

Introduction:

- A. Have you heard the expression, “a concert of prayer”? It’s an old expression, dating back 300 years. It comes from Matt. 18:19-20 where Jesus said, “*Truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.*” Jesus said that in the context of church discipline, but his words have a broader application than that. The Greek word behind the English, *agree*, has a familiar ring to it: *symphoneo*. It can mean *harmony*. Thus an *agreeing*, a *concert*—a *symphony*—of prayer.

In the early 1700s George Whitefield, the colonial evangelist used that expression calling believers to pray for revival. The phrase was picked up by the likes of Jonathan Edwards and others both in American and Great Britain.

- B. The last few weeks we’ve been talking about how our conviction that our church is a family—a home—is evident in the ministries of our church. Today, our last Sunday in this series, we focus on the ministry of prayer, and especially praying *together*. You’ve probably heard that old adage, “*The family who prays together stays together.*” Today, let’s make that about our church family.
- C. **Praying together brings harmony to our church family and answers from our Father.** Prayer, of course, is relational. “*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name....*” We’re talking to our Father and when we talk to him in concert with one another, our relationships with God and our brothers and sisters grow stronger.

Sometimes we pray in concert with one another but we’re not in the same room, like when we send out a prayer

request to the church. Musically speaking, it reminds me of how musicians now can record an album together and yet never actually be in the same place together. Each lays down a track in their own studio, and then email them to one person who masters all the tracks together. Our prayers can be like that.

But there is something especially powerful when we pray together on the same stage, so to speak. *“Where two or three gather [assemble] in my name, there am I with them.”* Christ is always with us through the Holy Spirit but evidently he joins us in a distinct way when we are gathered together to pray—to agree about what we ask for of our Father in heaven.

- D. When believers pray well together—that is, when we converse in faith with the Father—some unique things happen. For one, we are unified and the Holy Spirit is in league with us. For another, we fortify the faith of one another. You hear one sister pray with great confidence, grounding her prayer in Scripture you hadn’t thought of, and *your* faith grows stronger. And our faith in God’s Word and will are what empowers prayers. Also, our prayers are like fragrant spices blended together in incense and raised in worship to God. That’s the image God uses in the Bible. The fragrance of our prayers is enjoyed by God in heaven.
- E. Remember what Moses told the Israelites in Deut. 4:7, *“What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him?”* Prayer is how we come to know, love and trust our great God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **Acts 1:14** says that after his ascension, Jesus’ disciples *“all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and*

Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.” They did not want to be separated from the Lord so they prayed.

- F. What shall we pray for when we gather? Of course, God welcomes us to bring all our needs and desires to him, sometimes to sift them and sometimes to lay hold of them. We should pray together when important decisions must be made. When the apostles had to replace Judas they narrowed the choice to two. *“Then they prayed, ‘Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry.’”* We should pray together for fellow believers who suffer or are tempted and wandering. **Today I want to emphasize two key biblical reasons why we pray together.**

I. PRAY TOGETHER TO REORIENT OUR LIVES TO THE LORD

- A. Nehemiah is the story of the Jews rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem after their devastating exile in Babylon. When the work was all done all the people gathered in the city square and Ezra brought out the Book of the Law of Moses and the people listened attentively while he read it from daybreak till noon. They heard the stories of Adam and Eve, of God’s covenant with Abraham. They heard the stories of Moses and God’s rescue of Israel from Egypt. Then they heard the covenant and laws God gave them at Mt. Sinai. They heard about Israel’s hard hearts and the 40 years in the wilderness, and how God finally brought his people to the border of the Promised Land.

Neh. 8:6 says, *“Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, ‘Amen! Amen!’ Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.”* As the people heard God’s covenant and his commands they began to weep in the

realization of how they'd failed the Lord. But Ezra and Nehemiah and their other leaders told them, *"This day is holy to our Lord. **Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.**"* [8:10] So they had a feast to celebrate God's restoration of Israel.

Then about three weeks later they gathered again, this time fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads (ch.9). This time their leaders said, *"Stand up and praise the LORD your God, who is from everlasting to everlasting."* Neh. 9 records their prayer. It recounts God's faithfulness but Israel's recurring rebellions. They prayed, *"In all that has happened to us, you have remained righteous; you have acted faithfully, while we acted wickedly."* Then they made strong promises to return to godly ways. **And all that was in the context of prayer and worship.**

- B. We must pray together as a church family, under the scrutiny of Scripture, because we are always at risk of losing our first love of Christ. Do you remember how in Rev. 2-3, Christ walks among the lampstands of seven churches? To the church in Ephesus he said, *"Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! **Repent** and do the things you did at first."* Repentance is a process of prayer.

To the church in Laodicea: *"I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. ... Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and **repent**. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me."* We open the door to

Christ by praying together. We dare not think that because we're satisfied with our church Jesus is. Praying together bends our hearts to hear Jesus, to open ourselves to the scrutiny of Scripture and the Spirit.

- C. The story from Nehemiah reminds us also of the importance of celebrating together in prayer. *“The joy of the LORD is your strength.”* When we celebrate God together we get stronger. Our repertoire is in Scripture: *“Give thanks to the LORD for he is good.” “The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.” “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.” “Praise the LORD, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. ... Forget not all his benefits.”*

In this sense, our worship services are prayers in song and testimony. Col 3:16-17 says, *“Be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.”* That is part of praying together.

According to **Acts 2:42**, in the first days of the church, *“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread **and to prayer.**”* I’m guessing the prayers of those new believers were resounding with praise. God’s Messiah had come and rescued them. Jesus had died and risen again from the dead. He had ascended into heaven and would come back for them. Salvation was theirs. The Holy Spirit had been poured out on them. People were being added to their numbers daily.

*Now your burden's lifted
And carried far away
And precious blood has washed away the stain
So sing to Jesus, Sing to Jesus, Sing to Jesus and live.*

- D. So would you resolve to practice praying together so that our life together will be constantly oriented to the Lord?

The second reason we pray together is obvious in the requests of Paul. He wrote to the Romans, “*I urge you, brothers and sisters, ... to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. Pray that I may be kept safe from the unbelievers.*” [Rom 15:30-31] He wrote to the Corinthians, “*On [the Lord] we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers.*” [2 Cor 1:10-11] He asked the Ephesians, “*Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains.*” [Eph 6:18-20]

II. PRAY TOGETHER TO ADVANCE THE GOOD NEWS OF CHRIST

- A. Turn to **Acts 4:23-35**. Peter and John had been hauled before the Jewish council and threatened them if they continued preaching about Jesus. **Acts 4:23-24** says, “*On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard this, **they raised their voices together in prayer to God.***”
- B. This was no ordinary time in the life of the church. Jesus’ death and resurrection had happened only two or three months before. Now that deadly pressure was on the church. The new believers were now in league with Jesus against the powers of this world. And they knew it. The Holy Spirit had already taught them from Scripture and then He prompted them to pray in synch with God’s will. Listen to **vv.24-31...**
- C. The Christians prayed that God would seize the attention of the people around them with signs and wonders in Jesus’ name, and that God would “enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.” Look what happened: **vv.32-34a...** Perhaps there were other miracles performed

by the apostles that aren't mentioned here, but the striking miracle was that *"God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them."* That's a miracle on par with healing the blind or making lepers clean. And here's the thing: everyone in Jerusalem knew that and many more were drawn to Jesus, because such generous grace could only come from God.

- D. I'm thankful when 30—sometimes 40—come to *First Prayer*. The last time we met, when we were finished, I whispered to the person next to me at the end of our time, *"This is Village Church at our best."* But still, that's only a fraction of our church. Some of you have never come to pray with others. Would you make that a step of obedience to Christ next Sunday when we meet again for *First Prayer*?

One reason I'm committed to praying with others is because I don't always pray very well or very consistently alone. A few years ago I mentioned that weakness in a congregational meeting and afterward Bill Cargill came to me and said, *"I'd like to help you pray. I will meet with you for one hour anytime anywhere."* So we set a time and made it a time of staff prayer, which we still do every week.

We need to pray together because Christ is among us when we do. When we agree in prayer about the work of God's kingdom the Father resolves to answer us. Let us make a *concert of prayer* together whenever we can.

Conclusion

One of my favorite biblical images comes in **Rev. 8:3-5**... Here is the picture of the prayers of all God's people who, like those believers in Acts 4, beseech the Almighty God that his kingdom

might come on earth as it is in heaven. Our prayers, rising to heaven, are not mere whispers or wishes, nor are they arrows or flags. They are sacred, fragrant incense, rising into the temple of God himself in heaven, where a great angel adds holy fire from the altar of sacrifice. Then our prayers, ignited by the fire of Christ's sacrifice, are hurled earthward.

Here is why the poet **George Herbert** calls prayer "*reversed thunder*." Here is why the room where those Christians prayed was shaken. God does not just *hear* our prayers. He *ignites* them. To God our prayers, especially for the spread of his kingdom, are both **fragrance and fuel**. They are **incendiary incense**, and when we pray—**especially when we pray in concert**—our prayers rise to heaven and are hurled back to earth full of the holy power and presence of God. ***Reversed thunder***.

Come and pray with us!