

January 4, 2009

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

Continue Steadfastly in Prayer

Colossians 4:1 – 6

Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven. Colossians 2:1

Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. Colossians 2:2 Paul says we are to **continue steadfastly in prayer**. Other translations say **'be devoted to prayer** or **devote yourselves to prayer**. It means to be **constant in prayer** or **faithful in prayer**. It gives the sense of being faithfully devoted or dedicated to prayer as an appointed task, and working hard at it. The interesting thing about this word is that five of the ten New Testament uses apply to prayer. Besides Colossians 4:2 we read:

'These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to [continuing steadfast in] prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.' Acts 1:14

'They were continually devoting themselves to [continuing steadfast in] the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.' Acts 2:42

'But we will devote ourselves to [continuing steadfast in] prayer and to the ministry of the word.' Acts 6:4

'rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to [continuing steadfast in] prayer' Romans 12:12

It seems clear that **the normal Christian life one that looks like continuing steadfast in prayer**. And so you should ask, **'Am I devoted to to this thing? Am I continuing steadfast in prayer?'** It does not mean that prayer is all you do – any more than being devoted to your wife means that all you do is hang out with your wife. But your devotion to her affects everything in your life and causes you to build your life around that devotion. So being devoted to prayer doesn't mean that you spend 24/7 on your knees in your prayer closet. **It does mean that there will be a regular habit of praying that looks like continuing steadfast in prayer.** There is no set formula and everyone's prayer life will look different. **But continuing steadfast in prayer looks different from not continuing steadfast in prayer.** And the Lord to whom you are praying knows the difference. You can fool a lot of people, but you can't fool God. In the end, we have to answer the question: Have I been devoted to prayer? Is there a regular habit of praying in my life that can honestly be called **'continuing steadfast in prayer?'**

Praying only when you are under pressure would not qualify as a habitual practice of being devoted to prayer. Praying only at meal times, or before you go to sleep may be a habit, but is it the mark of a life that is continuing steadfast in prayer? Attending the church prayer meeting once in a while doesn't really fit the definition of continuing steadfast in prayer – nor is praying silently along with the pastor once a week on Sunday. I wouldn't say that you shouldn't pray like this – But if that is all you do, you are not meeting the criteria for continuing steadfast in prayer. I think we would agree that the expectation here is something much deeper for followers of Christ when it says, **'Continue steadfast in prayer.'**

A question that naturally arises when we talk about prayer is 'If God is sovereign and omniscient, why do we need to pray? After all, He knows the end from the beginning – He ordains that His will be done on earth – nothing can thwart His sovereign design – so why pray for things that will happen or not happen anyway without our praying?' And I would answer that yes God is sovereign and omniscient, and omnipotent, and He can do anything He wants. And when you think about it – it wouldn't make sense to pray to anyone that was less than omniscient or omnipotent. But He has nevertheless ordained that we participate in His sovereign design through prayer. John Wesley was convinced of this when he wrote, **'God will do nothing but in answer to prayer.'** **In short, prayer is God's design.**

We see this all throughout Scripture, but particularly in the life of the apostle Paul. In Acts chapter 9, Paul, *breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord*, was in a lather to get to Damascus where he knew he could find some of these disciples and put them away. But God had different plans – and His plan was to knock him to the ground and blind him and then have him led like a child to Damascus where he laid in bed blind for three days without eating or drinking – and then have a guy named Ananias pray for him.

And the question naturally arises, couldn't God simply open his eyes? After all, He was the one who blinded him in the first place. It seem that happened without prayer, so couldn't God do the same without involving Ananias? The answer is obviously, and emphatically, 'Yes'. **But the fact remains that He didn't.** He got Ananias, fearful about this guy who had a reputation for evil, to go to his house and pray for Paul. *Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, Ananias. And he said, Here I am, Lord. And the Lord said to him, Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.* Acts 9:10-12 And He answered Ananias' prayer. **And in His answering the prayer He inspired and bringing about the desired outcome, God got the glory and Paul got his eyes opened.** In other words, Prayer is God's design in order that we might participate in His purpose on earth and He would get all the glory.

Our praying gives God the glory. God says: *'call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me.* Psalm 50:15 Our praying to God to deliver us affords Him the opportunity to glorify Himself in and through our prayers. In fact you might say that the end of prayer is the glory of God. That is, our prayers make God look as glorious and all-powerful as He really is. *Whatever you ask in My name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.* John 14:13 I suspect that many of our prayers that seem to go unanswered **are prayers that in the end do not bring God the glory He deserves.** The *whatever* in John 14 is not an unqualified *whatever*. It is a *whatever* that brings Him glory. It is not as though He designed prayer so that He might jump through our hoops – rather that our prayers would line up with His will and purpose on the earth so that He might get all the glory and honor. And when He gets all the glory and honor – we get joy.

Prayer makes our joy full. In a multitude of ways, all through the Bible, God tells His people to pray. *'Call on Me and I will answer you.'* Jeremiah 33:3 *'Ask and it shall be given to you; seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened for you.'* Matthew 7:7 *you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will hear you.* Jeremiah 29:12 How is it that in the face of such unmistakable and generous invitations to prayer that our prayer lives are so often shallow and trite? I think it is in part that we do not understand that full joy is found only in the face of God. We do not fully grasp the design and intent of prayer, and use prayer either as a last resort or to call down more creature comforts. Jesus told His disciples: *Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.* John 16:24 Prayer *is* asking for things that we desire or need – but too often we do not understand that our deepest need is God Himself and our highest joy is wrapped up in Him. He built us in such a way that our deepest desires can only be fulfilled in Him. But we end up trying to use prayer like Aladdin's lamp – rubbing the lamp till the genie pops out and grants our three wishes. God our Father loves us with a massive love that delights in granting our requests for what He knows is in our best and highest interests, and for those things that will fill us with lasting joy. As a father myself, I know that I delight in my children asking for those things I know will bring them real joy and I am eager to grant those requests.

Because **prayer is also something God delights in.** Since it is God's will that we pray so that we might participate in His purpose, that our joy might be full, that must mean at the very least that God not only expects but delights in being asked for things that He intends to give. Proverbs 15:8 tells us that *'The prayer of the upright is His delight'*. In fact, He delights so much in answering the prayers that He inspires that He tells us in Isaiah 65:24: *Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear'*. He loves to hear our requests so much that He commands us to give Him no rest from our prayers: *On your walls, O Jerusalem, I have set watchmen; all the day and all the night they shall never be silent. You who put the Lord in remembrance, take no rest, and give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it a praise in the earth.* Isaiah 62:6-7 What a magnificent invitation! See if you can exhaust the limitless God!

Prayer is also a gauge of our dependence upon God. At the center of what prayer is all about is the sense of our dependence upon God for things. Praying for something means that we cannot get what we want on our own and so we ask. **To the extent we recognize our own need for God – to that extent we will pray.** Self-confident people don't pray. Proud people do not pray. Self-sufficient people don't pray. It is only those who recognize their desperate need for divine intervention who pray. God has ordained that we pray because He wants us to see Him as supremely sufficient and to see ourselves as absolutely needy. God has ordained things so that we would look to Him to satisfy all our wants and needs; that we would discover Him as the fountainhead of joy and satisfaction. His name, God Almighty, **means** the All-Sufficient One – the God who supplies all our needs. And the means to get the supply is prayer. That is why truly needy people pray. **No other spiritual exercise is a truer gauge of your walk than your prayer life.**

In a scene from *Shadowlands*, a film based on the life of C.S. Lewis, Lewis has returned to Oxford from London, where he has just been married to Joy Gresham, an American woman, in a private Episcopal ceremony performed at her hospital bedside. She is dying from cancer, and, through the struggle with her illness, she and Lewis have been discovering the depth of their love for each other. As Lewis arrives at the college where he teaches, he is met by Harry Harrington, an Episcopal priest, who asks what news there is. Lewis hesitates; then, deciding to speak of the marriage and not the cancer, he says, "Ah, good news, I think, Harry. Yes, good news." Harrington, not aware of the marriage and thinking that Lewis is referring to Joy's medical situation, replies, "I know how hard you've been praying Now, God is answering your prayer." **"That's not why I pray, Harry," Lewis responds. "I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God; it changes me."**

So ***continue steadfastly in prayer.*** That means you ***pray often and you pray regularly.*** Prayer ought not to be a hit-or-miss affair. It must not be regulated by our feelings or our circumstances or our situation. I remember a song from my childhood that went: 'Every time I feel the Spirit moving in my heart I will pray.' The problem was, I didn't often feel the Spirit move so I didn't pray. Prayer was never meant to be haphazard or spotty. As we noted earlier – in five out of the ten times this phrase: ***continue steadfastly*** is found in the New Testament, it is found in connection with prayer. I believe that this means that we must be intentional about prayer. ***We take steps to see that it happens.*** We are not haphazard about things that really matter in our lives. When is the last time you forgot to eat? How is it that you are so careful not to miss a day of work but missing out on your prayer time doesn't cause you any anxiety?

Paul says ***Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it.*** This implies that in praying there is the possibility that something will happen to blindside or ambush us – either to stop our prayers or to keep us from praying. Being watchful in prayer means that you battle against the distraction and hindrances that are devil-designed to keep us prayer less. Samuel Chadwick once wrote: ***The one concern of the devil is to keep Christians from praying. He fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work and prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil, mocks at our wisdom, but he trembles when we pray.*** He knows, even if we do not, that prayer is God's design to bring the power of heaven to bear on all the works of the devil to destroy them. He knows that ***without prayer*** – we can do nothing against him. And he knows that ***when we pray*** – the power of God comes down and changes things. So being watchful in prayer means that we are intentional about prayer. ***That is, we do what we must to pray.***

E. M. Bounds once wrote to Homer W. Hodge a strong encouragement to prayer: ***'I am trying to give myself more and more to prayer. Our only hope is in God. I do sympathize with you and pray for you and hold you I loving affection. Rejoice that you are well situated. God will save you from your buffeting devil. The devil is a great help heavenward. The worse agents he has the better we will get on. Pray more and more; keep at the four a.m. hour. God will be for it; and the devil against it. Pray on, you can't pray too much; you may pray too little. The devil will compromise with you to pray as the common standard: on going to bed and a little prayer in the morning. Hell will be full if we don't do better for God than that. Pray, pray, pray, pray always, rejoice evermore; pray without ceasing and in everything give thanks.'***

Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. I believe Paul's admonition here and also in Philippians 4:6 – ***do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God*** – means at the very least thankfulness to God for loving us and saving us in the first place; thankfulness for hearing and responding to our need in the second; and then thankfulness for what He is about to do in response to our prayers.

This morning, my aim is to encourage you to pray this coming year like you've never prayed before. I have the sense that we as a church are too easily satisfied and content where we are and I am praying that God would grant us the gracious gift of utter dependency on Him and a desperate energy to pray. I am praying that we would pray because we can't help ourselves. That we would pray because we know that we are helpless. That we would pray because the need flows out of us all the time, waking and sleeping. That we would pray because the power of God is made perfect in our weakness. That our praying would release the power of heaven on earth, give God glory and fill us with joy.

Our gracious heavenly Father.

We thank You for being a prayer-hearing God. Grant that we would cherish this gift: that the Master of the Universe would hear and answer His people's prayers and meet all their needs. Make us those who are devoted to prayer and to do what we must to pray. Shatter our prayer-hindering self-confidence and make us utterly dependent on Your mighty power. Fill our hearts and mouths with prayer to You and increase our faith in the truth that our praying brings in Your kingdom. Forgive us Lord, for our neglect and indifference to prayer. Flood our hearts with thankfulness for Your great salvation and strengthen us to continue steadfastly in prayer so that our joy would be full and Your name would be glorified among the nations, we pray in the powerful name of Jesus our Lord, Amen.

***May the Lord bless you and keep you
and make His face shine upon you.
May the Lord be gracious unto you;
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you
and give you peace.***