

Christ Sufficient Prayer

Colossians 4:2-4 *Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving; ³ meanwhile praying also for us, that God would open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in chains, ⁴ that I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak.*

Nothing humbles us like talking about our prayer lives. I think almost every Christian I have met will admit they wished they prayed more. It's easy to make a Christian feel guilty about prayer – sometimes just the mention of it does the trick. Rather than do that, I want us to see some truths about prayer emerging from this passage that will help us to pray better.

The first and main command of this passage is to *continue in prayer*. The word for 'continue' means to persist in prayer, to be devoted to it, to give ourselves to it. It has the idea of "stick to it, engage in it; don't break off from it".

What does this mean? It does not mean that your life is to be made of non-stop talking to God. It means that prayer should be an ongoing and continuous habit in your life. Prayer should not be a stop-start affair, pray on Tuesday, miss four days, pray on Saturday, pray on Sunday, pray again only on Wednesday. Don't let your prayer be something which flickers on like neon light about to fuse, and then off. Instead, let your life be characterised by regular, faithful prayer.

In other words, let's put it the way the Bible does. There are regular times when you meet with God privately, away from the world, in a consecrated time for you and Him alone. Jesus called this 'entering into your closet'. And then springing up from that is a life lived in an attitude of prayer – frequent thanksgiving, requests for mercy, confession, praise.

Often prayer is compared to breathing. It would be hard to live if you took huge breaths, held your breath and went about your business. But that is often how we pray. We come to the Lord for a certain time, but then we break off meeting with Him alone, or even silently living in an attitude of prayer for a while before we come back to Him.

The book of Acts illustrates this continuance in prayer.

Acts 1:14 *These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.*

Acts 2:42 *And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.*

Acts 2:46 *So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart,*

A number of commands call us to continual prayer:

Romans 12:12 *rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer;*

1 Thessalonians 5:17 *pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

Ephesians 6:18 *praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints --*

Philippians 4:6 *Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God;*

Now why is the command here, and in other places – to continue, to persist, to stick to it? The answer is that of all the things in the Christian life, prayer is the one we are most likely to postpone, procrastinate on, delay and skip. Of all the acts of devotion in the Christian life, the one that weak humans are most likely to give up is prayer.

Why? Why does prayer have such a high drop-out rate? Why do so few Christians pray faithfully?

1. Because it is hard work.

I didn't say that prayer is complicated. No, a child can pray. But to pray well is to learn spiritual concentration. There you focus all your attention on God, His presence and His nature. All kinds of thoughts fight for your attention, all kinds of inward and external sounds call for you to think about them, and not God. The struggle to call home the roving thoughts, to stay until you really pray is difficult.

It's especially difficult in a world where advertisers and entertainers have taught us to reduce our attention span to a few seconds. Do you know that movie, TV, and film producers know that they must change the image on the screen roughly every 5 seconds to be successful? We find it harder and harder to sit still and focus. But prayer requires that. It may be one of the hardest things you do, fighting with your own rambling, roving and distracted thoughts.

Now the good news is that those thoughts can be trained to come home a lot faster than they used to.

But let's just be honest. We come to prayer with great reluctance at the thought of that inward battle. And the sinful nature is tempted to laziness rather than to the hard work of obeying the command to pray.

Later in Colossians, Paul commends Epaphras for his prayers. Notice what the Bible says about him:

Colossians 4:12-13 *Epaphras, who is one of you, a bondservant of Christ, greets you, always **laboring fervently** for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. ¹³ For I bear him witness that he has a great zeal for you, and those who are in Laodicea, and those in Hierapolis.*

The words *labouring fervently* translate a single Greek word from which we get the English word *agonise*. Epaphras strove, he fought; he worked to exhaustion for the Colossians in prayer.

Prayer is hard work.

I like how one preacher put it:

‘There are two times to pray: when you feel like it and when you don't.’

In 1928, J. Sidlow Baxter entered the ministry determined that he would be the “*most Methodist-Baptist*” of pastors, a real man of prayer. However, it was not long until his increasing pastoral responsibilities, administrative duties, and the subtle subterfuges of pastoral life began to crowd prayer out. He began to get used to it, making excuses for himself. Then one morning came a crisis, as he stood over his work-strewn desk and looked at his watch. The voice of the Spirit was calling him to pray, but at the same time another velvety little voice told him to be practical and get his letters answered, that he ought to face up to the fact that he wasn't of the spiritual sort, that only a few people could be like that. That did it! “*That last remark,*” said Baxter, “*hurt like a dagger blade. I could not bear to think it was true.*” He was horrified by his ability to rationalize away the very ground of his ministerial vitality and power.

That morning Sidlow Baxter took a good look into his heart, and he found that there was a part of him that did not want to pray and yet a part that did. The part that didn't was his emotions, and the part that did was his intellect and will. This analysis paved the way to victory. In Dr. Baxter's own inimitable words:

‘As never before, my will and I stood face to face. I asked my will the straight question, *"Will, are you ready for an hour of prayer?"* Will answered, *"Here I am, and I'm quite ready, if you are."* So Will and I linked arms and turned to go for our time of prayer. At once all the emotions began pulling the other way and protesting, *"We're not coming."* I saw Will stagger just a bit, so I asked, *"Can you stick it out. Will?"* and Will replied, *"Yes, if you can."* So Will went, and we got down to prayer, dragging those wriggling, obstreperous emotions with us. It was a struggle all the way through. At one point, when Will and I were in the middle of an earnest intercession, I suddenly found one of those traitorous emotions had snared my imagination and had run off to the golf course; and it was all I could do to drag the wicked rascal back. A bit later I found another of the emotions had sneaked away with some off-guard thoughts and was in the pulpit, two days ahead of schedule, preaching a sermon that I had not yet finished preparing!

At the end of that hour, if you had asked me, *"Have you had a 'good time'?"* I would have had to reply, *"No, it has been a wearying wrestle with contrary emotions and a truant imagination from beginning to end."* What is more, that battle with the emotions continued for between two and three weeks, and if you had asked me at the end of that period, *"Have you had a 'good time' in your daily praying?"* I would have had to confess, *"No, at times it has seemed as though the heavens were brass, and God too distant to hear, and the Lord Jesus strangely aloof, and prayer accomplishing nothing."*

Yet something was happening. For one thing, Will and I really taught the emotions that we were completely independent of them. Also, one morning, about two weeks after the contest began, just when Will and I were going for another time of prayer, I overheard one of the emotions whisper to the other, *"Come on, you guys, it's no use wasting any more time resisting: they'll go just the same."* That morning, for the first time, even though the emotions were still suddenly uncooperative, they were at least quiescent, which allowed Will and me to get on with prayer undistractedly.

Then, another couple of weeks later, what do you think happened? During one of our prayer times, when Will and I were no more thinking of the emotions than of the man in the moon, one of the most vigorous of the emotions unexpectedly sprang up and shouted, *"Hallelujah!"* at which all the other emotions exclaimed, *"Amen!"*. And for the first time the whole of my being - intellect, will, and emotions - was united in one coordinated prayer-operation. All at once, God was real, heaven was open, the Lord Jesus was luminously present, the Holy Spirit was indeed moving through my longings, and prayer was surprisingly vital. Moreover, in that instant there came a sudden realization that heaven had been watching and listening all the way through those days of struggle against chilling moods and mutinous emotions; also that I had been undergoing necessary tutoring by my heavenly Teacher.” (*Disciplines of a Godly Man – R Kent Hughes pp105-106*)

2. Because of our unbelief

Unbelief is one of the last things we confess, because we often don't realise it's there. We say we believe one thing, but our actions betray what we really believe. Sometimes, at the root of prayerlessness is doubt.

What kind of doubt?

- [Doubt that God is willing to answer prayer.
- [Doubt that my prayers have any power with God.
- [Doubt that I will see specific answers to specific prayers.
- [Doubt that I really need God's grace, when I can handle most things by myself.

So when our prayer life is being broken up into something sporadic, look out for either the weakness of the flesh, unwilling to embrace the difficulty of prayer, or the unbelief of the flesh which thinks prayer to be pointless or hopeless or needless.

Our Lord Jesus gave at least two parables to overcome these kinds of thoughts and attitudes, to provoke us and encourage us to pray.

Luke 11:5-13 *And He said to them, "Which of you shall have a friend, and go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; ⁶ 'for a friend of mine has come to me on his journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; ⁷ "and he will answer from within and say, 'Do not trouble me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give to you'? ⁸ "I say to you, though he will not rise and give to him because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will rise and give him as many as he needs. ⁹ " So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ¹⁰ "For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. ¹¹ "If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? ¹² "Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? ¹³ "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!"*

Notice that the power of Jesus' illustrations lies in contrast. Here is a friend, not even a blood relation, who is reluctant to meet a need simply because it is late and personally inconvenient. But simply because his friend insists, he receives.

The point is one of contrast. Is God merely a friend? No, He is a Father.

Is God ever inconvenienced by us? Does it ever get late for God? No. The point is, how much more will the God who never sleeps nor slumbers answer your needs – if you simply persist?

Then Jesus takes it further. Now He asks, 'Which human father will give a stone, a snake or a scorpion to a child asking for food?' It seems ridiculous to us. Fathers cannot be so wicked. But then Jesus drives home the point. But you – who are evil by nature, can do at least that much good to your own children – what do you expect from a perfectly good Heavenly Father?

Luke 18:1-8 *Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart, ² saying: "There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. ³ "Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, 'Get justice for me from my adversary.' ⁴ "And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, 'Though I do not fear God nor regard man, ⁵ 'yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.' " ⁶ Then the Lord said, "Hear what the unjust judge said. ⁷ "And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? ⁸ "I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?"*

Here the contrast is even deeper. A widow-a helpless person with no bargaining power, needs justice from a wicked judge who is usually bribed to do anything. What hope does she have of justice from him? There is no relationship. There is no obligation.

The only reason for meeting her request was that he didn't want to be pestered with it.

Are we helpless widows before God? No, we are his children?

Is God an uncaring, unjust judge? If an unjust judge answers a request from a stranger merely because of her persistence, how much more will God answer the persistent cries of His children.

Jesus is decisively dealing with the unbelief that says – God is not willing. God is not interested. God does not care. God will not answer me specifically. By emphasising God as Father, and God as good – Jesus is saying, God is willing. God is able. God will answer your requests. In other words, the fault of unanswered prayer does not lie with a lack of willingness from God, but a lack of asking from us.

Jesus is also dealing with the laziness of hearts that do not ask. By picturing a man needing food, children needing food, a woman needing justice – He is showing these people sensed their need, and didn't stop asking until the answer came. Laziness was not an option. Jesus is saying – when

you realise your need of grace, you will ask and keep on asking.

Grace – that's what prayer is about. You have a Father who is gracious, and you have much need of grace.

Paul gives two qualifiers to the command to continue in prayer: be vigilant, and be thankful.

You could think of them like this:

Be vigilant means: be aware of your need of grace.

Be thankful means: rejoice in the reception of grace.

Be vigilant: Be aware of your need of grace.

This word 'vigilant' is translated by some other versions as being watchful. It means 'to give strict attention to'. It has the idea of someone being alert to dangers, staying awake so as to avoid calamity.

1 Peter 4:7 *But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers.*

Matthew 26:41 *"...Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."*

Mark 13:33-37 *Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time is. It is like a man going to a far country, who left his house and gave authority to his servants, and to each his work, and commanded the doorkeeper to watch. Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming -- in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning -- lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping. And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch!"*

Luke 21:36 *Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man."*

You'll notice that watching is often contrasted with sleeping in these passages. It is associated with not being caught by surprise at the Lord's return. Now what does this have to do with prayer? Does it mean we must cut down on sleep so as to pray?

Watching and 'not sleeping' is not referring to a physical sleep. It is referring to the sensitivity of your own soul to the dangers around us. Just like physically we can get drowsy, so our souls can get drowsy. The drowsier they get, the less they sense the urgent need for grace as long as you are in this world. A spiritually drowsy person does not pray because he does not sense the need to. He does not sense the spiritual dangers around him, the danger to his own soul and those around him. And, like someone falling into a deep sleep before a calamity such as a flood or a fire, to allow your soul to fall into a drowsy, spiritually insensitive state, before you go to glory, can be tragic.

Just like certain things induce physical drowsiness, so certain things increase spiritual drowsiness. If we immerse ourselves in the worldly entertainment, we emerge with a sense that life can't really be about heaven and hell and God and His glory. It can't be that serious.

If we immerse ourselves in the materialism of this world, we emerge with a sense that life cannot really be about holiness and sanctification and fighting sin – it's just about living a fairly comfortable life, having enough money, settling down into a simple, bourgeois life.

If we immerse ourselves in the pluralism of this world, we emerge with a sense that evangelism is not critical, missions is not urgent, the Gospel is not precious.

If we immerse ourselves in friendships with those who deny Jesus Christ, we emerge with the sense that it can't all be true. Jesus can't be coming back.

In Verse 3 and 4 Paul reminds the Colossians of some of the spiritual realities. He needed to preach the Gospel. Only God can open the doors of opportunity. Paul wanted them open, and he wanted the grace to proclaim it as he ought. He was not asleep, he was very much aware of his spiritual surroundings, and of what was needed.

The result of this drowsiness is that we don't think we need grace. Spiritual realities are far from us, and as a result, prayer is far from us. We won't be praying for people's salvation. We won't be praying for missionaries. We won't be praying for our own spiritual growth, deliverance from temptation, sanctification, for evidence of salvation. We won't be cleaving to Christ in prayer, confessing our trust in Him, staking our continual claim on Him

The call is – keep your soul vigilant. Keep away from whatever dulls you. Whatever lulls your soul into a dreamy state where the truths of God's Word seem not only less real, but even unreal – beware -those are spiritual sedatives. Watch! Keep alert. It is not that you have to invent reasons to need grace; you just have to wake up to them! You just have to stop taking the spiritual sedatives. Guard against the things that rob you of a sense of needing grace. Guard against the things which rob you of a sense of need.

Take the things that are spiritual stimulants. And guess what the most important one is? Prayer is the most important! Prayer is direct dealings with God about eternal matters. Add to that the Word of God, obedience to the Word, fellowship and accountability with other believers in the local church, evangelism. These things keep us spiritually wide awake.

I think modern Christianity is just about sleepwalking. Be at pains to keep yourself in a state of continual awareness of our deep need of grace.

That need not be a restless state, because you know how willing God is to dispense grace. It can be, and should be, a peaceful and restful frame of mind. But it should never be a complacent and spiritually dull state of mind – that is what we are warned against.

I've never met someone filled with watchfulness who gave up praying. Only the spiritually drowsy lose a sense of the dangers around them and stop praying.

But the second call here is to pray also with thanksgiving.

Be thankful: rejoice in the reception of grace.

Not only do you need grace, but you have already received grace.

One of the strongest motives to continue in prayer is one we overlook – gratitude for grace received. We often look at that on the outside, and we are not excited. We think, ‘Who wants to spend extended time saying “thank you, thank you”, when I don't feel thankful?’

But that's just the thing. We only usually *feel* thankful once we engage in the act of prayer. If we wait to feel thankful before we start praying, we will not pray. But begin praying, and begin acknowledging the mercies of God to you. That He has spared your life, given you food, given you shelter, given you health, given you money, surrounded you with helpers, protected you, blessed you with all kinds of material goods, showered you with kindnesses. It won't be long before you are led to thank Him for your salvation, for the inheritance you have in Christ, for the way He has led you and shepherded you from day one. All your blessings will come back to this one truth – you are in Christ, and Christ died for you. If you keep that up, you will eventually end up adoring Him for who He is – gracious, kind, merciful, loving, patient, just, righteous.

Begin to think on the grace you have received, and you will soon find an endless supply of items. The remarkable result will be the desire to take each one and name them before God, like proudly showing photos to someone else. Once gratitude sets in, it is not a burden, it is in fact life-giving

energy. The joy of the Lord is our strength. Prayer is hard work, in crying out for grace; but it provides energy in that you keep seeing how much grace you have received.

The trouble is getting past that initial hump of resistance.

We need to pray continually. But it is hard work, and we tend towards laziness and unbelief. But the Bible portrays God as gracious. So be vigilant that you stay aware of how much grace you need. Keep reminding yourself of how much grace you have received. This is part of what will keep us faithful at the throne of grace.