

In 1981, Christian Führer began a Monday evening prayer service at his church. This may not seem so extraordinary. Churches all over the world hold prayer services. But he was pastor at St. Nicholas Church in Leipzig. That was in former East Germany, and the Communists were still very much in power. So, as you can imagine, few people dared to come out for prayer. But there were a few, and they devoted themselves to prayer – prayer for their city, for their nation, and for freedom. Did they ever feel like giving up? Probably. Things got worse before they got better. But little by little, more people joined in. Soon three other Lutheran churches nearby started holding Monday evening prayer services of their own. They even got up the courage to end their services with a joint candlelight walk around the city. In time, Lutheran churches throughout the land started doing this. By 1989, attendance in Leipzig alone reached the tens of thousands. The tipping point came October 9th. Incensed by these after-service prayer walks, the Communist authorities decided to play hard ball. They sent in the military with orders to shoot. Seventy thousand people showed up anyway. Amazingly, not a single shot was fired. Well, the next week 120,000 came. The next week 500,000. And the result? Soon the Berlin wall fell, then the Communist government. Of course, there were many factors behind all this. But back then, most people credited the Monday evening prayer services. In fact, a banner even went up in the Leipzig city center: “*Wir danken Dir, Kirche!*” “We thank you, church!”

Of course, the real “thank you” should go to God! But it’s easy to see why folks might feel grateful to that group of intercessors. After all, they had the courage to come together in the first place, and they had the will to persevere. Against all odds, they trusted in the power of mutual prayer – and it worked! We can be grateful to them, too, because they’ve shown us that such prayer didn’t just work back in Bible times. Mutual prayer can still work wonders today. Even in ordinary Lutheran churches like those of Leipzig – or a church like our own!

This shouldn’t surprise us. The New Testament emphasizes mutual prayer. In fact, most teaching on prayer is in the plural – “when you pray” meaning “you all.” Now, in some cases this may be due to the fact that the message was directed to a group. But not in every case, or even the most significant cases. For instance, think of Jesus’ model prayer. Does it begin “My Father”? No, it’s “**Our Father.**” And most of the petitions are plural, too. “**Give us this day our daily bread.**” “**Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.**” “**Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.**” Surely, this is no coincidence! Anymore than when Jesus says, “**If two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.**” Clearly, God values mutual prayer!

What may not be so clear is the reason why. After all, the spiritual realm is not a democracy, so it’s not as if more prayers count like more votes. Nor can God be

pressured by more prayers into doing something He doesn't want to do. So why does God call for mutual prayer? And why does He seem more willing to answer mutual prayer? It could be a divine strategy, growing out of God's desire to do more in our lives than just give us the specific blessings we're asking for.

For instance, we all know God wants us to **break out of self-centeredness** and **grow in love** for one another. Now, if we always just prayed by ourselves for ourselves, what would be the effect? That could actually make us more self-centered, couldn't it? So maybe having us pray together for others is a way to get us out of ourselves; also a way to encourage concern for others and build bonds between us. That would make sense. Mutual prayer would then bring blessings beyond whatever specific blessing we were asking for.

Likewise, we know God wants us to **grow in Christian unity**. Just praying by ourselves for ourselves wouldn't promote unity, would it? That might even undermine unity. So maybe having us agree in prayer for others is a way God pulls us out of isolation, gets us working with others, and strengthens the bonds between us. That would also make sense – and bring blessings beyond whatever specific blessing we were asking for.

Or it could have to do with the **big picture**. Maybe God waits to move until we are spiritually ready to **recognize** that He is moving and are ready to **receive** the answer to prayers as an answer **from Him**.

Again, I think back to former East Germany. God could have brought down the communist regime any time, any way. But would the people have been ready to make the most of the new situation without having prayed for it, and without having prayed for it together, and without having prayed for it together long-term with great fervor at great risk? Frankly, I doubt it. Something about the change coming in response to mutual prayer gave strength to the people, inner confidence. It also helped prepare them to face the challenges freedom would bring. As it is, there has been much backsliding since then. God only knows what the situation would have been without the experience of prolonged mutual prayer! But God **does** know – that's the point. And no doubt it's the point a lot more often than **we** know. Suffice it to say there may be many good reasons why God desires mutual prayer!

Why, in our own congregation we've seen how beautifully mutual prayer can deepen love, unity, and spiritual growth. For instance, when little Connor Rosscup was battling cancer, how our people prayed for him! Many of us here tonight. And what was the effect of all that mutual prayer? I am glad to say that Connor is alive and well. That was the blessing we sought. But it was not the only blessing God gave. How many people felt moved to support Connor and his family – maybe with a casserole or a book or a card or a DVD! How many people took this boy and his parents to their hearts – without even really knowing them! You see the blessings! Joining together in mutual prayer tapped a well-

spring of love for Connor and his family! Joining together in mutual prayer united us around something that really mattered! In fact, I believe joining together in mutual prayer – for Connor and many others – has prepared us for our congregation’s current step forward in spiritual growth: more intense intercessory prayer. And these are just the obvious blessings. No doubt there are many more. But experiences like this make it clear that there are very good reasons why God desires mutual prayer!

So...“**devote yourselves to prayer,**” says our text. And this really doesn’t call for much more than what we’ve already discussed these past three weeks. In mutual prayer, we can just talk to God like when we’re praying alone – though we must also “**agree in prayer**” so that our mutual prayer is truly *mutual*. Likewise, we need to “**ask in faith, never doubting,**” and that is actually easier in mutual prayer, because we have more support than if we are going it alone. We also need to “**persevere in prayer.**” This, too, is easier in a group, for if one loses heart, there are still others who will keep at it and offer that one encouragement.

Really, the only additional thing is getting together for prayer. And sure, we *can pray* together without *being* together. Our e-mail prayer chain is one obvious example. But there are definite advantages to *being* together. For one thing, it’s more unifying when we’re actually together as we pray. I think that’s one reason why God expects us to worship together as a body each week, rather than just go it alone – say, out amidst the beauties of nature. When the Word says, “**Do not forsake the gathering together of yourselves,**” that is not just an arbitrary command. It is meant to strengthen and build up our unity. And that’s also the effect of getting together for prayer. Plus, each person brings different gifts and insights, which enrich our mutual prayer. And the act of getting together helps us be more disciplined in prayer, more likely to pray. We all know how easy it is to tell someone, “*I’ll pray for you,*” and then not get around to it, or only pray a perfunctory prayer. Well, there’s something about getting together and praying together that makes sure that those prayers get prayed and that they’re not just perfunctory. Mind you, getting together for prayer doesn’t have to be anything fancy or formal. It can be friends praying together, a growth group praying together, a choir or a class or you name it. Logistics aren’t important. What matters is getting together to “**devote**” ourselves “**to prayer.**”

For instance, before the Penleys left for their mission in Egypt, and then before Pastor Karen left to join them, some folks got together at Val Silva’s to pray. I was at the second get together, and it was very casual, yet also very full of blessing. The blessings we asked for were granted – that the Penleys and Pastor Karen would be safe and that God would work through them. But praying together united our little group. It deepened our support for this mission work and our love for those carrying it out. I think God also stirred up desire in the rest of us to engage in some mission work of our own, or to better support mission work in general. I sure felt that. At any rate, it was a strengthening, encouraging,

uplifting experience – not just for those we prayed for but also for those who were praying. There were mutual blessings in our mutual prayer!

And hasn't that also been the case as we've been doing our prayer homework from these Lenten services? Two weeks ago, we agreed to pray for every RLC member who could be in church that weekend, and there was a mutual sense of excitement, wasn't there? And nervousness. And sharing in something important. Afterward, maybe there was some mutual disappointment when attendance didn't boom as we'd hoped, but also mutual joy as some long-absent members came to worship. So whether or not we realized it at the time, there was something unifying about that mutual prayer and something spiritually deepening.

Even more the next week when we looked at some things that get in the way of prayers being answered and focused on persevering in prayer. *Okay, many of us thought, I'll keep at it. I'll keep trusting. I'll persevere in this prayer that every RLC member who can be in church next weekend will be. And especially if people know we're praying for this, we should see better results.* Which we definitely did! There were 113 more people in church than usual. But besides that obvious blessing, praying together two weeks in a row was even more unifying, wasn't it? It united those who were praying and focused us more on those we were praying for. I mean, week by week we usually don't pay much attention to worship attendance, but many sure did this last weekend. And it wasn't just idle curiosity, seeing if the prayer would work. It was genuine interest in our fellow members. In fact, when we still didn't see everyone who could have been in church, I wouldn't be surprised if many of us thought what at least one of us did: *If a person gets a card saying their fellow members are praying for them to be in church, and if they just ignore the card or even get annoyed and decide not to come, that's really sad...and a far deeper problem than whether or not they come to church. Deliberately disobeying the third commandment? Feeling indifference, even hostility, toward fellow members' praying for them? That's a far deeper problem, and something that should inspire far more prayer. Not censure. Not judgment. More frequent, fervent, persevering prayer!* And my friends, do you see the blessing in that insight? The love welling up? The spiritual concern? Even the sense of unity with those not present and the feeling of responsibility for them? These are very precious blessings! And I think we have to ask: would they have come about, who they have even occurred to us, had we not joined together in mutual prayer?

You see why mutual prayer is often called "*love on its knees.*" If our Christian love is genuine, we'll naturally join together in asking God to bless others, and as we lift them up to God, our love will be blessed and deepened. Small wonder God's Word tells us: "**Devote yourselves to prayer!**" Individual prayer is great, but it is only part of our calling. For good reasons, we're also called to pray together. And whatever God's answer to our specific requests may be, we will find mutual blessings in our mutual prayer! Amen.

