

The Importance of Prayer

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Last Month, I received a newsletter from the Gideons International. It's the organization that puts Bibles in hotels, prisons, hospitals and other areas. They are a very good organization. On the next to the last page, they have a section in the newsletter that is called "Unite with us in prayer". They had four items that they wanted prayed for – equip, spiritual growth, response to Gospel, and more workers in the field. I've been involved with the Gideons since I became pastor. Prayer is a very large part of their organization. What is prayer? It's easy to roll that term off our tongue, but do we really believe or understand it as we should. You see, prayer is critical when we try to follow Jesus. Prayer is critical when we are suffering, going through trials, or temptations. Prayer is critical when life is going well. Paul addressed the prayer issue in his letter to the Colossian Church and today we're going to spend some time looking into prayer. This will be the last sermon on Paul's letter to the Colossians and we've learned that Paul was concerned for the Colossian Church. He was concerned about how they were living in their culture. Paul was concerned that they were to follow Jesus and not new false teachings that were always popping up in their culture that went against Jesus' teachings. We have the same issue today and we must keep close to the Word of God and have the faith that the Holy Spirit will guide us into God's truth as we follow Jesus. So, Paul is reminding the Colossian Church how important prayer is for the follower of Jesus and for His Church.

So, let's turn to Colossian 4: 2-6 where Paul states this through the Holy Spirit, ²Devote yourselves to prayer with an alert mind and a thankful heart. ³Pray for us, too, that God will give us many opportunities to speak about his mysterious plan concerning Christ. That is why I am here in chains. ⁴Pray that I will proclaim this message as clearly as I should.

⁵ Live wisely among those who are not believers, and make the most of every opportunity. ⁶ Let your conversation be gracious and attractive^[a] so that you will have the right response for everyone. (NLT – www.biblegateway.com)

Paul gives a small section of his letter to prayer, but it is a powerful piece. Paul starts off by telling the Church that they are to devote themselves to prayer. The KJV has “continue” in prayer. The Greek term used here “proskartereo” for devote means to be faithful, to spend much time together, to continue (Strong’s Concordance) So, Paul begins by saying the followers of Jesus are to be faithful and to continue in their time of prayer with the Lord. Paul doesn’t say this is only for those who are old or what we consider as saints. All followers of Christ are to be faithful and to continue in their time of prayer with the Lord. We make the excuse that we need prayer warriors to pray for us and in some ways that is true. Some people are gifted in prayer. However, we have to stop using that as an excuse for limiting our own prayer life. All of us need to be faithful in prayer and spend much time in it everyday with our Lord. Paul is only giving a short sentence of what Jesus stated in Luke 18: 1-8 where Jesus states this about faithful prayer, “**18** One day Jesus told his disciples a story to show that they should always pray and never give up. ² “There was a judge in a certain city,” he said, “who neither feared God nor cared about people. ³ A widow of that city came to him repeatedly, saying, ‘Give me justice in this dispute with my enemy.’ ⁴ The judge ignored her for a while, but finally he said to himself, ‘I don’t fear God or care about people, ⁵ but this woman is driving me crazy. I’m going to see that she gets justice, because she is wearing me out with her constant requests!’”

⁶ Then the Lord said, “Learn a lesson from this unjust judge. ⁷ Even he rendered a just decision in the end. So don’t you think God will surely give justice to his chosen people who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? ⁸ I tell you, he will grant justice to them quickly! But when the Son of Man^[a] returns, how many will he find on the earth who have faith? (NLT – www.biblegateway.com)”

This lady never gave up and Jesus uses her as an example of always praying and don’t give up, but this doesn’t mean we just keep babbling on and on in prayer. Jesus makes an important point in verse 8 about how many will He find on the earth who have faith? In other words, our prayers need to be done in faith. James makes this statement in James 1: 6 – 8, “But when you ask him, be sure that you really expect him to answer, for a doubtful mind is as unsettled as a

wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. People like that should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. They can't make up their minds. They waver back and forth in everything they do. (NLT)" Prayer is not just empty words which can happen to Christians at times. We may think we have to pray every day, but we miss the meat of prayer. If we go back to Colossians, Paul tells us to devote ourselves in prayer. The Greek term Paul uses for prayer here is "proseuche" which means prayed earnestly (Strong's Concordance). In other words, the English term does not show the true strength of this Greek term. Paul is telling us to be devoted to prayer and we must be earnest in prayer. The definition of earnest is showing sincere and intense conviction (Oxford). Maybe we can call this deep prayer. The same type of prayer Jesus had in the Garden before His March to the cross. In Luke 22: 41, Luke tells us that Jesus walked away from His disciples and He knelt down and prayed. The Greek term Luke uses here is the verb form of the noun that Paul uses in Colossians. In other words, we pray like Jesus did – prayed earnestly. We pray in sincere motives and with intense conviction. Paul is telling all followers of Jesus that we must pray in the same way as Jesus.

Paul then continues to tell the Church to pray for him and those helping him in verse 3 of chapter 4 of Colossians. The Greek term used by Paul here is the verb form of the word he used in verse 2. So, we pray earnestly for each other. We don't just pray with a list of names only. We pray earnestly for each other. The only way that can be done is when we have the second part of Jesus' command on our mind – love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12: 31). If we truly love people through Christ, we will pray for them earnestly. To do even that, we need the help of the Holy Spirit because our human nature has a problem with loving people through Christ. You see, our prayers can also be called intercession prayers as well. In 1 Timothy 4:5, we have Paul instructing Timothy, a young Pastor, about false teaching that was going on during their time period. Paul was going over that food that was made by God is good and not to follow human teaching about what to eat and not to eat. Then Paul states this, "For we know it is made holy by the word of God and prayer" (NLT). In other words, these things should be prayed over. Now, Paul uses a different Greek term for prayer here than he used in Colossians. The Greek term is "enteuxis" which means prayer, intercession (Strong's Concordance)" I looked up the definition of intercession and this is what

I found: the act of praying to God on behalf of others, 'standing in the gap' to plead for their needs, protection, or salvation, to intervene (AI). This Greek term narrows the focus of prayer on the needs of others. Paul is trying to get Timothy to understand the people had to stop focusing so much on food and start focusing in praying for the needs of the people. If we bring prayer in Colossians and prayer in Timothy together, we are to pray earnestly for the needs of others. This includes the need of salvation for others. The Gideons also ask people to pray for the areas they will be going into to hand out Bibles. They want intercession prayer before they go into the area. They want people to pray for protection from God, their needs supplied by God, movement of the Holy Spirit for salvation, and the list can go on. I like the other part of the definition in intercession – standing in the gap. I wonder if we realize how important it is for us to pray for unbelievers – those who don't believe in Jesus? If they don't believe in Jesus, they won't have a prayer life or they'll have an unhealthy prayer life. When a true follower of Jesus prays for an unbeliever – they are "standing in the gap" for that person. When Paul used the Greek term for prayer when he was teaching Timothy, Paul wanted the church to stop focusing on the non-important items and start focusing on what is important – intercession prayer. Why must we do this? Paul was only following the example of Jesus. In Hebrews 7: 24-25, we read this, "But Jesus remains a priest forever; his priesthood will never end. Therefore he is able, once and forever, to save everyone who comes to God through him. He lives forever to plead with God on their behalf. (NLT)" Jesus pleads on our behalf and we must plead on the behalf of others. Jesus "stands in the gap" for us and we "stand in the gap" for those we know as well. Again, this can only be done through the love of Christ by the working of the Holy Spirit that should dwell inside us. You see, Paul wanted to make sure the Colossian Church and Timothy understand the importance of prayer when following Jesus.

We'll finish up on this about prayer. Paul makes an important statement about prayer in Philippians 1: 3-5, "Every time I think of you, I give thanks to my God. I always pray for you, and I make my requests with a heart full of joy because you have been my partners in spreading the Good News about Christ from the time you first heard it until now. (NLT)" Paul uses a different Greek term here for prayer,

which is “deesis” which means prayer, request, petition (Strong’s Concordance). Not only should we pray earnestly in intercession for others out of love for them, but we do it as a request and petition before the Lord. I found this definition for “request”: a formal or polite act of asking for something (AI). A petition is used to influence policy and to request changes (AI). When we pray, we always have to remember who we are prayer to. We ask in a request manner, not in a “you must do” manner. We ask in a polite manner because of who the Lord is – holy and righteous. So, we request changes or to influence an outcome. We don’t tell God how to do something; we request it out of love for Him. We request in prayer because this leaves room for God to make the best decision and that His Will be done. Your prayer is a request to Jesus because of who He is – Son of God. I hope we’re starting to see the importance of prayer and that it’s not just a set of empty words. Paul has given us some guidance on prayer. When we use this guidance and it’s peppered and salted with the Holy Spirit, our prayer life will start to grow stronger and healthier. So, ask Jesus to help you to have a better and more loving prayer life. He’ll have the Holy Spirit help you to pray in the way that is pleasing to the Lord. We need a healthy prayer life as we continue to follow Jesus in this life on this earth – our temporary home.

NLT Life Application Study Bible. Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.: Wheaton, 1996

The Strongest Strong’s Concordance. Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2001.