

PRAYER

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Prayer

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The Ministry of Prayer

Hebrews 13:18,19

One of the greatest privileges given to a human being is to be able to talk person to person with the eternal God. We are finite, created beings, yet the eternal God invites us to address Him personally and bring to Him our requests, burdens and the desires of our hearts. That is what prayer really is—talking with God about what is on our hearts. Sometimes it takes the form of thanking and praising Him for what He has done and who He is. Sometimes it is a request that something be accomplished due to a need or concern. Prayer is the privilege of talking with God about what is on our hearts. I must admit that as great an honor and privilege as it is to talk with God, it is easier for me to talk about prayer than it is to actually pray. I find it easier to preach sermons on prayer than to actually pray.

Our effectiveness in serving in the Church of Jesus Christ is tied to our faithfulness in prayer. I will be a better preacher and servant of Jesus Christ if you pray for me. You will be more effective in your service for Christ if I pray for you. We will find more opportunities to present the Word of God if we take the time to pray for one another.

In the two short verses which are the basis for our current study, the writer exhorts his readers to be praying for him. In fact, he commands them to pray for him. He really believes that if they will pray,

things will happen. He will also share in these verses what can be a barrier to effective prayer.

The opening command of Hebrews 13:18, "Pray for us" is given in the Greek imperative. It is a command in the present tense which could be literally translated, "keep on praying for us." He is reminding them that they are obligated to be continually praying for him. Keep in mind that he is writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This is something God is placing on these Hebrew Christians as an obligation.

Prayer Is a Family Matter

Prayer is not an option available to every person on the earth. We sometimes have a national day of prayer or a world day of prayer, but we must keep in mind that God does not honor the prayers of everyone. Prayer is a family matter, a privilege given to those who can call God "Father." That does not mean that a person who can call God "Father," is better than someone else, leads a more exemplary life than someone else or has done more for the good of humanity than someone else. Prayer is based upon a family relationship with God.

This family relationship with God is similar to our human families. In our family we have children who can call me "Father," because we have a family relationship. In that relationship they are privileged and obligated to look to me to have their needs met. There are other children in our neighborhood who are just as good as my kids. I hate to admit it, but it is the truth! There may even be one or two who are better than my kids! But my children, by virtue of a family relationship with me, can come and say, "Dad, I need this"; "Dad, I would like to have that." They have that privilege solely because of the family relationship we have. It is the same in our relationship with God. Only those who can come to Him addressing Him as Father have the privilege of looking to Him to meet their needs.

The Book of Hebrews is devoted to an explanation and development of this family relationship with God. It shows how a person can have such a family relationship, what its foundation is and how exclusive it is. This relationship is limited to a very narrow segment of people.

Jesus Christ—Our High Priest

Christ Provides Forgiveness

Jesus Christ is pictured in the Book of Hebrews as a high priest who has offered a sacrifice to atone or to pay for the sins of people. Those for whom the sacrifice has been effective have the privilege of prayer. He writes to those who have Jesus Christ as their high priest in Hebrews 4:14: “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.” In verse 15 he describes the high priest, then says in verse 16, “Let us therefore draw near.” He is speaking of those who have Jesus Christ as their high priest. They have recognized that Jesus Christ, by the sacrifice of Himself through His death on the cross and by His resurrection from the dead, has provided forgiveness for their sins.

We who have trusted Christ as our high priest are the ones who are to “draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16). We need not draw near with fear or hesitation, wondering if He will accept us. We can draw near with full confidence, coming into His presence as one who is totally accepted by Him. It is not because we are better than anyone else or because we have done more good than someone else. It is because we have a high priest who has opened the way into the presence of God for us. That is the key for getting into the presence of God.

Christ’s Priesthood Is Eternal

Hebrews 7 develops in some detail the priesthood of Jesus Christ. Verse 24 tells us that His priesthood is forever. Since His priesthood is forever, verse 25 tells us “Therefore, He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.” Eternal salvation is available to those who come to God through Jesus Christ. That is how narrow salvation is. Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me” (John 14:6). Jesus Christ paid the penalty for you through His death on the cross. The only hope for your salvation is to trust Jesus Christ as the One who died for you. The moment you do that, God declares you forgiven, your penalty is paid and He brings you into a family rela-

tionship with Himself. From that point on you can call Him Father because you have been born into His family. This is a result of what Christ has done and your response to His sacrifice.

Believers are not yet perfect. They still sin. But Hebrews 7:25 says that Christ “always lives to make intercession for them.” If a believer sins, Jesus Christ is there to say that He died for that sin and paid its penalty, which is death. The sin is taken care of.

Christ’s Priestly Work Was Final

Then the writer goes on to talk about the finality of the priestly work of Jesus Christ. He is a perfect, sinless high priest. “For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins, and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself” (Heb. 7:26,27). The offering this priest made was Himself. He offered His own body on the cross to pay the penalty for sin. Hebrews 10:10 adds, “By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” Being set apart by God for Himself occurred by the death of Jesus Christ, and it occurred once for all. Verse 12 shows that His work was finished. “But He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God.” The adequacy of that sacrifice is declared in verse 14: “For by one offering He has perfected for all times those who are sanctified.” Christ has cleansed them and brought them into a right relationship with God for eternity.

Chapter 10 also speaks of the confidence we can have in God’s presence. “Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus” (Heb. 10:19). As a child of God I can come right into His presence with no concern that God will reject me or turn me away. He is my Father; He accepts me. That acceptance is not because of who I am but because of who Jesus Christ is and what He has done for me. He has made possible our confidence in God’s presence by the offering of His own body. “Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Heb. 10:22). We are exhorted to draw near to God. Here we are, mortal human beings, walking this earth.

Yet God says, “Draw near to Me.” It is just like when I say to one of my children, “Come over and sit down beside me and tell me what your need is so I can meet it for you.”

It is amazing that I would have time for anything else! You would think I would be spending hour after hour every day in the presence of God, talking with Him about what is on my heart. But sometimes days go by, and I do not spend any time with God.

Spending time in the presence of God and sharing my needs with Him, is a great honor and privilege, which is founded upon what Jesus Christ has done. God has given the greatest demonstration of love and mercy that He could have shown. He gave His Son to die so that we could be forgiven, cleansed and brought into His presence. But that is the only access to His presence.

Many people bow their heads in prayer at religious services, but their prayers go no farther than the ceiling. They do not have a high priest who has opened the door for them, and they are not part of God’s family. You can only become part of His family and have access into His presence by trusting in His Son, Jesus Christ. The way to God is very narrow and very exclusive, but it is open to everyone who is willing to come that way. The prayers of unbelievers are repulsive to God. “He who turns away his ear from listening to the law, even his prayer is an abomination” (Prov. 28:9). God is saying that the prayers of those who refuse to hear what He says in His Word are repulsive to Him. Their prayers are an abomination. They are really saying they will not listen to what God says or submit themselves to Him, but they want to come into His presence and tell Him what they want. God simply says that there is no access for people who reject His Word.

Prayer Is Effective

Hebrews 13:18 commands us to pray. Even when prayer is our greatest privilege and honor, we are commanded to pray. Then He urges us to pray in verse 19: “And I urge you all the more to do this, so that I may be restored to you the sooner.” He really believes that prayer is effective.

Two Extremes

Tell God What to Do. We often fall into one of two traps—one extreme or the other. In one extreme, we want to tell God what to

do. He instructs us to tell Him the desires of our hearts, but if not in words, surely in our attitudes we tell God what we expect Him to do. And sometimes we even have a timetable for Him to keep!

If you will stop and think about your human family, you will realize it just doesn't work that way. I want my children to feel free to come to me with anything that is on their minds. But they do not have the freedom to tell me what to do because I am the father and they are the children. Sometimes they tell me what they want and I know it is not best for them. I cannot give them everything they ask for—it would not be good for them. One of my kids would be locked up in a room with a chocolate factory! Children have the privilege of sharing their requests, but they cannot tell the parent what to do.

I am thankful God does not do every dumb thing I ask Him to do. He knows that some of the things I ask for are immature requests which would not be for my best. He invites me to come to Him and share my desires, but I cannot tell Him what to do. He is my Heavenly Father. If my request is not the right thing or the best thing for me, then I want my Father to do what is best. My kids need to have that attitude when they come to me as well.

Leave It All to God. Secondly, on the other side of the pendulum, some decide that since He is their Heavenly Father and knows what they need before they ask Him, they will just leave their needs in His hands. They do not need to pray or talk with Him about anything because He knows what they need before they ask Him. If He wants to do it, He will do it. So they are satisfied to go on with life and just leave it in His hands. The problem with such an approach is that it indicates rebellion against the Word because God commands us to pray.

I have not worked out all the theological details concerning prayer, nor do I have every logical question resolved. I do know that Scripture says that if I will submit the desires of my heart to God, He will give them to me. He will do what is best for me and what is most honoring to Him; that is what I want.

We must be careful not to mire down in theological intricacies or some of our own logical deductions and come to a confused position on prayer. We want to be as theologically correct as we can, but the fact that we do not have all the answers should not hinder us. We are instructed to come into the presence of God with respect,

but with boldness, and to lay before Him what is on our hearts. We are to beseech Him and request of Him the desires we have, then leave it with Him to do what is best for us.

Prayer Makes a Difference

The writer of Hebrews believed that other people praying for him would make a difference. “And I urge you all the more to do this, so that I may be restored to you the sooner” (Heb. 13:19). The writer is making the same statement made in James 5:16: “The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.” When we who have the righteousness of God pray, things happen.

We sometimes need to be reminded how important prayer is. It is easy for us to get caught up in ministry and forget how important it is to pray. If we are not praying, things will not be happening. It amazes me that the Apostle Paul continually asked people to pray for him.

Exhortations to Prayer. Paul wrote in his letter to Philemon, “At the same time also prepare me a lodging; for I hope that through your prayers I will be given to you” (Philem. 1:22). Paul believed that if Philemon and others prayed, God would answer and he would be privileged to come to them.

Why do we not pray more? Sometimes prayer is just hard work. If you pray only when you feel like it, you will probably have a very limited prayer life. Paul wrote in Romans 15 of striving in prayer. “Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me” (Rom. 15:30). Paul is asking them to join with him in the struggle and become partners in the battles he is in. As they pray for him, they become an inseparable part of his ministry. They are going through the struggles and battles Paul is enduring as they uphold him in prayer. He asked them to pray, “That I may be rescued from those who are disobedient in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints” (Rom. 15:31). He was asking for deliverance from those who would attempt to hinder his ministry and desiring that the ministry he would carry on in behalf of Jerusalem, particularly the offering given, would be acceptable.

The Apostle Paul is held up as a great example of faithfulness in service to God, but I wonder how many are sharing with him now in the rewards of his ministry because they diligently prayed

for him. The visible focal point of ministry was on the Apostle Paul, but what God was doing through his life was at least in part an answer to the prayers of those who were diligently laboring with him in prayer. When we stand in the presence of Jesus Christ for the rewards to be given, we will probably find that while they were not visibly a part of his ministry, much more of the effectiveness of the ministry than we will ever realize depended on those who were not seen but were praying. It is easy to lose sight of the importance of prayer for others.

In the ministry to which God has called me, I become a visible figure. How important it is to remember that those who are diligently joined together in prayer for the ministry are being used of God to bring effectiveness to that ministry.

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 1 about the experience he had undergone in Asia—sufferings, trials and burdens to the point of thinking he was about to lose his life. In spite of these difficulties he wrote:

And He will yet deliver us, you also joining in helping us through your prayers, so that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for one favor bestowed upon us through the prayers of many (2 Cor. 1:10,11).

Paul believed that because people prayed, he would be delivered for more ministry and that would cause more people to praise God.

A key element of our attitude in prayer is found in Ephesians 6:18: “With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit.” As I submit my life to the Spirit of God, He takes control of me and my desires. As I am praying under the control of the Spirit, I will be praying according to the will of God. The Spirit will be moving me to ask God for what He is determined to do, that He might answer my prayers and do it. Paul continued in the same verse, “And with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints.” There must be perseverance as we pray for all the saints.

Specifics for Prayer. Paul went on to list some specifics for prayer: “And pray on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel” (Eph. 6:19). It excites me as one who is called to preach the Word that the Apostle Paul is asking people to pray for him that he might have the right words to say at the right time

and that he might say them with boldness. I hope my congregation prays for me every week that I will say the right things in the right way and that I will have the courage and boldness to say what should be said. If God's people will pray that the right words will be said in the right way within the right framework of time, we will see God work.

We sometimes think Paul was a different sort of character. We assume that he came in and seemed to always have the right word to say at the right time, without fear. But I wonder how many people at the Judgment Seat of Christ will be given rewards only to ask the Lord, "What is this for?" Then the Lord will reply: "This is because Paul was effective in his ministry at Ephesus, Colossae and Rome." "Well," they will add, "I wasn't there with him." Then the Lord will say, "But you joined with him in prayer, and that gave effectiveness to his ministry." We will probably be amazed when we stand in the presence of the Lord and see how many rewards will be given for ministry to those who have diligently prayed.

Paul gives further instructions about prayer in Colossians 4:2: "Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving." As we saturate our prayers with appreciation expressed to God for what He has done, that will help us keep alert. "Praying at the same time for us as well, that God may open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned; that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak" (Col. 4:3,4). What a prayer! God asks them to devote themselves to prayer that He might open up a door of opportunity.

Ministry a Result of Prayer

God has given us great opportunities to minister the Word here and in other places. The opportunities seem to grow larger and the doors are now open wider than ever. I believe this is because people have prayed. Some have been praying that God would open further opportunities for the ministry of the Word in other places. I do not believe those opportunities are the result of our great planning, although planning is important. Neither are they a result of important things we have done, though we do have a responsibility. In the final analysis we will find that much of the reward for open doors goes to people who are quietly, fervently praying for the min-

istry, asking God to expand its impact to people in other places. God has honored those prayers.

You need to be praying as well for Sunday school teachers, for home Bible study teachers and for those who share the Gospel with all they come in contact with during the week. Ask God to help them make the message clear and to present it with boldness and love. We ought to be saturating each other's ministries in prayer, upholding one another before the throne of grace.

Could God do it without our prayers? Of course He could, but isn't it amazing grace that He has chosen to allow us to be a part of what He is doing? He has given me the opportunity to share in your ministry by praying for you, and you the opportunity to share in my ministry by praying for me. We are not limited to our own little world, but we can reach out to a variety of places by joining together with one another in prayer.

Other passages of Scripture tell us some of the things we can be praying about in the ministries God has given us. "Finally, brethren, pray for us that the word of the Lord will spread rapidly and be glorified, just as it did also with you" (2 Thess. 3:1). Pray that people will respond and submit to it in faith. Paul's instructions continue in verse 2: "And that we will be rescued from perverse and evil men; for not all have faith." Ask the Lord to keep us from those who would stop the ministry or hinder its effectiveness. The Lord is faithful; He is the One who strengthens and protects us for the ministry He gives us.

Hindrances to Answered Prayer

It is important for each of us to remember the personal responsibility we have as others pray for us. You can pray earnestly and fervently for me, but I can keep your prayers from being answered. Notice again the command of Hebrews 13:18: "Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things." The writer is sure he has a good conscience before God. He wants to conduct himself honorably. The foundation for a good conscience is the finished work of Jesus Christ as described in Hebrews 9 and 10. But the emphasis here is on one who is brought into a right relationship with God, cleansed from all sin, having the responsibility to maintain that good conscience by walking in obedience and submissiveness to the Word of God.

We all know what it is like to have a guilty conscience. If I do something which I am convinced in my mind is wrong, I have a guilty conscience. It is important for believers to walk in obedience and submission to the Word because only then will we have a conscience which does not accuse us. If my conscience convicts me of rebelling against God and resisting His will, what right do I have to ask you to pray for me? Such a request would be hypocritical. I would ask you to pray that God would have His way in my life, but at the same time I would be aware that I was resisting God's will for me. In such a situation, your prayers for me cannot be effective because I have determined to stand against what God wants to do in that area of my life. As believers we are "to conduct ourselves honorably in all things." Every area of our lives must be submitted to Him and every thought must be brought into captivity to Him.

Paul also wrote to Timothy about the importance of a clear conscience. "But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (1 Tim. 1:5). As I hear the Word and submit to it, I will have a good conscience. We must each examine our lives to determine if our conscience is clear before God. Is there anything in your life which you believe to be unacceptable to Him? If so, you need to deal with it. If not, you have a good conscience.

In 1 Timothy 1:18 Paul writes about fighting the good fight then adds in verse 19, "Keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith." Those who do not maintain a good conscience bring disaster to their walk with Jesus Christ. This does not mean they lose their salvation, but they suffer shipwreck. When a ship wrecks there is a crash. It begins to break apart. When a Christian begins to tolerate things which his conscience tells him are wrong, that is an area of his life where he is determined to resist God. Things begin to come apart and before long there are other areas that are out of kilter. The life of such a person becomes like a ship which is battered by the waves, the sea and the wind. It starts to break up. Many Christian lives have become total turmoil and confusion. That did not happen all at once. They tolerated a bad conscience in one area. Then the sin spread and the result was disaster. If you do not have a good conscience, then you do not have your life under control. You may think your life is well controlled, reserving for yourself one area which you

have blocked out where you are resisting God. If you continue with that approach, just wait to see what a beating you will take.

Deacons are instructed in 1 Timothy 3:9: "But holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience." They are to be holding to the truth that God has revealed with a clear conscience. Is there anything in your life which is in conflict with the Word? If so, you cannot have a good conscience. You must deal with that sin. That does not mean it will be easy to deal with, but God gives us the power and strength to do it. Paul spoke further of a clear conscience and also mentioned the importance of a holy and godly life.

For our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you (2 Cor. 1:12).

We must live in obedience to the Word so we can be what God wants us to be.

I believe that if you pray, things will happen and God will answer your prayers. I am confident to ask you to pray for me because I have a clear conscience. To the best of my ability I am walking honorably before God and in all areas of my life I am submitted to Him.

The combination is important here. If I will commit myself to pray for you and if you will submit your life to the Word of God, things will happen in your life and ministry. If you will commit yourself to pray for me and if I will submit myself to the Word of God and allow the Spirit of God to work in my life, things will happen in my life and ministry. As we together submit ourselves to the Word of God and walk in obedience to it, committing ourselves to pray for one another, we can expect that there will be more opportunities to proclaim the Word of God to more people and that God will use us in more ways to accomplish His purposes. God desires to work in and through us. We must first have lives that are submitted to Him; then we must be willing to seek from Him His work in our lives.

If I could have one thing that I would ask for myself and my ministry, it would be for more people who would commit themselves to pray for me. That one thing would be the most effective thing you could do for my ministry. It is the most effective thing

you could do for the elders or staff of your church. It is the most effective thing you could do for teachers, nursery workers and other volunteers in various facets of ministry. If we are willing to commit ourselves to pray for one another, we will see God working. You will not get the glory and credit for that now. But if you are praying for someone, you will share the rewards of their ministry in glory. That makes me want to pray for more people! I would like to be in on the rewards you are getting because that is what God tells me to do. I want to share in what you are going to have in the presence of God. I may never have worked together with you in an area of ministry, but if I have been praying for you in your ministry, then I will share the results of that ministry with you in glory.

Recently at a conference a lady came up to me after the service and shared: "I have been praying for you and your ministry for years. I have never been to your church and I have never met you before, but I have heard of your ministry and I have been praying for you." I do not know how much of my ministry is a result of the faithfulness of this lady in prayer. We will find out when we get to glory.

What an honor that we should be privileged to call God our Father and come to Him with the desires of our hearts!

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