

Recipe for Effective Prayers!

Then the LORD said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know." The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD. Then Abraham approached him and said: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" The LORD said, "If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake." Then Abraham spoke up again: "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city because of five people?" "If I find forty-five there," he said, "I will not destroy it." Once again he spoke to him, "What if only forty are found there?" He said, "For the sake of forty, I will not do it." Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?" He answered, "I will not do it if I find thirty there." Abraham said, "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?" He said, "For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it." Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?" He answered, "For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it."

Do you like meatloaf? I love it. You don't need much, just some ground hamburger, salt and pepper and ketchup, form it into a loaf, bake it and enjoy. But I like to do a little bit more with my meatloaf. I like to add two eggs. Egg is the "glue" in the food world and it will help keep your meatloaf from crumbling apart. I also like to add some bread crumbs for the same reason. I also like to add some chopped yellow onion, basil, garlic and thyme for flavor. I like to use a little beef broth for flavor, too, and if you are daring, a couple dashes of Tabasco sauce gives it some zing. Finally, consider using ground chuck instead of ground hamburger, or mix the two. All of this can make a perfectly satisfying meatloaf into something much better.

Today we are talking about prayer. What a privilege God gives us to pray to him. You could simply slap your hands together and start praying. Or you can add a couple more things to really make your prayers into something special. This morning we will turn to Abraham for a recipe for effective prayers. The first ingredient we see is simple: opportunity.

I. The first ingredient for an effective prayer is opportunity.

"Then the LORD said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know." The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD. Then Abraham approached him and said: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?"

God and two of his angels took on human form and paid a visit with Abraham. After he showered them with some generous oriental hospitality, they told Abraham that his wait is almost over. Within the year he and his wife will a son after a 25 year wait. How that must have excited him.

Then the Lord let Abraham know he was on his way to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to see for himself if things are as bad there as he had heard. This doesn't make sense. The Lord knows our thoughts, the future; he is present everywhere and is all knowing. He already knew that things were bad there. Why did he tell Abraham that he was going? He wanted to give Abraham a chance to pray.

How many opportunities does God give you to pray each day? The next time you hear the ambulance or the flight of life helicopter, God is giving you a chance to pray because someone needs help. Maybe you will have meatloaf for supper tonight. That is an opportunity to pray. Pay attention to the news and the shootings, or other problems out there. These are opportunities to pray. The outcry of our own nation rises up to God. Let's pray for our nation, that God forgive our wickedness and spare us for the sake of his Church and his gospel.

And note one more thing about Abraham. He cared. Yes, he wanted God to spare the cities for the sake of the righteous people, but this would mean sparing the wicked as well. Abraham cared about everyone and every soul. Wherever he went, he ***"called upon the name of the Lord,"*** an Old Testament phrase for sharing his faith. He wanted unbelievers to believe, too. Even if they remained unbelievers, he cared for them. Earlier he formed his shepherds and servants into an army to save Sodom and Gomorrah from a foreign invader. What an example for us. I can't find a passage in the Bible that says, "Love only fellow believers." He wants us to love and care for all people. Maybe our love will get their attention and they ask about our faith. Maybe not. But love knows no bounds. It loves, period.

So opportunity is an ingredient for effective prayer. Another is that we rely on God and is grace alone.

II. Effective prayer relies on God and his grace.

The truth is, we have no right to pray to God. If you had an employee who never showed up for work, who calls you names, and steals from you, and then he comes up to you and asks for a raise, would you give it to him? No. What have we done that

says we have the right to pray to God? We have not done what the Lord says. We keep the commandments that suit us and forget about the rest. We let God's voice be drowned out by the voices of the world around. We have no right to speak to God let alone to expect that he answer our prayers.

Abraham understood that. He confesses in our text: ***"Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes."*** This phrase takes us back to Genesis 3 where God pronounced his curses upon man and his sin, ***"By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."*** Dust and ashes remind us we are under the curse of sin.

Yet, Abraham was bold to pray to God because he based his prayer on God's grace. Notice how Abraham didn't pray, "Lord spare Sodom and Gomorrah because they are providing a good economy." Abraham's prayer relied on God and his love and his mercy; not on the Sodomites; not on the righteous; not on Abraham. By Grace God chose Abraham to be his believer and father of a great nation. By grace Abraham would be the ancestor of the one special descendent, the Messiah whom Abraham trusted would take away his sins, by grace alone.

You and I have it much better than Abraham. Abraham based his prayer on the coming Messiah. We have seen him. We base our prayers on God's grace proven to us in Christ. It says in Colossians 2, ***"When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross."*** God is just. He punishes sin. He is also a God of grace. He freely saves us from our sins. So let's base our prayers on God and his mercy and grace.

Another ingredient of effective prayer is persistence.

III. Another ingredient is persistence.

Abraham prayed and he appealed to God's grace. Surely God wouldn't destroy those cities if he found fifty righteous people there, and God said he wouldn't. God answered his prayer. Abraham could have walked away, but he didn't. He kept praying: ***"... What if only forty are found there? ... What if only thirty can be found there? ... what if only twenty can be found there? ... What if only ten can be found there?"*** Abraham kept on praying and praying and praying. But such persistence is God pleasing. Jesus told us in the gospel how a man will eventually get out of his bed at midnight and give his neighbor some food because he kept knocking on the door. That would be annoying, wouldn't it? I suppose that is a reason telemarketers keep on calling; sooner or later we will give up and say yes.

It may be annoying to us, but not to God. He finds such persistence wonderful. It shows we have faith because we keep coming back to him. Children do that with their parents and parents often give in. Our persistence in prayer shows that we are his dear children and he is our dear Father. So keep praying.

And the final ingredient to an effective prayer is submission.

IV. Finally, submit to the Lord's will.

Abraham finally stopped at ten righteous people. Then he placed everything into God's hands. The next morning Abraham went back to the place where he prayed to God and he saw dense smoke rising from the vicinity of Sodom and Gomorrah. There was no news, yet, about Lot. Was he dead?

Yet we are told in Genesis 19:29, ***"So when God destroyed the cities of the plain, he remembered Abraham, and he brought Lot out of the catastrophe."*** God's answer wasn't what Abraham expected. Yet, God still answered his prayer. Though the cities were destroyed, God made provisions to spare Lot. You can imagine how relieved Abraham was when he heard about Lot's rescue.

Approach God with that kind of submission. Sure, we can offer him advice: make grandma better, a raise or promotion at work would help, a little less rain right now would be helpful. But faith means we finally leave it in God's hands. He will answer your prayers, but often with a twist or in a way we did not expect. We trust him because he will work everything out for our good. We trust him even when he says, "no," because all he does is out of love for us.

There is a lot of good advice on prayer out there. Folding hands and bowing heads is good when you can. Even reciting the Lord's prayer is good. But Abraham gave us a wonderful recipe for our prayer life. Look for opportunities God gives us to pray for all people. Sprinkle on God's grace, some persistence and a lot of submission. That is a delicious recipe for effective prayers. Amen.