

## He Hears (Part 2) – Obstacles to Prayer

Matt Chandler – May 22, 2016

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Hey, how's everybody doing? If you have your Bibles, go ahead and grab them. Ephesians, chapter 2. We're going to start in verse 1. This is week two in a two-week series on prayer that we've called *He Hears*. We're going to talk a little bit about a couple of different things this week than we talked about last week.

Last week we talked about how prayer operates between these two poles of *praise* and *petition*. We praise God in praying, and then in that praise of who he is and what he has done we can at times, by the Holy Spirit, become convicted. That leads to confession, and then that confession leads to cries for help and for God to intercede on our behalf. Prayer continually bounces back and forth between praise and petition.

We talked about that last week, and then we spent time praying with one another and for one another and in this place. That idea that prayer has to be caught more than it's taught. We know we should pray. Many of us even know how to pray, but we can't quite seem to know why we don't pray like we want to pray.

What I thought we would do in our time together today is simply look at what I think are the biggest hurdles to a robust, deep, vibrant prayer life. If it is true for many Christians that we would like to pray more than we do, that we would like to spend more time with God than we currently are, what are the hurdles that keep us from consistently and deeply communing with God in prayer?

If we're going to tackle that, if we're going to talk about that, I think what we need to do is have a very brief overview of the gospel, what we believe as Christians, the root of what makes us Christians. If we can look at that, then I think we can get to the bottom of these hurdles that keep us from the type of prayer life we would like to have.

If you have your Bible, Ephesians 2:1-10. If you memorize Scripture, I would encourage you that in these 10 verses is so much of a clear definition of what the gospel is. The word *gospel* means good news. Like I said, it is the root of what makes us Christians. Belief in what I'm about to read and in what we're going to briefly talk about is what makes us believers in Christ. Belief in what we're about to read. Ephesians 2, starting in verse 1. The first four verses have to do with us. The last six verses have to do with God. Let's start with us.

**"And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind."**

This is fundamentally true about everyone in this room. Everyone at one time was this. Many of you in here even now are *still* this, but for those of us who are Christians, this is what we once were; it is not what we now are. If you're not a Christian, have not professed faith in Christ, then very much so you're in this. You couldn't read this and say you *were*, but you could read this and see where you're currently located.

Let's talk about this. The first thing he says (remember, we're just doing a gospel primer here) is we were dead in our trespasses and sins. This isn't some sort of ethereal gaseous kind of statement. This is on the ground, that you and I have been in active rebellion against God. According to this text, we followed the way of the world, the way that seems right to man but in the end leads to death. You and I have followed that.

We've followed the prince of the power of the air. Maybe unknowingly, but we gladly did it. You and I bought into the lies of the fallen, broken nature of the world. We gave ourselves over to them. One of the ways you can see that in our modern culture is every little aspect of restraint or repression is now looked upon as the greatest infringement on your freedom and your happiness, when throughout human history the opposite has actually been true.

Restraint and repression has actually led to better life, greater life, richer life, more enjoyment of life than no rules, "I do what I want. I decide for me." We bought into that. Every one of us bought into that. We gave ourselves over to that. The Bible says this is sin. You and I gave ourselves over.

We were born sinful. We gave ourselves over to sin. We have been rebellious against God. Therefore, we are objects of God's wrath.

Everyone in this room at one point was an object of God's wrath. I know that's so unpopular and widely debated. In fact, even a lot of those who would call themselves evangelicals would argue that God can't have wrath and he would never be wrathful. You see this oftentimes as God being a God of love. I've tried to press on this, in my 13 years with you now, that love and wrath coincide. If you have love, wrath is present. It's impossible.

Because I love my children the way I do, if you tried to harm them, if you tried to hurt them or take them, I would feel wrath, and that wrath would be born out of my love for them. In the same way, the reason God has appointed wrath toward those who rebel against him is out of the well of his love...his love for his name and the glory of his name, but also his love for those of us who will become children of God.

We've all rebelled. How have we done that? We have thought we're smarter than God. According to this text, we steal and get all the credit for good. We tend to generally flaunt our rebellion in front of God as though he did not exist and did not care. One of the ways I think you can most consistently and easily see this is if you'll listen to people talk. People will blame God for everything bad and take credit for everything good.

Anytime anything bad happens they're like, "Well, if God existed, why would this...?" But anytime good happens they're like, "Nailed that. I did great at that." This is a clear indication of flaunting rebellion against God. The Bible tells us that God has made us objects of his wrath because of that rebellion. Again, everyone in this room, because you're not born a Christian, has at one point in their life been brought forth in iniquity, is a sinner, has rebelled against God, and had God set his face against you. This is the gospel.

I know some of you are like, "I thought you said good news." Okay, remember, we're just talking about you. We're going to get to the good news. That's what we see now starting in verse 4. We're going to start hearing about God's response to that. Here's God's response to this. Look in verse 4. "**But God...**" If you write in your Bible, I would circle, highlight, or do whatever you do there on those two words.

**"But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.**

**For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."**

We see that you and I are dead in our trespasses and sins. We are objects of God's wrath. We flaunt our rebellion in front of the most powerful thing in the universe, and God's response to this, even with his wrath present, is if you look to what this says about the character of God, that being rich in mercy and having a great love with which he loved us, he made us alive in Christ.

How crazy is that moment? That's why the gospel is good news. We're stuck in our rebellion. We're stuck in our sin. We are isolated and far from God. We are by our nature flaunting rebellion against one who can destroy not just the body but the soul, and yet God's response is, out of mercy and a deep love for us, to make us alive together in Christ.

This phrase *in Christ* is where life comes from. Again, this is just a gospel primer. You can talk about these things at length, but our purpose today is to set this so we can get to hurdles of prayerfulness. What we see happening in this exchange... I talk about this all the time here, so if you're a consistent attendee, this'll sound like every week here, which is good news. We cover the good news every week.

In the end here, Christ comes and he lives a perfect life. The life you and I could not live, he lives for us. Perfectly righteous, never sins, upright in God's eyes. Then he goes to the cross. He is beaten severely, nailed to the cross, and the Bible tells us that the wrath of God... As you were an object of God's wrath, God takes that wrath and pours it out on the Son, pours it out on Jesus, and Jesus absorbs that wrath fully until it is all gone, which is why Jesus says, "It is finished."

In that marvelous exchange, after the resurrection and the ascension, we are by grace alone, through no act of our own, received by faith alone, through no act of our own, made alive together

in Christ. That's the good news of the gospel. That's why we proclaim it and go, "There's good news." It's so interesting to me that so many people stay on the bad news. "I can't believe God is bothered by that."

No, the good news is he has made a way. He has come and he has saved. He has opened up a door. He has laid down a bridge. He has invited you into eternal life by grace through faith. No act of your own. You don't have to clean yourself up. You just get to come. It's an invitation to be washed clean. It's stunning. Then on top of all of this, he plans on showing us, according to the text, the immeasurable riches of his grace and his kindness in the ages to come.

Since our God is infinite and eternal, the sheer amount of kindness and riches of his grace are immeasurable, so it's not just in this life that we begin to walk in and experience those riches, but it's in the life... It'll take ages, aeons, to experience the fullness of God. I don't know if you ever think about heaven, start thinking about eternity and get a little wiggled out about what's actually going to be going on 10,000 years from now.

Since God is an inexhaustible well, what this text is trying to communicate is you'll never grow weary of the experience of the fullness of God. That's hard for us to imagine here, because we'll get tired of any experience here on earth, but God is so deep, so beautiful, and the riches he possesses are so immeasurable it's going to take the coming ages for us to continue to experience these. In fact, it'll take forever.

One more thing that I think is important. Not only do you get to experience the immeasurable riches of his kindness and mercy and grace toward you, but on top of that, the Bible says that in his unique wiring you and unique placing of you, you get to be a part of good works that he prepared in advance for you. This is what's great.

I think people read this text and go, "Okay, now I'm saved; let's do good works," but really it appears that the good works have been created and now you'll walk in them. I think that's a better way to read this text. I think it reads better that way in the original languages. Here's something to consider. However God has designed you, wired you, and placed you, you're going to have the opportunity to be faithfully present.

If you're a lawyer or a businessman or a teacher, an educator of some kind, if you're in the domain of ag or government... Whatever domain of society you're in, you're now set up to do good works

where you are. You don't have to go looking for them; they're right in front of you. They're in your home. They're in your neighborhood. They're in your workplace, and you've been set free now to pursue these things for the glory of God. It is faithful presence that Christians become the salt and light of the world.

So why do we need to walk through the gospel again if we're going to talk about prayer? Well, I think the major hurdles to a robust prayer life are tied to a misapplication of the gospel, and if not for a misapplication, a misunderstanding of the gospel. I'm going to invert those and start. I want to start with the *misunderstanding* of the gospel. How does a misunderstanding of the gospel affect our prayer life?

The first misunderstanding is that the gospel saves us but doesn't necessarily sanctify us. If these are words you're not familiar with... *Sanctify* is a very church word. Maybe you think the gospel kind of forgives your past sins, but now you have to clean yourself up. "I gave my life to Christ. I became a Christian. Now I have to work to stay saved."

That's a fundamental misunderstanding of the gospel and will totally rob you from a robust prayer life, because this means guilt and shame remain. If you think of the gospel as it *saved* me, past tense, but it's not *saving* me, present tense, and holding me into the future, that means guilt and shame remain. It means that although you would intellectually ascribe to what we read in Ephesians, chapter 2, you are not living as though you believe it. Guilt and shame remain.

Oftentimes in conversations with people here's what I've found. They don't pray because they don't pray. Here's what I mean by that. They feel guilty because they don't pray, so they won't pray because they haven't prayed. That's silly, but that means guilt and shame remain. It means I have to earn the right to pray to God by praying to God. That's certainly not the gospel.

The gospel says prayer is an invitation to inhabit God's space. The judgment on your life has been done, and you have been deemed spotless and blameless, so come. That's what the Bible means when it says, "Approach the throne of grace with confidence." God's gavel has been banged concerning me. I am spotless, blameless in his sight. I'm not showing up dirty; I'm showing up clean by the blood of Christ.

It's in this misunderstanding of the gospel that so many of us are robbed from robust prayer lives. "He saved me. He loved me. He was crazy about me, but now I'm just kind of a disappointment to

him." It's like your best days were yesterday. That's just not how the Lord sees you. It's this misunderstanding.

The second misunderstanding around the gospel is I think people have a tendency to think technically rather than relationally. We hear the gospel and we understand the gospel, but we're still not thinking in terms of relationship with God. We're not thinking in terms of, "I have a relationship with God, a relationship where I get to spill my heart." In fact, it's the best relationship you'll ever have. "What about my spouse?" It's better than that relationship.

He knows everything. There is never a moment in your relationship with God where you should ever hide from anything that's actually going on in your heart. Think how amazing that is. You might be in a conversation with someone else and think, "Oh man, I could never let them know that. What would they think?" God already knows that.

There need be no pretense, no pride. He already knows. You can go, "I hate this part of my heart. I wish I wasn't thinking like this right now. Will you help me?" God is not appalled, because he's not surprised. You just don't have any secrets from him. He's the one relationship you have where there's nothing hidden. He knows all and has not condemned you.

So when Jesus says, "Come to me," when he uses the illustration of the persistent widow who just kept pleading until the judge... He's inviting. Prayer is an invitation to be relationally connected to God. "Come. Sit. Speak." He knows everything. So I think those are the two big misunderstandings: that the gospel saves me but it doesn't necessarily mean God and I are cool right now. I have to kind of gauge, "How am I doing right now? Am I doing well? Am I not doing well?" That's what leads to either prayerfulness or prayerlessness.

There's also a *misapplication* of the gospel. Let me give you three of those, and then I want us to spend some time praying. The first misapplication of the gospel is, "God is sovereign over all, so why pray?" If God is sovereign, if God knows everything, if he has already made up his mind, then why should we pray? Well, a couple of things on that. What the Bible teaches us is that God hears and responds to his children.

There are some things (this is from the Scriptures) that God has sovereignly decreed would be accomplished through the prayers of his saints. God is going to accomplish something, and he's

going to accomplish that through the prayers of the saints. So he invites the saints, you and me, to pray, because he's going to accomplish these ends.

Just as illustration... I don't want to spend too much time here, but when I was diagnosed with cancer, and they were like, "You have two or three years to live. We're going to poison you for 18 months of that, so let's get busy." There were two types of people on the prayer spectrum who really, in a real way, caused a lot of consternation in my own heart.

The first was if I just had enough faith I would be healed, which biblically is ridiculous. I don't have enough time to unpack that right now. I think faith *is* involved in that, but it doesn't guarantee anything. Then there were others who were like, "Well, if it's the will of God that you'd be healed, then you'll be healed." Both of those have smidges of the truth, but not the full truth.

We clearly see in the Scriptures that God's expectation is for us to pray for people to be healed. We want to ask God, "God, heal this man. Heal this woman. Drive out this disease. Repair their body." We've been called to pray that God would heal people. We even said in last week's sermon... We talked about, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." I don't think I'm going against that right now.

We want God's will to be done, but we don't know what God's will is regarding prayers for healing, so we're going to pray with open hands, knowing God is going to accomplish what God is going to accomplish, but maybe by his grace he has determined that he is going to heal this person through our prayers, so we want to beseech him and bother him and plead with him to do that. He's never bothered by us bothering him. That's awesome. That's a misapplication of the gospel.

Then, again, I think we can get to navel gazing. "I can't do it, and God knows I can't do it." This misapplication of the gospel, that I can't and God knows I can't... That in and of itself is a prayer. This is where understanding the gospel ushers you into prayerfulness. When you understand the gospel, even that "I don't know how to pray" becomes a prayer. "I don't know how to pray. Help me learn how to pray."

Then lastly, and this is the one that has broken my heart the most over the years. I think it's birthed out of really bad teaching. "Prayer doesn't work; I've tried." I've come across quite a few people who had this season of their life or this moment of their life where, with tears wetting the ground, they begged God to do something, begged God to accomplish something, begged God to make

something happen, and it didn't happen, so their conclusion is, "God doesn't hear us. God doesn't respond. God does not care."

I heard Tim Keller say this once, and I want to say it to you, and then I want to usher us into some time praying with one another. Tim Keller wrote in a book about prayer that if we knew all that God knew, we would answer all of our prayers the same way he does. If we knew all that God knew and had all of the facts in the span of eternity, if we knew what God knew, we would answer all of our prayers the exact same way God answers them.

If you think about it, how often have you heard or read about prayer and you just kind of feel guilty? I think you can teach some technical aspects of prayer, but I think, by and large, you learn to pray by praying, so we wanted to set aside chunks of time to pray. We're going to do that here now. I want to pray for us, and then we're going to begin to pray with one another for the next 20 minutes or so. Let's pray.

Father, I thank you for these men and women and that right now you hear what I'm saying. As infinite as you are, as loud as the universe is, with suns burning and things exploding in all the reaches of the universe, with all the noise on this planet, you hear my voice, you know my thoughts, you understand my heart, and you delight to hear me cry out to you.

So we transition now to us as a congregation, as a group of your people, and some here *not* your people, who will pray, that you will hear our prayers. We thank you for the gospel, that we can boldly approach your throne of grace with confidence today. You're generous and good to us. We love you. It's for your beautiful name I pray, amen.