

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 18, 2012**

TIME TO PRAY

Daniel 6:1-16

I want to talk with you about prayer today. About the centrality of prayer if you want to have a healthy, growing relationship with God personally, and if we want to have a healthy, growing church where we love God passionately with everything we are and everything we have, where we love one another with the same kind of love with which Jesus loved us, and where we love and serve and minister to the needs of others in the world around us in the name of Jesus. Prayer is not an optional add-on reserved only for “spiritual giants.” And there is way more to it than just a kind of formalized religious obligation we are supposed to check off. Prayer is both an immense spiritual privilege and a spiritual tool endowed by God with enormous power. But too many of us know too little about it, and we spend too little time actually doing it. I say “we,” not “you,” because I’m talking about me and preaching to myself as much as I’m preaching to you today.

ALL WE HAVE TO DECIDE

The common thread running through this series of messages the last several weeks is the idea of time. The author of *The Hobbit* and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, J. R. R. Tolkien, observed that “all we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.” *All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.* It might be worth taking some time to think about that statement and its application to your life. How do you decide what to do – or what not to do – with the time you have been given? What beliefs, values, principles, or commitments guide your decision-making? How do you know how best to “redeem the time” God has given you, whether long or short?

Here is what I know. Here are the answers we have found in God’s Word in recent weeks:

- It is always time to “seek the Lord while He may be found” (Isaiah 55:6), time to stop dawdling, time to stop playing games in your spiritual life, time to repent and turn away from sin in your life, time to run straight to the cross. Straight to the arms of Jesus. It is always the right time to get right with God and start fresh with Him. You can never do it too soon. Now is the time – “while He may be found.” The day will come when it is too late.
- It is always time to love: Time to love God with everything you are and everything you have – with heart, soul, mind, and body (Mark 12:30). Why? Because God is worthy. Because it is what He deserves and desires. Because of who He is and what He has done for us. Because of His love for us and His amazing, all-sufficient grace.
- It is always time to love others as we love ourselves (Mark 12:31), time to love one another in the same way that Jesus loved us (John 13:34). Generous love. Self-giving love. Sacrificial love.

There is never a time when it is not time to love. Never a time. Nothing in life is more important than loving God and loving others.

- It is also time to accept and embrace God's love for you. *For you!* And for me. Do not doubt the fact of your Heavenly Father's unconditional love for you. And let His love revolutionize your life. Until you know in your head and believe in your heart that God loves *you*, you will not be set free to love the way God wants you to love.
- As we saw last Sunday, it is time to "get the Spirit." Or, maybe it is better to say, time to "get *with* the Spirit." The Holy Spirit came to take up residence in you when you came to saving faith in the Lord Jesus. If you have put your trust in Christ alone for your salvation, you've got the Spirit. But you can have the Spirit without being filled with the Spirit. As Paul indicates in Galatians 5, God wants us to live by the Spirit (under the Spirit's guidance and direction), to keep in step with the Spirit, and to produce "the fruit of the Spirit" in our lives.

There is never a time when it is not time to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. Never a time. Keep all these things in mind as you make decisions both big and small about what to do with the time you have been given.

DANIEL: A MAN WHO TOOK PRAYER SERIOUSLY

Now, about prayer. And Daniel. Daniel believed in the value and importance of prayer. He took prayer seriously, and understood that there is never a time when it is not time to pray. Daniel was just a teenager, probably 14 or 15 years old, when he was deported from Jerusalem to Babylon around 605 BC, and then chosen for service in the palace of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. For the rest of his life, Daniel lived in exile in a foreign land, seeking to serve God faithfully in the midst of a polytheistic kingdom and culture. Not an easy place to serve. But the legacy of Daniel's life and witness is truly remarkable.

Though he had been young at the time he was taken into the king's service, Daniel was no longer a young man when he was found guilty of violating an unalterable, unchangeable, unrepealable royal decree, and was thrown into the lions' den as punishment. Nebuchadnezzar was dead. So was his successor, Belshazzar. The Babylonian empire had been conquered by the Medes and the Persians, led by Darius the Mede. Just as he had served Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar with distinction, Daniel became one of Darius the Mede's most trusted advisers. At the time of the events in Daniel 6, Daniel was getting up there in years. He was now in his 80s, and still going strong. Darius had promoted Daniel to a prominent and powerful position in his kingdom, which resulted in a backlash of envy and animosity toward Daniel. Political intrigue is not merely a modern phenomenon. Daniel's enemies devised a plot to persuade the king to enact a law outlawing prayer to any god or mortal except the king, for a period of 30 days, a law they knew Daniel was sure to violate, because they knew he was a man of prayer.

They were right. Did you notice what Daniel did when he heard that the royal decree had been signed and made public? He did what he had always done. He went home and went

upstairs, to the room where the windows opened to the west toward Jerusalem, got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks and praise to God, and asking for God's help, as he was in the habit of doing three times a day. The king's edict did not stop him. Daniel did not panic. He did not call a press conference to denounce the new law. He quietly continued his daily prayer times, "just as he had done before" (Daniel 6:10).

DAILY APPOINTMENTS WITH GOD

Daniel had made a daily appointment with God – three of them, in fact, every day – and he kept those appointments. Why? Because Daniel understood that his connection with God in prayer was essential to his spiritual well being and to his faithfulness to God in a foreign land and culture.

Do you have a daily appointment with God to pray and read the Bible? It doesn't have to be the same time every day, though you are probably more likely to keep your appointment if you meet with God at a consistent time. And you don't have to try to prove your spiritual "bonafides" by having three daily prayer times, like Daniel, or by setting the world record for the longest devotional time ever. Just make it a priority to have a daily time set aside to meet with God, to allow Him to speak to you through His Word, and to bring your cares and prayers, your praises and thanks, and the burdens and longings of your heart to Him.

Daniel's daily appointments with God were so important to him that he risked being thrown to the lions. I think Daniel had to know what would happen if he were found out, if he were found to have disregarded and disobeyed the edict of the king. He had to know. But he prayed anyway. And, just as his enemies hoped, Daniel got caught in their sting operation. They went immediately and tattled to the king, but only after reminding the king that his edict was binding and he could do nothing to alter it. You see, Daniel wasn't the only one who got "caught in a trap." In his own way, the king was caught, too. Despite his great admiration, appreciation and respect for Daniel, the king's hands were tied. The law was the law. And the punishment – being thrown to the lions, a certain sentence of death – was the punishment. As you know, though, things didn't turn out the way Daniel's accusers expected.

THE CIRCLE MAKER

I've been reading a new book by Mark Batterson called *The Circle Maker*. It is a stirring, convicting, inspiring, humbling book. It is primarily about prayer, and is written out of the belief that "bold prayers honor God" and "God honors bold prayers." Another time, perhaps, I will tell you where the book's title comes from. But you don't have to wait for me to do that. Get the book. Read the book. As you read, ask God to speak to you about your life and the kind of prayers He wants you to pray. Ask God to speak to you about our church and the kind of prayers we should be praying.

Listen to what Batterson says about Daniel: "His persistence quotient was unparalleled, as evidenced by his habit of getting on his knees, three times a day and praying through an open window toward Jerusalem. Even when King Darius outlawed prayer, Daniel continued to stop, drop, and pray three times a day.... Few people prayed with more consistence or

intensity than Daniel” (pp. 138, 139). Then, a few pages later, he turns the spotlight on Daniel once again, calling Daniel “one of the most brilliant minds the ancient world has ever known... a Renaissance man two thousand years before the Renaissance, with an unusual aptitude for both philosophy and science. He could explain riddles and solve problems unlike anyone in his generation, and no one could dream or interpret dreams like Daniel. But the thing that set him apart,” Batterson writes, “wasn’t his IQ; it was his PQ. Daniel prayed circles around the greatest superpower on earth, and because he got on his knees, he brought kings and kingdoms to their knees.

“Daniel didn’t just pray when he had a bad day; he prayed every day. He didn’t just dial up 911 prayers when he was in a lions’ den; prayer was part of the rhythm and routine of his life. Prayer was his life, and his life was a prayer” (p. 148).

If we learn anything from the life of Daniel, it is that there is never a time when it is not time to stop, drop, and pray.

OTHERS WHO TOOK PRAYER SERIOUSLY

Daniel, of course, is not the only figure in the Bible who took prayer seriously and wove it into the fabric of his life. Think of Hannah, the mother of Samuel. Think of David, Elijah, and Nehemiah. Above all, think of Jesus, who “often withdrew to lonely places and prayed” (Luke 5:16), whose habit of personal prayer prompted the disciples to ask Him to teach them to pray (Luke 11:1), and who told His disciples one particular parable, about a persistent widow, to show them they should keep on praying and not give up (Luke 18:1-8).

Think also of the first believers in the church at Jerusalem following Pentecost, who “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread *and to prayer*” (Acts 2:42, emphasis added). Even before Pentecost, when the band of believers was small, they were constantly meeting together for prayer (Acts 1:14).

In Acts 4, after they were arrested, jailed overnight, interrogated and then released by the religious leaders in Jerusalem, Peter and John went back to the fellowship and told what had happened. “When they heard this,” it says in verse 24, “(the believers) raised their voices together in prayer to God.” They devoted themselves to prayer (cf. Colossians 4:2). And do you know what happened on this occasion when they had finished praying? Verse 31 says that after they prayed, “the place where they were meeting trembled and shook. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak God’s Word with fearless confidence” (*The Message*).

Even though I would probably be startled by it at first, I would love for that to happen when we conclude a time of prayer. Or even while we are praying. The empowerment of the Holy Spirit for faithful, fruitful Kingdom ministry in response to the impassioned prayers of God’s people: Lord, let it be so! Let it be so in us!

A CHURCH DEVOTED TO PRAYER

Before I close today, I need to tell you a couple things the Lord has put on my heart related to prayer. I believe God wants us to make prayer central – more central – in our life as a church. I believe God wants us, in the words of Paul in Colossians 4:2, to “devote (ourselves) to prayer, being watchful and thankful,” not only as individuals, but as a church family: *A church devoted to prayer.*

As a church devoted to prayer, I believe God wants us to pray for our mission fields, and not just those far away, in places like France or the Middle East or Africa, but right across the street. Literally. God has put a burden on my heart to pray for the mission field across the street from us at Edison High School – in effect, to draw a prayer circle around the Edison High School campus and to pray for its blessing:

- To pray, as Jesus taught us to pray, for God’s name to be hallowed there, to be treated with reverence and honor and respect; for God’s kingdom, His gracious kingly rule, to be extended into the hearts and lives of students, faculty, staff, administrators, volunteers, and families; and for God’s gracious and perfect will to be done on the Edison campus.
- To pray for open doors of opportunity for us, as good neighbors, to serve the Edison High School community in whatever ways the Lord desires.
- To come alongside the Christians who are already there – Christian administrators, teachers and staff, students, parents and families – in whatever ways we can to let the light of Jesus shine in that place and to get the salt of our lives out of the saltshaker and into the world.

PRAYER-WALKING

And there is one more thing. I believe the Lord is calling us to a ministry of prayer-walking at Edison and other mission fields where He has placed us. I’m not an expert in prayer-walking, but I think Mark Batterson is right when he says there is something powerful about being in proximity to the person, place, or thing you are praying for. Prayer-walking simply involves silently praying for a place, a school, a neighborhood, an organization, seeking God’s blessing upon it and all who are part of it, as you walk around that place or through it. I have taken prayer walks around Kelsey Point Circle, the neighborhood of townhomes right next door to us, and further down Castlewellan Drive as well. This is a ministry we can do not only at Edison High School and here in Kingstowne, but in the neighborhoods where we all live, in our schools, and the places where we work.

It is something I believe God wants *me* to do. And I believe it is something God wants *us* to do.

I don’t have a master-plan for prayer-walking all figured out. But if your heart is drawn to any of this, if you think this may be something from the Lord, I want to invite you to come and meet with me here next Sunday afternoon at 4:00 PM so that we can talk and pray about it together. Next Sunday, March 25, at 4:00 PM.

May we, like Daniel, remember that there is never a time when it is not time to pray. May we, like Daniel, make and keep a daily appointment with God. As Jesus taught His disciples, may we not become discouraged, but keep on praying and not give up. And may we trust God to work through our prayers. In His time. In His ways. For His glory.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.