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DEVOTED TO PRAYER

Romans 12:12c

By

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June 17, 2012

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Romans, Lesson 84

Devoted to Prayer Romans 12:12c

Our text is only three words, "devoted to prayer," and yet these three words raise more guilt than almost any other subject in the Bible. Not many of us could honestly say, "Yes, being devoted to prayer describes me." I've read how Martin Luther was so busy that he had to devote four hours every morning to prayer and it drives me further under the pile of guilt and inadequacy in my prayer life. Maybe Luther's prayer life has motivated some to become more faithful in prayer, but to be honest, it de-motivates me because it's so far from where I live that I know I'll never come close. And so I muddle along in my inadequacy.

My aim in this message is *not* to raise your guilt level about prayer, because guilt is a crummy motivator. Rather, I hope that this will be a practical message that will motivate you by God's grace to become more devoted to prayer (NASB) or constant in prayer (ESV). I want this church to become devoted to prayer, so that all the glory for any results goes to God alone. In our text, Paul is saying,

The mercies of God call us to be devoted to prayer.

The Greek verb means to adhere to, persist in, be devoted to, or hold fast to something (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, by William Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich [University of Chicago Press, 2nd ed.], p. 715). It is often used with reference to prayer in the New Testament. As the early church waited for the promised Day of Pentecost, we read, Acts 1:14, "These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer" Later, Luke sums up the activities of the Jerusalem church (Acts 2:42), "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

When the apostles sought to find seven faithful men to take care of the problem of meeting the needs of the widows, they explained (Acts 6:4), "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

Paul instructed the Ephesians (6:18) about prayer, "With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints" "Perseverance" translates the noun that is related to the verb, "be devoted to." In Colossians 4:2, Paul writes, "Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with *an attitude of thanksgiving*." And, although he does not use the same word, Paul expresses the same concept in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, "Pray without ceasing." The Greek word translated "without ceasing" was used of a hacking cough and of repeated military assaults. So the idea is not that we pray every waking minute, but that we keep coming back to prayer again and again. We are relentless in prayer.

So these verses tell us that prayer is not to be a little segment of our lives, where the extent of our praying is to bless our food before meals or to pray with our kids as we tuck them into bed. Rather, prayer is to permeate all of life. We should pray about virtually anything and everything. And so, being devoted to prayer is one of those commands that I'll never be able to check off my list and say, "I've got that one down. What's next?" No, there is always room to grow more devoted to prayer. My prayer is that this message will help move you in that direction.

First, I'm going to mention some books (besides the Bible) that have been especially helpful to me for growing in devotion to prayer. Then I'll mention four grace-oriented motivators for growing in devotion to prayer. I'll conclude with brief answers to seven questions about prayer.

SOME HELPFUL BOOKS ON PRAYER:

I've read many good books on prayer, but these are some that I keep going back to for help.

First, as I've told you before, God changed my spiritual life in the summer of 1970 when I read for the first time, *George Muller of Bristol*, by A. T. Pierson [Revell]. While my prayer life is no where close to that of Muller, his testimony of God's faithfulness to answer prayer still motivates me to pray. Read anything about George Muller and your prayer life will be strengthened.

Second, John Calvin's *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Ed. by John McNeill [Westminster Press], Book 3, Chapter 20) has

about 70 pages on prayer that are very helpful. This has recently been collected into a book, *On Prayer: Conversation with God* [Westminster], with an introduction, summary, and discussion questions by John Hesselink. Calvin has rich, practical insights on prayer. For example, on the problem of unanswered prayer, Calvin observes (3:20:52, p. 919) that our praying is not in vain even if we do not perceive any fruit from it, because we will have drawn near to God. If we have Him, we have all good things in Him. We'll understand the rest on the day of judgment. I've compiled some insights on prayer from John Calvin and George Muller, which are on the church web site (fcfonline.org/Resources).

Third, Paul Miller's *A Praying Life* [NavPress] is down-to-earth and practical. Miller shares his struggles and his victories. He has some encouraging counsel on praying like a child. He has many practical insights, such as (p. 65), "You don't need self-discipline to pray continuously; you just need to be poor in spirit." For a message by Miller that sums up the book, go to DesiringGod.org, "Conference Messages," 2011 Conference for Pastors.

Fourth, Bill Thrasher's *A Journey to Victorious Praying* [Moody Press] has many practical insights and encouraging stories.

Finally, *Praying* [IVP] by J. I. Packer and Carolyn Nystrom has many helpful insights on deepening your prayer life.

Again, there are many more books that I could mention. *Taking Hold of God: Reformed and Puritan Perspectives on Prayer* [Reformation Heritage Books], edited by Joel Beeke and Brian Najapfour collects many rich insights on prayer into one source. Matthew Henry's *A Method for Prayer* [Christian Focus], edited by Ligon Duncan, shows a plan for prayer and how to use Scripture in prayer. So dig in and grow by reading about prayer.

FOUR GRACE-ORIENTED MOTIVATORS FOR GROWING IN DEVOTION TO PRAYER:

Legalism and guilt do not motivate me to pray. By legalism, I mean setting up unbiblical standards to try to follow so that I can feel good about having met those standards: "I prayed for an hour today, so I am spiritual!" By guilt, I mean that often we feel guilty because of our lack of prayer, so we determine to pray through a list or pray for a certain amount of time, thinking that it will ease

our guilt. But, it is God's grace and mercy in Christ that motivates me to pray. Prayer is drawing near to our gracious, loving Father.

1. To be devoted to prayer, consider often the mercies of God.

As I've mentioned, Romans 12:9-21 is built on Romans 12:1-2, which is founded on Romans 1-11. It is because of God's many mercies as spelled out in chapters 1-11 that we present our bodies to God as living sacrifices. Because of His mercies, we should be motivated to draw near to Him in prayer. As we saw in Romans 8:32, "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?" If the Father paid that great price to save us and if the Son is at His right hand interceding for us (Rom. 8:34) and if the Holy Spirit is helping us by praying for us with groanings too deep for words (8:26), that motivates me to pray. The author of Hebrews puts it this way (Heb. 4:14-16):

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as *we are, yet* without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Do you need mercy and grace to live? You'll find them at the same place you found them for salvation: at God's throne of grace. Let that motivate you to pray!

2. To be devoted to prayer, begin each day by finding delight in God Himself through His Word.

George Muller taught this frequently from his own experience. He said (Pierson, p. 257), "The chief business of every day is first of all to seek to be truly at rest and happy in God." Muller's prayer life was rooted in his reading and meditation on God's Word. When he was 92, Muller told Pierson that for every page of any other reading he was sure he read ten of the Bible. During the last 20 years of his life, he read through the Bible carefully four or five times per year (Pierson, p. 49). His prayer life was directed by his communion with God through His Word.

So don't neglect the Bible or your prayers will be misdirected. Rather, let the Bible direct your prayers in line with God's promises and purposes. Use the Word to find delight in God each day.

3. To be devoted to prayer, think about your absolute need for God to work in your situation.

Jesus said (John 15:5), "... apart from Me you can do nothing." But as the angel told the virgin Mary (Luke 1:37), "For nothing will be impossible with God." C. H. Spurgeon (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Pilgrim Publications], 25:352) said, "Nothing sets a man more eagerly upon prayer than a deep sense of his need of that which he is seeking at the Lord's hand." In speaking of our Lord's prayer life, Paul Miller puts it this way (p. 44), "If you know that you, like Jesus, can't do life on your own, then prayer makes complete sense." He adds (p. 55), "Prayer is bringing your helplessness to Jesus."

Miller shares a lot about their struggles in rearing their children, one of whom is severely autistic. He says (p. 169), "Until we become convinced we can't change our child's heart, we will not take prayer seriously." He adds that when we see our child's self-will and anger, we need to ask ourselves, "How am I self-willed? How am I angry?" Prayer isn't so that we can dominate our children and have a more comfortable life. It is to show us our deep need to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. To the extent that you see your need and God's gracious offer to meet your need, you'll be motivated to pray.

Thus to be devoted to prayer, consider often God's mercies that saved you. Begin each day by finding delight in God Himself through His Word and prayer. Think about your absolute need and God's willingness to work in your situation.

4. To be devoted to prayer, consider what God can do through your faithful praying.

James 5:16b says, "The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much." To be effective, we must come to God as clean vessels, seeking to please Him in all respects. Psalm 66:18 says, "If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear." James 4:3 points out one reason for unanswered prayer: "You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that

you may spend *it* on your pleasures." But in Psalm 81:10, which was a favorite promise for George Muller, the Lord says, "I, the Lord, am your God, who brought you up from the land of Egypt; open your mouth wide and I will fill it."

Dorothy Clapp was an older Christian lady who felt God leading her to pray for a public high school near her home in New Jersey. So day after day, month after month, year after year she prayed that God would save young people in that school. She began to pray that God would not only save them, but also send them to the ends of the earth. After 12 years of praying, she began praying for one young male student. She sent him a Gospel of John. For three years she prayed and at last, God saved George Verwer.

Before long, George had led 200 other students to Christ. In 1957, three of them went to Mexico to evangelize during their summer vacation. That was the beginning of Operation Mobilization, which now has a worldwide outreach into many of the most difficult countries to penetrate with the gospel (story by Wesley Duewel, told by Thrasher, pp. 36-38). Sometimes, of course, we won't see the results of our prayers until we're in heaven. But if we are seeking God's glory and the furtherance of His kingdom, He can do mighty things through our prayers. Finally:

SEVEN QUESTIONS ABOUT PRAYER:

1. What conditions must we meet to have our prayers answered?

George Muller outlined the following conditions of prayer (in Pierson, pp. 170, 455, 456): (1) We must ask for that which it would be for God's glory to give us. (2) Ask in dependence on the name of the Lord Jesus, that is, expect it only on the ground of His merits and worthiness. (3) Be separated from all known sin. (4) Believe that God is able and willing to give us what we ask Him for. (5) Continue in prayer, expecting God to answer, until the blessing comes. Packer & Nystrom put it this way (p. 154): "We are to make requests to the Father that the Lord Jesus will back."

2. What should be our motive or aim in prayer?

As I just said, our motive should always be that God would be glorified and that His will might be done. That's easily said, but it's easy for selfish desires to take first place so that we forget about

God's glory: "God, heal my marriage! God help our children to follow You!" Why? "So that we'll be a happy family!" Okay, but why? The answer should be, "So that God will be glorified through our happy family."

3. On what basis can we come to God with our needs?

As just mentioned, we come on the basis of the merits of Christ and through His blood. While we must be separated from all known sin, we do not come on the basis of our performance: "I've been faithful in reading the Bible and praying and serving the Lord, so now He should answer my prayers." Rather, come to the Father through His grace and through the merits of His Son, who is our high priest (Heb. 4:14-16). Come as His needy child, laying hold of His promise (Luke 11:9), "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you."

4. What should we pray for others and for ourselves?

Often our prayers are too broad and generic: "God bless the pastor, bless the church, and bless the missionaries. Amen!" This is where praying the Scriptures back to God for others and for yourself can help. I took a list that Will Bruce of Overseas Missionary Fellowship prepared and added to it and added the biblical references. You can probably come up with more, but I listed 20 things (you can access it on fcfonline.org/Resources). I don't have time here to list all 20, but pray that the person (family member, missionary, pastor, yourself, etc.) will love God more fervently from the heart. Pray that he will be filled with and walk in the Holy Spirit. Pray that he will be regular in reading, studying, and memorizing God's Word. Pray that he will grow in Christlike maturity, developing the fruit of the Spirit in his life. Pray that he will not love the world or the things in the world. Pray that he will grow in humility and have a servant's heart. Pray that he will be a good steward in financial matters. Etc.

Regarding physical healing, pray for it but realize that it may or may not be God's will to heal. But whatever His will regarding the healing, pray that He will use the illness to glorify Himself, to reach others with the gospel, and to shape the person who is ill into the image of Jesus Christ.

5. Why does God delay or deny answers to our prayers at times?

This is always difficult. I struggle often with it, in that it seems that I get more delays or denials to my prayers than immediate answers. I can only touch on it here. One reason for the delay may be that God wants me to grow closer to Him and as long as the need persists, it keeps me drawing near through prayer. All parents know that if you give your children everything that they ask for at the minute they ask, they do not learn patience. They do not learn self-denial. They do not learn to trust your word. Even so, we often grow by waiting patiently for the Lord.

Also, the Lord may want to purge my motives, so that I truly want His glory above all else. Often we ask selfishly, with no thought of God's purpose or His glory. By waiting, we learn our own weakness and His strength. We abandon all thought of our own glory and seek His glory alone.

Also, if He instantly granted every request, I might not appreciate the answers as much as I do after I've cried out to Him for a long time. Waiting deepens our gratitude when the blessing is granted. Even after 38 years, I'm thankful every day for Marla because I had to wait a long time for her!

Also, the Lord knows all things and so He knows the best time and circumstances to answer our prayers. I only see things from my narrow perspective, but God sees the big picture, taking all factors into account.

6. How long should we persevere in praying for a need?

Jesus told the parable of the friend who comes asking for bread at midnight and the parable of the unrighteous judge (Luke 11:5-8; 18:1-8) to teach us that we need to persist in prayer. Bill Thrasher (pp. 192-193) offers some guidelines on when to persevere. Persevere "when you desire God more than you desire the answer to your prayer." Jonathan Edwards put it this way (cited in *Taking Hold of God*, p. 201), "The good that shall be sought by prayer is God himself." Also, persevere "when you are standing on the Word of God." Argue your case using the promises of the Word. Third, persevere "when you are willing to wait on God's timing for the answer." George Muller said (Pierson, p. 457, italics

in original), "Most frequently we fail *in not continuing* in prayer until the blessing is obtained and *in not expecting* the blessing."

7. How do I begin and how do I develop a habit of devotion to prayer?

Start simply. If you're not praying consistently now, don't begin by aiming for an hour of prayer daily. Set your alarm 30 minutes early. Get up, read a Psalm and a portion from the Old and New Testaments. Turn what you read back into prayer.

I find it helpful to use the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9-13) as an outline: "*Our Father, who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name.*" Begin by worshiping the Father for who He is and asking that His name be holy (hallowed) in your life and the lives of your loved ones. "*Your kingdom come . . .*" Pray for missions and missionaries. "*Your will be done . . .*" Pray for discipleship and submission to God's will in your life and the lives of those you have contact with. Pray for lost people you know to come to salvation.

"*Give us this day our daily bread . . .*" Pray for personal needs. "*And forgive us our debts . . .*" Confess your sins and appropriate His forgiveness. "*As we forgive our debtors. . .*" Pray about your relationships and make sure that you're not harboring bitterness. "*And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*" Pray for holiness in thought and deed for yourself and others.

Also, begin to send up short prayers during the day for every situation that you encounter. It can be as short as, "Help!" (See Neh. 2:4-5.) If your child is upset or disobedient, pray before you deal with the child. If your mate is upset, stop and pray with her before you talk about the problem. If you're going into a meeting at work, pray. In any and every situation, pray. God is merciful. We lay hold of His mercies through prayer. That's why we need to be devoted to prayer.

Application Questions

1. What is your biggest struggle with prayer? How could you begin to overcome it?
2. Do you agree or disagree with Paul Miller's comment, "You don't need self-discipline to pray continuously; you just need to be poor in spirit"? Why?
3. Someone complains, "If God is so ready, willing, and able to answer my prayers, why are so few answered?" Your reply?
4. What does it mean to ask "in Jesus' name"? Why is this important?

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