

Strength in Numbers: Praying For One Another (March 20, 2011)

This year our overall annual church theme is Living Life Together.

It is our contention that most people in our church have lots of acquaintances. I know that I have some 290 Facebook friends and who knows how many people I am connected to through LinkedIn. But how many people do I have (do you have) that fit the litmus test for friend based on the Bible. Consider the following:

- ✓ **Proverbs 17:17** A friend loves at all times, And a brother is born for adversity.
- ✓ **Proverbs 18:24** A man of *too many* friends *comes* to ruin, But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.
- ✓ **Proverbs 27:10** Do not forsake your own friend or your father's friend, And do not go to your brother's house in the day of your calamity; Better is a neighbor who is near than a brother far away.

How many of us have friends that are closer than family?

How many of us have a place to go when we are hurting and suffering?

Who is in our life that has locked arms beside us and gone to war with us?

We are concerned that at least a portion of you would say that you do not have friends like this. As a result, we want to make it as easy as possible for you to develop friendships that accurately represent these biblical truths.

- Part of making it easy is helping you understand some of the core elements of friendship. After all, if your idea of having a friend is simply who will make you happy, or who will give you what you want then you have the wrong idea of biblical friendship.
- Last week, P.V. taught us about hospitality. He helped us see that part of being a friend is inviting people into our home and spending time together – even in the midst of our very busy lives. Rather than finding people that are going to serve us, being a biblical friend is finding ways to serve them.

This morning we are going to consider a second element – Strength in numbers: Praying for One Another.

With that in mind please turn in your Bibles to Colossians 4:2.

As you are getting there let me say first that if a requirement for speaking this morning is that I handled this area of my life perfectly then I would have had to tell Pastor Viars that he needed to assign this sermon to someone else.

- So I am in the trenches with you. I need this text; I need this sermon just like you do. In fact, maybe I need it more because I have to hear it three times!
- Since, I prepared for this message on Tuesday, it has been convicting me and challenging me all week.

- My prayer is that we will all get to a better place as a result of thinking about this important spiritual discipline.

Okay commercial is over. Colossians 4 [Read the text]. Let's think together why prayer is such an important part of friendship.

Sometimes the issues we face cannot be fixed.

- I have shared before that I am not very handy. It is not that I don't want to be, but I have tried enough things to know that handyman type activities are not my strong suit.
- But I do have some friends that are very handy – they can fix just about anything. When one of those problems occurs ... that problem can be solved.
 - o My car can be fixed.
 - o The repair in my home can be fixed.
 - o My computer can be fixed.
 - o In fact, there are many different issues and challenges that can be fixed.

But other times in life we face challenges where “fixing it” is not an option.

- I have the privilege of teaching the young couples ABF class at 9:30. I have done so for several years. Sometimes there is a young couple in our church that would like to have a baby, but for one reason or another has not been able to conceive. I cannot fix that. I cannot take that pain away.
- We have people in our church, here today, that are receiving treatment for cancer. I cannot fix that. I cannot take that pain away either.
- Stephanie and I have had friends in very rocky marriages and I cannot fix that nor can we take the hurt away.
- I have been in situations where people have lost a father, a child, a grandfather and I cannot fix that either.
- There are singles among us that would love to be married. I cannot fix that ... even though I have on occasion made a few efforts along those lines. I know more than ever that I cannot fix that.
- We know of families whose grown children have walked away from the Lord and they are grieving over the decisions of their children. I cannot fix that.

I could have gone on another 10 minutes but you get the point, there are many times when we cannot fix what is wrong in the life of our friends. But I can do something very valuable, very helpful, and very biblical. I can pray.

With the time remaining I would like to organize my thoughts around 3 points found in the text this morning.

I. Be devoted to prayer (v. 2)

Since we are in chapter 4 it is probably wise to trace quickly what Colossians is about.

- Paul wrote Colossians while under house arrest in Rome (he had been in some form of prison or house arrest for several years).
- Paul did not actually start the church in Colosse, but rather had sent others to preach the gospel there.

- In the meantime, there arose in the church some questions about Jesus.
- So Paul writes to answer those questions and correct any error. After all, you can be wrong about a lot of things in life, but you cannot be wrong about Jesus.
 - o So the work of Jesus is highlighted throughout the epistle.
 - o Colossians also highlights the supremacy of Jesus
 - o Based on the person and work of Jesus we are instructed to live in certain ways.

One of those ways is that we are to be devoted to prayer. Let's consider first,

A. The importance of devotion and commitment (v. 2)

Not surprisingly, this word explains the kind of attention, commitment, and passion that we are to bring to the activity of prayer.

In fact, this word is often associated with prayer:

- **Acts 1:14** These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with *the* women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.
- **Acts 2:42** They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.
- **Acts 6:4** "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."
- **Romans 12:12** rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer,

In other words, a mark of the early church was a commitment, a devotion, to prayer. Prayer is not something that you do after everything else has been done, but rather prayer is one of the first priorities. One dictionary explains that devotion means to continue to do something with intense effort. The concept of intense effort is seen in all these passages, but even when the term is not used with prayer the idea of intense effort is clear.

- **Acts 2:46** Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart,
- **Romans 13:6** For because of this you also pay taxes, for *rulers* are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing.

If you and I are really going to give Jesus first place and demonstrate by our lives that we appreciate and value all that he did for us on the cross then we must give some significant effort to the matter of prayer.

- According to some researchers, Christians spend less than 5 minutes per day praying.
- I am not sure that is a good definition of "intense effort."

We are talking about continuing in something with intense effort right?

- The journey is going on. An article posted on CNN just before the games began explained how CBS was wondering whether so many people would watch the games at work that they have to shut it down! Estimates were around 1,000,000.
 - o The productivity of the American work force was 50% at best last week. Why? Because people were committing some effort to watch the games!

- I admit that these games are fun to watch ... the last second shots, the big upsets, it is just exciting.
- But there are people more fired up over these three weeks and whether their team will win than they are about the things of God.
- They know how to give intense effort ... they are just giving it over the wrong thing.
- I am preparing to run the Indy mini this year. I am the type of person that does not just want to finish ... I want to run a respectable time.
 - So training for the event requires a certain amount of intense effort that I need to bring to the process. So I have to answer that same question.
 - Do I care more about whether I can beat a 1:45 min goal (that is the time I would like to run) more than about the things of God?
- What about you? As you think about your passions, the things that you are devoted to, and the things that you give intense effort toward ... is prayer one of those?

You need prayer ... so do I. The text continues ...

B. Keep alert while you pray (v. 2)

This verse also explains that you and I are to be alert in prayer.

- Normally, this word is used in contexts that have something to do with standing guard or keeping watch during a military shift.

Implication #1: I would take this to mean at least this ... if you fall asleep within 30 seconds of the time you started praying, then you are not keeping alert.

- The disciples struggled with that. In the garden right before Jesus' arrest the disciples were encouraged to pray (maybe they did for a short time), but soon sleep took over.

Implication #2: That might not be all that this command is hinting at - there may also be a sense of being mindful of the return of Jesus.

- In other words, prayer is closely connected with the reality that Jesus is coming again and he will make all things right.

Implication #3: But maybe there is a sense in which this portion of the command is explained, "Informed prayer is likely to be more purposeful, personal, and powerful." In other words, there is something about the focus given to the Lord and the people you are praying for.

Let me illustrate it this way:

- Many of us (I put myself in that category) have been caught not listening very well.
 - I have been reading the paper, opening the mail, thinking about a task that I have yet to finish, or pondering some issue that has yet to be resolved, while either my wife or one of my kids was talking to me.
 - In other words, I was not very alert and thus I have occasionally given answers to questions that don't even make sense. Question: "What would you like for dinner?" Answer "Yes." Question: "Can I have a \$100?" Answer: "Sure." Question: "What would you like to do this weekend?" Answer: "San Francisco" [we are going to a counseling conference later this fall.]

- I admit it, I have been caught red handed not paying a lick of attention and not being focused.
- Sometimes I wonder if that is the attention we give when we pray. Again, learn from me. I have on more than one occasion listened to someone pray and the only words I heard were “Let’s pray” and “Amen.”

I think this command is saying something like this to us ...

- When you pray for Karen’s cancer pray as if you mean it. If you are asking God that he would pour out his grace on Karen then pray as if you want it to happen.
- When you pray for Tom to take a step in his walk with Christ that you are actually thinking about Tom rather than the 100 other things that you needed to do ASAP.
- When you pray that your pastors would be faithful, wise, and godly in all their dealings then I hope that you are actually thinking of us.
- If we were honest this morning, that is the way we pray when we are hurting.
 - I have been on my knees begging God for a request
 - I have, with tears running down my face, asked God to intervene and to rescue me. [Cross Country in High School]
 - I have, with great passion, asked God to keep me from foolishness.
 - So if I would pray that way about me, why wouldn’t I be praying that way for you? If you would pray that way about you, why wouldn’t you pray that way for me?

You see, that is the way we pray for our friends. We want God to rescue them, keep them from sin, give them blessing, and to intervene in their life.

Acquaintances, possibly even Facebook friends, get little or no prayer at all.

- They certainly do not get prayer with this kind of intensity.

Let me push the pause button for a moment...

- Are you that kind of friend?
- Do you have anyone in your life that is that kind of friend to you?
 - If you would answer these questions “no” then I want to encourage you to take a step of growth beginning today.
 - Be this kind of friend.
 - Pray for people in your ABF with an alertness worthy of you actually wanting God to do something about it.
 - If you don’t have an ABF find one.
 - Pray for people you serve with. Whether in Children’s ministries or over at the community center.

Don’t wait for others ... be this friend. The text adds another element

C. Our prayer must be made with thanksgiving (v. 2)

Sometimes we can be fooled in the midst of our struggles that we actually don’t need to pray because there is nothing that is going to change anyway.

- We will never be able to have kids.

- Our cancer will not go into remission.
- Our brother, cousin, father, or mother will never come to Christ
- Our children will not come back to the Lord.
- Or in Paul's case, after sitting in either prison or under house arrest for the previous 4 years, he will never be released from custody.

Instead of succumbing to these thoughts and the powerlessness in prayer, this passage reminds us to pray with thanksgiving.

- We serve a living Jesus.
- Jesus meets us in our struggles, he comforts us in our pain, and sometimes (like the handy men who fix my junk) he fixes my problem.
- Jesus has the power and authority to help you while you suffer and to deliver you from suffering.

The church in Colosse had not properly understood the central role that Jesus played in all of life. So Paul speaks often about Jesus. Here is a small sampling:

- Prays in 1:10 that they would walk worthy, pleasing Jesus in all respects
- Explains that Jesus is creator and sustainer and that he is to have first place in everything 1:18
- Teaches every person so that they can be mature/completer in Christ 1:28
- Christ is the location of all the riches and treasures of wisdom and knowledge 2:3
- Jesus made you alive and took your debt and nailed it to the cross 2:13-15
- Seek the things above, where Christ is 3:1
- The ground is level at the foot of the cross 3:11
- Do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus 3:17

So we pray with thanksgiving knowing that Jesus is on the throne, that our hope (if we are a genuine follower of Jesus is secure, and that he is more than able to grant any request according to his will. [Give gospel ... stats say many people pray who don't believe in Jesus])

Praying with thanksgiving does not mean that God will give us what we want exactly as we asked for it.

- God is not a genie offering 1,000 wishes.
- But we can give thanks that God will grant to us and to the friends we are praying for exactly what he wants according to his will and that God will provide the necessary sustaining grace to be able to endure it.

The application is pretty clear.

- You and I need to take a step of growth by becoming much more intense in our praying.
- We need to pray with an alert mind, rather than a mind that in 30 seconds will be asleep.
- We need to pray thinking about the people we are praying for and asking for requests with a sense of urgency.
- At the same time, instead of struggling with hopelessness we remember Jesus and thus can pray with thanksgiving.
- So let me encourage you to take a baby step this week.

- Pick 2 people that you are going to pray for ... and I mean pray for.
- Make sure you know something about them.
- Pray with a commitment to those people as if you genuinely care whether God does something in their life or not.

So the command is clear, be devoted to prayer. But that immediately raises a separate question that is, at least partially, answered in the text. What should we pray for?

II. Be devoted to praying for the right requests (vv. 3-4)

I think we are pretty familiar with the typical requests ... issues of health, safety, protection, success in school/work.

- Those issues are legitimate prayer requests, but the danger is these questions become the sum total of what we ask pray for and what we pray about.

In vv. 3-4 we have two prayer requests from Paul. Just by way of review let's not forget that the reasons Paul is in jail, humanly speaking (v. 4 gives us the real reason), are

- (1) the Jews hate him and sometimes Roman governors did stuff to make people happy and
- (2) the Roman governors were thinking that with his popularity they would be able to get a significant bribe

In other words, he is locked up because people don't like him. So imagine all the things that Paul could ask people to pray about.

- Justice, his health, his protection, his financial challenges, etc.
- Here is what he asks for:

A. Open door for the gospel (v. 3)

The first request is that doors of opportunity to proclaim the greatness of Jesus would be opened. What a request.

- He is not complaining
- He is not looking for them to get him out of his mess
- He does not ask specifically that they ask God to deliver him
- He simply asks for an open door for the gospel

Is that what we are looking for? Is that what we are praying our friends would have? The second request is the next logical implication of God answering the first.

B. A willingness to use that open door as effectively as possible (v. 4)

In other words, Paul is not simply after an open door, but also that he would walk through that door.

- I know there have been times in my life where a door seemed opened but out of fear, busyness, or lack of concern I did not speak as I should.
- Paul makes this request multiple times so maybe there was a sense in his own life where he knew that he might have the same tendency without the Lord's strength in his life.

In fact, to the church at Ephesus he wrote,

Ephesians 6:18-20 ¹⁸ With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints, ¹⁹ and *pray* on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in *proclaiming* it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.

At this point I would like to broaden our scope just a bit. I would like us to consider some of the requests that Paul prays for the churches.

C. Other requests based on Paul's prayers

This list is certainly not comprehensive, but I think it gives us a small picture of the kinds of things that friends pray for.

1. Abound in love

1 Thessalonians 3:12 and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also *do* for you;

The Lord understands that we struggle with Loving God with our whole heart and loving others as ourselves.

- But the response to the challenge is not to quit.
- Instead, it is to recognize that we cannot do this on our own and to rely on the Lord Jesus to increase our love for one another and for all people.

This is part of our humility and dependence upon God is represented by our prayers.

- Do we get that we cannot simply grow spiritual without the Lord's help. Or, is Jesus just good for salvation and then I can handle the rest?

Being a godly friend involves praying for others to grow in their love.

2. That you would be blameless

1 Thessalonians 5:23 ²³ Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Funerals are a vivid reminder that life is not all there is. In fact, this life now is not even our best life.

- Recognizing the significance of an eternity with the Lord Jesus the apostle Paul prays that God will sanctify them so that they will be complete at the return of Jesus.
- In other words, Paul is praying for spiritual growth.

3. Understand God's will

Colossians 1:9-10 For this reason also, since the day we heard *of it*, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰ so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please *Him* in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;

We come back to the book of Colossians for this request. The point seems pretty clear.

- We need God's help understanding God's will.
- Paul prays that God's people would understand that so that they could live in a way that pleases God.

As we think about how Paul prayed we see that many of his requests come under the heading of progressive sanctification. Open doors for the gospel, a willingness to take advantage of those open doors, abounding love, blameless life, and a greater understanding of God's will.

That raises some helpful application questions:

- Do I pray that God would help my friends take a step of growth?
- Do I pray that God would give them open doors for the gospel in their workplace, in their neighborhood, and in their families and then that God would give them the boldness to take advantage of them?
- Do I pray that my friends love for God and others would grow?
- Do people pray that for me?

Colossians 4 is calling us to something profound. It is calling us to pray with a measure of intensity and effort. It is calling us to be alert, focused, and concerned about what God's answer might be. It is calling us to pray not solely for health, safety, protection, and success, but greater likeness to the Lord Jesus.

There is one more element found in this passage that is worthy of our time and focus.

III. Remember that prayer is a significant part of your ministry to your friends (v. 3)

We can all get caught in the trap where we don't know what to say. We can't fix it so to speak. But please hear this...prayer is important. James Dunn, in his commentary, says is well,

Paul had no embarrassment in understanding prayer as asking for things and on behalf of people (Jesus had so taught, e.g., Matt. 7:7–11/Luke 11:9–13). Such prayer expressed not a selfishness or acquisitiveness, but a recognition of dependence on God for the opportunities to serve him and the enabling to do so. So Paul does not hesitate, rather is eager to ask for prayer for himself and his work. (James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon : A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1996), 263.

IF TIME ... I don't think I have shared this story publically before, but it is an interesting one. Back in the late 90s when I was in seminary my parents came to this church for the counseling conference. They were so encouraged by the whole event that my mom started praying that I would come be part of this church. There are lots of little details that go with this story that I don't have time to share but let's just put it this way. Sometimes God answers "yes, and more." My parents have been huge supporters in their prayers.

So there is no shame in praying or asking people to pray. In fact, it is one of the ways that you can be like God.

A. It is one of the current ministries of the Spirit

Romans 8:26 ²⁶ In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for *us* with groanings too deep for words.

This is a wonderful passage reminding us that when we don't know what to say ... the Spirit speaks on our behalf.

B. It is one of the current ministries of the resurrected Jesus

Hebrews 7:23-25 The *former* priests, on the one hand, existed in greater numbers because they were prevented by death from continuing, ²⁴ but Jesus, on the other hand, because He continues forever, holds His priesthood permanently. ²⁵ Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.

What a comfort it is to know that the living Jesus intercedes. Our savior is our intercessor.

C. It provides a wonderful opportunity to celebrate God's work together

I don't have time to unpack the ways in which I believe that Paul's prayer in Col 4 was answered, they include at least:

- (1) the gospel went to Caesar's own house
 - (2) countless people became followers of Christ as a result of Paul's ministry and
 - (3) Paul was released from Roman custody to carry out ministry unhindered.
- It is going to be enjoyable to watch God open the right opportunity for the next few years. Will a property become available at Purdue? Will those properties be tied up in issues we don't even know about yet? Will God provide a different opportunity?
 - I don't have answers to those questions, but I do know this – it will be a time to celebrate when God makes those things known.

We have covered a lot of ground this morning. So let me end with just a few practical suggestions to get you started if you don't have much of a prayer life right now.

- (1) Keep a notecard file on the people you pray for. It will help you be alert and focused as you pray for them.
- (2) Do not limit your prayer to a quiet time. Plan for 1-2 minutes several times a day where you pray for just one or two people.
- (3) Pray for spiritual growth in addition to the other concerns

Let's take a step of growth in Living life together by being devoted to prayer.