

Pray for Your Pastors

By Dr. Ligon Duncan

sermonaudio.com

Bible Text: Ephesians 6:19-20
Preached on: Sunday, November 26, 2017

First Presbyterian Church

1324 Marion St
Columbia, SC 29201

Website: www.firstprescolumbia.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/fpcolumbia

If you have your Bibles, I invite you to turn with me to Ephesians 6. Tonight, I want to exhort the congregation to pray for your pastors and to pray especially for Gabe and Callie and the girls as they join the ministry of this congregation. There are few things more important than prayer in the Christian life. I suspect that at the end in the judgment day, we will find out that prayer is far more significant than we have ever suspected, and that prayer has been far more decisive in the effect of gospel ministries than we have ever dreamt. And so tonight, I want to go to a passage where Paul asks for prayer for himself.

If you allow yourself to look at Ephesians 6:18, Paul is giving an exhortation to the congregation to pray at all times, and then he says very briefly in a one sentence prayer request something that he wants the congregation to pray for him, but as we look at this passage tonight, I would ask you to allow me to point out to you six things that you can pray for your pastors, and for Gabe in particular, that we get really from one prayer request and then one incidental passing comment that Paul makes in verse 20. It's really just one prayer request and one passing comment but it's a very rich prayer request. You know how it is when somebody asks you to pray for something and they do work in a few extra prayer requests in that one thing? Well, that's sort of what Paul does here. It's one prayer request but it's very rich with specific things that he wants the Ephesians to pray for him, and so I want you to see these things together tonight.

Before we read God's word, let's pray and ask for his help and blessing again.

Heavenly Father, we do not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. So speak, Lord, your servants listen. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

This is the word of God beginning in Ephesians 6:19,

19 and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth
boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, 20 for which I am an
ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.

Amen and thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired and inerrant word. May he write its eternal truth upon all our hearts.

Paul asks for the Ephesians to pray for him and I'd like you to see six things that we can learn to pray for our pastors from this one prayer request. And the first thing is simply this, you see the language, "and also for me." Pray also for me. Don't just pray for all of these other things that I've just exhorted you to pray for but pray also for me. Now just take this in. This is the Apostle Paul asking the Ephesians to pray for him. Now if the Apostle Paul felt the need for the Ephesians to pray for him, I assure you that your pastors need you to pray for them. This is the Apostle Paul who had been carried up into the third heavens and seen things which is not lawful for a man to tell. This is the Apostle Paul who had been personally called into service by the Lord Jesus Christ while he was on the way to Damascus to persecute Christians, and he asked for prayer. If Paul needed prayer, your pastors need prayer.

And let me say this, prayer for your pastors will uniquely bind your hearts to them. I had the privilege of studying at Edinburgh, Scotland for three years, and while I was there I attended Holyrood Abbey Church of Scotland because Dr. Douglas Kelly told me that I was going to be attending Holyrood Abbey Church of Scotland. He said, "Ligon, when you're in Edinburgh, you're going to attend Holyrood Abbey Church of Scotland." And I said, "Yes, sir, Dr. Kelly." And that's where I went and every Saturday night they had a prayer meeting for two hours. That's right, Saturday night is when prayer meeting met from 7:30 to 9:30 and on the church hall walls there was a board with the name of every Evangelical Church of Scotland minister and every Evangelical Church of Scotland missionary. Now I say Evangelical because the Church of Scotland was a mixed denomination. Now it's almost entirely liberal but in those days it was about 2/3 liberal and 1/3 Bible believing and the names of every Bible believing minister were on the board in that church hall, and we would pray for every single one of them every Saturday night. And I know a number of those men whose names were on the board and oftentimes they were in parish churches where though they believed the Bible, most of their congregation didn't and very often their congregations were quite hateful to them. And I talked to more than one of those men who said, "If I didn't know that the folks at Holyrood Abbey in Edinburgh and Gilcomston South in Aberdeen and St. George's Tron in Glasgow and Sandyford Henderson in Glasgow, if I didn't know that those people were praying for me, I would not have been able to climb the stairs of the pulpit to preach."

And it's also interesting how not only were the ministers themselves palpably strengthened by the prayers of God's people but the people of God, even if they didn't know them very well, felt closer to them. William Law used to say there's nothing that binds your heart to a pastor like praying for him. When I was a little boy, there were two elders in my congregation in Greenfield, South Carolina who kind of got crosswise with one another, and they were not getting along. So my pastor called them into his office and had a chat with them, and at the end of the chat, he asked them to get down on their knees and pray for one another. And they got down on their knees really resistantly, but when they got up, they were friends and they remained friends the rest of their lives. It's amazing what happens when you pray for another person. It knits your heart with them.

And here's the Apostle Paul saying, "Pray for me." There's nothing that will knit your hearts to your pastors like praying for them, and your pastors will feel it and they'll know

it, and your pastors will know whether you're one of those people who says when you say, "I'm praying for you," you are or not. I knew that Eileen Moorehead was praying for me at First Pres Jackson. When Eileen said she was praying for me, I knew she was praying for me and I hope that Gabe and Derek and Neil and Ralph and Josh and David and all these other dear brothers, I hope that there's some of you when you say, "I have been praying for you," they know in their souls that you have been praying for them.

So there's the first thing: pray for your pastors. If Paul needed it, they need it. Secondly, pray that they would understand what a solemn thing it is to get up here and open God's word before you. Notice the language, pray for me "that words may be given to me," listen to the language, "in opening my mouth." Now that may sound like an unnecessary thing to say, after all, when you're going to preach, it's a little difficult to preach if you don't open your mouth, right? But in the "opening of my mouth" is actually a term of art. You will find it in the Bible when particularly solemn speeches or occasions are about to happen. So for instance, in Job 3:1, Derek Thomas will know this, we read, "And then Job opened his mouth and cursed the day that he was born." So the language there, it's specialized language indicating that something very very sober and solemn and important is about to be said. And in Matthew 5:1-2 we're told that Jesus sat down and then he opened his mouth and then what did he do? He preached the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, 6 and 7. So the opening of my mouth is an idiom, it's a special term of art to indicate particularly important and solemn speech. And notice here Paul says, "pray that in the opening of my mouth I would realize the significance of what I am going to do. I'm going to be a herald of the word of God, pray that I would be earnest in my proclamation."

William Baxter indicates or Richard Baxter indicates how serious the preaching of the word of God is in his little phrase "I preached as if never to preach again. I preached as a dying man to dying men." Or Martin Luther is famous for saying, we're celebrating the 500th anniversary of Wittenberg this year, and Martin Luther is famous for saying, "I preach as if Jesus was crucified yesterday, was raised again from the dead today, and was coming again tomorrow." That's pretty solemn speech. That's pretty urgent speech. And yet John Owen says it's an easier thing to bring your head to preach than it is to bring your heart to preach. Now think of that, John Owen says that. That's so encouraging to me, that John Owen realized it's very very difficult to bring the whole of yourself to the task of the preaching of God's word. Won't you pray for your pastors that they'll bring the whole of themselves in the opening of their mouth because this is such a solemn, sober, important thing.

Every time the word of God is preached from this pulpit, invariably two things happen: either sinners are brought to saving faith in Jesus Christ and saints are built up, or those whose hearts are hardened are hardened yet more. Jesus himself said, "I was appointed for the rising and falling of many in Israel." And that happens every time the word of God is preached. That's a sober thing. So pray for your pastors in the opening of their mouths, that they would know the solemnity of what they're doing and that they would bring their hearts to that task.

Third, notice what Paul prays for. It's mind-blowing, "pray that words may be given to me." You've got to be kidding me, Apostle Paul. You're asking me to pray for you that words will be given to you. You wrote almost half of the New Testament. You're asking for words to be given to you, you've got to be kidding. Your speech so overwhelmed the people in Greece that many of them thought that you were Mercury, the messenger of the gods, and you're asking for words to be given to you? Well, it's a little bit like Jesus' prayer for the disciples, "Don't worry about what you'll say, when the time comes I'll give you the words that you need." You see, Paul knows that oratory cannot raise the dead and bind up the broken-hearted, only the word of God can do that and only the word of God that has been put into the mouth of the preacher, coming out of the mouth of the preacher can do that work. So pray for your ministers to be given a divine supply of truth. It's the word of God that is powerful and effectual and sharper than any two-edged sword, not the oratory or the rhetoric of your preacher. He needs the word of God to dwell richly in his heart and then he needs to speak that word to you.

So pray for your ministers to be given a divine supply of truth. It's very interesting, my favorite description, it's not quite a definition but my favorite description of preaching is J. I. Packer's description of preaching in his book "Truth and Power," in which he says in the sermon, the word of God delivers through the preacher an applicatory declaration to the congregation about God and godliness. Now you could do an entire sermon series on that one sentence. I've always wanted to be able to write one sentence like J. I. Packer and then I'd just quit. I'd say, "Hey, look, look at that sentence that I just wrote." But listen, what I love about that definition in the first case, notice it does not say that the preacher delivers the word of God, it says the word of God delivers through the preacher a message to you because that's what you need. You don't need my words, you don't need my ideas, you come here because you want God, you come here because you want to meet with God, you want an encounter with the living God, you want God to do business with your souls, you want God to save you, you want God to give you hope, you want God to direct you in your life, and I cannot help you unless I'm speaking God's word because it's God who you want. And so pray for your pastors to have a divine supply of truth.

Fourth, listen again to a remarkable prayer request. It is a request that Paul would be bold and fearless in proclaiming the gospel, that "in the opening of my mouth I would boldly proclaim the mystery of the gospel." Look at verse 20, "that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak." Now again, this is remarkable. Here is the Apostle Paul praying or asking that you would pray for him that he would be bold. You've got to be kidding. Out of all the things that I could think that Paul needed prayer for, boldness would be way way down the list, and yet here he is saying, "Pray for my boldness." And I know, I know that preachers, especially preachers settled in wonderful congregations who love them and whom they love, you start to want people to like you and you don't want to tell them things that they don't want to hear but you don't want a preacher who tells you what you want to hear, you want a preacher who tells you what you need to hear, you want ministers who care enough about your souls that they'll tell you the truth even when the truth is uncomfortable.

So here's Paul, if Paul has to pray for that kind of boldness and fearlessness, then pastors need you to pray for that. I think one of the greatest compliments ever given to John Knox was given to him by Regent Morton over his grave and every minister needs to remember that John Knox is buried under a parking space, you know, just anytime that we start feeling uppity, just remember John Knox is buried under a parking space, and then remember Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf's life motto, "Preach the gospel, die and be forgotten." That was his threefold life plan, preach the gospel, die and be forgotten. That's actually a good aspiration for every minister. But here's what Regent Morton said over dead John Knox in his grave, "Here lies a man who neither feared nor flattered any flesh." That's a pretty good compliment for a preacher. He wasn't a man-pleaser or a man-fearer nor was he a flatterer. He feared the living God and therefore he preached boldly. So pray for your pastors that they preach boldly.

Now the fifth part of this prayer request is even more surprising. Paul says that in the opening up, "pray that in the opening of my mouth I would proclaim the mystery of the gospel." You've got to be kidding, Paul. I mean, almost all of the best short summaries of the gospel outside of the gospel of John come from your hand. "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for the ungodly. He made him who knew no sin to be sin that we might become the righteousness of God in him. He who spared not his own Son but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him freely give us all things?" The man that wrote that is asking the Ephesians to pray for him that when he opens his mouth he would proclaim the gospel? Yes, he did because it's very easy to forget.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones tells the story of a young man who was preaching his first sermon in the presence of a very famous minister and he was quite desirous to impress this older minister, and so when he went to the back door of the church, he hoped that the older minister would give him words of encouragement and the older minister said, "Do better." Now at first the young man thought that the minister was exhorting him to do a better job of preaching and then he realized that what actually the older minister was saying is the message that you just preached to the congregation was "do better" and that's not the gospel. The gospel is not "do better." The gospel is that Jesus has lived a life that you have not lived and he has died a death that you deserved to die in your place, and as you receive and rest on him alone for salvation, you are forgiven and accepted and adopted and transformed and prepared for an eternal life of communion with the living God. Do better cannot do justice to that message. And here's the Apostle Paul saying, "Pray for me that when I open my mouth I'll preach the gospel."

Now one last thing and this is the passing comment, you see it in verse 20, "the gospel for which I am an ambassador in chains." Now this isn't part of the prayer request. It's a passing remark. You see, "Pray for me that when I preach I'll preach the gospel, and by the way, I'm an ambassador in chains for the gospel." Paul is asking and reminding the Ephesians that he bears certain trials and tribulation and suffering as a part of his apostolic ministry and this is the case for every true gospel ministry. You show me a preacher worth his salt and I'll show you a man with a broken heart because the way that God prepares a man to minister to you is he breaks his heart. And it's different with all of us, we all have different sins and we all have different things that the Holy Spirit needs to

work on us with, but typically the Lord uses trials and tribulations and hardships and sufferings to do it. So here's my sixth and final prayer request for you to pray for your pastors: pray for your pastors in trial and tribulation and hardship and suffering because they have it and they're going to have it and that's how God prepares them to be tender servants of the Lord to you.

Callie, it's been a hard, wonderful, heartbreaking, blessed year. We're praying for you and we're praying for Gabe as he ministers to you. Your pastors know heartbreak. I've lived long enough to get to know some of my preaching heroes, you know, and in this world of scandals and fakes, I am so happy to be able to report to you all of those men, I've got to know them and they are 100% genuine. What they are when you see them up in the pulpit is the same man that I know in private when I'm with them, but with every single one of them there's significant heartbreak. I'm thinking of one man right now who may have been used to spread the glorious doctrines of grace more than any other single person around the world and three of his children don't know the Lord. Now what would that be like to have been used to bring tens of thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands of people to saving faith in Christ and to a knowledge of the glorious grace of God and you're own children don't know the Lord? That's heartbreaking and that's how God makes a minister. So pray for Gabe, pray for your ministers in their heartbreak because in that God is preparing them to minister to you.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, thank you for your word, thank you for this time in it. We ask that your hand of favor would be upon Gabe and all the pastors of this congregation so that in the preaching of the word they would boldly open their mouths to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, and that even in their heartbreak they would trust you and you would mold them into the servants that your people need for Christ's sake, for their souls' sake, for the glory of God in this world. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.