

Text: Psalm 51:10-12

February 24, 2008

Theme: Prayer can do whatever God can do.

Title: *Help to Change*

Well, we're two months into 2008. How it's going so far?

What about your new year's resolutions? I don't mean to step on toes, but it usually is by now that most resolutions are broken: the overeater gains the weight back, the heavy spender breaks the budget, the workaholic packs the schedule too tight again, the smoker goes back to the habit, the drinker makes the same mistakes.

And we could go on and on listing the things we would like to change: a bad temper, a broken relationship, anxiety, lying, lack of exercise, insecurity, too much time playing video games, pornography, excessive worry, addiction, guilt, disease, someone you love who is far from God or far from you—you know what I am talking about: the behavior or mindset or circumstance that can control you, what you keep returning to, what burdens you: the things we would like to change.

Time doesn't change these things. We hear that, sometimes say that. But as a pastor, I often talk with people who are still carrying around wounds and problems they've had for sometimes 30 or 40 years. The truth is time can make things worse, allowing a problem to fester to the point of infecting our entire life and those around us. Time only extends the pain if the root of it isn't dealt with.

Willpower doesn't give us change. If it did, we wouldn't break our new year's resolutions. I've said before that this is the problem with all the self-help books and seminars that say we need to believe in ourselves and think positive thoughts.

Those books don't give you the power to do that. Willpower doesn't do it. I know that from personal experience: we don't have it in us to generate the change we want.

Which is the posture of prayer, the very essence of prayer. Prayer is the act of admitting we need change that we cannot make happen. Prayer is a declaration of dependence on God.

Prayer is very humble. Probably the reason we do it so little. Prayer involves a lowering, a descending, an emptying of self down to the place of God's power. Who wants to do that, unless you have to. People resist prayer, to our loss. People usually avoid praying for change until our pain becomes greater than our fear of change.

That's why there's no sin more easy to commit than prayerlessness. And it is that: sin. In his farewell speech to all of Israel, Samuel said, "Far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you." (I Samuel 12:23)

Neglect of prayer shows that either we don't really trust God or don't feel that much need for his help. We invest our time in what we trust will really make the difference.

And every time we pray, we say, "That is God." We believe prayer changes things.

We pray to a God who knows. The Bible teaches that God knows you up close and personal.

"Nobody knows the hell I'm going through in this marriage." Wrong. God does.

"Nobody knows how I'm struggling to make a change, but I can't get the old stuff out of my mind." Wrong. God does.

"Nobody knows the depression and the fear that I'm feeling." Wrong. God does, "for

your have listened to my troubles and have seen the crisis in my soul,” Psalm 31:7 [LB] says. Nothing escapes Him.

Sometimes we don’t want God to know all the stuff we do. The fact is, there is nothing off the record with God. He knows the mistakes you’ve made, and He still loves you. God is not shocked by your sins. He even knows why you did them, when you don’t understand your own motivations. God knows all about it.

We pray to a God who knows and who cares about your situation. He says in Jeremiah 31, “I have loved you with an everlasting love.” (Jeremiah 31:3) God’s love doesn’t quit. God cares for me when I serve Him and when I don’t. God loves me when I’m right and when I’m wrong.

God’s love is not based on my performance. It’s based on His character, His nature. “God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us.” (Romans 5:8 [LB]) Just look to that lonely, twisted, tortured man on the cross, nails through His hands and feet, back cut to pieces, limbs pulled out of joint, face bleeding from thorns, mouth intolerably thirsty, plunged into God-forsaken darkness: look there at the God who set aside any immunity from pain to enter into our world of suffering and blood and tears and death: look there to know in your bones that God cares about your situation. He entered it. All of it.

We pray to a God who knows and who cares, and a God who can change things. Not just surface changes, not just the symptoms. God can re-create us, make us whole from the inside out as we “begin to understand how incredibly great his power is to help those who believe [in] him. It is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead...” (Ephesians 1:19-20 [LB])

Sometimes God changes you. Sometimes He changes your situation. Sometimes He changes both.

But if God can raise Jesus from the dead, He can raise a dead relationship. He can raise a person back to health. He can set you free from addiction. He can help you close the door on the past, if you trust Him.

This is the God of our prayer, the God who can change things. We believe prayer can do what God can do.

I know that firsthand: the profound change God brings about inside a person through prayer. I’m the poster child of that kind of desperate praying.

I could give you examples all day long of people in this church who were in impossible, dead-end, seemingly unsolvable situations six months ago, a year ago, and it has changed.

People you would have never thought in a million years could change, but they have. Prayer changes things.

What we’re talking about this morning is the necessity of prayer for change in life: communicating deeply with God for help to change.

That’s what King David was desperate for as he cried out in prayer in Psalm 51: “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.” (51:10)

David had created a huge mess of adultery with Bathsheba, the arranged murder of her husband Uriah, a cover-up operation that got exposed through the prophet Nathan: David knew he was in trouble. And he had the sense to know the change he needed was

not in the circumstances. He needed an inside change, a deep change. That word “create”—“Create in me a pure heart”—carries a meaning in the original language of something new being made which cannot emerge from what is. “Just start over, God. Change me.”

And “renew a steadfast spirit within me” (Psalm 51:10): a steadfast spirit, a determined spirit renewed to keep going until God is finished. He does that as we pray. I’ve mentioned before how, in World War II, the Marines used a strategy in the Pacific on every island to retake it from the Japanese, and it worked every time. First, the Marines would go to the island that had been taken captive, and they would start bombing it: all kinds of explosives and grenades. They called it the softening-up period. And many of you are in the softening-up period. All kinds of explosions are going off in your life that are sending fragments everywhere. And you’re saying: “This isn’t working.” It’s coming to a point when you can say, “I need something beyond myself. There’s too much stress. I need God in my life.”

In the second phase, the Marines would come in and establish a beachhead, maybe only 20 yards deep and 200 yards wide. But they would just get a presence on the island. When they had established the beachhead, had they completely liberated the island? No. They had just gotten in. From there they began to fight their battles. Sometimes they’d move 100 yards forward, and sometime they would get pushed back. Sometimes they would win a battle, and sometimes they would lose. But everyone knew that once they’d established a beachhead, total liberation of the island was inevitable. It was just a matter of time. And in the history of World War II, once the Marines had landed and established a beachhead, they never lost an island. It was just a matter of time before the entire island would be set free.

Every time you pray, you establish a beachhead for God in your life. The Holy Spirit moves in. Maybe that’s why the evil one is active to keep you doubting or busy or intimidated by prayer. He knows that, if you pray, his time is short. Prayer gets God in and keeps us steadfast until the change is finished. God does that as we pray.

“Create in me a pure heart... Renew a steadfast spirit... Restore to me the joy of your salvation.”

David was praying for change at multiple levels of life: for a new mindset of wholeness and salvation that would reestablish for him the delight and joy of life. That’s what we’re talking about today: the necessity of prayer for change in life, communicating deeply with God for help to change.

Laura Beach has experienced prayer at multiple levels like that. Laura will be one of those helping to guide our Prayer Summit next weekend. And in advance of that, I wanted you to hear her story.

LAURA BEACH

“Praise the Lord, I am not who I used to be.”

Laura is like most of us in that her prayer life grew with some ups and downs, through difficulty, with uncertainty.

I think of the story in the Bible of a guy named Jairus. One day, Jairus came to Jesus and said, “Lord, I know you can heal people, and my daughter needs to be healed.”

But Jairus was really honest. “But Jesus, I’ve got a lot of doubts. I want to believe. Please help me with my unbelief.”

And Jesus said, “That’s good enough.” (Mark 5:22-43 and Luke 8:41-56)

“Grant me a willing spirit,” David goes on praying in Psalm 51, which is a fairly tentative word: willing. It’s not like he prayed, “Grant me a courageous spirit. Give me a bold spirit of prayer. Give me an assurance of your answers.”

No, just “grant me a willing spirit.” That’s good enough.

You and I don’t have to have a big faith in order to pray. Jesus said that if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, nothing will be impossible for you.

It’s not the size of your faith that matters. It’s the size of what you put it in, the size of your God.

You could be thinking, “Well, my problem is not that bad.” I would ask, “How bad do things need to get before you admit that you need some help.”

So many people wait too long to pray, they put off asking God for help to change.

We said before that people usually put off praying until the pain becomes greater than our fear. Why not save yourself some pain and start praying now.

Or maybe you’re thinking, “This is so good. I’m glad Centenary emphasizes prayer. I think its great we’re having a Prayer Summit next weekend. But I just don’t think I need that right now. We have a busy weekend schedule. This series on prayer is really for someone else.” And you’re probably right. Someone you know and care about probably does need to know about the Prayer Summit next weekend.

But if that’s the only person you think this might help, I think that could be denial, because unless you’ve lived a perfect life, there are some things you need to deal with, too. We all need to grow. We all need to change.

And for that we all need to pray.

Centenary is committed to being a place of authentic change in the lives of people, a safe place where real people with real problems can experience real change in the power and love of God.

We’re committed to becoming a house of prayer: not certain ones, not a prayer group, not the special interest of a few, a but a people of prayer, experiencing what God can alone do.

invitation / appeal:     core of my calling / job description here  
                                  urge you to pray / description of Summit

Sources:

Thomas, David R., *The First Step to Freedom* (January 7, 2007), *Letting Go* (January 21, 2007), *On a Mission to Heal* (February 15, 2004), *The Spirit Prays* (March 13, 2005), *This One Great Necessity*, and *Where to Get Help When You Hurt* (January 14, 2007).