

The Church on Bended Knee

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It was two years ago this week that we started our study of the book of Ephesians together and now we're coming to the conclusion of it, this week and next. And for those of you that are part of our church, I want to just remind you of a couple of things as we enter this closing time in the book of Ephesians because we should view this time with a sense of fondness and a recognition of what the book of Ephesians has meant to us in the life of our church. Ephesians has been a bridge for us from rented space in northern Kentucky to this beautiful facility that we now own in the city of Cincinnati. In those two years we went from being Truth Community Fellowship to being Truth Community Church and in every sense, a New Testament church validated by scriptural teaching. During those two years, we don't mind saying that some people came and went when they didn't find the teaching of God's word to be to their liking. We accept that. We understand that. We bear them no ill will. It was entirely during the book of Ephesians that we received all of our current church members that now are on our membership roll. This has been a remarkable book. This has been a remarkable two years in our lives together as believers as we have walked together by faith, as we have walked together through this book, a lot of things have happened and it's easy to lose sight of that in the week by week sameness of what we've done. But when you look back on it and say where were we two years ago when we started this, we were in a much less, a much different position than where we find ourselves today and how fitting it is that on this day as we come to the second year anniversary of about to finish this book, that we would even be able to install a qualified elder at the end of this service.

What a blessing God has given us. As you look back on the harvest of what God has done, we are very very thankful and here's the thing as we come to our text for this morning, the life of our body is somewhat mirroring, acting like a mirror to the actual text of Ephesians and what Ephesians is saying at the end of the book is fitting for the end of the two years for us at the body of Truth Community Church. As Paul closes Ephesians, he closes on a ringing call to prayer, dependent prayer that says in light of everything that you have been instructed about the nature of salvation, in light of everything that you have been taught, Paul says, about living in unity, living in love, walking a walk of love, light and wisdom, everything that has been said about the nature of the spiritual battle that rages against Christians by demonic forces, and in light of everything that God has given you in the armor of God, the righteousness of Christ, the revelation of God, reconciliation with God, a future hope that will never be taken away, in light of all of

those things, what do you do? Well, what you do is this: is that you turn yourself humbly and dependently in prayer to God. You don't become boastful and strong and self-sufficient. Quite to the contrary, you turn to God in humble prayer and not just prayer for yourself but as we're going to see, for the entire ministry of the body of Christ and the proclamation of Christ. It's a wonderful text that we are about to see.

Look at Ephesians 6:18 and what we see here at the end of Ephesians is that which would launch us into the future that is ahead of us as Truth Community Church. This is a call upon each one of you and particularly those of you that have identified in membership with Truth Community Church, here is a biblical injunction to you that says here is how you are to carry the people of Christ and the proclamation of Christ in your heart, and he calls us and bids us to respond in this way. God's word, Ephesians 6:18 says this to us,

18 With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints,
19 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, 20 for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in proclaiming it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.

Now, as we go into this text, turn back just a moment to verse 13 of chapter 6 because this passage that we're going to look at today is a carrying on of the commandment that was central in this chapter. In verse 13, the Apostle Paul said, "take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm." Then he repeats the command immediately and he says, "Stand firm therefore," and goes into that discussion of the armor of God that we have been looking at. What we're looking at here in verses 18 to 20 is a carrying out of that "stand firm" command. We should never lose sight that after all of this instruction that God has given us in the book of Ephesians, the call to us as Christians, the call to us as a church is to stand firm, to plant our feet and stay where we have been delivered to and not move off of it but to stand and defend the ground that God has entrusted to us both in the body of truth committed once for all to the saints in our own spiritual lives, and that of us as a congregation, that we would stand firm, not be tempted away by the philosophies of the world or the false philosophies of what passes for Christian ministry in this day and age but that we would come to Scripture, submit to it, depend upon it, depend on Christ, depend on the Spirit and prayerfully seek its advance in everyone that we know that names the name of Christ. Beloved, what I want you to see is that this is a call upon your heart; it is a call upon your spiritual life that this would be a priority in your affections.

After all of this, this is the grand conclusion that Paul leads us to and we can think about it this way and this next sentence will help kind of frame the way that we receive the rest of the text. A Christian preeminently identifies with Christ, right? We identify with Christ. We receive him as Lord, as our Savior. We submit to him as our Master. We are joined in union with him. Our future resides with Christ in the language of Ephesians 2. We have been raised up and seated with him in the heavenlies and all that Christ has, he has entrusted to us and he has shared with us so that we are joint heirs with Christ of the

inheritance that the Father has. We have a rich identification with Christ. Well, what does that mean? How do we live that out? Well, in one primary way it works out in your life in prayer and this calls us out of our mediocre selfish approach to petition before God and calls us into a realm where we say, "I identify with Christ." And what did Christ do? Christ died for his people and so my prayer is identified with the purposes of Christ by supporting the people of Christ as they move through life and as we're going to see, as we identify with Christ, beloved, we identify with the proclamation of Christ, the preaching of Christ. So that which advances the kingdom of God, the preaching of God's word, is also at the center of the heart of your prayers and so we suddenly see that prayer is not about me shaving off the rough edges of my own personal circumstances, praying for my own peace and prosperity and going forward like that, to pray like that in a consistent way is to be a very impoverished and immature Christian. Christ calls you out of that kind of selfish approach and selfish appropriation of access to God and says, "Now that you have been given this full and bold access to God through our Lord Jesus Christ, use that to identify with and to further the purposes of Christ, calling on the arm of omnipotence to do things for others, not for yourself primarily."

So let's walk through this passage together. First of all, what do you do? Point 1 here this morning from this passage: you pray for the people of Christ. You pray for the people of Christ. You pray for Christians and particularly within the context of the local church where you have committed yourself to a body like this. You should be mindful of the fact that going with that commitment is a responsibility and an opportunity to identify with the people of God in your private prayers. What did Christ do? He died for his people and he died for all of his people and so when we identify with Christ and we say, "Lord Jesus, I love you. Lord Jesus, you're my all in all and I submit to you and I embrace you"; well, understand that when that is the attitude of your heart, understand that one of the implications of that is that just as Christ spread his arms, as it were, over his people, so you want to spread your prayers over the people of God as well, and that that for which Christ died, those for whom Christ died, those who were the object of his affection and attentions, that spills over and says, "Well, if that's what my Lord loves, do you know what? I'm going to love like that too and that's going to express itself in the way that I pray." So you don't just pray for yourself, you pray for the people of Christ. You pray for all of God's people.

Let's look at verse 18 again and we'll walk our way through this rather rapidly if things go as intended. Verse 18, "With all prayer and petition." Notice as we are reading through this again, look for the word "all" as Paul goes through this. It's a central feature of understanding this verse. "With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints." All. All. All. All. All. All. Join them all in. Every one of them and identify with them. You pray for all of God's people. And what Paul is saying here and I realize that when it comes to the matter of prayer we all feel inadequate and that's because probably we all are inadequate in prayer and so this has a convicting element to it, but it needs to have that impact on your hearts, beloved. This needs to impact your life and you need to feel the conviction of being selfish, of being purposeless, of being narrow and mediocre in your prayers and let this call you out of it into the realm of spiritual life that Christ intends for you to live in,

and for some of us, we're going to need to adjust our schedules and make room for this in our lives realizing that this is a priority of God, not simply an optional accessory like costume earrings are for a cheap date. I don't know where that came from but you get the idea.

Four times Paul uses the word "all" to speak about prayer in a comprehensive sense. Look at the first phrase there, he says "with all prayer and petition." He throws an umbrella, as it were, to embrace and to cover every area of prayer that you could possibly think of; that when you go to God in praise, you go to God in thanksgiving, you go to God in confession of your sins, you go to God to intercede for your loved ones and for the people of God and particularly those within your own local church, you realize that there is a comprehensive nature to prayer. So it's not simply, and let's put the cookies on the bottom shelf here to realize and realizing that some are new Christians, some are not Christians at all here and so we just want to build from the ground up as we talk about these things, to realize that prayer is not simply a matter of you going to God and asking him for things that you want for yourself. No, prayer is all encompassing. Prayer is a matter of exalting God in the privacy of your own room, of your own solitude. "God, I gave you my praise. I give you my thanks because of the greatness of who you are and the goodness of the way that you have dealt with me. Father, I recognize blessings temporal and eternal all around. I thank you for all of them. Father, I'm mindful that I have sinned and fallen short against you with my wicked thoughts, with the failures of responsibility that I have done. I have been harsh and angry with people. I have been anxious and fearful over things when you have told me don't be anxious. Father, I confess that and lay all that sin out before you and ask you for forgiveness freshly from the blood of Christ. And Father, I think of my brothers and sisters in Christ, some of them going through hard times. O God, I think of Jane and Bob in particular and I pray that you would strengthen and sustain them. Help them to walk in a manner that is worthy of Christ as they go through this valley. Father, I pray and I see George and Susan and I see them strong in Christ and I pray, O God, that you would continue to keep them strong and help them to be strong in the Lord and in the strength of their might. And I think of the body of my local church and, Father, I pray that you would lead us not into temptation but that you would deliver us from evil because, Father, I just want your blessing to be upon your people with all manner of prayer, Father, praise and thanksgiving, confession and intercession. God, I lift my heart up before you."

I know that sometimes you start to feel like you kind of fall into a rut, fall into a pattern and it just seems like you're saying the same things over and over. Let me give you just a couple of things to help you with that that might be useful, those of you that use a calendar, especially with your computer, your iPad, do this, some people have found this helpful: rather than trying to pray for every single person every single day which isn't feasible or that gets kind of tedious if you just try to take a prayer list of 100 items and 200 people day after day after day, no one is going to do that, not well anyway; do this: break that up into a few different days of the week, assign a few different people to different days of the week and set a recurring reminder to yourself, especially if you use a computer program that lets you do computer things like this and Monday is devoted to this group and Wednesday to this group. Then you don't worry about praying for them at

other times because you say, "Okay, I've got an ongoing walk in prayer here," and you go through that and you do that. Well, you come to the end of the year and you have prayed for these people dozens of times throughout the year and so you just look for ways, whatever works for you, to be able to break this up into units that keeps it meaningful.

You say, "Well, what do I pray for?" Well, let's all admit that this is what we do, we really tend to forget about most people as we go, if we're not intentional and deliberate in that pattern, and when we start to pray for someone, it's often in response to a crisis of some kind in their lives and the emotion of it, here's what I want you to see and this is where we fall short so much, our prayers are driven by our emotions, driven by circumstances of what people are going through at the time and that lasts for two or three days and then you start to drift away until you see them and say, "Oh yeah, I forgot, I haven't even prayed for them for days and days on end." Could that possibly be what Paul is talking about when he says "with all prayer and petition"? Is that pattern of prayer what this verse is pointing us to? I suggest to you that it's not and I say this not to condemn you at all because I am in the same boat with you but for us to see a better way forward; to commit ourselves and to find a way to implement, again, whatever works for you, so that you have a pattern, you have a plan that embraces the fullness of the relationships that are in your life. And what do you pray? Well, then all of us sudden you're freed from praying about the latest medical crisis or the latest difficulty that's coming along and it's always reactive and in response to a crisis. What do you pray then? Well, let Scripture give you your cues. Let Ephesians give you your cues. Say, "Lord, as I'm mindful of Ephesians 4:1," and these are just examples, this is one way for you to do it, "God, I pray that this person would walk in a manner that is worthy of Christ." Do you realize how comprehensive that is? "Father, whether they are in joy or in sorrow, let them walk, let them live in a manner that is worthy of Christ in the midst of the circumstances that you have given to them. O God, I pray that they would be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. O God, defend them from Satan. O God, lead them not into temptation but deliver them from evil. O God, make them faithful to Christ."

Look, we all need to be prayed for that way and we all need to pray somehow in that manner in a transcendent way that goes beyond circumstances of earth that are temporal and that are going to be forgotten in six months anyway. Make it your pattern, make it your goal, find a way to implement transcendent biblical content to your prayers for all the people of God that you know in your life. And all of a sudden you say, "Ah, I'm identifying with Christ in these prayers and I'm identifying with his people and I know that I'm praying rightly," here's the key, "I know that I am praying rightly because I'm praying informed by scriptural standards of what Christians are to be like and so I just say, God, here is your word, here are your people, and take them and work by your Spirit in their hearts to elevate their lives to that which your word calls them to be." And all of a sudden we can say, "Okay, this is more like it. This is no longer a long checklist of tedious praying; it's no longer superficial and help them through this or that. God, work out eternal purposes in their lives. Sanctify them in the truth. Sanctify them completely in body, soul and spirit. God, help them to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord," 2 Peter 3:18. And your earnest commitment to Scripture and your earnest

commitment to Christ starts to draw upon other things that you know from Scripture and say, "This is the way that we pray."

That in no small measure is that which Paul points us to, go back to Ephesians 6, when he says, "With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit." Well, how do we know what's in the Spirit? What comes from the Spirit? How do we know that in this New Testament age? We know it from Scripture, the Scripture that the Spirit inspired. We know that this is where we find God's principles, God's purposes, God's priorities. So you take your life of prayer and you realize that and you step back. You step back and you look at the big picture of things from a scriptural perspective and you say, "I have been given this unspeakable, wonderful access to God in prayer and I'm called to it." And you ask yourself a most fundamental question as you sit here today looking forward in your life, you say, "What am I going to do with that great access to God?" Would you spend it selfishly praying in response to a Savior who gave himself up for you selflessly? Say, "God, make this about me." Ugh, it's kind of distasteful, isn't it, when you think about it from that perspective? You say, "Ah, no. No, I'm identified with Christ and what Christ cares about is the advance of his people. What does he call his people to to advance them spiritually in his word? Ah, now I find the roots to sink my prayers deep in the Spirit. And Lord, where my prayers are inadequate, when I don't know what else to say, I pray in the Spirit in this sense, I pray that the Spirit of God would sanctify and take my prayers and bear them up to your throne in a way that makes them acceptable and pleasing to you."

So, beloved, here's what I want you to see. I've said this about prayer many times, God willing I'll say it many many more times as long as he gives me breath. When we talk about praying, I'm never talking about praying just simply praying longer and getting up earlier and just making more effort into it. The key to improving your prayer life is not to simply praying longer and to grind your teeth and grit it out longer, it's to pray better. It's to pray in the way that Scripture calls you to pray and that's what Paul is pointing us to here in this passage.

Notice what he says there in verse 18, he says, "pray at all times." I know you're like me, I know you're like everyone else, Christian, non-Christian alike, it's easy for people to pray when the chips are down, when times are bad, when you're feeling pressure, when you don't see any way out. Beloved, here is precisely where you need to take a step forward in your spiritual life, it is precisely here where you say, "Okay, this is where I grow. I recognize the inadequacy of that manner of life and I embrace something different."

You look at this, look at verse 18 with me again. Look at the simple single syllable words that are there: pray at all times, he says in verse 18. You see, Christians, growing maturing Christians are marked by the fact not that they pray in bad times and when the pressure is on, Christians know what it's like to pray in good times, to give thanks and say, "Lord, sustain us in this." Christians know to pray in sorrow and in joy, in poverty and in prosperity, in temptation and in strength; that the time for prayer is as broad as life itself. "Father, in the joy of new life given to our family and this young infant that's in

front of us, Father, we pray. Father, as we come to the end of life and we're about to commend this one into your eternal hands, Father, we pray. At all points in between, "Father, we pray." In all manner of circumstances, "Father, we pray." You see, in the shallow way that we have been taught in the past about prayer in other times and in other places and when prayer has just been about us and trying to figure out how we can manipulate God to get him to do what we want in this particular circumstance, when you see the real biblical model and pattern and instruction on prayer, beloved, I trust and because I know you, I'm confident that you see that impoverished approach to prayer set next to the real biblical model of prayer and you say, "I don't want to go back there. I want to walk away from that smallness of heart into the realm where God calls me: pray in all prayer and petition, at all times in the Spirit." I'm confident that that's the way you want to respond to God's word here today and it's just a matter of saying, "Oh, now I see what I'm supposed to do," and you move forward in that way.

Notice something else about this passage as we consider that God calls us to pray for the people of Christ. Notice what he says there in the middle of the verse, he says, "be on the alert with all perseverance and petition." He starts to repeat himself with all the petition, "Pray it this way." Well, you are mindful when you pray biblically that you're not simply going through a motion; you're not simply checking something off of your list, and I did this for so long. There are books that teach you to time your prayers so that you pray a certain amount of time and all of that. Well, if we're supposed to pray at all times, then I don't know what good marking off 15 minutes does. But you move beyond that self-satisfaction, reliance on your own performance into a realm of maturity that says, "I need to be on the alert. This text," you say to yourself, "this text comes to me right in the context of saying that our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the world rulers, against the powers, the forces of this darkness, against spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places." You're on the alert, you say, "because there's a whole spiritual realm going on of wickedness that I am engaged in somehow that I can't see, hear or touch but, Father, your word describes it to me and so I'm on the alert against that. I'm alert. I am aware when it would seem that division would enter into the body. When I'm entering into temptation, Lord, I'm on the alert therefore I'm praying." You're aware. You remember that Christ could return at any time. You're aware that you are mortal, that you're sinful, that your life is a puff of smoke subject to removal at any time, a flower that flourishes in the morning and is shriveled by the end of the evening. And when you're aware of the spiritual realm and the return of Christ and your own mortality and sinfulness, then you're on edge that leads you to prayer rather than your self-sufficiency, your self-confidence, and your self-preoccupation that tends to mark our lives. Here's the thing, beloved, as you simply think through the realities of biblical truth and what it says about your own mortal life, it acts as pressure on the back of your legs to buckle your knees and bring you to prayer before God. "God, I'm mortal. God, I'm sinful. God, Christ could return at any time. God, our struggle is against wicked forces. What else can I do, O God, but pray and plead for your protection, plead for your blessing, plead for your help?" In dependency going to him like this.

And let me just say a word that I'll repeat at the end of the message as well, you know, I think, it's not too much to say that our church to whatever extent it's known for anything

it would be known for the teaching of God's word because we don't do much else; there's not much else for us to be known for. But, beloved, if I could ask you for anything, for us to be known as a church going forward as we rocket out of Ephesians, if Scripture would call us to anything, it would call us to be known as a church of prayer; to be known as a people of prayer; to be known as the church on bended knee. And here's the thing: we live in relative prosperity and we've got a pretty comfortable environment in which we meet and all things considered, we've got a pretty comfortable life and the circumstances of life don't drive you to prayer as they might in a different location where the persecution is more open and the need is more immediate. Beloved, what I ask of you, what Scripture calls us to is to not let that be that which motivates us but the realities of biblical truth that I have been laying out here and say, "That is what compels us, impels us, drives us, makes us want to be people of prayer." And to pray in the right way as Paul lays it out here.

Are you with me? This is what we need to be and that is going to play out in the reality primarily of your own private walk where no one knows about it. That's where this reality is going to play out is you embracing the opportunity and the responsibility before a holy God that says, "God, whatever anyone else does, I'm going to be that kind of man. I'm going to be that kind of woman. I'm going to be that kind of young person." You see, just talking to our church and what else am I going to do, I mean, this is who I'm talking to, to be known as a teaching church without being a praying Church is meaningless. We're wasting our time. And let me say one other thing about it that weighs on my heart that we have talked about as elders together: none of us in this room should be satisfied with where our church is at. I'm not and you shouldn't be either. It's great, we've got a full room and it's not that we don't love each other, it's not that we're not thankful for what God has done but this isn't the end goal. Do you know that? Do you see that? Do you understand it? The goal for us to exist is not simply that you and I would have a comfortable place to go where we generally like the preaching even if it's a little bit too long from time to time and that we've got our place to meet and be comfortable in week by week when it suits our business to come. That's not acceptable. Here's the thing: none of us and this is going somewhere, none of us should be content with how dry and dusty that baptistry is because we're not seeing people converted on a regular basis under the power of the preaching of God's word. No one of you should be happy with that. None of us should be content with that. Now, we understand that God is sovereign over salvation. I'm going to teach on baptism before very long. Maybe some of you just don't realize that that's what you need to do and we'll take care of that and we'll help you with that but I'm talking about something else, I'm talking about how you think about our church and what matters to you and what's important to you and what you pray about. None of us should be content to simply come together week after week without seeing visible evidence of conversions being played out in our lives and lost sinners being saved, repenting and coming to Christ and leading to newness of life. None of us should be happy with that. And what do you do when you realize that unhappiness? Well, you could fire the pastor, I suppose. Talk to the elders and say, "Maybe we just need a new pastor." I'm not recommending that. I hope not. No, what it does is it makes you dependent and you go to God in prayer and you say, "God, we are thankful. God, I am thankful for what you've done but, God, it's not enough! It's not enough just for other Christians to come and join

us, we want the cries of new birth echoing in the walls of this room." And you want it enough that it becomes that for which you pray. "God, forget my prosperity. God, forget my career. God, forget my activities. I don't care about that, O God, pour down your spirit in a way that manifests itself in new spiritual lives in people who were previously dead in sin but now are alive in Christ; they belonged to the kingdom of Satan but now they are safe in the kingdom of Christ. God, that's what I pray for."

And so I ask you: will you join with us and pray that way? And those of you that have stood apart on the margins, distanced yourself at a safe distance from the church, won't you come and help us? Brethren, we've met to worship, won't you pray with all your power while we try to preach the word? I'm grateful for what the Lord has done in our church, grateful for the things that he has given me in my own life but I'll tell you, today if I died today with the dearth of conversions in the midst of our body as measured by credible baptism testimonies, I would die a sad man. I would die and hang my head in shame. Won't you join in prayer that God would change that dynamic in our church and that our growth would come from new life somehow? The very least that we could do is ask God for that as we go.

So, beloved, don't be satisfied simply that you stand firm in Christ, don't be satisfied that your life is prosperous or what it wants to be and that just makes you kind of superficial in prayer. I beg you, I beg you, I plead with you to look at what Scripture says about all of these things and let it move you into a different kind of praying than what you have done before. Think of your brothers and sisters that are around you. Look out for their welfare in prayer. Look out for their spiritual growth in prayer and let your praise before the people of Christ. Paul says, "for all the saints," there at the end of verse 18. But, you know, as Christians, we identify with more than each other, we identify with more than the people of Christ and I kind of spilled over into my second point while I was still on the first point, that's okay. There is no grading of this really by humans anyway. But what else should we do, especially in light of what I was just saying earlier? Point 2: pray for the proclamation of Christ. Pray for the proclamation of Christ and what I said earlier kind of frames this now.

Paul here as he wrote Ephesians, remember he was writing from prison, look over at chapter 3, verse 1, Paul says, "For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles." Verse 4, "therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord." He's writing from a Roman cell awaiting trial and yet, beloved, and thinking through the selfish way you have been conditioned to pray over the course of your Christian life and the way people have told you, "If you pray this way, God will give you this and you'll get what you want," in light of all of that selfish approach that I don't need to expostulate for you, notice what Paul does. He doesn't ask that they pray for his release. He's not talking about his private circumstances and, "Pray that I might stay encouraged in the midst of this dark dungeon in which I find myself." No, Paul's focus is completely different. What Paul was like in prison is what you and I should be like in life, in freedom. Paul says in verse 19, even though he is asking for prayer for himself, you'll see how utterly self-effacing this prayer is. He says in verse 19, "and pray on my behalf." What specifically would you have me pray for, Paul? "That utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make

known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in proclaiming it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak." Notice the centrality and the virtual exclusivity of his concern with the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ and he asked for prayer for that. He says, "Here I am, I'm an apostle of Christ, I'm an ambassador of the kingdom of God." You know what ambassadors get, don't you, when they go to other countries? They get royal treatment. They are representatives of another kingdom and so ambassadors are received with pomp and circumstance and honor. Here's Paul, an ambassador for the highest one who sent him, for the highest kingdom of them all, and what's Paul's reward for it? He's in chains. What kind of an ambassador is that? How incongruous is that? That an ambassador would be in prison? But what is he praying for? He's not bitter, he's not resentful. He says, "Brethren, pray to God that he would give facility to my mouth, that when I open it to speak the mystery of Christ, that there would be clarity, there would be boldness, there would be courage, there would be a freedom of proclamation in what I say that communicates the truth and the authority of God to everyone who hears and that when they hear, they would receive it with the impact of power of which it is worthy." He says, "Pray for me like that. Pray that I would proclaim Christ with clarity and with boldness." Paul here may be anticipating the fact that you remember in the book of Acts, he appealed to Caesar. It's possible that he is anticipating an audience with Caesar, at least with a high representative of Caesar, at the very seat of the Roman government and saying, "Pray for me when that moment comes that I would speak with clarity and courage and that I wouldn't back down."

I love this word for boldness. I studied it many many years ago and it always thrills my heart to see it come back up again. It's a Greek word that was originally used to identify a citizen's freedom of speech; their political right of freedom of speech; that they could speak whatever was on their mind without fear because the law guaranteed to them that right. As it went on, it started to take on a little different tinge of usage, that that right became to be identified with boldness fueled by a sense of authority and privilege and prerogative to say what you have to say. That's what Paul is saying here, "That I would speak with the sense of prerogative and power in keeping with the high glory of the Gospel when I speak." He had already said, talking about the mystery of the Gospel earlier in the letter, that the mystery of the Gospel was that Jews and Gentiles alike could approach God through faith in Christ and now he says, "I want to be faithful to that mystery. I want to finish well. I want to have such poise, courage, boldness, clarity, power when I speak on behalf of Christ that there would be no room for anyone to think that there was any kind of shame or hesitancy in what I say."

Paul says, "Pray for me that way." He wants the freedom of tongue to speak about Christ without shame and when you think about it, think about it in terms of the original context of the first century writing to these Christians, probably a circular letter that went to a number of different churches, these people who were all comparatively speaking recent converts who had been transformed by Christ, who had heard the message of the Gospel and believed, who had benefited from the ministry of the Apostle Paul and now had received this letter from his hand that laid out all of the glories of salvation and the glories of the church and the call to walk a worthy life and they loved it and embraced it, identified with Christ, identified with the proclamation of Christ, Paul says, "From that

position of Christian virtue, that position of Christian blessing, all brought to you because the message of the Gospel one day in the past came to you and you believed, God changed you through the Gospel," he says, "Remember your identity with Christ and pray for me as I seek to carry that forward, as I seek to advance it in other realms. Join with me. Be a copartner. Share with me in the burden and the labor and the opportunity of this ministry, if nothing else, through the way that you pray for me," Paul says.

Look at it there in verse 20. I very rarely will say this but there is a weakness in the translation that I want to point out to you. Paul says, "that in proclaiming it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak." The word "ought" there, it's okay but it's really a stronger term than that, it's a term that talks about necessity. This is the word, the same Greek word that is often used to express a divine necessity in the Gospel of Luke if you remember that message from two or three years ago. What he's saying is, "Pray for me that I would speak boldly," and it's a proper way to understand this. Where does the "ought" come from? He says, "There is a divine necessity that I speak in this manner. This is God's Gospel. This is the Gospel for which Christ died. I am proclaiming it to people that they might receive Christ. This needs to have the full boldness and clarity and courage that is fitting with the one who sent me on my apostolic commission and it is necessary, it is imperative that I speak this way. That's how I ought to speak."

So, beloved, as we apply this in our own setting, it carries over to today. We need to pray for those who have the responsibility to teach the word. Beloved, those men who teach the word need the help of the Holy Spirit to do it in the right way and if you are identified with Christ and you love the Gospel, then even whatever you think about the individual man and the role, you say, "O God, for the sake of the Gospel help that one who has been given the position to speak clearly, courageously, boldly, because that's how he ought to speak." And you gather up behind the men who have that responsibility and pour out a particular prayer on their behalf in that manner. You pray for that goal. It's not about the man. It's not that the man in himself has more prerogative or anything like that. It's about his message. It's about the message. It's about Christ. That's why we pray. How does Christ make himself known? Primarily through the proclamation of the word and if we love Christ and we love the proclamation of his word, then our hearts are drawn to say, "O God, help that weak sinful man preach it in the way that he should. Help him to get it right. Help him to be bold. help him to be courageous. And God, go a step further and let there be visible fruit from it." Why? I pray that way because I love Christ, because I identify with his message. So you pray for those who proclaim Christ. Sometimes they won't ask you to do it personally, you just take your cue from the word and say, "This is what I must do." This is an obedient response for you to the word that says, "Pray for me in this manner of making the Gospel known with boldness."

Well, Paul has covered immense ground in the book of Ephesians and what he's done, having covered all that ground, he's wrapped it up here in these three verses. He says, "Pray for each other and pray for the proclamation of the Gospel." You know, our church has covered a lot of ground in the past two years for which we are very thankful. From the perspective of the pulpit, we're about to set sail for new seas ahead. Beloved, knowing that most of you love and identify with this church, don't take the progress for granted.

Don't take the past two years for granted as if that's a guarantee of future success. Let your prayers wrap around the ministry, wrap around the people in such a way that says, "O God, protect it still more. O God, further it still more." That's not me saying that, this is the way Scripture teaches us to pray about the work of Christ as we see it played out in a local church. And beloved, I'll say it one more time along the lines of what I said before: don't be satisfied with a comfortable routine in our church, in our church life. Don't take it for granted. Seek the full blessing of God. Will you pray for each other? Will you pray for those who teach the word in this context? Please do.

Let's bow together in prayer.

Father, would you take these words and with the disciples, Lord Jesus, we come to you and say, "Teach us to pray." And Lord, we do ask in a simple, inelegant, unsophisticated way, "Help us in such a way that we would indeed be known as that church that lives on bended knee." We pray these things in the name of our Lord Jesus. Amen.

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