

It's good to pray with others

26th November 2017

What does the Bible have to say about praying together and how that is good is what we're going to be looking at this morning.

If it's not a subject you've studied at any great depth you may think there are perhaps half a dozen references the most well known probably being:

Mathew 18:19-20

" Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

Possibly followed by:

James 5: 16

"Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective."

and to complete my personal top three which I believe is very relevant today:

2 Chronicles 7:14

"If my people who are called by my name 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."

There are in fact over 100 verses in both the Old and New Testaments that either directly or indirectly allude to us, as God's people, praying together which perhaps says something about the importance that God gives to prayer and corporate prayer in particular.

But this morning let's have a look at these three Scriptures in particular and see what they tell us about praying together.

Matthew 18:19-20 tells us some important things about praying together:

Firstly, numbers don't matter to God!

Don't get me wrong, I would love to see our church full every Sunday and so many people coming that we have to think about having two services or even looking to expand or move premises. It is certainly every minister I know's desire to see their congregation grow in number and if that is part of God's plan it will happen for we're told are we not that God will build HIS church. If it happened tomorrow or next week that would be fantastic and I would be first in the queue to give thanks to God but you may recall a minister, a personal friend, that David Rhodes was telling us about who had served faithfully in the same church for twenty plus years and the church congregation had stayed at roughly the same number doing great work in the community and growing spiritually and in their prayer life over the years. Revival was always on their prayer list.

Suddenly, and David's friend told him that they had done nothing different, continuing to be faithful in prayer and praise and the reading of Scripture, it was as if God said, "I want to reward you for your faithfulness over the years." The congregation started to grow, not with transfer growth from other churches, but with new people coming in wanting to hear and explore the word of God, slowly at first so they weren't overwhelmed, but then more quickly as they saw what was happening and were more prepared for it. After a few months baptisms were happening on a regular basis, and discipleship classes were set up. The congregation doubled and doubled again over five years and I haven't spoken to David recently about it, but last time we spoke God was still blessing them and the only explanation David's minister friend could offer was that God decided the time was right for them to be blessed and grow as a church.

So we need individually and as a church to keep praying that God will fill those empty seats that John reminded us about a few weeks ago, believing that when the time is right, God through the Holy Spirit will touch people's lives and we will see the church begin to fill with new people. It would be brilliant if that was with the new people who will be moving into and have already moved into the new housing estates that are being built, but our job is to pray believing prayers (they're not going to be very effective if we're not believing what we pray!) and wait patiently (not always easy) on God's perfect timing.

It also doesn't matter to God how many of us are praying together at any one time, the prayer will be just as effective. God is very practical and knows that it is not always possible to have large gatherings of his people for prayer. In Jesus day and following there was a great deal of persecution of the Christian believers and it was not always possible for them to meet other than in twos or threes in secret to pray and God knew this and promised to be there in the midst of them regardless of the number. What we can easily forget today as we have freedom of worship in this country is that the majority of Christians around the world still face persecution and the fact that Jesus promises to be in the midst however small the number must bring great comfort to them as they huddle together in a small room with one eye on the door and one ear open for any disturbance to meet together to pray and encourage each other.

God is not looking for our huge numbers rather He is looking for our faith and sincere devotion as we pray no matter how large or small our number.

James 5: 16 is a verse which encourages us to pray specifically for each other for God to forgive our sins and to heal.

Bold prayers you might say but they are not when we realise that we have no power of ourselves but only the power of God can bring about change, our responsibility is to be faithful in prayer for one another and to seek for God's will to be done in each others lives whether that be the forgiveness of sins or healing.

Yes God does forgive sins and yes He does heal, often in miraculous ways, I can give testament to that in my own life, but we have no right to demand of God that He do either and anyone who claims they can bring about healing is deceiving you. Only God heals and He does it in His way and in His time. Sometimes healing is calling someone home to be with Him in heaven, other times it is

full restoration of health, or forgiveness of sins, you may recall the story of the man who was lowered through the roof into Jesus presence and the first thing Jesus did was to tell Him his sins were forgiven which caused a bit of a stir and then He healed him. Other times it may be Spiritual healing. God knows in each situation what is best and our responsibility as I said before is to be faithful in praying.

2 Chronicles 7:14 is one of those verses that we find several times in the Bible where God's people have rebelled and deserted Him for the pleasures of the world and turned to worshipping other gods and idols and once more God calls them back to worship Him but there are conditions to be met. May I suggest that as a world today we are in a similar position where the majority have turned their backs on God and are seeking the things of the world to bring them gratification and are looking to their own interests rather than " Loving their neighbour as themselves" which is God's way. But in order to do that they need to first of all to " Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." (Matt 22:37) In other words put God above all things.

Here in 2 Chronicles 7:14 God is speaking not to the world at large but to "my people who are called by my name" Christians, you and me, because if we won't do what He asks then what chance do the rest of the world have, so the healing process starts with us. God is basically saying, I think, now as then, if you stop looking to your own interests and striving to be the one with all the answers, humble yourselves before me and pray earnestly to me, turn away from the wicked ways you have got yourselves into, all actions we need to take, if God sees us doing that with sincerity of heart, then He will hear our prayers, forgive our sins and heal our land.

There is an implied thought here, I believe, that healing the land will entail us as His people not praying as a one off but continuing in prayer and action reaching out to those around us who don't know God and bringing the message of the Good News to them as we have opportunity. In other words carrying out the "Great Commission" that Jesus gave us to go out into all the world and make disciples.

As a church are we ready to do that? Are we ready to reach out to the people on these new estates and bring the Good News to them? Are we ready to listen for God's voice and leading for the way in which He wants us to do that? It will cost us time and effort but isn't that what we're called to do. John and I have been praying into this for some time and at the Council meeting next week John will be outlining our thoughts on the way forward but we don't want it to be just something that we direct, as a church we all have a responsibility for reaching out to those around us and at the February Council meeting we would love to hear your thoughts on what you believe God would have us do and how we go about doing it. If you have things that you want to share with us before then either of us would be delighted to talk with you.

As we conclude this time of looking at prayer, Keith has spoken with me about the fact that as a church we seem to have had an unusual number of members who have or are ill and also close family members who have been ill and we thought it would be good if we spent a few minutes now, corporately praying giving thanks for those who have been healed, for healing of those who are still poorly, for Satan's power to be bound in this church and for God to reign supreme and in His mercy to pour out blessings upon us.

The Korean church, as some of you know have a slightly different way of corporate prayer in that they all stand and pray together either aloud or silently. It would be good if we could do that now and if anyone has a specific prayer that they feel we should all share, then if you come out to the front and we will make space to hear it.

I hope and pray that this season of looking at prayer has given you food for thought on your own prayer lives and that some of the things you have heard have helped you in this vital area of communication with God. The sermons are available on our website as podcasts should you wish to reflect on a particular one or several again. I know from speaking with some of you that you've already done that, if you haven't I'd encourage you to have a look.

But now let's get serious with God and raise our voices in prayer.

Amen.