

When the Church Prays: Praying Authentically – Nehemiah 1:5-11
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Introduction:

In his book, *Honest to God*, Bill Hybels recalls “A personal growth conference for Christians isn’t the place where you would expect to see a fight.” But at just such a conference, as a new believer, Bill says midway through the meeting, a question arose about a delicate decision. It led to debate, and the debate escalated to arguing, and within 45 minutes, these Christian leaders had almost come to blows. Before the issue could be resolved, the time came for the next part on the conference schedule – a worship service. Everyone at the conference abruptly filled into the adjoining room where the committee chairman, who had been as spiteful and malicious as anyone else there, grabbed the microphone. Bill says, “Smiling from ear to ear [the man] said, ‘Scripture tells us that the mark of a true Christian is love, so let’s all join hands and sing *They Will Know We are Christians By Our Love*.’” Bill says, “That was my initiation into the world of inauthentic Christianity.

Have you ever known someone who acted one way on the outside, but you knew inside they were someone else? Most of us have had encounters with people who were less than genuine; where we were skeptical of their motives, when we weren’t sure we could trust everything they were saying. And I would say that most people are turned off by fakes, phonies, and hypocrites. Instead, one of the most rare and most prized virtues in our culture is authenticity.

And the truth is, God values authenticity, too. Just as we prefer not to be around hypocritical people, God also prefers us to be genuine. 1 Peter 2:1 says, “Get rid yourselves of all malice, deceit and hypocrisy.” David writes in Psalm 24, “Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false.”

When it comes to prayer, which is simply speaking with God, the Lord expects us to be authentic. The writer of Hebrews teaches us that when we pray, “let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.” (Hebrews 10:22).

And there is hardly a better example of sincere prayer in scripture than Nehemiah. And as we read the prayer of this godly leader I think we can learn some lessons about praying authentically. And I believe God has made it clear that when our church prays, we need to pray authentically.

Look at Nehemiah chapter 1. That’s page 342 in the church bible in front of you. Nehemiah was a devout Jewish man who lived during the 5th century before Christ. A little over 100 years before, the Hebrew people in Jerusalem were conquered by the Babylonians, and most of them were exiled from that Promised Land and sent to Babylon. Later, the Babylonians were defeated by the Persians. Many of the Jewish people were allowed to return to Jerusalem at that time, but the city was in ruin, and much of their Jewish faith had been forgotten. In time, the Temple was rebuilt in Jerusalem, but the walls remained in ruin. In those days, city walls were a necessity for protection, and they were a symbol of pride and strength.

In 445 BC, Nehemiah is serving as cupbearer to the king Artaxerxes, and that position gave him frequent access to the king. Sometime that year, Nehemiah got news from Jerusalem that the city walls laid in ruin, and the people were in trouble and disgrace. Nehemiah was greatly troubled by this, not only because he also was a Jew, but because he was a natural leader.

Nehemiah says, “When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.”

I believe the reason why this bothered him so much was because Nehemiah was a natural leader. And I would suggest to you that if you are a Christian, you are a leader, too. All of us are leaders in some way or another.

- Parents are leaders.
- Teachers are leaders.
- Those who work with children are leaders.
- Friends lead friends.
- Christians should be leaders too by the example we set for our friends, relatives, and non-Christians all around us.

Now, God calls leaders to a higher standard. (James 3:1, NIV)

“Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.”

But God also gives leaders the strength to do what He calls them to do. In the scriptures, we read about many leaders, both good and bad. In today’s scripture text, we see not only an example of how all of us as leaders should pray, but also how to pray authentically.

Here’s the first thing we learn about authentic prayer:

1. It’s not about Me.

4When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. 5 Then I said:

"O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, 6 let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. (Nehemiah 1:4-6, NIV)

For Nehemiah, prayer wasn’t just about him; it was about his people. In fact, their situation did not really affect him one way or the other in a physical sense. He was not living in Jerusalem. He was in Babylon. The fact that the walls were broken down in Jerusalem had nothing to do with what was happening to him in Babylon. And yet, he was moved by the news. He wept and mourned for his people. It was not about him. It was about them.

- Consider Others

Proverbs 21:13 says, If you close your ear to the cry of the poor, you will cry out and not be heard.

We can go through life and let other people live in hellish conditions and it might not affect us one way or the other in a physical sense. But friends, as spiritual beings, as godly men and women, we cannot just sit back and watch as people are herded into hell. We cannot just observe as if through a looking glass as people live in hellish conditions. We have to care, because God puts that care in our hearts.

Authentic prayer is when you reflect the character of Christ and reach out to those around you with his love and compassion. But when we pray with no consideration for others or for God, the bible says we will not be heard.

- Consider Your Motives

And we need to consider our motives, too. Are our motives purely selfish, or are they pure?

I've heard a lot of Christians have fallen into the "if then" philosophy. We say if we do this then God will do this. Do you ever play this game in your relationships, you say if I clean the kitchen then my wife will give me a back rub. If I get up with the kids then my husband will let me sleep in.

The "if then" philosophy can set us up for disappointment, and we often find ourselves doing things not for the other person, but for what they will do for us in return. We sometimes try to manipulate God that way, we think that if we serve him, and if we come to church often enough, and if we tithe, then God should grant our every request.

But God doesn't want us to play Games with him. James 4:3 When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

Think about how much of our prayer lives are spent trying to get what we want out of God.

1. Lord, help me to get the promotion.
2. Lord help child do well in the ballgame.
3. Help me get a car like that.
4. Help me get rich.

Here's the test: When God doesn't reply, it is an opportunity for us to show him that our love for him is the same in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad. When God doesn't answer your prayers, it will show what your relationship with him is made of.

You see, it's okay to ask God to honor you, but let your motivation be to glorify him. God will honor those who honor him.

Nehemiah's prayer focused not on what he wanted for himself, but it focused on glorifying God. He honored God in his prayer, and he desired that the Lord's people in Jerusalem would be restored.

Authentic prayer understands it's not about me, but there is one way that Authentic prayer IS about me!

2. It IS about ME!

Nehemiah prays, v6 "[Lord] let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. ⁷ We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses. (Nehemiah 1:6-7)

There's one way that authentic prayer IS about us, and that's when it comes to confessing our sins.

Isaiah 59:1-2 "Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear."

Nehemiah acknowledged his sins and the sins of his people. Now, He was not just pointing the finger of blame at the people and saying, "They are sinners", but he looked at himself and recognized that he was far from perfect. He recognized that he and his people had acted wickedly against God. They had not obeyed God's commands. In this sense, they were all in the same boat. They were all sinners who had failed God.

If we're going to pray authentically, then we need to be honest and come clean to God about our sin. As leaders, we need to acknowledge before God where we have failed Him.

1 John 1:8-9, NIV says If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Some of you have heard the story Bill Hybels tells in his book “Too Busy Not To Pray”. He says:

Imagine you've been on a vacation for two or three weeks. You come back and your lawn is about eight inches high, and you realize your mower is broken.

Fortunately your neighbor has a John Deere riding mower that will cut anything, and he has told you before you're welcome to borrow it anytime you need it. You decide to take him up on his offer.

As you walk to his house, your neighbor's little dachshund waddles up and starts bothering your pant legs. Now, you hate dachshunds, especially this one. It howls, it messes on your lawn, and it snaps at you- You can hardly put one foot in front of the other without getting tripped. Exasperated, you give the little fellow a short, swift kick, and he goes flying across the yard.

Then you look up and see your neighbor standing on his front porch, arms folded, looking straight at you. Is it a good moment to ask for the lawn mower? Or is there something you need to clear up before asking for favors?

When we have unconfessed sin, or if we have sin on the calendar, then before God will answer our prayer, we need to clear the air. God wants us to come to him in honesty, and acknowledge where we have disobeyed, before we ask him for favors.

Proverbs 28:13 says “He who tries to conceal his sin cannot prosper but he who admits them, confesses them, forsakes them will have mercy.”

Christians are all leaders of something, and a good leader prays with authenticity. If we are going to pray authentically, then we need to recognize it's not about me – it's about the needs of others and bringing glory to God. And we need to notice it is about me – that I need to come clean about my sin before a Holy God. And Nehemiah's prayer also teaches us that prayer is Beyond me, but it's not beyond God.

3. It's beyond me, but not beyond God!

8 "Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, 9 but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.'

10 "They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. 11 O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man."

I was cupbearer to the king. (Nehemiah 1:8-11, NIV).

Nehemiah understood that he was ONLY the cupbearer. He was not a high ranking official. He was not a trusted counselor. Who is a cupbearer that a king should listen to him?

By the World's standards Nehemiah was just a servant of his king. His job was to make sure the king did not drink something with poison in it. Anyone can do that job. All you have to do is drink from the cup and if you don't die the king can drink.

But according to God's standards, Nehemiah was a servant of the Most High God. There was more to Nehemiah than met the eye. He had a heart for God and for his people.

Approaching a pagan king and asking for help to go to your people and rebuild those walls was like putting yourself on the firing line. Because of his insignificance to the king, it would take a miracle of God for the king to listen to what he had to say, to not laugh at him or kill him. It would only be by the hand of God that the king would allow Nehemiah to leave, and as it turned out Nehemiah's prayer was answered. Not only did the king not punish Nehemiah for making his request, but he actually helped him with the task.

If we're going to pray authentically, we need to have the right measure of humility. But we need to avoid two extremes: We can't approach God with arrogance, but we shouldn't approach God timidly, either.

We haven't earned the right to speak to God, and no amount of success in the world's eyes makes us more pleasing or worthy when it comes to making requests to the Lord.

But by God's standards, we are His servants. And God's servants are special to Him. And we have been commanded to be bold in our prayers. We can speak to God through prayer with confidence. The bible says:

"In [Christ] and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence."
(Ephesians 3:12, NIV)

Hebrews 4:16, NLT "So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most."

When Moses was leading the Israelites out of Egypt, he boldly asked God to go with him, and he was bold when he asked to see God's glory. God didn't scold Moses for making bold requests. On the contrary, he did what Moses asked for.

Abraham asked God to spare Sodom & Gomorrah, and the Lord agreed to spare the city, even if there were just 10 righteous people. There were not, but the Lord still allowed Abraham's relative Lot to escape.

You know what boldness looks like when we pray authentically? Boldness is when we ask God to help us do something that will fail if he doesn't. Let me say that again. We should pray for God to do things in us, and in our families, and in our church that are so big, that if God isn't in it, it will fail.

Rather than pray, "God keep us safe." Perhaps we can boldly ask God to make us dangerous, and use us to confront our culture, or take a mission trip.

Rather than pray for God to keep us comfortable, let's pray that God will stretch us maybe to tithe or even to give more than a tithe to see His kingdom grow.

Rather than pray for non-Christians to come to our church, let's boldly pray that our church will go to people who don't know Christ. And that we will double the size of our congregation over the next 3 years.

Rather than pray for our kids to be successful in the world, let's boldly pray that they will serve God in ministry and be significant in the kingdom.

Boldness in prayer isn't afraid or anxious. It's confident. And that confidence doesn't come from trusting in ourselves and our own abilities. Our boldness and confidence comes from a rock solid trust in the God of the Universe and our relationship with His Son Jesus Christ.

Philippians 4:6-7, NIV “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Praying Authentically like Nehemiah did means I am not going to look only to my own interests, but to the interests of others. Our motivation will be to glorify God rather than ourselves in prayer, because it's not about me.

And praying authentically like Nehemiah means we will confess our sin to God. We recognize the reason our prayers go unanswered is because we haven't cleared the air with our Heavenly Father. So we need to realize that the effectiveness of prayer is about me and my relationship with God.

And like Nehemiah, we need to speak to the Lord with boldness. We will pray for things that are beyond us, but not beyond our God. Because when we get serious about prayer, and when we understand how awesome God is, we can have confidence in Him. And because of our relationship with Jesus, we can come close to the ear of our God and ask him for help. It's not because of anything I've done, but what Christ has done.

If you want to have that kind of prayer life, you need to have a relationship with Christ. We can't be authentic with God when our sin has separated us from him. We need to clear the air, and that is only possible when we put our trust in Christ. He's the one who gives us access to God.

If you've never put your trust in Christ, and repented of your sin, confessed Jesus as the Lord of your Life and been baptized into His name, then why not do it today? You can meet me down front, and today, you can have all your sins washed away – all the guilt, all the anxiety, all the fear. And you can know without a doubt that God hears you when you pray, and that when this life is over you'll spend eternity with Him in heaven.

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