11-3-19

Ephesians 6:18-24 (2)

Although prayer has come up throughout this letter, Paul concludes with a much deeper focus on the prayer life of Christians. Just to remind ourselves how important prayer is, think of the Gospel accounts of Jesus Himself in prayer. Jesus is God; He is a coequal member of the Trinity. But He willingly laid aside His deity and became a man. During His time on earth, He was entirely dependent on the Father by being obedient to Him, and on the Holy Spirit for power and guidance.

We who are disciples of Christ, seek to be more and more like our Master. Jesus has provided the way for access to God the Father and given us the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit. To be like Jesus then, we must seek to be obedient to the Father and depend on the Holy Spirit for power and guidance. Remember that Jesus communicated and communed with God by prayer; and that is what we must do also. As we read through the Gospels, we see that Jesus prayed for Himself; He prayed for those who were closest to Him; and He prayed for those who were still to come: you and I.

Last week, we talked about what a wonderful gift prayer is; that we get to have audience with the almighty God of the universe. We considered that there are really no limitations on how we pray, or what position we are in, or where we are. There is adoration, worship, praise, and petition. In petition we looked at asking for needs of our own and of others; and also, of praying for the miracle of salvation for those who are unbelievers.

As we continue through verse 18, Paul tells us that we are to pray all our prayers in the Spirit. This is very important because the Spirit here means the Holy Spirit, not our own spirit. So, we need to know what this means. First, let me talk about a couple things that it does *not* mean.

The main thing is that praying in the Spirit does not mean praying in tongues. Now certainly, if one is praying in tongues, the Holy Spirit is directly involved. But that is not the meaning of praying in the Spirit. In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul writes about speaking in tongues; and in verse 14 he says:

For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.

When we look at the surrounding verses, we see that although praying in tongues is indeed prayer, nobody can understand it unless there is an interpreter. If nobody understands what is being prayed, how do we follow the instructions here in Ephesians to pray and offer petitions and lift up the saints? Further, in verse 19 of the Corinthian letter, Paul says, “in the church I desire to speak five words with my mind so that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue.” By this we see that praying in the Spirit is praying using our minds, it is using language that we understand, and if we are praying in a group out loud, it is edifying to our fellow Christians.

Additionally, praying in the Spirit is not getting oneself all worked up emotionally. Some will work to become very emotional in prayer by crying or speaking with exuberance. Remember that we are to pray in the Holy Spirit, not our own spirit. Concentrating on getting ourselves worked up is missing the point and doesn’t help our prayer. Now, having said that, I want to make it clear that there is nothing wrong with becoming emotional in our prayer. Perhaps we are in such deep distress that the only prayer we can pray is to kneel down and cry. Perhaps we are so joyful and grateful that our prayer is simply lifting our hands and faces toward heaven and laughing or just grinning from ear to ear.

The difference is falsely generating emotion as opposed to having emotion springing naturally from our prayer or whatever is happening in our life. Naturally occurring emotion during prayer is a wonderful thing; it shows that our heart is also involved while we commune with God.

Now we can look at what it actually means to pray in the Spirit. The best way to understand it is to have a better understanding of what the words translated as “pray in” can mean. The Greek words have several different nuances. They can mean “by means of”, “with the help of”, “in the sphere of”, or “in connection to”. So, there are several ways we can think of what it means to pray in the Spirit. We can: pray by means of the Spirit; pray with the help of the Spirit; pray in the sphere of the Spirit; pray in connection to the Spirit.

What we get from all this is that praying in the Spirit means accepting the help and direction given by the Holy Spirit when we pray. What this comes down to is continuing to depend on God for everything. That is what God wants us to do; be dependent on Him. We must realize, and I think most of us do, that our salvation is entirely by the grace of God, we have no part in it. Our preparation for life in the Kingdom of Heaven is entirely by the work of God. God calls us to place everything in our lives in His hands. This includes prayer. In Romans 8:26 we are told that “we do not know how to pray as we ought”. We must depend on God even when we are talking to Him.

It takes practice, but praying in the Spirit involves being aware of the promptings of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will put into our minds things to pray for or about; the Bible even tells us that we are so lousy at it that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us in prayer. Still, when we are about to spend some time in prayer, it is good to start by asking for help from the Holy Spirit. Ask for His guidance in what to pray for and to make our prayers acceptable to God. Once you ask, go ahead and pray; you don’t have to wait for some special sign or thought. To ask for help in prayer is in accordance with God’s will, so you will receive what you ask for.

While you are praying, something or someone may come to mind that you hadn’t previously thought about; that is a prompting by the Holy Spirit. Pray for whatever that something or someone is. The Holy Spirit will also help by keeping your mind focused on prayer. When we pray, we will immediately be attacked by satan; things will come into our minds and we will find ourselves thinking about them rather than prayer. With the help of the Holy Spirit, ours minds are shielded from these things and we can concentrate on communing with our Father.

Keep in mind that even after asking for help, we may still have trouble concentrating; we may still have trouble focusing on our Lord. Don’t be discouraged. This does not mean that you’re out of the Holy Spirit. It’s just that we are in a war, a spiritual war, and when we are in a war we will be attacked. Just keep on persevering, keep going back to the prayer, use the shield of faith to understand that God is hearing your prayer and is pleased by your perseverance. When we persevere in prayer, eventually, satan will flee.

In addition to our devoted time of prayer, the Holy Spirit may inspire us sometime as we go about our day. Perhaps someone may come to mind and they seem to occupy our thoughts, that can be a prompting to pray for that person. Take a few moments to pray for them, for their well-being and for the Lord to care for their needs; don’t put it off until later, pray right then. Perhaps something good takes place during the day; right then is the time to offer up praise and thanksgiving to God. These are just a couple of examples, but those quick, sincere prayers offered as we go about our day are Spirit led prayer and are praying in the Spirit.

Paul next tells us to be on the alert. We can think of Jesus going to pray in the garden of Gethsemane. He took with Him Peter, James, and John and asked them to keep watch. Someone who was keeping watch would be on the alert; they would be paying attention; specifically, in this case, they would be praying for Jesus. We can also think of the parable of the ten virgins. While waiting for the bridegroom, they dozed; but when he came, the five wise virgins had brought extra oil for their lamps. In this case, their alertness showed in their being prepared.

We are called to alertness, watchfulness, preparation. We must be alert to the promptings of the Holy Spirit to prayer. We are to actually be looking for things to pray about. We need to have plenty of prayer, so that when the unexpected happens, we are ready.

Verse 18 finishes with “be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints”. This is a call to pray for our fellow Christians. Remember that “saints” does not describe some very special Christian who goes above and beyond everybody else. In the Bible, saints is the term used for every child of God. All those who belong to Christ are saints. This is an important reminder because we tend to not pray for other Christians unless there is something urgent going on in their life. Christians always need prayer because they are always under attack by very powerful forces of evil.

We need to be alert and watch for occasion to pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ. Whether it be for some obvious need or simply for their continued protection and strength. Again, we see this word ‘perseverance’. We pray for them and we keep praying for them. Perseverance is foundational to the Christian life. So often, we don’t see results; so often, it seems so hard to keep going and living as citizens of the Kingdom of Christ. It is a demonstration of our faith that we keep on going and keep clinging to Jesus. All of us need the prayers of others to help us in this.

The word ‘petition’ comes up again; we ask for things on behalf of the saints. Certainly, we ask for things they need in this life; physical necessities, strength and comfort in times of stress. But as citizens of the Kingdom, the saints need even more prayer regarding spiritual things. Paul gives us some very good examples of spiritual requests to make on behalf of the saints in this letter. In chapter 1 starting in verse 15:

[I] do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention *of you* in my prayers; that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. *I pray that* the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe.

Then, in chapter 3 starting in verse 16, Paul prays:

that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; *and* that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.

Sometimes we might think of prayers like this as only prayers that an apostle can pray; but they are not, we can pray these prayers for each other. The saints are people who are saved. We need to pray for their spiritual strengthening and usefulness to God. We need to pray these things for each other.

Paul goes on to ask for prayer for himself, but notice what he asks for. Keep in mind that when he wrote this letter, he was in prison, awaiting trial before Caesar. He faced the very real possibility of execution. But he didn’t ask for prayer for his release or comfort. There would be nothing wrong in praying for this; the saints prayed for Peter when he was in prison and he was miraculously delivered. Paul had been miraculously delivered from prison. But Paul’s concern here is for the Gospel. He wants the boldness to proclaim it to all he comes in contact with while under arrest, and even to Caesar himself.

It can be hard for us to think of the apostle Paul needing the prayers of others; but he did. So you can be sure your pastor needs your prayers. You can be sure that those who are sitting around you need your prayers. There are saints in the world now who are suffering for their King, who may not even have the strength left to pray for themselves; we must pray for them. All of us need more of the power of the Holy Spirit and less dependence on ourselves. All of us need more boldness to proclaim our risen Saviour, Jesus Christ. All of us need the prayers of other saints.

Paul’s great concern is to be a servant of Jesus, but in his pastor’s heart he knows that those he is writing to care about him and want to know how he is doing. Paul provides for that by sending this letter with someone close, so that he can let them know all the details of Paul’s imprisonment and ministry. We don’t get to know those details; the Holy Spirit wants us to concentrate on the spiritual aspect of Paul’s ministry so that we may do the same.

Paul offers a final prayer for his beloved church; and it is a good one for us to offer up for each other.

Peace be to the brethren, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ with incorruptible *love*.

Prayer

LORD God, how very blessed we are to have Your word preserved for us in the Bible. We are comforted to know that it is divinely written; the words come from you and are truth and are life for us. Thank You for the faithfulness of Paul, that he was willing to be led by You to record Your will for countless Christians to come.

Thank You for the wonderful gift of prayer. We do ask for the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit, so that we may pray according to His leading, which is according to Your will. Give us a greater awareness of His presence and leading; so that we don’t miss opportunities to intercede with prayer.

Prod us Lord, that we are more willing to pray for our fellow saints here in this church; and also for Your people throughout the world. Help us to focus more on others and more on You than on ourselves. Holy Spirit, help us to pray.

We ask these things in the name of Jesus our Lord

Amen