

There once was a couple who went to visit a marriage counselor. The husband said, “We’ve been fighting a lot lately, and we can both see that our marriage is heading in the wrong direction.” And the wife chimed in, “We don’t understand why this is happening – our marriage should be fine. We both have very good jobs that keep us busy.” “Both of our kids are happy,” the husband added. “They keep us busy too.” “And we live in a nice neighborhood – we have lots and lots of friends that keep us busy.” “And we’re both healthy,” the husband added. “It’s probably because we both spend a lot of time working out.” The marriage counselor listened and said, “Do you ever make time to talk with each other?” “Oh yes,” the husband said. “We have to talk. That’s how we figure out who’s picking up dinner on the way home from work, or who’s picking up the kids, or who’s going where and doing what. We talk all the time.”

The marriage counselor said, “That’s not what I mean. I think I see your problem. When was the last time you had a real conversation with your spouse, when you really took time to ask each other questions, real questions. When was the last time you actually spent time talking, and having real quality time together, like you did before you got married. That’s your problem,” the marriage counselor said. “You don’t take time to talk, to have real conversations with each other. That’s why your relationship is struggling.”

I think this happens to Christians in their relationships with God. If someone were to ask you, “How is your relationship with God?” Maybe you’d say, Fine, fine. “Do you ever talk to God? Do you ever pray?” Oh sure. In church. Before I eat, sometimes. And when I’m in trouble. That’s about it. That’s enough praying, right? But God wants us to take time out of our lives to really talk to him, to have a conversation with him, to really and truly pray. How is your prayer-life with God? What is a prayer-life supposed to look like? Today we meet a man who had an interesting prayer life, and that man was Abraham. God wants us to follow in his footsteps and “Practice Persistent Prayer!”

In Genesis chapter 18, we are told that God and two angels paid a surprise visit to Abraham. After spending some time with Abraham, God told him the situation. Verse 20: “Then the Lord said, ‘The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.’” God told Abraham that he was getting ready to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, those two cities famous for their immorality. God told Abraham this because he was giving Abraham a chance to pray, to talk with him. Abraham knew about those cities and the reputation they had. Abraham also knew that his nephew lived there. His nephew was a believer, and maybe there were other believers. Abraham didn’t want his nephew and those other believers to be swept away in God’s judgment, and so Abraham prayed to God.

Isn’t it interesting that God shared his plans with Abraham? That reminds us that we Christians are not inferior. We have an in with God as he shares his plans with us. From the Bible we Christians know that what is going to happen to the world in the end and what we can expect after death. These are topics that those who don’t read the Bible can only guess at. What then do we learn from Abraham as far as prayer is concerned?

The first thing we learn is that although God had just let Abraham in on a secret Abraham didn’t get cocky and think that he could tell God his business. Instead he approached God in humility. Abraham said, “I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord,

though I am nothing but dust and ashes”(Genesis 18:27). Abraham based his requests on mercy, not merit. He knew that the same sinful heart that beat in people of Sodom and Gomorrah beat in his own chest. He recognized that it was only by God’s grace and patience that he had not been destroyed for the many times that he had failed to obey God and trust his promises. Perhaps we need to be reminded that prayer is a privilege, an audience with the King that we don’t deserve. If we saw prayer this way we too would be humble in approaching God as Abraham was. That in turn would keep us from taking the blessings of prayer for granted thinking that it’s something that God owes us. The only thing that we deserve is the same kind of punishment that Sodom and Gomorrah experienced.

Abraham’s prayer is not just exemplary because it was humble; it was also unselfish. I suppose Abraham could have said, “Yeah Lord, that’s a good idea to go down there and destroy those cities. They’re bad news. But when you destroy them could you be careful not to scorch the land around it because it’s great for grazing and I’d love to bring my flocks down there.” Instead of thinking of how he could benefit from the situation Abraham was concerned for his nephew and his family, and any other believers that might be in those cities. Therefore he prayed for God to spare both cities if he should 50 believers in them. Abraham wanted the people of those cities to experience the same grace he had experienced from God throughout his life.

In the same way our prayers too should be unselfish. The Apostle Paul said, “I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone— 2 for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness” (1 Timothy 2:1, 2). “Pray for everyone!” Paul says. Start with your family, the people here in church, your co-workers, friends, and yes, pray for your enemies too. Pray for your governing officials instead of complaining about them. Paul says that by praying for others you will benefit. For example when we pray that God give wisdom to our leaders won’t they be better prepared to make wise decisions that profit us?

Although Abraham approached God in humility and unselfishness he wasn’t timid. Even though God had said that he was planning on destroying Sodom and Gomorrah Abraham boldly asked God to reconsider. Abraham knew he could be bold because he realized that while God is just and must punish sin he is also loving and patient with sinners. He therefore appealed to God’s mercy and patience so that the righteous could be spared. Perhaps the most amazing thing about this account is that God listened to Abraham’s prayer and agreed not to destroy the cities if he could find 50 believers in them. That teaches us something important about prayer. It teaches us that God doesn’t command us to pray just because it inflates his ego to have millions of people crying out to him. He invites us to pray because he promises to hear and listen to our prayers. He lets himself be overcome by the prayers of his people and takes what we have to say into consideration in the way that he rules the world! Remember that next time you hesitate to pray thinking there’s no point since God is going to do whatever he wants anyway.

Do you know who whispers “why bother” into your ear, every time you think about praying? It’s the Devil. CS Lewis is a famous writer – maybe some of you have heard of him. He wrote a book called the “Screwtape Letters” – it’s a series of letters

from one of Satan's demons named "Screwtape." The demon was writing to the other demons, and he wrote, "Prayer is lethal to our cause." I can picture that demon saying, "We need to do everything we can to stop the Christians from praying. We need to tell them that it doesn't matter if they pray or not."

Often times, you and I are guilty of listening to that voice that says, "Why bother." God tells us to be bold, to pray to him often. To never give up. And we say, "Why bother." That's is our sin. But what's amazing, is that God forgives us of that sin. "I forgive you," God says, "And now, I invite you to be bold, and to pray to me." Just as God condescended to Abraham, God also condescends to us – he comes to us and speaks to us through his Word. He comes to us and speaks to us through his Sacraments – the Lord's Supper and Baptism – and what does he say to us here? God says to you, "I forgive you for thinking, why bother. Now come to me, be bold, and pray to me.

Abraham was not only bold in what he asked for; he was bold in how many times he came to God with his petition. 6 times, starting with 50 righteous people going all the way down to 10, Abraham pleaded with God not to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. In our gospel lesson Jesus also encouraged his disciples to persistent in their prayers. This of course doesn't mean that God will always do what we want him to do just because we are persistent. We still need to recognize that we don't always know what is best while God does.

Do you know how God answered Abraham's prayer? The next morning, we are told that Abraham got up very early – he probably couldn't sleep after talking to God. He walked back to the spot where he had prayed so boldly. He looked out over the valley to see what would happen to Sodom and Gomorrah. And do you know what he saw? The Bible tells us that he looked, and he saw dense smoke, rising from where Sodom and Gomorrah used to be. But God listened to Abraham's prayer, because right before he destroyed the place, two angels rescued Abraham's nephew and family. God listened to Abraham's prayer, and modified his plans, rescuing Abraham's relatives. God answered Abraham, just not the exact way Abraham was hoping for.

This is how God answers your prayers too. He listens to what you have to say. And he responds. Sometimes he changes his plans or modifies them, to take into account what you are asking him for. Usually, God answers in a way that's not exactly what you were expecting – but God always answers, 100% of the time. The story is told of a Scottish preacher who prayed in the morning service, while the sun was shining, that it would rain in the afternoon for the farmers. As he went to church in the afternoon, his little daughter said, "Here is your umbrella, Papa." "What do we need that for," he asked. "You prayed for rain this morning, his daughter said. "Don't you expect God to send it?" And so they carried the umbrella on that sun-shiny afternoon to church, and when they came home they were glad they had it, because a storm popped up out of nowhere and drenched the area with a hard rain.

The point is, God is listening to you, and God promises to answer you. Someone once said, and I think it's true, that "the church has many organizers, but few agonizers, many who pay, but few who pray, many resters, but few wrestlers, many who are enterprising, but few who are interceding." Let us be bold. Let us be confident. Pray, Christian, pray. Amen.