

The book we have chosen to read is ‘Fresh Wind; Fresh Fire’ by Jim Cymbala. When we pick a book from someone who is successful in his/her ministry, we need to remember: whatever a book tells us may not work for us because our situation is different. We are not trying just to copy their ministries, but we are trying to get some insights into what other churches do based on the Scriptures. In that regard, I think this book is well balanced with Scriptures and the testimonies of real people.

For example, Jim Cymbala expressed how much he struggled in his early ministry. He said, “sometimes I didn’t want to show up for a service” (p.25). He didn’t want to preach because he felt the church was spiritually dead. One day, while he was preaching, he was so overwhelmed that he had to say, “I’m sorry.... I... I can’t preach in this atmosphere... Something is terribly wrong... I don’t know what to say – I just can’t go on” (p.18). Then he asked the congregation to come forward to pray. He stopped preaching, and they began to pray together. That was the beginning of his prayer ministry, which continued on every Tuesday night. Ever since, the Tuesday Night Prayer meeting has grown to thousands of people.

Charles Spurgeon once said, “The condition of the church may be very accurately gauged by its prayer meetings. So the prayer meeting is a grace-ometer, and from it we may judge the amount of divine working among a people. If God be near a church, it must pray. And if he be not there, one of the first tokens of his absence will be a slothfulness in prayer” (p.28). So, we may say Jim Cymbala’s church is healthy since prayer is the main focus of the church.

When Jim Cymbala came to the church, the number of the congregation was about 50 people, and now about 10,000 people meet every week. As the church became successful (?) and healthy, many pastors and church leaders tried to follow the example. They have tried Brooklyn Tabernacle’s prayer ministry; some succeeded and others did not. One of the unsuccessful pastors said, “Jim, the truth is, I couldn’t have a real prayer meeting in my church. I’d be embarrassed at the smallness of the crowd. Unless somebody’s teaching or singing or doing some kind of presentation, people just won’t come. I can only get them for a one-hour serve, and that only once a week” (p.59).

If we gauge our church by prayer ministry, how healthy are we? If we call a prayer meeting, how many of us will come? The reason that we judge our church by prayer ministry is not because of what Charles Spurgeon or Jim Cymbala said, but it is because of what God said. The Sovereign LORD declares, “*these (foreigners) I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations*” (Isaiah 56:7). Jesus repeated it in the New Testament, “*My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations*” (Matt. 21:13; Mark 11:17). It doesn’t matter what traditions we have. Reformed, Baptists, Pentecostal, whatever denomination we are from; white, black, Hispanic, Asian--whatever race we are—if we are led to the holy

mountain, the Father's house, we know that this place is supposed to be a house of prayer. Jesus never said, "My house shall be called a house of preaching." He didn't say, "My house shall be called a house of music," either. Preaching, music, the reading of the Word – they are all important, but "they must never override prayer as the defining mark of God's dwelling" (p.71).

So how do we pray in the church? I am not asking about personal prayer at home. I believe you have your own prayer life. You may pray at work; you may pray while you are driving; you may pray when you wake up or before bed. But, I am talking about praying together. Jesus and the apostles command us to pray together (cf. 2 Chron. 7;14; Matt. 18;20; Romans 15:5-6; James 5:16; etc.) because there are so many benefits by praying together. When we pray together, we witness more tears of repentance and more joy of salvation. We give more glory to God. We hear beautiful and powerful testimonies about how God changes his people. There is more unity and growth when we pray together. Yes, God hears our individual prayers, but when we pray together we hear from people about God – who He is and what He does in people's life.

This is what we can see from our text. "*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer*" (v.42). Breaking bread is a part of fellowship. So I can say they devoted themselves to three things: the Word, Fellowship, and Prayer.

This is the model of the Jerusalem church in the first century. The church was greatly persecuted by Rome. It was a very weak and struggling church, but "*the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved*" (v.47). The church began from Pentecost in Acts 2. It was a small church with 120 people (cf. Acts 1:15), but 8 years later in Acts 11, we can see that the church grew to many thousands of people and began to send missionaries to other cities in just a few years. How could that small church grow both in numbers and faith especially under a great persecution? It was possible because of the three things: the Word, Fellowship, and Prayer.

When I say "prayer," I don't mean just one-minute quick prayers. I don't mean a prayer for a meal or after a meeting. I mean a devoted prayer. In order to dedicate ourselves in prayer, we need to dedicate our body and soul, and our time and effort. Such a prayer requires a devoted heart and mind. One of my brothers, whom I have known from my previous ministry, always prayed on his knees. Whenever we had a prayer time, he always knelt down. Some people might have criticized him, but I couldn't because I knew how seriously he prayed. That was his way to dedicate himself to prayer. I also know one lady who always goes to the church to pray. She could pray at home; she could pray in any other place, but she loved to pray before the cross because she felt the presence of God more at the Father's house. That was her way to dedicate herself to prayer. In what ways do you dedicate yourself to prayer? We don't need to kneel down, we may not come to the church every time, but we need to dedicate ourselves to have devoted, powerful, and life-changing prayer. How shall we pray?

Jesus himself showed us an example of prayer. Before he began his ministry, he fasted and prayed for 40 days and nights; early morning or at night, he spent time in prayer; before he chose his disciples and before he took up the cross, he prayed until his sweat became like blood; he asked his disciples to pray for him; he even prayed for those who crucified him. If Jesus, the Son of God, had to pray that much, how much do you think we need to dedicate ourselves to prayer?

If you pray as Jesus did, you are blessed, but if some of you, like me, don't follow his example, what is the problem? Here are some reasons why we have a hard time dedicating ourselves to prayer. **First**, *we don't realize the urgency of prayer*. Have you seen a mom chasing her little baby who is walking right in front of a moving car? The mom becomes a superwoman. She yells and flies to grab her baby. If a car happens to come near the baby, I am sure she will do anything to stop the car, even if it means costing her own life. It is because she loves her baby. If you look at your family and friends, I am sure you can see someone who is walking toward hell. We are not talking about an injury for months or years in this world; we are talking about eternal punishment and death. Don't we need to be like a supermom? Don't we need to cry out for the lost souls among our family and friends? This is the time we need to fast and pray.

Another reason *we don't pray is because we are not used praying*. We may say, "Well, God is in control, isn't He? All things will be done according to His will. So, why do I need to bother Him?" No, that is not true. God commands us to pray. It is because God fulfills his plan through us. When he brings us together as a family and friends, we are to pray for each other. God initiates; He will do what he decreed, but he wants our participation. God is waiting for our dedicated prayer to save our family members, to bless our children, and to heal this land.

Here is **one more reason** *we don't pray: We don't want to share our problems*. Maybe we are just too shy. Maybe we are so nice that we don't want to bother others. Or, we may be so confident that we think we can handle our problems. But if we are closing ourselves off from others, we are actually preventing others coming into our lives. We are sending a message, "Don't bother me as I don't bother you." It is a selfish and self-centered attitude. Yes, prayer is our personal communication with God, but prayer has to go out, for His Kingdom and for the Kingdom's people. How do you know what to pray without going into other people's lives? How will others pray for you if you don't open yourself? You don't need to share every problem with everyone, but you need to open yourself so that others may come to you. God's blessings often come through people. Even Jesus himself may come through a stranger.

I am sure there are many more reasons why we don't pray, but **all these reasons come into one**: *we do not pray because we don't depend on God*. Jesus is not just looking for what we do, but how we do. If we depend on him, we will pray. If we believe God is doing all things through us, we will pray. "*My house [this church, Modesto Christian Reformed Church] will be called a house of prayer for all nations*" (Mark 11:17). As we humble ourselves before God, we will pray, and God will make this church to grow both in numbers and faith.

In our text, we have 8 verbs, and interestingly all of them use the imperfect tense, which indicates a continuous action. As I have told you before, the present tense in Greek also indicates an on-going action, but the present tense emphasizes the current action. The imperfect tense is an on-going action from the past. It is an action with a known result. Let me give you an example. Imagine that three guys were sitting in a theater. Now the movie was on, but somehow all three guys received phone calls. One guy ignored the call because that is what he was supposed to do; the second guy went out and said he would call back later. He came back quickly because he didn't want to miss anything. The third guy went out to answer the phone call and stayed out there for a while. It wasn't really an important call but he couldn't stop talking, and because of that he had to miss half of the movie. Maybe he wished the movie would stop for him but it didn't. The movie kept on playing. This is what I mean by "a continuous action." No matter what the three guys did, the movie kept running. When the movie was done, all three guys could talk about it. Even the one who missed half of it could still say he watched the movie, but he missed many fun and exciting parts of the movie.

When we believe in Jesus, we belong to the kingdom of God. We are called to work for the kingdom. We are commanded to expand God's kingdom on earth by seeking His kingdom and righteousness. We can do so by devoting ourselves to prayer. No matter what we do, His kingdom will come. It is a known result just as the movie kept running. In mean time, we may act differently. Some people may get busy with many other things; others may want to seek their own pleasures. But if we are called for the kingdom of God, we need to dedicate ourselves to God's commands. Prayer is one of them.

Throughout history, we can see that all revivals and all healthy churches began with prayer. You are called to pray for your family and your church. We may not become like Charles Spurgeon or Jim Cymbala; we may not become famous, but God is looking for someone like you, an ordinary hero. Brothers and sisters, you are ordinary heroes. People may not recognize how much you pray, but you are the one who can bring "fresh wind and fresh fire" in this place. God has so many blessings for your family and church, and you open the door of heaven by prayer. Let us continue to devote ourselves to prayer...together... until the Kingdom and the righteousness of God is fulfilled. Amen.