

45. Strive together in prayers

March 22, 2009

We've been studying the Book of Romans for 44 weeks so far and we are not quite done yet. I believe that the Lord is going to speak to us through this Book two more times.

Right before his final greetings and benediction of the letter to the believers of Rome, this aging apostle Paul is pleading to them to strive together with him in prayers to the Lord.

I don't know if there is anytime that demands our prayers like now. Greedy executives who make millions of dollars a year from their salaries thought they deserve bonuses which came from tax payers of current generation as well as next two generations and engulfed it without thinking twice. Washington, D.C. is filled with politicians who love to point fingers at someone else when something goes wrong and would take credit in a heartbeat if there is anything good even if they have nothing to do with it. The United States of America is at the brink of financial destruction since her people chose money over God.

Never in the church history, the Christian believers, at least in America, are so organized. When there is some legislations coming up that would threaten our freedom of faith, we get to have e-mail alerts from Christian watchdog organizations. Many of you receive those forwarding e-mails from me.

The problem is not in our protests to those ungodly legislations but how we handle the whole thing. We are more inclined to protest than pray, we are more interested in who is in the White House than God's house. We are more passionate in politics than salvation of our families and friends. The answer to the current situation in America is not political, but spiritual.

A. THE PRIMARY PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST

Our primary purpose as the church of Jesus Christ is not in protesting in front of abortion clinics, or reversing homosexual culture in court room, or cleaning up filthy movies and music industries. You are thinking, "OK, finally the pastor went off the deep end. He lost his mind." Before you pick up rocks to stone me, listen to me carefully, please.

If a militant homosexual gets saved by our Lord Jesus, he would stop being a homosexual and walk straight with our God. If a young woman realizes that she desperately needs the Savior and receives Christ into her heart, she would not abort her baby. If a filthy x-rated movie producer comes to sense that he would be in hell without the Son of God in his heart and becomes a born-again Christian, he would not make another x-rated movie.

In other words, we need to get to the root problem by making Jesus Christ known to the unbelievers instead of fighting against the symptoms of our decaying culture with another political movement.

How are we going to make our Christ known to others? All the Christian actions must start from prayers. Prayer is our secret weapon in spiritual warfare. Some might say, "That is right. There is power in prayer."

With all due respect, I disagree with that comment. There is absolutely no power in prayer itself. It is nothing more than a cry from us to our God who activates His almighty power for His glory on behalf of us. Apostle Paul clearly understood this point and he is asking the believers of Rome to pray with him.

B. STRIVE TOGETHER WITH ME IN PRAYERS

Romans 15:30-33 Now I beg you, brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the Spirit, that you strive together with me in prayers to God for me, 31 that I may be delivered from those in Judea who do not believe, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, 32 that I may come to you with joy by the will of God, and may be refreshed together with you. 33 Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen.

Paul was not afraid to let others know he had needs. Notice how he framed his request – he urged them to pray for him. ‘Urge’, in the Greek, is ‘parakaleo’, which means “to call to or for,” “beseech,” “summon,” or “exhort.”

In this case, Paul is using his position as an apostle – one who speaks with almighty authority in the name of God – to exhort his friends to pray. His call is urgent and it is more than a mere request.

If Paul, the apostle, felt the need to boldly ask for prayer from fellow believers in Christ, how much more should we willingly share our needs with others? Sharing our needs can be threatening, it’s true. Why? It is because it can make us feel weak, vulnerable, insufficient, exposed and even becoming humble. Either our upbringing or our pride tells us that we ought to be able to handle our problems on our own. But that kind of thinking only leaves us alone, hurting and isolated from a caring community.

In light of sharing prayer requests, as many of you already know, we have two types of prayer lines. For those urgent prayer requests, we use telephone to call our church congregation who are on the prayer chain. If you are on it, you might get a call in wee hours in the night. For other prayer requests, we use e-mail systems to let the people know. Then on Thursday night, right after our Midweek Service we lift up those requests to our God. I believe that we have somewhere around 150 people including children in our church. I’ve noticed that only a handful of people utilize these prayer systems in the church.

Praying for others is an honor and a privilege as Christians. Let us know how we can come along side of you and your families and lift you to the Throne of Grace. It is not that we are trying to poke our noses in your businesses. You don’t have to give us the detail information. A simple description will do. You can also find prayer request sheet on top of the Agape Box for you to fill it out and give it to us before you leave this service.

Note the words ‘strive together’ in v30 again, please. Prayer is not something to be entered into lightly. The Greek word for ‘strive together’ is “sunagonizomai” – literally meaning, “agonize together.” To emphasize the importance and intensity, Paul repeats the word twice: sunagonizomai, sunagonizomai.

This same root word for ‘agony’ is used of the anguished prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus asked His disciples to agonize with Him in prayer. They failed at that critical moment and left Jesus to struggle alone.

When was the last time you poured out your heart onto our gracious and merciful God on behalf of another person? Can you say that you strived together with that person in prayers to our God? Or was it one of those “quickie” prayers when you happened to think of that person?

Ladies and gentlemen, prayer is our only help-line to our God against the onslaught attacks that come from our enemies – whether it is from satan and his demons, or those people who hate Christianity and are doing everything they can to destroy us, or it could be physical infirmities, or whatever the difficulties that person is going through.

Apostle Paul is pleading to the fellow believers in Rome to stand with him and fight with him for the sake of spreading the Gospel of the Grace of our God.

This kind of prayer is hard work, requiring commitment, time and even extracting a toll. To pray effectively with, and for others, we need to get involved with what they’re facing and pay the price for that involvement.

Some of you may say, “No way, Jose. That is not what I signed up for.” OK, but what if you are in that very, very difficult situation I mentioned before, which kind of person would you like to have – someone comes to your side and pour his or her heart out to the Lord on behalf of you with sincere and righteous prayers, or some one who would says, “Yeah, I will say a prayer for you if I have time.”

C. PRAYERS FOR PASTORS

Great missionary to India William Carey who was known as the Father of Modern Mission, said to his supporters before he went to India, “I will go down into the pit, but brother Fuller and the rest of you must hold the rope.” How could they refuse the request? When apostle Paul asked the Roman Christians with his prayer requests, I don’t believe one moment they refused to pray for him.

I know that many of you are praying for me everyday. I need them and I thank God for them. Pastors are sustained by the power of the Spirit through the support of their congregations. While I am in this subject of praying for pastors, I am going to ask you shamelessly to pray for me with this list:

- 1) Pray to the Lord that my relationship with Him be pure, holy by the blood of Jesus and by keeping short accounts with Him.
- 2) Whatever I learn from Him, I must live by it.
- 3) Ask the Lord that I see my sins as God sees and stay far away from them
- 4) Pray for me that I may continue to be the faithful, loving husband to my wife Karen and the loving father my daughter would be proud of
- 5) Ask the Lord to give me the right message by the Holy Spirit, not of my own.
- 6) May the Lord anoint me that it is impossible for anyone to misunderstand His truth that comes out of my mouth in my teachings.

D. THE AIM OF PRAYER

The aim of prayer is not to force God’s hand or make Him do our will against His own – as if we can. Rather it is to deepen our knowledge of Him and our fellowship with Him for His glory, confessing our dependence and need and consciously embracing His goals. Consequently our requests must be according to God’s will and in Jesus’ name. To ask in Jesus’ name is not to use it as some kind of a verbal spell but to base our requests on Christ’s saving relationship to us through the cross.

E. HOW CAN WE PRAY EFFECTIVELY

When we have a bad headache, what is the first thing we do? Generally, popping headache pills. When we go through really tough financial problems, what is the first thing we do? Some grab credit cards to get cash out – by the way, that is a really, really terrible idea. It would make the matter worse. Many people don't even think about turning to God and seeking His way in prayer. If we pray, it is like a Christmas wish list that we demand Him to be our Santa Clause in heaven 24/7.

So how can we pray effectively? Here are a few tips we can consider:

1) Our prayer must be offered to our God.

I know it sounds so elementary. When we pray, we spill out our long demand list to someone whom we have a tendency to think a butler in heaven. We don't think about His will on earth as long as we get our will here right now. If we really think about whom we are praying to, I guarantee you that we would change the way we pray.

2) Our prayer should be aligned with His will, not ours.

Nothing is outside of God's reach except that which is outside of His will.

1 John 5:14-15 Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. 15 And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.

Some of you may ask, "Where do I find the will of God?" I will answer you with two words, the Bible. The more you get to know the Word of God, the more you get to know the heart of God. Remember, prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance, rather it is getting hold of God's willingness.

3) Our prayer must have a great and sincere intensity.

No one wants you to pray for them haphazardly. Even you don't want to pray for yourself haphazardly. When we pray, we should pray as if the person's life is depending on that very prayer.

E. CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

Before we leave I must give you a warning regarding a subtle movement of prayer that has been going around for some time within the Christian communities.

You may have heard 'contemplative prayer' or 'centering prayer' or "breath prayer' from some Christian books or in conversations with someone who claims to be a Christian.

So what is this contemplative prayer? It is a mystical prayer practice that leads one into the "silence" but in actuality leads away from God. It is a modern day untruthful movement which a person empties the mind of thought through repetition, usually of a word or phrase or focus on the breath. In this case the silence would be an absence of thought, all thought. It is a newly packaged eastern cultic meditation which is from the pit of hell.

The purpose of contemplative prayer is to enter an altered state of consciousness in order to find one's true self, thus finding God. The people who practice believe that man is basically good.

This movement has penetrated even the ranks of Christianity including rather famous people, like Rick Warren who is a pastor and author of the book "The Purpose-Driven Life". Warren says:

"Use 'breath prayers' throughout the day, as many Christians have done for centuries. You choose a brief sentence or a simple phrase that can be repeated to Jesus in one breath." – "The Purpose-Driven Life", p. 89.

That is not the only thing you find problems with Warren's "The Purpose-Driven Life" book and you know why our Chapel Bookstore does not carry it.

Do you know what the Oriental people call repeating the same words over and over as a form of prayer in buddhism and other cultic religions? Mantra or chant. That is what some of the ignorant Christians embrace as a new movement of prayer. How do I know? I came from that culture. There is a Greek word for contemplative prayer – hogwash.

Matthew 6:7-8 And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. 8 Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.

Please do be careful how you handle your mind. If you empty it without filling it with the Word of God, it will be filled with all the garbage that comes from satan which may sound, look like the truth. Just because it sounds and looks spiritual, it doesn't mean that it is from our God. When He speaks to us, He never, never contradicts His Word in context.

1 Thessalonians 5:21-22 Test all things; hold fast what is good. 22 Abstain from every form of evil.

1 John 4:1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

F. APPLICATIONS

1) Our highest privilege is to pray to God and our highest duties are to listen to Him and pray for others fervently.

2) Prayer is an earnest conversation with God, not a formula. It's not the words we pray that matter, it's the condition of our heart.

3) We need to keep this in mind: If our prayer request is wrong, God says, "No"; if our timing is wrong, God says, "Slow"; if we are wrong, God says, "Grow"; but if our request is right, our timing is right and we are right, God says, "Go."