

How to Pray for One Another, p. 1

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Bible Text: Ephesians 3:14-19
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Grab your Bibles and go to Ephesians. Let's go to Ephesians 3. Again, we're in the second part of the book, maybe not literally chronologically but as far as the emphasis that Paul wants to give us. As you get through chapter 1, Paul has laid that glorious foundation of the doctrine of salvation and the God-centeredness of all that he does and accomplishes in saving us, and then he begins to weave in the practical side of our Christian experience as if he's to say, "Now here is how all of this should be working as you're still on the earth and still in your imperfect state but you're growing and progressing in sanctification."

Now we come to an area on prayer and this is where I think this has such a rich application for us because as you kick off this new small group here, I want you to take the way Paul instructs us to pray from his own experience and I want to challenge you to seriously pray for your small group this kind of praying. It's going to take us two weeks to get through it but this is so vitally important, it's so foundational, and I believe that the blessings of God on this church are greatly due to those of us who have been praying in this perspective or this way, for this work for many many years.

Let's read it together, Ephesians 3, beginning in verse 14. Paul says,

14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, 16 that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.

This is a powerful outline of what prayer ought to be and let's look at it this way, to start things off, we'll be more practical in next week's session, Lord willing, but let's start this off, I. with the passion of prayer. Prayer needs to have a passion behind it and sometimes, as a matter of fact as we look at this, I think what you're going to find out is we all far too often, we're not praying wrong but we're praying upside down. We pray for temporal things and earthly burdens and needs and that's biblical and right, but we seem to do that first and secondarily mention the spiritual things that we ought to be praying about.

Paul had a passion but his passion was right side up. Paul was feeling very deeply, that's why he talks about he was compelled to his knees. Now the Scriptures do not require that you have to have a certain posture, however the Bible does say that Jesus sometimes prayed on his knees. Paul on another occasion mentions being on his knees in prayer but it emphasizes the deep emotion, the deep passion of his heart.

I remember years ago, our pastor's counsel, we called it, or what became our elders, we would meet on Wednesday mornings and it was primarily a prayer time and we would get on our knees and pray there around the table. We started doing that and just felt like we ought to do that and that's been, goodness, 30+ years now and right at 30 years and as the decades went by, there was groaning and difficulty in getting on your knees and getting back up off your knees. I even started to buy some of this little foam pads they sell at Walmart for gardening where you can kneel on it, and somehow we moved to Sunday morning, our prayer time to Sunday morning, and we have prayed on our knees but it's not common for us to pray on our knees. I don't know if we're less spiritual or not. I hope that doesn't mean anything, but that's not really an absolute emphasis in Scripture though sometimes the burden just seems to put us there.

That's where Paul is, but Paul unlike the elders of this church, was not in an air conditioned, heated, carpeted, beautifully decorated conference room. Paul was in a Roman prison. That's where Paul was kneeling. It adds to the weight of the burden of his heart. He has committed no crime. He's there for preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. Paul kneels on what was probably a dirt floor behind a locked door. There is no telling what the condition was in his cell: the stench, the vermin, the loneliness. We probably cannot imagine his circumstance but he's burdened and he prays and he prays on his knees.

Just a quick overview of that and you would say, "Well, sure, if I was in that kind of horrid position and I'm completely innocent and I'm incarcerated completely because I've tried to be obedient to my God, I would be crying out to God and I would be burdened and I would be calling out, 'God, help me!'" But that's not what he's doing. He prays not for himself but if you understand the context of where he's coming from and when you get down to this part in Ephesians 3, there are two things that just jump out or are so prominent and clear that are the passion of Paul's heart and this is where you and I have got to walk and live and mature in Christ to where this resides as the chief passion of our hearts. I'm not saying you don't have other concerns and other burdens, I'm just saying this is the chief burden and we'll weave this back in at the end, but the two things I want to point out are these two and they are inseparable and that is Paul is greatly and deeply burdened about the glory of God and the good of the church. That's just what consumed him: the glory of God and the good of the church.

You know, it's really interesting in today's world, I'll just be honest, I don't think in the evangelical community today there is much of that passion. First of all, far and away too many of them have no concept of what a real church is. They know what a meeting is and they know what hearing somebody maybe preach the word, maybe do something like

preaching the word, but to have a passion for God's glory and God's church, that's Paul's passion.

As a matter of fact, look at Ephesians 1 again as he outlines what God was doing in saving men. He goes through all these glorious doctrines that are bigger than our brain to comprehend. Are you okay with that? Can you handle that with me tonight? Can you just reconcile in your soul there are parts of how God saves us that I'll never get my puny brain to be able to fully comprehend it, I'm just going to have to accept a lot of it by faith. You don't want a salvation no bigger than your little brain, do you?

Well, as he talked about it, he says things like verse 4 of chapter 1, "just as He chose us." When did he choose us? He chose us in Jesus "before the foundation of the world." "Pastor, what does that mean?" It means he chose us in Jesus before the foundation of the world. He chose us way back then before time even was that we would be "in Him before the foundation of the world," to be like what? The last part of verse 4, "that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love." You talk about eternal security of the believer. Now Baptist friend, understand something: that's where our forefathers came up with the phrase "the perseverance of the saints or the eternal security of believers" is because God saved us or declared us his and converted in Christ Jesus before the world began. Strap that on and wrestle with that for a while.

He's not through, verse 5, "He predestined us," that means to mark out beforehand, "to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will." So he ends verse 5 with saying, "Here's why he did it. Why did God choose us before the foundation of the earth and why did God choose us so that we would one day be holy and blameless before him through the love he has shown for us, i.e. basically dying for us? Why did he predestine us, mark us out particularly beforehand that we would be adopted as his sons?" He answers it, "according to the kind intention of His will." Here's what he's saying, "Because I'm God and I've decided to do it." That's what he means. That's simply what it means. "I'm God. I decided to do it." And this may stretch your brains but for God time, he's not limited to time, he's eternal in his perspective. Time has no bearing on him. You and I have to live in time and work within time, he does not.

So that's all about how he saves the individuals who make up his church, his local churches and then his glorious universal church, and then he tells us in verse 6 what this is all to the end of, "to the praise of the glory of His grace," so that we might be able, the angels might be able, all created beings might be able to see what God can do and accomplish.

Scout on down in the text to verse 12. There is so much more I could say. I don't want to re preach the whole chapter. I would just love to but I don't need to do that. "To the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory." So why were we caused to come to God and believe on Jesus Christ so we hope in Christ? Why was all that happening? To the praise of his glory.

Verse 14, talking about the Holy Spirit "who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory." So Paul is consumed with the – listen now – the infinite wisdom, power and beauty of God in the way he does his work and saves his people and builds his church and he's saying, "God is unfolding all of this in time – now listen – so that in time and then ultimately in eternity, all created beings will be wowed over what God can do." The depth of his love, the greatness of his love, the unfathomable nature of his wisdom to devise such a plan, the infinite power to bring it about perfectly, it just all glorifies God.

So we get to chapter 3. Paul is in a prison cell. He's burdened. Deep emotions. He's passionately praying and what does he pray about? "O God, do you see the squalor I am in? O God, do you see the vermin and the rats and the filth and I don't have enough to eat and I'm innocent? O God, help me!" I'm not saying that would be a wrong prayer but that's not primarily what he's praying. He probably did pray some of those things but that's not the main thing. He prays for the glory of God and the good of the church. As you read this text, that's exactly where his heart is: the glory of God and the good of the church. As a matter of fact, when we get to the end of chapter 3, that verse that's become something of a theme verse for us at Grace Life, look at 3:21, you have both aspects, "to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen."

So Paul says in summarizing this thing up: we want God to be made much of; we want God to be exalted; we want God to be marveled over for what he did in saving his church. You see, the church is the centerpiece of God's purposes and God's glory for time and eternity because the church shows off what God can do and perform. Other things do, he made the stars in the heavens and the galaxies, those show the glory of God but nothing like his work in making his church show his glory. So Paul is all wrapped up in God being glorified and the church being all it can be because that's the way he glorifies himself and that's why I've ranted and raved and worked and yelled and screamed and hollered from this pulpit and hopefully implemented sound biblical methodologies for this body because God's glory is on the line and that ought to be most important. It's not about us being effective or successful or cool or clever or fun. Some of that does happen. We do have fun, we do like each other but it's about God's glory and that's where Paul is. That's the passion of his prayer.

If we could, keep your finger in Ephesians 3 and go to the Lord's Prayer, as we call it. Actually it's the model prayer in Matthew 6, would you turn there? Matthew 6 and let's see this same thing outlined here. The same perspective, the same passion that Paul says he had, and certainly he's giving it to us as an example, the Lord laid out the same basic thing as he was giving us a model or an example of prayer in Matthew 6.

Look at verse 9. The Lord says, "Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name.'" What does that mean? Hallowed, name means the composite of all that you are. Your name expresses what your character is. So may people learn of who you are and what you're like and may they hallow, make much of, praise you, give you your due for who you really are. That's the glory of God.

And then what follows that up? Verse 10, it's the church. "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven." You could almost say the church and the kingdom are interchangeable. Now, I know the kingdom involves a little more than the church like the glorified angels or the good angels are a part of the kingdom, but the church is so prominently centered and central to the kingdom of God, you could view it that way and not be out of line with what the Scripture is saying here. As a matter of fact, how is God, what is God's kingdom? God's kingdom is where God's rule is honored and yielded to. There is only one collectivity on planet earth where men are genuinely striving to honor God's Lordship or God's rule on the earth and that's the church. That's the church. That is God's means of building his kingdom into the eternal state, and the church will even exist there.

So the same thing Paul, Paul says, "I have this passion for God's glory and for the good of the church," and Jesus said, "When you pray" – now listen to me, church – it's not that this is automatically your passion, it means you're to grow spiritually until it is your passion. Get under sound, strong, spiritual preaching until it envelops your heart. "Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name." That's glorify. We want you to be made much of and glorified. "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven." May your church be strong and may your work through your church be done and then one day you'll come, rid the earth of all evil and sin and everything that's not perfect and righteous and everything will be your kingdom.

Then after that, look at the model prayer again, verse 11, Matthew 6, "Give us this day our daily bread." Now he emphasizes earthly needs and earthly things. That's why I've said we pray upside down. It's not wrong to ask for earthly stuff, it's just not the priority for born again, Spirit regenerated children of God.

One other thing I'd like to point out in Matthew 6 in this model prayer is the plural pronoun. Notice, "Give us this day. Our Father." In other words, the church is so central and vital, we don't even pray for food unless we're thinking about the body of Christ. "Give us this day our daily bread." We've got to spend eternity together, we might as well just think about each other now a little bit. Amen?

One of the things that God had to grow me out of as a pastor was not to take this Bible as some sort of manual to help individuals live good successful lives. It does have principles that do that but everything in this book is written to people who are in interconnected reciprocal relationships with others in a church. If you interpret outside of that, you're missing it. It's almost like preaching the sections on marriage and leaving out the husband or the wife. They've got to be there for it to be a marriage. Well, the church has to be there for the "us" to make any sense and the "our daily bread" to make any sense. There is an interconnectedness, a reciprocal bonding that we have as God's church that cannot even for eternity be absolved. It's a powerful thing.

So he has this passion. Now let me take this on out to where you and I live and walk and work and we're starting this small group year and so if we want to see God glorified and

good brought to the church or the building up or the strengthening of the church in the right sense of the word, then we can take just our simple Strategy Statement for Small Groups. It's biblical and it's right there where Christ is and it's right there where Paul is. Pray that your small group will see lost souls saved. Evangelize the lost, that's the first part of our Strategy Statement. We are to evangelize the lost. Pray that we would see the saved built up. Equip the saved and pray that we'd meet one another's needs. All this loving, caring, evangelizing and discipling in the body through small groups glorifies God and builds up the church and that's Paul's passion and that's Christ's passion. We didn't just write these Strategy Statements because I got a great idea one day. I just went to old Bible truth and laid it out.

Let me ask you: is this the way you pray? Is that the main thing in your heart when you pray? Or do you just kind of view God as some sort of an errand boy to fetch things and fix you? Well, God says, "My fixing of you is to get your heart where my heart is, on my glory and on the church." You know, if you don't have the Holy Spirit, this doesn't mean anything to you. It just doesn't mean anything to you. Like, "What's he talking about?"

Well, II. we talked about the passion of Paul's prayer, the glory of God, the good of the church, now the Father to whom he prays. The Father to whom he prays and he wants to emphasize this. We're back in Ephesians now, chapter 3. He wants to emphasize this because he wants you to see the infinite resource, the power we have available to us as we go to our heavenly Father.

So we look at it there in verse 15. Well, I'll just read all of verse 14, "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom," and the New American Standard says, "every," I agree with the scholars that say that's not a good translation, "from whom not every but the whole family." It means "the whole family of God, those in heaven, those already in heaven and glorified and those still living on the earth derives its name." That is, he is the foundation of us all. He is the head of us all. He is our Father. So what Paul is saying here is this Father to whom we pray is the Ultimate One. He is the Almighty One. He is the Creator. He is the Lord God of all. What a resource we have in prayer. That's what Paul is saying.

You see, our prayers are not to one who just has great power, our prayers are not to one who just has great wisdom, our prayers are not to one who just has great concern for his children, our prayers are not to one who just has great control over all of creation. No, he does not just have great power, he has all power. He does not just have great wisdom, he has all wisdom. He does not just have great concern for his children, he has all concern for his children. He does not just have great control over everything, he has all control. And that's the one we pray to. Wow.

Then he says in verse 16, we're praying to this Father who is the Father of all, the departed glorified family in heaven and the ones still being sanctified, living on the earth, all of God's children, "that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory." According to the riches of his glory. A Presbyterian theologian, Charles Hodge, says this means the plenitude of his divine perfections. According to the greatness of who he is as

a being. You know, you're not just praying to some deity, you're praying to the deity. Everything in God is glorious and the composition of all that God is is glorious. Did you get that? If you take any particular attribute or characteristic of God and you put it right here and you analyze it, God is spirit, and you study it and analyze all that the Bible says about God as spirit, it's glorious, but then you put that with all the other unlimited attributes or characteristics of God that the Scripture reveals to us and you put them all together, the way they fit all together is glorious. He's just glorious in every...you slice him any way you want to slice him, he's just glorious and the composite whole of who God is is glorious. He said, "That's the God we're praying to and I'm asking him to do something in your lives, Ephesian church," that's what Paul is saying, "out of all that he is, all the resource of who he is."

So out of God's omnipotent wealth and resources, Paul prays to God on behalf of these believers and God's supply is limitless and God's supply is perfect. So Paul looks to this infinite God to grant these petitions for these Ephesian believers. Now two or three thoughts from a few other sections of Scripture about this kind of God, this limitless, infinitely glorious God we're praying to. He's such a God that we don't have to be like the Jews. Remember Jesus rebuked the Pharisees because they would just use repetition and they thought in the fervency and the persevering and all of these reciting of these prayers to God that that would open the heavens and Jesus said, "That's stupid." That's basically what he says. It's ridiculous because he's such a God, he already knows what you need before you ask.

So there is a sense in which – are you listening to your pastor – a whole bunch of chattering prayer is not what God's looking for. When I first became a Christian and I started having a quiet time, I was on such a legalistic works burden. There was a time when if I didn't pray for an hour and 45 minutes or two hours a day, I felt like I was backslidden. Then I found out I was backslidden because God didn't want me to pray for an hour and 45 minutes or two hours, he wanted me to commune with him all day long, not just through some act of praying in a closet. We do pray privately but the point is the communion with God. And by the way, do you know you worship all the time. God lives in you and as you honor him, look to him, respect his precepts over the world and over yourself, you're continually worshiping him. You're saying, "You're wise, I'm not. You're wise, the world is not. You're truth, the world is error." And so when we come together, we don't come together to worship, we all come together bringing our worship. We all come together bringing our worship and then we all bring it all together and it's called corporate worship. We don't come in here to create something, we come in here to just throw it all together what's already been going on all week long.

Paul tells his disciples, "Don't pray like those guys pray. They think by this show and the energy of their prayer somehow they've earned God's hearing." God knows what you need, Jesus says, before you ask it, that's in Matthew 6:8. But on the other side of the coin, in Matthew 7, Jesus invites and encourages us to be persistent and confident in our prayers. "Pastor, which one is it?" It's both. It's both. "Do we pray a lot?" Well, sure you do but you don't trust in your energy in prayer. Did you hear that? You don't trust in your eloquence in prayer. You don't trust in your repetition in prayer. You go to God

consistently because you trust only in him and you're not going to stop until he answers. There's a difference in the two. There's a great difference in the two.

Jesus said we ought to pray and believe we've received what we ask for in Matthew 21:22. He said, "And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive." Now there are some prerequisites to that, of course. You need to be praying in God's will. Look, if you're praying for God's glory and the good of God's church, you are praying God's will. I don't know, you may or may not get that new car but just make sure that's not the priority of your prayer life. There's nothing wrong for asking for a car, by the way, but that's not your joy and that's not your treasure and that's not your priority. It's the glory of God and the good of the church.

Well, III. and we'll end here and we've been beating this drum heavily since I started preaching but let's end with it because I think he ends with it again here, and that is the priority of his prayer. The priority of his prayer. It's kind of a different part of the overall thing of being God-centered and glory of God focused in our praying.

He says there in verse 16, let me just read it all but we're going to emphasize the last half, "that He would grant you, according to the riches," or out of the riches, "of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit," here it is, "in the inner man." In the inner man. The new car is the outer man. It's not sin to pray about that but that's not your priority. The clothes are the outer man, all the other stuff is the outer man. Paul says the priority of prayer is the new man that was created when you were born again and there is a sense in which we have two natures. Now there are those who say, "Well, you can't say that." That's wrong. It's just semantics. There are two parts to you when you're converted: the new part created in Christ Jesus and the old man that's a rotting corpse but he's still there and he still works on you and his desires are still real and he still pulls and draws. And one day as Paul said, "Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from the body of this death?" What's he saying? "The old man is still there and I hate it. I do have a new part of me that loves God and loves his law and loves truth but there's an old part that keeps pulling the other way."

Well, Paul says what we ought to be praying is this limitless, glorious God who has no sense of anything too hard for him, would continue to work on our hearts, that the new Spirit-man in us would get stronger and stronger and stronger and stronger. You pray that for your class, you pray that for the brothers and sisters in your small group. That's a great thing to pray. "God, help us to grow spiritually in the inner man."

Oh, so much to say here. Real quickly, look at Matthew 6 again. Would you turn there? Matthews 6, look at verse 25 and we'll run down the page. "For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" Jesus said that's not sin necessarily but that's not your priority. Your life is more than food and drink and clothes. That's the outer man stuff.

"Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life? And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith! Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?' For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things." He's saying those who don't know God, those who are not born again, that's what they do. They live as the totality of their being for the ends of the earth. Stop. Not wrong to have stuff, not wrong to have nice stuff, but it's wrong if it's your hope. It's wrong if it's your joy. It's wrong if it rules your heart. That's what Christ is saying.

The Gentiles, that's the way unsaved people live. He says, "for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things." So he's not saying that's unimportant, he's just saying that's not the priority. Yeah, you're to get up. Yeah, you're to go to work. Yeah, you're to pay the bills. Yes, you should have a retirement account. That's all right and good but make sure that's not where your heart's hope is.

We've had a few church members through the years and some of them had a good bit of money by the time they got old and I liked them but I never discerned a real hope in Christ in them. There just wasn't much of that there and I thought, "Well, maybe on their deathbed when you put the bankbook beside them and let them cry out to it." Anything wrong with a big bank account? No, I can't tell you that scripturally. There are wealthy men in the Bible that God commends but it's not where their hope is. Can I challenge you, sir, starting with Jeff Noblit, will you view your treasure as a tool for the glory of God and not an idol to hope in? And put your hope in strengthening the new man, the inner man, as Paul prayed?

Then this culminating summarizing verse that we all know so well, Matthew 6:33 here at the end, "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness." There's the priority, that's what Paul is talking about here. There is the priority, seek first that his kingdom would be in your heart and his kingdom would be built in the earth and his righteousness will be established in men's hearts by believing on Jesus Christ and in the earth as we are the salt and light of the earth. Then he says if you'll get that first, if you'll seek that and pray for that, if that's your joy and that's what's first, "then all these things will be added to you."

I don't know how to pin this down with one section of Scripture but it has been my experience when I wanted some thing, God wouldn't give me that thing until he got me to where I really didn't want or have to have the thing. He typically would make me wait for the thing until I didn't really love the thing all that much and then he gave me the thing. Is that your experience? I hope it is. It just helps you that way because you remember when I told you when Pam and I build our first house and we thought, "Boy, this is exciting," and we moved into the house and I thought, "Well, I've got a house." Then I walked out in front of that house one day and looked at it and said, "Do something for me." Nothing

wrong with a nice house. I've got a very nice house. It's one of my primary investments in life but it isn't my main thing. We've got to be able to walk to where we say, "God, the house is yours, the truck is yours, the bank account is yours, the retirement account is yours. I feel I need these things but what I really need is you. I just want to keep this yielded to you."

That's kind of where Paul is getting here when he says, "I'm in prison and I'm not even praying about my condition because my passion is the glory of God and the good of the church." And primarily as he gets into the particulars, that you would be strengthened in the inner man. You'd be a stronger spiritual man or woman. And as he unfolds this, it just really gets glorious. But can I challenge you this Sunday night as we begin this small group year to set your heart the way God wants us to set our hearts, seeking first spiritual things.

Let me ask you something and, please, don't misunderstand your pastor. Absolutely we want to pray for each other's burdens and concerns and needs. Absolutely, but it is concerning sometimes when praying for sick folks is 98% of what we pray for and God's kingdom and the building up of the church and the strengthening of the inner man is 2%. And that's not wickedness, it's just that we kind of slide over there, not thinking about it, I think. So let's renew our hearts to, as Jesus put it, seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will then be added unto you. Amen?