

A SYMPHONY OF PRAYER

EXODUS 3:9-10, MATTHEW 18:19-20

Matthew 18:19-20, “Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven.

For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”

Exodus 3:9-10, “Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel has come to Me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them.

Come now, therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring My people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt...”

Moses, a former prince of Egypt, had swapped his *royal scepter* for a *shepherd's staff*. While in Egypt he'd taken it on himself to avenge the injustice done to a single Hebrew slave. His efforts angered the pharaoh, and forced Moses to flee. Now he's content to live out his days on the back side of a desert caring for sheep.

But something grabbed his curiosity... there was a sighting on the mountainside of a bush that burned, but was not consumed. Moses went to see for himself... And he got more than he bargained for... God appeared to him in the bush, and told him, “Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.”

Exodus tells us, “Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God.” A burning bush was the sight Moses had clamored to see. *It would've been a sight to behold.*

But while the burning bush got Moses' attention on Earth, something else had already gotten God's attention in Heaven. God tells Moses, *"the cry of the children of Israel has come to Me, and I have... seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them..."*

While he was in Egypt, Moses had reacted to the cry of a solitary slave. He saw a fellow Hebrew being beaten by a cruel taskmaster, and avenged the injustice. Moses killed the Egyptian, and hid his body in the sand.

But *a single cry* was not what moved God to action.

He didn't respond to *"the cries (plural) of the children of Israel."* God wasn't reacting to an injustice here, and a brutality there - as many as there must've been. Multiple, individual complaints was not what got God's attention.

God's *all-seeing eye* and *all-hearing ear* allowed Him to hear **a corporate cry**... many voices were speaking as one. Their anguish had blended and harmonized.

Exodus 3:9 reads specifically, God heard **"the cry"** - *singular... the collective cry of all His people.* He heard thousands, if not millions of cries all voiced in unison.

God heard a collective wail, and it moved Him to call a man named Moses, and send Israel their deliverer.

James 5:16 conveys a marvelous truth, **"The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much."** Make no mistake about it, God hears the lone, solitary voice.

A pointed, heartfelt prayer from a man or woman who seeks to live in a right relationship with God is powerful.

Ezekiel 22:30 tells us God is on the look-out for such an intercessor. “So I sought for a man among them who would... stand in the gap before Me on behalf of the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found no one.”

The implication is that all it would've taken to make a difference was one caring, praying person. God hears the individual petitioner who stands alone - in the gap.

God hears **both** *the lone prayer* and *the collective cry*.

If you're a music aficionado, there are times when you enjoy a skilled solo artist - perhaps a violinist, a classical guitarist, even an electric lead... Or you relish hearing a gifted vocalist who showcases her range and tonality...

But there're also times when a music connoisseur prefers a band or choir - a more full-bodied sound. The blending of instruments, or the harmonization of many voices, can combine to create something unique. It's true, “**The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.**”

I'm equally moved by the clarity and power of an Adele, as well as the blending and harmonizing of Pentatonix. For different reasons, I'm struck by both the **solo** and the **symphony**. *The same is true of God's ear.*

I'm sure the effective, fervent prayer of one righteous person always warrants God's consideration. The Bible teaches that such a prayer never goes unnoticed.

But there is also biblical evidence, that on occasion, it's *the combined cry* - the corporate prayer - of God's people that grab His attention and move Him to action.

In the book of Acts we learn that corporate prayer was a habit in the early church. After Jesus ascended to heaven, His disciples returned to Jerusalem. Acts 1:14 tells us, "These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication..." On the Sunday God first poured out the power of the Holy Spirit on the Church the believers had gathered together for this same reason... *to pray!*

Even after the Spirit's initial empowering the Church kept coming back for more. The end of Acts 2 tells us, "They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers."

This is also what the same people were doing in Acts 4, "And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness." These repeated, communal prayer meetings were popular, because whenever the Church met to pray God did something out-of-the-ordinary!

It happened again in Acts 5. Verse 7 reads, "Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church." Earlier they had prayed for boldness, but now they pray for their buddy, Peter.

He was in trouble. A trial date had just been posted.

In response to the Church's prayers, God sent an angel to the jail where Peter slept. Pete snoozed so soundly, the angel had to slap him to wake him up.

The angel led Peter past the guards and through the gates. Peter didn't really know if he was dreaming or if it was real, until he found himself on the streets outside the prison, and the angel had departed.

That's when Peter decided to report to the prayer meeting. We're told a funny story, verse 12, "he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying.

And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer. When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate. But they said to her, "You are beside yourself!" (or mad) Yet she kept insisting that it was so."

The Church had been in constant prayer for Peter, yet when God answers their prayer and engineers his miraculous release, they don't believe it's happened!

Obviously, it wasn't their great faith that made their prayer effective... *Could it be that when lots of weak people pray together it adds strength to their prayer?*

Putti Sok used to refer to herself as a "Cambodian Buddhist girl." Though she'd grown up in California she'd been raised in a Buddhist home. When she went to college she met some Christians who told her they were praying for her. She was

offended. She was defiant. She told them, “Leave me alone and quit praying for me.”

Yet life has a way of getting your attention.

In her sophomore year, Putti, “*hit a wall.*” She was struck by life’s insignificance. She started to realize, “If what I was doing didn’t have eternal meaning, then it was all in vain.” She figured if there was a God, He’d be able to hear her prayers, so she started praying.

One day she was in the student ministry building where her Christians friends hung out. *It must’ve been God’s providence,* when she walked into a closet that the Christians had been using as a prayer room.

In the closet, she found a bowl, and in this bowl were slips of paper with names of students for whom the Christians on campus had been praying. Putti was stunned to see her name on so many of the papers.

Even though she’d told her friends not to pray for her, they loved her so much they’d made a point of doing it anyway. The next night she felt God’s calling so strongly, she humbled herself and surrendered her life to Jesus.

Literally, it was the collective prayers of her friends that made the difference in this young woman’s conversion.

Corporate prayer touches the sinner’s heart, and it also revives the Church. For the 2000 years of Christian history, whenever the church began to lose it’s charge, God jump-started it with a emphasis on collective prayer.

It reminds me of a Christian businessman named Jeremiah Lanphier. In 1857 he moved to Manhattan, NY.

Convinced that only God can change lives, he decided to start a noon prayer meeting at a downtown church.

He passed out 20,000 invitations to New Yorkers.

For the first 30 minutes of his inaugural prayer meeting he sat alone. By the time the hour was up five men had joined him. The second week though there were 14. The third week saw 23. The noon meeting soon grew to thousands, and in a few months similar prayer meetings had started in cities across the country.

Historians now recognize Lanphier's noon prayer meeting as the catalyst for what would become known as *the Great Awakening*. It revived the church and launched a missionary movement that lasted 100 years.

If you're walking the streets of Manhattan today, you can rest on a bench next to a sculpture of Jeremiah Lanphier. It's entitled, "[An Invitation To Pray.](#)" And he'd certainly be inviting us to gather this week for prayer!

Yet despite the biblical examples, as well as stories like Putti Sok and Jeremiah Lamphier, I've heard folks, even Christians, object to public, corporate prayer.

They quote Jesus, in His Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 6:5 "when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly." Critics of corporate prayer

meetings say that according to Jesus we're suppose to pray *secretly*, not *publicly*. When it comes to prayer, Christians should *get alone*, not *gather together*.

But that's not what this verse means! Here Jesus is talking about *pompous praying*, not *public praying*.

We should never pray to be "*seen by men*" - *that is, to showboat spiritually...* to try and impress others with our spirituality... *This doesn't mean we shouldn't pray with others, just don't pray to promote yourself.* God wants us to pray together, but in a sincere and humble manner.

In fact, in this same passage, Jesus teaches us to pray - and over and over in His model prayer He uses plural pronouns. He says in 6:9, "*In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name... Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.*"

The implication of Jesus' model prayer is that prayer isn't something I do *by myself for myself*. Prayer is a collective effort. It's to be experienced among believers.

Jesus intended for His followers *to pray together*.

And likewise, this is what Jesus taught in Matthew 18, *the verses we read earlier*, "*Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven.*"

For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them." Jesus promises His followers a

special power and authority when *we gather together, pray in harmony, and ask in His name.*

Matthew 18 provides us both encouragement and instruction for *corporate praying...* **Be together, and see together, and agree together...** and like the Hebrew slaves of old - like the early Church - like Christians throughout history - our collective cry will move heaven!

Be together... see together... agree together...

First, Jesus tells us to **be together.** We should *come together* with the deliberate intention of *praying as one.*

“Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there...” And if those **“two... agree on earth concerning anything... it will be done for them...”** This is a bold incentive for believers in Jesus to come together and pray... *Yet it doesn't happen as often as it should...*

A Princeton survey revealed that only 34% of adults pray with their friends *“often”* or *“somewhat often.”*

A survey of the habits of our own church would show the same deficiency. At CC we're sure *to study God's Word,* but we should also gather *to seek God's face.*

Maybe it was all the rain we got this week, but a photo on the internet grabbed my attention... Here's a church-full of believers in the Philippines. They're worshipping and praying together in stormwater up to their shins.

Despite torrential rains, and a flooded sanctuary they saw the need to gather together to pray and seek God.

I'm not going to get legalistic. You all know that coming to church doesn't make you a Christian, any more than watching a Star Wars movie makes you a Jedi warrior.

Our standing with God is by faith and faith alone.

The thief on the cross never set foot in a church; yet Jesus told him, "Today you will be with Me in Paradise."

But let's get serious for a moment, *if coming together and being the Church* - really doesn't matter that much...

If we're not willing to make a sacrifice to get here - and our attitude is so casual we'll come just as long as there's nothing better to do - then who are we kidding?

We're missing a strategic element of the Christian life.

Jesus promised, "where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them..."

He knew you might not always want to see the "two or three" - depending on who "the two or three" might be.

That's why He throws Himself in the mix. Aren't you willing to bear with - even **those** "two or three" - if it means a special audience with Jesus - if it means sensing His presence in a unique and wonderful way?

Before the Spirit of God was poured out on the Church... before the upper room shook... before Peter was released from prison... the Church came together to pray. Realize the implication, none of these monumental miracles happen, if the church doesn't get together.

A scientist from Oregon State University, David Perry, has identified a fungus that helps the roots of trees draw

nourishment from each other. In the forest a tree's roots grow deep - up to half its height. Roots spread out twice as wide as the limbs and branches above the ground.

When the roots of two trees meet a natural battle for dominance occurs, unless this fungus is present.

The mysterious fungus reduces competition even among different species of trees. It allows two trees to share light, nutrients, water. Perry says a forest acts like a community. Everything is touching below the surface.

And so it is in church... when we gather we touch roots. Even if you don't see it on Sundays - it happens on a spiritual level. We draw strength from each other.

In this New Year, I challenge us all to take our church commitment more seriously. This week we're going to pray together, but to do so we need to **be together**.

But that's not all... we also need to **see together**.

To pray effectively Jesus says we should pray *"in His name."* Verse 20, *"For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them..."*

To pray in Jesus' name is to pray as He would pray. It's to see God, and life, and others through Jesus' eyes.

The phrase, *"In Jesus' name"* isn't some kind of *magical incantation* - it's not a formula, or a spell. The words themselves are not what convey the supernatural power. Some folks use the phrase as a sort-of spiritual *open-sesame*. That's not what was meant by the phrase.

Nor is it *a religious-sounding salutation* - a way to sign-off at the end of our prayers... *"In Jesus' name, Amen."*

It's not *an incantation* or *a salutation*... To pray in Jesus' name is when we carry His concerns and His authority into our prayers. It's to pray as He would pray!

I'm not a big participant in social media... I do have a Facebook page and a Twitter account (@pastor_sandy), and I'll post to both accounts from time to time...

Of course, someone else may tag me on occasion, and their post appears on my page. At other times an ad for sunglasses, or somebody's weird rant, or video ends up on my page. *And when it happens I cringe...*

It's gone out *in my name - on my page*. And I'm quick to block or delete any post that misrepresents me.

I'm careful *what* and *who* I allow to post under my name. I want those pages to only reflect *my views... my priorities... the issues I want to convey at that time...*

And this is what we're doing when we meet together and pray *"in Jesus name..."* we're posting to His page.

We're putting up a request, or a statement, or a picture that accurately reflects the will and ways of Jesus.

Literally, you could say, when a person prays in Jesus' name, he or she is *"on the same page with Jesus."*

This is the second step to praying corporately - we need to *see together*. We get on the same page with each other, by getting on the same page with Jesus.

God hears and answers us when we find a unity.

We should **be together** - then **see together** - then we can **agree together**. This gets more specific. You come together around whatever it is that concerns the group.

In corporate prayer everyone is **present together**.

Everyone is **on the same page** as Jesus - *desiring to please Him, seeking His will, wanting Him to be glorified*.

Then everyone rallies around each other's requests, and **turns them into the group's concern...**

Think of me trying to lift a heavy barbell. I can't get it up on my own, so you come alongside, then someone else - together we get the weight up over our heads.

Think of that stack of weights as a prayer. Corporate praying is the combine effort of lifting a burden to God.

And as in weight-lifting, how much easier it is to hoist a heavy stack of weight if you've got other people's help.

In prayer, my burden feels lighter when you put your shoulder to it - and your burden lessens when I help hoist it up to God. **A collective cry** makes our life easier.

Author Andrew Murray once put it, "Christians cannot reach the full blessing God is ready to bestow through His Spirit, but as they seek and receive it in fellowship with each other. It is in the union and fellowship of believers that the Spirit can manifest His full power."

Our text this morning teaches us that prayer packs a powerful punch when believers participate in it together.

In sports, athletes stress **playing as a team**. No player is more important than the other. Each teammate knows their role and position. A team player resists the urge to do too much. He doesn't step on another player's role.

Yet when his teammate struggles, he or she isn't bashful. They're quick to step up, and offer support.

It's true in any sport the most successful teams are those that play together. And the same is true of churches. We need to learn to **pray as a team**.

And in verse 19 Jesus gives His team a tremendous incentive to pray together. He says, **"If two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven."** If we can get together long enough to really agree with each other and pray together as a team there's no victory we can't win.

I understand one possible motivation the Lord has in making this promise... I've used it with my own children.

With four kids of varying ages, very seldom did the Adams gang ever agree on anything. *The restaurant, the movie, the TV show, the flavor of ice cream...* there were always four conflicting opinions on what to do.

But on those rare occasions when they did find common ground, their Dad was so delighted with their unity that he was willing to give them whatever it was they wanted... *And perhaps this is Jesus' attitude...*

He's encouraging *His kids* to be united. He's enticing us, He's baiting us, ***"If you guys at CCSM can get it together and find something you all really want, that I want, then whatever it is, I promise I'll give it to you."***

I love the Greek term translated “agree.” It’s one you’ll recognize immediately. It’s “**symphoneo**” from which we get our English word, **symphony**. This is what corporate prayer needs to be - a *symphony* or *concert* of prayer.

The Greek word “**symphoneo**” means “**to harmonize.**”

Say this week we pray for Gail Beatty, which we will. Gail is a lady in our church who’s battling cancer. *Her family prays a certain way... A doctor present might pray another way... A cancer survivor in the room will have a unique view... A nurse in the church has her concerns...*

Everyone sees Gail’s need from a different angle and expresses it in their prayer. It’s **a harmony of hearts.**

When we agree together, and harmonize in prayer our mutual effort gets the need covered from every angle.

A harmony of hearts is a powerful force!

When a group sings in beautiful harmonies it’s spine-tingling, attention-grabbing - *so it is when we harmonize in prayer.* You don’t fall asleep in that prayer meeting.

And corporate prayer affirms that we’ve really prayed.

Someone once quipped, “**The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.**”

Ever communicate with your spouse... Oh, you’re sure you were heard... only to discover later that wasn’t the case at all. It went in one ear and out the other.

Well, a symphony of prayer solves that problem in our communication with God. When a prayer gets prayed in every octave we’re more confident it’s been heard.

Again, imagine us praying for the Ward's twin sons.

In the course of our prayer, *Steve is praying out of a father's heart... I'm praying from the perspective of a granddad... Matt is praying as a pastor... Jan Liesenfelt is praying from the heart of a teacher... Stacy is praying as a children's director who cares about their soul...*

In essence, we're all praying the same prayer - we're singing the same melody - but we're hitting different notes - we're harmonizing... *it's a full bodied prayer!*

That makes it a strong, confident prayer!

Sadly though, I've been in prayer meetings that were anything but a *symphony*. They were more a *cacophony*.

Just a clanging of random instruments - or worse competing instruments each hogging the limelight.

Imagine kids in the nursery banging on pots and pans all at once... Or think of a concert consisting of one drum solo after another. *How pleasant would that be?*

I've been to prayer meetings where prayers go rogue. Rather than stay sensitive to each other - rather than seek to find the heartbeat of the group - all people pray about are their own joys, or sorrows, or concerns.

It reminds me of the two men who knelt at the altar to pray. The first man was passionate and loud, "[Lord, I need 50 bucks.](#)" He was drowning out the businessman next to him, who was asking God for half-a-million dollars. The businessman couldn't concentrate, so he turned to the first man, and stuffed a \$50 bill in his hand.

The guy praised God, and ran out of the church!

That's when the businessman prayed, "*Lord, now that I have your undivided attention...*" That's not how our prayer meetings need to roll. I should hear your heart, and you need to bear my burden. Prayer gains more punch when we lock hearts, and really pray together.

Remember **a harmony of hearts** is our goal...

When this happens... People praying **with** each other, not just **beside** each other - or **against** each other, but **for** each other... lifting up each other with encouraging words... it really does feel like you've been to a concert.

Of course, a symphony needs a maestro, a conductor.

And this is why in the NT we're constantly exhorted to "**pray in the Spirit.**" It's the Holy Spirit who lives in us to conduct our prayer life! He motivates and elevates. He even guides our thinking as we pray. He makes us sensitive to each other, and directs us into God's will.

I've heard it said, "**Nothing lies beyond the reach of prayer except that which lies outside the will of God.**"

This is why we need to pray in the Spirit!

2 Chronicles 7:14 is a verse that sets the table for corporate prayer. In the OT the gathering place for prayer was the Temple. Solomon had just dedicated the Jewish Temple, when God promises the nation...

"If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their

sin and heal their land. Now My eyes will be open and My ears attentive to prayer made in this place..." *God will hear them as they gather in prayer!*

Here, we glean a few tips on corporate prayer...

Again, He mentions "*My name...*" - being *called by His name, praying in His name* - is always strategic to God.

Humility is also essential. Pompous, selfish petitions sabotage our prayers... Notice too, the desire to please God - to turn from our wicked ways, is what paves the way for God to forgive our sin and heal our land...

We often apply this promise at patriotic times and over concerns for our nation - but "*my land*" is not only my country - it's *my house, my family, my church, my work*. *If we come together to seek His face, He'll heal our land.*

The story is told of a small child that belonged to an African tribe. One day the little boy wandered off into the thick jungle. All day long the tribe members searched for the tiny tot... but it was to no avail.

The next day the tribe all joined hands, and walked through the tall grass together. They found the child, but it was too late. He'd failed to survive the cold night.

When the limp body of her lifeless son was placed in the weeping mother's arms, she sobbed, and cried over and over... "*If only we had held hands sooner.*"

Let's not wake up one day and utter the same cry, "*What great works could've been done... what prayers could've been answered... how many souls could've been saved...*"

what a powerful church could've been planted... if only we at CC had held hands sooner."

We too need to join hands, *or better yet lock hearts.*

We need to gather together in a symphony of prayer, not just anytime, but now... *to see what God will do.*

Satan knows the power that's unleashed when God's people gather to pray. That's why he'll do his best to keep you away. As it's often said, *"Satan trembles when he sees the weakest saint upon his knees."*

Would you plan to be here once a day this week?

Tomorrow, at 6:30 am on your way to work - or at 6:30 pm on your way home. Remember, it takes *being together*, and *seeing together*, and *agreeing together*.

And if it's *just not possible* for you to physically make it, would you join us from wherever you are, and pray?

On **Monday** we're praying specifically for *our church, our school, and our leaders...* On **Tuesday** we'll focus on *the lost people in our community and the churches around us...* On **Wednesday** we'll pray for *individual needs - healing and guidance...* On **Thursday**, in this election year, we're praying for *our nation and world...*

In years to come who knows what answers to prayer we'll be able to trace back to this week. Over the next few days here at CC, *let's make some beautiful music together, and offer up to God a **symphony of prayer.***