

Pray for Us

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Hebrews 13:18-19
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Well, I came across a story this week about five college students from the 19th century who were visiting London. And since they were there on a Sunday, these particular college students decided that they wanted to hear the famed prince of preachers, Charles Spurgeon. And so they arrived early that Sunday morning, and while they were waiting just outside of the Metropolitan Tabernacle, a man greeted the students at the door and he said to them, "Good morning gentlemen, allow me to show you around." And then he asked them, "Would you like to see the boiler room?" Well, since it was a hot day in July, these young men were not particularly interested in going in to see the boiler room, but at the same time, they did not want to offend this new stranger. And so they agreed to take him up on his offer. So the man showed them around the church building through the auditorium, and eventually he led them down a stairway to a door.

And there, as he quietly opened the door, he looked at the young college students and he whispered, "This is our boiler room." The five students looked inside the room and to their surprise, there, with their heads bowed together, were hundreds of people praying, seeking God's blessings upon the morning service that would soon be starting in the auditorium above them. And then softly closing the door, the stranger introduced himself to the college students and it was none other than Charles Spurgeon. And so for Spurgeon, just as he was getting across to these college students, and it has been attested by many ministers of his day, when people would ask him what the secret to the success of his preaching was, he would say to them, without fail, "It is because I have a faithful congregation praying." And my friends, it is that great need and dependence upon prayer that is being expressed by the author of Hebrews and our passage for this evening.

And so with that in mind, the first thing we're going to discover in our passage tonight is ***The Need for Fervent Petitions, The Need for Fervent Petitions***. The author says, very simply, if you look there with me at the beginning of verse 18, three English words, "Pray for us," the title of tonight's sermon. Pray for us. Now, the only way for us to understand this and appreciate it rightly, is if we first recognize it in its proper context. So I want to remind us that this call of prayer is flowing out of the weighty admonition from back in verse 17. You recall from last week that the author of Hebrews called these believers to obey their leaders and to submit to them as those who will stand before God and give an account for how they led. And so it is the sheer gravity of that soon coming judgment and the weightiness that comes from considering such a serious and sobering reality that causes the author of Hebrews to now plead with these believers to pray.

And although that initial plea in verse 18 is relatively brief, there are a number of implicit presuppositions that are built within it that I believe will be helpful for us to consider tonight and in this series. And so first, I want us to see the object of your prayers. The object of your prayers, particularly as it comes to us in the context of this passage. You'll notice with me that the author of Hebrews here, at the beginning, uses the plural pronoun us. In other words, he is identifying himself with the other leaders or pastors of the church. And so he's not just requesting that the church pray only for him, but rather he is instructing these believers to join together in praying for all of their pastors. And of course, as we think about the original context, we know that there has been a host of things going on.

Some of those we have contemplated and considered throughout this series, the emotions of all that is taking place, the persecution that is happening in the midst of their lives and more that could be said and that we do not know about. But then as we think about applying this to our own context here at Redeemer, one of the unique things about a church of our size is that we have a relatively large pastoral team. And as we've heard throughout this weekend, the Lord is adding to that pastoral team much because of your prayers and the way that the Lord continues to bless our church. So while that may mean that your prayer list under the category or heading of pastors is perhaps a little longer than most, I cannot emphasize enough the crucial importance of spending time in your time of prayer for us as leaders.

I shared with my wife Alicia on the way here, that there's a little bit of attention that's found in teaching this scripture because I'm calling you to pray for me. Seems a little bit self-serving, but yet this is exactly what scripture calls us to. And for good reason, as John MacArthur has said, "To pray for our leaders in the church is to serve and to please God." Why? Well, because he goes on to say, "Satan knows that if he can undermine the leaders, many others will go down with them. If he can get them to compromise, to weaken their stand, to lessen their efforts, to become dejected and hopeless, he has caused the work of Christ great damage." In other words, if the enemy can injure the shepherd, then what becomes of the sheep? So that leads us to the next presupposition that's found within this opening call to prayer, and that is that this exhortation of prayer is not optional for the believer.

You'll notice that the author of Hebrews here is not asking a question or making a recommendation. He's not giving a suggestion. No, he's giving these believers a command. Pray for us. And so the second thing I want us to see within this call, and exhortation to prayer is the ***duty of prayer. The duty of prayer.*** In other words, prayer is the duty of every genuine believer in Jesus Christ. Every genuine follower of Christ is commanded by God to pray and specifically in our context, to pray for their pastors. And let me just say brothers and sisters, prayer for the believer should be like breathing. And what happens if you or I stop breathing? In the same way that we should not hold our breath for very long, we should not neglect to pray. The reformer, Martin Luther addressed this topic on the duty of prayer saying this, and I did not give the full quote.

It gets a whole lot more stern throughout it in very Lutheran fashion. But I'm just going to give you the beginning. It says this, "From the fact that prayer is so urgently commanded, we ought to conclude that we should by no means despise our prayers, but rather prize them highly." And I might also add my friends, if you do not pray for your pastors, if you do not pray for your pastors, then who will? Who will? So we desperately, desperately need and depend upon your prayers. Like Spurgeon, when people ask us what is the secret to the success of Redeemer Bible Church, we want to be able to answer, it is because we have a faithful congregation who prays for us. So that leads me to the third and final presupposition found embedded within this call to prayer. And that is the privilege of prayer. The privilege of prayer.

So my friends, not only does the Lord command us to pray, but we also need to recognize this evening that he allows us to pray. And this is what the author of Hebrews understands as he is calling the church to fervently petition the throne of God. He knows that God has given all believers direct access to the throne of grace. This is the same author, keep in mind, who wrote to the church back in chapter 4:15 and 16 saying this, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect, has been tempted as we are yet without sin." So what is the conclusion to that? Well, he tells us in verse 16, "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

So brothers and sisters, we need to understand that we have a sovereign God who is literally in control of all things, and we have a perfect savior and mediator who is actively this very moment building his church. But that same God and Savior is not just sovereign over the ends, he is also sovereign over the means. Do you understand that? He delights to hear our prayers and he delights to use them to accomplish his perfect plans and purposes all for his glory. So pray, pray, pray for your pastors, pray for our families, pray for our wives, pray for our marriages that we would be the husbands that God has called us to be as we seek to love our wives as Christ loves the church. Pray for us as dads that we would be earthly fathers who reflect the character and the nature of our heavenly Father as we seek to provide for and protect and teach and love our own children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

And pray for us in our role as shepherds that we would first look after our own souls well, but then that we would shepherd the church of Christ in a way that honors the sacrifice that he has made. And what is that sacrifice? It is the shedding of his own blood, the redemption of his precious church. And it is that sincere desire on the part of the author of Hebrews that leads us to the second part of verse 18 this evening. And it is there that we are going to discover ***The Necessity of Honorable Intentions. The Necessity of Honorable Intentions.*** If you look there with me, he goes on to say, "For we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things." So once again, we need to take a moment to remember our context. These Hebrew believers have been facing persecution from the unbelieving Jews, which includes a host of accusations concerning the legitimacy of their faith.

We saw one of those a couple of weeks ago, the accusation that says you don't even have an altar. To which the author of Hebrews responds, "We do have an altar and that altar is the cross of Christ." And so these attacks are coming from all sides. And as we know, when detractors cannot invalidate the message, they will attack who? The messenger, right? And so, to those within the church who are being persuaded by that rhetoric, the author of Hebrews sees the great need to defend his reputation and his intentions. And again, we notice that he's not just speaking here on his own behalf. This is not a self-serving effort on the part of this pastor, but rather he is speaking on behalf of the entire leadership team of the church, of all the pastors, and he provides a statement of confidence on behalf of the church's pastors that is twofold in nature.

First, it is a statement of confidence concerning the conscience of their pastors. The conscience of their pastors. And he says very simply that their conscience is clear, it is clean. In other words, in spite of the accusations and the attacks that are coming against them, they have a clean and unblemished conscience before the Lord. And I want to make sure we catch the beauty of this statement that the author of Hebrews is applying here. He is actually applying Christian theology. And so if we want to see an application of why theology is always practical, this is a great example of that. He's actually taking the very theology that he taught these believers earlier in this letter and he is now using it to help them to see both the emptiness of the accusations and the effective power of the gospel.

Earlier in this very letter, back in chapter 9, he wrote to the church beginning in verse 13, and here's what he said, "For if the blood of goats and bulls and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh," right? He's juxtaposing the Old Testament and the law with the New Testament, the gospel, "How much more," he says, "will the blood of Christ who through the eternal spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" In other words, the gospel of Jesus Christ cleanses, purifies, wipes clean the conscience of the believer from the dead and lifeless works of which we have previously corrupted it. And so on the one hand, he's saying that their conscience has been completely purified by the blood of Jesus Christ, which is something that the unbelieving Jewish detractors cannot say.

They do not have that privilege because they are not under the new covenant of Jesus Christ. But then on the other hand, he's also saying as those who know that they will stand before God and give an account for how they've cared for the souls entrusted to them that their conscience is clear. And what we need to understand is that this is precisely the attitude and perspective that all pastors should strive to live with. And I would underline and highlight and circle the word strive, to live their lives in a way that is worthy of the gospel, to live in such a way that Christ is magnified through the way they live their life and that there is no reproach brought upon the truth of God's word. Because again, that can either be a great blessing to the church or it can do great damage.

Of course, we live in a world and within an American culture, especially in the 21st century where we have sadly seen multitudes of so-called pastors living in just the opposite way, haven't

we? It's commonplace for us to see this type of thing. We see the truth of God's word, slandered. We see the character of God because of these types of people, it is maligned. And pastors fall left and right due to both theological error and moral failure. It has become commonplace in our culture to see these types of things happen. And so it is all the more important, especially in the day and age in which we live, that pastors live with a clear conscience before the Lord both in position that is in Christ and also in practice. In other words, that their private life matches who they claim to be publicly. As Paul said in Acts 24:16, "I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man."

And once again, this is one of the many reasons that I am supremely blessed to be a part of the pastoral staff of Redeemer Bible Church because like the author of Hebrews, I can stand before this congregation with supreme confidence and declare on behalf of our entire pastoral staff that we are men who live with a clear conscience before the Lord and before those entrusted to our care. My friends, that is a beautiful, beautiful confidence and proclamation to be able to make. And likewise, of course, I can concur with the second statement of confidence that is provided by the author of Hebrews as well, which is a statement of confidence in their intentions. Their intentions. Once again, he says that they are desiring to act honorably in all things. So this is a statement concerning the entirety of their intentions, no doubt still responding in implicit fashion to the attacks that are coming against their character by the unbelieving Jewish detractors.

The author of Hebrews wants to boldly declare that in their thoughts, in their words and in their actions, it is their supreme goal to honor the Lord. There is nothing else within their intentions that has to do with selfish purposes or agendas. It is completely and totally aimed at the honor of God. As those who shepherd with the knowledge that they will stand before God and give an account for every thought, word and deed, pastors need to make sure that they are careful to evaluate every motivation, to weigh every intention, and to measure every action. Why? Why is that crucially and vitally important? Because the Lord is our judge, the gospel is our charge, and the church of Jesus Christ is our stewardship. How much more of a high and lofty calling can there possibly be? And it is because of that high and lofty calling and the expectations that come with it that are placed upon pastors of Christ's church that we see the emphatic words coming from the author of Hebrews in our final verse for this evening, verse 19.

And it is there that we're going to discover ***The Nature of Sincere Supplications. The Nature of Sincere Supplications.*** So, coming full circle and kind of doubling down, if you will, on his original plea, the author of Hebrews says here in verse 19, "I urge you the more earnestly to do this in order that I may be restored to you the sooner." Now, to start by stating what we do not know, we have absolutely no idea why the author of Hebrews is not with his believers. We can guess, we can speculate, but that really doesn't do us any good. You'll notice that there is a shift in verse 19 from the plural pronoun in verse 18, us and we, to now the singular pronoun, I, in verse 19. And so, the author of Hebrews is now thinking specifically of his own particular set of circumstances, whatever those might be.

And of course in God's providence we can say it is certainly because of his absence that we have this letter of the Hebrews at all. But it's clear that in his absence, his desire is to be back in their presence. And you and I can obviously attest to the feelings of longing that we have for those that we hold dear when we experience those providential seasons of separation, can't we? The longing to be back in the presence of those whom we hold dear. But in addition to that, what we do know is that this pastor of Christ's church has supreme confidence in Christ's power. He believes steadfastly in the promise of scripture, which we find in James 5:16, which tells us that the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working, or in the way that I memorized it, the prayer of a righteous man availed much, right?

This pastor and church leader is now calling on the believers of Christ's church all the more earnestly to sincerely and consistently petition the throne of God once again because he knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Lord is sovereign over both the ends and the means. God is pleased to use the prayers of his people to accomplish his sovereign will. And I want to park there just for a moment to make sure we understand the point that we're driving home here. On the one hand, there is a ditch that we can fall into that says, well, God is sovereign and so he is going to accomplish whatever he wants to accomplish. He doesn't need me to do it. And that's partly true, but it's a ditch, nonetheless.

On the other hand, there is another ditch we can fall into, and that is to say that the Lord needs me and that I have to pray to change the Lord's mind somehow. Not true at all. The reality is this, God is sovereign over all things, but he is pleased and chooses and desires to use the prayers of his people to accomplish his sovereign will. So the Lord, think of that, is pleased when we come to him in sincerity, earnestly expressing our burdens. Though he knows them all, he desires to hear from his children, and he uses those requests to accomplish his plans and his purposes in your life and in the life of this church.

And so again, this speaks to the absolute dependence upon the prayers of God's people. As Charles Spurgeon once said, "What can we do without your prayers? They link us with the omnipotence of God. Like the lightning rod, they pierce the clouds and bring down the mighty and mysterious power from on high." In line with Spurgeon's words, the author of Hebrews, my friends, is thoroughly convinced of two things. One, that every single need he has can be met by the sovereign God who is the giver of every good and perfect gift. That's one. And two, that the means of obtaining those blessings are found by seeking our good and gracious God in prayer.

So brothers and sisters, as we think about the life and the ministry of our own church, what are the needs that we have? We could go around the room this evening and ask each one of you specifically, and we could make a list a mile long for you personally, and we could do the same for our church more generally. One obvious need in terms of an application point that we're all aware of is the need that we have for a building. We need a space that will enable us to carry out the very ministry that the Lord has called us to and continues to bless here in Gilbert, Arizona and in the surrounding areas. And like the author of Hebrews, we know that God has the power

and the ability to answer that prayer like that. But I wonder this evening, how fervently are you praying for that request?

How consistently and how sincerely are we petitioning the throne of grace and pleading and begging our God to pour out his blessings upon us in specific answer to that prayer? My friends, there are two primary motivations that will either drive us to pray to the Lord more or they will stop us from praying to the Lord more. Will we believe that the Lord is able? And do we care enough to spend the time and energy to petition the Lord with the time and the energy and the effort we have in our lives? I would challenge each and every one of us tonight to pray more. To pray more consistently, and to pray more fervently for that request. And that's just one example. There are others that we could mention as well. As we've said already, the pastors of Redeemer also greatly depend upon your prayers as we think specifically about the immediate context of our passage for tonight.

So ask yourself this evening, how often do I pray for my pastors? How often do I speak to the Lord and pray for my pastors? How often do I pray for them as a team, for their fellowship and their comradery and their working relationship and their success in ministry and their joy and their drive? How often do you pray for that? How often do I pray for their families? How often do I pray for each of them individually by name? May we make the leaders of Christ's church the object of our prayers, embrace the duty of praying and enjoy the privilege of petitioning God on their behalf. And we'll close with this, as Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing. Give thanks in all circumstances for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." Pray with me.

Father, Lord, what a gift that you have given to the church through Jesus Christ. Oh, Father, you have given us direct access to your throne, and you have called us to come, not hesitantly, not apprehensively, but boldly, to come as often as we desire, to park ourselves there for as long as we desire. And you have promised to answer our prayers according to your good pleasure. So, Father, I pray this night that you will move upon our hearts, that you will cause us to reprioritize our time, help us to see the vast importance of spending time and energy in prayer, not giving up, but continually coming to you again and again to lift up our requests, to spend time in fellowship with you, to share our burdens and our desires, and to pray for our pastors. I pray, oh God, that you'll be honored and glorified through the time we spend in prayer to you, and we ask this all in Jesus' name, Amen.