Before I went into ministry I was an entrepreneur and a partner in several businesses. One of those businesses was a Commodity Trading Group I started with my father. We would raise a pool of money from investors and then trade it in commodities such as metals or grains. When you buy an option, it’s risky because your dollars are leveraged, and therefore a small shift in price can cost you or make you a lot of money. Neither one of us had a lot of experience in trading commodities so we were not experiencing the kinds of returns we hoped for. Now we were both Christians and so when things didn’t go well, I found myself growing more and more frustrated with God. I mean we had already invested a lot of money into this company and I just expected God to bless us because we were believers. We started looking into the purchase of a computer trading system that was supposed to help us make more profitable trades. The system that we wanted cost about $50,000 and was a lot of money for us at the time. So we decided to make a trip to California to watch a live demonstration of this system and were very impressed with what we saw. At one point during the demonstration, we took a break and stepped outside. As we talked about what we were going to do my dad asked if I thought we should buy this system. I said yes, I do. He then asked a very clarifying question. He said Steve have you prayed about that? With a lot of frustration I said, “No I’ve not been praying about it, and I don’t care if it’s God’s will or not. We are buying this system!” He didn’t respond, but I’m sure he was disappointed in my refusal to pray. Well we purchased the system and it did not perform as well as we expected. Not only did we lose a good portion of our clients’ money, but we lost our investment and eventually closed down the company. Well friends we are in a series of messages based on my new book called Creatures of Habit. We are talking about characteristics or sins in our life that if we are not intentional about dealing with them, they will become bad habits or spiritual strong holds that will keep us from God’s best. Today I want to talk about the habit of prayerlessness, which at first glance might seem a bit confusing because it’s not something we *do* but something we *don’t* do. You see not only are there sins of commission, which are the sins we commit, but there are also sins of omission, or in other word things we should be doing but we omit to do them. Prayerlessness is a sin of omission, F.B. Meyer the great author and pastor in England once said,(“The greatest tragedy of life is not unanswered prayer, but unoffered prayer.”) Listen prayer is our connection to God; it makes room for his direction as well as his correction in our life. In fact, the Bible specifically tells us to “pray continually”, so anything other than a continual attitude of prayer and communion with God is disobedience. You see I think if I would have prayed about the decision to purchase that trading system, the outcome might have looked very different. Prayer is like the air we breathe, it’s our lifeline, our connection to God, and it sustains us spiritually. Listen without prayer our spiritual life will suffocate. Without prayer we will find it difficult at best to break any of the habits that are defeating us. Which is why we need to understand how we’ve gotten into this habit of prayerlessness. I think most Christians at one time, or another have experienced a season of prayerlessness. Maybe you allowed your priorities to get messed up. Everything else in your life has become more important to you than time spent with God. Or maybe it’s because of an independent spirit. God’s encouraging you to do something, but you don’t want to do it, so you stop praying. Discouragement or resentment can be another reason for prayerlessness. Maybe you prayed for God to save your marriage and yet your spouse still left, or maybe you prayed for God to heal a loved one and they still died, or maybe you’ve been asking God for a child, but nothing has happened. And since God didn’t answer your prayer, or at least the way you wanted him to, you have this sense of betrayal and you’re too hurt to pray. Friends there’s a lot of reasons we won’t pray but essentially, it’s caused by our unbelief. Now there’s a difference between disbelief and unbelief. *Disbelief* is to not believe in God, while *unbelief* is to reject or doubt the promises of God. In Mark’s gospel we see a man bring his demon-possessed boy to the disciples for help. They tried but were unable to do anything. So the man then took the boy to Jesus Mark 9:22–24 (NIV) This father believed that Jesus was a healer and yet he struggled to believe that he would heal his son. Unbelief is basically an absence of faith. And scripture tells us without faith it is impossible to please God. So it’s important to know that not only does God love us but we can also trust Him. It’s also important to know that if you ignore the unbelief in your life it will lead to a backslidden condition. To be backslidden is a condition that results from spiritual apathy or disregard for the things of God. In other words, a backslider is someone moving the wrong way spiritually. Maybe at one time in their life they trusted Christ, but recently their heart has grown cold because of their unbelief. Andrew Murray, a South Africa–born pastor and missionary was asked by one of the men in his church, “What is the cause of so much prayerlessness? Is it unbelief?” And he answered, (“Certainly, it is unbelief, but the question is, what is the cause of *the unbelief*?”) Guys prayerlessness is the major cause of unbelief. When you are not praying you are not hearing from God when he tries to guide and direct you, and it clouds your heart to the temptations surrounding you. On the other hand, when you are spending time with God in prayer it strengthens your faith and floods your heart with joy. 1 Peter 1:8 NIV. You cannot have a healthy relationship with God if you’re not spending time with him in prayer. Peter also tells us 1 Peter 5:7(NLT) How do you give your cares over to God if you’re not praying? A prayerless life will always lead to a more stressful life. Another consequence of prayerlessness is that you lose your hunger for more of God. For instance, if I stop talking to a close friend, I will eventually lose a desire to work on that friendship. Well the same thing will happen if I stop talking to God. Listen friends, absence does not make the heart grow fonder… absence makes the heart grow distant. Prayer is the way we communicate with God and communication is the basis of life. Whenever there’s healthy communication there is a healthy relationship, but when there’s no communication you will end up with a broken relationship. Guys prayerlessness is sin. James 4:17NIV. Sin is any lack of conformity to the moral character of God and it’s anything that stands between us and God. A prayerless life makes no space for God. It was John Bunyan who said, (“Prayer will make a man cease from sin, as sin will entice a man to cease from prayer.”) Billy Graham warned of the dangers of prayerlessness: (“We are to pray in times of adversity, lest we become faithless and unbelieving. We are to pray in times of prosperity, lest we become boastful and proud. We are to pray in times of danger, lest we become fearful and doubting. We are to pray in times of security, lest we become self-sufficient.”) As Christians we often say we want to be led by the Spirit, but prayerlessness leaves us walking in the flesh. Prayerlessness is to settle for less than God’s best. I heard a story of a pastor who asked his church to pray that God would shut down the neighborhood bar. So the entire church gathered for a prayer meeting. A few weeks later lightning struck the bar, and it burned to the ground. The owner of the bar heard about this prayer meeting and decided to bring a lawsuit against the church. As they stood in front of the judge that day, the owner argued that God struck his bar with lightning because of the prayers of this church. The pastor admitted they had a prayer meeting for that purpose, but no one in his congregation really expected anything like this to happen. The judge then leaned back in his chair and just shook his head. He said, “I can’t believe what I’m hearing. I have a bar owner who believes in the power of prayer and a pastor who doesn’t!” There are a lot of Christians who say they believe in the importance of prayer, and yet their actions show otherwise. On the other hand, there are some Christians who want to pray but they feel like they don’t know how. For instance, the disciples were so discouraged by their own efforts to pray that they asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. Because when Jesus prayed things happened. They watched him turn water into wine and give sight to the blind. They were there when he fed the five thousand and raised the dead. Jesus prayers were effective. James 5:16NIV. The disciples didn’t ask him how to teach, or how to forgive, or how to do miracles. They wanted to learn how to be effective in their prayers. Listen Jesus was effective in his prayers because he spent time doing it. Everything within us wants to follow our own selfish ambitions and the lure of this world. But prayer is what keeps us centered and focused on God, its an act of obedience and dedication to the Lord. Prayer is what drowns out the noise and confusion of the world. And yet until we realize how desperately we need him, we won’t pray. And I believe one of the greatest tragedies in life is the prayers that go unanswered because they go unasked. So let’s take a look at some steps we can take to break this bad habit of prayerlessness and create a good habit of prayer. But before you can break the habit you have to own it, to acknowledge that you’re not spending enough time with God in prayer. And then once you’ve confessed it to God, ask him for the motivation to change. And once you do that you are ready to take some steps to break this habit. #1 Identify your obstacles. In other words what are the things keeping you from prayer. Do you have a hard time concentrating when you pray? Your mind drifts off to other things. Or maybe there are things that upset you so much you find it difficult to pray about them? Maybe you have unresolved conflict? Or there’s unforgiveness in your life? Listen if every time I pray, the Holy Spirit convicts me of my unforgiveness, I will either deal with the unforgiveness or I will stop praying. Once you identify your obstacles and get them out of the way, it will become much easier to break the cycle of prayerlessness. #2 Schedule a time to pray. Listen life can get really busy so I know if I want to have a healthy marriage, I have to schedule time alone with my wife or we will drift apart. Well the same thing is true in my relationship with God, if I don’t schedule time alone with Him my relationship will suffer. So I have to be proactive and schedule a daily time of prayer. Now some will tell you that you have to pray for at least an hour a day. And if that’s what you elect to do that’s fine, but prayer is not measured by the minutes or hours, the secret sauce to a successful prayer life is having a dedicated time each day to get alone with God. During the day I find it easy to keep the communication lines open and ongoing with God. I will talk to him while I’m driving my car or while I’m trying to make a decision. But because my life is so busy its harder to have a scheduled time with him. Which is why I have to be intentional to make it happen. #3 Find a Prayer Partner. Finding someone of the same sex to pray with on a regular basis can help you have the accountability you need to stick with it and break the habit of prayerlessness. That’s why Jesus encourages us to pray together. Matt. 18:19NIV. When you pray with someone else your prayers are no longer all about you. A prayer partner will help you to focus on each other’s needs as well as the needs of others. There might be times you are going through a difficult struggle and just don’t have the words to pray. Having someone who cares about you pray on your behalf is very encouraging. Eccl 4:9-12NIV. And your prayer partner should be someone you trust. Because you need to be open and honest with each other and share the good, the bad, and the ugly. #4 Use An Outline. I can be a little ADD when it comes to my time in prayer. My mind has a tendency to drift to the things I need to get done. So I’ve found it helpful to use a prayer formula or an outline to keep me focused. Other times I find it helps to write out my prayers in a journal. And yet other times it helps to simply pray Scripture. Listen there’s a lot of good formulas or outlines out there to use so I don’t think it matters which one you pick. One example is the acrostic (ACTS, which starts with Adoration or praise to God, then Confession or to own up to your sins, then Thanksgiving or thanking God for all he has done in your life, and the Supplication or making requests for yourself and others.) Another model I’ve used is the Lord’s Prayer. The idea is that there are five sections to this outline and you spend time praying through each section. Whether you use it to pray for five minutes or fifty minutes a day, it will help you to stay focused and on track. Guys just find a model or outline that works for you and give it a try for a couple of weeks and see if it resonates with you. If it doesn’t just try another until you find one that helps you to grow in this habit of prayer. #5 Pray With Boldness.I once heard a pastor say that God does not answer vague prayers. I’m not so sure that’s true but I do believe that God wants us to be bold with our prayers. You don’t have to look far in Scripture to find numerous examples of people praying bold prayers. Think about Moses standing in front of the Red Sea asking God to deliver them from the Egyptian army. Or what about when Joshua prayed that God would help the Israelites in their battle by stopping the sun. But I think one of my favorite examples of bold prayers is that of the mother of James and John. Matt. 20:20-21NIV. This mother didn’t ask if her sons could one day hold the door for Jesus; she wanted her boys to be on the right and left sides of Jesus in heaven. Now that’s a bold prayer. Many think she stepped over the line. I don’t think she did. What loving mother hasn’t gone the extra mile in trying to achieve what’s best for her kids? God may or may not answer your prayers in the way you want, but Scripture tells us that bold prayers are exactly what the Lord wants from us. That’s why Jesus said in Matt. 7:7–8NLT. Billy Graham once said, “This should be the motto of every follower of Jesus Christ. No matter how dark and hopeless a situation might seem, never stop praying.” Now sometimes we need to be still and listen for that still small voice, we need to contemplate what the Spirit of God is saying to us. But I just feel it’s important for us to push through passivity and apathy and put ourselves in alignment with God. So always remember that bold prayers honor God and God honors bold prayers. So friends if you want prayer to be a way of life, then the only thing left to do is practice praying. Not just when you are in a crisis but every day of your life. Always remember a prayerless Christian is a powerless Christian.