

## **AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY - Part 4**

### **The Most Important Prayer You'll Ever Pray**

**Dr. Derek Morris**

Preaching passage:	Acts 2:42
Subject:	To what did the early Christian devote themselves
Complements:	the apostles' teaching fellowship the breaking of bread prayer
Exegetical idea:	The early Christians devoted themselves to the apostles teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer.
Homiletical idea:	<b>An authentic Christian community is a praying community</b>
Purpose:	To help my hearers to understand the identifying characteristics of an authentic Christian community and to encourage them to devote themselves to prayer.

#### Introduction

I visited Amazon.com this past week and did a book search on “prayer.” Can you guess how many books titles came up? 98797! Obviously, a great deal has been written about prayer through the ages. Those 98797 books currently available on Amazon.com are just a few of them! My favorite definition of prayer in all of my study through the years comes from a little book called *Steps to Christ*. Listen to these profound words, in a chapter entitled “The Privilege of Prayer”: “Prayer is the opening of the heart to God as to a friend. Not that it is necessary in order to make known to God what we are, but in order to enable us to receive Him. Prayer does not bring God down to us, but brings us up to Him.” (p. 93) This morning, we want to focus our attention on the most important prayer you’ll ever pray.

This is the fourth sermon in our series on Authentic Christian Community. For the past three weeks we have been studying a single text of Scripture. This text describes an authentic Christian community raised up by the power of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. In this

one text of Scripture, we have noticed four essential characteristics of an authentic Christian community—back then, and also today. Where is this text found? Acts 2:42. These Christians, according to Luke’s testimony in Acts 2:42, devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.

We noted in the first sermon of this series that the apostles’ teaching can be summed up in one sentence, as evidenced in Acts 5:42. “Jesus is the Christ.” The truth about Jesus is the heart of the apostles’ teaching. Jesus is at the center, and that is true of any authentic Christian community. If Jesus is not at the center, you can call the community what you will, but it is not truly Christian. It’s my prayer that this church would be an authentic Christian community with Jesus Christ at the center. Isn’t that your prayer too?

A second characteristic of an authentic Christian community is devotion to koinonia, devotion to fellowship. We defined koinonia as being connected with one another in love with God at the center. And this true Christian fellowship is demonstrated in very practical ways: loving one another, caring for the needy in our midst, bearing one another’s burdens. And I’m excited to see a growing commitment to true Christian fellowship in our midst. That’s not just an optional extra. Koinonia fellowship is one of the essential characteristics of an authentic Christian community.

Last week we noted that this group of Christians described in Acts 2:42 not only devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, but they also devoted themselves to the breaking of bread. We decided that this term, the breaking of bread, did not primarily refer to picnics and potlucks. Rather, “the breaking of bread” was primarily a reference to the Last Supper where Jesus said, “This is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of

Me.” The early Christians were devoted to the breaking of bread. It was a time of sacred communion, remembering what Jesus had done for them. I’m excited that this afternoon we have the opportunity to break bread together. God has impressed us this week that this service will be a time of profound spiritual blessing. And so I want to personally invite you to the agape communion this afternoon at 5:00 pm in the Upper Youth Center. I could try to motivate you to come by telling you that Stephanie Jensen and her team will have the Upper Youth Center beautifully decorated and an agape meal prepared. I could tell you that my wife and I will sing a beautiful Scripture blessing from her new CD. I could tell you that you’ll be challenged by a powerful message from God’s Word. But those aren’t the reasons to come to the breaking of bread. We come because Jesus invites us to come. We come because authentic Christians are devoted to the breaking of bread. So I’ll be looking for you this afternoon, and I’m excited to see what God will do.

And then comes the fourth characteristic of an authentic Christian community. Let’s look at our text again, in Acts 2:42. Not only is there devotion to Jesus, the heart of the apostles’ teaching, not only is their devotion to fellowship, not only is their devotion to sacred communion, but there is also devotion to what? Devotion to prayer.

At first reading, this might seem like the easiest characteristic to comprehend. Devotion to prayer. **An authentic Christian community is a praying community.** Do you believe that? I do. **An authentic Christian community is a praying community.** People who worship with us, people who work with us, people who live near us....they ought to say, “Those Christians are praying people!”

But I have a question for you. What kind of praying were those early Christians devoted

to? As I mentioned to you at the beginning of this sermon, there are 98797 books on prayer currently available on Amazon.com. Should we just randomly choose one of those to teach us about prayer? Or perhaps trust the bestseller as being the most accurate? I don't think so. If we're wanting to be an authentic Christian community, like the community described in Acts 2:42, a community raised up by the power of the Holy Spirit, then I think we should look at the inspired record of Scripture and learn how those early Christians prayed. Does that make sense to you?

So what kind of praying were those early Christians devoted to? It's true that the apostle Paul encourages Christians to pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers. But was there a special focus to their prayers? I believe that we can learn some important lessons about prayer from these early Christians who devoted themselves to prayer.

The word used in our text, Acts 2:42, "they devoted themselves to prayer," is  $\text{B}\Delta\cong\Phi,\Lambda\text{P}\text{I}\text{Z}$ . This Greek word for prayer,  $\text{B}\Delta\cong\Phi,\Lambda\text{P}\text{I}\text{Z}$ , is made up of two words:  $\text{,}\Leftrightarrow\text{P}\text{I}\text{Z}$ , which means "a wish" and the prefix  $\text{B}\Delta\cong\text{H}$  which means "to" or "towards." To make a wish towards. This is not just wishful thinking. This wish is directed towards someone. Who is this wish directed toward? God. So prayer, in this context, is expressing a heart desire to God. The opening of the heart to God as to a friend. Would this always involve words? Not necessarily. The apostle Paul tells us in Romans 8:26 that "we do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express." Sometimes these heart desires are expressed to God in words. Sometimes in tears. Sometimes in silence. But whether with words or with tears or in silence, these prayers are directed toward God. Because those early Christians believed the word of the Lord when He said, "Call upon Me, and I will

answer you and show you great and marvelous things which you have not known.” Jer 33:3

The first reference to prayer among early Christians in the book of Acts uses this same noun, ΒΛ≐Φ,ΛΠΖ. To make a wish toward. It’s found in Acts 1:14. Let’s look at that text together. Acts 1:14 “They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.” Here is a picture of a community that is devoted to prayer. What was the heart wish, the heart desire that they were expressing to God in their prayers? Was it “Dear Jesus, Help me to have a nice day?” Or “Dear God, Help me to make more money?” I don’t think so. But we don’t have to guess. If we carefully investigate the inspired record, we can find some clear indicators regarding the content of their prayers.

What happened immediately prior to this special prayer time recorded in Acts 1:14? Look at the beginning of Acts 1. What has just taken place? Jesus has ascended to heaven. And what had He told them before His ascension? Look with me at Acts 1:4-6, 8.

“.....”

So what wish, what heart desire, do you think that these early Christians were expressing in their prayers of Acts 1:14? They were not praying that the Holy Spirit would come. His coming was promised by Jesus. So what was the content of their prayer? Not, “Heavenly Father, Please send us your Holy Spirit!” But rather, “Holy Father, Let my heart be open to receive your Holy Spirit who will surely come as Jesus promised!” And is that all of the preparation that is necessary to receive the Holy Spirit to be with us and in us as Jesus promised? Is it just a matter of asking, of being willing? Look again at Acts 2:38. “.....”

Do we just need to pray, and ask for the Holy Spirit that we might have power to be witnesses for Jesus? No. We also need to repent. What does it mean to repent? To turn away

from our sins. To have a change of mind. A change of heart. And that is a supernatural work of God. We can't convert ourselves. But we can cry out to God to turn us around! And that repentance is visible, through the sacred service of baptism, and day by day, through a change of behavior.

I want to suggest that part of the prayers described in Acts 1:14 and Acts 2:42 were prayers of repentance, prayers of surrender to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, that they might be ready and receptive when the Holy Spirit was poured out.

What else was included in their prayers? Well, let's read one of their prayers, recorded in Acts 4:24-30. "....." Their prayer included praise to God. Sovereign Lord, creator of heaven and earth. And then comes a request, a petition, in verse 29.

"....." And what was the result? Acts 4:31. "....." They prayed for holy boldness, and for power to fulfill the mission that Jesus had given to them. And in response to their prayer, the Holy Spirit came upon them with power.

So this devotion to prayer was not just a private spiritual exercise. This devotion to prayer was focused. These Christians wanted to be all that Jesus intended them to be—His witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. The most important prayer a Christian will ever pray is a prayer of repentance and surrender to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, asking that you might be open to His Spirit to do the work He has called you to do.

Earlier this year, I had a privilege of attending a prayer conference at Pine Springs Ranch, in Southeastern California Conference. What a blessing! One of the presentations by Ron

Halvorsen was on claiming our communities, claiming our neighborhoods for Christ.

One practical suggestion that Ron Halvorsen gave for impacting our neighborhoods was prayer walking. Praying for our neighbors to know Jesus. A lot of us walk in our neighborhoods anyway. Why not pray for our neighbors while we walk? Why not claim our communities for Christ? Ron got the idea of prayer walking from the experience of Joshua. Joshua walked around Jericho and claimed it for God. What do you think Joshua was doing while he was walking around the city? Sight-seeing? No! He was praying. And the priests, who were carrying the Ark? They were praying. And the trumpeters? They were praying while they were playing. And the singers? They were praying while they were singing. They were prayer walking-claiming that territory for God.

And the Lord told Joshua, when you enter the land of Canaan, "every place that the sole of your foot will tread I have given you." Josh 1:3 And so Joshua prayer walked the land. And I believe that we need to do some prayer walking too. Have you noticed that Satan is making inroads in our neighborhoods? Are we going to just sit back and do nothing? Are we going to barricade ourselves inside our homes and inside our beautiful

church and ignore everyone around us? I pray that the answer is "No!" As authentic Christians, we must devote ourselves to prayer. Prayers of repentance, prayers of surrender to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, prayers that we will be open to receive the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, prayers that the mission of Jesus will be fulfilled in us and through us.

Ron Halvorsen told the story of an elderly lady who started prayer walking in her community. She was too timid to give Bible studies. She didn't want to talk to anyone. But she said that she was willing to pray for her neighbors while she walked each day. And so she prayer walked day after day. One day, she was walking by a neighbor's house, and the strong impression came to her: "Knock on that door." The thought startled her. She didn't know who lived there. She had no invitation. So she passed on. But the conviction came again. "Knock on that door." So she turned back and knocked on the door. She probably was hoping that no one was home. But the door opened. She said, "I'm a prayer warrior! I'm praying for people in the neighborhood. Do you need prayer?" And the neighbor began to cry. Her husband was sick, in the hospital, and this woman sensed a great need for prayer. And so this elderly prayer walker prayed with her neighbor. Several days passed. Then one

day, while the prayer walker was passing by that same house, the door flew open and the neighbor called out, "Prayer warrior. Come in and meet my husband. He's home from the hospital." Now that elderly lady has business cards printed which reads "Prayer Warrior." On the back of the card it says, "If you need someone to pray with you, call....and there's her telephone number! What a transformation! Hallelujah!

My wife and I were so impressed by that story that we decided to start prayer walking in our neighborhood. We walk almost every morning. Usually we pray for each other, for our children and for special needs that the Lord has brought to our minds. But we decided to start praying for our neighbors as well. We want to claim our neighborhood for Jesus. So we began to pray as we walked. And just a few days after we had started prayer walking, as we were almost finished with our walk, my wife Bodil was impressed to go up to a neighbor's front door and knock. Now, for those of you who don't know my wife, she doesn't just go up to strangers' houses and knock! But that morning she felt compelled by the Holy Spirit. And so she walked up to our neighbor's door and knocked. And waited. And waited. Nobody came to the door. I was already halfway down the driveway, and Bodil had turned to leave when finally the

front door opened. And the lady said, "Hi there. Come in!" We turned, walked back to the front door and went inside. Within less than 60 seconds, the neighbor said, "God sent you here at just the right time. I'm going to unburden my heart to you, if that's OK." And her eyes filled with tears. For the next hour, she poured out her heart. And as we listened, I thought, "This is amazing!" No. God is amazing! We were able to pray with our neighbor, and ask God to bless her and guide her.

I want to personally challenge you to start praying for your family, for your neighbors, for your community. You can prayer walk, or prayer drive. You can gather with some friends to pray. Pray over the phone. You can come to one of the prayer services at church: on Wednesday morning, Wednesday evening, and early Sabbath morning. You choose. But pray somewhere. And not just "Dear Jesus, Help me to have a nice day" prayers. Authentic Christians are humbling themselves before God in confession and repentance, asking that they might be open to receive the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, that they might have a part in fulfilling the mission of Jesus Christ to the world.

Remember, **an authentic Christian community is a praying community.** May it be said of us, by God's grace, and by His Spirit, "those Christians are praying people!" That's an authentic Christian community. They are devoted to Jesus, devoted to true Christian fellowship, devoted to Christ-centered worship in the breaking of bread, and devoted to prayer.