

When Prayer Feels Like a Workout

“But while Peter was in prison, the church prayed very earnestly for him” (Acts 12:5, NLT).

I want to expound on the word *earnestly* in the verse above. The original Greek word for earnest is *ektēnes*, and it means “resolute,” “tense,” and “stretched out.” The word is also used in 1 Peter 1:22 to describe the way we’re to love one another: “*fervently, with a pure heart*” (NKJV, emphasis mine).

We’re all familiar with the feeling of *ektēnes*. We feel it when we set goals for ourselves, like dropping 10 pounds and running a half-marathon or completing our college education. We feel it when we’re head over heels in love and would happily drive 200 miles in a single night to be with our beloved for a single hour.

And we feel it when someone we love is in the ICU and all we know to do is lie prostrate on the floor and cry out to God like a helpless child. This is the type of earnestness with which we’re to pray for the ailing among us, the community around us, the enemies who hate us, those who lead us—*everyone*.

Maybe you’re guilty like me. You are guilty of saying, “I’ll be praying for you,” and then forgetting the promise 10 minutes later. Or if I do remember to pray, I’m guilty of only praying once that evening ... and for 15 seconds ... and while I’m chopping onions or scrubbing dishes, not somewhere still and silent, where I can focus on interceding with fervor. I’m guilty of praying only for friends and family, not for my community, enemies or the leaders of our nation.

James 4:2 says, “You don’t have what you want because you don’t ask God for it” (NLT). If we continue to disregard the

Bible's exhortations to pray earnestly, we will never see the kind of life-saving, miracle-making, angel-summoning prayer that Peter and his friends witnessed in Acts 12, as we are willingly refusing to ask God for His wisdom, strength and divine help.

The late Scottish evangelist and teacher Oswald Chambers said, "Prayer is an effort of will." It doesn't matter whether you're a missionary in Africa or a mom in Alabama; everyone struggles to pray, at least sometimes. Why? Because as I mentioned earlier, Satan doesn't want us to pray, and he'll do all he can to discourage and distract us from doing so. Not even Jesus' 12 disciples could stay awake to pray on the night before His crucifixion. Jesus told them, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

We are three-part beings comprised of the spirit, the soul and the body. We may have the very best of intentions when we tell people we'll pray for them, but because we flesh and blood beings are prone to sleepiness, forgetfulness and, let's face it, selfishness, we often allow hours, even days to pass without talking or listening to our heavenly Father.

Just as it takes effort to will ourselves to work out some days, to study for an exam, to cook for our families or to even roll out of bed, prayer requires effort and a resolute—*ektēnes*—determination to put aside our schedules, silence our phones, ignore all distractions and pray directly to the Giver of all good gifts.

I want to challenge you to pray for others. No five-step process to follow, no scheduled alerts or alarms to remind you, no pretty prayer journal to fill up. Just you and the Lord with desire to see His will done in your life and the lives of those He's placed on your heart to intercede for.

Remember, you can pray wherever you are and at any time. God's office door, if you will, is never closed. And when you feel

unmotivated to pray, think about Jesus, who displayed the greatest example of earnest, “stretched out,” *ektēnes* prayer as He hung on the cross, arms outstretched for you and me as He cried out to God:

“Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

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