

January 5, 2020

“Lessons in Prayer”
1 Thessalonians 5:16-28

FCF: The struggle to pray

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Our greatest need is to know God better.
(magnet) He has shown us the way. And it is through prayer.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

For many Christians, the very mention of prayer conjures up feelings of dissatisfaction and discouragement. It can be a struggle to pray. There are the difficulties of time - allocating it and setting it aside. There are the difficulties of drift - easy distractions and wandering thoughts.

Prayer can be a struggle. And so we make resolutions to do better. Which is fine so long as we are well grounded in what it is we are setting out to do. What does it mean to pray? How should we pray? Or why should we pray? Those are questions well worth wrestling through.

We’re going to explore this for the next few weeks. Specifically, what we learn of prayer through the Apostle Paul. “Praying with Paul” - a theme and a series inspired by D. A. Carson.

SCRIPTURE READING: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-28

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

What is our greatest need? What is our greatest need as a church? Zeal for evangelism. Engagement with the needs of our community. A biblical worldview. Transparent relationships. No doubt we could come up with others. No doubt there is truth to all those answers. But good and right as those answers may be, they are but symptoms of something deeper and more vital.

The greatest need we have is to know God better. That informs and transforms all the other needs we might list. The greatest need we have is to know God better. But let’s press into that a bit. How do we get to know God better? A foundational and essential means towards that end is prayer. It’s prayer. So let’s pull all that together. The greatest need we have is to know God better. And an essential means towards that end is prayer. So you see how important this is.

The rub, however, is that we are allergic to prayer. It’s the most natural thing that we could do that comes so unnaturally to us. Think about it. Prayer requires that we be still, that we slow down, that we put the brakes on all the other work and the big things that need to get done and do something that seems, quite frankly, rather unessential to getting things done. But our greatest need is to know God better. And He has shown us the way. And it is through prayer.

Which begs the question, “What has He shown?” Well, just looking at this particular text, we see these two things. First, how to pray. And, then building off of that, what to pray.

I. HOW TO PRAY

First, Paul tells us something as to how to pray (**READ 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18**).

A) Three Commands

Three simple commands and one profound reason. First, let’s look at the commands.

1. Rejoice always

“Rejoice always.” Paul is writing to a persecuted church. He is not saying, “be happy, cheerful, and bubbly” but “let your soul’s roots be in the Lord for there you will find joy, even with tears.”

2. Pray continually

“Pray continually.” Paul cannot mean literally doing nothing but praying 24/7. Rather, this is a posture of reliance upon God in all things at all times, quickly and consistently turning to Him.

3. Give thanks in all circumstances

“Give thanks in all circumstances.” Not for all circumstances - being grateful for evil things - but in all circumstances with a heart’s assurance of God’s good hand ever always at work.

These make up a three-legged stool. And you hear this consistency to them. But how?

B) One Reason

How can we pray in this way? One profound reason ([READ 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18](#)).

1. As did Jesus

As did Jesus. We read the Gospels and we see Jesus doing these very things. As did Jesus.

2. In union with Jesus

But also in union with Jesus. We are His, one with Him. His name is on us. We do not stoically surrender our lives to cosmic fate. We entrust our lives to the King of love who is our Shepherd.

This is (at least partly) how we are to pray - to rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and to give thanks in all circumstances - knowing whose we are and who has us in His hand.

Application:

Now think with me as to what obstacles stand in the way of our praying like this. We will not rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances if we believe that we are on our own. We will not pray this way if we believe that the Lord is not really with us, that He is not really for us, that His presence and power are just idle tales we tell our children. But what if we did believe all that? What have we just celebrated? Immanuel - God with us.

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II. WHAT TO PRAY

So that is how to pray. What are we to pray? Again, this is not an exhaustive treatment of the subject. We’re just exploring one particular passage ([READ 1 Thessalonians 5:23-25](#)).

A) Paul Prays for Them

Two things here. Paul prays for them. And he asks for prayer. First, he prays for them.

1. Paul’s love for people

To really love someone is to pray for them. Paul loved people well. So he prayed for them.

2. Two petitions

And there are two petitions here. First, Paul appeals to the God of peace - the source and supply of any and all real peace - to sanctify them. That is, to enable them to die unto sin and to live unto righteousness. He prays for this inner work of renewal, slowly but surely in their lives.

That's the first petition. The second is tied to it, reflecting themes we see throughout this letter - a restoration of the whole person, coming to completion upon Jesus' return. It's quite a prayer.

3. Sure confidence

All offered with a sure confidence (**READ 1 Thessalonians 5:24**). Where is this confidence laid? Not in their great efforts or determined resolution but in the Lord's firm tenacious faithfulness.

B) Paul Asks for Prayer

That's his prayer for them. Then he asks for prayer (**READ 1 Thessalonians 5:25**). This is normal for Paul (**READ Colossians 4:3-4; 2 Corinthians 1:11; Philippians 1:19; Philemon 22**).

1. His assumption

What is Paul's assumption here? That there is a real partnership between him and his readers. And also, beyond even that, God accomplishes His purposes through the prayers of His people.

2. His humility

Paul's assumption is worth grasping. As is his humility. He knows his need of the Lord's help. And he is not afraid to admit it. He knows his need and he is not afraid or ashamed to admit it.

This is (at least partly) both how and what we are to pray. Which raises some questions.

Application:

How do we pray for one another? And how do we ask others to pray for us? Let me just assume that we do pray for one another and that we do ask for prayer. How then do we do this?

Praying for our health, jobs, school, and pressing crises is all fine. Jesus is the Lord of all and all is under His rule. But what about the currents below the surface of those things? What about the need we all have for the God of peace to sanctify us completely? And that we all have so much room to grow in rejoicing always, praying without ceasing, and giving thanks in all circumstances? That's not to rule out the felt needs. But it's to recognize those that run deeper.

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CONCLUSION:

As we wrap this up, there's one more thing that should be said. The Lord has not only shown us the way. He has made it possible. And that is the only way we can pray to Him at all.

Imagine you are on a journey. You've lost your way. You come upon a man who greets you. You ask for directions. He points down a road and tells you what you can expect along the way. But you discover you need more than directions. You come to discover that the way is impassable. The bridge is out. The tunnel is blocked. The river is flooded. Pick whichever of those you like. You simply cannot get there no matter how good the directions prove to be. But somehow in the flow of events, your guide connects the bridge, clears the tunnel, and carries you across the waters. He does what only he could. And, in the process, gives all that he has - himself - his life for your safe passage. On your arrival on the other side, you learn that this was

the Prince of that country who did all he could so that you, a lost traveler, could come home to his father, the King of the land. The Prince didn't just show you the way. He got you home.

That's us. That's what the Lord has done for us. And I tell you that not to guilt or shame you into prayer. I tell you that to encourage you. This is who we pray to! See how He loves us! See what He has already done for us! We can truly now go to Him with absolutely anything.

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