

Sermon Ephesians 1:15-19

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Introduction

In this section we have Paul giving thanks for the Ephesians and telling them that he remembers them in his prayers. He also tells them what he asking God to give them. The Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that they might know him better. And also that their eyes would be enlightened in order that they may know the hope to which they have been called, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power of us who believe. For this sermon though I don't want to cover these particular things in detail but rather take a step back and ask – what is prayer and how do we pray? I thought that this would be useful in light of the tool time that Olwyn brought us and more generally as a encouragement for us to pray. As I said in my last sermon, I think for many of us prayer is something we find difficult, even though it really shouldn't be. We are not sure how we should pray or what we should pray about. And sometimes we feel that the prayers we do pray are just meaningless repetitions of the same set of words and didn't Jesus specifically tell us somewhere in the Bible not to pray like that? Well lets have a look at prayer and hopefully what I say will be helpful to you and encourage you to spend more time in prayer.

One important thing to note though - we do not learn to pray by reading books or listening to sermons about prayer. They may help us but the best way to learn to pray is by praying.

So let's start at the beginning.

Remembering Who We Are

The first thing we need to remember when we come before God to pray is just who He is and who we are. Putting it simply there three different ways in which we relate to God. These are:

- 1) The relationship of Creator to creature. God is infinitely greater than we are. He is all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful. He has the whole of the universe in his control. This is the God to whom we are praying. Ecclesiastes 5:2 puts it this way - *“Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few”*.
- 2) We also have to remember that we come as sinners into God presence. God is holy and just. Moses when in the presence of God hid his face for he was afraid to look at God (Exodus 3:6). Jesus tells us the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The tax collector wouldn't look up to heaven but rather beat this chest and said *“God have mercy on me, a sinner”* (Luke 18:13). Isaiah was the same - *“Woe to me! I cried I am ruined. For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty”* (Isaiah 6:5).
- 3) But the best of all – we also come as children to a God who wants us to see him as a Father and who is a father to us. Neither of the first two relationships we have with God can give us the one thing that so desperately need and that is love and acceptance. It's as we pray that our love for God and his love for us can meet and we can call out - *“Abba – Father”*. But it's the first two relationships we have to God that enhance this relationship – that the God who created us and the God who knows all our faults and our mistakes and our sins treats us like a child whom he loves and is happy to call us sons and daughters of his, and even more than that, meets with us. Is that not grace overflowing?



Why Are We Praying?

Another thing we need to think about is our motives for praying. We need to remember that God can see our heart and our thoughts – we cannot hide anything from him. In fact he knows what we are going to say before we say it. If this is the case then we can say one about prayer - it is not there to inform God as he already knows. Ironically enough this is one of the reasons we should pray to God. As Jesus said in Matthew 6:7-8 - *“And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him”*. Which implies though that he still does want you to ask – just that you are not going to wear him down by the number of words that you speak.

But if he already knows why should we pray then? Surely it's a pointless exercise? Not at all. He may know but he still wants us to communicate with him – what we think and feel, the things that are troubling our mind and why, the grief we are feeling. etc. A human father may know why his child is crying, but he still listens with love to the child telling him what happened and the feelings associated with it. God is like that with us.

Furthermore the Spirit even helps us to pray when we don't – Romans 8:26 - *“In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express”*.

The second reason for praying is because that is the method God has chosen to use to respond to our needs. *“For everyone who asks receives...”* - Luke 11:10. One of the reasons may be that it helps us to see our dependence upon God. Another may be from the human side is that praying comforts us, relieves the anxiety and returns the joy to our lives.

But probably the most important reason for praying is that it brings joy to God. *“The Lord detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him”* Proverbs 15:8. The prayers of the righteous rise as incense to God. Prayer is communing with God and that is something he delights in. He loves talking with us – incredible as that may seem.

So What is Prayer?

We can see from the reasons why we should pray that prayer is a lot more than a catalogue of requests. If we look through the Scriptures we find that prayers include praise of God and his ways, acknowledgment of who he is and of his wonderful character in all its aspects, confessions of sin, cries of grief and despair, sighs of hope and even outpourings of bitterness. In other words, the full gamut of human emotions.

And so yes, there is a place in prayer for requests but it is not the primary reason for praying – the primary reason for praying is to have fellowship with God. And that includes listening as well. Habakkuk wrote *“I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint.”* Here Habakkuk is expecting God to answer him. Jesus told us his disciples to watch and pray in Matthew 26:41.

What Are We To Pray For?

Paul put it like this - *“I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness”* (1 Timothy 2:1-2). Notice that not only are we to pray for all men, but also to be thankful for them – and that includes even those whom we do not like or disagree with or even hate. Love your enemies and pray for them (Luke 6:27). Maybe it should be



the other way around – pray for your enemies and you will start to understand them and from that understanding comes love for them. In praying we see things not only from our shoes but also their shoes and Gods. And it is in prayer that we take all those burdens and lay them upon Christ and take on his burden which is light. And so we may live peaceful and quiet lives.

So it's not about what we pray for but rather what shouldn't we pray for.

How Are We Then To Pray?

1 Corinthians 14:15 - *“So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind.”* Interestingly enough all the other versions I had a look at don't have the my in this verse – they rather have *“So what shall I do? I will pray with the spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with the spirit, but I will also sing with my mind.”* But which ever we take it there are two important parts to praying – with the spirit and with the mind.

But we also need to pray with our minds as well. God does not short-circuit our intellect. God may if he so chooses speak to us directly but most of the time he lets us use our own minds as we commune with him. God does not answer all our prayers with direct answers. As you read through Acts for example we sometimes see Paul or Peter being told something directly from God. At other times they discussed it with their brothers and sisters in Christ. And sometimes the Scriptures are enough to give us the answer we need as the Scriptures show us something of the mind of God.

To Persevere or Not to Persevere?

So what if our prayers are not answered? Should we carry on praying? We have read Jesus's words about not babbling like pagans so should we just carry on praying anyway? Well we know from our own lives that God only sometimes seems to answer prayer and it can be very discouraging to pray and pray and not see anything happen.

Let's read two parables that I think may help us – Luke 18:1-8 – the parable of the persistent widow and Luke 11:5-13 – the parable of the selfish friend. To us it may seem like God is the selfish friend or the unjust God. We call out to him, we pray and argue and complain to him, but he doesn't answer. And it seems that God doesn't care. But notice that these two parables say nothing about why there is a delay in the answering. He could have talked about patience and growth and how some things take time. That's okay when things are going well, but not when we are seeing God as being unjust or selfish, when our faith is low and we not really sure whether God is there and listening anyway. But he is and he will answer. The question really becomes are we prepared to trust him even in the midst of our doubts and fears?

What About Faith?

Which brings us to the question of faith. How do we understand passages like these:

Mark 11:22-24 - *“Have faith in God, Jesus answered. I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, Go, throw yourself into the sea, and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”*

Matthew 21:22 - *“If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.”*

How do we reconcile passages like these with what we know about God and prayer? Well, lets look at the other side of the story. Paul prayed three times for the thorn in his flesh to be removed. God



said no. True faith is not faith in receiving what we ask – rather its faith in God. Another good example is Hebrew 11. Some received all amazing things but then it carries on – Hebrews 11: 32–40.

Conclusion:

But remember as I said in the beginning - we do not learn to pray by reading books or listening to sermons about prayer. We learn to pray by praying. And today is the best day to start.



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