and they had disobeyed God. Some of these people came to Ezra and said, "Ezra, we're in trouble. We have disobeyed God and we have to do something about that. As I have told you, while not all of the Bible is addressed to us, ALL of the Bible *applies* to us. I want to ask you a question of each one of these points as it applies to us, especially related to prayer. Too many Christians have married our godless culture. Are you outraged about it? Are you appalled? Are you so upset that the church has become so worldly? That the church of the Lord Jesus Christ has done the same thing the people of Israel did? We intermarried with our culture to the extent that you sometimes cannot even tell the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian. The line of demarcation has been erased! Sometimes people today have to tell you they are Christians, because you can't see it in their lives. That's the application to us today. We have become so much like the world, it's like we have

intermarried with them.

The New Testament says nothing about prohibiting marriage between people of different races. It doesn't say anywhere that a Caucasian can't marry an Oriental or an African or an Indian. That's not in the New Testament, but I'll tell you what *is* in the New Testament. The New Testament teaches a Christian man should never marry a non-Christian woman and a Christian woman should never marry a non-Christian man. It says, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers.” (2 Corinthians 6:14) Now that's the New Testament and we are New Testament Christians. So, according to what the New Testament says, you would be more in your will if a black Christian man married a white Christian woman than if a white Christian man married a white non-Christian woman. That's what the New Testament teaches. “Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers.”

Sometimes people think that only applies to marriage—and it does apply primarily to marriage—but it applies to some other relationships too. A man once told me he had sinned against God, because he got into a business deal with a non-Christian. “I was bound contractually to a non-Christian and I was yoked together unequally with an unbeliever and I got in all kinds of trouble with that.” The Bible does teach that as Christians we are to be separate from this godless culture around us. We are to be in the world but we are not to be of the world. Jesus prayed in John 17:18 about us. He said, “As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.” The world means this culture around us that does not know Jesus. I John 2:15-16, says, “Do not love the world or anything in the world...the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world.” As Christians, we break the laws of God when we get connected with this godless culture and we become like it. That's why the Bible says, “Be separate! Come out! Be different from them, but be in the world not of the world. Somebody said it's like this: We as Christians are to be like a boat in the water. You're the boat and the world is the water. You put a boat in the water and that's okay but if you put water in the boat, you are soon sunk. That's the way we are to be in the world. When we see the church and we see Christians yoked together with this godless culture, like Ezra and his people, it ought to cause us to be outraged! I can tell you are not too outraged about it. Have you ever become so upset about the worldliness of the church and worldliness of Christians that you have ripped your clothes and torn your hair and beard out? That's the kind of outrage we see in his life, the conviction of sin. He came under such great conviction he was outraged.

2. THE CONFESSION OF SIN

Number two. Let's move on to the confession of sin. What we have here beginning in chapter 9, verse 6, is a beautiful prayer. I want you to picture Ezra as he prays it. If you want to pray the Bible way, Ezra got on his knees, spread out his hands to the Lord God. He prayed. “Oh, my God! I am too ashamed and disgraced to lift up my face to you, oh God, my God, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens.” Have you ever started a prayer like that? Where is the shame today for sin? Did you know today there are few Christians that blush anymore? Blush because of some of the language we hear, blush because of the jokes told in our presence, blush because of some of the things on television and in the movies. Christians don't blush anymore, because we've gotten used to it. We are not ashamed. By the way you are going to learn the fault is not with Ezra. Ezra didn't marry someone from another

clan. He was broken on behalf of his people around him. In spite of that he said, "I am disgraced to lift up my face."

Ezra 9:7-9. "From the days of our forefathers until now, our guilt has been great. Because of our sins, we and our kings and our priests have been subjected to the sword and captivity, to pillage and humiliation at the hands of foreign kings, as it is today. But now, for a brief moment, the Lord our God has been gracious in leaving us a remnant and giving us a firm place in his sanctuary, and so our God gives light to our eyes and a little relief in our bondage. Though we are slaves, our God has not deserted us in our bondage. He has shown us kindness in the sight of the kings of Persia: He has granted us new life to rebuild the house of our God and repair its ruins, and he has given us a wall of protection in Judah and Jerusalem."

You could stop right there and as you pray for your nation and as you pray for your church and as you pray for your family fill in the blanks. "Lord, you have blessed us. You have delivered us. You've met all of our needs. You've given us a great place to live. You've given us a great church. You've given us a nation where we can worship without persecution" on and on and on.

Ezra 9:10-12. "But now, O our God, what can we say after this? For we have disregarded the commands you gave through your servants, the prophets when you said: 'The land you are entering to possess is a land polluted by the corruption of its peoples. By their detestable practices they have filled it with their impurity from one end to the other. Therefore, do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them at any time, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it to your children as an everlasting inheritance.'"

Now that's a quotation from the book of Deuteronomy 7:2. God said, "When you go into the Promised Land, there are godless people there. Don't marry them! Do not even be friends with them.!" James 4:4 says, "Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God." That's like spiritual adultery. The only reason we are in the world is to *win* the world. Do you think we ought to have lost people as friends so we can lead them to Christ? Absolutely! But that's the reason you have them as friends—to bring them to Christ. You don't have them as friends so you can be buddies with the world. You make friends, as Jesus said, "with the Mammon of this world so you can bring them to Christ.

Ezra 9:13-15. "What has happened to us is a result of our evil deeds and our great guilt, and yet, our God, you have punished us less than our sins have deserved and have given us a remnant like this. Shall we again break your commands and intermarry with the peoples who commit such detestable practices? Would you not be angry enough with us to destroy us, leaving us no remnant or survivor? [That's what happened!] O Lord, God of Israel, you are righteous! We are left this day as a remnant. Here we are before you in our guilt, though because of it not one of us can stand in your presence."

To me that is probably the most powerful prayer of confession in all of the Bible! Ezra does not make any excuses. He doesn't try to give any reasons why they acted this way. He said, "God,

we're guilty and you punished us and we even deserve more punishment than you have given us." Here's the question as it applies to us: Are you ashamed by our national sins? As far as we know, Ezra didn't intermarry a foreign person. He was okay, but he was burdened and broken and he was outraged and appalled and then he was ashamed because of what his people had done. Two weeks ago I preached on this from Daniel and as I have said, this is when these two sermon series are intersecting historically. Daniel confessed the sins of the nation of Israel; Ezra confessed the sins of the nation of Israel. Are we confessing the sins of America? Have you been so ashamed that you get before God and say, "God, I am ashamed that we are killing unborn babies! God, I am ashamed that we are allowing homosexuals to have the same kind of living arrangements as a husband and wife! I am ashamed that we are living in a culture like that! God forgive us! God, I'm ashamed that there is so much illegal drug use. God, I am ashamed that there is pornography!" Have you done that? Until every Christian American gets burdened and ashamed for the sins of America, we're not going to see a national revival.

3. THE CORRECTION FROM SIN

May I suggest that the prayer of Ezra be a model for all of us as we pray? By the way, when you get convicted of your sins by the Holy Spirit, that's the start. When you confess your sins to God, that's not the end, because there's something else—you never need to miss in the Bible as it relates to sin—and it's the third part of this message I call the correction from sin. They did something about it! You see the Bible teaches we confess our sins, but it also says we must repent of those sins and Ezra did it in public, in front of the temple.

Ezra 10:1-4. "While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a large crowd of Israelites—men, women and children gathered around him. They too wept bitterly. Then Shecaniah, son of Jehiel, one of the descendants of Elam said to Ezra, 'We have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women from the peoples around us. But in spite of this, there is still hope for Israel. Now let us make a covenant before our God to send away all these women and their children, in accordance with the counsel of my lord and of those who fear the commands of our God. Let it be done according to the Law. Rise up; this matter is in your hands. We will support you, so take courage and do it.'

These people were convicted of their sins. They confessed their sins but then they were willing to correct their sins. They were willing to repent of their sins. Here's the question here's how it applies to us tonight. Are you willing to repent and to call our nation to repentance? You see you and I have absolutely no right calling America to repentance if we are not willing to personally repent of our sins and shortcomings.

We have completely misunderstood this idea of confession. Sometimes we think we can go to God and say, "Well, God, I did it again! Forgive me!" "God, I did it again. Forgive me." "God, I did it again. Forgive me!" "I did it again...I did it again..." and we think us coming to God and confessing and confessing and confessing in prayer and do think God is saying, "All right I forgive you I forgive you I forgive you." The truth is yes, God forgives you, but unless there is repentance in your life, unless there is turning to holiness and purity in your life you're not going to have the kind of relationship and fellowship with God you ought to have! The reason we

confess our sins is not so we can have forgiveness, because as I have said before, the truth is when you come to Jesus Christ, all of your sins, past, present and future are forgiven! You are not going to go to Hell but you get out of fellowship with God because of unconfessed sin in your life. When you are out of fellowship with God, you are not walking with God you are not going to have the blessings of God on your life and you are going to be absolutely miserable! That's why you must confess and repent of your sins.

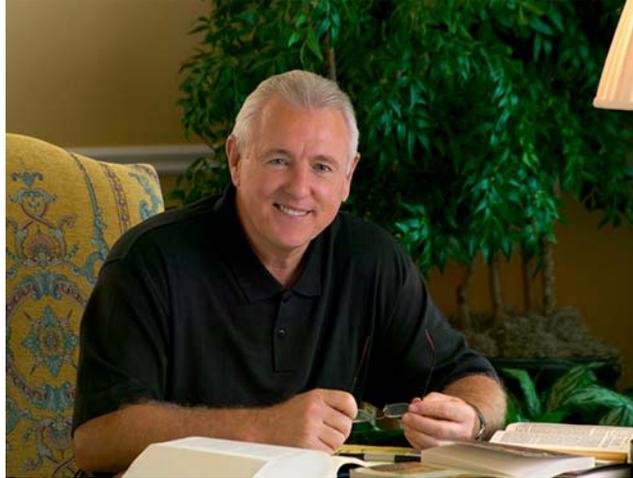
How are you praying? Are you willing to confess your sins? Are you willing to confess the sins of America? Are you willing to be outraged and appalled by them as the scripture says? I started this message with a personal story of a prayer that was not answered, thank God. I want to finish with a modern story of answered prayer to show you God *does* answer prayer.

CONCLUSION

This is a true story from Houston, Texas. There was a strange man who came to a church during the week of a singles activity of a church in Houston and he was sitting on the back row with his head on the pew. Some of the other singles there for the meeting that night recognized he was a newcomer. There was a lady there named Ellen who was one of the leaders in the singles group. She thought it was her place to go out and at least introduce herself to this guy who was obviously a newcomer, because that's what you are supposed to do. When you are in a church and somebody new comes, introduce yourself to them. So this lady walked back to that man and tapped him on the arm. He looked up and she said, "Hi! My name is Ellen." His eyes got big and without saying a word, he bolted out the back door of the church. She thought, "Whoa! Do I have breath or what?" She was embarrassed. But the next week at that Singles meeting he was back. His name was Bob Wright. He walked up and found this lady and said, "Listen. You have to forgive me. I know you thought I was crazy last week but you won't believe what happened" He said, "A few months ago my wife, Ellen, died. I was so lonely that when I came last week, my head was on the back of that pew and I was saying, "God, give me another Ellen!" I looked up and you said, "Hi, my name is Ellen." It scared me to death! That happened a number of years ago and believe it or not, Bob and the new Ellen married and they have been happily married for fourteen years now in Houston, Texas. God answers prayer!

OUTLINE

1. THE CONVICTION OF SIN
2. THE CONFESSION OF SIN
3. THE CORRECTION FROM SIN



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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes