

THREE DIFFICULT REQUIREMENTS FOR EFFECTIVE PRAYER

INTRO: Over the past number of years, when we come to September and we begin our regular Wednesday night prayer meeting I have given a message on prayer. But this year I had not planned to give a message on prayer at this time. And then, just before we left on a few weeks of holidays, again I felt I should encourage prayer. From now until June we will meet for serious prayer. It is the hardest battle we face as a church and the number of those who are consistent at it is not high. Yet I believe it is very crucial. Although I will not center our thoughts this morning on united prayer, united prayer is very important according to the New Testament and I have spoken on that in the past.

Just as I was beginning to write this message I was reading through the Midnight Call Christian publication and Arno Froese, the editor was promoting Wim Malgo's book, "Called To Pray." This is what he said, "This is one of our least popular, but most important books." We could say that about our prayer meeting. It is the least popular but the most important. Then he said, "Few topics are as talked about, yet practiced so little, as prayer. It is said to be at the heart of the Christian faith. And yet, even the most ardent, devoted followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, if truthful, would have to admit that they have neglected prayer" (Aug. 2013).

One of the families in church got a little card holder for me some years ago that says on the front, "Pastor." And it holds about 40 or 50 cards that have verses on prayer. And one of the cards has Colossians 4:2 on it and I have put that on the top of all my prayer lists. Colossians 3-4 give a number of terse commands like, "Let the peace of God rule in your hearts", or, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly", or "Wives, submit to your own husbands", or "Husbands love your wives", or "Children obey your parents", or "Fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath", or "Servants, obey your masters" and so on. And then in 4:2 he adds, "Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilante in it with thanksgiving." In this verse are given to us three difficult requirements for effective prayer and they will form the basis of this message.

Now the subject of this verse is prayer. The main idea is to continue in prayer. That is hard enough. You know that by experience. But it is the descriptors of prayer we want to consider and to miss these is a threat to all our praying. These descriptors deal with some very difficult things to maintain consistently in prayer.

I. PRAY EARNESTLY

So, the first difficulty for effective prayer comes to us in the word 'earnestly'. If you are using the KJV you will not find this word earnestly which the NKJV has. The original word meaning *to continue* is *kartereo*. But the word in our text is 'proskartereo'. In the original language they heightened the intensity of a verb by adding a preposition to it. Sometimes they would add two or even three, thus making the word very intense. These are often hard to translate accurately. So to make the word 'continue' more intense here, they added the preposition 'pros' to *kartereo*. The NKJV seeks to bring that out the meaning of that added preposition by the word 'earnestly'. We are to continue *earnestly* in prayer.

Now, the original word *kartereo*, means *to continue* or *to endure*, *to be steadfast*. The idea here is to continue in prayer. Be steadfast in prayer. Endure in prayer. What does that tell us? It tells us that consistent endurance in prayer is difficult. You do not have to *endure* something that is easy or enjoyable. The word, *kartereo* comes from a word meaning strength. Endurance takes strength.

Now the command 'to continue in prayer' is hard enough. We all know that. But when you add the preposition in the front of this word it heightens the intensity of it. So Darby translates like this: "persevere in prayer." The ESV says, "continue steadfastly" in prayer. The NKJV says, "continue earnestly" in prayer. By the words to persevere, or continue steadfastly, or continue earnestly, these translations have sought to strengthen the idea of continuing by adding this describer word.

Oh, how challenging is this command! We are not only to continue in prayer. Of course that is very important. But we are to continue steadfastly or

earnestly in prayer! Check your prayers after you have spent some time in prayer and you will probably find it hard to continue earnestly in prayer.

Just before Jesus ascended to heaven He told His disciples to not leave Jerusalem until they had received the promise of the Father. This was the promise of the Holy Spirit. Then after Jesus had ascended from the Mount of Olives, the disciples returned to Jerusalem and waited. They waited and prayed for ten days, and then the promise came. But I want you to notice in Acts 1 just how they waited (read 1:14). There, in that word, 'continued' is our word. They continued in prayer and in supplication. They prayed like this, about 120 of them, until the day of Pentecost and then the Holy Spirit came upon them. They prayed for 10 days. It is also worth noting here that the Church was born in a united prayer meeting, a prayer meeting that went unceasing until this event happened.

You may wish to jot down Acts 2:42 which says, "And they *continued steadfastly* in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers." And again in Acts 2:46, "And they, *continuing daily* with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart..." And yet again in Acts 6:4, "But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word."

And then there is Romans 12:12 which says, "Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing steadfastly (or instant, as the KJV has it) in prayer", and last, Colossians 4:2, "Continue earnestly in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving..."

II. VIGILANCE

Let us look now at the second difficult matter to maintain in our prayers. Our verse says, "Continue earnestly in prayer, *being watchful in it*..." There is our second describer. This time it is the phrase, 'being watchful in it'. We are to be watchful or vigilant in our praying. Oh what a challenge this is.

Now it is not too difficult if your prayers are 1 or 2 or 3 minutes long. May I ask you, have you ever timed your praying, say for a day? I know that does not sound very spiritual. Nor am I saying that God answer us in accordance with how long we pray. But it may shock you if you checked how much time you spend praying each day. We have 1440 minutes in a day. If we pray 5 minutes in a day, that is .003 % of our day spent in prayer. Now it is not so hard to stay vigilante for 1 minute. And second, it is not too difficult to remain vigilant if you are right in the midst of some tragedy that is very close to your heart. But when you continue in prayer day after day, and you are praying for 15 minutes or half an hour or maybe an hour; and you are praying many times for the same things, then being vigilant throughout the prayer time becomes a very difficult battle.

Our text says that when we pray we are to remain watchful in it. We are to pray earnestly, and we are to remain awake in it. The word for 'watchful' here is *gregoreo*. You can tell that we get our name Greg or Gregory from this word. It means to be watchful or wakeful. It comes from the word *egeiro*, meaning to rise up. To pray as we are instructed here means to rise up from sleep and stay alert and awake or vigilant.

There is a story from the ancient city of Pompeii that gives a picture of true watchfulness. In 79 AD, 9 years after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, Mount Versevius erupted and Pompeii lay at its base. Ash began to rain down on the city and ultimately buried it under many meters of debris. In 1599, some 1500 years after the event, for the first time this city began to be unearthed. One book of illustrations I have says that they found many people buried there and they were in different positions, some were in deep vaults where they probably went for safety and others were found in lofty chambers. But one of the most outstanding finds was a Roman watchman. They found him standing in the city gate where his captain had placed him. His hands still held his weapon. While the ashes and cinders began to cover him, he stood at his post. He was a watchman. He was vigilante to the last.

Our text instructs us like this: "Continue earnestly in prayer, being watchful in it." There are many times when circumstances around us seem to lull us to sleep spiritually. That is the danger of a watchman. Then there are times when circumstances around us draw our attention away from our task. Surely the Roman watchman must have been tempted to run. But his job was to watch, and watch he did in spite of what was happening around him. Could I ask you this morning, how would you rate your spiritual life? How about your prayer life? Have other things lulled you into a spiritual stupor? Has the mundaneness of life lulled you to sleep? Or have the things of this world crowded out prayer? Or, like the ashes and cinders falling around this Roman watchman, have dire circumstances drawn your attention away from this critical duty? You have been instructed by your captain to pray, and to be watchful in it, and something has drawn you from it?

When Paul and Silas were in the Philippian jail and the Lord sent an earthquake and they could have escaped, when the jailor saw the doors of the prison open he was going to commit suicide. When the Roman watchman had been trained, he knew that if a prisoner escaped from him he would die. So this jailor wanted to end his life before his superiors did it. Here is the instruction of our commander: Continue earnestly in prayer. And along with that is the instruction to be watchful in it.

Turn to Mark 14. Jesus has entered the Garden of Gethsemane with His disciples. It is already getting later in the evening. And when He entered His extreme agony He prayed for one hour and then came back to His disciples. So look at verses 32-38 (read). Here is the command, "Watch and pray."

It is one thing to remain awake, it is another to remain alert and focused. So let me give you some reasons why we need the command of this verse to be vigilant. First, for many of us prayer is so common that it is easy to not pay close attention when we are praying or when others are praying, say before we eat. For us, as Christians, prayer is so common that we can do it or partake in it without paying much attention to what is being prayed. For many of us it

can become just a ritual. You don't need to pay much attention during such rituals because it is so common place.

But when we learn to pray for more things and for others as well as ourselves, and our prayers become a little longer, now we are in the biggest danger of not remaining watchful or focused. Maybe we have concerns, and it is amazing what all you can be saying while you are thinking about your concerns, and then we are no longer watchful or focused.

Then there is another matter that can steal our focus. Prayer is, in the norm of life, quite relaxing. And when we get relaxed it is easy to become a bit drowsy and our mind, ever ready to wander, can just lead us out of the path of what we are praying. In such times of prayer grogginess or drowsiness is most likely to set in. Many years ago I heard a pastor who said he was praying with his wife in the evening before they went to bed, and as he was praying, either it dawned on him or his wife told him, but what was happening is that he was praying for the cows in Mexico or something like that. That may seem funny, but it is a danger to the man of prayer. For those who do the 1 or 2 minute thing, they don't have enough time to get drowsy, but then they are not truly continuing in prayer either.

When you meet to pray in groups, as we do here on Wednesdays, especially when you are praying for something that has been on the list for several years it is easy to let your mind just lead you anywhere else, and just say the normal things without giving it much thought, and it becomes a challenge to stay focused and watchful in prayer.

So the Apostle says, "Continue earnestly in prayer, *being watchful in it.*" This wakefulness or watchfulness is difficulty number two.

V. WITH THANKSGIVING

There is a third difficulty given to us in our text. So we come now to the last phrase, "Continue earnestly in prayer being watchful in it *with thanksgiving.*" Continuing in prayer, it seems, is

challenge enough. To continue earnestly in prayer is still more challenging and to continue in prayer earnestly being watchful in it that is very challenging, but top that off yet that we are to do it all with thanksgiving, an area, it seems, we all have difficulty remembering and so we have in this verse a great challenge before us.

Maybe you have heard of the pastor who always found something to be thankful for no matter how difficult life got. And one day it was perfectly miserable outside and the pastor was to preach and someone thought, "I wonder if he will find something to be thankful for on a day like this." And when he got up to speak he said, "Thank You Lord that not every day is like this."

How much would we have to be thankful for every day if we but stopped for a moment to consider it, things that are actually good things. But how much more would we have to be thankful for if we but stopped to consider all the things that could have happened to us, but haven't? When our daughter worked in the Blue Hills school she became friends with a young lady who has a certain debilitating disease. At that point this young lady was helping out in the school. And she told my daughter she would be happy if she lived to be 24. Well, recently we were out at a lake and my daughter saw this young lady and they met and hugged like long lost friends. She was by now close to her 30's. She said that by now, several times a day her muscles that cause her to breath stop working and her breath just stops. And my daughter commented to her that at one time she had said she would be happy if she lived to the age of 24. And she said the doctors had said that she would not likely have lived to this age if she was not so positive about life.

Think of the young man in our congregation who broke his back last winter. No doubt thankfulness is one of the reasons he is where he is now. I am aware that the idea of the power of positive thinking has been abused. But I also know that complaining and being negative is not good for anyone. It seems that complaining and being negative comes natural to most of us. But to be thankful, truly thankful, we must find something positive. Thankfulness is good for us,

and if anyone should be thankful, it is the Christian. I am told that the dilemma of the atheist is when he feels thankful but he has no one to thank. We know to whom thanks belongs.

Now think for a moment of the young lady I mentioned. How many umpteen dozens of diseases might we have that we could be thankful for that we don't have them? How many people do we hear of that are suffering or starving or flooding out by water and so on. Oh how thankful we should be so many times for so many things.

Before we eat we give thanks for our food, but has that become mundane to us as well? Do we just take it for granted and we are not focused or alert when we thank God for it? Oh the plentitude of food we have. Do we thank God for a full freezer, a full fridge, full cupboards, a full cold room?

What about clothing. I can remember having only one pair of pants. I can remember wearing old faded shirts to school. But it is not like that any more. I just take clothing for granted. I don't even have to be thankful for it any more.

Have you ever thanked God for your possessions? I look around in our community and I cannot believe how rich we are. I wonder, are we thankful for them. Would we not have cause to thank God over and over again for so many things that we possess? I think of the Ethiopian man we had in our church some years ago. He said if you can be a Christian in America you can be a Christian anywhere. We think, if you can be a Christian in Ethiopia you can be a Christian anywhere.

Have we ever thanked God for two seeing eyes? Two ears? Have we ever thanked Him we can eat by ourselves? That we can walk? That we can read? Think of the many things each day requires of us that someone else would have to help us with if we did not have these seemingly simple abilities.

Then think of our country; our province; our town and so on. Think of the freedoms we have. How many times do we complain about the price of things? But we

don't stand in line to wait to get some necessary food items. We have the freedom to buy a Bible. We have the freedom to read it. We have the freedom to pray as we wish. Think of our stores and our access to doctors and medicine. Think of our freedoms to travel. Think of places like North Korea, and what it is like to be a Christian there. Think of so many Christians who live in lands where Christianity is hated and they are persecuted. Think of the clean pure air we have here.

How do we respond when negative things happen to us? What kind of person are we? Do we grumble or complain, or have we learned to be thankful. Anyone with a Christian library of any size probably has a commentary written by Matthew Henry. One day he was robbed of his wallet. In his diary that day he wrote, "Let me be thankful first, because I was never robbed before; second, because although they took my purse, they did not take my life; third, because, although they took my all, it was not much; and fourth, because it was I who was robbed, not I who robbed." Now he could have grumbled or complained. He could have said, "Where are the police when you need them?" But he did not. Instead he found a lot of things to be thankful for. A negative event can create a lot of thanksgiving if we but take the right perspective.

Now our text reminds us to be thankful when we pray. Let me give you a way by which you can remember thanksgiving in your prayers. It is not original with me. As a matter of fact, I want to do something like this about my prayer lists so that I remember in my church prayer time to spend some time in thanksgiving. To remember to be thankful in prayer it is helpful to use the word 'Acts' as an acronym, from the book of Acts. This word gives a very good structure for our prayer times. The first letter A is for Adoration. I would call this true worship. It is to first focus on God by way of adoration. Adoration or worship is a good way to begin a prayer time.

For some years when we came to prayer meeting on Wednesday nights, we shared verses that described God in some way. One of our folk kept a list of those verses and when I come to church and have my prayer time I spend some time by looking at those verses in

order to come before God in adoration. I am presently working my way through Exodus 34:5-7. When God had given Moses the ten commandments and Moses had gotten frustrated and broken the stones on which they were written, God instructed him on what to do. Go to Exodus 34 for part of this account (read 1-8). You will find in these brief verses a description of God that is so unlike any other gods, and that is so very encouraging, and that will make you do what it made Moses do if you but give thought to them. When God had said this to Moses, it says he made haste and bowed his head towards the earth and he worshipped Him. When some consideration of God has shown us how awesome He is and you puny we are, we are ready to worship. Worship bows us down before Him.

Start your prayers, for instance, with the very first description here. "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful..." Learn what it means to be merciful and then consider that our God is merciful, and you will see something so far above us many times that it will bow you to the earth and you will worship Him. Here is adoration, the A for Acts.

Then is C, confession. Once we see how incredible God is, confession wants to almost come natural because we are so far from how He is. And Scripture gives us this wonderful promise that if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. When we have adored or worshipped Him, and confessed our own shortcomings, weaknesses and sinfulness to Him we come to the T. Here is thanksgiving. Now it is time to thank Him and just a little consideration will give us plenty of things to be thankful for. And when all of that is done, then comes the S in the word Acts, and it stands for supplication. This is asking for things. We ask God for all those things we wish Him to do.

If you are like I am, my prayers want to start and finish with asking for things, but that is only a part of what prayer should be all about. So you may wish to remember, Acts; A = adoration; C = Confession; T = thanksgiving and S = supplication.

CONCL: And so, in conclusion, our verse said, "Continue earnestly in prayer being watchful in it with thanksgiving." May I challenge us in closing, first of all to prayer. That is a mighty challenge in itself. But let me add to that, that when we pray, we have been instructed to pray earnestly.

I am encouraged with Revelation 5. Turn there. Revelation 4-5 pictures scenes that take place in heaven. There is an incredible picture of God on a throne and then all those who surround Him including myriads of angels and Christians who have already gone there. And around the throne, representing, I believe, the Church are 24 elders. And there are four special living creatures. So let us read verses 5:6-14 (read). Now what is special to me is that there are 28 bowls which contain the prayers of the saints. I do not know if this includes the prayers of the saints up to that time, or the prayers of the Church age saints, but what is important to note is that God treasures these prayers. He stores them up. They give a sweet aroma in glory. He loves the prayers of the saints.

I have noted that here on earth, everything that is of some value is either rare or hard to find or difficult to get. One of the things that God treasures is the prayers of His saints. There is much about prayer I do not understand but what I do understand is that God wants us to pray and our text has challenged us to "Continue earnestly in prayer being watchful in it with thanksgiving." And from Revelation 5 we learn how much God treasures our prayers.

On our holidays my wife and I listened to a number of messages on Revelation 2-3. And in the letter to the Laodiceans, the lukewarm church it says they say they are rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing. Now it is my view that this church did not say such things in words. That sounds far too unspiritual. But they said it by their actions. And the speaker of the message listed the first action by which he thought we say this, "I am rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing." It is this: prayerlessness. What does prayerlessness say? Could the speaker by right by saying prayerlessness says, "I am rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing."

So, our text instructs us: "Continue earnestly in prayer being watchful in it with thanksgiving."