

THE FOCUS OF PRAYER

D.L. Moody once entered a tavern in order to ask the bartender if his two little girls might be allowed to attend his Sunday School. He was told that there was an atheist club that met in that bar every Thursday night and the owner of the bar did not want to offend them. Moody looked into the face of this man and pleaded with him on behalf of his girls. Finally, the man's heart was touched and he said, "Preacher, I'll tell you what I'll do. If you'll come down here this Thursday night and debate with those atheists in a joint discussion, and win, you shall have the children. If you do not win, my girls cannot go to Sunday School. "Agreed," said Moody. He left the tavern and went right out and saw a crippled newsboy he knew who really knew how to pray. He told him, "Tommy, I need you this Thursday night!"

When the hour of the meeting arrived, Tommy and Moody entered the tavern. It was full of men sitting on whiskey barrels, beer kegs, and even on the bar—eagerly awaiting the coming debate. Moody began by saying, "Gentlemen, it is our custom to open our meetings up with a word of prayer. Tommy, come up here and lead us in prayer." Tommy began to pray to the Lord for the souls of all present. As the tears began to roll down the little fellow's cheeks, one by one the men began to leave the tavern until there was no one left except the bartender, Moody and the praying boy. Moody turned to the father and said, "I claim your girls for my Sunday school!" The bartender answered, "All right, you win. But it's an odd way to fight!" Moody answered, "True, but it is the way I win most of my battles."

Today we are continuing in our series on prayer. Last week we talked about the power of prayer – this is WHY we pray. Today I want to talk about the specifics of prayer. In other words, WHAT should we be praying for. Maybe you have heard this story;

A father walked by his daughter's bedroom door which was cracked just enough so that he could see that she was kneeling beside her bed in prayer. Interested to find out what subjects a child would bring before God, he paused and listened. He was puzzled though to hear her reciting the alphabet: "A, B, C, D, E, F, G ..." She just kept repeating it. He didn't want to interrupt her, but soon curiosity got the best of him and he broke into her prayer. "Honey," he asked, "what are you doing?" "I'm praying, Daddy," she replied. "Well, why are you praying the alphabet?" he asked. She explained, "I started my prayers, but I wasn't sure what to pray. So I decided to just say all the letters of the alphabet and let God put them together however He thinks best."

Sometimes we are asked to pray for people and we wonder what we should be praying for them. What to pray for missionaries, pastors and other people, some of whom we may have never met. Paul had never met the Colossians, but he faithfully prayed for them. His prayers teach us how to pray for others, whether we know them or not.

Col 1:9-12 For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. 10 And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, 11 being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully 12 giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light.

One of the greatest privileges that we have as believers is to pray for others. So often our prayers are focused upon our own wants and needs. God has called us to be others focused. So, what is it that we need to be praying for in the lives of others? Four things;

1. Pray for Purpose

The first thing that Paul prays for the Christians in Colossae is that they might be filled “with the knowledge of His will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.” This is a powerful prayer. This is something I also pray for people, that they would understand God’s will for their life. As believers in Jesus, this is an important but often difficult thing to understand.

So often we pray for people and simply ask for God’s blessing upon them. We ask for their healing if they are sick or we ask that God would make them happy. The most important thing is that they understand and know God’s purpose for them.

It was back in 1799 that French Soldiers found a stone slab with inscriptions on it outside the city of Rosetta (modern day Rashid) in Egypt. The inscription was a decree issued in 196 BC after the coronation of King Ptolemy 5th and written in 3 languages - ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, Egyptian script and Greek. Until this time, it had been impossible to translate Egyptian hieroglyphs, but the Rosetta Stone made it possible. Without the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, all the ancient history and wisdom of Egypt would have remained a mystery forever.

Have you ever tried to learn a foreign language? It is pretty tough. It requires a textbook or teacher or software program to help you learn. Imagine not having any of those things at your disposal. Now imagine it is a language that no one else in the world can now speak. It would not just be hard to learn, it would be impossible. Jesus came into the world to decode the translation of God’s mysterious plan for redeeming our lives. He came to teach us God’s language of salvation and God’s plan of redemption. Through Jesus, the Holy Spirit now dwells within us to help us hear God’s voice and understand God’s distinct will for each one of us.

This is why we did the series on hearing God. This is why it is so important. As a pastor it is such a joy to see people discover God’s plan for their life. When they understand their purpose, the reason that they were born. This is what we need to pray for people. Pray for purpose. Pray for an understanding of God’s calling in their life.

The story is told of a terrible traffic accident. Police officers were called to the scene and when they arrived they found a husband, wife, and two children lying unconscious in the car. As they were pulling them out of the wreck they noticed a monkey in the car also. Seeing that the monkey was the only witness to the accident who was conscious, the officers decided to question him about the accident. Turning to the monkey they asked, “What was the dad doing at the time of the accident?” The monkey motioned, indicating that the dad had been drinking. The officers next asked what the mother had been doing at the time of the accident. The monkey took his finger and shook it angrily at the unconscious man. The officers then asked what the children had been doing. The monkey this time indicated by hand gestures that the children had been fighting in the back seat. The officers said, “Well, no wonder there was an accident with all of that going on in the car.” As they turned to leave, almost as a parting thought they asked, “By the way, what were you doing at the time of the accident?” To which the monkey signed that he had been the one driving. Sometimes we go through life that way, uncontrolled without direction. Pray for an understanding of God’s purpose.

2. Pray for Productivity

Paul prays that the Christians in Colossae would not only understand God's will for them but also that they would do it. They would know God's will, "And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God." Not simply that they would have the right attitude but that this attitude would be followed by action, and that action would lead to spiritual fruit.

Paul prayed that people would know God's will, but he also understood that knowing God's will does not guarantee doing God's will. There are many times in life when we know God's will but fall short of doing it. We know that God has called us to a certain task or decision but we do not follow through in obedience.

A fruitful life is an obedient life. It is only through action that we can fulfill the purpose God has for us. Only as we act on God's will can we please Him in greater and greater ways. The ultimate aim of knowing God's will is walking in that will in a worthy manner that pleases the Lord.

It is my first public declaration that a thing which looks to be unreasonable and seems to be unprofitable, being commanded by God, is law, is law to me. If my Master had told me to pick up six stones and lay them in a row I would do it, without demanding of him, 'What good will it do?' This type of question is not fit for soldiers of Jesus. The very simplicity and apparent uselessness of the ordinance should make the believer say, 'Therefore I do it because it becomes the better test to me of my obedience to my Master.'" When you tell your servant to do something, and he cannot comprehend it, if he turns round and says, "Please, sir, what for?" you are quite clear that he hardly understands the relation between master and servant. So when God tells me to do a thing, if I say, "What for?" I cannot have taken the place which Faith ought to occupy, which is that of simple obedience to whatever the Lord hath said. Baptism is commanded, and faith obeys because it is commanded, and thus takes her proper place. -- Spurgeon

F. B. Meyer once had a man come to him and asked the question, "Why do you think it is that I have no conscious joy, and have had but little for years." Meyer asked if the man used to have joy in his life and he said, "Yes, for some time after my conversion to God." Meyer then asked the man if he knew of any time that he had refused to obey some distinct command from God. Tears began to well up in the man's eyes and he answered, "Yes, years ago I used to think that God required a certain thing of me; but I felt I could not do what He wished. It bothered me for a while, but after some time it seemed to fade from my mind, and now it does not often trouble me." Meyer said to the man, "that is where you went wrong! That is the reason for your lack of joy."

When you pray for people, pray that they would be obedient to God's calling in their life. Pray that they would live a life worthy of the Lord. Pray that they would seek to please God in every way. If they do that, they will show it by bearing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God. Fruitfulness flows out of purposefulness.

The greatest fruit that a person's life can bear has lasting value; usually that means actions with eternal consequences, such as salvation for unbelievers and Spirit empowered ministry to other members of the body of Christ. So when you pray for others, pray that they would be productive, and that they would choose to bear fruit that is eternal. -- John Maxwell

We pray for an understanding of God's purpose and also for the obedience to follow God's plan that leads to productivity. Bearing fruit as we discussed in our last series.

3. Pray for Power

Paul continues to pray in verse 11 that the Christians in Colossae would be "strengthened with all power according to his glorious might." The power that Paul prays for here is the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Notice that he does not pray that they would receive power according to their want or need but according to God's glorious might. God is infinitely powerful, so the prayer is that they would receive far more than they can ever ask or even imagine. We talked about this principle a few weeks ago when we were talking about pruning for productivity.

John 15:5 I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

If you just push your lawnmower around your lawn, nothing will happen until you turn it on. Without Jesus we are not just half as effective or a quarter as effective, we can do nothing. Like an electrical appliance we were designed to be plugged in to a power source in order to work properly.

Psa 20:7-8 Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God. 8 They are brought to their knees and fall, but we rise up and stand firm.

This is why it is so important that we pray for people and ask God to give them His power. Without that power, they won't be able to make a difference for Him. But with that power, they can show strength in the face of adversity, patience during trials, and endurance to finish the race God has laid out before them.

You know what it reminds me of? Remember the first Indiana Jones Movie, where for several seconds this crazy and skilled guy is threatening Indiana by whirling this sword around with incredible flash, then in an instant, Jones calmly, with mild irritation, pulls out his gun and BANG it is all over. This is a picture of how we need to be with God. God is our gun here and no matter how bad things appear, we simply need to rely on Him and trust Him.

They repeat this scene in the second movie, The Temple of Doom. Indiana is running away and suddenly comes across two big men swinging swords. He smugly reaches for his gun but this time it is not there. The expression on his face changes as he realizes that he is in big trouble. We don't have to worry with God, but we better worry without him.

We pray for people that they would understand God's purpose, for productivity and power.

4. Pray for Perspective

The last thing that Paul prays for the Christians in Colossae is that they would have "great endurance and patience - joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light." True believers in Jesus who understand God's will for their life and who are obedient and Spirit filled are not ungrateful, easily provoked miserable people. They are thankful and joyful people.

Paul prays that, through it all, they would maintain a positive, joyful and thankful attitude. Attitude is so important. It impacts nearly every aspect of our lives. It influences our behavior, our ability to learn, our contentment, and relationships - including our relationship with God. Our attitudes affect our lives in a far greater way than we may think. Towards the end of his letter, Paul comes back to the topic of gratitude;

Col 3:15-17 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. 17 And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Gratitude has a way of lifting our eyes off ourselves and on to others. When we are content, our focus shifts to others who are still in need. I have found that the more I pray for other people, the less I think about myself. The more I pray for others, the more I find that my own focus shifts from being blessed to being a blessing. As I pray for endurance, patience, joy and gratitude for others, I find that I receive these things myself. That is the amazing thing about prayer. It does not simply change others, it also changes you

It changes our attitude. We stop being so concerned with the problems we see around us and we become preoccupied with "the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light." Less concerned with earthly kingdoms and more concerned with the heavenly kingdom that awaits us.

So, let me ask you a question this morning. Anyone listening to me right feel grateful? How many out there are joyful this morning? We have a lot to be thankful about this morning. It may not always seem that way. Throughout this pandemic, have you noticed how every time there was a hint of good news the media was quick to cover it with bad news. Infection numbers are decreasing – but there is going to be a second and third wave! People are getting vaccinated – but there is going to be a new variant that will be worse!

Thankfully our gratitude and joy is not based on what we see going on around us. Remember that Paul wrote these words from prison! If anyone had a reason to not feel thankful and joyful it was Paul. In the midst of everything that was happening, Paul prayed for perspective.

I pray for that for us as well. I pray for perspective. I pray that we stop being consumed by what we see on the news and focus instead on the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. Stop being so concerned about this temporary place and start being more concerned about our eternal home. It's all about perspective.

I heard a story of a ship that was sinking in the middle of a storm, and the captain called out to the crew and said, "Does anyone here know how to pray?" One man stepped forward and said, "Yes sir, I know how to pray." The captain said, "Wonderful, you pray while the rest of us put on life jackets -- we're one short."

As we talked about last week, prayer is powerful. We have the great privilege of praying for others. Will we do it? One of the things you will hearing more about in a few weeks is that we are wanting as a church to initiate a new prayer ministry. So often people come looking for prayer and do not have the opportunity to be prayed for.

An aviation cadet, on a practice flight, temporarily stricken blind, in panic radioed that message to his control officer. The officer radioed back, "Follow my instructions exactly." After keeping the blinded cadet circling the field until the whole field was cleared and an ambulance had arrived, the control officer radioed: "Now lose altitude." "Now bank sharply." "You're coming onto the runway now." The cadet brought his plane to a perfect landing, was saved, and later his sight returned. All the Lord is asking of us is strict obedience.