

THE SPIRITUAL ARMOR PT. 10

“How to Pray for a Preacher”

Eph.6:19-20

If you were invited to have an audience with the world’s greatest king who promised to grant you a request... when he asked, “What would you like?” do you think you would respond, “Gee, I haven’t thought about it. How about some new tennis shoes?” If you did show up with that kind of attitude it would just show that you weren’t taking the offer seriously. This message will help you think deeply about what to ask God for in prayer.

18 With all prayer and petition praying on all occasions in the Spirit, and regarding this, being alert in all perseverance and petition concerning all the saints. 19 Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel 20 for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

INTRODUCTION

On August 15, 1778 Charlemagne's army was moving through a mountain pass when the rear-guard was ambushed by the Basques. According to the epic poem “The Song of Roland,” the twenty thousand Christians of the rearguard are ambushed by a vastly superior force, numbering in the hundreds of thousands. Roland, who was the commander of the rear guard, refused to blow the horn to call back Charlemagne's main force because of pride. He underestimated the strength of the attackers, and he and the entire rear-guard were massacred. He didn’t call for help because he was so prideful he didn’t think he needed help.

The story of Roland is the story of many Christians in our world. We underestimate the threat. We live in such a private, self-sufficient, individualistic culture... That we always think we can handle just about anything on our own. And so we rarely ever blow the horn. Christian after Christian finds himself overwhelmed and defeated by the enemy because he thought he could handle it alone. And the horn is so seldom blown that when it is sounded the rest of us hardly recognize what it even is.

That is not the way wars are won. If you’re thinking, “If I were a strong enough Christian, I could handle this problem alone”... Think again. God never promised us enough strength to win the war single-handedly. Starting in v.18 of Eph.6 Paul is teaching us how to blow the horn.

REVIEW: THE 6 MARKS OF WARFARE PRAYING

1. We are to use all the various kinds of prayer,
2. on all occasions or opportunities,
3. enabled by the Spirit (praying in faith and in accordance with Scripture),
4. We need to stand guard protecting the saints with our prayers,
5. being persistent in prayer,
6. for every kind of saint without showing favoritism.

PAUL’S EXAMPLES OF WARFARE PRAYING

Paul’s epistles are loaded with examples of warfare praying. If you want to know how to pray for a saint, there is a great amount to be learned from his examples, which are inspired by the Holy Spirit and recorded

for us. And when we look at those texts it becomes obvious that primarily we should be praying for people’s spiritual progress.

2 Cor.13:9 our prayer is for your maturity.

That includes

- spiritual strengthening (Eph.3:16),
- increased love (Php.1:9),
- steadfastness (Col.4:12),
- stronger faith (1 Thes.3:10),
- perseverance (Php.1:11),
- sharing their faith (Phlm 6),
- restoration from sin (1 Jn.5:16),
- fruitfulness (Co.1:10) and
- the fulfillment of God’s purposes 2 Thess.1:11,12)...¹
- And especially enlightenment. Each of those other things is mentioned once; but there are at least 4 different places where Paul prays for people to be enlightened

Eph.1:18 I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you

Col 1:9 we have not stopped ... asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

Phil 1:9-10 And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, 10 so that you may be able to discern what is best

When you pray for someone to have increased understanding you are really doing them a favor. I did find once place where someone prays for good health (3 Jn.2). But for the most part the pattern we learn from Scripture us to pray about spiritual things.

This morning we come to verse 19, where Paul gets even more specific. First we were told to pray with all kinds of prayer... Then he honed in on one specific kind of prayer – intercession (praying for the all the saints). And now he gets even more specific and asks for prayer for one specific saint – himself.

And there are two important sets of implications of that. On the one hand this passage teaches us about how to ask for prayer for ourselves. And it also teaches some principles about praying for preachers and missionaries.

But before we get to that, I need to say a couple things about the effectiveness of prayer – particularly supplication type prayer.

By the way, if I gave the impression that I believe God answers all prayers “yes,” I apologize. Not even Jesus got all His prayers answered yes. If you pray for something that is impossible to fit within God’s perfect plan, of course the answer will be no.

Having said that, however, we must also recognize that prayer is extremely powerful. It is indeed “the slender nerve that moves the mighty muscle of omnipotence.” Prayer moves the Prime Mover. A.C. Dixon: “When we depend upon organizations, we get what organizations can do; when we depend upon education,

¹ Ephesians 3:16 I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being
Philippians 1:9 And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight

Colossians 4:12 Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.

1 Thessalonians 3:10 Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

Philem 6 I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith

1 John 5:16 If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life.

2 Thessalonians 1:11 With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith.

Colossians 1:10 And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God,

2 Thessalonians 1:12 We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

we get what education can do; when we depend upon man, we get what man can do; but when we depend upon prayer, we get what God can do."² If we pray for something that is possible to fit within God's perfect plan, He will grant it in response to our prayers... If we pray in line with certain principles. Scripture gives us a number of principles that make it more or less likely that God will give you what you request in prayer.

You see, God is not a vending machine. He is a person. And when He is deciding whether or not to grant a request, He takes a number of things into consideration. Every person has a certain amount of influence with God. Every one in this room has a different level of influence with their prayers. If you're a Christian, then God has promised to listen to your prayer, so you have some influence. But you can increase that amount of influence. You can increase the effectiveness of your prayers – increase the likelihood that God will grant a request that you make. How do you do that? The most obvious is by asking for something according to His will – that is, something that can fit into His perfect plan.

1 John 5:14 if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.

John 16:23 I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.

Another major factor is our level of righteousness in the way we live.

James 5:16 The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

1 John 3:21-22 we have confidence before God 22 and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him

Ps.66:18 If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.³

The more righteous you are, the more responsive God will be to your prayers.

Another factor God takes into consideration in responding to your prayers is faith.

Matt 17:19-20 Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" He replied, "Because you have so little faith."⁴

Another factor is perseverance.

John 15:7 If you remain in me... ask whatever you wish, and it will be given to you.

Another factor is earnestness.

James 5:17 Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly... and God granted his request.

Another factor is reverence.

Heb 5:7 During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.

God listens to all His children, but He is responsive to each of us in varying degrees. So if God allows each of us to have a certain amount of influence - it stands to reason that the more people who are praying for something, the more responsive He will tend to be, because of the combined influence of several of His children asking for the same thing. So there is a good chance that if you pray alone for something you really want, God won't answer your prayer. But if several godly people pray for you to get it, God will grant it.

² Cited by Piper "Brothers we are not professionals" p.56

³ Pr.28:9 If anyone turns a deaf ear to the law, even his prayers are detestable
Proverbs 15:29 The Lord is far from the wicked but He hears the prayer of the righteous.

¹ Peter 3:7 Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.

¹ Peter 3:12 For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."

⁴ James 1:6-7 But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts... should not think he will receive anything from the Lord...

That's one reason why intercession is so important. Another reason it's important is what we talked about last time – it's an act of love, and God is responsive to love.

2 Cor 9:14 in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you

Prayer is not only an act of love, but it activates deeper love from the heart. And God responds to that. If one of my kids asks for something special, and then the other kids are urging me to do that special thing for the first one... Not because they will get anything out of it, but just out of love... That's going to have an effect on me. I want to encourage that, and I'm going to be pleased to respond to that kind of love. So praying for one another, as a body, is an integral part of the way God designed the Church to function. A great amount of what God wants to do among us is accomplished only through our praying for each other. And there are two things we learn from this passage about that. When we look at Paul's example here we learn principles about asking for prayer as well as principles about praying for others – particularly preachers. We'll start with how to ask for prayer.

1. HOW TO ASK FOR PRAYER

Know that you need prayer

When I did all this study on all the times Paul asked for prayer, it occurred to me that he seemed to ask for prayer far more often than I do. And that got me to wondering why I don't ask for prayer more often.

If I believe that there are unsearchable resources available to me, and that I will get them if you pray for me, and many of them I won't get if you don't pray, and if I'm fully convinced I really, really need them, then I'm going to be asking you to pray all the time – just like Paul.

So if I'm not asking much, what does that say? Either I don't believe those riches are available, or I don't think your prayers will make a difference one way or the other, or I don't believe I really need them that much. Paul seemed to have a sense that he was desperately in need of something that he couldn't get without others praying for him to get it.

I came to the conclusion this week that if I was more diligent about having my mind set on things above, I would begin to want those spiritual riches more I would need more of a sense of dependence on God, so I felt the need for you to pray for me, and I would realize the desperation of my condition without them.

Know what you want

So the beginning point is to know how serious your need is. The next thing we can learn from Paul's example here is that he focused on what he wanted, not on the circumstances.

Generally speaking, most people don't ask for prayer very often. And when we do, many times it's not so much that we want prayer as much as we just want an occasion to share some upcoming worry with someone. "I would appreciate your prayers for me this week, because I have this coming up..." And we go on to talk not about how they can pray for us, but about what it is we are facing. Paul doesn't say, "Pray for me – I've got a trial coming up, my friends are turning on me..." When he asked for prayer he didn't focus on circumstances – he told them what he wanted from God. He had an acute awareness of what he wanted. Sometimes he needed greater strength. Sometimes he wanted a chance to speak. Sometimes he was longing for fruitfulness and effectiveness.

One reason we tend to be so vague in our prayer requests is we are fuzzy in our understanding of what we need spiritually. We haven't even thought that through, so when someone asks us, we don't know what to say.

So you have a really big presentation coming up at work, and you ask for prayer. But prayer for what? What is it that you want? Are you asking for prayer that the presentation will go well for the sake of your standing at work? Or are you asking that there will be a chance to be a witness for Christ in the process? Or are you asking that it result in greater profits for your employer? Or are you asking that you will be able to simply do your work as unto the Lord?

If you were invited to have an audience with the world's greatest king, and you knew he was going to grant you some request... Do you think you would show up, and when he says, "What would you like?" you'd respond, "Gee, I haven't thought about it. How about some new tennis shoes?" If you did show up with that kind of attitude it would just show that you weren't taking the offer seriously. So realize how needy you are for the prayers, then think through specifically what you want so you can...

Let them know how to pray

Now that you've figured out what you really want from God, let others know that. Sifting out the unimportant things from the important is hard work. And if you don't do that hard work, you'll find 90% of your prayers will focus on the trivial. But if you've gone through the hard work of setting aside the things that ultimately aren't that important... And you've zeroed in on the important things... Let others know that. If you've done all that work, there's no sense in making them do it too.

And Paul is such a great example of this. You never hear him say, "These chains are chaffing my skin. Pray for my right leg." He wanted prayer for things like ministry opportunity, protection, strength and fruitfulness in ministry.⁵

So the first thing we learn from Paul's example is how to ask for prayer. Realize how much you need prayer so you will be motivated to ask for prayer and know what it is you want so you can tell the person how to pray.

2. HOW TO PRAY FOR A PREACHER

The other thing we learn from this is how we should be praying for ministers of the Word. Now, every Christian is a minister of the Word to some degree.

Col 3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom

So these principles really apply to every Christian. But the more involved someone is in the direct proclamation of the Word, the more they apply. So, what did Paul ask for? The request Paul had most often for himself had to do with protection and deliverance. (Ro.15:31-32, 2 Thess.3:2, 2 Cor 1:10-11, Php.1:19) For Paul it came in the form of dangerous men. It can also come in the form of temptation to sin. But whatever form it takes, those who are busy ministering the Word of God are going to have a bull's eye painted on their back, and need protection.

Another big category for Paul was ministry opportunity.

For ministry opportunity

Romans 1:10 I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you.

Col 4:3 And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ

For ministry fruitfulness

2 Thess 3:1 Finally, brothers, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you.

⁵ Ro.1:10, 15:30,31, 2 Cor.1:11, 9:14, Eph.6:19, Php.1:19, Col.1:10, 4:3, 1 Thes.5:25, 2 Thes.3:1, Heb.13:18

Join in the struggle

Romans 15:30 I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me.⁶

So those are some ways you can pray for those of us who are involved in the ministry of the Word. But in this passage, Paul mentions two more things. And it’s a little surprising that he would ask for these things.

1. Prayer for speaking skill

19 Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me

He’s not asking that God would give him a message. He already has that. What he’s asking for is the right words and manner of delivering them. What Paul is asking for is clarity and power of speech.

Col.4:4 Pray that I may proclaim [the mystery of Christ] clearly, as I should.

What Paul wants prayer for here is speaking ability – communication skill.⁷ He knew he couldn’t add anything to it or improve on the message in any way... But he needed prayer and supernatural, divine intervention to be able to keep from detracting from it by a lack of skill. So pray for skill behalf of those who minister the Word. And there’s a reason why he wanted that skill.

⁶ Recently I saw some footage of a basketball game where a bench-clearing fight broke out. Players were in fistfights all over the court. But not every player was involved. Some ran out there to help their buddies fight, while others hung back.

I think people who get in fights over sports are absolute morons. But the scene sticks in my mind as a poignant illustration of this idea. Because in spiritual warfare, it really is appropriate to run out there and join the battle if your comrade is under attack. And that’s what Paul was asking the Romans to do.

⁷ When I came to the conclusion that that’s what he means, my first question was, “How does that fit with 1 Cor.2?”

1 Cor 2:1-7 “When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. 2 For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. 3 I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. 4 My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, 5 so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power.”

So which is it? Did Paul want to have powerful rhetoric or not? This has been an issue that has been of major concern to me over the years (for obvious reasons). I want to know – should I try to become skilled in rhetoric or not? Would it be better if I stood up here and mumbled, and my points were a jumbled, incoherent mess so that it might be clear that the power comes from God and not me?

I think we would all agree that it’s better to speak clearly than unclearly. And it’s better to be persuasive than unpersuasive. But where do you draw the line? You want me to be clear, but on the other hand you don’t want me spending all my time getting degrees in oratory and reading books about public speaking instead of studying Scripture. How do you fit 1 Cor.2 with Eph.6:19?

I think part of the answer to that is right there in 1 Cor.2. After Paul says all that about no wise and persuasive words... “6 We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age”

The point of 1 Cor.2 is not that Paul was a mumbler or that he had no speaking skill. The whole context is about human wisdom. What he’s saying is, “I didn’t come to you with speaking that is impressive from a worldly point of view. I determined not to come to you with the type of thing they are impressed with.” But that’s not to say he stuttered and mumbled. He did come with wisdom. He came with the kind of wisdom that truly wise people are impressed with.

Is there some overlap between what the world considers wise and what truly wise people consider wise? Yes. In both cases you need to be clear in your speech, and in both cases word choice and the order in which things are presented makes a difference. It’s just that with the world, the power of the message is supplied by the delivery.

In true wisdom the power of the message comes from the message, and it can only be diminished by the delivery. Good delivery can add nothing to it, but poor delivery can detract from it.

So we seek to be as skilled as we possibly can in communicating the Gospel. However, whenever there is a conflict between the principles of persuasive communication, and the clarity of the Gospel, we choose the latter. And that’s actually fairly often. There are plenty of times when I’m working on a message, and I can see that once I get to the half way point, if I just went down this path, I could really develop it into a powerful, moving conclusion. But the text takes a different turn – a turn that’s not nearly as powerful from the standpoint of rhetoric. Sometimes the Holy Spirit decides to inspire a paragraph with three points where point 2 doesn’t fit very well rhetorically with points 1 & 3.

And on a bigger scale, many times there are elements to a passage that, from a human point of view, seem to detract and distract from the rest of the message. In our human wisdom we think the call to salvation would be more effective if it were all about God’s love, with no mention of hell or wrath. We think the commands of Scripture would be more effective if there were no mention of things like predestination or the sovereignty of God. We think the call to evangelism would be more motivating if it weren’t for election. And so we trim what we think are the ragged corners of the Gospel so we can appear relevant to the world.

I think that’s one reason why so many pastors refuse to take a verse-by-verse approach in teaching God’s Word. And when they do go verse by verse, they skip half of them. They think “verse-by-verse” means you go right by the verses you don’t think people will like.

So to the Corinthians Paul says, “I will never accommodate the message to impress the world.” But to the Ephesians he says, “Pray for me so that when I open my mouth to speak, my presentation of the message will be clear and powerful.”

2. *Prayer for boldness*

19 Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel

He wanted skill so that he could speak in a fearless, bold way. The core idea behind the word **fearlessly** is freedom. And it refers specifically to the freedom that comes from lack of fear.

Paul knew he needed divine help when it came to the area of courage. As I was studying this it occurred to me that all those courageous things Paul did – those didn't come easy to him. I have a tendency to lift Paul up to some kind of superhuman level and imagine that nothing was hard for him. In Scripture he seems like such an awesome figure – standing before Felix with unflinching resolve, rebuking and preaching to men who were deciding his fate, taking charge of a disintegrating sinking ship when it was too much for the captain to deal with and the crew was trying to abandon ship – Paul hardly seems to bat an eye. And when he could be set free, he decides to sign his own death certificate by appealing to Caesar. “So it will cost me my life – at least I'll get to stand before the Emperor and call him to repent and bow his knee to a crucified Jewish carpenter.” He seems fearless. But He wasn't fearless. He was totally freaked out by the situation at Corinth. He went there **in weakness and fear, and with much trembling** (1 Cor 2:3) For Paul to go into a town and say things that he knew for a fact would cause the people there to try to kill him... That was just as scary for Paul as it would be for you and me. When he saw that cat of 9 tails being pulled out for the 5th time, when they came at him with the rods, that was every bit as terrifying to him as it would be for us. And he knew that if he didn't get the Ephesians praying for courage for him, he wouldn't have enough courage when the threats came.

The mystery of the Gospel: a scary message to preach

He mentions specifically not just the Gospel but **the mystery of the Gospel**. That's the part of the Gospel that was hidden prior to Christ. And in Ephesians, the mystery refers primarily the uniting of the Jews and Gentiles in Christ. And that's a scary message to preach. It takes serious courage to go to a bunch of 1st Century Gentiles, who hated the Jews, and say, “You have only two options: Bow down and worship a Jew, or go to Hell forever.”

It takes courage to go to the Jews and say, “Being a decendent of Abraham and following the rituals of the Mosaic Law are not enough for you to be included in the Covenant.” “Even though you are the chosen people, you have absolutely no advantage over Gentiles in being saved if you don't worship Jesus Christ.” The God who brought your forefathers up out of Egypt and who made all the promises to you... That God will consign you to eternal hell unless you are converted and become Christians. Even today Jewish people aren't crazy about that message.

God called Paul to preach that message to hostile Jewish and Gentile ears, and then promised him big time suffering.

Acts 20:22-23 I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. 23 I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.⁸

Yet Paul didn't hesitate to go anyway. He knew he could handle it - all it took was some courage And that he could get if he could get the Ephesians praying.

⁸ Today we talk about countries that are closed to missions. And by that we mean if you preach the Gospel there they will put you in prison. For Paul the definition of a closed country was much different. For him it was only closed if the Holy Spirit prevented him from going there, or if Satan prevented him.

Acts 16:6-7 “Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia.”

1 Thess 2:18 “For we wanted to come to you ... but Satan stopped us.”

If the Holy Spirit prevented it, or Satan prevented it, then a city was closed. But if the only threat was prison, Paul considered that place wide open to missions.

If Paul needed it, we really need it

If anyone needs to hear this, it's us – Christians in the United States. Very often we are so deficient in boldness we get stopped in our tracks not by the threat of prison or torture or death... But at the threat of mild embarrassment or some social discomfort. If Paul had to pray for courage, how much more do we need to be praying for it?

When the Holy Spirit told him he would face suffering and prison no matter where he went... His response was to say

Acts 20:24 I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me — the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

When the prophet announced that Paul would be bound and imprisoned if he went to Jerusalem, and then everyone tried to dissuade him from going...

Acts 21:13 Paul answered, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart ? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."

If Paul has an attitude like that about suffering and death, and yet he needs to recruit a whole church to pray for him to have boldness... How much prayer for boldness do you think we need?

Defensive preaching

Keep in mind, the context is a defensive stance against attack. So the picture is not so much one of proactively going around preaching... Paul did do that of course, and in Colossians prays for help along that line too... But here the idea is more that when under attack he would be able to clearly & boldly articulate the Gospel.

There are many times when we proclaim the Gospel from a defensive posture. That's called “apologetics.” Our word “apologetics” doesn't mean “an apology.” Just the opposite. It comes from the Greek word *apologia*:

1 Peter 3:15 Always be prepared to give an answer (*apologia*) to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.

It means “a defense.” The implication is they are asking in a challenging way.

You are at work, and the name of Christ is being mocked, and you're standing right there, and you realize at that moment, “*If I stay silent, that will be a loud, clear message to everyone there that I agree with the blasphemies.*” So your only option is to speak up.

Sometimes speaking up can cost you your job – or your dignity. You find yourself in a University classroom, where a professor is ridiculing God's Word, and you know that he is far more experienced, more articulate, more educated, more respected, and he has spent years of his life honing the skill of trying to make Christians look dumb. And you're 17 years old, and you realize you need to take him on in front of 100 other students.

The thing I want to point out about this is that apologetics is more than just answering people's objections. Paul is talking about taking a defensive stance here, but what he does in the defensive posture is **make known the mystery of the Gospel.**

The point isn't just to answer people's questions so you can prove them wrong or prove us right. The point isn't to just be able to stand up for yourself so you don't look bad.

When you find yourself in a position to defend the faith, never forget that you are doing so from a position of authority and strength... And your duty is not to just give answers, but to make known the Gospel.

Look what Paul calls himself in the next verse: an ambassador. An ambassador had the authority to say anything and everything he was commissioned to say. Don't just offer plausible arguments for their objections... Boldly, courageously and authoritatively proclaim the Gospel as absolute truth. And call on them to repent and turn to Christ.

Praying for boldness glorifies God

Praying for boldness is really a wonderful thing to do. If you're praying for boldness, it means you must want boldness, and the very fact that you want it glorifies God. Because if you want boldness and courage in proclaiming the Gospel, and you're praying for that... The obvious implication is that you desire to suffer hardship for His name.

I don't mean you want to suffer just for the sake of suffering. But it does show that you want to proclaim the Gospel even though it will involve suffering. If you are unwilling to suffer for Him, then you won't be praying for boldness. You'll pray for deliverance or protection or comfort or ease or blessing, but you won't pray for courage.

In Acts 2, when the believers are threatened by the authorities and ordered not to preach any longer... The church immediately gets together to pray, but they don't pray for protection. They pray for boldness.

Now, there's nothing wrong with praying for protection, if that's what you want. Jesus prayed for deliverance in the Garden. Paul prayed for protection and deliverance several times as we saw earlier. So it's OK to pray for deliverance and protection. So why didn't they do that in Acts 2?

I don't think they were just trying to be show off or appear super-spiritual. I think they were just praying for what they really wanted most. They wanted to proclaim this wonderful Gospel that had just brought them salvation. They truly wanted to proclaim this Christ who had just died for them. And they didn't want to be hindered by their own cowardice, and so they prayed for courage.

And it's the same way here for Paul. He mentions that he's in chains, yet he doesn't say, "Pray for my release." "Pray that I'll get out soon, so I can get out there and really preach the Gospel." I'm sure he wouldn't mind being set free. He probably wanted that a little bit, but what he really wanted was boldness. So you glorify God just by wanting boldness, because of the intentions it points to in your heart.

Sometimes you hear people joking around about praying for patience. They say, "Don't ever pray for patience." And the implication is that if you do, God will teach you patience by bringing trying circumstances. And so the joke (at least I hope it's a joke), is that it's better not to ever get the virtue of patience than to have to endure what you have to endure to learn patience.

Well, if praying for patience is a scary thing, praying for boldness is a really scary thing. Because just think if that prayer gets answered. I don't see why God would give you a virtue that you would never have an occasion to use. So if He gives you boldness, it means you're going to need boldness. And if you're praying for boldness, it means you are willing to come to the point of needing boldness. This is critical, because we are all ambassadors for Christ.

A chained ambassador?

20 for which I am an ambassador in chains.

That's an ironic statement, because in those days, like today, ambassadors had complete diplomatic immunity. So an ambassador could never be put in chains. He could be expelled from a country, but never imprisoned. So Paul is a very unusual kind of ambassador - **an ambassador in chains**.

The reason ambassadors had diplomatic immunity was precisely so that they could speak freely – without having to worry about any consequences from what they said. Ambassadors had total freedom of speech to say absolutely anything they had been commissioned to say by the king who sent them.

Prisoners, on the other hand, had no freedom. No doubt could be punished for saying just about anything.

So what do you do when you are an ambassador in chains? The temptation is to act like a prisoner rather than an ambassador. And so Paul prays for the courage to speak as he should – like an ambassador. On that awesome day when he stands before the Emperor, he must not speak like an intimidated prisoner, but as a true ambassador sent by a mightier, more powerful King.

That's a good lesson for all of us. We've all been sent on a mission for the King. If you are a Christian, at any given moment in your life, there is some task that God has called you to. Right now your task may be to

teach or preach, or your task may be to deliver loaves of bread to visitors. Or maybe your calling right now is to just be available to fill in the miscellaneous gaps where help is needed.

Your calling changes as you move through life – God calls you to do different things. But His call on your life covers every moment of your life. Don't think of your calling as something way off in the future that you are working toward. At any given moment in your life, God is calling you to something. (Some people prefer the term "leading" rather than "calling," which is fine with me – but I really don't see any difference.) If God leads you to do something or calls you to do it, either way you have a divine mandate and a huge responsibility to do it.

I say all that because I don't want anyone to read this and think Paul needed to behave courageously, because he had an assignment from God, but I'm not in that same category. That is unbiblical thinking. If the Creator of the Universe calls you to mop a floor – that task is eternally significant just because it was something God commissioned.

So you have a calling from God. You are an ambassador for Him. But from the human point of view you don't really look like an emissary from heaven. You look like a regular human being. When the world looks at you, they don't see a diplomat on a mission from God. All they see is an evolved pile of protoplasm on its way to becoming dirt. And sometimes when we look in the mirror that's all we see too.

So the big question is how are you going to live? As a dignitary commissioned by the King of kings to do an eternally important task? Or as a random product of human reproduction who is just trying to make it through life? You and I look like nobodies to the world. And a lot of the time we wake up in the morning feeling like nobodies. And so it's hard to believe that our task is of any real importance - which is why so many Christians don't take their task very seriously.

Can you imagine a hand-picked dignitary sent on an important mission to represent the world's mightiest king - arriving in the country he was sent to and just keeping his mouth shut, mixing in with that culture and blowing off his commission? Refusing to deliver the message? I can't imagine an ambassador doing that unless he was planning on never going back home.

We spent our leadership retreat last week reminding ourselves of our church's purpose statement. And in case you don't know it, here it is:

We exist to help as many people as possible discover and fulfill their calling.

That is the only thing we do at Creekside. And a big part of helping you discover your calling is to let you know that whatever God leads you to do He calls you to do.

You are an ambassador. And so you need to carry on your work with a sense of authority. If the King has sent you to do some task, no human being can tell you otherwise.

And He has commissioned you, at some level, to make known the Gospel.

Pray for your leaders

So pray for boldness for yourself and others – and especially for your preacher and other teachers. The temptation to be spineless in the pulpit is incredibly strong. Sometimes someone in the church makes it crystal clear that my position on a certain thing deeply offends them - It may be a godly family that I dearly love, and that is very important to the church - and two weeks later a passage comes up in my verse by verse preaching that addresses that very subject. And I know if I just skim over it, I can avoid a huge crisis.

More than once I've been in a position that I knew if I was faithful to preach what I thought a passage was saying, I would very likely lose my job. That is a very hard thing to do when you have a wife and children and no skills to earn a living. Pastors need your prayers for courage. Very often good, solid, sound churches drift into error and compromise, and it's usually because of fear on the part of the teachers.

And pray also for the evangelical scholars. One huge problem we have these days is the fact that some of our best conservative scholars are so intimidated by the liberals that they don't have the courage to boldly proclaim confidence in God's Word. And so they capitulate and equivocate and back farther and farther off their convictions - until there is hardly any discernable difference between them and the liberals who reject

the Gospel altogether. And then they write that stuff and it effects the next generation of pastors, who effect the next generation of the Church. So pray for boldness for yourself, for each other, and for your leaders.

Conclusion

John Piper: “Unless I’m badly mistaken, one of the main reasons so many of God’s children don’t have a significant life of prayer is not so much that we don’t want to, but that we don’t plan to. If you want to take a four-week vacation, you don’t just get up one summer morning and say, “Hey, let’s go today!” You won’t have anything ready. You won’t know where to go. Nothing has been planned.

But that is how many of us treat prayer. We get up day after day and realize that significant times of prayer should be part of our life, but nothing’s ever ready. We don’t know where to go. Nothing has been planned. No time. No place. No procedure. And we all know that the opposite of planning is not a wonderful flow of deep, spontaneous experiences in prayer. The opposite of planning is the rut.” (Desiring God)

Last week I asked how many of you have made the decision the past few weeks that you need to make significant changes in your prayer life, and most raised their hands. So I urged you to make a commitment to come to corporate prayer on Sunday nights twice a month. Today I want to urge you to also commit yourself to intercessory prayer within the church. We used to have a system at Creekside where every single person was prayed for by name every day for as long as they attended. That ministry became too large to administrate, and it kind of fell apart. Normally when that happens I’m content to let a ministry die, but I’m not ready to let go of this one. I really think it’s important to have everyone in the church being prayed for, and for there to be a widespread mutual praying.

So here’s what we would like to begin doing: On the last Sunday of every month we will ask each one of you to find three non family members to pray for next month. If you are already praying for people in your small group on a daily basis, then you don’t need to worry about it. But otherwise we want you to just find 2 or 3 people and say, “Can I pray for you next month?” Your job will be to pray for those people most every day throughout the month, and to try to speak with them each Sunday that month. This is a way we can take what we have been learning, and instead of just stuffing it into our heads and letting it leak back out over time... We can immediately put it into practice and become doers of the Word.

Benediction:

2 Co.13:14 May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Review question

1. What is the irony of the phrase “ambassador in chains”?

Ambassadors had diplomatic immunity. We need to act like what we are – not what the world thinks we are.

Discussion Questions:

1. In what areas are you most in need of a) words to be given to you, and b) boldness in “defensive preaching”?
2. What is it that is preventing you from doing more to seek to get others to pray for you?
3. What do you most want prayer for?