

# When a Church Is Not a House of Prayer

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by Jim Johns

Believers with a burden for prayer can become discouraged when God's house seems busy about everything except prayer.

## What can you do?

Shouldn't we take notice when a matter that was given powerful emphasis in the Old Testament is affirmed in the words of the Lord Jesus in the Gospels?

One such affirmation is found in Matthew 22:34-40, when Jesus was asked "which is the greatest commandment?" His reply, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and with all your mind," establishes forever the highest priority in the life of every human being.

There is another affirmation from the lips of our Lord that brings grief today to the hearts of many who live in intimacy with Him. In Isaiah 56:7, God tells His prophet, "...my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations." In His zeal for the purity of His Father's house, Jesus quotes the Isaiah passage after driving the money changers from the Temple:

"Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'" [Mark 11:17]

The Father said, and the Son affirmed, that the house of God is intended to be a house of prayer. They did not say it should be a house of evangelism (though it certainly should.) Nor that it should be a house of worship (it most assuredly is to be that.) *But primarily, it is to be a house of prayer.* Why? Because prayer is the singular method by which man keeps his fellowship with God. It was for that fellowship that man was made. How can anyone be surprised if God insists that this be the central, elemental, manifest purpose of the place where God's people gather for fellowship with Him and with one another?

## Can that be said of your church?

If so, you are richly and uniquely blest, because it is certainly not true of a great number of churches in America today. Overwhelmed by plans and programs, many churches and their members find themselves too busy to take time to be quiet and pray. Perfunctory prayers begin Bible study classes and committee meetings. Brief prayers open and close services of worship. But corporate prayer, in which a body of Christ may pray at length to bring praise and petition to the God of heaven, far too often has become a rarity.

The pain that is felt by many who long for such times of prayer is acute and demoralizing. Plans are made, programs implemented, buildings built, and victories declared on the basis of numbers of baptisms, Sunday School attendance, and "converts" stepping forward in church services for one purpose or another.

Confession and repentance? Crying out for the presence of God to bring healing and peace and power while the world perishes in its sin? Who needs it? We're growing! Look at the numbers!

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### **What does God want?**

God does not command us to succeed. He commands us to pray. His people's busy-ness has never impressed Him (the Pharisees were very busy about the observance of religious practices). His ways are not our ways, nor His thoughts our thoughts [Isaiah 55:8]. There is a way that seems right to a man, says Proverbs 14:12, but in the end it leads to death. Are today's churches so busy doing things *that seem right to them* that they are on a one-way road to nowhere?

That's the way many prayer-conscious people see the trend. We sermonize about how Satan "fears the weakest Christian on his knees," as E.M. Bounds wrote, but we still spend far more time in work than in prayer. We seem to think, as Oswald Chambers states in *My Utmost for His Highest*, that prayer is to prepare us for the greater work. But, Chambers rightly says, "Prayer *is* the greater work."

If it is not by might nor by power, but by the Spirit of God that spiritual progress is to be made, why are we not doing the one thing that brings the enabling Spirit to our side?

It is not an easy question to answer -- "How did we get ourselves into this mess?" -- but the more serious question of the day is, "What do we do now that we're in it?"

#### **1. All who have a heart for prayer must keep on praying**

The only cure for prayerlessness is prayer.

#### **2. Pray that the Father will thrust forth laborers**

We've taken Matthew 9:28 to be a call for evangelism, and that is a correct interpretation. But the greater meaning is that, whatever the task, when more of us need to be involved in what God is calling us to do, the thing to do is to ask the Lord of the harvest to "thrust forth laborers into his harvest field."

#### **3. Assume responsibility within your church's prayer ministry**

It can be a lonely battle, but Jesus taught His disciples in Luke 11 and Luke 18 that we are to persevere -- to pray without giving up. If no one else is willing to pray, you pray. Before long, God will honor your prayers by sending you others with the same burden.

#### **4. Don't expect a prayer ministry to grow dramatically and quickly**

God builds the ranks of His prayer warriors one pray-er at a time.

#### **5. Risk being thought of as a fanatic**

People who don't pray don't always like those who do. We live in a "doing" culture. Our worth is judged by what we do. God sees us otherwise.

## 6. Risk being thought of as unproductive

There are those in places of leadership in our churches, some of whom are writing books on church growth, who will tell you that prayer is a cop-out -- a substitute for hard work. Their problem is that they don't know what hard work really is. Let them try praying night and day for God's power to be visited on *them*. Then they'll discover the meaning of hard work!

## 7. Mark in your Bible the scriptures that will keep you going:

1 Thessalonians 5:17  
Ephesians 6:10-18 (especially verse 18, which wraps up all that Paul has said in 10-17)  
Matthew 6:5-15  
Mark 1:35  
Luke 6:12  
Luke 11:1-13  
Luke 18:1-8  
John 17:13-26  
Acts 1:12-14  
Acts 2:42-47  
Acts 4:23-31  
Acts 6:2-4  
Acts 12:5-17

The church that forsakes the only means of hearing from God is in grave danger of losing its place in His plan (see Revelation 2 and 3). In Revelation 3:20, we find a much-misunderstood picture of Jesus knocking at a door. It is the door of His church, and He is waiting for His people to open up to Him and allow Him entrance to a place that is too busy to hear Him knocking.

Make it your constant, consistent and urgent prayer that your church will hear and respond as He desires.