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PRAYING RIGHTLY

Romans 15:30-33

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Romans, Lesson 105

Praying Rightly Romans 15:30-33

Whenever I speak about prayer, I want you to know that I speak as a fellow-struggler in the trenches. I've never found prayer to be easy. Also, many messages and books on prayer lay a guilt trip on the listener or reader for not praying enough. They tell about how Martin Luther was so busy that he had to spend four hours every morning in prayer. Somehow that is supposed to motivate me to get out of bed at 3 a.m. to pray, but it doesn't work for me. So I don't want this message to imply that I've got it together when it comes to prayer or to increase your guilt level.

But I do want for us all to learn how to pray rightly and be motivated to pray more by Paul's request here that the Roman Christians pray for him. If we want God to use us individually and as a church in this New Year, we need to be people who depend on Him more in prayer. John Piper wrote (*Let the Nations be Glad* [Baker], p. 66),

Not only has God made the accomplishment of his purposes hang on the preaching of the Word, but he has also made the success of that preaching hang on prayer. God's goal to be glorified will not succeed without the powerful proclamation of the gospel. And that gospel will not be proclaimed in power to all the nations without the prevailing, earnest, faith-filled prayers of God's people.

I have a hunch that most of us would have to admit that our prayers usually focus on our needs or the needs of our immediate family. Of course we should take our needs and our family's needs to the Lord in prayer. But in the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9-13), Jesus teaches us first to pray that God's name would be treated as holy, that His kingdom would come and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven. After this He teaches us to pray for our own needs. So to pray rightly, the Lord's glory ("hallowed be Your name") and the Lord's work ("Your kingdom come, Your will be done") should be uppermost in our prayers. The lesson for us from Paul's request here is:

To pray rightly, pray for the Lord's work with the right motivation, the right mindset, the right understanding, and the right relationship.

1. To pray rightly, pray for the Lord's work with the right motivation: We have great needs and a great God.

Romans 15:30: "Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me...." This verse teaches us four things about praying with the right motivation:

- A. The urgency of needs should motivate us to pray.

"Urge" is the same word that Paul used in Romans 12:1, "Therefore, I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice" The English Standard Version translates it, "I appeal to you." The Holman Christian Standard Version reads, "I implore you." Putting aside the debate about whether Paul was right to go to Jerusalem, he knew that he faced some severe difficulties there. The Holy Spirit had warned him that bonds and afflictions awaited him at the hands of the Jews (Acts 20:23; 21:4, 11). He knew that even among the believers in Jerusalem, many were prejudiced against his ministry to the Gentiles (Acts 21:20-21). They might not accept the gift of financial help that he was bringing from the Gentile churches. And so he urges the Roman believers to pray for two things (15:31): that he would be rescued from the disobedient in Judea; and that his service for Jerusalem (the gift) would prove acceptable to the saints.

Paul often asked for prayer in his letters because he was constantly aware of his desperate need for God to work if his efforts for the gospel were to amount to anything. He asked the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 5:25), "Brethren, pray for us." More specifically, he asked them to pray that the word of the Lord would spread rapidly and be glorified and that he would be rescued from evil men (2 Thess. 3:1-2). He asked the Philippians to pray that he would be delivered from prison, but that whatever the outcome, Christ would be exalted through him (Phil. 1:19-20). He asked the Ephesians (6:19-20) and the Colossians (4:3-4) to pray that he would have opportunities to preach the gospel and that he would do so

with boldness and clarity. He asked the Corinthians to pray that God would deliver him from the peril of death (2 Cor. 1:9-11).

These repeated requests for prayer are all the more significant when you remember that Paul was one of the most gifted and godly men who ever lived. If there was ever anyone who seemed to “have it together,” it was Paul! Sometimes such great men come across as if they don’t have any needs. They try to project an image of self-confidence so that others will follow their leadership. But Paul freely and repeatedly let the churches know that he desperately needed their prayers. For Paul, prayer wasn’t a nice thing to do; it was a necessity for survival.

In his excellent book, *A Praying Life* [NavPress], p. 65), Paul Miller observes, “You don’t need self-discipline to pray continuously; you just need to be poor in spirit.” In other words, to be motivated to pray, don’t focus on more discipline; focus rather on how needy you and those you pray for really are. Unless God works, nothing will happen of any lasting spiritual significance.

B. The authority of our Lord Jesus Christ should motivate us to pray.

Paul urges us to pray “by our Lord Jesus Christ,” which is an appeal to Christ’s authority (C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [T & T Clark], 2:776). When Jesus gave the Great Commission just before He ascended into heaven, He said (Matt. 28:18), “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.” That doesn’t leave any place where Jesus does not have authority (see Eph. 1:21-22)! So we can pray to God in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ with the confidence that He has the power and authority to answer our prayers that are in accord with His will.

If you’ve ever had a difficult matter to resolve, you know that if you try to go through a lower level bureaucrat, your chances of getting what you’re after are slim. But if you know someone in a position of authority and you can do directly to him or her, you have a much better chance of success. As Christians, we can go directly to the God of the universe through the authority of His Son, who has all authority in heaven and on earth! That should motivate us to pray.

C. The love of the Holy Spirit should motivate us to pray.

Paul urges them to pray “by the love of the Spirit.” While grammatically this could refer to the Spirit’s love for us or to our love for the Spirit, I agree with the majority of commentators who argue that this refers to the love that the Holy Spirit produces in all who walk by the Spirit (Gal. 5:16, 22). Paul is saying, “If the Holy Spirit has produced His fruit of love in you, show that love by striving together with me in your prayers to God for me.”

If you love people, you’ll pray for them. You pray for your kids because you love them. You pray for other family members (even if they frustrate you at times) because you love them. If you care about someone’s eternal destiny, you’ll pray for his salvation. If you care about a couple that is struggling in their marriage, you’ll pray for them. While Paul knew many of the believers in Rome (16:1-16), there were many there whom he did not know. But by reading this letter to them, they could sense Paul’s love for them. Even though they had not seen Paul, the love that the Spirit put in their hearts for all who love the Lord Jesus should prompt them to pray for him. So when we hear of fellow believers who are in great need, the love of the Spirit should motivate us to pray for them.

D. Because the God to whom we pray is the heavenly Father, we should be motivated to pray.

Paul mentions all three members of the trinity in this verse: We pray by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit to God, who of course is the heavenly Father. Jesus taught us to pray (Matt. 6:9), “Our Father who is in heaven.” What a great privilege that we can come to the God who spoke the universe into existence by His great power and address Him as “Father”! When we come to His throne through our great high priest, we can draw near with confidence, knowing that it is a throne of grace where we receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need (Heb. 4:14-16). So to pray rightly for the Lord’s work, pray with the right motivation: We have great needs and we have a great triune God.

2. To pray rightly, pray for the Lord’s work with the right mindset: Prayer is warfare.

Paul urges the Roman Christians (15:30), “strive together with me in your prayers to God for me.” There are two things here:

A. Strive in your prayers.

This is the only time this compound verb (“strive together”) is used in the New Testament, but Paul uses the root verb with reference to prayer in Colossians 4:12, “Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bonds slave of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God.” We get our word “agonize” from the Greek verb. It was used of athletic contests. Paul uses the noun most likely in reference to his own prayers for the Colossians (Col. 2:1), “For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face.”

Paul describes his ministry as (Col. 1:29), “For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.” He sums up his entire ministry by using both the noun and the verb (2 Tim. 4:7), “I have fought the good fight.” Although he doesn’t use the same word, the same idea lies behind Paul’s description of spiritual warfare (Eph. 6:12), “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual *forces* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*.”

These verses all fly in the face of the popular teaching that the Christian life is an effortless matter of “letting go and letting God.” I’ve heard Bible teachers say, “If you’re struggling, you’re not resting in Christ.” I guess Paul needed to learn some things from them! He struggled, he strived, he wrestled, he fought.

This means that if you don’t find prayer to be easy, welcome to the Christian life! It requires striving and wrestling against the forces of darkness and against the desires of the flesh. If you have the mindset that prayer is easy and effortless, you won’t do much praying. Prayer requires striving.

B. Strive *together* in your prayers.

Paul was already striving in prayer for his upcoming trip to Jerusalem, but he asks them to join him in the battle. Sometimes I’ve heard Christians try to rally large numbers to pray for some urgent need and it seems as if the mentality is, “If we just get enough people praying, it will tip the scales and God will have to answer.” But

that's not why we should strive *together* with others in our prayers. The effective prayers of a righteous man (singular) can accomplish much (James 5:16).

Rather, when more people pray, God gets more glory when He answers. Also, when more pray and God answers, it strengthens the faith of all those who prayed. And, it lightens the load of the person who is praying if others come along and help carry the burden. It helps to know that others care enough to pray for your need. Since prayer is warfare, it's better to go into battle with as many troops as you can muster, rather than by yourself.

John Piper has often pointed out that our prayers are often ineffective because we wrongly view prayer as calling for the butler to bring us another glass of iced tea, rather than rightly viewing it as a walkie-talkie to call in more supplies and ammunition to the front lines of the battle. In other words, our prayers should not be focused on trivial things to make us more comfortable, but rather on crucial things to advance the cause of Christ against the enemy.

So to pray rightly, pray for the Lord's work with the right motivation: We have great needs and we have a great God. Pray with the right mentality: Prayer is warfare.

3. To pray rightly, pray for the Lord's work with the right understanding: Prayer is powerful, but we must submit to God's sovereign will.

Paul asks for two specific things: to be delivered from the disobedient in Judea (unbelievers); and that his service (gift) to the saints would prove acceptable. Those requests teach us two things:

- A. Understand that God's power flows through our prayers.

Paul assumes that in response to his and the Romans' prayers, God can restrain the disobedient Jews from killing him and that God can work in the hearts of the prejudiced and untaught believers in Jerusalem so that they will accept the gift from the Gentiles. The fact that the Romans were over a thousand miles away from Jerusalem and didn't know either the disobedient Jews or the prejudiced saints made no difference. God was in both places and He is powerful to restrain sinners and change the hearts of believers. The fact that people have a "free will" to do as they choose makes no difference. Without robbing people of their freedom to

choose and their responsibility for their choices, God works all things after the counsel of His will (Eph. 1:11; Ps. 103:19; Ps. 115:3; Prov. 21:1). He uses our prayers as a part of that process!

If salvation depends ultimately on the “free will” of lost, sinful people, then you should quit praying for their salvation, because God’s hands are tied! But if salvation is from the Lord, then pray that He will soften hard hearts, open blind eyes, raise dead sinners, and cause them to respond willingly to the gospel. It’s true that they must choose to believe in Christ, but it’s also true that no one can come to Jesus unless the Father draws him (John 6:44). So pray with the assurance that in some mysterious way that we cannot understand, God’s mighty power to restrain evil, to save the lost, and to sanctify the saints flows through our prayers.

B. Understand that God is sovereign in how He answers our prayers and so we must submit to Him.

Some of the “Word-faith” preachers arrogantly teach that we are to command God in our prayers and that He must do as we say! What blasphemy! God is sovereign; we are not. We should pray as specifically as we can in line with what we understand to be God’s will for His glory, but we have to submit to His sovereignty in how He answers.

Were Paul’s prayers here answered? Yes, sort of, but not exactly in the way that he probably was thinking when he asked for prayer. He was rescued from the disobedient in Judea, but only by becoming a Roman prisoner for the next four years. His service to Jerusalem seems to have been accepted (Acts 21:17), but the account is clear that many of the Jerusalem saints had a decidedly Jewish view of Christianity that wouldn’t have been enthusiastic about uncircumcised Gentiles being on equal footing with them in the church (Acts 21:20-21). They may have thought that by accepting the gift, they would be giving tacit endorsement of Paul’s work among the Gentiles. Or, they might have viewed Paul’s gift as a bribe to try to get them to endorse his breaches of the law among the Gentiles. Or, some may have been too ethnocentric to accept any help from the Gentiles. So we really don’t know to what extent Paul’s second request was answered.

Verse 32 expresses not a third request, but rather the desired result if the first two requests were answered. Paul wanted to “come to you in joy by the will of God and find refreshing rest in your company.” Even though the first two requests were perhaps not answered exactly as Paul envisioned, and he arrived in Rome as a prisoner via a shipwreck, he did come to them in joy (Philippians, which is full of joy in the Lord, was written during his Roman imprisonment) and with fresh encouragement in the Lord because of the warm welcome he received (Acts 28:15).

As a side note, as a church, we should make sure that visiting missionaries who come to us find refreshing rest in our company. Have them in your home and ask them about their work. I've talked with missionaries who visited a church where no one even bothered to ask about their work or how they could pray for them. They've been living in a difficult place, facing loneliness, hardships, and discouragements. It would encourage them to know that we've been praying and that we want to know how things have been going on the front lines. But the main lesson is: Pray with the right understanding, that prayer is powerful, but we must submit to God's sovereignty in the outcome. Finally,

4. To pray rightly, pray for the Lord's work with the right relationship: “The God of peace be with you all.”

Verse 33 is Paul's benediction or prayer for the Roman saints. It's the third benediction of this chapter. Paul has prayed that the God of perseverance and encouragement would grant them to be of the same mind with one another (15:5). He prayed that the God of hope would fill them with all joy and peace in believing (15:13). Now he prays that the God of peace will be with them. In 16:20 he assures them that the God of peace will soon crush Satan under their feet.

Since God is with all believers, Paul's prayer here must mean that he wants them to experience God's presence as the God of peace. Because of the cross, we have peace with God (Rom. 5:1). We also should experience peace with other believers, especially with those who are different than we are (Rom. 14:1-15:6; Eph. 2:14). And we should know God's peace in the midst of anxious circumstances as we bring our requests to Him in thankful prayer

(Phil. 4:6-7). So we pray rightly when we are in right relationship with the God of peace.

Conclusion

So to pray rightly, pray for the Lord's work with the right motivation: We have great needs and we have a great God. Pray with the right mindset: Prayer is warfare. Pray with the right understanding: Prayer is powerful, but we must submit to God's sovereign will. And, pray with the right relationship: "The God of peace be with you all." Let me suggest a few ways that you all can join with me in praying for our church in this coming year. (If you need ideas on specifically what to pray for family members, pastors, missionaries, or yourself, see "What should I pray?" under "Resources" on the church web site.)

- ✓ Pray for conversions, both through the witness of our people and through the Word preached (here on Sundays and online).
- ✓ Pray for all our missionaries.
- ✓ Pray through the church directory. As you do, pray for harmonious marriages and pray for the conversion, growth in grace, and protection of our children.
- ✓ Pray for health, strength, growth, encouragement, and wisdom for our ministry staff and our support staff.
- ✓ Pray for healthy, spiritually nourishing relationships to flourish through our small groups.
- ✓ Pray that all who come here would be serving, disciple-making disciples.
- ✓ Pray for God to put on the hearts of some to devote their lives to reaching the unreached.
- ✓ Pray for adequate finances, the sale of the Equestrian Estates property, and the purchase of the parking lot across the street.
- ✓ Pray that our worship services would be marked by sincere, wholehearted worship in spirit and in truth.

May this be a year when we see God do great things through our prayers!

Application Questions

1. What most motivates you to pray? What most discourages you from praying? How can you overcome this?
2. Do you view prayer as a wartime walkie-talkie or as a bell to call the butler for more iced tea? Discuss how these opposing views might affect your prayer life.
3. Why must we maintain the tension between God's power to change resistant hearts and man's responsibility to believe? What happens if either of these is out of balance?
4. Read through some of Paul's prayers (Eph. 1:15-23; 3:14-21; Phil. 1:9-11; Col. 1:9-14; 1 Thess. 3:9-13). What does Paul pray for? How can these prayers shape your prayer life?

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