

9 Reasons Church Leaders Struggle With Prayer

John, a leader in a church I assisted as a consultant, admitted to me what I'd heard before from seminary students and church leaders alike: "Dr. Lawless, I don't always pray like I should. I know better, but prayer isn't easy."

I've heard something similar so many times that I've begun asking for more details. These findings are anecdotal, but here are my general conclusions about why church leaders struggle with prayer.

1. **Leaders are "fixers" by nature.** Most leaders don't readily admit a need for help. Instead, we are problem-solvers who seek solutions, attempt answers and try again if the first answer doesn't work. Indeed, our followers expect us to come up with solutions. Our persistence and tenacity to do so—both good traits in themselves—sometimes push prayer to a last-resort option.
2. **We never learned how to pray.** Churches make this mistake with most spiritual disciplines: We *tell* believers what to do but don't *teach* them how to do it. "Pray. Pray. You must pray," we proclaim. When we tell but don't teach, though, we set believers up for discouragement and failure. If leaders are honest, we'll admit that we, too, have much to learn about how to pray.
3. **Prayer has become more about ritual than about relationship.** This reason relates directly to the previous one. We know we should pray, even if we don't know how, so we go through the motions of prayer. It is not a relationship with a living Lord that calls us to prayer; it is instead only religious ritual. Ritual seldom leads to a consistent, vibrant prayer life.
4. **Prayerlessness can be hidden.** No one in our church needs

to know about this struggle. We can talk about prayer, teach about prayer, write about prayer and even lead corporately in prayer—all without anyone knowing that our personal prayer life is sporadic at best. This kind of hiddenness is an enemy of heartfelt prayer.

5. **We don't really believe prayer works.** Sure, we teach otherwise about prayer. No church leader I know would teach prayer is ineffective. Nevertheless, our prayer life often suggests otherwise. Sometimes we don't pray at all. When we do pray, we're too often surprised when God does respond. Surprise is one indicator we're not convinced about the power of prayer.
6. **We have never been broken under God's hand.** The Apostle Paul, who was a leader extraordinaire, learned the power of strength in weakness (2 Cor. 12:7-10). Faced with a thorn in the flesh, he pleaded with God to remove it. God instead sovereignly used the thorn to weaken the apostle, who experienced God's strength at his weakest moments. It is in our weakness that we learn how to pray, but leaders naturally fight against weakness.
7. **Leaders read the Word in a one-sided way.** Leaders are often teachers who read the Word for information transmission more than life transformation. When we approach the Word that way, we miss the opportunity to be in dialogue with God. Our Bible reading—even when preparing for teaching or preaching—should bring us to praise, confession and obedience. It should lead us into prayerful conversation with God.
8. **Some leaders have simply lost hope.** It happens. Church leaders who prayed more consistently in the past sometimes lose hope under the weight of church conflict, family struggles or health concerns. Unanswered prayer leads to faithlessness, which leads to prayerlessness.
9. **We miss the gospel focus on the prayer life of Jesus.** I love the four Gospels, but I admit to reading them for many years without meditating on Jesus' prayer life. A seminary professor challenged me to read the Gospel of

Luke with this focus in mind, and my prayer life has never been the same.

In fact, church leader, I give you that same challenge. In your quiet time this week, read these texts. Note how Jesus prayed. Listen to His teachings. Think deeply about the Word. Then respond to Him in prayer. Take the first step toward being a praying church leader.

Chuck Lawless currently serves as professor of evangelism and missions and dean of graduate studies at Southeastern Seminary. You can connect with Dr. Lawless on both Twitter and Facebook.

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