

The Importance of Prayer Romans 15:28-33

We have been looking at this section in verses 22-29 of Paul's plans to visit Rome and his delay in coming to them. He was taking up this collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem by many of the Gentile churches, and this shows the importance of giving and also our solidarity in the gospel of Christ. But look at what he says in verse 28, **"When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you."** There are a couple of things I will point out quickly about this verse. One is that Paul did not leave anything undone. He accomplished the task at hand. He accomplished the ministry that God gave him and did it fully. And so often we start well in doing what God has called us to do, but we just do not finish well or keep going. We might learn truths about being a godly husband or wife, or mother or father, or faithful church member, and we grow in that area, but then we get weary with the stresses and trials of life. And we stop doing the things that we previously did. And little by little we drift away from completing what the Lord has given to us. The same can go with any ministry that our God has given us.

The second thing I want to point out about this verse is Paul's plans to come to Rome freely after delivering this offering gives an air of authenticity to the letter. Because in the providence of God he would not go freely but in chains. And anyone who would forge a letter would not have put this section in the letter. This letter really came through inspiration of the Holy Spirit of God and through the pen of Paul. We plan but it is God who is in ultimate control of our lives.

Now look how he rounds out this paragraph indicating his future plans, **"I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ."** Again, it is amazing how God sent Paul to Rome - in a way that he certainly did not expect. But he expects to come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ. This will be a spiritually enriching time for him and for the believers at Rome as they enjoy their fellowship one with another. And the key here is "of Christ." This is where all the undeserved and unmerited favour of salvation flows through. It flows through him.

Now this morning I want us to look at verses 30 and following, which deal with Paul's request that the Roman church might pray that they might pray for his safe arrival in Rome. And this passage really challenges us with the importance of prayer. And one of the spiritual disciplines that believers are lax on to say the least is prayer. We say that we need God, but we live as if we do not need him. Many Christians have no prayer life at all. They never or very seldom pray for even their loved ones - for the struggles of their children, or for the needs of their spouse, or for the ongoing spiritual health of the church. And if they pray it is very generic and not specific. If you examined the life of the average Christian and the lack of prayer in his or her life you would come to two conclusions. One is that we are able to fix in people what only God can fix. People just need to get their act together, or they need some sort of behaviour modification but they do not need God or a changed heart. So if I can bring the change in others why pray? Our confidence is in self and not in God.

The other conclusion we would come to is: God is not sovereign. It is more like the old deistic approach to life. God has set the basic laws of reality in place but it is all up to us. God does not change anything. He cannot change our circumstances and he

certainly cannot change us, so why pray? You can see the absence of prayer in our lives in the barren wasteland of our relationship with him. After we get out of church our marriages, families and life has little to do with God. It is easy to say that I trust God and I need God, but prayer is that language of dependence. And let me challenge you this morning: do you pray? Do you really take time, not just mumble some thoughts before God, but do you really take time to commune with God? Here is the amazing thing about that question : if you answer is the negative (no I do not pray as I ought), there is good news. You can start to pray now. There is no special course that you need to take in order to pray, but you can begin to establish this valuable spiritual discipline of the glory of God even today. And note this: God's people are to be a dependant people. We are so deluded with our own power and ability. Since God's people are a dependant people on him, God's people are a praying people.

And what I want to see in this final paragraph here in chapter 15 is three aspects of prayer, this week and next week, that I hope will help and encourage you to begin to pray and trust God. It will change your life, your relationship with God and others, and it will change others.

1. Prayer takes work and great effort. V. 30.

Prayer takes work. It takes effort. And unfortunately there is so much spiritual laziness. We know we should pray. We know that it is vital to our relationship with God, but we tend to be spiritually lethargic. And I will admit, prayer is hard and difficult. We have to get our minds in the right framework. We might read and think through a passage of Scripture, maybe through one of the Psalms. We have to think about what and who we are going to pray for. What is going on in my family life? Who do I know that is outside of Christ? What are the needs of my spouse or children? What is going on in church? What is going on globally that I need to pray for? I need to examine my own heart, and admit my own sin before God and even the struggles that I am having. I need to ask for his grace in the daily battles that are in my heart. And then there is the time invested after that. And we know that prayer to God is prayer to a Person and is essential but let me encourage you to put in the effort. This is well worth the time and effort compared to so many others things and activities that we invest in.

Look at verse 30 here, "**I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ.**" Now notice here is Paul is appealing for help. And the help is through their prayers to God. And the word at the beginning is very strong: "I appeal." I am begging you to help and aide me in this way. And again, this is an activity of "brothers." In other words, those who are Christians. We ought to be praying for one another. But how much do we do. It is so easy to listen to someone and then say: I will be praying for you, but say it is such a way that I want to stop talking about your struggle. I want to end the conversation, with really no intention of really praying. Saying that I will pray and come before our great God should be one of the most encouraging thing that we can say and offer to one another.

Now look at what he says here: "**by our Lord Jesus Christ.**" Now what does he mean by that? And he could mean a couple of things. One is that we pray through the merits of Christ. We come into God's presence not through our righteousness but through Christ. And it is a wonderful truth that I can come into the presence of God wherever I am because of my relationships with Christ. Listen to Hebrews 4:14-16,

“Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” We can come through the our great High Priest Jesus Christ. We are in him. Prayer is a gift and privilege.

But what it could also mean is that we do all things for the glory of Jesus Christ. Life is about him. So prayer is about seeing Christ magnified. Life is about the glory of Christ. This is where we get in trouble with prayer because we think of prayer as a way of getting a happy and prosperous life from God in the here and now. If I can just learn the secret of prayer to unlock all the pleasures and the happiness of this life. But prayer should admit that whatever trial I am going through, whatever struggle with my children, whatever heaviness in my marriage, this trial is not first and foremost about me. We are so intoxicated with the happy life theology rather than the holy life theology. I can remember talking to someone in an unhappy marriage: I have tried everything and he or she has not change. Surely God does not want me in this unhappy marriage for the rest of my life?! Listen to 1 Corinthians 7:10, **“To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband.”** That is quite clear isn't it. Listen to what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10:31, **“So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”** So life is about his glory, and following him even when it is difficult.

Now what does that have to do with prayer? Our prayers do not have as the main intent the glory of Christ but so often our own ease, comfort and pleasure, even when we ask for good things, we ask them for ourselves and not for God's glory. Listen to James 4:1-3, **“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.”** Notice the quarrels and fights take place first and foremost not outside of us but inside of us. But all the concentration is on the other person. And then we pray and James says we do not receive not because we asked for the wrong things, but because we asked with the wrong motives. It is all about our passions.

How often have we prayed in these tough situations and relationships: God help me to be patient and kind and endure in love for the glory of Christ even when it is not returned? How often do we ask God when we are disappointed and heart broken to show us our own sin and our own sinful passions? Your trials and your life is not about you. God is not there to make life work for your passions and pleasures. If he did, then he would not be all loving. He cares too much for you to give you what you want in those battles. Prayer takes work because it has to look in our own hearts and cut through all of the fog and lies that we tell ourselves about our own righteousness. It reminds us of how far we still have to go in our walk toward holiness. And the greatest battle I have in glorifying Christ is never others but my own sinful heart. Our prayers are never to be me-centred but God centred. We give up so often because we waste our

prayers on wanting to spend it on our own passions. Ask God to continually open your eyes to your own corruption. Ask Him to help you make this trial about him.

But look how he continues in this verse, **“I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ (or for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ) and by the love of the Spirit.”** Now again, if you want to be blessed and changed through this passage of Scripture, you have to ask: what does he mean by “by the love of the Spirit.” Because Paul is making an appeal that these believers would pray for the sake of the glory of Christ, and also by the love of the Spirit. Now it could mean a number of things. One is that it could mean because we love the Spirit of God. Another is that we come through Jesus Christ in prayer by the power of the Spirit to God to the Father. And it is amazing how all three members of the Trinity are present in this verse. We have the glory of Christ here, and the Spirit of love, and the prayer is being offered up to the Father.

What I believe Paul has in mind here is that we pray and can pray for the welfare of others and the glory of Christ, we can pray for the absolute highest and best good of others because the Spirit is the Spirit of love. He, with his presence in each of our lives has caused us to love God - to love and trust Christ. He takes our minds and hearts to continually focus on Christ and Christ centred. Paul says a little earlier in this epistle in 5:4, **“and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”** He is talking about how trials work for our good and God’s glory. And the ultimate reason why is the love of God has been poured into the very depths of our souls through the Holy Spirit of God. Listen to the hymn, *My Jesus, I Love Thee*, **“My Jesus, I love thee, I know thou art mine; for thee all the follies of sin I resign; my gracious Redeemer, my Savior art thou; if ever I loved thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.”** Now why do we sing that hymn with so much passion and meaning and unashamedly? It is because the love for Jesus Christ has been poured out in our lives by the Holy Spirit of God. Our love for Christ is not a love that was generated by us but through the new birth - through the agency of the Holy Spirit of God. This love is foreign in each of us.

Now what has that to do with the Romans praying for Paul? And the answer is everything. They do not know Paul, but because the love of Christ has been poured into their hearts they can love Paul and passionately pray and love him. Right?! That is the horizontal outworking of the vertical love that we have for Christ. Listen to the words of Jesus on this, John 13:35, **“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”** There are all kinds of people who care about others and love other individuals in this world. But here Jesus says that one of the greatest evidences in the world and to the world that you are my disciples is your love for one another. And you have to conclude that this love is of such a nature and quality that it is different, and holy and pure and giving and sacrificial and feeling in nature, that is so different than anything that we have seen in the world. Well, where did this love come from that we would call one another brothers and sisters? It is came from the Spirit of love that causes us to see and revel in the love of God that he has for us, and causes us to love him, and the horizontal outcome is that we love others.

And if that is not enough, we even love and pray for those who do us hard and oppose us. Listen to Jesus again, Matthew 5:44, **“But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”** How is that possible? It is possible because

we come and pray through the merits of Christ in the power of the Spirit of love. Think of some of the toughest relationships you have; think of the individuals that have hurt you most in the present, and ask yourself: am I praying for them, not for their condemnation, but for the highest good and the glory of Christ in their lives. It is amazing the more that we have those Christ centred prayers, God starts to change our hearts and attitudes towards others. We do not want our opponents many times in our lives, and we certainly do not want them being blessed of God. This is why prayer is so difficult. it is not about us. Life is not about you - but about the glory of Christ. Again, prayer is work. It takes so much introspection and examination.

But let us see if we can get through our first point and this verse as far as prayer being work, look at what Paul says here, **“I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf.”** Look at that word “strive.” The English word does not bring out the full intent of that word. It literally means to agonize because you are straining every part of your being. And again, prayer takes work and effort. And as we engage in this striving, it is not useless, but we seek to overcome the obstacles for the glory of Christ. We realize that we have a great enemy of our souls. And to him, if he can put obstacles in our way or convince us that our prayers are useless and a waste of time, he will. A prayerless Christian is a victory in his books. And we do not wrestle against flesh and blood. Our battle is intensely spiritual. Not only do we battle against the devil but we battle against our own minds and hearts. We often are so lethargic in prayer, we are like the disciples in the Garden of Gethsamane - we just do not realize the spiritual dangers around us and in us, and also in others. We drift even when in prayer, in and out of prayer. One moment we are thinking about God and his glory and then we are somewhere else entirely. Prayer will stretch you and test you. It will cause you to agonize and use your spiritual muscles, and along with the intake of God’s Word will cause you to grow spiritually like nothing else in your life. Prayer takes concentrated effort. Prayer is real spiritual labour for the people of God.

What used to be a staple in church life was prayer and prayer meetings. They have gone by the wayside and in many churches disappeared all together. Even churches that have prayer meetings, very few show up to pray with the people of God. And many will counter that you do not have to be in a prayer meeting to pray and they are right. But really? Are you praying? A sign so often that we are not praying is that to pray with the people of God is a waste of time, waste of effort. It is too uncomfortable. Paul calls on these believers along with him to strive in prayer for him through the love of the Spirit and for the glory of Christ. The call for you today in all your busyness and all the good things that you are involved with in your life to pray. Can you think of anything more important that communing with the God of all the universe? What a privilege prayer is when you realize the enormity of who God is and who we are. God is necessary in your life so prayer is necessary in our lives. So let us put some effort into prayer and seek to do as Philippians 4:6-7 says, **“do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”** Let us seek to come as dependant children and do as 1 Peter 5:7 says, **“casting all your anxieties**

on him, because he cares for you.” Let pray like Paul prayed in Ephesians 6:18, “praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints.” Or as Colossians 4:2 says, “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.” Don’t give up. Don’t give in. Persevere in praying for the glory of Christ!