

Two Ways of Personal Prayer

Scripture Text: Colossians 4:2-4

Introduction

Not far from the city of San Antonio, Texas, there are the largest known commercial caverns in the state of Texas, called the Natural Bridge Caverns. My wife and I toured these caverns while visiting San Antonio recently, the way those who discovered them in the early 1960's. It was a three-hour tour that followed the path the first discoverers took. We had to crawl, climb, rappel, and slide over and through various obstacles inside the cave — with only the light of our helmets to guide us. It was not for the weak of heart. We explored approximately one mile, going down to 230 feet below the surface to the Fault Room of the cave. One of the scariest moments of the tour, though, was at the very beginning. Once outfitted with caving gear, we were each lowered by rope through a 160-foot well shaft that was less than three feet in diameter, just like the original explorers did. I did not think I was claustrophobic, until I was being lowered into that well shaft. I was praying and hoping to reach the bottom, safely and in one piece.

We have been learning some specific things about being disciples of Jesus Christ. Disciples need to know who God is, who they are, and about having a genuine relationship with God. Disciples need to be students of God's Word, the Bible. We need to earnestly long for God. We need to find our satisfaction and joy in Him and not in anything else. Disciples also need to pray. Prayer is an essential part of having a deeper relationship with God. We cannot have a real relationship with God without a fervent prayer life. Even though prayer is so important to a disciple's life, I think we treat it so carelessly. Prayer can become either a much neglected part of our lives, or a ritual that is rote or meaningless. Prayer should never be an item on a list of spiritual things to do. It is not a religious task, but rather a natural part of our relationship with God. Prayer is simply a conversation with God that includes the humble act of taking our *natural* concerns to a *supernatural* God. How we pray and what we pray are important to God.

There are so many passages we could read about prayer. The Psalms are excellent to see how God's people have prayed. One such prayer was Psalm 143, which we read a couple of weeks ago. That psalm taught us to be honest with God, to remember how God has helped us in the past, and to trust Him to take care of us in the present and the future. We also learned that God is our greatest need. We learned to pray for God to show us His will and to help us to do His will. At the core of what David prayed in Psalm 143 was a *prayer for guidance*. He basically said, "Lord, show me what I am supposed to do." That is the essence of a servant's prayer to God: *Show me your will and help me to do it*. There is a way to pray, otherwise, Jesus would not have given His disciples instruction on prayer. Paul would have also not spent much time writing about prayer. Thus we come to this passage in Paul's letter to the Colossians and Paul has given us some instruction on prayer. Paul's exhortation in this passage is divided into two issues on prayer: 1) *How to pray*, and 2) *What to pray*. Let us look at the first.

An Unwavering Commitment to Prayer

So, how do you pray? If someone were to ask you, “How should I pray?”, what would you say to that person? What are some key things about prayer that you would tell that person? There are many things you might say. You could tell someone that it is important to pray the Lord’s Prayer. You could tell others to pray when they wake up in the morning or when they go to bed at night, or both. You could impress upon them the need to pray for others first and then for yourself. You could say to pray in a closet or to pray with others. Paul’s instruction on prayer in this passage did not go into those particulars, but Paul did tell us several things about prayer, that could basically be summed up as this: *Have an unwavering commitment to prayer.* Look at verse two.

Colossians 4:2 Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.

The only direct statement in these verses is “continue steadfastly in prayer”. You could say this means to “devote yourselves to prayer” or “have an unwavering commitment to prayer”. In other letters, Paul wrote, “Pray without ceasing” or something like that (1 Thessalonians 5:17). That same general tone occurs here in this passage. We should persist in prayer. We should be wholly devoted to praying. We should have an unwavering commitment to it. Prayer should characterize the Church of Jesus Christ. This passage is toward the end of the letter to the Colossians and Paul ended it as he opened it, urging the church to pray. Look at how Paul began the letter.

Colossians 1:9-10 ⁹ And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰ so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.

He wrote, “We have not ceased to pray for you”. The command to continue steadfastly in prayer was described in two specific ways. Not only are we to be devoted to praying, we are to go about it in a particular way. Paul wrote that the Colossians were to be *watchful* in their constant prayer. Jesus said something similar when He told His disciples to “watch and pray” so that they would not fall into temptation (Mark 14:38). He also told them to “be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come” (Mark 13:33). The term for “being watchful” here in Colossians is for a sentry stationed on vigilant watch who does not fall to sleep. It is a word for being awake, aware, attentive, and on the look-out. Many who profess the name of Christ are passionately engrossed in a lot of other things such as a workaholic pattern, watching TV, gardening, shopping, sports, and countless other things. The priority of a serious Christian is to be in a real commitment to prayer, on the ball, on guard, and not distracted. This means that we should know the circumstances of life, particularly those which affect the spread of the gospel. Informed prayer is likely to be more purposeful, personal, and powerful. We should pray with alertness for the coming of Christ, for the needs of the saints, for the persecution of the enemy, and for the mission of the Church in telling others about Jesus. Are you praying with devotion and alertness like this?

The second way to be devoted to prayer is *with thanksgiving*. The disciple of Jesus Christ will also pray with thanksgiving. Like yeast leavens bread, thanksgiving leavens prayer so that it does not become merely a selfish pleading to have one's desires fulfilled. Thankfulness is a common theme in Paul's letter to the Colossians. Paul modeled it and also exhorted the church to do it. Look at the following passages.

Colossians 1:3-4 ³ *We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴ since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints,*

Notice the connection at the opening of Paul's letter between prayer and thanking God. Paul thanked God "when" he prayed for the Colossians. Then later in the letter, just before the passage we are exploring, Paul mentioned thankfulness several times.

Colossians 3:15-17 ¹⁵...And be **thankful**. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with **thankfulness** in your hearts to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving **thanks** to God the Father through him.

There are at least three times in just those verses that Paul mentioned thankfulness. It was obviously an important issue for Paul. Thankfulness should flow from God's Word dwelling in you, to how we worship together in teaching and singing, to whatever we say and do. Thankfulness is a hallmark of every disciple of Christ. Therefore, our prayers need to be saturated with genuine thankfulness. Someone once called thanksgiving a *delightful spice*. It seasons our prayers, and indeed all things of life. It makes life more delightful. Just think about how you react to genuine thankfulness from others. We love to receive genuine thanks, and so does God. Thankfulness provides a safeguard for informed praying. Paul urged the church to offer prayer in an attitude of thanks. This kind of prayer sees clearly the obstacles and difficulties but recognizes that God is able to work. The circumstances need not affect one's joy. Thus, we should have an unwavering commitment to prayer that demonstrates alertness and thankfulness. Now that we see how to pray, let us look at what to pray.

Praying for the Right Things

What sort of things do you pray? Do you generally pray for God to do something for you or for someone else? It is not wrong to ask God for something. We should bring our concerns to God. However, are your prayers more about asking God for something for yourself, and less about actually loving on Him for who He is and thanking Him for all that He has done and has promised you? Do you treat God more like a vending machine than a faithful Father and the Lord of your life? From a devotion to prayer, Paul transitioned to a particular request in prayer. The passage shifts from praying in general, with both alertness and thanksgiving, to praying for a specific important matter. Paul requested the Colossians to pray for something particular, and it might not be what we would expect if we were in Paul's situation. Look at verses three and four below.

Colossians 4:3-4 ³ At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison- ⁴ that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.

We have already seen prayers for ourselves in the Psalms. There is nothing wrong with praying for ourselves, in fact, many of the Psalms and other prayers in the Bible are for the one praying. God desires for us to have a relationship with Him and we cannot have a real relationship with God unless we are regularly communicating (more importantly, listening) with Him. Here, though, Paul asked for those in the church to *pray for him*. He asked for *intercessory prayer*, a type of prayer we have for other people. Do you pray for others in the church? That is why we have a prayer guide, in order to assist you in praying for the specific needs of others. We need to be praying for one another.

The nature of Paul's prayer request is interesting. He was in prison. If we were in Paul's situation, we might have asked for prayer, too. Paul's circumstances could have been discouraging as he awaited trial for preaching the gospel. If we were in Paul's shoes, we might ask for others to pray for a quick release from prison. We might ask for others to pray that we have a favorable outcome in court. We might even ask for others to pray for our safety while we are imprisoned. These are some of the things Paul could have asked the church to pray, and things we might have asked for prayer. However, those are not the things Paul asked the church to pray. First, Paul requested that the church pray for an open door for the gospel (4:3). An "open door" was a common expression for an opportunity for someone to do something. Paul asked the church to intercede for him so he could continue to spread the gospel. This is similar to what Luke reported in Acts.

Acts 14:27-28 ²⁷ And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. ²⁸ And they remained no little time with the disciples.

Paul always sought ways to communicate the gospel. Paul was gifted to turn any situation into an open door for the gospel, into an opportunity to be a witness for Jesus Christ. Paul looked to God to supply these opportunities and for the wisdom for those opportunities. The church was to pray that God would provide these open doors. Paul did not ask for God to open the prison doors so that he would be free, but for God to provide opportunities to share the message of true freedom to those who were truly enslaved in sin. The second petition Paul made occurs in verse four. Paul wanted the church to pray that he would proclaim the message of Christ clearly. Paul asked for the ability to walk through such doors as God would open and not stumble or blunder through those doors of opportunity. Paul wanted to use those opportunities effectively so that unbelievers would clearly hear the message of Jesus Christ. Paul hoped that he would do justice to the nature of the gospel so that the witness would be clear. In spite of his imprisonment and difficult circumstances, Paul asked the Colossians to pray that he would have opportunities to share the good news of Jesus Christ, and to share it clearly. Christians should pray for each other to have those opportunities and to communicate the gospel message effectively.

Do you pray for that? Do you pray that God would give the church opportunities to share with others the hope we have in Christ? That is what we pray every week for the missionaries we support, that God would open doors of ministry and that these men and women would clearly (and boldly) proclaim the message of Jesus Christ. Do you pray that God would give *you* opportunities to share Christ with others? When you are at home, at work, in the store, at a yard sale, in a nursing home, or wherever God happens to have you, do you pray that He would give you opportunities to share the hope of Jesus Christ with others. You should. You might not pray for it because you do not care enough to share the hope of Christ with others. Oh, you may want others to know Jesus, but only if others are doing it. You might not pray for it because you are afraid that God may actually answer that prayer and you would have to say or do something. In prison Paul was concerned that the church would be spiritually prepared and that he would be an effective evangelist. That should be our concern as well.

Conclusion

In closing, are you devoted to prayer? Do you have an unwavering commitment to pray? If not, then perhaps that should be your prayer today. Ask God to help you to be fully committed and wholly devoted to prayer. When you pray, do you pray with an attitude of gratitude? Are you generally thankful and do you thank God often? You should. Christians should be the most thankful people on the planet. Do you need to change what you pray? Are your prayers more about getting more stuff or God giving you something? Do you pray for the lost? Do you pray for God to give you opportunities to share your faith in Christ with others? The greatest need anyone has is to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Are you praying that God will use you to share the need for a Savior? You should. Let us pray that we will be a people firmly committed to prayer, that our prayers will be seasoned with watchfulness and thankfulness, and that our requests will be primarily to serve God more faithfully by sharing the gospel more clearly. That is good news. Thanks be to God. Amen!