

Pray till you're scared

By [David Kamphuis](#)

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“I know you pray a lot, but what actually gets done?”

I get a lot of odd questions in this calling. The one above came recently while I was at lunch. To tell you the truth, I wasn't really surprised by this one. The value of prayer seems to be at an all-time low right now.

I've had good leaders in the church say to me, “We're not just praying, we're doing.” In December the *New York Daily News* ran on their front page “God isn't fixing this” with the opening line of the article saying “Prayers aren't working.” And truth be told they are saying this because so often politicians and leaders use prayer as a substitute for actually living out their calling.

Prayer, it seems, is at an all-time low.

Over and against this, however, is what I experience in my neighborhood on a regular basis. Within the first month of arriving at the congregation I serve, a woman in my neighborhood said, “Oh, you're the new pastor! Please pray over me because I got a demon.” Another man said to me, “I really respect what y'all are doing and I pray for you every night,” after he told me that he couldn't come to church anymore because he was moving. Prayer is this vital action in my community that grants life, or at the very least sustains life for another day.

No experience sums up this prayer dichotomy better than when I talk about how I spend my time. A few months ago I was in a meeting with a few pastors and I told them that, as an inner-city pastor, I purposefully leave 50 percent of my time unscheduled so I have room to deal with the various crises that arise in my neighborhood. Another pastor asked, “What happens when no crises arise?” Right then, another pastor joked, “Oh, you spend all that time praying.” Everyone began to chuckle.

The very next day I was in a meeting with some colleagues from the city and we got on the same subject. Someone said to me, in the most serious manner you could

imagine, “Young man, you had better be spending all that time in prayer and meditation.”

Prayer as joke and prayer as dead-serious matter. Ever since that week, I’ve been trying to reconcile this dichotomy in our world. How can prayer be so dismissed on one side and so necessary on the other?

It doesn’t come down to basic belief in God because, as I said, I find the dismissive attitude about prayer among Christians as much as I find it among nonbelievers. The person who asked me, “I know you pray a lot, but what actually gets done?” goes to church every Sunday (not mine).

On the podcast *Preachers on Preaching*, [Will Willimon told host Matt Fitzgerald](#) that often we use prayer wrong. Prayer, he said, often gets reserved for the elderly and for people who are sick. Biblically prayer is used for a lot more than that, Willimon pointed out.

So in Acts 4 the apostles, facing all sorts of threats, pray for boldness. Not wisdom or safety, but that “with all boldness your servants may speak your word” and “that signs and wonders may be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

If I think back on my own prayer life, how often have I prayed for signs and wonders? Truthfully, not very often. Part of this is because I am afraid that it might not happen. Prayer isn’t a wishing stone and God’s not a genie with a lamp.

However, I think a larger reason is that I’m afraid prayer might actually do something.

Our problem with prayer is that we put limits around it. I pray for the sick. I pray very general prayers in worship. But prayer in scripture often consists of bold, almost terrifying, requests of God. In Acts 12:5 “the church prayed fervently to God” for Peter while he was in prison. The next thing that happens is that an angel rescues Peter. The church can hardly believe it themselves.

My community needs prayer and finds that prayer does actually get things done. Maybe they believe that because their prayers are bold. Prayers that ministry will thrive and prayers that evil’s power be put to flight.

So with all that we face in this world, what we need more than ever is prayer. Not just prayers for the sick or prayers of sympathy, but bold and almost scary prayers.

In the face of decline our churches do not need new strategies but rather prayers for boldness and prayers that we will be driven by the Spirit to places that we fear. In our world today, where racism and hatred and injustice seem to be so strong, we as a church need to start not with new programs, but with prayers for signs and wonders from the living God.

Warning to the wise: these prayers will scare us, but we need them.

“I know you pray a lot, but what actually gets done?” I ended up listing off a lot of things that get done, but what I should have said is that prayer has a power to do more than just accomplish things. Prayer is asking God to act with the full power of the living God instead of in some tame and predictable way.

I prefer tame and predictable. It's less terrifying.

But it's also not what I need right now.

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