

Prayers Needed

Colossians 4:2-6 Ephesians 6:18-20

This sermon, like many others, is simply a reminder of things we may have forgotten. Most Sundays, it's not new information we are looking at, but like a favorite meal – we partake again, for the equipping of the saints. Quotes about prayer are numerous. “Time spent in prayer is never wasted.” (Francis Fenelon) “Prayer delights God’s ear; it melts his heart; it opens his hand. God cannot deny a praying soul.” (Thomas Watson)

“Fervent prayers produce phenomenal results.” (Woodrow Kroll) “Prayer should be the key of the day and the lock of the night.” (George Herbert) “Prayer is the link that connects us to God.” (A. B. Simpson) “The greatest tragedy is not unanswered prayer, but unoffered prayer.” (F. B. Meyer)

Stories about prayer are many, inspirational and often humorous. When Jean McMahan, was visiting a church in Kentucky, everyone watched an especially verbal and boisterous child being hurried out, slung under his irate father's arm. No one in the congregation so much as raised an eyebrow -- until the child captured everyone's attention by crying out in a charming Southern accent, "Ya'll pray for me now!" (*Reader's Digest*, April 1980).

In laying the groundwork for the next 500 years of church life – prayer is a foundational habit. But I think many followers of Jesus tend to think of prayer like a life jacket. We don't want to have to use one, but want one handy if we do need it. We often treat prayer this way. Prayer might be talked about a lot, but practiced less than anything else. This includes individual, family and group prayer.

Simply put, if we want the next 500 years of church life to be even more faithful and more fruitful, we have to use this gift God has given us. And we need to do more listening. Prayer

is not like a fire alarm we only pull when there is a fire. It needs to be a habit that includes meditation and listening.

Some early African converts to Christianity were earnest and regular in private devotions. Each one reportedly had a separate spot in the thicket where they would pour out their heart to God and listen. Over time the paths to these places became well worn. As a result, if one of these believers began to neglect prayer, it was soon apparent to the others. They would kindly remind the negligent one, "Brother, Sister, the grass grows on your path." (*Today in the Word*, June 29, 1992).

So what do we know about prayer? In our Colossians text, the Apostle Paul tells us to “**Devote** yourselves to prayer.” This isn't a casual instruction. It's in the tone of a command, an imperative. You have to pray – exclamation point! It comes with the idea of being steadfast, dedicated and **persistent** in prayer. Prayer is assumed. The instruction is to devote ourselves to prayer.

After Jesus taught the disciples the Lord's Prayer in Luke 11, verse nine goes, “Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you.” This verse is present tense – active – keep persisting - don't ever give up. Some times it takes years for prayers to be answered – so let's be devoted to prayer.

George Muller, who is known as one of the greatest prayers of all time, offers a wise thought. “It is a common temptation of Satan to make us give up the reading of the Word and prayer when our enjoyment is gone; as if it were of no use to read the scriptures when we do not enjoy them, and as if it were no use to pray when we have no spirit of prayer. The truth is that, in order to enjoy the Word, we ought to continue to read it, and the way to obtain a spirit of prayer is to continue praying. The less we read the Word of God, the less we

desire to read it, and the less we pray, the less we desire to pray.”

Have you found this to be true in your own life? I confess I have. In fact, I’ll let you in on a secret about pastors. Too many of us get so busy, or so lazy, our prayer lives stink – if we are not devoted to doing it. I’ve always thought my job as pastor was to pray a lot – to prioritize prayer time in my schedule. But it’s always tempting to keep the church schedule going, people happy, do the fun things, use my family as an excuse, and let prayer time slide. There is always more work to do. But there is always the need for more prayer. All of us need to be devoted, steadfast in prayer.

Another thing we know about prayer is that we need to be **passionate** about doing it & fervent as we pray. Now this goes against logical, stoic, reserved German Russian Mennonite habits, personalities, and culture. But since we measure religious life through the eyes of Jesus as the centre of our faith, our example, we must work at being more enthusiastic, ardent, and devoted persons of prayer.

Please note, our text tells us to be **watchful**. It makes sense that passionate prayers are alert, vigilant, observant and attentive. This is the opposite of going through the motions. When I saw Mike Baxter, a character in the TV show, *Last Man Standing*, say something, I was reminded I did the same thing years ago. It got me into trouble with Rose.

Mike’s TV wife, Vanessa, insisted that each member of the family share a list of what they are grateful for at the Thanksgiving dinner table. So after Vanessa shared her list, Mike, her husband, impatient to eat, said, “Ditto.”

I did that once when Rose and I were having a prayer time. So now, Rose usually insists, I pray first. “Ditto” is not a devoted, persistent, passionate, watchful prayer.

Every time we see Jesus praying – there is passion. It’s not just from the head but it’s from the heart. It’s from the gut. Heartfelt, intense, earnest feelings and emotions are involved. Jesus was always praying – which is a form of desire, hunger, and craving. James 5:16 tells us, “The effective fervent prayer of a righteous person can accomplish much.” It’s being watchful, persistence and listening. It’s intentional. It’s looking around us. Being alert. Jesus told us, his disciples to watch and pray. To notice things to pray about and people to pray for. And then just intentionally, automatically pray.

Martin Luther shares this story. When Luther's puppy happened to be at the table, he looked for a morsel from his master, and watched with open mouth and motionless eyes. Martin Luther said, 'Oh, if I could only pray the way this dog watches the meat! All his thoughts are concentrated on the piece of meat. Other wise he has no thought, wish or hope.' That’s persistence, devotion, passion & watchfulness!

Then the Apostle Paul tells us to be **thankful**. We know this. Most prayer acronyms and teaching we’ve ever been taught tells us to be thankful. For example, the ACTS acronym tells us to Adore, Confess, Thank and offer Supplication. So we devote ourselves with passion, watchfulness, persistence, and we keep being thankful.

Paul is a fantastic example. Despite all the hardship he faced and experienced, his letters in the Bible drip with thankfulness. Even when he’s telling some church to straighten up, you can hear the persistence, the passion and the thankfulness that his life was full of. Paul spent his life being on watch, being alert about his friends, fellow workers, and the followers of Jesus in congregations. This reminder is one of seven times in the book of Colossians that Paul tells us to thankful.

I think it's the human condition to complain before appreciating. Grouse before grateful. Finding fault instead of expressing pleasure. But the habit of prayer, and all the teaching we've had on it, plus our own experiences, lead us to voicing thanks. Notice that with Biblical laments, after really giving it to God, they often name who God is and offer expressions of awe and wonder and thanks.

Being thankful is important because it helps us remember at least 5 important things:

1. We are dependent on God and others.
2. It reminds us we are in relationship.
3. It gets us into a better frame of thinking.
4. It leads us to have a broader perspective.
5. It helps us to become and stay faithful.

Plus, as William Culberson said, "Keep praying, but be thankful that God's answers are wiser than your prayers!"

Next the Apostle Paul tells us, "Pray for us." Paul was never shy about asking for prayer. For **intercession**. Petition. Asking on behalf of others is an important prayer habit. This goes with being willing to lament like we looked at a few weeks ago.

The Bible tells us Jesus prays for us a lot. For example in one place it reminds us, "Jesus is sitting at the right hand of the God the Father, making intercession for us." (Romans 8:34)

Please notice what Paul asks for. "Pray for me – for us. Pray that God may open a door for our message. Pray that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ." Then notice, Paul was in jail, in chains when he wrote this. I suspect he also prayed that he could get out of jail so that he could go and do some face to face ministry.

In this request for intercession for himself and his co-workers, Paul was persistent and devoted about his calling, his work of sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Being in jail was just an irritation. It did not dim his passion.

It did not stop his thankfulness. Jail did not stop his watchfulness because he was able to send this letter to the church in Colosse to correct some of their theology and to remind them and teach them some spiritual truths.

Paul wanted God's kingdom to keep growing numerically and in maturity. Like Jesus he was concerned about others, about their souls, their salvation and their sanctification. Even prison didn't cause him to back off from his life's work. Notice, in our Ephesians scripture – Paul wanted prayer for himself - to not be fearful about sharing about Jesus.

So let's follow Paul's teaching and example of being devout, persistent, passionate, watchful, thankful and praying for others. Prayer is the oil that lubricates our spiritual strength. It's the diesel that gives our lives power. And it's the wheels that keep us moving forward in God's will.

Praying for others and for ourselves is important. To close, here is one more thought. It's strange that, while praying, we seldom ask for change of character, but always a change in circumstance. It's strange that, while praying, we seldom ask for change of character, but always a change in circumstance. If this is true of ourselves, and of our thinking about church, maybe we should shift our prayer focus a little. Please note, in our scriptures for today, Paul didn't ask for prayer to get out of jail, but for prayer to continue to fearlessly tell others of the Gospel.

So we are encouraged by the Apostle Paul to: "Give a lot of time and effort to prayer. Always be watchful and thankful. Pray for us too. Pray that God will give us an opportunity to preach our message. Then we can preach the mystery of Christ. Because I preached it, I am being held by chains. Pray that I will preach it clearly, as I should."

