Series: Praying with Paul

Message: “Agony, Unity, Ministry”

Text: Romans 15:30-33

Theme: Following Paul’s example in prayer

Date: May 26, 2013

Location: Christ Community EFC

Well we come to the final sermon in our series “Praying with Paul”.

When we begin this series, I am made three assumptions:

1) Most people pray.

2) Most of us feel inadequate in prayer.

3) Most of us would like some practical help in prayer.

In this sermon series we have made a pathway through some of Paul’s prayers to provide some practical patterns of pray that when put into practice will produce a prayer life that is precious, profitable, and powerful.

We have been discovering patterns in prayer that will get past the God bless Aunt Bessie stage of praying.

It has not been my intent to guilt you into praying more but to help you want to pray more by getting turned on to the power, fruit and comfort that comes through pray.

It has been my hope that you will become passionate about praying.

Prayer is both the easiest and hardest discipline of the Christian life.

It is so easy that the youngest child or the newest Christian can learn to pray. But prayer is also the hard to maintain over the long haul.

It has been said that it is easy to enroll in the School of Prayer but it takes a lifetime to get a graduate degree.

Even in our best moments, we all must admit that we have barely touched the hem of the Master’s garment in the arena of prayer.

Now, I can only speak for myself but I have found this series personally enriching.

Over these past few weeks I have found myself praying, “Lord, open the eyes of my heart that I might know you better.”

And I have asked God to strengthen others with power through the Spirit on the inside.

And I have prayed that my loved ones would have insight to make wise choices under pressure.

These are some of the patterns or themes in prayer that come directly from Paul’s prayers that we have considered.

For me personally, I am grateful for what the Lord has done in my own prayer life as I have pondered and put into practice the patterns of prayer we have seen in Paul’s prayers week by week.

Now in this final sermon, I want to summarize what we have learned and then I want to briefly look at one more of Paul’s prayers.

It is found in Romans 15:30-33.

**In fact, if you would, please turn in your Bibles to Romans 15:30.**

What have we learned? How can we summarize the prayers of Paul?

Here is my own list. Paul’s prayers were …

Practical

Thankful

Fervent

Earnest

Regular

God-centered

Aimed at spiritual growth

Not focused on outward circumstances

But, Kingdom-centered

Among other things, he prayed for enlightenment, power, discernment, growth, love, encouragement, endurance, boldness, protection and unity.

He prayed for believers to be thankful, cheerful, strong, stable, and fruitful so that they would walk worthy of the Lord and bring great glory to God.

As I thought about these various patterns found in Paul’s prayers, I found 10 needs we all have that can only be met through prayer.

**Our first need is to know God better.**

This comes from Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 1:15-23 where he prays that the eyes of your heart might be opened so that you may know God better.

Until the Holy Spirit opens your eyes, you will never know God deeply and personally. This is where all spiritual growth must begin.

Until you come to the knowledge of God, everything else is just religious decoration.

**Our second need is a new appreciation of God’s power to help us.**

In Ephesians 3 Paul prays that you might be strengthened with might through the Spirit in the inner man, the inner person—deep in your soul.

This is a prayer for power on the inside so that you will be strong in the face of adversity from the outside.

**Our third need is the ability to make wise choices under pressure.**

This calls to mind that you are to choose “those things that are best.”

When Paul wrote to the Philippians, he prayed that they might be filled with insight to choose those things that are best (Philippians 1:9-11).

When facing so many choices in life, you truly need God’s help to sort out the good from the bad, the better from the good, and the best from the better.

And you need the ability to do it on the spur of the moment, when the pressure is on, which is where most of life’s decisions are made.

**Our fourth need is strength to endure so we won’t give up.**

In Colossians 1:11 Paul prays for strength that leads to patience and endurance.

You need this for those inevitable times when the going is rough, when things aren’t going your way, when it would be easy to give up, when you are tempted to throw in the towel, and say, “I quit!”

**Our fifth need is genuine love for others.**

This comes up again and again in Paul’s prayers.

In 1 Thessalonians 3, he prays that your love may increase and abound toward each other.

This sort of overflowing love is made visible in the way you treat other people. It is one of the most obvious proofs that you know Jesus Christ.

**Our sixth need is a willingness to trust God for the impossible.**

At the end of his prayer in Ephesians 3, Paul offers this doxology: “**Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us**” (v. 20).

God’s power is far beyond your imagination.

Your largest, boldest prayers don’t begin to exhaust His mighty power.

You need strong faith in a big God to overcome the challenges you face.

**Our seventh need is a life pleasing to the Lord Jesus Christ.**

In Colossians 1:10 Paul prays that you would walk worthy of the Lord. This means living in such a way that God is pleased with you.

This touches every part of life, from the tiniest choices to the most major decisions.

**Our eighth need is to be fully equipped to face spiritual opposition.**

In several prayers Paul mentions the opposition he faces from unbelievers who actively opposed the preaching of the gospel.

You see this, for instance, in I Thessalonians 3 where Paul prays that you might be fully equipped for whatever you might face.

You are in a spiritual battle. But with the full armor of God you can stand and fight victoriously.

**Our ninth need is growing thankfulness to God.**

Paul’s prayer in Colossians 1 ends with a call for thanksgiving based on all the blessings of God in salvation.

This includes redemption, becoming citizens of God’s kingdom, and having a great inheritance in the life to come.

You ought to be thankful when you consider all that God has done for you—past, present and future.

**Our tenth need is the humility to ask others to pray for us.**

On more than one occasion Paul said, “Pray for me.”

If the great apostle felt no shame in asking others to pray for him, neither should you feel shame in asking others to pray for you.

Pride keeps you from asking for help, which is why many fail when its crunch time. Far better to ask for prayer than to wish you had!

These 10 prayer patterns sum up a great deal of what Paul prayed about.

They also touch needs that we all have. Here is my challenge to you.

As you pray this week, pray along the lines of these 10 points. Use them to pray for yourself, use them also as you pray for others.

II. A Final Reminder

We come now to the final prayer by the Apostle Paul in this series.

It’s not the final prayer that he prayed or even the final prayer of his in the New Testament, but it is a fitting closing prayer because it is a prayer request by Paul for his own personal ministry.

This is what he says (Romans 15:30-33): “**I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me.**

**31 Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea and that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there, 32 so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed. 33 The God of peace be with you all. Amen**.”

Two things strike me as I consider Paul’s words.

First, notice how personal he is. Seven times in verses 30-32 he uses the words “I, me, my.” “Join me” in “my struggle” by praying “for me.”

This is the most personal of all of Paul’s prayers.

The second thing I notice is how honest he is.

He speaks openly about the “unbelievers” in Judea. The word literally means “disobedient.”

He is referring to Jews who had heard the gospel and not only rejected it, but had become hostile against it.

They followed Paul wherever he went, harassing him, accusing him, doing all they could to stir up the Gentiles against him.

Often their tactics were quite successful.

No doubt Paul had come to a crisis moment and felt that his ability to minister was in jeopardy.

Rather than pretend he was doing fine, he bares his soul and begs for help from his friends.

As we look at this request from the standpoint of the 21st century, three lasting truths emerge.

**First**, prayer is **agony**.

When Paul says, “**Join me in my struggle**,” he uses a Greek word from which we get the English word “agony.”

Join me in my agony. What a thought that is. Prayer is agony.

Prayer isn’t fun; it’s hard work. And true prayer is agony of the soul.

Prayer is wrestling with God, it is striving in the realm of the spirit, it is spiritual warfare against principalities and powers and the forces of evil all around us.

When was the last time you agonized in prayer?

When was the last time you wrestled in prayer?

When was the last time you shed tears in prayer?

You’ll discover what agony means when you have a sick child in the middle of the night with a rising fever and you can’t get the doctor on the phone.

You’ll learn about agony in prayer when your marriage is on the ropes.

You’ll know how to agonize in prayer when a loved one is wheeled away for life-saving surgery.

Sooner or later, we all learn to agonize in prayer.

The **second** lasting truth I see here is that prayer promotes **unity**.

Paul says, “**Join me in my struggle as you pray for me**.”

Though they were hundreds of miles away from Paul, they became one with him through their prayers.

Distance doesn’t matter when we are on our knees. We can be anywhere in the world and yet in the realm of the spirit through prayer, we can be joined with brothers and sisters thousands of miles away.

The **third** lasting truth about prayer is that is **advances** ministry.

Paul asked for deliverance from his foes; then he prayed that his ministry to the poor saints in Jerusalem might be acceptable; then he prayed that one day he might come to Rome, meet the saints face to face, and be refreshed by his fellowship with them.

Paul understood that the church advances on its knees.

The power of the church lies not in money, plans, buildings, preachers, programs, or anything else that comes from the hand of man.

Our only true power is the power of prayer.

When we pray, God moves from heaven.

When we pray, things happen that would not otherwise happen.

By prayer all things are possible. If we want to see the church move forward and the kingdom of darkness vanquished, we must pray and pray and pray.

We have no other secret. If prayer won’t do it, there is no Plan B.

One final thought and I am done. Paul mentioned three specific prayer requests:

1) He prayed that he might be rescued from those who opposed his ministry.

That prayer was not answered. His opponents became even stronger and eventually had him arrested, put in jail, and eventually he was sent to Rome for trial before Caesar.

2) He prayed that his ministry in Jerusalem might be acceptable to the saints there.

That prayer was answered and his ministry was successful.

3) He prayed that he might come to Rome and be refreshed with the saints in that city.

That request was answered but not in the way he prayed it. He eventually made it to Rome—in chains, as a prisoner.

So his three prayers were answered this way:

No

Yes

Yes, but …

That’s the way it is for all of us.

We never have all our prayers answered exactly as we pray them, and sometimes the answer is clearly no.

Yet even in this we can see the hand of the Lord at work.

Sometimes it is better for us if our prayers are not answered immediately. Sometimes it is better if they are not answered at all.

The great question is not, how can I get my prayers answered?

The great question is, what will it take to draw me closer to God?

According to one account, the following poem was found on a body of a soldier who died in the Civil War:

I asked God for strength, that I might achieve;

 I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey.

I asked for health, that I might do greater things;

 I was given infirmity, then I might do better things.

I asked for riches, that I might be happy;

 I was given poverty, that I might be wise.

I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men;

 I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.

I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life;

 I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.

I got nothing I asked for, but everything I had hoped for.

 Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.

I am, among men, most richly blessed.

It is a great advance in spiritual understanding to be able to say, “I got nothing I asked for, but everything I had hoped for.”

Great doors are open before us—Pray!

Great challenges face us—Pray!

Great needs rise in our path—Pray!

All things are possible when the church begins to pray. So Lord, do whatever it takes, but please, O Lord, teach us to pray. Amen.