



TRUTH MATTERS

A Newsletter Discussing Matters Related to Truth Because Truth Matters

The Concentric Circles of Prayer

Resolved to Pray!

The beauty about having small children is that their excitement and love for life awakens both memories and then feelings you once had as a child. For example, watching the pure joy of a 7 year-old girl and a 5 year-old boy throwing rocks in a lake is amazing. At a purely objective viewpoint it is an activity that is entirely childish. Adults find the actions somewhat immature and annoying. Mothers worry about them getting their feet wet; or worse – heaven forbid! – one of them falling in! Dads get annoyed because they know those kids would be content to stay there all day and he has a schedule to keep. He is here to relax, not watch the kids throw rocks in a lake. (In other words, parents have a hard time relaxing when they are supposed to be relaxing – mothers worry and dads keep schedules – that will be a topic for another article.) But if you will but stop long enough to listen – to listen to their giggles; if you will stop long enough to look – to look at the joy in their eyes; something miraculous will happen. As you hear them giggle and see their love, the pure pleasure that throwing rocks into a lake brings them, something transforming begins to shake your adult stoicism away.

You immediately find your mind taking you back to another time and a different lake not that long ago where you remember doing the same thing. But you do not simply recall the act of doing it, for instantly you remember the joyous emotions that came with it. I say “instantly remember” because it is impossible to remember an emotion without experiencing it again (This is the dynamic that makes good memories good and bad memories bad!). All of a sudden, the giggles of your kids are not annoying and you are no longer nervous about them falling in – because you remember that you fell in once and did not die! Before you even realize what has happened you find yourself as a 33 year-old kid throwing rocks into the water.

Now, the point of this little diatribe is more than “be a kid again,” though that is a worthy thing to write about. The point is that I want to recall for you what gripped me as I threw rocks into a lake.

After I got over the joy of making the splash (like a 5 year-old), I could stand for hours at the shoreline throwing rocks into water because I became mesmerized by the “ripple effect.” I loved watching the ripples flow out and subside. I noticed how bigger rocks carried the waves further and faster and so forth. I also loved throwing one rock in at one place and then another rock in at another place to see what would happen when the ripples collided. I was fascinated with the ripple effect. The point of the story is really the ripple effect. ***Ripples are concentric circles in motion!***

When I call this article *The Concentric Circles of Prayer* I have in mind six levels of prayer. However, I do not have in mind six different and unrelated levels of prayer drawn in concentric circles on a motionless page of paper. Rather, I have in mind six concentric circles of prayer that work together the way the ripples

of water work after throwing a pebble into a lake. I have in mind, six concentric circles in motion! ***Each circle is somehow driven and forced further out by the effect of the inner circles.*** Starting with that first initial thrust of water, the inner circle forces itself on another, and then another, and so on. I have six circles-in-motion in mind.

The six concentric circles of prayer are the six different levels I believe that prayer is to be entered into. However, you will not enter into prayer at one level until you are first driven further out by the energy of an inner circle. One circle sets another circle in motion.

Level 1 – The Closet

I believe that the Bible calls all believers first to a life of devotion and prayer at the level of the closet. Jesus said, “But when you pray, go into your room and ***shut the door*** and pray to your Father who is ***in secret***. And your Father who sees ***in secret*** will reward you” (Matthew 6:6; emphasis added).

There must be a period of time each day (weekends not withstanding) when you go into your secluded place to pray. “Shut” doors and “in secret” are the words that tip us off to the nature of this time. It is God-and-I time like no other. And there is no room here for a discussion of duty vs. delight. If you have no desire to be alone with God, you don’t know God! The closet comes when there is nothing more than pure excitement in making the splash! Fascination with the ripple effect follows the splash!

Level 2 – The Couple

I want nothing to hinder my prayer time with God. I want effective prayers going forward. Therefore, it is this desire alone that forces itself upon the next circle – the ripple effect has begun. If you are married, Peter says that nothing will hinder your prayers more than the relationship you have as a couple! “Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, ***so that your prayers may not be hindered***” (1 Peter 3:7; emphasis added).

The way I converse with my wife affects my prayers as an individual. Thus, the inner circle – my desire to pray in the closet – drives my desire to pray with my wife. Why? Because, as an application to this verse, I am never more vulnerable than when praying with my wife. She, better than anyone on the planet, knows my hypocrisies. When I open myself up to pray with her, I have my sin most profoundly confronted, not necessarily by her, but because of my desire to be genuine before her eyes. One way to dwell with my wife according to knowledge and in honor of her is to pray with her.

Level 3 – The Children

This leads obviously to the third level of prayer – families gathered on the couch for prayer. Because I know that at 7am each morning and 8 pm each evening I get to lead my family before the throne of God in family prayer, I find myself held accountable in the way I respond to them throughout the day. Paul says in Ephesians 6:4, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” Purposing to come before my children twice each day as God’s ambassador means I need to be vulnerable before them. I need to guard my reactions. They need to hear daddy praying for their souls. They need to hear daddy praying for *his own* soul!

My point is that unless I am a praying father in the closet, I will never be a praying father with my spouse, as a couple, or with my children on the couch. Why? I will not because my conscience will scream, “HYPOCRITE!” Thus, neglect to the responsibility silences the scream in our hearts. The inner circle must force its energy on the outer circles in the ripple effect.

Some of you reading this article do not have children; so level three is not for you. Others do not have spouses; so level 2 may not be for you. But we all join in at level four.

Level 4 – The Comrade-in-Arms

If you are a believer who longs to have effective prayers then you know good and well that “the prayer of a righteous person avails much (or, “is powerfully effectual”)” (James 5:16b). But have you ever noticed the context of that verse and what it is that makes a righteous person’s prayers effectual?

“Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working” (James 5:16).

Here we have the same dynamic that we have already seen at the other levels: there is something powerful about opening myself up in vulnerability that makes my prayer life effective. When we confess our sins and pray for one another, our prayers are effective. This means that other believers must play an active role in your prayer life. That is, you must meet with another individual and/or a small group for the express purpose of holding yourself accountable and keeping yourself effective in prayers. We all need a comrade-in-arms to help us fight the fight for faith (1 Tim. 6:12).

This dynamic is precisely the burden behind our Growth Groups. Have you opened up in vulnerability yet and asked them to pray for your weaknesses? Is your silence due to the reality that there are no inner waves driving this level of prayer? You cannot open up to others because you have not opened up to God, your spouse, your children. (By the way, if you open up to another but not your spouse, it is short-circuited and false. It will fizzle!)

If I leave the house open and honest and transparent before God (level 1) and before my wife (level 2) and before my children (level 3), it is a joy to come before others and be transparent. The participation others play in my sanctification is a means of grace! The more there are, the merrier!

Level 5 – The Colleagues

As your pastor, my level four is the relationship I have with your deacons. They are the single most effective group of people, outside my family, in holding me accountable for sin in my life. It really translates into a generic level five, however, because if the leadership of the church is not praying together, neither will the corporate church.

The Apostles determined to devote themselves to prayer in Acts 6:4; so must your church leaders. So must you who read this as leaders in our church!

Level 6 – The Corporate Church

The most popular reason for believers staying away from corporate prayer meetings is that they feel uncomfortable praying in public. The excuse will not finally hold up under a close reading of the intent of public meetings as given in the NT. For example, when Paul was writing to the church of Corinth about their abuse of sign gifts and spiritual gifts in general, he makes this remark: “If you give thanks with your spirit (I take that to mean silently or in seclusion), how can anyone in the position of an outsider say “Amen” to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying? *For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up*” (1 Corinthians 14:16-17; emphasis added).

The implication for public prayer meetings is this: the purpose of gathering as a church is for building others up. If you do not come to prayer meetings, but choose to stay at home and pray strictly in seclusion, you fail at your calling as a part of the body. Your prayers, uttered in the midst of other believers, build them up. If you come to a prayer meeting, but choose to stay silent in prayers as a matter of course, you fail for the same reason! Who would have ever thought they would hear a pastor telling his church to think of others as they pray? Paul is saying exactly that!

A Call to Prayer

Church, I am calling us to be a people of concentrated and concerted prayer as we set in motion the concentric circles of prayer.

Each one of you needs to become well accustomed to your closet. Husbands, pray with your wives. Parent(s), pray with your children. Believers, pray with one another. Growth Group leaders, focus more on personal prayer with your group. Leadership, pray before, after and throughout every meeting. Get together for no other purpose than a time of concerted prayer. Church, let’s pray more together. Don’t shy away from corporate prayer. You will not feel comfortable praying in public until the energy from the other circles in forcing itself on this wave.

It is my prayer that each of you will throw yourself into the lake of God’s mercy as you enter your closet; then ride the waves of the ripple effect before the throne of God!

Pastor