

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (17-11-1996 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Ephesians 6:18-19
Additional Reading: Luke 11:1-13

Christian Prayer

Introduction

The Christian is in a battle against a strong and cunning enemy who never sleeps and is always ready to strike and defeat. Therefore Paul bids the Ephesians to be strong in the Lord, to put on Christian armour, and now to **Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests** (Ephesians 6:18). Not another piece of armour but something we have to do when we put each piece of armour on.

προσευχομενοι suggests something we continuously do when going through the whole process of donning the armour. Many hymns remind us of the link between the armour and prayer.

*“Put on the Gospel armour
Each piece put on with prayer”
“To keep your armour bright...
And watching unto prayer”*

We have to put on the armour in a spiritual way, looking to the Lord at all times as we do it. Maintain contact with God. Orthodoxy is not enough. Need to be spiritually minded. Not a mechanical practice. There must be communion with God.

Picture of Israel’s battle described in Exodus 17:8-16. While Joshua fought the Amalekites in the valley, Moses was on the mountain in prayer. Both were needed. No matter how able and talented we may think we are, we urgently need that total and unreserved dependence on the Lord, which we express in real prayer.

This is one of the greatest and fullest statements about prayer in the New Testament. How vital and central its place should be in our lives. It was important to the Lord – not just in His teaching but also in His example. Do we expect to be able to manage better than He? Is prayer just as important to us? What place does it have in our lives?

Going to look at what we are to do, how to do it, and for whom we are to pray.

What we are to do

In the original, this injunction contains four “all”s. Pray *always*, with *all* prayer, with *all* perseverance, for *all* the saints (N.K.J.V.). Andrew Bonar recorded in his diary, “Unless I keep up short prayer, every day, throughout the whole day at intervals, I lose the spirit of prayer.” The Psalmist prayed morning, noon and night (Psalm 55:17). So we are to pray on all occasions – on our own, with the family, in church, when walking along the street, in our leisure, in the car, when we open a letter, in prosperity and adversity, in sickness and in health, when life is carefree and smooth,

and when we are in the midst of problems and trials, whether we are engaged in Christian service, or working around the house.

It is very comprehensive, no exceptions. **In everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God** (Philippians 4:6). We can do this at all times because we are never alone if we belong to the Lord. We are entitled to look to Him for our every need. **Jesus told his disciples.. they should always pray and not give up** (Luke 18:1). **Pray continually** (1 Thessalonians 5:17). He has endless and illimitable resources. We can stretch out our hands to Him in total dependence on both the ordinary days and in sudden crises, with all kinds of prayer.

Our prayers can be audible or in the silence of our own heart. Public or private. Orderly and well thought out, c.f. the Lord's Prayer, or just an ejaculation, sigh or groan, "O Lord, help".

There should be five "looks" in our prayers. We look *up* in worship, look *in* in confession, look *back* in thanksgiving, look *round* for others, and look *forward* for ourselves – our personal life, family, business, church, relationships, finances and responsibilities.

"With all perseverance" suggests it is not something we can drift into or something which just happens. All perseverance is required. It is not something we do in fits and starts, not casual or half-hearted. προσκαρτερησει, c.f. use of προσκαρτερεω. **They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching** (Acts 2:42); **We will give our attention to prayer** (Acts 6:4); **Be faithful in prayer** (Romans 12:12); **Devote yourselves to prayer** (Colossians 4:2). Determination, commitment and concentration are called for. This is not about twisting God's arm, but about having a deep concern, longing for an answer. **I have set the Lord always before me** (Psalm 16:8). Sometimes it is easier to take our troubles to another person rather than to God, it takes determination to make prayer the habit of a life.

We must pray for all the saints, all our brothers and sisters. All part of same family, all in the same army. We have a common Saviour, heavenly Father, aims and intentions, heading for the same heavenly home. All face similar temptations. Sometimes we are full of pity for ourselves, as if no one else has so much to put up with as we do. **No temptation has seized you except what is common to man** (1 Corinthians 10:13). People are often amazed to discover that their temptations and sufferings are shared by others. Knowing we are not alone brings release and relief. Therefore we are praying for others who are in the same boat.

Some are in very special circumstances, some are far worse off. Those in jail, separated from loved ones, without jobs or education, because they are Christians. Some nearer home bear crushing loads and are at point of collapse – despite their smiling faces. The sovereign God has the remedy for His own, and their ills and troubles. When we are thinking and praying for others, we forget about self and our own troubles. So in being concerned for others we are solving our own problems and getting wonderful release and easing of our own tensions.

If Paul needed the prayers of fellow Christians, how much more do Christians today. May God deliver us from narrow self-centred prayers, so that we will remember

others engaged in the same grim warfare. Pray for those in other regiments with different names. Pray for the new recruits. Pray that wounded comrades will be cared for, pray that the thinned out ranks will be filled, pray that officers will be trained and for the funds needed for supplies.

Therefore in summary – pray on all occasions, with all kinds of prayers, always keep on praying, and pray for all God’s people. Most Christians, alas, pray sometimes, with some prayers, with some perseverance, for some of God’s people. To replace “some” with “all” would take our prayer life into a whole new dimension.

Prayer is wonderful, but it is a mystery we cannot understand. Why pray when God knows all and is all-powerful? No complete answer, but He has told us to pray. He has ordained that blessing will come in and through prayers. Prayer makes all the difference, and is essential to help and change things in every situation. In prayer we acknowledge how weak, ignorant and helpless we are, and ask God to take the field and occupy centre stage with all His wisdom and power.

How we are to pray

Pray in the Spirit... be alert (Ephesians 6:18). Again we come to one of the many places in Scripture where there is man’s responsibility, but God’s enabling. Here is the secret of true prayer, its very life and reality. **The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us** (Romans 8:26). **We worship by the Spirit of God** (Philippians 3:3). **Pray in the Holy Spirit** (Jude v.20).

Not just pray, but do it in the Spirit – else it is not true prayer, merely uttering of words, vain repetition. We who reject liturgy can be just as cold, formal and heartless, even with our beautiful phrases, correct doctrine and evangelical clichés, in our free prayer as any one who reads out of a book of prayers.

True prayer is created, empowered and directed by the Spirit. Comes not just from the mind, but from the heart. Heart and soul and will are all engaged. It happens when we are in the Spirit, as John was on the Lord’s Day on the isle of Patmos (Revelations 1:10). Therefore we must not rush into God’s presence and say the first thing that comes into our minds. Need to submit to the Holy Spirit for Him to guide and direct our prayers.

Give them warmth and freedom. Pray with reality, power and conviction, with urgency and assurance. Prayers ignited in the will of God. Sense the presence of God, know He is listening and that we are speaking to Him. Sense Him moving your heart, and know a real exchange is taking place. Enjoy the glorious liberty of children of God. If prayer life lacks reality and power, need to ask to be shown what it means to pray in the Spirit. Seek His help and ask for His power.

At the same time we need to be alert. The Devil will do anything to hinder our prayers. Lethargy, burdens of other cares, filling our minds with doubt, discouragement and depression.

For whom in particular Paul asks us to pray.

Now at end of this great statement, Paul makes a special plea for prayers for himself. Here is this mighty man, great preacher, founder of churches, writer of amazing letters, pioneer missionary in many countries – asking his readers, many of whom were poor slaves, to pray for him. Not too proud or important to ask very ordinary people to help and support him. He depends on them. No confidence in himself. Realizes strength of the enemy, so anxious not to fail the Lord.

He asks for two things. (Note, these are not that he be set free or be more comfortable). He wants to be an effective witness, so firstly he wants words to be given him when he opens his mouth, and secondly he wants to speak boldly as a faithful ambassador in chains. He desires to be frank, plain, concealing nothing, fearless even in the presence of his enemies and people of high rank.

This is a prayer we ought often to pray for those in the ministry of the Gospel. That they will be clear in their message, obscure nothing by muddled speech, and hide nothing by cowardly compromise. Clarity and courage are two vital elements in Christian preaching. Content and style are important. Some can be lucid teachers, but their sermons lack solid content because message is diluted by fear. Others are bold as lions, fearing no one, but what they say is confused and confusing. The pulpit needs combination of clarity and courage. So Paul asks first for words, and then for boldness. His desire is to present the whole counsel of God boldly and unashamedly though with love and compassion. He wants to please God, and to be faithful to His Word, but in a gracious winning way.

Conclusion

Wonderful passage on prayer. End with emphasis on the four “all”s – all occasions, all kinds of prayer, always keeping on, for all God’s people. And to practice them in the power of the Holy Spirit. Let us remember these words which were spoken to very ordinary people, most of them bondservants living in far worse circumstances than we have ever known and with problems we have never encountered.

What place does prayer have in your life? How essential is it to you? Is it a delight or a duty? This is the real test of the quality of your Christian life. “What a man is on his knees before God, that he is and no more” (R.M.McCheyne).