
Prayer for Ministry

Romans 15:30-33

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Introduction

This evening we're going to be looking at Paul's petition for prayer as it related to his ministry in Romans 15:30-33. Remember the purpose of this series is to learn what he prayed for, what were his priorities, what beliefs shaped his prayers so that we can adopt those same biblical priorities for our prayers. And praying for gospel ministry was definitely a priority for Paul.

As I prepared this message and accessed my own prayer life it made me aware that not enough of my time in prayer is focused on our ministries and their specific needs. What became obvious after studying this petition was Paul requested prayer because he knew that it was at the center of all gospel ministries so prayer must also be a vital part of the well being of our ministries at the Chapel.

The theme of this message is that prayers for ministry are to be the consistent response of our unity in Christ and our love of the gospel. There are four lessons from this text that I hope will inform and transform our praying as it relates to ministry.

- First, Prayer for ministry is to be offered fervently and persistently.
- Second, our prayers should focus on the specific needs of ministries.
- Third, our prayers for ministry should have a long-range vision in mind.
- Fourth, our prayers for ministry are always in submission to the will of God.

Prayer for Ministry: Its Theological Foundation

Before we get to Paul's petition we need to go back to the beginning of the chapter to set the theological and the ministry context that leads up to it. Paul's concern was for their unity as God's people. It was because of their unity in Christ that Paul requests and values their prayers. The church at Rome was made up of people that wouldn't from a strictly human perspective be unified, the rich and poor, slaves and masters but especially between Jewish and Gentile converts. Throughout this letter he's been instructing and exhorting them about their unity that is grounded in the gospel. His exhortation for unity also has direct implications for us. Like the church at Rome we are a body of believers whose differences of opinions and individual preferences can become the soil where disunity festers and grows. Disunity will not only negatively impact personal relationships but whole ministries and it definitely hinders our prayers.

This is what he writes concerning their unity in Christ in verses 1-8, *"We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God of endurance and*

encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy."

These verses form the theological foundation for his petition. He instructs them that Christ is the savior of both Jew and Gentile. Christ saving work is what unites them as God's people for God's glory.

While Jewish converts believed in Jesus as the messiah some also held that following the Mosaic Law was also necessary for the Christian. Paul's exhortation to bear with the "failings of the weak" centered on matters of conscience concerning the Law's dietary restrictions and holy days. They were making judgments and causing disunity because others were not adhering to their flawed ideas and restrictions concerning the Law.

But Paul drew a clear line of separation between the Old and the New Covenants. Their unity in Christ has torn down all the old barriers that separated them because of the Laws commands concerning food, drink and holy days. This is also a challenge for us. Do we allow biblical non-essentials to take root and cause divisions? Do our personal preferences and subjective desires become things that are so prized that we allow them to erode our unity both personally and within ministries? We should always be seeking to prefer one another in love so that we will be bound together in peace and harmony.

Their Unity and Purpose in Christ (5-6)

In verses 5-6 Paul prays that God will make them of one mind. *"May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."* He knows people resist having their personal convictions called into question. It is by God's grace that prejudices of the heart are overcome so that mutual respect and acceptance of different viewpoints will foster unity and God glorifying worship.

Their Togetherness in Christ (7-13)

He concludes his instruction on unity in verses 7-13 commanding them to welcome one another because Christ has welcomed them. He then quotes four OT passages that speak directly to Christ being the hope of the Gentiles. He wants to reinforce in the minds of his readers that the salvation of the Gentiles was always the trajectory of the OT scriptures.

Prayer for Ministry: Its Missional Context

Now that he's completed his pastoral instructions he turns the discussion to his ministry to the Gentiles. He begins by expressing his confidence in their maturity to handle the difficult issues he has previously raised. He writes in verse 14, *"I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another."*

Minister to the Gentiles

Even though he believes that they are *“filled with all knowledge”* nevertheless even mature believers need to be reminded of the truth of the gospel. So he says, *“But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God.”*

Notice that Paul describes his mission of proclaiming the gospel as a *“priestly service”* and his gentile converts as an offering. He seems to be suggesting that the OT ordinances of the priesthood with its sacrifice’s have found its fulfillment in his ministry of the gospel. The outcome of his gospel ministry is that believing Gentiles have been made acceptable to God therefore making their offering also acceptable and holy. So he is right to be proud of his ministry to the Gentiles because it originates in Christ not in himself.

He attributes the success of his ministry in verses 18-19 solely to the power of Jesus Christ. He writes, *“For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed,”* God gave him the ministry of bringing Gentiles to obedience (saving them) by preaching the gospel. But now his ministry to the Gentiles has been completed in the areas surrounding the eastern Mediterranean. Paul is an evangelist and church planter. This is why he says in verse 20, *“I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation”*. His desire to proclaim the gospel and plant churches in the unreached regions of the Gentile world is at the heart of his petition in verses 30-33.

The Basis of Paul’s Request

Paul now describes the immediate circumstances his ministry is facing. He is carefully and purposeful prioritizing his next steps and future ministry plans.

There are four facts that sum up his current situation and desire for future outreach in verses 22 to 29.

- First, he makes clear that his missionary endeavors are now complete in the regions of the eastern Mediterranean. He writes, *“I no longer have any room for work in these regions”*
- Second, he desires to finally visit Rome and be helped by them as he travels to Spain. He says, *“... since I have longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain and to be helped on my journey there by you,”*
- Third, he describes his present journey to take the monetary contributions from the gentile churches to aid the saints in Jerusalem. He writes, *“I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.”*
- Fourth, that he would come to them as Christ’s divinely chosen agent to bless them and to be blessed by them. *I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.*

Paul’s Petition for Ministry

Based upon these facts and the bond they have in Christ he now makes his petition.

In verses 30 to 33 Paul writes, *“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, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. May the God of peace be with you all. Amen.”*

There are four lessons we can draw from this short petition as it relates to how we pray for our ministries here at the Chapel.

Lesson 1. Prayer for Ministry is to be Offered Fervently and Persistently

The first lesson is that we are to pray for ministry fervently and persistently. Paul begins his petition with strong emotional language. *“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,”* When I read these verses in other translations like the NKJ and the NIV I was struck by the urgency and passion of his request. The NKJ renders it *“Now I beg you, brethren...strive together with me in prayers to God for me,”* the NIV reads, *“I urge you, brothers and sisters...to join me in my **struggle** by praying to God for me,”* Even though he has never met them he addresses them with strong affection because they are in union with him in Christ. They are after all his brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Their Shared Experience

Paul grounds his request in their shared Christian experience when he says, *“I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ ...”* He's saying: If you have believed and submitted to Jesus as Lord and Savior and desire to see his kingdom expand throughout the world, then pray for me and my ministry. And if you have experienced *“the love of the Spirit”* that fills and empowers you then fervent and persistent prayer for gospel ministry will be the genuine expression of the Spirit's work in your life. Essentially he's saying because we share in the blessings of the gospel, then you will pray for my ministry and me.

Their Shared Struggle

He goes on in the second half of this sentence to express the intensity of the prayers he wants them to offer for his ministry. He says, *“...strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf,”* The emphasis on striving in prayer or as the NIV puts it “struggling” is to be a mark of the normal Christian life. Paul understands that real prayer has an element of struggle associated with it. When we pray for ministry we enter into spiritual warfare.

Dan's message this morning about the “Parable of the Sower” reinforces why Paul is using the concept of struggling in prayer. Satan is at work to destroy or take away the seed of the gospel that Paul has been sowing.

Paul understood that when we engage in prayer for the gospel ministry we are engaged in spiritual warfare. How will people be won and grow in Christ when Satan and the powers of this age have blinded them? The most formidable weapon God gives us to that end is fervent and persistent prayer for gospel ministries.

Lesson 2. Prayer Should Focus on Ministries Specific Needs

The second lesson comes from the fact that Paul's petitions were never just vague generalizations. Paul's requests were specific and tied to his vision of what God has called him to do. First he requests that he would be kept safe from unbelievers. He writes, "*...strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea,*" Paul had already stated that he was on his way to Jerusalem to bring the gift from the Gentile churches to aid the poor saints in Judea. This connects back to Paul's earlier instruction for unity between Jew and Gentile. There were many unconverted Jews who believed Paul was an apostate. They thought he was trying to overthrow the Mosaic Law and Temple worship by his proclamation of Jesus's death and resurrection.

We experience this same opposition to gospel ministry from unbelievers today and it's growing in its intensity. Unbelievers willful disobedience and moral rebellion against Christ and his gospel makes praying for those doing the work of ministry a necessity, not an option.

Paul goes on to request, "*...that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints,*" It seems strange that the giving of a monetary gift would in some way be unacceptable. But his request simply reflects the potential for its rejection by his Jewish recipients. Some of the Jewish converts could have been affected by the slander of unconverted Jews against Paul and the Gentile converts. It's reasonable then for Paul to think that not all the believers in Jerusalem will understand much less approve of what he is doing. God's grace was necessary for them to receive this gift from a people they had once considered unclean and cut off from God. Their acceptance of the gift would demonstrate to the unbelieving world their oneness in Christ for God's glory.

What specifically can we draw from these two petitions as it applies to our praying? First, we should pray that our ministry leaders would be delivered from unbelievers seeking to destroy their ministry. We might not be aware of specific attacks against our ministries but scripture clearly warns us that attacks will come. All those serving in leadership need the fervent prayers of God's people for their protection.

Secondly, we should pray that their service would be acceptable to the body of Christ. Leaders sometimes find that the very people they are trying to serve don't accept or approve of their ministry for a host of different reasons. Opposition from within the church for those serving in ministry can be extremely damaging. Are we quick to find fault but slow to pray that God would bless them and their ministry?

Ask your ministry leaders how they are doing and what are their challenges so you can intercede for them with specific requests. They need your prayers.

Lesson 3. Prayer for Ministry Should Have a Long-Range Vision

The third lesson is that prayer for ministry should have a long-range vision. Paul was not requesting that he'd be allowed to come to Rome simply to take a break from his ministry responsibilities. He desired their fellowship and to partner with them for new opportunities to preach the gospel in unreached regions such as Spain.

He wanted his ministry to continue to reach those who had never heard the gospel. Without the prayers and support of God's people his vision for ministry expansion could be hindered. Paul never let his belief in God's sovereignty lessen his need for prayer or the responsibility of God's people to pray for him. It is the sovereign work of the Spirit that causes and enables us to pray for that which accomplishes God's will. (1 John 5:14)

I hope each of us would have a vision for gospel ministry that extends well beyond 2738 Pennyroyal Road. Let's emulate Paul who sought prayer forever expanding gospel outreach. Even though we are a small church God has generously gifted us with men and women whose ministries are impacting believers and unbelievers locally and around the world. God would have us share their long-range vision by fervently and consistently praying for them.

Lesson 4. Finally, it is important to understand that our prayers will not always be answered in the way we would prefer.

The fourth and final lesson is understanding that our prayers will not always be answered in ways that we would prefer. I said earlier Paul understood that his ministry was always subject to the will of God. Paul asked that he would be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea and that his ministry would be acceptable to the church in Jerusalem and that he would be "refreshed" in Rome before heading for Spain.

So, of his three requests only the second was answered as he had hoped. His service in bringing aid to the saints in Jerusalem was accepted. But, in the book of Acts Paul is beaten and nearly killed when he enters the Temple in Jerusalem so he was not delivered from the unbelievers in Judea. He did get to Rome but not in the way he would have wished. He was put in prison in Caesarea and after two years he was sent to Rome in chains to make his appeal to Caesar. The scriptures make no mention of him actually making it to Spain and tradition tells us he was finally executed in Rome.

One of things I greatly appreciate about God's Word, it never whitewashes the reality of the world we actually live in. Paul's prayers were not always answered as he hoped for and it's the same for us. Our prayers are also subject to God's will. But knowing that should never be a hindrance to prayer. In this text Paul makes clear prayer is central to God's purposes for expanding His kingdom? As we pray for ministries here at the Chapel we are participating in God's mission to redeem people. If we pray little for our ministries and those serving in them what does that say about our love for one another and our unity in the gospel? Finally, we can be confident that God will answer our prayers for ministry in the best way possible. Paul concludes with these comforting words, "*May the God of peace be with you all.*" We pray fervently and persistently in the Spirit, we trust in God's sovereign goodness, and then can we can rest in God's peace for the answer.

Reflect and Respond

How should Paul's short petition challenge and reform our praying as they are focused on Chapel ministries?

- Does your unity in Christ with those serving in ministry give you cause to pray for them?
- Do you share in the struggle of gospel outreach by praying for the ministries of the Chapel and those serving in them?
- Are your prayers characterized by fervency and persistence? If not, why not?
- To what extent do you spend time praying for ministries as opposed to complaining about them?
- Go to your ministry leaders and ask them what their challenges are and how you can pray specifically for them.

Let's adopt Paul's priority of seeing the gospel advance by committing to pray for our ministries consistently, specifically and with great fervency for God's glory the furthering of his kingdom.