**The Importance of Prayer**

Three times in the first ten verses of this letter the Apostle Paul has told the Colossians that he is praying for them. He tells them he is thanking God for them and that his prayers on their behalf are unceasing. These are not nice platitudes only. I believe Paul WAS praying for these people.

**What is Prayer?**

It seems that the first question we must ask is this: what is prayer? The simple answer is this: prayer is talking with God. We pray when we open our heart to the Almighty.

As simple as this is, it is also something people need to hear. Too many people feel that prayer is a certain sound . . . Shakespearean English, rich in theological terminology very often spoken VERY loudly. Others feel prayer is something that takes place in a certain place or with a certain posture. But none of those things are requirements for true prayer. In fact, you can sound holy and not be doing anything other than talking to yourself.

I love to share the story Howard Hendricks tells of a young man who met Christ after many years of life in the world. After his conversion he went to his first prayer meeting. Everyone was getting up and uttering their flowery (and maybe showy) prayers. Finally, this new convert stood to pray and said, "Lord, this is Mel. I'm not sure whether you remember me or not . . . I met you last Tuesday night. I just wanted to say . . . well . . . Thank-you for changing my life." And then he sat down. The simplicity and honesty of that prayer brought tears to the eyes of many. I suspect it brought a smile to the face of the Father, as well.

True prayer is honest, humble and personal.

**Four Reasons for Prayer**

There are several good reasons to pray.

* It is a great privilege. Can you think of any greater honor than to have an audience with the One who rules over ALL creation? We have been invited to talk with the one who put the stars in place. We are invited to seek counsel from the One who is truth and wisdom. We are invited to sit down with the One who knows all things. The Puritan John Preston lays it out very plainly,

Prayer is a privilege purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ. Christ died for this end, it cost him the shedding of his blood, so that we, through him, might have entrance to the throne of grace. And will you let such a privilege as this lie still? If you do, so far as is in you, you cause his blood to be shed in vain. For if you neglect the privileges gotten by that blood, you neglect the blood that procured them. [The Puritans on Prayer p.17]

Conversation is a part of any vital and growing relationship. We sometimes measure the quality of a marriage relationship by how well the couples communicates. Or to state it another way, one of the first things people point to as evidence that a marriage is in trouble is a lack of communication. The same is true for our relationship with the Father. True, honest, heartfelt conversation is a sign of a healthy relationship. A lack of conversation, or conversation only in public is a sign of a relationship in trouble.

* We should pray because we are in a fierce battle. Constantly we are warned of the Devil's intention to neutralize and demoralize us. We are told that "*our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms*." (Eph. 6:10). We are in a battle and we need the help of God. The enemy has marshaled his armies . . .when we neglect prayer, we go into battle unarmed. Do you find it at all instructive that Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, found it necessary to pray? If He did not feel He could face the battle in His own strength . . neither should we.
* Prayer is a deterrent to sin in our lives. In the quiet times of private, honest prayer God exposes the rationalizations and the excuses that we use to cater to sin. In prayer God holds a mirror up to our lives so we can see the way we really are. . .and repent.
* Prayer makes a difference. I can't tell you how it "works" . . .I know that circumstances change when people pray. Diseases are sometimes healed, strength is imparted, guidance is given, hearts are softened, needs are met. I know that when I pray for others it helps them. But I also know that when I pray, I am changed.

**The Content of Prayer**

One of the most instructive parts of our text is in noticing what Paul asks on behalf of the Colossians. Paul does not focus on the material and temporal. He is not primarily concerned with comfort . . . He is concerned for their spiritual growth.

**Pray that they discern God's Will**

Notice that Paul's first request is this: I ask that *"God fill you with the knowledge of His will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding*." The word "fill" means to be completely filled or totally controlled. The word for knowledge is the normal Greek word for knowledge with a prefix that intensifies the meaning. Paul's primary concern is not for physical health, material prosperity, effective witnessing, or a greater experience of spiritual gifts. Paul's first and primary concern is that the Colossians come to love and understand God and submit to His will.

When Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane He sought to submit to the will of the Father. Many of us have turned this around. We spend our time pleading with God that MY will would be done. We want God to give us what WE want. We want Him to see the wisdom of our desires. Some even proclaim that praying, "Thy will be done" is a weak prayer. All I can say to such nonsense is, "tell that to Jesus."

We come to understand God's will as we come to understand God. In our marriage relationships we very often can tell you what our spouse will say to a certain request. How can we do this? We have come to understand our mate. We know what they like and don't like. We have a good idea of what their "will" is. The same is true of God.

We understand his plan and purpose in life as we come to know Him in the Bible, through prayer and through our obedience. Paul prays that the Colossians would not be satisfied with a superficial relationship with God. He prays that they would continue to build a relationship with Him until they understand what God is doing and why.

**Pray to DO God's Will**

Paul does not only pray that the Colossians are able to discern God's will. He prays also that they might have the power to DO God's will. In verse 10 we read that Paul prayed that they might understand "*in order that you may life a life worthy of the Lord and please Him in every way.*" Paul is not praying just that we might be more knowledgeable . . .He is praying that we might learn more about God so that we will live more faithfully before Him. As one wise person said, "you can be a master of theology and a failure at living."

Paul is seeking balance in the lives of these young Christians. He prays that they might understand . . . and when they have understood, that they might live on the basis of that understanding. We'll talk more about Christian living next week.

Do you see how much different the content of this prayer is from the prayers we often pray? When you pray for others are you "aiming low?" Are you asking the Lord for superficial things and neglecting the greater things? Are you focusing on the temporary and neglecting the eternal? Dare we spend all our time focusing on the body and no time focusing on the soul?

**Overcoming Obstacles to Prayer**

Before I conclude this all too brief discourse on this vital issue of prayer, let me confront two obstacles to prayer.

**TOO BUSY**

One of the biggest obstacles to prayer is our schedules. We say we have a hard time finding time to pray. We need our sleep in the morning so we can function during the day. We are busy in family activities after our work. We stay up late because we need to finish our work for the next day. We want to pray, we say, but we don't have time.

Let me ask you some pointed questions. Do you stop to eat each day? Do you wash? Do you read the paper or watch the news? Do you have time to watch the big game on television? Do you have time to take a nap? Do you have time to exercise? Which of these things is MORE important than building your relationship with the Father? Which of those things has an eternal dimension to it? If you really don't have time to pray . . . substitute prayer for one of those things you DO make time for.

**TROUBLE CONCENTRATING**

If we are honest, many of us would admit that one of the greatest obstacles to prayer is the difficulty that we have in concentrating. We start out in prayer but then our minds begin to wander. It seems futile, so we stop praying.

There are several ways to help a wandering mind.

* Pray at a time when you are most mentally alert. (Generally praying while you are lying in bed isn't very effective.)
* Pause to remember who you are talking to. The more important we believe the conversation to be the more attention we give it. Have you ever noticed that though students may goof off during most class periods, they will give rapt attention when the teacher is telling them what to expect on an exam.
* Go to a quiet place where you will not be interrupted
* Speak out loud
* Use a prayer list
* Keep a pad of paper handy. When reminded of something you need to do . . . write it down and then go on.

**Conclusions**

There is so much more we could have talked about today. But hopefully by looking at Paul's practice of prayer we have been stimulated to work on our own prayer lives. If all we have done is gained more information about prayer we have wasted our time. We must move from here resolved to pray. So to that end, let me give you some suggestions.

1) Set aside a time for prayer. Get up early. Block off a certain time. Find a quiet place. Give prayer priority in your schedule.

2) Discuss your life with the Father. Too many times we "do our prayers" and then move on. We have taken care of our guilt but we have never really touched the throne. So, make your prayer time personal. Talk honestly about your struggles, your fears, your calendar. Listen carefully.

3) Use the Word of God as a starting point. Read through a passage of Scripture and then apply that scripture to your life. When you read a command to "forgive others" ask God to help you release the bitterness and the hurt that makes you resist that command. When you read about the importance of "thinking pure thoughts" confess the areas where your thinking is polluted and ask God for help to think better. This practice will help you focus on the deeper issues rather than the superficial.

4) Keep a prayer list. Make a list of the people you pray for. Be specific. What needs do you want to help carry for another. When someone asks you to pray for them . . . add them to your list. Then make it a point to contact these people and tell them you are praying for them daily. This is important because the next time you are tempted to omit your time of prayer you will remember that you told someone you were praying for them . . . and in your desire to be faithful you will make time to pray.

5) Take time to notice God's answers to prayer. God answers in many ways. Sometimes He gives us what we expected. Sometimes He answers in unexpected ways. Sometimes He removes a burden . . . other times He gives strength to endure the burden. Sometimes He provides the things we want. Other times he changes our wants by teaching us to be content. Sometimes He answers right away . . . other times He waits until we are ready. Notice the answers. When you notice. Thank Him.

6) Read books on prayer and the biographies of people who prayed. Don't do this instead of praying, do it as an encouragement to prayer. These books and resources remind us of the things the Devil hopes we forget. They will spur us on.

What I desire most of all today is not that you feel guilty about your lack of a prayer life. I want you to feel hungry for a greater prayer life. I don't want to "beat you up", I want to "spur you on." I want you to come to see prayer not as a duty but as a privilege. I want you to pray not because of our battle with the Devil, or because of the pain of those around you. I want you to pray because of the sweetness that comes from spending time with the Father.