

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

May 14, 2023

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Time-Tested Truths for Our Times

Impact for Jesus...via Prayer

(Judges 7; John 14:13; 1 John 5:13-15; more...)

Study #3

Introduction: Something else is going on here...

Shortly after the 1988 Olympics (when Team USA did **not** win the gold medal), the International Olympic Committee decided to open competition to professional athletes.

This allowed the USA to send NBA players to the Olympics, and thus was born the Dream Team.¹

Included on the 1992 Olympic team were three of the game's all-time greats: Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, and Larry Bird. Throw in eight more NBA All Stars² and the MVP of college hoops in 1992, Christian Laettner, and America had the team of its dreams.

When the Dream Team won the Olympic gold medal, nobody was surprised.³ They were supposed to win!

¹ The coach of the Dream Team was veteran NBA coach, Chuck Daly. Daly said, "It was like Elvis and the Beatles put together."

² Charles Barkley, David Robinson, Patrick Ewing, Karl Malone, Scottie Pippen, Chris Mullen, Clyde Drexler, and John Stockton.

³ Opposing teams didn't have a chance, nor did they care. During their eight-game romp to the gold medal, Team USA won by an *average* of 44 points. One player, while trying to guard Magic Johnson, was seen frantically waving to a teammate on the bench, signaling to make sure he got a picture of them together on the court.

But what would we think if the USA Olympic Committee tried an experiment in 2024 and sent the Carson Elementary Cowboys to the Olympics in Paris?

What would we think if the Carson Cowboys won game after game in the Olympics against the best squads from Latin America and Europe and eventually won the final game, coming home to San Antonio with a gold medal?

Well, if Carson Elementary wins Olympic gold, we will have to conclude that there was **something more going on** beyond talent, athleticism, basketball know-how, and coaching.

Most everyone would agree, Christian or not: God was in it!

Today, we're not going to think together about what we can do by our own strength and abilities for God, but the outsized impact we can have for Jesus when we trust Him to do what only He can do when we ask Him.

I'm going to start off this morning, by making a point about the impact God wants His people to have in the world. Impact for good. Life-changing impact.

The Apostle Paul put forward a vision for impact when he wrote to the church at Corinth.

God's Ages-Long Strategy: Impact Disproportionate to Size

The Principle Stated

The church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:26)

However, on the way to giving some inspiring vision-casting, he wrote this to the church: ***[1 Corinthians 1:26] For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble...***

If he had written that to us, we might not have taken it as a compliment. It sounds like a major slap. We might have been offended.

Paul would have been surprised if we were offended because he sure wasn't trying to offend. He was simply pointing out the true unremarkableness of the membership at First Church of Corinth.

So, given that this was the case, why would it be the case that the Corinthian church members - and members of other churches we might think of - were unimpressive people?

Paul explains.

[1 Corinthians 1:27] but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, [28] and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, [29] so that no man may boast before God.

Here, Paul gives us tremendous insight into God's method for impacting the world for good.

He chooses and uses the weak so that when lives change and the kingdom of God advances and families are restored and addictions are broken and whole communities are impacted, nobody will think that the force behind those things is the really great people in the church. It is God!

Paul continued, using himself as an example of this principle.

The Apostle Paul

[1 Corinthians 2:1] And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God...[3] I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling...[5] so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.

Paul intentionally came to Corinth in weakness so that when powerful things started to happen in Corinth - and they did! - the

Corinthians wouldn't think that it was because of him. God was at work through a weak apostle.

When it comes to the work of God, we, we cooperate. Yes, we get to actively participate. And yes, we joyfully serve.

But God delights to produce life-changing impact way out of proportion to the size of our resources so that everyone will see that the power does not come from us, but from Him.

As Paul wrote, ***[2 Corinthians 4:7] But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves.***

The principle is that God uses small, weak things to accomplish great things so that everyone will see that there is **something more going on** than people doing the best they can.

Impact disproportionate to the size or ability of the Christ-follower or the church proves the power of God.

The Principle Illustrated in Scripture

To demonstrate that this is a VERY common theme, I'll highlight one story from the Old Testament.

Stories from the Old Testament

Gideon's army (Judges 7)

In the 7th chapter of the book of Judges we meet a man named Gideon who had been chosen by God to be a judge in Israel. Gideon's special assignment from God was to deliver the Jews from their enemies, the Midianites.

Gideon came from an obscure family that was a part of one of the lesser tribes of Israel (Manasseh). His lowly family of origins, though, didn't stop God from wanting to use him mightily.

When Gideon told the men of Israel that they were going to war against Midian, they were more than happy to follow him into battle.

In fact, thirty-two thousand responded, ready and willing to fight the ferocious Midianites.

That number represented a good response and would have been a fine fighting force. It might have even matched the Midianites man for man on the battlefield. But God didn't like those odds.

And it wasn't that He was disappointed that more men hadn't volunteered. No. Listen.

[7:2] The LORD said to Gideon, "The people who are with you are too many for Me to give Midian into their hands..."

So, He told Gideon to pare down the fighting force. ***[Judges 7:3] "Whoever is afraid and worried, is to return"*** and go home.

Well, it turns out that twenty-two thousand men who had come at Gideon's call admitted that they were frightened. So, they went home, leaving ten thousand to fight the Midianites.

That's a huge reduction in force. But the Lord still saw that as too many Jewish soldiers. So, he further whittled the number down to three hundred.

The Israelite army went from 32,000 to 10,00 to 300 to face the entire army of the Midianites. And that was a number God was willing to work with.

Yes, the Jews are hopelessly outmanned. But, with three hundred soldiers, and using a God-inspired strategy, they won. Israel defeated the Midianites.⁴

⁴ God told Gideon to tell these remaining three hundred soldiers to place lit torches inside earthen jars and circle the camp of the Midianites in the dead of night. At the sound of Gideon's trumpet, they were to break the jars, allowing the light of the torches to shine brightly all around the enemy camp. They did exactly as they had

Talk about an upset!

Sure, God could have let Gideon to go to war with 32,000 soldiers. But He knew that if Israel won with 32,000, everybody would say, *"Good fighting, guys!"*

But, if Israel's three hundred won against an army of tens of thousands, everyone would know that there was **something more going on** than military strength to win the victory.

God was at work.

Or, as He actually said to Gideon:

[7:2]... "The people who are with you are too many for Me to give Midian into their hands, for Israel would become boastful, saying, 'My own power has delivered me.'"

God orchestrated the reduction in force to teach His people to trust Him and not their own strength. And we could multiply these stories from the Old Testament.

...and more

- After four hundred years of slavery, Israel had victory over Egypt at the Red Sea - by God's mighty power. (Exodus 14)
- The teenaged shepherd, David, met and defeated the giant, Goliath, in battle - to prove that the battle belongs to the Lord. (1 Samuel 17)
- King Jehoshaphat feared the four nations that had come against him in battle, so he told the choir to start singing - and God won a victory for His people. (2 Chronicles 20)
- King Hezekiah prayed for protection against the Assyrian army - and God miraculously delivered. (2 Chronicles 32)

been commanded. And, at the sight of the torches, the Midianite soldiers were demoralized, thinking that they had been surrounded by a much larger force.

I could list lots more examples of Israel having victory while there was clearly **something more going on** than their strength giving them success.

In countless episodes in the Old Testament God drove home the truth that His people needed to depend on Him to do for them what only He could do.

Stories from the New Testament

When we turn to the New Testament, we find the same dynamic. God chose to use the weak and the powerless to do great things so that everybody would know that He was the energizing Force.

Study the Gospels and you probably won't come away thinking, *"Yep, Jesus chose the cream of the crop to be His disciples. No wonder they took the world by storm."*

No. We look at Peter and James and John and the rest and marvel that they were so, well, ordinary. UNremarkable.

And yet God did use them to turn the world upside down for Jesus, showing that the power came from Him, not from them.

There are other stories I could tell, but just listen to this one about the time that the apostles Peter and John had been released from jail for preaching Jesus.

They were threatened with further punishment if they did so again. However, rather than back down, they went back to their brothers and sisters in Christ. And they prayed.

[Acts 4:29] "And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence, [30] while You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus."

This story gives us a clear picture of what it looks like to depend on God.

There is a recognition that God does the work. There is a passion to boldly speak out for Jesus. There is an eagerness to pray.

In this case, after they prayed, God answered with a localized earthquake that shook the place where they were praying AND the gift of boldness (just like they asked!) to proclaim Jesus.

God delights to work in outsized ways through us when we depend on His power, recognize our own weakness, and pray.

Expressed in 2023

We see this in so many ways.

In lands where Christians are persecuted for their faith, they often make impact for Jesus way out of proportion to their place in society, wealth, or influence.

While they are weak in the eyes of their countries' leaders, God uses their boldness and courage and love to make great impact.

We can even see the principle of "impact disproportionate to size" at work here.

At a church of Northwest size in suburban San Antonio, you would expect to find a youth group, Children's Sunday School and a Nursery, a praise team, weekly worship services, periodic fellowship events, and a small groups ministry.

But when a smaller church also hosts a Spanish-speaking ministry and an ESL ministry and a Food Pantry and a recovery ministry and a ministry to an Afghan refugee family and their friends, it's hard to escape the conclusion that **something more is going on** than lots of effort.

And when a smaller church has the capacity to bless multiple ministries around the world with significant financial help with evangelism and church-planting, water well drilling and other

humanitarian relief, Bible distribution and pastoral training, well, **something more is going on** than good organization.

The presence of these ministries here isn't a cause for boasting.

We don't brag about what is happening through us by God's provision of people and financial resources. That would be nutty.

We give Him the credit for allowing us to do and to be involved in what we wouldn't be able to do without His provision.

The principle of impact disproportionate to size is currently being lived out here - and I thank God for that.

But I think that more impact for Jesus might happen than is happening now. I believe that the path forward into this greater impact is by way of prayer.

The clear teaching of the Bible is that God has chosen to not write all of history by His own hand. He wants to use us to accomplish His will, on earth as it is in heaven.

He uses our actions - service, giving, speaking - to open and close doors and to effect change. So, it is good for us to serve, to give, and to speak.

But He also uses our prayers for the same purposes.

C. S. Lewis (quoting Blaise Pascal) wrote that God gave us both the ability to work and the privilege of prayer *"to allow His creatures the dignity of causality."*⁵

Let's pay attention now to what the New Testament says about the impact our prayers make on what God is doing in the world today.

Let's explore how "impact disproportionate to size" might grow via our prayers.

Essential to Impact Disproportionate to Size: Prayer

The God Who Hears Invites us to Pray

Some of the many benefits of prayer

Rewards (Matthew 6:5-8)

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told His listeners to pray.

He said, ***[Matthew 6:6] But as for you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door, and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.***

Jesus doesn't tell us what the rewards will be. Only that God rewards us for praying. Bank on that.

And then there is this from the Apostle Paul in his letter to the church at Philippi.

Peace (Philippians 4:6-7)

[Philippians 4:6] Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and pleading with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. [7] And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Why pray? Because when we pray about ***"anything"*** and ***"everything,"*** God will grace us with His incomprehensible peace.

No doubt about it. Prayer is good. And we find dozens of references to prayer throughout the New Testament.

Often, the writers commend prayer without giving a reason for praying. The point is that the simple act of focusing on God and talking to Him, pouring out our hearts to Him, is a good thing.

⁵ Quoted by C.S. Lewis in "Work and Prayer," an essay in God in the Dock.

It is a good thing to praise and worship God in prayer. It is good to confess our sins to God in prayer. And it is good to come to Him with the many requests we have, knowing that He hears and cares.

But...

- There is also, in the New Testament's examples and teachings about prayer, optimism - because God answers.
- There is excitement - because He promises to give us what we request.
- There is confidence - because He tells us that when we ask, God will say, "Yes!"

This morning, I am praying that all of us here will take a "next step" into a fuller understanding and experience of the exciting life of prayer God has for us when it comes to expecting Him to answer.

Recorded in the Gospels are declarations that Jesus made about prayer that promise God's answer. And in the letters written by the apostles there are declarations about prayer that promise God's answer.

These declarations invite boldness in prayer. But it is only honest for me to tell you that "certain conditions apply" to these declarations.

Here's one that Jesus mentions repeatedly. (Especially in the Gospel of John. See also John 15:16; 16:23-24, 26)

God Promises to Answer Our Prayers When We...

...pray in Jesus' Name

[John 14:13] And whatever you ask in My Name, this I will do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. [14] If you ask Me anything in My Name, I will do it.

First off, praying "*in [Jesus'] Name*" has nothing to do with a formula, as if there is something magical about using Jesus' Name in a prayer. (As in, "*Give me a new Corvette, in Jesus' Name.*" Check.)

What does it mean, though, to pray in His Name? Here's the way I look at it.

Let's say that you have a legal matter to take care of and are scheduled to sign documents in court this Wednesday. But...you are leaving on a trip on Tuesday and won't be able to sign.

In that case, you might give legal authority to someone you designate to sign "*in your name.*" They are doing what you would have done if you had been physically present.

Praying "*in Jesus' Name*" is asking Jesus, "*Glorify the Father (v. 13) by doing through me / us what You would do if You were right here.*"

And notice that Jesus gives this condition right after telling His disciples that they will do "**greater works**" than He has done. (v. 12)⁶

So, when we pray that He will do through us what He would have done had He been here and when we pray that the Father will be glorified by what we are praying, God will give us what we ask.⁷

The Bible also links answers to prayers that we pray according to God's will.⁸

⁶ I don't believe that this means Christians will do more spectacular miracles than Jesus did, but that by the Spirit working through believers, more souls will be saved, and more lives changed than were saved and changed during Jesus' life.

⁷ Carmen Imes (She wrote, Bearing the Name) believes that the sense of the Old Testament command to not take God's Name in vain (Exodus 20:7) was not so much about speaking as it was about how we live. God placed His Name on Old Testament Israel just like we put our name on a possession to show ownership. God was saying to Israel, "*Now don't go out and live as if you're not Mine!*" as THAT would be to bear God's Name in vain. Much the same idea may be in play here when Jesus speaks about praying in His Name. Praying in His Name means that we are asking things that are in alignment with who He is, what He stands for AND that we are living in alignment with who He is as we pray.

⁸ There are other conditions for answered prayer we could explore. Jesus said that He would do for us whatever we asked of Him if we "**remained / abided**" in Him.

Listen to this from John's first letter. John is telling us something we can know with certainty.

...pray according to God's will

Confidence when praying in alignment with God's will

[1 John 5:13] These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

The way to know with certainty that you have eternal life is to believe in Jesus. That's very clear - and it's extremely important.

Then, he moves to a second thing that we can know. He writes just as clearly, and this is also extremely very extremely important. This is about prayer.

[1 John 5:14] This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. [15] And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him.

In other words, we can have the same level of confidence in answers to prayers that are according to His will as we have confidence that believing in Jesus gives us eternal life.

The only thing we need to know, then, is what God's will IS. And this is where we may get tripped up in our prayers because in many of the matters we pray about, we don't know God's will.

The "fog" of prayer

(John 15:7) He also said that we were to pray in faith, believing that the answer was as good as given, and it would be given. (Mark 11:24) James tells us that key to answered prayer is praying with right motives. (James 4:2-3)

And we can't know His will in many matters because God hasn't revealed His will in many matters.⁹

We know what we want when we pray, but Scripture doesn't promise that God will answer prayers prayed according to OUR will.

And, while God certainly may provide for our needs in unusual ways, provide specific healings, and provide any deliverance He wishes to provide, He doesn't give us His promise that He will do these things.

By all means, pray for "**anything**" and for "**everything**" as Paul urges in Philippians 4:6-7. God will overwhelm you with His peace as you entrust your burdens to Him.

But if you and I want confidence that our specific prayers will be answered, we need to learn to pray what the Bible identifies as God's will.

His will is plainly seen in His Word, and we can find something we know is God's will from almost every page of New Testament.

So, let's end this morning by highlighting just a few of the items that are clearly laid out in Scripture that are His will.

A Template for Prayer

- Do you need wisdom to navigate a challenging trial or a pressing temptation with God-honoring grace? Pray for that wisdom. He promises to give it. (James 1:5)
- Do you need help in remaining faithful to God while facing serious hardship? It could be an illness, a relationship fracture, or a

⁹ Remember, too, that God has the big picture that we don't have. If Joseph had prayed that God would release Him from the traders who were transporting him to Egypt after his brothers had sold him, or if he had prayed for release from the jail in Potiphar's house prematurely, he would not have been elevated to be the second most powerful man in Egypt, able to rescue his family from a terrible famine and to keep the line of Abraham alive.

financial stress. Pray for help in exactly that. He will give it. (Hebrews 4:16)

- Do you need boldness to speak for Jesus when that will be difficult? Pray for that boldness. He promises to give it. (Acts 4:29-31)
- Do you need guidance for how to interact with others so that they are spurred on to walk with Jesus? Pray for God to provide opportunities to interact with others at deeper than surface levels. He wants that to happen. Watch how He provides. Try praying THAT each Sunday morning before you come to church. (Hebrews 10:24-25)
- Do you need help in growing in a certain character trait? Maybe it's one of the fruits of the Spirit. (Galatians 5) Since you know that it is God's will that you to grow in love and kindness and patience and self-control, pray that He will grow you.
- Do you long to see someone else grow in character, grow in faith, resist temptation, find grace in hardship? Of course you do. So, pray that. It is God's will for them, too - and to the extent that they are also seeking these things, God will do it. ¹⁰

You get the idea.

Of course, continue praying for the things that are on your heart. But if you want to increasingly receive answers from God to your prayers, rather than primarily take to God the things that you want, increasingly pray for those things that you know God wants.

Look for something that God lets you know is His will and pray THAT.

Conclusion:

¹⁰ As God has created us as free moral agents, if the person you are praying for doesn't want God's wisdom or God's peace or to draw near in adversity, your prayer for them may not be answered.

Having heard all of this, you may still be tempted to think that if God is all good - and He is - then He's going to do what is good, anyway, whether I ask Him or not AND that if He is all-powerful - and He is - then my prayer won't make a difference in what He is going to do.

I can simply tell you that the testimony of the Bible is that our all-good, all-powerful God has orchestrated reality in such a way that our prayers impact Him.

Our prayers impact Him to such a degree that things happen when we pray that would not have happened had we not prayed, and that things that would have happened had we prayed don't happen because we did not pray. (See James 4:2!)

So, we trust, depending on Him to do what only He can do, creating out of our work and our prayer impact completely disproportionate to our size to that He gets all the glory.