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SERMON TITLE: "Overcoming strongholds"
SCRIPTURE: 2 Corinthians 10:3-5
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Why Pray? Series

Did you ever have a child—maybe yours or a friend's child come to you and ask for something? My aunts were the ones—and my granddad—they would never say no! So I always looked forward to seeing them. Even if I was being very selfish they made me feel like they were glad I asked.

One great benefit to prayer is that God always listens when we show dependency.

But you may not believe that. You may believe you have to have your act together to pray. You have to ask for only the right things. You can't be selfish. You have to live like you're supposed to live—no backsliding! Do you see why many people don't pray?

That's sort of false human reasoning against prayer.

Paul wants us to let go of the stronghold of human reasoning because human reasoning can be so obsessed with its own intelligence that it has no need of God.

The stronghold Paul is talking about is *an easy dismissal of God's input*. "I'll think about that next time, but right now I want what I want." "I'll get this first and then I'll go to God." Or "I know what I need better than God." That's sin.

To understand Paul's words, it might help to know something about the people he wrote to. Corinth's citizens included Roman soldiers, traders, sailors, a large Jewish population, philosophers and entrepreneurs. It had a ship-building yard, bustling commerce, and a temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love. The Temple employed more than 1,000 temple prostitutes. Along with the mixture of people, traders, and travelers came a reputation for drunkenness and debauchery.

The church located there was a mixture of people – Jews and Gentiles, mostly not-so-rich but some wealthy, some law abiding and others licentious. They aspired to follow the teachings of Jesus in the midst of this Wild West sort of town.

Do you think they were perfect? If you have read Corinthians, you know that they pridefully divided over

church leaders, they were jealous of those who spoke in tongues. They sued each other. Some of them were promiscuous and lax, living however they wanted. Others followed the Old Testament law and judged those who didn't. These people were simply a mess.

Paul said: "I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as...infants in Christ.... You are not ready for solid food. For you are still of the flesh." (1 Cor. 3:1-2) They had many strongholds in their lives and were living with one foot in the Christian world and the other foot in this world.

So they lived without vibrant faith, caught in the middle between a life of faith and this physical world, desiring all life's prideful rewards. Do you ever find yourself trapped there, not able to overcome the stronghold of "gaining all there is in this life." God said the ways of the world are not the solution. That's false thinking. *I will destroy the wisdom of the wise*, said God. (1 Corinthians 1:18-19)

The Corinthians were caught by their desires and their wants on the one hand, and whether they had to follow the law on the other. What was the truth?

We know Christian lifestyles value humility over pride; have a high view of sexual morality. For us, God's truth eclipses human reasoning that says we should strive for all we can get. That may not be your struggle, but we all have strongholds that are related to human reasoning and untrue justifications and the worries that accompany them.

A stronghold is often reinforced over a lifetime and can pass long to the next generation. There are strongholds in that shape people and hold the world in patterns of sin.

Paul explained it like this: *I have discovered this principle of life-- that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. I love God's law with all my heart. But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord.* (Romans 7:21-25)

The war is in the mind, not the heart. Paul's heart was in the right place. He loved God. But the war was in his mind. Let's notice who will free him: Jesus is the answer!

It takes personal involvement with Jesus to actually change those strongholds. That means prayer changes you.

I bought a bicycle. The store owner taught me the gears. I read up on riding rules. But, I was a little reluctant to actually ride it. Would I fall over? Make a fool of myself? Would my back hurt? But until I got on it and rode, my legs would not get stronger or my balance improve.

It is exhilarating to ride the bike. Gaining experience makes me stronger and my body has benefitted. The best thing is I don't have to be a professional at it!

Prayer is like that. We tend to hold back on prayer because we might not be good at it—we are too self-centered or haven't changed some bad habits or wonder if God hears us. But none of that matters. God wants to hear from you! People in the Bible often just blurted out what was on their mind. Consider Moses's prayer after a particularly bad day in the wilderness with 600,000 people:

Moses said to the LORD, "Why are you treating me, your servant, so harshly? Have mercy on me! What did I do to deserve the burden of all these people? Did I give birth to them? Did I bring them into the world? Why did you tell me to carry them in my arms like a mother carries a nursing baby? How can I carry them to the land you swore to give their ancestors? Where am I supposed to get meat for all these people? They keep whining to me, saying, 'Give us meat to eat!' I can't carry all these people by myself! The load is far too heavy! If this is how you intend to treat me, just go ahead and kill me. Do me a favor and spare me this misery!" (Numbers 11:11-15)

Moses's worried about his responsibilities but his weakness didn't bother God. God immediately responded by calling seventy elders to help him. God sent a wind that brought quails for the people to eat. (Numbers 11:24ff)

So Moses overcame the stronghold of worry by praying, and God answered.

Later, God became extremely angry with the people. But Moses had grown into a better leader. Now he cared about the people who were previously such a huge worry to him and asked God to forgive them. And God did:

The LORD said, "How long will these people treat me with contempt? Will they never believe me? . . . I will disown them and destroy them with a plague." . . . But Moses objected. . . . "Now if you slaughter all these people with a single blow, the nations that have heard of your fame will say, 'The LORD was not able to bring

them into the land he swore to give them, so he killed them in the wilderness.' Please, Lord, prove that your power is as great as you have claimed. For you said, 'The LORD is slow to anger and filled with unfailing love, forgiving every kind of sin and rebellion. . . .' In keeping with your magnificent, unfailing love, please pardon the sins of this people, just as you have forgiven them ever since they left Egypt." Then the LORD said, "I will pardon them as you have requested." (14:11-20)

Moses had grown as a leader because of simple, humble prayer. He went to God when he was troubled. His stronghold was so changed that he was able to plead for the people and receive a positive answer to his prayers.

You might have a stronghold that affects your family. Prayer can greatly change those strongholds. It can open your mind (and heart!) in ways you cannot imagine.

John D. Rockefeller was so ambitious he became a billionaire early in the 20th Century. When asked "How much money is enough? He answered, "Just a little bit more."

Rockefeller built Standard Oil Company by buying out competitors, often forcing the buyout. His business practices were very controversial. His company was convicted in federal court of exploitative antitrust practices and it was split up. That did not stop Rockefeller's ambition. But later he changed his focus and became a philanthropist supporting church-based efforts, educational institutions, and medical research. In his lifetime, his donations were instrumental in eradicating hookworm and yellow fever.

How did he do it? A scathing book came out that let him see the damage done by Standard Oil's practices. It was a wakeup call. Having been raised by a devout mother, he committed himself to daily Bible reading and prayer meetings twice a week. While he had always tithed, seeing the effect of his greed on others, along with his growing involvement with Jesus, he changed into a humanitarian who spent the next forty years concerned for the betterment of society. In total, historians estimate that during his lifetime he gave away \$550,000,000, more than half a billion. The Rockefeller Foundation continues to thrive today.

Sometimes we get it backwards. We come up with our own ideas, our ambitions, and goals. We worry about fulfilling all our own plans and never seem to feel satisfied. By prayer and connection with Jesus we can turn those human strongholds into life-giving assets. Do you want to overcome your strongholds? Begin with simple prayer. Get to know Jesus personally. PRAY.

AMEN