

Holy Habits – Set Apart for Prayer
Eph 6:18-20, Gal 5:16-25

Well brothers and sisters, we've been focusing on the importance of developing holy habits over the last couple weeks, looking at the habit of giving God the first-fruits of what He blesses us with, and the habit of gathering together with the body of Christ for regular worship.

And it is important that we work at developing these habits because they start to shape our lives; they cause us to be set apart (holy) for God's purposes and plans, they reinforce the reality that we belong to Jesus Christ and not to ourselves, it gives us intentional ways to co-operate with the Holy Spirit's efforts of changing us...

And lastly – our habits form our instinctive and spontaneous reactions that occur in our day to day life.

So when you receive extra money – do you automatically think about giving a portion of it back to God? When you travel out of town on business or vacation – do you

instinctively think about looking for a church where you can attend worship when Sunday rolls around?

When you wake up in the morning, what are your first thoughts? What are your first actions?

Or when you are faced with a challenge, an emergency or a disaster... what instincts kick in, how do you react?

Now since we are talking about the habit of prayer this morning this is a good time to consider if your reaction to challenges and disasters is to throw up a Hail Mary prayer.

And I don't mean the actual Roman Catholic Hail Mary prayer "*Hail Mary full of grace etc...*" I mean a Hail Mary like in football, where you just throw that ball down the field and hope that someone on your team catches it and scores.

So a Hail Mary prayer is when you're stuck in traffic on the Deerfoot and you're late for an important meeting – you throw up your hands in frustration and say "*Oh God - help*

me!" in hopes that the traffic would miraculously start moving again.

Or in a more serious situation where you've just received some devastating news about a loved one who has been in an accident or diagnosed with a terminal illness... you respond with a Hail Mary prayer saying *"O God, this can't possibly be true, please don't let this happen!"* In the hopes that somehow, miraculously, there has been a mistake.

So when it comes to our holy habits, because of the challenges and disasters that we face in our lives, I think it's safe to say that most people have developed this particular prayer habit.

Because all of us eventually come to realize that so much in life is outside of our control and so we are forced to look for help in our efforts to cope with what we cannot control.

So brothers and sisters it is our instincts and reactions to daily life and especially how we respond to the challenges that come our way in it, that reveals to us whether or not the truth

of scripture and obedience to Christ have permeated into our hearts, or if they are still only skin deep... and it will also reveal to us if our habits are holy or not.

And brothers and sisters, throwing up a Hail Mary prayer in the face of difficulties and disasters is not a holy prayer habit.

A Hail Mary prayer is simply thrown up to whomever or whatever might hear it. It is a prayer of desperation, a last ditch effort that has little hope of success – and if this is our habit - it reveals that we are not consistently setting apart time where we engage in intentional prayer with Jesus.

Do you see what I'm getting at here?

Now engaging in intentional prayer with Jesus means that we are praying in Jesus name; praying out of the gratitude that comes from our salvation from sin, we are praying for things which will help others experience salvation from sin and for the part we have to play in that...

We are praying for God's Kingdom to come, His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven and for guidance as to how we can be obedient to that and help facilitate that.

Now that is a very brief description of intentional prayer - and you'd probably agree that it's definitely a holy habit that we ought to develop in our lives. But that is the challenge isn't it!

It's difficult to develop the holy habit of prayer, or any of the holy habits for that matter, because it takes our time and energy and there is an increasing amount of activities and responsibilities which compete for these limited resources.

We are bombarded with messages about making sure we make time to do what is important for us and our families – we need to eat right, exercise, watch our finances, save for retirement, spend quality time with the family, help the kids with homework, drive them to soccer and so on... oh and we have to earn a living and pursue our hobbies somewhere in there too.

Brothers and sisters, in all honesty there are more good things that we ought to do than what we have time and energy for!

But the good news is that when it comes to developing the Holy Habit of prayer – we have Prayer Help!

Just like a nutritionist or a personal fitness trainer who helps us to eat right and exercise properly, the bible tells us that the Holy Spirit is there to help us in our prayer life.

And the apostle Paul realizes that it is going to be difficult for us to pray in the way that we need to. In verses 10-17 prior to our scripture reading today Paul writes about putting on the armor of God to protect our faith because it's a struggle to live as a Christian... and not only because we are so busy that it's hard to find the time to be a disciple of Jesus.

It's because the Enemy will use whatever He can to prevent us from growing spiritually and strengthening our faith and trust in Jesus Christ – and in our neighborhood he is especially effective in his strategy of convincing us that other things

should take priority over our holy habits that we find ourselves simply too busy to pray intentionally...

So brothers and sisters, hear Paul encouraging us this morning to “Pray in the Spirit” because friends – life happens, business happens and if we know how to pray in the Spirit, and what this actually means then prayer can become habitual for us.

So the first thing we need to understand about “Praying in the Spirit” is that it means the Holy Spirit is here to help us pray.

Now this sounds kind of odd because when Paul says to “pray in the Spirit” – we tend to read this and understand it as if it were something that we do - like praying in a certain style or praying from our spirit as opposed to our mind.

But what it actually means is that the Spirit is doing something to us as we pray - He helps us to pray and so Paul is encouraging us to seek out His help - “to pray in the power, with the help of the Spirit”

And the more we know about this - the easier it becomes to cooperate and partner with the Holy Spirit, “*to keep in step with the Spirit*” (Gal 5:25)

So, how does the Holy Spirit help us pray... intentionally?

Well in scripture the Spirit speaks to people and instructs them to do things; He lead Jesus into the desert to fast and pray (Mark1:12), He lead Phillip to the Ethiopian Ruler in his chariot (Acts 8:28), and He told the Church to set aside Paul and Barnabas to go out and evangelize the Gentiles. (Act 13:2)

So the Holy Spirit will speak to you as well. He will speak through scripture, thoughts, and intuitions to pray for things.

And the Spirit gives us the confidence that we can actually speak to our God as our Heavenly Father through prayer and ask for what we need. In Romans 8:15 Paul says “*the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father."*”

The Holy Spirit makes us believe this is true, He convinces us of it, enables us to accept it, and allows us to feel it. So we are in a place where we can pray confidently.

But, confidence is only part of developing the holy habit of intentional prayer, what do we say, how do we ask???

Well, Jesus says in Luke 12:11-12 *"do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say"*.

So, if the Holy Spirit gave the disciples the right words to say when they needed it – (and that is recorded in the book of Acts) how much more will He help us to know what to pray for when we speak to God so that intentional prayer can become a holy habit for us.

And if we are worried that we will slip back into the bad habit of sending up Hail Mary's when we encounter times when we are so anxious, distraught due to such extreme circumstances that we are unable to be intentional in our prayers...

Because we are so overcome with grief, or shock, or wrestling with doubt, or disabled by disease so that prayer is impossible.

Brothers and sisters let me tell you this morning before you encounter a situation like this... the good news is that the Holy Spirit is praying for you! And... more than likely, He is speaking to someone else to pray intentionally for you as well.

Romans 8:26 tells us that the Holy Spirit prays for us when we can't. *"the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans."*

That's pretty amazing isn't it, all these ways in which the Spirit helps us to pray – to "Pray in the Spirit."

Now another the great thing about the Spirit's help is that it can come in all sorts of ways. Some people experience His prayer help in a spectacular fashion – they feel like they are zapped with electricity, they might fall down; they may speak in tongues...

Others experience the Spirit's help in a quiet way – they may get a premonition, an intuition, a thought, a desire, a scripture passage brought to mind as they pray in the Spirit.

The thing is not to get hung up on how we experience the Holy Spirit's help. It's more important is that we experience it, **cooperate** with it so that we are enabled to overcome the tyranny of busyness and give the time needed to develop the holy habit of prayer.

So what does it mean to cooperate with the Spirit in prayer?

Well in our Ephesians passage Paul says that when we pray in the Spirit we can use all kinds of prayers and requests and we are to pray this way - always.

So what we learn here is that the Holy Spirit's help doesn't depend on what kind of prayer we are using – like silent prayer, the Lord's Prayer, written down prayers, or spontaneous prayers.

Nor does it depend on what we are praying about; our personal situation, our friends, or someone's salvation...

Nor does it depend on when we are praying; before meals, at church, early in morning, or at an all-night prayer vigil...

Friends, to co-operate with the Holy Spirit's prayer help just ask Him for it. Remember that after Jesus taught his disciples the Lord's Prayer, he said to them: *"If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:13)*

Friends, if you have not experienced the Holy Spirit helping you pray – maybe it's because you have not asked for Him, so just ask Him.

Now asking the Holy Spirit to help you pray is a bit like asking a consultant to come in and help you run your business better.

It may cost you some of your pride, but in the end your business will run better, you'll grow, and become more profitable.

So when the Holy Spirit comes to help us pray He's going to bring things to our attention in our lives that need to change in order for us to pray better.

But if we consistently ignore the advice that He gives us, He will stop – after all why did you ask for his help if you won't follow the advice that He gives you.

The bible calls this “grieving the Holy Spirit” and Paul talks about this earlier on in Ephesians 4:30 – 32: *“And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”*

So Paul is addressing a situation where people want the Holy Spirit to work in their lives, but they would like to be able to continue to be bitter, angry, fight and slander each other.

Paul says that doesn't work, instead how you relate to people needs to be like how God related to you in Christ – otherwise you won't be able to pray out of gratitude for your salvation.

It's kind of like how the doctor will tell me that I should eat less fast food and exercise more, and my dentist always tells me that I need to floss each day.

These people are giving me this advice so that I can stay healthy and energetic.

But if I consistently ignore it and yet still ask them to help me with my health – eventually they're going to say what's the point... you won't listen.

It works the same with the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is going to show you what is getting in the way of you praying like the scriptures teach us to - but when He does then we need to cooperate with Him.

If you aren't experiencing the Holy Spirit helping you – maybe you've been ignoring his advice and he's just waiting patiently for you to get around to obeying him so he can help you.

So... if follow the advice that you've been given, He will continue to help develop the holy habit of prayer.

Now this is where we begin to see how habit of praying intentionally with the Spirit's help begins to make us holy.

Galatians 5:22-23 gives us the "Fruit of the Spirit" as a guideline to measure ourselves in terms of holiness.

How much agape – sacrificial love, patience, kindness, gentleness, etc... are we showing evidence of in our lives?

On the other hand how much evidence of our sinful natures is showing, or how comfortable do we feel around things like *"Sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like..."*

When the Holy Spirit comes to help us pray He may say to us... our flirtations with sexual immorality need to go, our fascination with psychics, horoscopes, and the occult needs to go, our selfishness, our misuse of alcohol, the busyness that comes from making good things into god things – idolatry... it needs to go.

Whatever it might be... the Holy Spirit is going to show us what our sinful nature is up to and tell us to fight against those manifestations of our sin.

To replace those sinful habits with holy habits, and start by making it a habit to confess the acts of our sinful nature in our regular times of prayer, asking for forgiveness for them.

And confession of sin leads to the Spirit replacing it with His fruit – agape love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and gentleness, goodness, faithfulness and self-control.

Now as the fruit – *not fruits...because this is a whole package, a fruit salad if you will, none of them are optional...*

So as this fruit becomes more and more evident in your life I will guarantee that you experience the Holy Spirit helping you to pray more and more – and it becomes a Habit for you.

You will be able to see that amidst all the good things that clamor for our time and our energy – there are those which are ***the best things*** to do... and prayer is one of them.

As the famous Reformer Martin Luther once said *“I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer.”*

Brothers and sisters, I challenge you to put this to the test. Don't give in to the “to-do list” as the first thing you do in the

morning when you wake up. Instead go through that to-do list in prayer with Jesus and discuss it with Him.

Do this each day for a few weeks and take note of what is happening in terms of how much time and energy you have for all the demands on your time.

And then when the times of challenge and crisis come up unexpectedly- you'll be prepared and already prayed up and you won't fall back into the habit of throwing up a Hail Mary.

And, God forbid should you lose your capacity to pray... you'll be able to rest in the fact that you know the Holy Spirit and others are praying for you in ways that words cannot express.

Brothers and sisters this is what it means to Pray in the Spirit, to pray empowered by the Holy Spirit, to pray with the help of the Holy Spirit so that prayer becomes a Holy habit in our lives.

And my prayer is that what we've learned this morning will not simply be more information – but that you will experience more and more of the Spirit empowering your prayers.

So that making prayer, intentional prayer with Jesus, into a habit becomes something easy for you to pursue and you want to pursue it – and chose it over other things.

Because brothers and sisters, few things are as important and critical to our spiritual life – in regular life - as prayer.

Few things are as important and critical to the success of our mission - growing as disciples and then Going Out and making more disciples - as prayer...

Trust and believe and act upon the good news that the Holy Spirit has been sent to help us pray.

Brothers and sisters, the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk... but of power! (1 Cor 4:20) May you be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit – and may you pray! Amen.