

Romans: The Good News of God

Principles to Guide Our Prayer

Romans 1:9-12

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Principles to Guide Our Prayer

Scripture

Today is the first Sunday of our Annual Week of Prayer. And so it seems appropriate to skip a few verses ahead to Romans 1:9-12 to learn about some of the Apostle Paul's principles as they relate to prayer. Let's read Romans 1:9-12:

⁹ God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you ¹⁰ in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you.

¹¹ I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong— ¹² that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. (Romans 1:9-12)

Introduction

Dr. Luke, the author of the Gospel of Luke, records that one day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples" (Luke 11:1). Jesus then taught them the prayer we know as "The Lord's Prayer."

The disciples apparently saw Jesus at prayer and knew that his prayer was not merely a vocalization of empty words that went nowhere and accomplished nothing. No! They knew that Jesus' effectiveness in ministry was directly linked to his prayer life. And so they asked him, "Lord, teach us to pray."

Our subject today is prayer, and the most significant thing to note about Romans 1:9-12 is that it teaches us about principles to guide our prayer. It is not a treatise on prayer. It is not a "how-to" for an effective prayer ministry. Rather, it is a glimpse into the Apostle Paul's own prayer life—into his pattern of prayer for

Christians in the growing church at Rome—and is therefore a model for us as we think about principles to guide our prayer.

Lesson

There are three principles to guide our prayer that I want to show you in Romans 1:9-12 today.

I. Prayer Is Consistent with Christian Service (1:9-10a)

First, prayer is consistent with Christian service.

Paul said, **“God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times”** (1:9-10a).

It should not be necessary to say that, of course, but we often divorce prayer and service in our thinking. Sometimes we think that some are called to pray while others are called to service.

When we think of those whom we call “prayer warriors,” we sometimes think of frail old people who are incapacitated in some way and who can therefore “only” pray. Now, please don’t misunderstand me. There are some people who are in fact given just such a ministry precisely because of their circumstances. Moreover, if you ever find yourself in such a situation and you are unable to be outwardly active in Christ’s service, I want to encourage you to spend much time in prayer for others. That is indeed a valuable ministry. But, what I am cautioning against is the view that separates prayer and service in the life of the believer.

Here is where the example of the Apostle Paul is so helpful. We know of his life from the account of it in Acts. And we have additional insights from what Paul says about himself in his letters. We know that he was a pioneer missionary, taking the gospel of Jesus Christ to places it had not previously been known throughout much of the Roman world.

Paul was extremely active in Christian service. Listen to the tremendous hardships Paul endured as a pioneer missionary and apostle in 2 Corinthians 11:23b-28:

I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

The Apostle Paul established churches everywhere he went. After he established them he constantly kept in touch with them, helping them work through their problems so that he spoke of the “daily pressure” of his concern for them (2 Corinthians 11:28).

No harried pastor has ever been more pressed for time than Paul. No busy executive ever carried a greater burden of responsibility.

Yet Paul modeled a powerful prayer ministry. In Romans 1:9-10 Paul said that he prayed for the church at Rome—only one of the many churches of the growing Christian movement and one that he had not yet even visited—**constantly** and **at all times**.

Do you think Paul was exaggerating? I don't think he was. I think he had an amazing capacity to keep all of the churches in his mind's eye as he brought them regularly before the Lord in prayer, just as Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, and other effective Christian servants of Christ did.

Martin Luther once said that he had so much to do in a day that he could not get through it without spending at least three or

four hours on his knees before God each morning! On the contrary, we find that we are so busy that we *don't* have time for prayer!

Friend, prayer is consistent with Christian service. As commentator Robert Haldane said, “Prayer and labor ought to go together. To pray without laboring is to mock God; to labor without praying is to rob God of his glory. Until these are conjoined, the gospel will not be extensively successful.”¹

No matter what your service for Christ is, be sure it is joined with prayer. If you take care of the children in the nursery, pray for God’s help as you serve his covenant children. If you serve coffee and snacks, pray that God will make your service a blessing to those you serve. If you teach, pray that God will help you to convey his truth accurately. Whatever your service to Christ, be sure that it is bathed in prayer.

II. Prayer Directs Christian Service Properly (1:9-11)

Second, prayer directs Christian service properly.

Again, the Apostle Paul is our model. We can think of examples of people who are engaged in Christian work but who do not seem to be going about it in the right way. Either they use the world’s methods, which produce only the world’s results. Or else their goals seem to be secular rather than truly biblical.

As we read what Paul says about his prayer life in this text, we see that this was not the case with him. Combined with his study of God’s Word, he prayed about his service, and as a result God directed it to be done in a spiritual way and for spiritual ends.

He says several things about it. Let me mention three.

A. *Our Service Must Be Wholehearted (1:9a)*

First, our service must be wholehearted.

¹ Robert Haldane, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans* (MacDill AFB: MacDonald Publishing, 1958), 40.

The Apostle Paul said in Romans 1:9a: **“God, whom I serve with my whole heart.”** Paul served God from the very depths of his being—wholeheartedly.

Now, this is an important point. Not all who profess Christ serve him wholeheartedly. Some are lazy in their service to Christ. Others are trying to please themselves rather than please Christ. We need to heed the warning in Hebrews 6:12: “We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.”

What kept Paul from getting lazy? What kept Paul from falling into half-hearted service? Clearly it was his relationship to God, deepened by his study of the Word, and sustained by consistent and fervent prayer. As he sought God in prayer, God enabled him to serve the Lord Jesus Christ wholeheartedly.

If you feel that your service to Christ is not wholehearted, make it a matter of prayer. Seek the Lord in prayer. And ask the Lord to give you wholehearted devotion and service to him.

B. Our Service Must Be Gospel-Centered (1:9b)

Second, our service must be gospel-centered.

Paul said that his service to God was carried out **“in preaching the gospel of his Son”** (1:9b).

It is our task—individually and corporately—to make the gospel known. God did not call you to himself merely so that you could have fire insurance against going to hell. No. God called you to himself so that you could glorify him by making his name known as the waters cover the sea (Habakkuk 2:14).

Whether you are a student or a professor, a professional or a laborer, a homemaker or a business woman, your task is to make the gospel of Jesus Christ known. For Paul it was through preaching. For you and me it is through our present vocation. Our task is to bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ whatever we do.

I have a friend named Rob. Several years ago he set up a new oncological surgery practice in Dayton, Ohio. He asked our family

to come out one weekend so that I could participate in a service of dedication of his medical practice to God. So we did. On a Sunday afternoon about 20 of us, staff and friends alike, gathered in his office and dedicated it and all who worked there to glorify God by making the gospel known through their practice of medicine.

That should be our attitude. Our service, whatever it is, must be gospel-centered. And what will keep us gospel-centered? The Word of God and prayer. Prayer focuses our attention on God and his gospel as it is revealed to us in his Word, which was clearly Paul's case, as is evident in the verses before us.

Prayer will help focus your attention so that you view all of life from God's perspective. And it will help your service be gospel-centered.

C. Our Service Must Be for Others (1:10b-11a)

And third, our service must be for others.

Clearly, this was Paul's burden in his prayer. Paul wanted to serve the Roman Christians. And so he said in Romans 1:10b-11a: **“[A]nd I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you. I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong.”**

There is a sequence of three important ideas here, and it begins with prayer. First, Paul prayed that he might be permitted to see the Roman Christians. Second, he prayed that he might see them in order to impart a spiritual gift to them. And third, he prayed that he might see them and impart a spiritual gift to them so that they might be strengthened in their faith.

Now, how did Paul propose to do that? The answer is clear. It was by preaching the gospel to them with his whole heart, just as he had preached it to other people.

We need to see the importance of prayer here also. And the best way to see it is to realize that Christians frequently lose their desire to serve others. Don't you sometimes find it easier to sit at home than serve someone else? I do.

We lose our desire to serve others for several reasons. Criticism lessens our zeal to serve others, especially if the one we are to serve is the one criticizing us. Fatigue diminishes our capacity to serve. We become tired, and serving others is the last thing on our minds. Sin also destroys our desire to serve others. This is because sin breaks our contact with God, who alone is the source of right motivation and desire. Sin also focuses attention on ourselves. Sin is really self-centeredness rather than other-centeredness. These are some factors that will turn us from serving others.

What will keep us on target? What will keep our service directed toward others? One of the most helpful things that will keep us from falling prey to these temptations is prayer. Prayer will remind us of God's approval in spite of undue criticism. Prayer will direct our energies, so we will not tire unduly. And prayer will keep us close to the foot of the cross, so that we can confess our sin and self-centeredness and receive God's forgiveness and power for service.

Joseph Scriven had wealth, education, a devoted family, and a pleasant life in his native Ireland. Then unexpected tragedy entered. On the night before Scriven's wedding, his fiancée drowned. Scriven then dramatically changed his lifestyle. He left Ireland for Port Hope, Canada, determined to devote his entire life to serving others. While in Port Hope, Scriven's mother became ill in Ireland, and he wrote her a comforting letter which included the following poem:

What a Friend we have in Jesus,
all our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
ev'rything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
all because we do not carry
ev'rything to God in prayer.

Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?

We should never be discouraged:
take it to the Lord in prayer!
Can we find a friend so faithful,
who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our ev'ry weakness—
take it to the Lord in prayer!

Are we weak and heavy-laden,
cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Savior, still our refuge—
take it to the Lord in prayer!
Do thy friends despise, forsake thee?
Take it to the Lord in prayer!
In his arms he'll take and shield thee;
thou wilt a solace there.

If we find ourselves criticized, if we find ourselves weary, if we find ourselves struggling with sin, let us take it to the Lord in prayer. And in doing so we'll discover that the Lord will revive us to serve others.

III. Prayer Changes Us (1:11b-12)

And finally, prayer changes us.

This was true of the Apostle Paul. By temperament he was not a particularly gracious individual—at least, that is how he seems to me. In his early days he was in fact cruel and heartless. He killed those who disagreed with him. Even after he became a Christian I am sure that he had his bad moments. He had a sharp disagreement with Barnabas over John Mark, for instance (Acts 15:37-39).

And yet, how gracious and compassionate Paul was in this letter! Paul wrote of his desire to visit Rome “**so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong**” (v. 11b). But no sooner had he said this than Paul, not desiring to set himself up above the believers at Rome as if he were somehow superior to them, immediately added as an important qualification, “**that is,**

that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith" (v. 12). That is an insight into the life of a man who had been changed by God through prayer.

Sometimes people ask, "Does prayer change circumstances, or does prayer change people?" That is a good question, and the answer is probably, "Both!" Prayer does change circumstances, since God responds to prayer and frequently alters circumstances—at least from our perspective—because of our prayers. James intimates this when he says, "You do not have, because you do not ask God" (James 4:2).

On the other hand, I am convinced that far more frequently God uses prayer to change *us*. Because by it he brings us into his presence, opens our eyes to spiritual realities, and makes his perspective our perspective.

In Ray C. Stedman's book *Talking to My Father*, he tells the story of a missionary couple who were returning to the United States by ship after a life-time of service in Africa. It was during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt, and President Roosevelt, as it happened, was sailing on the same ship. He had been game hunting in Africa, and when he came aboard there was a tremendous fanfare. Bands played. Dignitaries appeared. Crowds of people stationed themselves to greet the President and say farewell.

When the ship arrived in America the same thing happened again. President Roosevelt was applauded, and many important people of the government came out to welcome him.

Nobody paid any attention to the missionary couple. In fact, no-one even came to the port to welcome them. It greatly distressed the old man. The two were in broken health. They had no retirement fund. They had hardly any money. They had nowhere to go. They were afraid.

"It's not fair," the old missionary said to his wife. "We have served God all these years, and when we come home there is not even a single person here to welcome us. We have no money. We have nowhere to go. If God is running the world, why does he permit such injustice?"

His wife gently—and wisely—said, “Why don’t you go into the bedroom and talk to God about it?”

The old missionary did, and when he came out some time later a great change had come over him. His wife said, “Do you feel better now, dear?”

“Yes,” he replied. “I began to pray and tell God how unjust the whole thing was. I told him how bitter I was that the President of the United States should receive a grand welcome and that we should receive nothing. There was not even a single person to welcome us home. But when I finished, it seemed as if the Lord just placed his hand on my shoulder and said in a quiet voice, ‘But you’re not home yet.’”²

Our perspective on life is so easily out of focus. And one of the most important principles from Paul is that prayer changes us. Just as God realigned that old missionary’s thinking during prayer, so God changes us during seasons of prayer so that we can see things from God’s perspective.

Perhaps you are going through a time when you need to see things from God’s perspective. Let me encourage you to pray until God either changes the circumstances or he changes you so that you can see things from his perspective.

Conclusion

So, in this text today we learn three principles to guide our prayer. First, prayer is consistent with Christian service. Second, prayer directs Christian service properly so that it is wholehearted, gospel-centered and for others. And third, prayer changes us. Amen.

² Ray C. Stedman, *Talking to My Father: What Jesus Teaches About Prayer* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1975), 25-26.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAYER:

Our Father in heaven, we thank you that you have made communication with you so simple. Thank you that we do not have to go through all kinds of contortions in order to come into your presence. How grateful we are for the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Mediator of the New Covenant, and through whom we have access into your presence.

Lord, teach us that prayer is consistent with Christian service. Moreover, teach us that prayer directs our Christian service so that it is wholehearted, gospel-centered, and for others. And teach us that although prayer may change our circumstances, it also changes us.

And all of this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.