

Just As I Am

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[0 : 00] All right, good morning, everybody. Welcome back and Happy New Year.! So good to be back here as we launch out into 2026 together.

! And New Year's always feel like they bring new possibilities, new hope, or new anxious, depending on your proclivity. So whether you're coming in this year optimistic or anxious, I do want you to know, not to be too on the nose, but that one thing I am confident of, I have no idea what this year is going to bring, but the one thing I am confident of is Jesus is going to be our good Lord in it. And so hold your head up and lift your eyes up. We get to be the church this year. And if you're here, it means that God made you for such a time as this.

And so in that, we can go forward and be grateful and hopeful as we go into a new year. And as we start the year, as Jesse said, we're really going to start as a church by exploring together what it means to be a people who have a spiritual life that is centered around prayer.

Because you can't stumble over one page in Scripture and not find God's people praying. It's not some add-on to the Christian faith.

[1 : 27] It's not some side quest that you do to get stronger. It is a central part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. And so we want to spend a few weeks talking about that.

And it's kind of a little primer for the series this week. What I want to do in this sermon is kind of open up just the very basics about prayer, but also why we believe this is an important way to start the new year.

And maybe to give you a little quick insight as to why we really want to become a praying church. And so I guess we'll just start with a little candor about what our experience of a prayer ministry in a church might actually look like.

So to start today, I want you to think of those times in your life when you have been in the somewhat unenviable position of going church shopping.

Right? So like maybe you've moved to a new area or maybe something really bad happened at a church that you were going to and you realized it was time to move on. And so you find yourself in the place of having to go around maybe a new area to you and find a church.

[2 : 39] Maybe some of you are actually here doing that today. And can I just say, it really is the worst. Looking on websites, examining statements of faith, visiting various churches, not knowing anyone, kind of feeling like an outsider, wondering if you're going to be accepted.

It's hard. You want to find a place you can plug into and follow Jesus and belong and you don't know what you're walking into. And so when I say what I'm going to say next, I want you to know that don't take any shame in anything I'm getting ready to say.

Okay? But I do want to honestly think together. When you're investigating a new church, like when you're looking for what you're looking for in a church, what is it that you look for?

Like what are the things that we look for? And I would guess it falls into a couple categories. One might be who has engaging and interesting preaching that challenges me, that opens up Scripture that I enjoy listening to.

That's a big thing, right? You walk in, am I bored? Do I want to listen to this person? Do I feel that Scripture is being taught to me? 100% good thing to look for.

[3 : 57] Maybe it's who in town has the music the best done in the style that I resonate with and draws me into worship, right?

I mean, you ask all the questions. Is it kind of contemporary? Is it kind of old style? Is it loud? Is it not loud? Can you help me understand what that's going to look like? Maybe it's you look at who has a dynamic and broad set of ministries for kids and for teens.

Because I have kids or I have teenagers going in the world and I want to shepherd them towards Christ. And so the thing that really matters a lot to me in this season is that who has a ministry that's going to speak into that, that's going to prepare them for the challenges.

Maybe it's you really gravitate towards what are the statement of faith and the beliefs and the distinctives that I believe are faithful to Scripture because it feels like we're just in an ever-changing world of ever-changing ideas and I really want something that's built on the solid foundation of Scripture.

Maybe it's just where can I engage and make a friend? Like where is there a community that actually will accept me where we can be people together walking towards Jesus?

[5 : 17] I just don't want to do this journey alone. Or maybe your vision always goes towards missions. Like who is engaged in thinking about the world in international missions? Who is thinking about the poor in our own community?

Who has ministries for different life stages where I'm at? Or Bible studies on topics that I'm interested in? And again, can I just say, all of those can be really good things.

They're worthy to be thought about and considered. But if we're honest, in all of those things, does I want a church that spends most of its time praying ever enter into the equation?

Or, I want a church, the thing that's most important is that they have a prayer culture like no other. Like if the website said, if all it said was, we have the best prayer ministry in town.

I mean, it doesn't really pop, does it, right? It feels like bad marketing. Like you want pictures of people doing fun things, right? And I think there's a lot of reasons for that that we're going to talk about throughout the course of this series.

[6 : 30] And I honestly think one of them is simply this. Prayer doesn't have good metrics. Right? Like if you're in the business world, if you can't measure it, it doesn't exist.

Or if you can't measure it, you can't manage it, right? And so when we think about what would a successful church look like, again, our minds just naturally gravitate towards things like, is the church growing?

Like are more and more people coming? And that's understandable because growth can be evidence of people sharing their faith, of inviting other people to church. It's understandable we look at that as health.

How many baptisms did we have? You probably want to count that number, right? Because maybe it's evidence of the gospel being shared and evidence of God's grace in redeeming people.

We think about things like, how much money did the church take in and how much did they give away? And that's not inappropriate. It can be evidence of generosity flourishing in people's hearts and what we treasure.

[7 : 32] How many people are engaged in not just the big gathering but in small groups? Because maybe that's evidence of discipleship, of people taking their faith seriously.

And just as a side note, we measure every one of those things here. Like we watch every, we look at all of those to try to understand what's happening. But the impact of prayer is just much harder to measure.

And success in prayer may not look like something that's easy to see. And I think because of that, it's hard a lot of times for us to get excited about it.

Maybe you're even thinking, it wouldn't shock me if you come in and you see, hey, we're going to do a series on prayer. And you're like, eh, can we not? Like, can we talk about like marriage or like revelation or something interesting?

And yet, it is central to the life as a disciple in Jesus' kingdom. Jesus spent more time praying than he did doing.

[8 : 40] For him, the battle, the work, the privilege was the place of prayer. You know, when the early church was beginning to grow, and God started adding dozens and then hundreds and then thousands to their number, the original 12 disciples who were leading this growing body of believers started to run into the same administrative problems that any church runs into when it starts to grow.

Who is going to manage all these resources? Who is going to take care of people? Who's going to help the widows? Who's going to make sure it gets done properly? There's just, there's the urgent things that need to be done.

And when they started to think about what they needed to do because they couldn't handle all of it, they said, well, we need to entrust this work to others. And mind you, not because it wasn't important, so much so that when they set the criteria for people who could do those things, that criteria looks very similar to what it is to be an elder.

Like they wanted trustworthy people making sure the affairs of the church get taken care of. But then when they're talking about it and when they're setting aside this first set of deacons and the disciples are, the apostles are talking about what should we be doing, they tell you pretty clearly in Acts 6 verse 4 what they valued the most.

They said, what are we going to do? But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. That certainly isn't all that a church does, but the original apostles, when thinking about what they should be giving most of their time to, said prayer cannot be neglected for anything else. [10:32] And yet, it just doesn't register often as one of our top priorities. Not as a church and not as individuals.

And if I can be completely real with you for a moment, I've been an elder at City Grace for a few years, but I've been in the church game at various levels of leadership for a long time.

And I've seen all the programs, I've gone to all the seminars, I've been part of intimate small churches and dynamic fast-growing mega churches.

And I can tell you that in all those contexts, in every church I've been in, the things that stick in my heart and my mind and my spirit most, and the things that still draw my interest the most now, are not programs, they were not methods.

It was just the times when I got to touch the hem and the garment. When I saw God do something that only God can do. When I saw God change a life that nobody else could change.

[11:40] Not a well-executed marketing plan, not being the rave or the talk of the town. Just God doing what only He can do in response to prayer.

And so I know it's not always the glitziest vision. I mean, just think for a moment, what if one of the dreams we had as a church, like one of the things we, what is City Grace known for?

What if it was just something as simple as City Grace is a church where the power and the presence of God is available in an unexpected and surprising way to heal and redeem and to save. Because it's people pray. And so, Lord, teach us to pray. Now during the course of a series like this, we'll hope to touch on a lot of things that may be in your mind around prayer.

Like, what is prayer really for? How does prayer work? What will help me pray? Can I actually get better at praying?

[12:51] What does it mean to pray in faith? Because I hear, like Kirk said this morning, you've got to have faith. And a lot of times I just don't. I feel like I'm full of doubt, so am I disqualified? What is appropriate to pray for?

Like, can I actually pray for my team to win the Super Bowl? Or is that kind of off limits? I don't know. Some of our teams need all the help they can get, right?

How do I hear from God? Like, not just a warm feeling or a tingle. Like, can I actually hear God speaking to me?

And as I noted today, this is really just a primer. We want to get to all of that, right? So you've got to start somewhere. And I think a good entry point, I'm going to take the risk of just giving you the point of the entire sermon right here up front, and hope you won't tune out, right?

But this is really the crux of this whole sermon, okay? I want you to pray. Like, I really don't want to overcomplicate the beginning, because the first key to prayer is simply to do it.

[14:05] It's that kind of hard-hitting teaching you come here to City Grace for, right? You should pray. But it really is the starting point. And we've said that in a lot of different ways.

Like, you start where you're at. Where you're at. You pray what you've got. You bring before God what is in you, not what is supposed to be in you.

You really don't have to do anything to get started. You can just start. You know, in Acts chapter 17, there's this scene where Paul is in Athens, and he's waiting on some of his missionary companions to join him there.

And the Scripture tells us that he's really stirred up in his spirit, because the city is so full of idols.

And so Paul, being Paul, decides he's going to start talking to people about it, right?

And so in the city of Athens, there's many forums where you can discuss and debate. And he starts to do that with a very foreign culture that has no framework for the message that he is reaching out

to them with.

[15 : 13] But he stands in those forums, and he talks to them about God, and he talks to them about Jesus. And interestingly, they're intrigued enough that they invite him to speak in the area of Pagus, which is just kind of this key center of power and kind of a key aristocratic council, sort of the center of judgment and life.

And so when they say, Hey, Paul, do you want to come speak about Jesus in this big forum where everybody will hear? He says, Don't mind if I do. In Acts chapter 17, it says, So Paul, standing in the midst of the area of Pagus, said, Men of Athens, I perceive that you are in every way very religious, for as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found an altar with this inscription, To the unknown God.

Now what you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you, The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as if he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling places, so that they should seek God and perhaps feel their way towards him and find him, yet he is actually not far from each one of us.

That tells us some really interesting things that I think are important for reaching out to God in any context, but I think it's certainly the case for prayer as well.

[17 : 01] And the first thing I really see in this speech that Paul gives is I think it tells us the best place to start in prayer is just right where you are.

Now we've talked about this here before, but oftentimes, particularly in our cultural moment, I think to even get to prayer, you have to be honest about and move through some very real objections, some real anxieties that people have when they approach prayer that scuttle us from even getting started.

Some of those anxieties are around what we believe about prayer, and some of that's just honestly conditioned into us. We are conditioned to think of prayer as passive and not proactive.

Like there's praying and there's doing, and if I have to choose something, I'm going to choose the doing. And underneath that is an even more powerful unspoken thing is what you're really saying is, look, at the end of the day, prayer doesn't work.

Doing works. Prayer doesn't work. Honestly, not sure if it's real or if it's a waste of time. And if that's where you're at, you have to be honest about that to start.

[18 : 22] Some of our anxiety comes from what we believe about God, and there's a lot of ways to express that, but I think a simple kind of way to think about it this morning is the place where you say, look, if I pray, and then God lets the bad thing happen anyway, what do I do with that?

How can I move forward in faith if I pray for something? How will I trust Him?

And then that kind of becomes, see also, I don't think prayer works. I'm not sure any of this is real. And if that's where you find yourself this morning, let me just say, I do believe it can be helpful and important to read and to study and to listen to others who are pursuing God.

You're not the first person that's felt like that, that moved into a life of prayer. And certainly if you have any questions in those realms, any of the pastors of this church would be glad to meet with you and start to work through that.

There are certainly things we have all learned over the years that I think could help ease some of those anxieties, encourage you. But I also believe it is really important for you to know you do not have to have all of those things solved to start praying.

[19 : 43] And in point of fact, I actually think it's important to start in prayer before you feel like you have it figured out because one of the most important things to know about prayer is it's not formulaic.

You can't learn what you need to know about praying from learning about praying. You have to do it.

You know, it's really, it's not unlike the difference of, what's the difference between like reading about being in a romantic relationship and like reading a book about dating or marriage and doing it?

Like they're two different things or maybe parentings like this, right? You can read all the books you want on being a parent and have your game plan laid out.

And it's like your kids didn't read that material. Like, you know, you've got your game plan of how they're going to be early readers and they're going to be respectful and they're going to do X and Y and Z.

[20 : 45] And it seems like we're stuck on shoes. Like I've really felt, like wearing shoes is really critical for life. And somehow, they seem to think they're optional, but reading a book about being a parent and being a parent, two different things.

Learning about praying and praying, two different things. And so what that means is, God is not disappointed when you show up without a wealth of knowledge about it.

He is not disappointed when you don't have it figured out. Look at what Paul told that gathering in Athens. He said that they should seek God and feel their way towards Him.

Like, God is not disappointed with the stumbling steps of a child trying to find their way to Him. And you know, as a side note, I also think, if you can come to prayer having that mind about it, that I don't have to have it all figured out, that I don't have to feel like I'm succeeding in it, it actually puts you in the mind space that you need for prayer because it removes you from control of it.

If you can't measure it, you can't manage it. Well, you're actually not supposed to manage it. It's actually the opposite of what Paul was seeing in Athens.

[22 : 13] Why was he so stirred up? Because they were a culture where they had rituals and practices and witchcraft and idols. And what are all those things designed to do?

Make God small. Make Him controllable. Make it something I can put my hands on. If I do X, then God must do Y.

I can see this thing in front of me. But prayer doesn't work like that. It's not based on a method. It's not a formula. It is relational.

And if we're honest, again, that might be the part that scares us even more. I want to pray, but the truth is, man, I'm not well.

I'm not good. I'm struggling. I'm broken. I feel like I don't have any faith. I feel like all I'm doing is failing forward every day.

[23 : 19] I want to approach God, but how can I? You might even be thinking, honestly, I'm so ashamed to even talk to Him.

But thankfully, Scripture also tells us that the best way to approach God in prayer is just as you are. Charlotte Elliott was a Victorian hymn writer, and she was born in South London in 1789.

And for a lot of her youth, she was actually somewhat of a famous and humorous poet of that era. She had a degree of notoriety in that society that she enjoyed for much of her youth.

But then, when she was 32, she suffered a serious illness and it left her disabled, both mentally and physically, for the rest of her life.

And that incident took its toll. She started to struggle with depression, with feelings of uselessness, with frustration and anger about her condition, about not being able to do the things she used to do.

[24 : 38] In one of her darkest points, it's recorded that she had one of her lifelong spiritual mentors and pastors, a man named Cesar Mallon, came by and he felt in that moment that the counsel that God wanted to give to her was Charlotte, you need to come to Christ just as you are.

Though from all accounts, didn't really register in that moment, she didn't want to hear it, kind of dismissed him. Sometime later in her life, Charlotte and her family had moved from around London to Brighton and she was living with her brother and there came this day when her entire family went out to a bazaar, so like a fair to raise funds for a charity school, but because of her condition this day, Charlotte just wasn't able to go.

And so all the things that you would think might creep in, the family has gone to something both fun and purposeful and on mission and I'm stuck here.

And so she started feeling all the things you feel in that, depressed, lonely, useless, I can't, I can't be where the center of the action is.

And she recalls that on that day for whatever reason, the spirit brought back to her mind those long lost words that Caesar Malin had spoken to her, come to Christ just as you are.

[26 : 07] And though she didn't feel like it and she didn't feel competent and she hadn't written a hymn in a while, on that day she decided to do it.

I don't know what I have to offer but I'm gonna, God I'm gonna come just as I am. Physical and mental limitations and all and she started to write a hymn and it was on that day that God gave her the grace to overcome her distress and she wrote a hymn that came to be titled Just As I Am. Now a lot of people around the world know that hymn because in more modern times it was picked up by evangelists like D.L. Moody and Billy Graham and John Stott and they used that hymn as kind of a key piece of their altar calls at the end of their service where they were calling people to Jesus and you know there's certainly a whole discussion we could have about how God uses the things we don't think are that much because if I mean if you sat back and you thought about it how many untold people in the last century have come to meet Jesus with the words of Charlotte's hymn playing in the background but more than that for today I want to go back to that moment because if she had gotten stuck in her weakness if she had seen nothing more if she had she had waited until she felt like she was ready or capable that hymn never would have graced the pages of history and indeed the people in scripture who are commended are not the ones who wait until they have all the right knowledge and they've got their game together and they feel like they're ready or they feel like they've sufficiently cleaned themselves up it's people who come just as they are there are people like Hannah who in the Old

Testament longed and longed to have a child and just couldn't she longed so much for this baby that she went to the temple one day and she was just pouring her heart out to God and the scripture tells us that she was such a mess of grief I mean you think about those moments when you're ugly crying right like you are not fit for public consumption you are not decent you are not put together but she still says I am taking a trip to the church house to pray and she is such a mess that Eli the priest who is on duty sees her and says she's got to be drunk like there's something wrong with her she tells him that no I'm just pouring my heart out she didn't wait until she had it together or she didn't wait until she could say oh all of this is in God's will that I don't have a baby she just came and poured out her heart incidentally God did answer her prayer and that child went on to do some stuff there are people like the centurion in Matthew 8 who comes to ask

Jesus because he's heard about Jesus and that he can heal and he's got a servant that is dear to him and so he comes to Jesus to ask him to heal his servant and you know the interesting thing about that is he's a centurion of Rome like the power that is oppressing Jesus and his people but he doesn't worry about that he doesn't stop to think about what his job is or what Jesus might think about him being in league with the Romans or do I have to clean up my current life choices he just comes and he asks because he believes Jesus can and will help so much so it's interesting when he shows up Jesus doesn't say how in the world would you think that I would help you you're a Roman as a matter of fact that interchange is interesting because Jesus says yeah I'll come and heal him and he says look I know you don't even have to do that

[30 : 31] I understand authority and you obviously have it you can say come or go and again Jesus doesn't say man you should have got your act together he says ha is there anybody in Israel that has this much faith he comes just as he is there are people like the tax collector in the parable that Jesus tells who has no plea but to simply come and say he doesn't justify himself he doesn't say anything about his life condition or he just comes and he says God have mercy on me a sinner and the Pharisee that's praying about him part of it is again the sort of arrogance and pride of God I thank you that I'm not like that but even inherent in that is kind of the secondary thought that it would be better if this person wasn't here how dare you come to God in your state go and get your act together that's the one that goes home justified he came with all he had which was the plea of a sinful man you can start your prayer life just where you are and it's as simple as that whatever you've got take it out and give it to

God and who knows who knows what you might find if you start to seek as the band comes up today couple of ways you can respond if you're here and you're not a follower of Jesus coming to Jesus just as you are is really part of the core of the good news of the gospel it's it's God God has told us that he hopes that you will reach out and try to find him no conditions on him he says if you are a sinner if you are a doubter if you are full of anger if you are depressed if you are full of hate but you want something better you want to believe that there is a better life that you can actually be forgiven for what you've done and that you can forgive!

others for what they've done to you start that right where you are there'll be a prayer on the screen that's a way that you can express that or if you have that hope there'll be pastors down front we would love to talk with you about that you don't have to have it all together you don't have to have

all the answers you don't have to feel like every piece of you is full of faith you can come just as you are if you're a follower of Jesus I think our hope is just let us commit ourselves together to the vision of what it would mean for us to be a people of prayer I am struck throughout history just by the great movements of God that are preceded by prayer it really is the doing I know I know

I've had the same experiences of you it doesn't always it feels like prayer is the thing that we do before we get to the thing that matters and there are certainly some things where it's like you can put your hand to the plow like it's okay to just move a chair if the chair needs to be moved listen I'm not trying to move nations to know God and that is not something you can do you can't just we've been trying to just get to the doing of fixing people it doesn't work there is one alone who can change a heart and so we come to him because this world doesn't primarily need our gifts our money our innovations our programs though let me say Jesus will joyfully lead you into using all of those for his glory those are not

Jesus works in the doing but what the world needs is the savior to see the things that only he can do so let's commit ourselves to that I really like what what Kirk offered today we can do that again like what what is the gap between where you feel like you want to be in prayer and where you are it's a day to start asking for that God's given you a whole series to sit through several weeks to experience a kingdom not of this world world that's what we want to do when you've asked him for that if you're a follower of Jesus there's a time here for communion so you can go to the table and take the elements take them back to your seat when you're ready you can partake of that it's relational it's about being a part of his body and his bride it's a reminder that

[36 : 09] Jesus wants this door of prayer to be open so bad that there was no distance he wouldn't travel there was no price he wouldn't pay father we give you this moment holy spirit i would ask that you would help us to pray scripture said we could your word says we can do that we can we don't always know what we can pray for so god i ask if if any in here doesn't know what to pray your spirit will help help us to see jesus advocating before the father for us standing in our place that you might hear our prayers father spirit please come and do in this place what is needed we ask in jesus name as