

“Prayer with Purpose”

Ephesians 1:15-23

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As a child, I prayed the same prayer every night for years. “God, please take care of mommy, daddy...” and then I proceeded to list all my brother, both sets of grandparents, a whole bunch of cousins, a few friends, and our German Shepard dog, “Shep.” Now there is nothing wrong with that type of prayer, especially if you are 8 years old. Yet, I wonder, as an adult, have my prayers for others matured much beyond the simple, “God bless everyone?” And Anglican priest was called to see one of the members of his parish who had been bitten by a snake. When he arrived, the man asked him to pray. So, he took out his prayer book and began to search through it. After a few moments he paused and said to the man, “I’m sorry. I can’t seem to find a prayer in there for snake bites. But if you want to die, I have a prayer for that.”

Oh, maybe my prayers are a little better than that, but do I really do a good job at praying for others, especially for you who are part of Chisholm Baptist Church? When I read our text today and see how the apostle Paul prayed for the Ephesians, I realize that my prayers, our prayers, for each other, could probably be a bit richer than they are. Now, I am not talking about how eloquent our prayers sound. Fancy words don’t make a good prayer. Yet, as I look at prayers in the New Testament, it seems that praying for specific needs of other people is better than a generic “God bless everyone in the whole, wide world,” as one of our sons used to pray. I don’t pretend to understand how it all works. I believe the Lord does hear and answer our generic “God bless us, everyone” prayers. If some of you pray every night, “Please bless Pastor Dan,” I appreciate that. I can certainly use His blessing. However, I think in some way we would often experience God’s grace more fully if other folks are praying for our specific needs.

Friends, today our journey through Ephesians brings us to 1:15-23. As we look at Paul’s prayer, I think we will find a model that will help us pray for each other more effectively. Let’s pause and pray we hear and heed what God says to us through His word today.

Let’s look at Paul’s prayer for friends in the Ephesian church. **Ephesians 1:15-16 For this**

reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you. There is a lot there, but I think it can be summed up in just a few words. Paul prays that they will know God better. Now, knowing God should not be equated at being good at bible trivia. You may be able to list all the Old Testament kings and still not really know God. Nor is this knowing facts about God. I know a lot about Aaron Rodgers, but I don’t really know him. Paul’s desire is that his friends develop a deeper and closer relationship with the Lord. Now, this doesn’t require learning facts about God. Theology is part of knowing God. Yet, even more important, is tearing down the barriers that prevent us from relation to Him as we should. God does this through the Holy Spirit, whom Paul calls “the Spirit of wisdom and revelation” who enlightens the eyes of our hearts. God makes Himself known to us through the bible, the Word of God. Many think the bible is like a textbook for a class in which you are not very interested. When I read the geology textbook, I knew what most of the words meant. I believed most of what the book said, but I certainly didn’t see that it had any significance for me. Some people read the bible, know what most of the words mean, believe a lot of what it says, but don’t think it has any significance for their lives. But these folks don’t really understand the bible. By helping us understand and believe God’s word, the Holy Spirit enables us to really get to know God. He helps us to get to know Him. Not just as an acquaintance to whom we say, “Hi,” on Sunday morning, but as our Lord and King, as our Father and friend. That is Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians. He wants them to know God better. Let’s take a look at three things that Paul prays they will understand and experience so this can happen.

First, he prays they will have hope. **Ephesians 1:18a Having the eyes of your hearts**

enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you. Another key word in this verse is “called” which points back to last week when we talked about being chosen by God. We have been called by God to be his sons and daughters. That is the focus of our hope. Whenever a big event is coming up in your life, a wedding, a family vacation, a big football game, looking forward to that event, the expectation, may bring almost as much pleasure as the event itself. And if your football team loses the game, the anticipation is much better than the event. Hopeful people are happy people, because they have great expectations. Christians look forward to more than wedding, vacations and football games. We anticipate something greater than gaining wealth and having fun. Instead, we yearn for and patiently wait for the fulfilment of God’s promises. And because of Jesus Christ and what He has done for us, a hopeful Christian knows that God ways keeps His promises. That type of hope, looking forward to what God has in store for His children, sustains us in the most difficult circumstances. When the communists ruled the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, followers of Jesus Christ were able to endure intense persecution because they never lost hope. They believed God would keep His promises. Believing God has good things in store, believing we may experience some of those good things tomorrow, and certainly will experience them all in eternity enables us to plug along, even when the road is very hard. Hope keeps us going.

Second, Paul pays that his friends will understand the riches of Jesus Christ. **Ephesians 1:18 That you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.** Bible scholars disagree whether this is an inheritance God receives or one that He gives. I think the context indicates this is an inheritance God gives to those who are saints through Jesus. I think Paul is praying that not only would the Ephesians desire spiritual blessings, but also that they would begin to grasp the incredible value of those blessings. Let’s pretend you are a contestant on the Price Is Right, a TV game show in its 50th season. Your name is called, “Come on down. You’re the next contestant on ‘the Price is Right!’” Then you are asked to guess the price tag of being a Christian. What is the value of knowing Jesus Christ? I suspect that no matter how high you guess, no matter how great you think Christianity

is, you will underestimate its value. Each believer in Jesus is an heir with other Christians to a priceless spiritual fortune. We can only begin to grasp how marvelous what we have in Christ truly is. Paul prays that his friends will grow in that grasping.

Third, Paul prays that the Ephesians might understand God’s power. **Ephesians 1:18,19a Having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe.** This power is experienced, **Ephesians 1:19b-21 according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, for above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and about every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.** Friends, by the power of God, Jesus is today the risen Lord, the head of the church, and the king of the universe. And God can use that same power in our lives as Christians. Paul is saying, “Hey, look at the exalted Lord, Jesus Christ. That is what the power of God can do. And it can work in your life too.” Now, some folks misunderstand what type of power God has made available. Some confuse it with worldly power and think it involves controlling people or situations. Not quite. Others, embracing new age think Paul is talking about the power to become one with God. He is not. Some Christians equate power with the ability to perform miracles. That may happen on occasion, but it is not what Paul means.

Rather, this is the power that brings life from death. It is God’s transforming power. It is the power that takes people who want nothing to do with God, who have no interest in Christianity, who are focused only on themselves, and turn them into people who love God and want to serve others. One day this power will transform Christians into people who have the same character as Jesus Christ. You might be thinking, “Pastor Dan, I have a long way to go. It is not going to be easy.” That may be true. But God can do it. He has the power and he is willing to use it. Paul had that power at work in his own life. The Lord had totally turned his life around. He went from being the great persecutor of the church, to

being the church's great missionary and theologian. That power has been seen in the lives of many people in this room who have gone from being lovers of self to lovers of God. There are men, women and young people here who are different, very different, because of what Jesus Christ has done in their lives.

Folks, what I want us to see is that when Paul prays, rather than simply saying, "Please bless my friends in Ephesus," he is more specific. His prayer is that they would really get to know God. He prays they would really understand and experience the hope, riches and power that are part of the Christian life. Frankly, when I pray for you all, my prayers are often a bit different. Even the prayers spoken in church on Sunday morning or at our monthly prayer gatherings are different. I usually ask God to bring physical healing to those whose bodies are sick or in pain. I often ask God to bring peace and reconciliation to divided families and those struggling with broken relationships. I ask Him to provide jobs for those who are unemployed. I ask the Lord to help students do a good job on their school work. Paul's prayer, however, is different. He prays for their spiritual growth and strength. Why does he pray for his friends the way he does?

First, he prays for what he knows his friends really need. If Paul were here, I think he would say something like this. "Pastor Dan it is great that you pray for healing, reconciliation, jobs and good grades. Sometimes I prayed for those things for my friends in Ephesus. But, what you really need to do is pray that your friends would get to know God better. Why? Because that is what they really need. That is what they need more than anything else in the world. Sick people need to know God more than they need to get well. Poor people need to know God more than they need money. People with lousy marriages need to know God more than they need a loving relationship. Students who are flunking tests need to know God more than they need to improve their grades." That is what I think Paul would say to me, and I am confident he would be right.

Some of you are thinking, "Whoa. That sounds a bit super spiritual. Those other problems are important." Yes, they certainly are. But we need to make sure we don't confuse symptoms with root problems, the real problem. If I have a toothache I can take some ibuprofen and it will

ease the pain, but it does nothing to solve the problem, which is a bad tooth. Often when we pray, we ask God to alleviate symptoms, rather than deal with the real problem. In **Matthew 6:33** Jesus says, "**Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be given to you.**" In other words, when you really get to know God, a lot of other problems will kind of take care of themselves, or just won't seem like problems anymore. It is not magical. Christians still have difficult situations. But when we really get to know God and are truly following the Lord Jesus, we can handle the stress, the pain, the adversities and the tragedies of life in a very different way. So it makes sense to pray that people will get to know God better, because when He answers that prayer, those folks will handle life in a better way. They will be better able to deal with sickness, divorce, unemployment, and being treated unfairly by a teacher. Even more important, when life on this earth is over, when we stand before the Lord, the things we often thought mattered so much won't really matter at all. How much money we made, how intelligent we were, how healthy and good looking we were, those are not going to matter. The only thing that will count is whether or not we know God. Paul prays that his friends will know God, because he knows that is what they really need. That is what our friends need as well.

So what does Paul's prayer mean for us?

First, praying for other people is an important ministry and really a high calling. This is a ministry where it doesn't matter how old you are, how much education you have, whether you are good at being up in front of people, or whether you are a gifted singer. Friends, you might be confined to a wheelchair or even to bed and still pray for other people. And it is a significant ministry. I have a feeling I might not be a pastor today if it wasn't for Vera Angelo, a widow lady in Prentice, WI, who used to pray for me daily until she dies and went to be with the Lord. I am pretty sure I would not make it through the week would not be able to prepare these sermons, without the prayers of people in this room who pray for me regularly. We often think of pastors, missionaries, Sunday school teachers, Deacons and Deaconesses, nursery workers and ushers as people who are doing ministry. Yet, pray for others is also a very important way of serving God and His kingdom. And if God is calling you to do that, do it.

Second, we should pray for the spiritual needs of others. More than anything else, we need to pray that our friends, family members, and other folks would get to know God better. We need to pray that through God's spirit they would really understand and experience God's grace and power in their lives. And remember, we can pray this for people even when we don't know the specific situations they are facing in life. You may have family members in another part of the country or know missionaries on the other side of the world. Even with email and Facebook there is much you don't know about their lives. Sure you can pray, "Lord, please bless Jim," or "God bless the Thomas'." Yet, much better is to pray for spiritual growth in their lives. We can always pray some will get to know God better, because none of us on this planet know Him as well as we should.

Third, we need to value our relationship with God. We likely will not be very good or consistent in praying for spiritual growth in other's lives unless we think our relationship with God is important. In the first part of Ephesians Paul talks about how great it is to be a Christian. Only when I cherish my relationship the Lord, only when I value it above the other things in my life, will I be strongly motivated to pray for the spiritual welfare of others. Friends, maybe you don't have that attitude because you don't really know God. You may know about Him, but you don't really have a relationship with Him. Today, if, as the Holy Spirit enables, you turn to Jesus and receive Him as Lord and savior, you can have that relationship. You will become a child of God. You will experience His grace and love in a way that you never imagined. Or maybe you are a Christian. God is your father. But the relationship has become kind of cold and distant. If that is the boat you are in, I pray you will get to know God better. If you want some ideas on how to do that please talk to Pastor Mark or me.

Friends, my challenge today for those of you who are Christians and know God is this: Be an intercessor. Pray for other people. Your assignment today is to pick one person for whom you are not currently praying and this week pray that he/she would get to know God better. I suggest you do that at least 4 times in the next week. Some of you already have a long prayer list. I hope you are praying for the spiritual growth and welfare of those people. However, I want you to add one other person and pray that individual

would be growing to really know the Lord. Friends, life often is not easy. Most of us know that or are learning that. We need to help, support, and encourage each other. And we need to pray for one another. Today we have been reminded that the best thing we can do for the people around us is to pray that they would know God better. May the Lord help us to do that today and in all the days ahead.