

Introduction

I've been in the church now for 59 years. During those years, I've been told more times than I can remember, "**Practice what you preach.**" That's clearly one of God's most urgent concerns for us. But there's another concern that's just as urgent. It's that we practice what we pray. Turn in your Bibles to the classic text that teaches us to do just that, Nehemiah 4:1-14.

Praying

The main action of this book is crowded into the spring and summer of 445 BC. In 587 BC, the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, leveled its walls, and exiled a large portion of the Jewish population to Babylon. Then, 150 years later, in 445 BC, God called an exiled Jew, Nehemiah, to return to Jerusalem and lead the Jews there in rebuilding its walls.

It was a daunting task. Enemy nations surrounded Jerusalem that wanted the Jews not to rebuild its walls. So they plotted together and devised three strategies to prevent them from doing so. Their first strategy, in verses 1-3, was to demoralize the builders by ridiculing their work. When that failed, they threatened military attacks against them, in verses 7-8. When that failed as well, they threatened even stronger military attacks, in verse 11.

What's instructive in this narrative is how Nehemiah and the Jews responded to the three strategies. Verse 4 and its opening words, "**Hear, O our God,**" reveal how they responded to the ridicule - they prayed. Verse 9 and its opening words, "**But we prayed,**" reveal how they responded to the first military threat - they prayed. And finally, verse 14 and its words, "**Remember the Lord,**" reveal how they responded to the second military threat - they prayed. They prayed. They prayed. They prayed. The first thing that Nehemiah and the Jews did when they had a problem was to pray. They went to God and asked Him to oppose their enemies and overcome the obstacles they presented.

They prayed – and so should we. Whenever someone we care about or we have a problem or need, we should pray and ask God to solve or meet it. It doesn't matter what the problem or need is: facing surgery, taking an exam, being exasperated by parents or children, losing a job, a car breaking down in the middle of nowhere, not being able to make ends meet, finding a babysitter, and so on. It doesn't matter what the problem or need is. We should pray and ask God to solve or meet it.

Sometimes concerned Christians hesitate to do that because they don't want to treat God like some kind of cosmic Santa Claus or butler. That is a valid concern to which we should be sensitive. We should never be presumptuous about His willingness to hear and help.

But at the same time, we need to understand what the great American preacher Charles Spurgeon taught, **“Whether we like it or not, asking is the rule of the kingdom.”** Did you know, for instance, that the Hebrew word in the Old Testament and the Greek word in the New Testament that are translated “pray” mean literally “to request” or “to make a petition.” It's true. Asking really is the rule of the kingdom. It's a dynamic and ongoing part of our life with God.

A man came to Charles Spurgeon and complained about a Christian he knew. The man said that this Christian was strange because he had prayed and asked God to help him find a lost key. The man said that God doesn't listen to such nonsense and fully expected Spurgeon to agree. But he didn't. He told the man that he himself prayed about things as seemingly unimportant as lost keys. That nothing is too small or common to pray about. That God cares about the things we care about.

Spurgeon, I believe, was right. Sir Walter Raleigh was always asking the Queen of England for things. After he made a request one day, the Queen asked, **“Raleigh, when will you ever leave off begging?”** To which he replied, **“When your majesty leaves off giving.”** That's the way it is with God and us. Again, we don't regard and treat Him as a cosmic Santa Claus or butler, but we do keep asking. Why? It's because He's our Father and we're forever dependent on Him.

Practicing What We Pray

But asking isn't all we should do. We've already seen that Nehemiah and the Jews prayed. But isn't all they did. They practiced what they prayed as well.

Notice the combination of prayer and action in chapter 4.

Verses 4 and 6 record how they responded to the ridicule. Verse 4 - **"Hear, O our God, how we are despised. Return their reproach on their own heads."** Verse 6 - **"So we built the wall . . . for the people had a mind to work."** They asked God to turn back their enemies and then redoubled their rebuilding efforts.

Verse 9 records how they responded to the first threat of attack, **"We prayed to our God"** and **"Set up a guard."** They asked God to protect them and then protected themselves by setting up armed guards around the wall.

Verses 14 records how they responded to the second military threat. **"Remember the Lord"** and **"fight."** They asked God to fight for them and then prepared to fight for themselves in verses 16-18.

That's what the Jews did. Now let's examine what their God did in return. 6:16 tells us. This verse recounts what happened after they had successfully rebuilt the walls" **"When all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations surrounding us saw it, they lost their confidence; for they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God."** Considering the circumstances, the Jews could not have rebuilt the walls on their own. Their enemies knew beyond any doubt, therefore, that God had helped them do it.

Now let's pull of this together and see what we've got. With each threat, Nehemiah and the Jews prayed and asked for God's help. After that, they went out and helped themselves. God then helped them as they helped themselves. That teaches us what is just a vital lesson about prayer. It is ultimately a partnership between heaven and earth, meaning, between God and us, His people. Heaven's part is for God to help us. Earth's part is for us to help ourselves.

That makes chapter 4's message crystal clear. Practice what we pray. I came across a poem that defines well what that means. It goes like this: **"I knelt to pray when day was done, and prayed, 'O Lord bless every one. * And then I woke another day, and carelessly went on my way. * The whole day long I did not try, to wipe a tear from any eye. * I did not try to share the load, of any brother on the road. * I did not even go to see, the sick man just next door to me. * Yet once again when day was done, I prayed, 'O Lord bless everyone.' * But as I prayed, unto my ear, there came a voice that whispered clear. * 'Pause, hypocrite, before you pray, whom have you tried to bless today?' * God's sweetest blessings always go, by hands which serve Him here below.' * And then I hid my face and cried, 'Forgive me God for I have lied.' * 'Let me live but another day and I will live the way I pray!'"** That last line defines well what it means to practice what we pray. It means to live the way we pray. We ask God to do or give something specific for others or us. We then go out and act consistently with what we asked.

Believe me when I tell you that practicing what we pray is just as vital to God and His kingdom as practicing what we preach. So, let's do that. Let's practice what we pray, which means two things.

Don't Work Against Our Prayers

First, don't work against our prayers.

A father I knew prayed faithfully for his children. One of his prayers was that God would give them the courage to stand up for their Christian convictions at school. But at the same time, he said and did things that made it clear he wanted them to be popular as well. But those are conflicting aims. Those who stand up for their Christian convictions at school often are, for that very reason, not popular.

That illustrates what it means to work against our prayers. We make a request of God and then go out and oppose Him granting it. We ask Him to do or give something and then speak and act in ways that

undermine His efforts to do or give it.

There are many Christians who don't practice what they preach. But there are just as many who don't practice what they pray. A person prays, "**Lord, help me get out of debt,**" but continues to buy things he doesn't need. A homemaker prays, "**Lord, deliver me from lust,**" but continues watching her daily soaps. A Christian prays, "**Lord, draw my unsaved co-workers to you,**" but is a slovenly worker. A mother prays, "**Lord, give my daughter the vision to be sexually pure,**" but allows her to wear seductive clothing. A lawyer prays, "**Lord, make my marriage better,**" but continues overworking. And on it goes.

You get the point. Don't ask God to do or give something and then speak and act in ways that undermine His efforts to do or give it. Don't work against our prayers. That's the first thing that practicing what we pray means.

Do Work For Your Prayers

The second thing it means is - do work for our prayers.

Nehemiah 4:9 is the Bible's most celebrated statement in that regard. I just love this verse. It says "**We prayed to our God**" and "**set up a guard.**" Nehemiah and the Jews asked God to protect them and then acted to protect themselves. They worked for their prayers in other words.

And so should we. You've all heard the old axiom, "**Put feet to your prayers.**" That's what it means to work for them. We make a request of God and then go out and assist Him in granting it. We ask Him to do or give something and then speak and act in ways that facilitate His efforts to do or give it. We say and do what we can to make what we prayed a reality.

There are times when problems or needs are totally beyond our power to solve or meet, when there is literally nothing we can do about them. In those times, the only thing we can do is pray.

But that isn't usually the case. There is almost always something we

can do about some aspect of the problem or need that we're asking God to solve or meet. There is almost always something constructive that we can contribute. When that is the case, we should do the same three things that Nehemiah and the Jews did: (1) pray and ask God to solve the problem or meet the need; (2) analyze the problem or need and figure out if there is anything constructive we can do about it; and (3) if there is, go out and do it. Popular author Barb Johnson sums it up well, "**Pray as if everything depended on God and work as if everything depended on you.**" That's sound advice. Pray as if everything depends on God. Work as if everything depends on us.

When I was in law school, my wife and I realized one day that we were about \$300 short of making it through the month. That was a lot of money in 1983 and so, with two small children to feed, the first thing we did was to pray. We asked God to give us the \$300. We then thought about what we ourselves could do and came up with something – have a quick garage sale. We weren't able to advertise the sale in the paper but made the \$300 we needed anyway, and then some. When we looked back on what had been done, we could honestly say, quoting 6:16, "**this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.**"

That illustrates the second thing it means to practice what we pray. It means to work for our prayers. We ask God to do or give something and then speak and act in ways that facilitate His efforts to do or give it. We say and do what we can to make what we prayed a reality.

Conclusion

That then is what it means to practice what we pray. First, we don't work against our prayers. And second, we do work for them. Praying and working are a potent combination that releases the powers of God into the circumstances of our lives. There's an old maxim that says, "**God helps them that help themselves.**" That isn't really right though. It should say this instead, "**God helps them that pray and help themselves.**" So, let's do just that. Let's practice what we pray.