



When we talk about prayer, we talk about it far too often as a personal thing. Today I want to talk about prayer as a communal thing. I want to talk about it as something not just about **me**, but about **we**.

A few months ago I was at our annual Men's Retreat at Mt. Hermon. Every year at the Men's Retreat a bunch of guys meet in the gym during our free time on Saturday afternoon. It's during this time that we divide up into teams and organize our own version of the NCAA Tournament. Men who haven't touched a basketball for years try to run up and down the court, jump, shoot and foul a lot. Men who should not take their shirts off in front of other people proudly rip off t-shirts when their team claims "skins" instead of "shirts." Local paramedics actually know when we're running this tournament because every year one of our weekend warriors goes down.

Now I've enjoyed playing in these games for several years and always felt I could hold my own, even against much younger guys. But last year was different. I was nursing a bad knee and at age 53 was beginning to face up to the reality that I wasn't Michael Jordan. So I decided to sit this tournament out. It helped that my 18-year-old son was playing and I could cheer his team on from the sidelines. I also looked forward to the entertainment. It's really fun to watch 50-year-old men drop like flies out on the gym floor.

And that's what I did. It wasn't easy. I had to endure a few rude comments from guys I thought were friends: "Finally gave it up, huh? Maybe you could keep score for us." But it was really me who had the last laugh. I saw guys go into cardiac arrest after two trips up the court. They were begging me to sub for them. One of our elders threw his back out and couldn't get up. Dinner that night was like being in an emergency room. One of our elders who is a chiropractor saw his client load double after the retreat. I just watched and laughed.

We can be very fickle about community, can't we? When we're healthy, when things are good, we're eager to jump on the court and join the fun. But when things turn ugly, when people start getting hurt, we prefer to stay on the sidelines, pointing and laughing at the crazy people on the court. Sometimes, no matter how committed or close we feel to our community, we're tempted to leave the game altogether.

This morning we're going to look at a man who refused to do that; a man who refused to stay on the sidelines and distance

himself from his community in the midst of their failures. Daniel saw his connection to God's people as a reality he couldn't escape and his prayers reflect that.

Though righteous, Daniel chose to identify himself with sinful Israel.

Daniel is one of the towering figures in the Old Testament. He stands out not just for what he did, but for what he didn't do. Pretty much every leader in the OT—Abraham, Moses, Noah, or David—blew it at some point. Even though they were great men of faith, the Bible describes how they all sinned against God. But no where do we read of Daniel sinning or even failing in any way. Don't get me wrong. I know Daniel wasn't perfect, but from the time he was a young man to the time he was old, he's described as one of the most righteous men in the Bible. But despite his faithfulness, Daniel's life was still impacted by sin—not his sin, but the sin of his community.

When Daniel was a very young man, he lived in Jerusalem at a time the people of God were in rebellion. They were enjoying great wealth and prosperity, but they rejected God to worship idols, and they neglected the poor. Because of their sin, destruction came upon Jerusalem. The Babylonian army swept in and destroyed the city, taking many of the people of Jerusalem as prisoners. Daniel was one of them. He was ripped away from his family and taken to Babylon. But even in captivity, Daniel stayed faithful to God. He refused to eat Babylonian food that would violate God's law. He refused to worship idols, even when threatened with death. He refused to stop praying to God, knowing he would be thrown into a pit with hungry lions. It's no wonder that Daniel was said to be a man "highly esteemed" by the Lord.

If anybody had the right to stand up and point their finger at God's people for their sin, it was Daniel. He had suffered for 70 years in Babylon as a result of **their** sin, not his own. He had been taken from his family because of **their** sin, not his own. He had endured persecution in Babylon because of **their** sin, not his own.

Yet as you read his prayer in Dan 9:1-19, you see something surprising. In this prayer of confession, Daniel includes himself. He identifies himself completely with Israel. Throughout the prayer, he doesn't talk about **me** but rather he talks about **we**.

Why would Daniel, a righteous man highly esteemed in the eyes of God, identify himself with these people? Why would he

choose to put himself on the court with God's rebellious people, when he had every right to stay on the sidelines?

I would propose that Daniel saw his relationship with God as not just personal, but communal. Daniel was a descendant of Abraham, which meant he belonged to the nation of Israel. It was with Israel that God had established a covenant. It was Israel God chose from among all the nations to be his very own. In Exodus 19 God said to Israel, *"Out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."* Daniel understood God had called this people to himself, a community. And that translated into his prayer life. Don't get me wrong. Daniel had an intimate personal relationship with God. But despite this personal relationship with God, Daniel saw that prayer isn't always about **me**; it's about **we**. His entire prayer reflects that. Let's take a closer look at his prayer.

Daniel saw his prayer as not just personal, but communal.

He saw God's promises as communal

First of all, his prayer reveals he saw God's promises as communal. In the opening verses of chapter 9 Daniel says he began searching the Scriptures. He says, *"I observed in the books the number of the years which was revealed as the word of the Lord to Jeremiah the prophet for the completion of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years."* So Daniel begins to do the math. Seventy years were just about up. That was great news. God would soon bring his people back to Jerusalem! If I were Daniel, I'd be very excited. I'd begin packing my bags. But he didn't do that. Look what he did.

So I gave my attention to the Lord God to seek Him by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth and ashes. I prayed to the LORD my God and confessed and said, "Alas, O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments,..." (verses 3–4).

Daniel turns to the Lord and he begins to pray. He fasts and he puts on sackcloth and ashes to show sorrow and grief. But he starts out by praising God for being great and awesome. He recognizes that God is a faithful, loyal promise-keeping God. He clearly saw these promises as something not just he would benefit from but the whole nation. These weren't personal promises, they were corporate promises; promises associated with the covenant God made with Israel.

That was the old covenant. We live under the new covenant. Most of the promises connected to the new covenant are corporate as well. We talk about the great commission. Jesus said, *"Go and make disciples of every nation..."* And then he gave a promise, *"I will be with you always..."* Who is that promise given to? It's given collectively to the disciples and by inference to us; not just

us as individuals but as a body. Paul said *"You are the body of Christ."* That's talking about us together. Each of us makes up a different part of Christ's body. Together, we reveal Christ to the world. He also said *"You are the temple of God."* That's talking about us together. Each believer serves as a brick and we're being built up into a dwelling place of God. Peter even takes the same communal language applied to Israel in the Old Testament and uses it for the church. He says, *"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God"* (1 Pt 2:9).

He saw sin as communal

We all like that. We like to receive those promises. We like to jump on the court and be part of a group like that with so many wonderful things to look forward to. But for Daniel the discovery of God's promise led him to reflect on Israel's sin. Look what he prays. *"We have sinned, committed iniquity, acted wickedly and rebelled, even turning aside from Your commandments and ordinances. Moreover, we have not listened to Your servants the prophets, who spoke in Your name to our kings, our princes, our fathers and all the people of the land!"* (verses 5–6).

Notice again the pronouns. To include himself in the promised blessing of God's people meant also including himself in their sin. He could have said, **"They** have sinned;" **"They** have done wrong;" **"They** have been wicked." But instead he says **"We** have sinned."

Why? Why would Daniel, a righteous man highly esteemed in the eyes of God, identify himself among the guilty? Why would he choose to put himself on the court with God's sinful people when he had every right to stay on the sidelines?

It's kind of like being on a football team. It's great when the team is doing well. We all get very excited. Someone scores a touchdown and everyone on the team jumps up and down. But what about when things don't go so well? What if just one person on your team jumps offsides? Who gets penalized? The whole team. When that happens, no one complains. No one says, "That's not fair. Why should I get penalized? I didn't jump offsides?" Everyone knows it's a team thing. When someone asks, "What happened?" we say "We jumped offsides."

Why is it that we want to claim the blessings of God's people without claiming the sin as well? When things are going well, we're happy to own the good gifts of God. But we quickly distance ourselves from what we'd rather not own, like sin or conflict or pain. We stand on the sidelines and point fingers. "Look at those hypocrites! What a mess they've caused! I'm sure glad I'm not part of that fiasco."

Daniel shows us a different way. For him the household of God is not a team you join and quit based upon how things are going. Daniel reveals that if we desire to claim the blessings of God's

people, we must also claim their failures. If we're going to own the good stuff, we have to own the bad stuff, too.

He saw judgment as communal

Which brings me to the third observation. Not only did he see sin as communal, he saw God's judgment as communal as well. This comes out over and over again in verses 7-14. Look at v. 7. *"Righteousness belongs to You, O Lord, but to us open shame, as it is this day--to the men of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem and all Israel, those who are nearby and those who are far away in all the countries to which You have driven them, because of their unfaithful deeds which they have committed against You."* Then look at v. 11. *"Indeed all Israel has transgressed Your law and turned aside, not obeying Your voice; so the curse has been poured out on us, along with the oath which is written in the law of Moses the servant of God, for we have sinned against Him."* Finally look at v. 13. *"As it is written in the law of Moses, all this calamity has come on us; yet we have not sought the favor of the LORD our God by turning from our iniquity and giving attention to Your truth."*

All these verses say pretty much the same thing. Not only did we sin collectively, but we're being judged collectively. Daniel knew this more than anyone. Though as a boy he hadn't participated in the sins of the people and had been faithful to the Lord, he still had to endure the judgment in being hauled away to a foreign land.

Right before we got married, I bought a car. It was the only one we would have. Lynn was a little upset that I didn't include her in on the decision. She didn't particularly like the car. But I wasn't used to making those kind of decisions together and kind of forgot that she would have to drive it, too. Plus, I was the one paying for it. So after we got married Lynn accepted that as our car. And when we started to have problems with the car, those problems became her problems! But she was very nice about it. I'm sure she was tempted to say, "You bought this lousy car; this is your problem." But we were married and she knew that my problems, regardless of where they came from, were her problems.

Daniel approaches the sin of God's people in a similar fashion. Whether or not Daniel personally committed all the sins everyone else did was irrelevant. The Bible says if one part of the body suffers, every part suffers with it. Daniel lived that. He embraced the pain and consequences of his community's sin as his own. He owned the good, so he knew he also had to own the bad. And he didn't walk off the court when that happened. He didn't say, "I'm done with you guys. You made the mess, now you clean it up. I'm out of here."

He made petitions that were communal

In v. 15 Daniel's prayer turns a corner. He begins to make requests of God. He begins to plead with God. And it's no mistake

he doesn't pray for **me** but for **we**. Look what he says in verses 15-19.

"And now, O Lord our God, who have brought Your people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand and have made a name for Yourself, as it is this day--we have sinned, we have been wicked. O Lord, in accordance with all Your righteous acts, let now Your anger and Your wrath turn away from Your city Jerusalem, Your holy mountain; for because of our sins and the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and Your people have become a reproach to all those around us. So now, our God, listen to the prayer of Your servant and to his supplications, and for Your sake, O Lord, let Your face shine on Your desolate sanctuary. O my God, incline Your ear and hear! Open Your eyes and see our desolations and the city which is called by Your name; for we are not presenting our supplications before You on account of any merits of our own, but on account of Your great compassion. O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and take action! For Your own sake, O my God, do not delay, because Your city and Your people are called by Your name."

He prays for the city of Jerusalem. He prays for *"your city and your people."* He barks his requests, *"Incline your ear...Open your eyes...Hear...forgive...take action..."* The basis for his requests is that God's name (reputation) is tied to them, corporately, as a people. He mentions over and over again that together they're *"called by your name."*

It's strange to think that for good or for bad we're connected to people all over the world because together we're called by his name. Donald Miller tells a story in his book, *Blue Like Jazz*, that illustrates how some Christians took this seriously. While a student at the ultraliberal Reed College, Miller and the few other Christians on campus had a crazy idea. At the college's annual Ren Fayre, a festival dedicated to drunkenness and immorality, the Christians were trying to find a way to share their faith in Christ. So they decided build a confessional booth. They built it right in the main part of the campus to be used on the morning after Ren Fayre when everyone was hungover. The booth was a huge shed with a slanted roof and two small sections inside, one for the monk and the other for the confessor. They painted "Confession Booth" in large letters on the outside of it.

As the campus started to wake up, students walked by and asked what they were doing. They stood and looked at the booth in wonder and asked, "What are we supposed to do?"

"Confess your sins," they told them.

The first guy named Jake came in and asked Miller, "So, what is this? I'm supposed to tell you all of the juicy gossip I did at Ren Fayre?"

Miller said, "No."

"Okay, then what? You want me to confess my sins, right?"

"No, that's not what we're doing, really. There is this group of us, just a few of us who were thinking about the way Christians have sort of wronged people over time. You know, the Crusades, all that stuff..."

"Well, I doubt you personally were involved in any of that."

"No, I wasn't," he told him. "But the thing is, we're followers of Jesus. We believe that He's God and all, and He represented certain ideas that we've sort of not done a good job at representing. He's asked us to represent Him well, but it can be very hard. So there is this group of us who wanted to confess to you."

"You're confessing to me! What are you confessing?"

"There's a lot. I'll keep it short. Jesus said to feed the poor and to heal the sick. I've never done very much about that. Jesus said to love those who persecute me. I tend to lash out, especially if my ego gets threatened. Jesus didn't mix His spirituality with politics. I grew up doing that. It got in the way of the central message of Christ. I know that was wrong, and I know a lot of people won't listen to the words of Christ because people like me, who know Him, carry our own agendas into the conversation rather than just relaying the message Christ wanted to get across. There's a lot more, you know."

"It's all right," Jake said. His eyes were starting to water.

"Well," Miller said, "I am sorry for all of that."

"I forgive you," Jake said. And he meant it.

When Jake left the booth there was somebody else ready to get in. It went like that for a couple of hours. They talked to dozens of people, saying the same things. Many people wanted to hug when they were done. All of the people who visited the booth were grateful and gracious.

We must learn that prayer isn't always about me, but about we.

I think they were on to something. From start to finish, Daniel's prayer bears witness to this same truth: it's not about **me**; it's about **we**. This isn't an easy concept for us to grasp. It doesn't come naturally for us to think communally. We're formed and shaped in a culture that promotes individualism—individual freedoms, individual rights, individual expression. We talk about a "personal relationship with God." Daniel certainly had

a personal relationship with God, but it was a personal relationship in the context of community.

What about you? Do you view yourself alone with God on the sidelines or part of God's people on the court? Do you think of yourself as an isolated appendage or as part of the diverse and unified body of Christ? Are you a lonely brick or one stone among many in a great temple of God? Are you just a person who has a relationship with God, or do you belong to a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation? How you answer these questions will determine how you view the church, how you relate to those seated next to you, and most of all how you pray.

Conclusion

You might be a Daniel who has walked faithfully with Christ for many years. As such, you might be tempted to stand on the sidelines and criticize God's people. But when you're tempted to do that, think about Jesus. In what we call the incarnation, Jesus, who was in very nature God—perfect, blameless, and righteous beyond any measure—didn't claim his equality with God. He didn't remain distant from his people. Instead, he took on the form of a man. He set aside the riches of heaven to become a poor man, familiar with suffering and pain. But that's not all. In an act of supreme love he chose to identify with our sin. The Bible says "*he who knew no sin be sin on our behalf*" (2 Cor. 5:21). Though he was perfect in every regard, he bore our burden of sin in the form of a Roman cross upon his back. Though he didn't deserve the judgment of sin, he accepted it on our behalf.

That's what we're remembering and proclaiming and celebrating as we come to the Lord's Supper today. This isn't something we do alone; it's something we do together. Paul rebuked the Corinthians because they were divided as a body and therefore ate the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner. We share in this together. It's a reminder of our unity.

No matter how you have viewed the church in the past—whether you've been on the sidelines or on the court—now is an opportunity for all of us to express our connection and unity in Christ. It's a chance for all of us to get in the game together—young and old, men and women, leaders, members, and attenders, innocent and guilty—to come before our God as one people who bear his name.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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