

## Sermon: "Praying and the Disciple-Making Church"

Text: I Thessalonians 2:17-3:13.

Sermon Outline.

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Introduction ~ Last Wednesday morning was "See You At The Pole." Each fall, Christian high school students gather at their school's flag pole to pray for their friends, their school, their teachers, their families, and for each other. It's a nation-wide, student-led prayer event. My daughters, Thyra and Krysta, were among the ring leaders at Mt. Lebanon High School. You're about to hear a voice from the balcony, Thyra, who will share what happened when one friend of hers "accidentally" stumbled into that prayer gathering...

It's hard to escape the impression that Thyra's friend may never have prayed to the living God before in her life, let alone in a group of people. That probable fact is both exciting and disturbing – exciting in that it may represent an exciting new beginning for Lilly; disturbing in that there are many people all around us – not just high school students – who have no clue about how to pray effectively to the living God.

How does a high school student or adult ever learn that? The Barna Report has a new survey out that indicates more and more high school students in our nation are highly skeptical and suspicious of the Christian faith. The numbers are deeply troubling. Who will teach these young people that effective praying works? It won't be their school teachers...

We're continuing our sermon series in I Thessalonians, a sermon series on "The Disciple-making Church."

Our text today in I Thessalonians is about far more than just Paul's circumstances and Timothy's activities and whereabouts. It's about the power of effective praying in the disciple-making church. In terms of our basic diagram, you remember that Paul, Silas and Timothy were focused on making disciples, not just converts. In basic terms, disciples are able to sustain their relationship with the risen Jesus through effective praying. Mere converts are not yet able to do that.

In connection with the focus on the Word of God and the total message about Jesus, effective praying is the critical path upward, the path out of being merely a convert and upward into becoming and being an effective disciple of Jesus.

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In the disciple-making church, disciples pray for one another effectively. Bluntly stated, effective praying for one another is what distinguishes a church of disciples from a gathering of converts.

Chip Maxwell has been encouraging you to read through I Thessalonians. And each week, the text of Next Sunday's sermon is listed for you. Friend, you also need to read through Luke's account of the planting of that church in Thessalonika; you'll find it located in Acts 17.

Yes, Thessalonika is a "success story;" but that does not mean that everything went smoothly.

1. The fact is, Paul had to make a rapid, unplanned exit from Thessalonika. He had to leave before he had even completed giving them their basic instruction in the faith. There were a number of essential topics Paul had yet to fill them in on. That's a major reason why he wrote these two letters to them.
2. Some weeks later, Paul was so concerned and worried about them that he sent Timothy back to Thessalonika to strengthen them and to finish instructing them in the basics of the faith.
3. Timothy comes back to Paul with some amazing news – despite persecution (they are already being persecuted)
  - A. The church is growing spiritually; and
  - B. The church is standing strong in the face of opposition!
4. This news about them is so good, so unexpected – given the constant activity of the evil one to undermine God's saving mission, so astonishing – that Paul knows it's a "God-thing;" the Spirit of God is working powerfully to build and to strengthen His church.
5. Paul shares a prayer report in vss. 9-10 of our text, expressing his thankfulness to God for what God is doing there among the disciples in Thessalonika.
6. Finally, Paul shares a simple prayer for the whole group of disciples. You see this prayer in vss. 11-13.

This letter was read out loud in a worship service in a private home. It was read in place of a sermon. But the whole deal is extremely interactive. You and I need to hear happen what Paul assumes will happen automatically: the believers all pick up this prayer and pray its pieces out loud, too.

Through the letter, they can hear Paul praying for them all once again. Don't miss this fact: Paul prays for the entire group of disciples.

In fact, there are two levels of effective praying: the individual level and the whole-group level.

Let's draw a foundational inference from our text:

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The disciple-making church prays for one another as individuals and as a group. At both the individual level and at the whole-group level, Paul, Silas and Timothy are focused on enabling disciples to pray effectively.

I. Let's back up to the individual level for a moment or two. Yes, there are some Jewish Christians in this church; but most of the disciples have come out of the most "garbage" personal background you and I can imagine – foul idolatry, ritual prostitution in the pagan temples, and prayer rituals of reciting prayers to the not-gods and seeing only evil results if any results at all.

A. Question: How does a total pagan who has now become a believer learn how to pray effectively?

Enabling a new believer to pray effectively is basic to the task all missionaries have faced from Day One, the Day of Pentecost. If a new believer is going to make it, he or she must learn how to pray effectively. How does a former total pagan learn how to pray effectively?

1. Step #1 – Junk everything you've seen and heard directed to all the idols in all your ancestral temples.
2. Step #2 – Start praying to the One True God, the God Who raised Jesus from the dead.
3. Step #3 – Choose the right mentor. First, Jesus. Then find someone who models effective praying, including the Jesus prayer. Effective praying is far different than rhetoric praying, the kind of praying that involves flowery words and sonorous syllables. You watch and listen to somebody who knows what they're doing and monitor the results and ask questions and connect the dots.

The kind of praying you heard growing up may not be effective praying at all! You need to be willing to pray something new in a way that's new to you!

4. Step #4 – Start praying with that mentor and with several other believers as a group – out loud. Pray regularly with a face-to-face group of disciples.
5. Step #5 – You next begin to pray with one another without your mentor being around and you monitor the results. Bring your questions back to your mentor.

6. Step# 6 – You pray together constantly and also as the situation and your circumstances demand.

B. At the individual level, there are some key pieces you can always pray for yourself or for another believer in Jesus Christ. Remember the Three Priorities? We keep coming back to the foundation, don't we?

The Three Priorities of Believing Discipleship are:

I. A Growing Commitment to Jesus Christ;

II. A Growing Commitment to the Body of Christ (your face-to-face group of believers); and

III. A Growing Commitment to the Work of Christ in your world.

Not only can you always pray these Three Priorities into your own life; you can always pray them for the life of another believer – even if you don't know anything about them or what they are facing in their life this coming week. It is always appropriate and meaningful to pray the Three Priorities into the life of any disciple.

II. But effective praying was never meant to be a solitary experience. This brings us to the whole-group level.

A. Paul's prayer contains three elements:

1. May God brings us back to you all;

2. May the Lord Jesus increase your love for each other and for everyone else;

3. May the Lord Jesus strengthen you hearts so that you will be blameless – free from sin – and holy – filled with positive goodness – when Jesus our Lord returns to earth.

[Remember your goal. Stay focused on the finish line.]

Each of these elements relates directly to the life circumstances of the disciples in Thessalonika.

- Paul wants to complete the teaching task of his job as church planter – teaching them all the basics of the Christian faith.
- Paul's statement about selfless, self-giving love for other believers and disciples anticipates what he's about to share with them in a few moments. It's also a reminder that the pressure of persecution can weaken each of the Three Priorities. Did the risk of being identified as a Christian cause some, a few believers to hold back from helping those who

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were arrested? We simply don't know. But Paul writes about love for a reason...

- Paul will be adding to their knowledge about Jesus' return.

Each of these elements clearly relates directly to their life-circumstances and their faith-situation.

The point I'm making is this: it is right and appropriate for the whole group to pray about their circumstances as a disciple making church.

The disciple-making church knows how to pray effectively about the circumstances they are facing as a group of believers – pray for and about the work of Christ in our Body of Christ.

Have you got the impression that I'm hammering on the Three Priorities?

- ❖ It's always right and appropriate to pray that God ... will enable each of us and all of us to experience a relationship with Jesus Christ;
- ❖ It's always good and wise to ask that God ... will enable each of us and all of us to experience a growing commitment to the Body of Christ, our face-to-face group of believers); and
- ❖ It's always acceptable and godly to ask God ... to give each of us and all of us a passion reach to reach people... people around us who have yet to enter into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ;

Following last Sunday's informational business meeting, one thing ought to be abundantly clear to all of us:

As a congregation, we have come to a place where

- we cannot move forward,
- we cannot move backward,
- we cannot move sideways, up or down,
- we cannot move in any direction...

without praying. God has brought us to the place where literally nothing is possible unless and until we pray.

Conclusion ~ God wants us to become a disciple-making church.

Effective praying is basic to a disciple-making church.

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God wants us to become a group of disciples who pray effectively – not just for ourselves as individuals, but for the work of Christ among us as a group.

See you all this Wednesday at 6:03 pm! It's potluck.  
The praying begins at 6:30 pm.