

Prayer

Colossians 4: 2-6

“Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly as I should. Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”

F.B. Meyer the author of “The Secret Guidance” said, “The great tragedy of life is not unanswered prayer but unoffered prayer.”

Instead of it being something we do every day like breathing, eating, walking and talking, it seems to have become to many like the little red glass covered box on the wall that says, “Break in case of emergency”. It is true that so often we associate prayer with crises in life.

There is the story told of the man who encountered trouble whilst flying a small aircraft. He called the control tower and said, “Pilot to tower, I’m 300 miles from the airport, flying at 600 feet and I’m out of fuel, I am descending rapidly, please advice over.” Tower to pilot, “repeat after me, “Our Father, who art in heaven....”

Prayer is for the most part an untapped resource, an unexplored continent where untold treasure remains undiscovered much like the bottom of the ocean about which we know so little despite all the advances in technology but when we discover something it is usually pretty amazing. It is talked about more than anything else, and practised less than anything else according to recent statistics. And yet for the believer it should be one of the greatest gifts our Lord has given us outside of salvation.

Einstein was asked by a student in 1952, “What is there left in the world for original dissertation research?” Einstein thought a while and then replied, “Find out about prayer, somebody must find out about prayer.”

The apostle Paul was someone who understood prayer and its power. Prayer was an essential part of Paul’s life, and he took it for granted that it would be a part of every Christian’s life. I, as he, would suggest you cannot really be a good Christian and not pray, just like you cannot have a good marriage if you don’t talk to your wife or husband. You can be a Christian and not pray, as you can be married and not talk. But in both circumstances you will be, I suggest, pretty miserable. Prayer is the pipeline of communication between God and His people, between God and those who love Him.

In the passage from Colossians Paul begins by saying, “Devote yourselves to prayer” In its original form it says, “Continue steadfastly in prayer,” It can be translated also as, “persist in, adhere firmly to, remain devoted to or to give unremitting care to,” It carries with it the idea of dedication. Of the ten times it is used in the New Testament four of them have to do with being devoted to prayer.

It is a very powerful word and in this verse is given as an imperative or command. In other words persistence in prayer is not an option for the Christian it is an order from the Lord himself. We have two parables given by Jesus on prayer emphasising persistence:

In Luke 18:1 we read, "Now, He was telling them a parable to show them that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart"

and in Luke 11: 9, " It is written, " ask and it shall be given to you; seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened to you;" each of these verbs is in the present tense, and active voice and could be translated: " keep on asking, keep on seeking and keep on knocking." Jesus does not want us to give up in prayer. He instructs us to be persistent.

Note there is a difference between a persistent prayer and a long prayer. A persistent prayer does not need to pray for a long time necessarily, persistence means not giving up, not rambling on!

Some people give up because they say they don't feel like praying, the joy is gone, the feeling is gone. But we are not to live by our feelings but to live by the commandments of our Lord who tells us to pray without ceasing.

George Muller said of persistence:

"It is a common temptation of Satan to make us give up on the reading of the Word and prayer when our enjoyment is gone; as if it were of no use to read the scriptures when we do not enjoy them, and as if it were no use to pray when we have no spirit of prayer. The truth is that in order to enjoy the word, we ought to continue to read it, and the way to obtain a spirit of prayer is to continue praying. The less we read the Word of God, the less we desire to read it, and the less we pray, the less we desire to pray."

We need to be persistent in prayer.

If you are persistent in something it stands to reason that you are passionate about it. In fact Paul says we should be vigilant or be watchful; it is the opposite of slothfulness. This describes passionate prayer.

Jesus was passionate about his prayer life, it was something He was always doing.

The author S.D. Gordon in his book, "Quiet Talks on Prayer" says

"How much prayer meant to Jesus! It was not only His regular habit, but his resort in every emergency, however slight or serious. When perplexed He prayed. When hungry for fellowship he found it in prayer, when hard pressed by work, He prayed. He chose His associates and received His messages on His knees. If tempted, He prayed. If criticised He prayed. If fatigued in body or wearied in spirit; He had recourse to His one unfailing habit of prayer. Prayer brought Him unmeasured power at the beginning and kept the flow unbroken and undiminished. There was no emergency, no difficulty, no necessity, and no temptation that would not yield to prayer."

Every time we see Jesus praying He was praying with passion:

Luke 3:1 at His baptism- while He was praying the heaven was opened – Passionate prayer opens heaven.

In Luke 6:12- before He called his disciples- He spent the whole night in prayer. Passionate prayer gives direction

In Luke 9: 29- at His transfiguration- and while He was praying, the appearance of His face became different and his clothing became white and gleaming- passionate prayer enables us to experience the glory of God.

In John 17- in His high priestly prayer – passionate prayer impacts the lives of others.

In Matt 26:39- in the Garden of Gethsemane- it is only through passionate prayer that we can pour out our hearts to God.

And finally in Luke 23:24 as He hung on the cross- a life that is lived in passionate prayer will enable us to maintain that spirit, even in the most difficult of circumstances.

Jesus always prayed with passion because He knew who it was He was praying to and He knew that the prayer to the Father is a powerful thing and not something to be taken lightly and glibly.

Prayer from the heart, that's what passionate prayer is, it is a prayer from the heart not just from the head.

That is how Jesus taught us to pray, not only through His example, but specifically through His teaching Look in Matt 6:7 in the Sermon on the Mount as Jesus instructs on prayer. It is here we find the Lord's Prayer which Nik has taught passionately on many times. But just before the Lord's Prayer Jesus says,

“When you pray, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do.”

What has happened in many cases to the Lord's Prayer? People repeat it as if it were some kind of magic mantra that will bless them or move God to hear them. They are doing with it exactly what He was instructing us not to.

James 5:16 says, “The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.”

We should also pray with thankfulness. Paul never fails to mention it:

Eph 5:20 tells us that thanksgiving is the natural result of being filled with and walking under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

Philippians 4:6 tells us not to be anxious for anything but in everything we should pray, giving thanks as we make our petitions known to God.

1 Thess. 5 :18 tells us that giving thanks at all times is God's will for us in Christ Jesus.

Colossians 3:17 says that as believers everything we say or do should be done in the name of the Lord Jesus as we give thanks to Him.

Expressing gratitude or thanks does several things:

It articulates dependence; It demonstrates relationship; It communicates gratitude and proper attitudes; It generates humility.

Jesus was also an intercessory prayer. Intercessory prayer is praying for God's will to be done in the lives of others.

In Luke 22:23 Jesus tells Peter, " I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail,"

Luke 23:24 on the cross Jesus prayed, " Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing."

Rom 8:34 tells us that Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father, making intercession for us.

In this passage in Colossians, Paul wanted to be sure the Colossian Christians understood what they were praying for. He wanted them to pray with specific purpose. He wanted them to pray for him that God would open doors to allow him to speak the gospel. It was preaching the gospel that had landed Paul in gaol in the first place. Paul's first priority was the expansion of God's kingdom above all else. He could have asked them to pray for his legal situation or his release from prison, but no, Paul's priority was to lead someone to Christ.

Paul wanted their prayers to be in accordance with God's will not simply after the greedy selfish desires of someone living for this world.

When you pray for others, when you pray for God's work to be done, for His will to be accomplished, He will begin to use you and grow you in ways that will astonish those around you. Sometimes I think we do not become what God wants us to become because we are too focused on ourselves and not on others. It is when we pray for others that we will become more like Christ, and as we become more like Christ, God will grow us more, show us more, and use us more.

Finally at least five things happen when we pray:

- 1. It deepens our ownership of the burden and our partnership with God. As we pray we begin to become aware of how God might use us to answer the prayer, how he might involve us in ways we had not seen before.**

2. Prayer forces us to wait.

Part of prayer is always waiting for God. God has three answers to prayer; yes, no and wait. Yes and no are easy we can see the answer. But wait is a tough one; John McArthur says,

"There is a tension between boldness and waiting on God's will. That tension is resolved by being persistent, yet accepting God's answer when it finally comes. "

Instead of getting frustrated that God is not on our schedule, prayer forces us to be on God's timetable.

- 3. Prayer opens our spiritual eyes.**

It enables us to get in touch with what God is doing and how He is doing it.

In 2 Kings 6 we read the story of how Elisha's servant got nervous when the Israeli army had surrounded Israel. In verses 15-17 we read:

“Now when the attendant of the man of God had risen early and gone out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was circling the city. And his servant said to him, “Alas my master! What shall we do?” So he answered, “Do not fear for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” Then Elisha prayed and said, “O LORD, I pray, open his eyes that he may see.” And the LORD opened the servant’s eyes and he saw; and behold the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.”

Prayer opens our eyes enabling us to see what God is doing, to see things we are blinded to without prayer. That’s because prayer is our communication. We speak to God, God answers us speaking to us and showing us His will.

- 4. It aligns our heart with God’s heart bringing adjustments and alignment. Setting our thoughts, emotions and actions in step with God’s will.**
- 5. Prayer enables us to move forward. Prayer engages God, enables God’s people and enlarges His kingdom. Jesus said, “without me you can do nothing,” Once we have prayed in the way we have described this morning we are ready to do anything; until we have prayed we can do nothing, but once we have prayed we can accomplish anything through Christ who strengthens us.**

So let me ask. What does your prayer life look like this morning? Are you persistent in prayer? Are your prayers passionate or perfunctory? Are they filled with intensity and fervour or are they weak, timid and lacking faith? What about gratitude? How much time have you spent thanking God for all He has done for you? And who are you praying for? Is there anyone in your life that you are praying will get saved? Is there a burden on your heart to see God’s kingdom expand, to see His will done?

These are questions which have struck me as I’ve been preparing this and I’m very much asking myself as well as you how I stand in regard to them. We are going to enter a time of worship now and perhaps as we do so we can reflect on where we stand in some or perhaps even all of these areas of our prayer lives, and perhaps we want to commit to improving them before the Lord.

Following worship I want to leave a time for prayer where you can sit quietly and bring your prayers to God, or find someone you trust to pray with about what is on your heart. Alex and myself will be available should you want us to pray with you but this is a safe place and please pray as you feel God is leading you.

When the time is right we will sing a couple more worship songs and then the young people will bring us their prayers that they’ve been preparing whilst I’ve spoken. I’ve also asked the prayer intercessors from Sunday mornings to seek God and to bring what He has laid on their hearts; Jean Orrell, Jo, Jean Millen, Keith, & Alex will bring their prayers but of course God speaks through any of His saints so if you feel you have a prayer to encourage us then please bring it as well.