

“Prayer That Matters”

Ephesians 6:18-20

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Herman Melville’s “Moby Dick,” which some English Literature teachers consider the best novel ever written, contains this scene. The whaling boat is crashing through the waves in pursuit of the great white whale, Moby Dick. Captain Ahab is shouting the orders, and the crew is working furiously, moving toward physical exhaustion. One man in the boat, however, appears to be doing nothing. He is not moving, he is not shouting, he is not sweating. He just sits, apparently ambivalent to the uproar that surrounds him. Why? The man is a harpooner. He quietly waits, prepared to deliver a deadly dart to the whale as soon as it comes into range.

Thus, his job – to sit, wait, and be ready – is absolutely essential. There is a paradox here. Even though on the surface it doesn’t seem like it, he has a very important job. What does not appear to be work at all, is the key to getting the whale.

Folks, I see an analogy here to the role of prayer in the church. Maybe you know some people who come to church regularly, but don’t really seem to be involved in the ministry. You wonder why they don’t contribute more to the work of the church. However, we must be careful not to judge. Some of the most important work in God’s kingdom doesn’t require great physical exertion or big financial sacrifices. This job does not require getting up in front of the congregation or serving on a committee. In fact, it is best done in the privacy of one’s home. It is the job of praying for the church and its ministry.

Friends, we have been studying the book of Ephesians in the past seven months. We have seen the apostle Paul’s grand explanation of God’s plan of reconciling human beings to Himself and to each other through Jesus Christ. Last week we explored the cosmic battle where the forces of evil strive to prevent us from experiencing God’s grace.

As he comes to the end of his letter, Paul turns his focus to the topic of prayer. Our text is Ephesians 6:18-20. Friends, any of us can find ourselves in a difficult and challenging situation. Maybe the bills are piling up and the money is just not there to pay them. With deep frustration you conclude.

“Well, all I can do is pray.” All I can do is pray?? We are so quick to forget that this is a fantastic thing to be able to do.

Friends, we look at the world around us, either on TV or driving around the community. We see a battlefield full of casualties. We see people whose lives are wrecked, either by their own sin or by the sins of others. Because we are basically a compassionate people, it troubles us to see so many, especially children, hurting so badly. Yet, what can we do about it? Do we plunge into a flurry of activity, trying to right all the wrongs and put all the broken pieces together? Or will we sit back and flounder in frustration and guilt because we are not making things right?

If you have listened to even a few of my sermons, you know that I believe very much in active Christianity. Our faith in Jesus leads us to action. We are not to sit in rocking chairs, waiting for God to bless us. Yet, I need to be careful, we all need to be careful, that our commitment to active, practical Christianity, still leaves plenty of room, plenty of time, for that simple, but most important job: Prayer. In so many ways, prayer is a foundation, a basic part of the Christian life. Eugene Peterson once said, “Prayer is saying, ‘I cannot, but God, you can.’” It is recognizing who God is as our creator and who we are as His children.

Since prayer is so essential, it is no surprise that Paul closes his letter to the Ephesian Christians with some instructions on prayer. As we explore what he says, my hope is that God would help us really understand these words, so that prayer would become a more important part of our lives. Let’s pause and pray that would happen.

Paul begins with some general instructions in **Ephesians 6:18 Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance making supplication for all the saints.** Because this verse comes right after Paul’s description of God’s armor in verses 13-17 some conclude he sees prayer as the chief weapon to be used in spiritual conflict. That is part of its purpose, but Paul has an even bigger picture in mind. As I read that

verse you may have noticed I stressed that little word “all” that Paul uses four times. Paul is pointing to the central role prayer should play in all of our lives, all of the time. Now, to pray in the spirit does not mean speaking in tongues or going into some mystical trance. All of our prayers need to be spirit led and need to flow out of a relationship with Jesus Christ. It is important to remember that Paul’s words are addressed to genuine Christians, believers in Jesus. Someone who is not a Christian, can still pray, but because they lack a personal relationship with God through Jesus, their prayers are not effective. When I get a phone call, and the name of a family member or friend comes up on the caller ID, I answer, if I am able to do so. I want to talk to that person. On the other hand, if it is a number I don’t recognize, especially from outside of the 218-area code, I know it could very well be someone telling me my car warranty will expire soon. Thus, I probably don’t answer that call. God loves to hear the prayers of His children.

Okay, lets take a closer look at verse 18. First Paul says, “Pray at all times.” Other verses say, “Pray on all occasions.” When you feel like you are in the midst of a spiritual battle – Pray! When you don’t feel like that, and your soul is at peace – Pray! Pray when you think things are going well and pray when it doesn’t seem that way at all.

In other words, pray for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness, and in health. We are to pray when we feel like it, and when we don’t feel like it. We should pray when what we think is a big request and when we have what seems like a small request. Of course, all our requests are really small to the Lord. Anytime is the right time to pray.

Second, pray a variety of prayers. Paul says, “With all prayer and supplication” or other verses say pray, “with all kinds of prayers and requests.” This is a reminder of the rich variety there can be in prayer. In Matthew 6:7 Jesus warns us against vain repetition or as the NIV says, “long, babbling prayers.” Yet, it seems people sometimes ignore that. I know folks who repeat the Lord’s prayer, sometimes called “the Our Father” 10 to 20 times per day, maybe every hour of the hour. But I cannot help but wonder, do they really think about what they are praying? Now, it is not just people in other churches who do this. I find myself sometimes uttering certain phrases just

because it is my habit to say them when I pray. It is easy to fall into ruts with our prayers. When that happens, we often don’t really think about what we are praying.

Variety in prayer helps us avoid those ruts and speak truly honestly to the Lord as we pray. What are the “all kinds of prayers and requests” we should be making to God? Well, there are formal prayers. Formal prayers go something like this: “Oh most Holy Sovereign of the universe. We thanketh thee for the blessing we have receiveth from thy hand. We ask this day that thou wouldst bless us with thy protection and provision.” That, folks, is a formal prayer. The informal prayer is something like this: “Help, Lord. Help!” Both these prayers are great if they are not just words we say, but words from the heart, spoken with sincerity.

One thing that helps me stay out of a rut when praying is to use this little acrostic – “ACTS.” Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. Now, the order is not important, but making sure all four of these are found in my prayers helps me to really think about what I am praying.

For me, and maybe for you, the easiest aspect of prayer is supplication, which is asking the Lord to provide the things I want for myself, family or friends. When I listen to other folks pray in public, it seems most of us are pretty good at asking God for things we want.

Thanksgiving in pray also come somewhat naturally for many. Common courtesy, which seems to be becoming more uncommon, dictates that we say thanks to the Lord for the many blessings we enjoy. However, the “A” and “C” of the acrostic – Adoration and Confession – are missing from many of my prayers and maybe yours.

When we express praise to the Lord, we often end up thanking Him for what He has done for us. That is great, but it is not the same as expressing adoration. When I read the book of Psalms, I find that much praise is directed to God because of His attributes and character. An old 70’s song says, “I praise you Lord, because of who you are, not for all the things you have done for me.” That type of praise, expressing adoration and love for God

simply because of who He is, should regularly come from our mouths.

Confession of sin is also part of a healthy prayer life. When I neglect to confess my sins, it is not because I don't have any. Rather, it is probably that I am simply not taking an honest look at my life, at my actions and attitudes. Failure to confess our sins robs us of spiritual health and joy. Friends do not get stuck in a prayer rut. Instead, pray, from the heart, with all kinds of prayers and requests, including Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication.

Third, pray with perseverance. Paul says, "keep alert with all perseverance." Don't get distracted when you should be praying. And certainly, don't fall asleep when you should be praying like Peter and the other disciples did in the Garden of Gethsemane. There are times when I tell myself I am too busy, or too tired to pray. I need to remember that when it seems I have a hundred other things to do, it is a very good time to pray.

Martin Luther realized this. His habit was to pray for an hour each morning, unless he was extra busy. Then he would pray for two hours. No, that is not very easy to do, but Luther understood that when more things were happening in his life, he needed to devote himself more to prayer. Folks we need to make prayer a priority and always keep praying, no matter how full our schedule gets.

Fourth, pray for fellow believers in Jesus. As Paul says, "Make supplication for all the saints." It is good to pray for your family, your friends, and for your own needs. Paul says, however, that your list needs to be longer. You should pray for all believers in Jesus, no matter where they live, or how old they are, or to what church they belong...all the saints!!

"What a minute, Pastor Dan! How can I pray for a billion people? Am I supposed to pray, 'God bless all the Christians in the whole wide world?'" No, I don't think that is what Paul has in mind. Yet, whenever we become aware of a need another Christian has, we should pray for that person.

If we are not careful our scope of prayer can become very narrow. It is easy to focus on the circle or people around us and pray for them but ignore some very obvious needs that others have. The war in Ukraine over the past couple of months

has caught the attention of the world, and I know many of you have been praying for Christians there.

That is great, but I am always amazed when I hear stories of Christians in other parts of the world, people in communist and Muslim countries, who are being persecuted for their faith who take time to pray for Christians in America. They pray we would be faithful to the Lord in the midst of our affluence. It seems strange the persecuted church would be more faithful in praying for us, then we are for them, but I suspect that sometimes happens. Friends don't discriminate in your prayers. Be willing to pray for all the saints.

Okay, from these general instructions about prayer in verse 18, Paul moves to a specific prayer request that he has. He wants the Ephesians to pray for him. **Ephesians 6:19,20 And pray also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.**

The specific request is that God would enable Paul to have boldness and clarity in telling others about Jesus. He desires God's help in faithfully proclaiming the great news, so that others might hear and be drawn to salvation by the Holy Spirit.

Paul calls himself an ambassador in chains. This reflects the fact that as he writes this letter, he is being held in some type of Roman prison. Now, if I were in prison and asking people to pray for me, I think I would ask them to pray for something else. "Please pray God gets me out of here!"

I am sure Paul would not object if God sent a couple of angels to free him from prison as he had done for Peter in Acts 12. Or Paul could ask the folks to pray for a list of things that would make his life more comfortable while he is in prison. Yet, his priority, his most important concern is that he would be an effective ambassador for Jesus Christ. So that is what he asks his friends to pray.

Friends, Paul is a good model for us here. The next time someone asks if you have a prayer request, you might say, "Please pray the Lord would heal the pain I have in my shoulder," or, "Pray the Lord would help me make the right decision about what college I should attend," or "Pray I would be able

to be a good and patient parent.” But a great prayer request is this: “Please ask God to help me to faithfully tell others about Jesus Christ.”

These verses also remind us of the privilege we have of praying for Chisholm Baptist Church. When Cooper Kupp of the L.A. Rams received the MVP award in the Super Bowl in February, he said he was humbled and gave praise to the Lord Jesus. He also noted that the victory was a team effort, and that all the Rams players, those of offense, defense, and special teams had contributed to the victory. Even those who may not have played that evening, still made contributions throughout the season that enabled the Rams to get to the Super Bowl.

Friends, I encourage you to remember two things. First, proclaiming the gospel is far more important than winning the Super Bowl. In fact, there is not task more important than helping people become believers in and followers of Jesus Christ. Nothing the United Nations, the United States government or Amazon does is more important than this. Second, remember, the work of God’s kingdom is always a team effort. When you pray for those who are proclaiming God’s word to others, you are part of the team and are making an important contribution in accomplishing God’s work.

When you pray for our global partners, that family in North Africa, or that other family in India, or Emmanuella in Cameroon, or the McCormick’s up at Grand Portage, you have a share in each of those ministries. When people in any of those places respond to the gospel, put their faith in Jesus and become His disciples, God is using your prayers to accomplish His purposes. Or maybe you pray for the Sunday School teachers at Chisholm Baptist Church. A teacher gave a lesson, and a little 3rd grade girl now really understands what it means to trust in Jesus for salvation. If you prayed for that teacher and those students, you helped change that little girl’s life. Or perhaps this morning you got up and prayed, “Lord, please speak to people through Pastor Dan’s sermon today. Let’s says during the past 25-30 minutes a number of people in this room have decided they need to be more focused and consistent in their prayer life. Friends if you prayed for me this morning, you played a role in those decisions.

Prayer provides an opportunity for each of us to be involved in ministry. Prayer plays a big part in the ministry of this church and every truly Christian church. Though I don’t really understand how it works, any more than I really understand how electricity works, I know that it does. A church without prayer is about as valuable as a lamp that isn’t plugged into the electric socket.

Years ago, an American pastor was in London visiting the Metropolitan Tabernacle, the church Charles Spurgeon served. The famous pastor offered to give the American guest a tour of the building. After a few minutes, Spurgeon said, “Now let me take you downstairs to show you our power plant.” The pastor expected to see a coal powered generator, but instead Spurgeon took him to a room where 200 people were meeting on a Friday evening, praying for the Sunday worship services.

The question I close with today is this: Are you praying for the work of God’s kingdom? We have not completed the work God has for us to do when we pray, but I believe it is usually the place where we should start. If you are regularly praying for the ministry at Chisholm Baptist Church, you may not feel like you are doing a lot, but your role is just as essential as that harpooner waiting on the deck of the whaling ship.

Now, I believe some of us are called to spend more time in prayer than others, but I think everyone who is a believer in Jesus is called to spend some time praying for the work of God’s kingdom. If you have been doing that, great. Thank you very much. If not, now is the time to start, because this is the type of prayer that really matters. And what better way to start than joining us for our prayer gathering tonight? It would be great to have you there.