

A Call to Pray

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- [0 : 00] I've heard it said that if you want to humble most Christians, ask them about their prayer life. I think this is true because for all of us, we are aware that our prayer lives are not what they ought to be.
- ! We are aware that there are ways in which we can grow. In our prayer lives. And so this morning, the purpose of this sermon is not to in any way try to convince us of what we already know, nor is it to heap more guilt on us that we may already feel because of the state of our prayer lives.
- But instead, the purpose of this sermon this morning, as we begin a new year, is to help us and to encourage us to pray.
- And the basis for the encouragement this morning is in Paul's letter to the Colossians. Colossians chapter 4, verses 2 through 4.
- So if you've not yet done so, would you please turn there and follow along as I read. Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.
- [1 : 31] At the same time, pray for us that God may open to us a door for the word to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison, that I may make it clear which is how I ought to speak.
- Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for your word this morning. And Lord, as we begin another new year, we pray that you would help us to heed the call to pray.
- Lord, help us to grow in our prayer lives. Lord, I pray that you would use this sermon this morning to do just that.
- And Lord, once again, I pray that you would help us all to receive encouragement from this sermon to pray and not lament more the deficiencies in our prayer lives.
- God, I pray that you would help me and help us to to grow in praying.
- [3 : 01] So use this sermon towards that end, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. In the preface to his book *With Christ in the School of Prayer*, deceased theologian and pastor Andrew Murray wrote the following.
- Of all the promises connected with the command, abide in me, there is none higher than this. If you abide in me and my words abide in you, you shall ask what you desire and it shall be done for you.
- Power with God is the highest attainment of the life of full abiding. And then he goes on and he writes, if there's one thing I think the church needs to learn, it is that God intends prayer to have an answer and that we have not yet fully conceived of what God will do for us if we believe that our prayers will be heard.
- God hears prayers. This truth is universally admitted, but very few understand its meaning or experience its power.
- As I prepared, the prayer in my heart then and the prayer in my heart now is that God would help us this morning to understand the meaning of this truth that God hears prayers and to experience its power in our lives individually and in our families and in our church family.

[4 : 53] Although these words that we're considering from Colossians chapter 4 this morning are very brief, they're actually quite profound what they teach us about prayer. And what we see in these three verses is the repeated truth that we find elsewhere in scripture and it is this, that in a world that's filled with opposition, God's people are called to a life of consistent prayer.

In a world that is filled with spiritual opposition, God's people are called to a life of spiritual prayer. Many of the commands that we find in scripture that call us to pray are associated with some kind of opposition to us actually praying.

Some kind of impediment, some kind of hindrance. I think many of you can think of the example of the Lord Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane when he was praying and he called his disciples at his weakest moment to that point and said to them, would you pray with me?

And scripture recalls that they were drowsy, they were sleepy and they were not even able to pray with their master at his weakest hour as they saw him.

And Jesus said the words to them, he said, the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. And brothers and sisters, that is our condition as well.

[6 : 33] Those words spoken to those disciples are true for us as well that when it comes to prayer, our spirits are indeed willing but our flesh, the reasons we'll talk about in a little while, our flesh is weak.

And so, the one who calls us to pray will help us to pray. And I trust that as we hear this message this morning that we would not be thinking what do I have to do although there are things that we do have to do.

I pray that we would be leaning on the Lord, trusting him for grace to do this which he has called us to do. And these brief words from the Apostle Paul are one impress upon us two aspects of this life of consistent prayer to which we are all called.

First, we see in Paul's words a call to pray generally. It's a call given to all believers.

In verse 2, we are not just being called to pray notice, but we are being called to pray steadfastly or we're being called to pray consistently.

[8 : 02] But it is a given that those who belong to Christ will pray. It is a given that those who follow Christ will pray. J.C.

Ryle, the very well-known Anglican bishop of many centuries ago, he wrote a little book called A Call to Prayer.

And he begins the book by asking the simple question, do you pray? Do you pray? And then he goes on to write the following, to be prayerless is to be without God, without Christ, without grace, without hope, without heaven.

It is to be on the road to hell. Now, can you wonder that I ask the question, do you pray? I ask again whether you pray because our habit of prayer is one of the surest marks of a true Christian.

Brothers and sisters, let us hear these words this morning because they are true words. Our habit of prayer is one of the surest marks that we are true Christians.

[9 : 17] because at the foundational level, prayer is spending time in communion with God. It's more than just asking God for things.

At a foundational level, it is spending time in communion with God who has given us rebirth. He has given us a new birth.

And those who have been born of God love God. And spending time with God in prayer is one expression of that newfound relationship that we have.

Bishop Rowe goes on and he writes, all of the children of God on earth are alike in this respect. From the moment there is any life and reality about their religion, they pray.

Just as the first sign of life in an infant when born into the world is the act of breathing, so the first act of men and women when they are born again is praying.

[10 : 24] This is one of the common marks of all the elect of God. They cry day and night unto him. The Holy Spirit who makes them new creatures works in them the feeling of adoption and makes them cry, Abba, Father.

The Lord Jesus, when he quickens them, gives them a voice and a tongue and says to them, be dumb no more. God is no dumb children. It is as much a part of their new nature to pray as it is of a child to cry.

They see the need of mercy and grace. They feel the emptiness and weakness. They cannot do otherwise than they do. they must pray.

Friends, what J.C. Riles said, what he wrote is true of all believers. They must pray. When we consider these three verses that the Apostle Paul wrote to the Colossian church, Paul clearly assumes that Christians pray.

He assumed that the Colossians as believers were those who prayed. And so he calls them to pray in a general way.

[11 : 59] And as he does, he touches on three characteristics that should mark their prayers and our prayers in a general way. And the first characteristic is to pray with steadfastness.

He tells us we should pray with steadfastness. Notice how he says it in verse two. Continue steadfastly in prayer. The NIV translates it be devoted to prayer.

Be devoted to prayer. In other words, God's people are to pray in an ongoing way. Paul could have simply said, continue in prayer.

But by adding the word steadfastly, he's indicating that we need to persist, we need to persevere, we need to continue in an ongoing way to pray.

But again, we all know too well, we know too well from personal experience that being steadfast in our prayers is not automatic, nor is it easy.

[13 : 11] And that's because we face opposition. That's because we face real resistance to do this, especially to do this, especially to do this.

And the resistance comes to us on three fronts. First of all, as I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon, it comes to us in our own flesh.

And by that I mean indwelling sin. The struggle that believers continue to have with indwelling sin until the day, the day will die.

The apostle Paul describes indwelling sin in his own life in Romans chapter 7. He describes it this way, verses 14 through 19, and now it's projected for you, so you don't need to turn.

He writes, for we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold unto sin. I do not understand my own actions, for I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate, now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law that it is good.

[14 : 31] So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh, for I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.

For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. This is the dilemma of the Christian in this fallen world.

Paul goes further, in verse 24, and he asks the question in relation to this battle with sin, and he writes, wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?

And then he answers the question in verse 25, thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ. So one of the reasons that we battle and we struggle to pray is this ongoing battle that we have with the flesh.

And like the Apostle Paul, we need to cry out to God and we need to ask for his help. We need to acknowledge the weakness of our flesh. When we find ourselves not wanting to get out of bed, we find ourselves drifting and not engaged in praying as we are, Lord, would you deliver me, would you help me, would you enable me to be able to resist the opposition of the flesh and pray.

[16:10] And then the second front on which we face opposition is the world. And when we talk about the world, it's not the created world, not the physical world that we see all around us, but instead it is the world that scripture generally defines the world and that is fallen humanity organized in its rebellion against God.

That's the world in which we live, that's the world in which we exist. The Apostle Paul describes it in Ephesians chapter 2 and he refers to it as the course of this world which we all were under its full control and even though we are no longer under its full control, it still affects and influences our existence on this earth.

And so we have to battle in this world world in which we live when it comes to this area of prayer. The many distractions, the many temptations, the trials and the difficulties that we face, they come against us and they bombard us and they retard our desire and even our ability to pray.

and then the third front of opposition to us in prayer is one that we overlook very easily and it is the devil.

And when I say the devil, I don't mean that Satan himself necessarily opposes us, although sometimes it might feel like he does do that, I'm talking about the spiritual forces of darkness over which Satan and his demons rule.

[18:12] And so although we face the devil's resistance and opposition in a general way in all of our lives, I believe that in this area of prayer more specifically, in a more targeted way, the enemy fights us.

I believe there's only one other area in which the enemy strategically opposes the people of God and that is in the proclamation of the gospel. In this area of prayer, he, in a very specific and targeted way, he resists us.

And it's because this is the means that God has ordained, that we would commune with him, and this is the means that God has ordained that in an ordinary way, he would intervene in our lives, and he would intervene in this world.

Not to say that he doesn't do otherwise, but this is the ordinary way that God has ordained that he would actually work. And so we face this resistance from the enemy in this area because of that.

And so we're being called to be steadfast in our prayers. And I think the reason that Paul says that is because of these oppositions that we face.

[19:39] Notice in verse 2 that Paul also not only tells us to continue steadfastly in prayer, but he also tells us to pray with watchfulness. To pray with watchfulness.

Think about that. To pray with watchfulness. Now, what does this mean? Does it mean that we're supposed to be looking around when we're praying?

I think we all know it's not that at all. Calling us to be watchful in the sense that watchful is used in Scripture. What we see in Scripture is that watchfulness is this call to be alert or to be spiritually awake.

And what we see in Scripture is that we are called to be watchful at times when danger lurks and when the stakes are high.

Spiritual watchfulness or spiritual alertness really is a cue to us about spiritual warfare. It's a cue to us that we need to be on guard for something.

[20 : 52] We need to be watching out for something. Paul is saying to us we're to be steadfast in prayer but he says we need to be spiritually alert. We need to be spiritually aware.

We need to have our spiritual wits about us because prayer is one of those situations in which danger lurks and the stakes are high.

one of the reasons that we are able to see what we're being called to in this watchfulness is when you consider in Ephesians chapter 6 the armor that God has given to us to fight this spiritual war that we are in.

There's only one weapon that we have that is mentioned. Everything else is defensive in that armor but we are told that we are to take the sword of the spirit which is the word of God and actually when you look at that in context and you see how the words are actually structured what you see is it actually is tying into prayer.

You can actually take up the part that it actually says that we are to take the sword of the spirit praying with all kinds of prayers and so those two are linked together very very closely the sword of the spirit and and and prayer.

[22 : 29] Paul also tells us not only to be steadfast and to be watchful as we pray he also says we're supposed to be praying with thankfulness we're to pray with thankfulness and this is something I believe that we need to hear especially in our generation in our time because it is so easy to be unthankful living in a very unthankful generation.

Sometimes we approach prayer as exclusively for asking God for things and then we don't get what we want we have an attitude we're complaining sometimes we forget what God has already done for us even as we are seeking him to do other things for us but what Paul calls us to do is as we pray we're to be thankful people our hearts are to be salted with thankfulness and it's not just thanking God for what he has done it's thanking God for who he is as well you see this pattern in the Psalms not only are the Psalmists thanking God for what he's done they're also thanking God for who he is and in Psalm 107 verses 1 through 3 we have this very good example oh give thanks to the Lord for he is good for his steadfast love endures forever that the redeemed of the Lord say so whom he has redeemed from trouble and gathered from the lands from the east and the west and from the north and from the south notice that the

Psalmist is actually focusing on the redemption that God has brought to his people and brothers and sisters that is always one reason for us to give thanks to thank God that he has saved us to thank God that he has lifted us up out of the pit of sin and he has forgiven us and he has reconciled us to himself and if that's not a reason for us to give thanks we don't understand fully what God has done for us we don't fully appreciate the condition we were in and how God showed mercy on us by saving us and calling us to himself and so in these few words in verse 2 we are called to pray generally and we are reminded that our prayers should be marked by steadfastness they should be marked by watchfulness and they should also be marked by thankfulness but in this passage

Paul not only calls us to pray generally we are called to also pray specifically in this passage is a call to pray specifically and we see an example of how we are called to pray specifically in verses 3 and 4 look at those verses again Paul says at the same time in other words at the same time that you're praying in a general way steadfastly and with watchfulness and thanksgiving at the same time that you're praying pray also for us that God may open to us a door for the word to declare the mystery of Christ on account of which I am in prison that I may make it clear which is how I ought to speak now Paul could have just let the call to pray generally stand on its own but he doesn't do that instead he calls the Colossians and he calls us to pray specifically and he calls the Colossians to pray about the most important aspect of prayer that believers can engage in

I want you to hear this this morning the most important thing we can pray about the most important matter that we can lift up in our prayers is for the gospel to be advanced for the gospel to go forth because that is the means by which God translates people from darkness into light from death to life from blindness to sight that is the way that God makes that change in the lives of people so the most important thing we can pray about is for the gospel to be advanced and this is one of the reasons why when I lead the pastoral prayers it is one of the first things that we pray about Lord let the gospel go forth and they may seem like aimless words but they obviously are necessary that we would do that Paul would not waste time saying to the

[27 : 32] Colossians to pray for God to open a door if the door just automatically just opened he wouldn't ask them to be praying that God would enable them to declare the mystery of Christ to declare the gospel of Jesus Christ Christ and brothers and sisters when we think about that it makes sense because the greatest act in human history that God has done is sending his son to die on the cross so that undeserving sinners like us can be forgiven and can be reconciled to God that is the greatest act in all of human history greater than all the creation that God did the splendor and the wonder and the beauty and all of that the greatest act in all of human history is the sending of God's own son to die on a cross to reconcile men and women to himself and so there's no greater work or effort in the entire universe than the salvation of the souls of men and since this is the case it should be beyond dispute that the most important activity that we can engage in is to pray that that gospel would go forth to lost humanity so that they can come in the saving knowledge of Jesus

Christ and brothers and sisters everything else pales in comparison Paul says to the Colossians he tells them three very specific ways in which they should pray and first when we consider what he says when he says pray for us essentially what Paul is saying is pray for gospel ministers he says one of the specific ways that you can pray is pray for gospel ministers as you're praying generally pray specifically in this way pray for gospel ministers pray for us also we should pray for gospel ministers based on our general awareness of their circumstances Paul's situation was he was in prison and it would have been appropriate for the

Colossians to pray for him that God would strengthen him that God would encourage him that he wouldn't feel abandoned that he would persevere that he would hold up on the hardship that he would be true to the gospel even in the midst of great difficulty and he also says to the Colossians not only pray for him and the others but he also said to them pray that God may open a door for us for the word to declare the mystery of Christ on account of which I'm in prison and so this is for us this morning a call to pray for gospel opportunities pray that God would open doors for the gospel to be proclaimed Paul refers to it as the mystery of Christ and as I've shared before mystery doesn't mean something that's hidden it means something that used to be hidden that God has now revealed and that's the way mystery is defined in the

New Testament and this mystery of Christ that Christ is the means by which God reconciles men to himself that Christ is the one who has come as the last Adam to do what the first Adam did not do so that those of us who put our faith in him the second Adam may be reconciled to God that is the mystery of Christ the gospel of Jesus Christ we're called to pray for that notice how in these few words we see this idea that is often seen in scripture that sometimes some people have a hard time reconciling because they hold on to one without the other and these two ideas of human responsibility and divine sovereignty and we see both set side by side in verse three

Paul says I want you to pray that God may open a door for us for the word you pray that God may open a door for us for the word now God is sovereign and you take the new well you know God is going to do whatever he wants to do no he says you pray you pray that God may open the door not you pray and your own words open the door but you pray that God may open the door now does God open doors sovereignly does God open doors even where there are times that his people aren't praying absolutely I'm sure he does but that's not the ordinary way the ordinary way is that we would pray that God would open the doors and God would open those doors you may remember in Matthew 9:38 Jesus himself when he saw the multitudes he said to his disciples pray to the

[33 : 37] Lord of the harvest to send laborers into his harvest you pray that the Lord would send and brothers and sisters let us not underestimate the importance of our prayers as it relates to the advance of the gospel praying specifically Lord would you would you open doors of opportunity for the gospel to be shared and then third and finally in this part what the apostle Paul says is he says pray in verse four that I may make it clear which is how I ought to speak pray that I may make it clear which is how I ought to speak it's interesting that Paul is asking for this Paul from general observation would be seen as such a bold a bold man and I don't think

Paul is so much praying about that he would have right theology I don't think Paul is saying you know pray that I don't get mixed up with what I want to say Paul was praying I believe for gospel faithfulness he was praying to be true to the gospel that he had come to understand knowing the price to be paid to preach it and where he was was evidence of the price to be paid he was in prison and see brothers and sisters listen the apostle Paul the Bible tells us that Elijah was no different from us that he was a man of similar passions these were human beings just like us Paul was a man just like us and here he is in prison and you can rest assured that the voices of the enemy and the temptations would have come just to say Paul go the other way take an easier road you don't need to go through all that you're going through he says no I want you to pray for me that I may make it clear which is how

I ought to do it and Paul said you preached the gospel vaguely alongside Judaism you were fine nobody bothered you but when you declared that by the works of the law no one would be justified in God's sight and that circumcision and law keeping could not help you you upset Pharisees and they did things like stone you and that happened to Paul at Lystra in Acts 14 and Paul said David you preached the gospel and you preached it alongside idolatry and paganism and you were not so clear on what you had to renounce and repent from you were okay but if you preached it clearly and you told people that they had to turn away from their long held idols whole cities would riot and oppose you and that happened to him in

Ephesus you see that's recorded in Acts 19 and so it would have been so easy for Paul to succumb to the temptation that others had succumbed to and not be clear or bold about preaching the gospel as I considered this I thought about our own context today and it is increasingly more difficult to remain faithful in a world where ministers and even whole denominations are going in an apostate direction where they are being unfaithful some of you may remember

Bishop Michael Curry the now famous bishop who preached at the royal wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle and he also preached here at Christ Church Cathedral just the other day I think on Thursday it was or Friday just on Friday I read an article in the Christian Post an online Christian magazine where the same man who preached love is the way is now punishing one of his faithful bishops for refusing to perform homosexual marriages in his diocese and requiring that all of his priests remain faithful to scripture as well and Bishop Curry has essentially stripped this faithful bishop of all of his authority and is overriding the decisions that he has made to seek to be faithful ironically this bishop's name is

[39 : 20] William Love and he preached love is the way but this man is paying an incredible price to be faithful to God's word in a denomination that has turned its back on the word of God here's what he wrote a very courageous man this is what he wrote in a pastoral letter late last year where he publicly said he would not follow the requirement to perform homosexual marriages in the diocese of New York he wrote sexual relations between two men or two women was never part of God's plan and is a distortion of his design in creation and as such is to be avoided to engage in sexual intimacy outside of marriage between a man and a woman is against

God's will and therefore sinful and needs to be repented of not encouraged or told it's okay and then he went on to say that he believes that both his denomination and the overall Western society his words have been hijacked by the gay rights agenda and that pro-LGBT Episcopalians have been deceived into believing a lie that has been planted in the church by the great deceiver Satan as a faithful man in a politically correct environment where there are those who will either toe the line and turn upside down and see in scripture what is not there and endorse homosexual marriage or there will be those who will be silent because there's a price to be paid I want you to think about it for many ministers in this denomination

I was reading just the other day about connected to this same article the Episcopal Church the diocese in South Carolina they decided that they were going to withdraw from the U.S.

Episcopal Church which they did and there was this court battle over some 500 million dollars in church property and assets and all these other things and Michael Curry led the way in fighting these people and so what essentially has happened and they lost to the courts so to be faithful to be faithful those churches had to walk away from decades and even centuries of investment in property and in buildings and in other facilities to be faithful the U.S.

Episcopal Church won in the courts and so they have those assets don't have the people but they have those assets and that's the price of being faithful and again ministers are human beings ministers are those who face temptations ministers are those who consider you know how would I earn a living if I make this decision which I know is going to cost me and that's why Paul says he says pray for us pray for gospel ministers pray that they will be faithful pray that they be faithful no matter the price no matter the cost pray that they will be faithful even unto death and brothers and sisters it's no different for us and understand every single person who names the name of Jesus Christ will one day have to draw the line in the sand and would have to stake their own claim the stake is higher for ministers but don't you think for a moment that you will not in some way be called upon to draw your own line in the sand and to be willing to pay your own price to be faithful because you will it's just a matter of time before in the same way that you have these

[43 : 58] European nations that are pressuring us in financial services they will pressure us in the area of our marriage laws they will pressure us in a similar way it's just a matter of time they're just working through their checklist and then we will see whether we as a country hold these things as convictions or we hold them as preferences if they're preferences we will simply comply with what they want of us so that they don't punish us with sanctions but if they are convictions we will pay the price for our convictions or we will do so willingly we will do so even gladly that's our context today and so taking the cue from the apostle Paul I say this is one of the ways you can pray for me this is one of the ways that you can pray for me in this in this new year pray that

I would be faithful pray that I would live for the day when I stand before the Lord and he will say to me well done good and faithful servant and that I would not forget that day and let that day be overshadowed by today and be more desires of being popular and being accepted and being with the crowd as sadly many are today and so this example that the apostle Paul gives us of praying specifically raises the most important matter of prayer which is the gospel he says pray for gospel ministers he says pray for gospel opportunities and he says pray for gospel faithfulness I want to encourage us as we embark upon this new year to hear and heed this call to pray let's pray generally but let us also pray specifically again pray for me as a not just as a pastor pray for me as a husband pray for me as a father pray for our church that in 2019

God will give us many gospel opportunities as a church and he would give us these gospel opportunities individually as well pray that he would provide opportunities for us to individually be engaged in the great commission to think about how we're going to be using those three weeks off that we have when we resume discipleship groups what are we going to be doing to be engaged in the great commission this is a great time to begin to pray God would you open doors of opportunity for me to be able to be involved in the great commission to share the gospel and watch how the Lord works as you do that pray for alternatives this opportunity that we have week by week to welcome and employ people and to share the gospel with them and help them to see that if they don't know Christ knowing Christ is greater and more important than getting a job pray for

Christianity explored this year pray that God would send unbelievers to the courses that we will offer these are ways that we can pray in very very specific ways I want to conclude this morning by encouraging all of us to think about the degree to which any prayerlessness in our lives is really due to very specific targeted spiritual warfare that's keeping us spiritually drowsy that is keeping us unmindful of the power that is available to us in prayer that many of the things we worry about we need to be praying about that many of the things that we just resign over we need to be praying about let's pray that God will open our eyes to see what is behind the indifference what is behind the prayerlessness what is behind the fact that we're able to give ourselves to so many other endeavors but we don't give ourselves to the endeavor of prayer and I encourage you to pray that not just as it relates to your personal prayer life but pray that as it relates to this church corporately as well

I mean think about what difference it must make if prayer makes a difference if more of us gathered when we pray together corporately each month if prayer makes any difference then the more of us gathering together and joining our hearts together and petitioning the Lord together has to matter and I believe it does matter and so I encourage us to let us let us pray that God would help us to be sober minded as we think about this and let us cry out to God for the grace to pray for the grace to change that we may become faithful in prayer again I remind us that one of the greatest privileges we have is to commune with the God of the universe and that has been made possible through Jesus

[50 : 16] Christ that has been made possible that Jesus shed his blood that we have been redeemed that we have been adopted into God's family and we now have this opportunity to commune with the God of the universe through prayer that the enemy uses all kinds of devices to keep us from that and so my prayer is that God will help us to see this amazing privilege that we have and that we would avail ourselves of this privilege let's pray father thank you for your word thank you for the call to pray I pray that we would all hear it and heed it and that we'll make a difference in our lives Lord you know what we need you know exactly what we face individually and corporately so oh God pour out abundant grace to us and help us we ask in Jesus name amen amen before we sing our closing song have any questions on the sermon this morning no questions no all right let's