Do you believe that prayer works?

By Chaplain John Swanson

Most of us have had someone we looked up to when we were growing up. We had a role model, someone we wanted to be like.

When I was in the eight-grade, I had a role model. I had someone I wanted to grow up and emulate. His name was Dick Butkus.

Dick Butkus played middle linebacker for nine seasons in the NFL from 1964-73. He recovered 27 fumbles in his career, a NFL record at the time of his retirement. He was one of the most feared players of his era and even appeared on the cover of "*Sports Illustrated*" in 1970 with the caption "The Most Feared Man in the Game."

He had one of his most productive seasons in 1970 with 132 tackles, 84 assists, 3 interceptions and 2 fumble recoveries. He was forced to retire after multiple knee injuries in 1973.

He played in eight Pro Bowls, was a six-time First Team All Pro selection, two-time Defensive Player of the Year and was voted to the NFL 75th Anniversary All-Time Team. Dick Butkus was the man. He was the icon football player who evoked fear in opposing players.

I wanted to be like Dick. I had a dream of playing high school football and playing… yep, you guessed it… middle linebacker.

When all 150 lbs of me showed up for ninth-grade football practice the coaches asked me what position I wanted to play. Of course I said middle linebacker. They put me on the offensive-defensive line. I was crushed. I later discovered that my athletic abilities were on the track and cross country teams. But, part of me always remembers those days when I wanted to be like Dick.

One day, after Jesus had finished praying, one of his disciples asked him to teach them to pray just as John the Baptist had taught his disciples. It is there in Luke 11 that we are introduced to that timeless prayer called the "*Lord's Prayer*:" "Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed by thy name…."

Why did the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray? It seems like an odd request. After all, they knew how to pray. They had been taught to pray from their childhood. So what was it about Jesus that inspired them to ask the question?

They saw that prayer mattered to Jesus. He spent many hours by himself in prayer and meditation. He had a special relationship with God and they wanted in on that. The disciples wanted to be like Jesus. Teach us to pray. We want to be like you Jesus.

One of the questions that we need to ask ourselves is, "Does prayer matter?" I ask you to contemplate that question. Does prayer matter? Does God hear our prayers? Does it make any difference whether I pray or not?

Most religious traditions practice prayer, meditation, contemplation, fasting or one of the other spiritual disciplines as a means to communicate with the holy. Christians, like many religious traditions, observe and practice the discipline of prayer. But does it matter? Does it really make a difference?

Christians pray on average three minutes each day. Clergy pray on average 12 minutes each day.

The question is, if we believe that prayer really matters, that it makes a difference, that God hears and answers prayer, then why don't we pray more? If we really believe in the power of prayer, why don't we spend more time praying?

Think of what a difference we could make in the world if we spent just a few minutes more each day in prayer. Just five extra minutes in prayer and meditation is 30 hours each year. Just 10 extra minutes in prayer is over 60 hours each year. That's more than an entire work week!

The Father of the Reformation, Martin Luther, is said to have exclaimed that he had so much to do on a particular day that he needed to spend an extra two hours in prayer at the beginning of the day. Spiritual giants like Augustine, John Calvin, Charles and John Wesley, Mother Theresa and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., spent incredible amounts of time in prayer and meditation.

While we may not be spiritual giants who spend an hour or two in prayer each day, can we increase our time in prayer and so foster a closer relationship with God? Absolutely. Think about it. Americans spend an average seven hours a day watching TV. Can we squeeze in a few extra minutes for prayer? No problem. But, we need to have a clear goal and an "accounta-bil-i-buddy" who will hold our feet to the goal we have set for ourselves.

If you want to improve your prayer life, grow spiritually and foster a deeper relationship with God and one another, then you need to start by spending more time in prayer. If you want to run a marathon, you don't begin the first day of training by running 26 miles. You work up to it. Running a little farther each day, each week, each month. Eventually, you can run those 26 miles. If you want to lose 10 lbs, you don't try to lose it all in one week. You work out more and change your diet. Eventually, the pounds come off.

The same is true with prayer. Make your spiritual goals realistic. Increase the time you spend in prayer gradually.

Maybe your goal is to simply pray each day. Start with the *"Lord's Prayer"* or another familiar prayer. If you don't know any, read the Psalms in the Bible or passages from your favorite holy writings. Maybe your goal is to increase your prayer or meditation time by five minutes.

Whatever your goal, make a clear commitment and find a mentor or prayer partner who will hold you accountable. When we know someone is going to ask us about our goals we are much more likely to follow through. In the end, you will be blessed.

Do you believe that prayer works? Then it's time to pray.