

The Ineptness in Our Prayer Life

Romans 8:26-27

Do you know of anyone who has ever said, “I can’t pray, can you pray for me?” The reality is it may well have happened to most of us here. I can’t speak for Pastor Wonnacott, but I can honestly say to you that there have been situations where I did not know for what to pray. Sure I knew the formula: Pray in Jesus’ name and ask for His will to be done. Yet, I and many of us here have experienced “our weakness” in relationship to “not knowing for what we ought to pray.” The truth is that there is ineptness in our prayer life. This morning we look at the cause of this ineptness and God’s answer to the problem.

We begin by looking at the fact that the ineptness in our prayer life is the result of our sinful nature. Paul is not here talking about the fact that we should pray more, although we probably should. What Paul is addressing here is what we are praying for and how often we don’t know what it is for which we are to pray. Elihu addresses this problem with Job as he tells Job we need help in our prayer life because “we cannot draw up our case because of our darkness” (Job 37:19). The Psalmist states in Psalm 77:4, “I was too troubled to speak.” It is clear from these passages that our sinful nature makes us inept in our prayer life for it leaves us speechless as for what it is that we are to pray.

We are inept in our prayer life because we often pray with a worldview of life. It is very hard for us to lift up prayers to the heavenly Father without materialism, self-centeredness, or pride being a part of our prayer life. In our

prayer life we fall into the trap of praying for things as if what mattered most were the things of this life, the comforts of our flesh, and freedom from all pain and suffering. This is a worldview of life as though that which really matters is the here and now, our comforts and our successes. Many times we struggle with that for which we are to pray because we are seeing life through the eyes of the sinful flesh and our vision is looking only to the things of this life.

We are also inept in our prayer life because we often pray with an ignorance of God's Word. In our prayer life we may offer up prayers that we consider being good or beneficial to us, yet they are prayed with an ignorance concerning the whole council of God. Take, for example, Paul's prayer for the removal of his thorn in the flesh. What that thorn in the flesh was precisely we do not know. Some believe it to have been poor eyesight, others epilepsy, and still others persecution he was encountering from some Jews. We don't really know what the thorn in the flesh was, but we know that the Apostle Paul saw it as being restrictive to the ministry he wanted to do for the Lord. Hence, he prayed for its removal. What Paul didn't realize and what we sometimes are ignorant about are the blessings that hardships, illnesses, and injuries can be in our lives. Paul learned that his thorn in the flesh was not a curse but a blessing, because through that thorn in the flesh God was keeping Paul humble so he would always be mindful of God's grace.

How many times have our prayers been inept because we sought that which was desirable for ourselves rather than praying for that which would be

beneficial spiritually? Garth Brooks, a country-recording artist, sang a song entitled, “Unanswered Prayers.” The song speaks about what we are looking at here. It begins with him and his wife attending a hometown football game and there running into his high school sweetheart. He recalls how he had wanted to spend the rest of his life with her, and prayed to God that that might come to pass. He then sings the chorus: “Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers Remember when you’re talking to the Man upstairs That just because he doesn’t answer doesn’t mean He don’t care, Some of God’s greatest gifts are unanswered prayers.” The song goes on to note that this former high school sweetheart wasn’t quite the angel he had thought here to be. He then notes: “I guess the Lord knows what He’s doin’ after all. As she walked away and I looked at my wife Then and there I thanked the good Lord For the gifts of my life.” That song, like Paul’s words in II Corinthians 12, shows us that our prayers are sometimes inept because the things we pray for are not always what are best for us. Our prayers are many times ignorant of God’s Word and His revealed plans for our lives.

The Apostle Paul speaks about the weaknesses in our prayer life and notes: “We do not know for what we ought to pray.” There are times when we are beset with temptations of the flesh, the values of the world, and ignorance of God’s Word so that we do not know how to pray, or we pray for the wrong things. Let us see how God answers this problem of ours in the words of today’s text.

The Apostle Paul teaches us that the ineptness of our prayer life is dealt with by the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul writes, “The Spirit helps us in our

weaknesses.... The Spirit Himself intercedes for us.” Notice here that Paul does not say that the Holy Spirit supersedes our weaknesses, but that He intercedes for us. This Greek word translated “intercedes” is found in the present tense telling us that He is constantly interceding for us.

This intercession means that the Holy Spirit keeps our prayers in tune with God’s will.

Recently my wife and I attended a concert in Warsaw where an orchestra played music written by Bach, Mozart, and Brahms. At the beginning of each section of musical pieces the program the instrumentalists assembled on stage and worked at tuning their instruments with one another. Instruments can quickly go out of tune, just like people. Even God’s people can get out of tune with God’s will. This is why the intercessory work of the Holy Spirit is so important. The Holy Spirit intercedes for us, so that our prayers may be placed in tune with God’s will and purposes.

The Holy Spirit also leads us to pray with a submissive heart. The interceding of the Holy Spirit is different from the intercession done by Jesus. Jesus’ intercession connects us with God the Father. It is through Jesus’ saving work in our behalf that we are forgiven children of God and heirs of everlasting life. Through Jesus we are able to come to our heavenly Father as dear children approach their earthly father. The Holy Spirit’s intercession, meanwhile, works in our hearts a belief that the heavenly Father will do what is best for us eternally, hence leading us to pray to the Father with a submissive heart.

The Holy Spirit further enables us to pray with the heart when we are not able to express ourselves with words.

The ultimate aspect of prayer is not that we use fine eloquent words, come forth with fluent statements, or have what some think to be an appropriate prayer style. No, the ultimate aspect of prayer is that we pray from the heart. Sometimes that which rests in our heart is difficult for us to put into words. Here is where the Holy Spirit intercedes for us. He takes those groanings that words cannot express and He brings them to the heavenly Father in a fashion that is “in accordance with God’s will.”

Charles Spurgeon, a Christian preacher and author of the 1800s, looked at this aspect of the Holy Spirit’s work similar to the relationship of a defendant to the best attorney available. The defendant wants to plead his own case, but he is unable to put the situation into the appropriate words. He knows very little about the law, and the prosecutor is a cunning and crafty man. Since the defendant has the best attorney available to him, he uses all his knowledge to deal with the case. The attorney suggests the plea, arranges the arguments, and puts his client at ease. When the case is eventually won, the testimony of the defendant was proven to be crucial, but it was the attorney who provided the impetus and the instruction.

With our weaknesses we come to the Lord in prayer. We are not always aware of God’s will or know for certain how God would have us to pray, but the Holy Spirit intercedes for us, taking the groanings of our hearts and presenting

them to the Lord in a way that is “in accordance with God’s will.”

At the beginning of today’s message I noted that there have been some very difficult situations I have been in where the groaning of my soul could not easily be put into words. One such instance was when my wife and I dealt with our oldest son’s car accident 13 years ago. As my wife and I stood beside his bed in the intensive care unit of Parkview Hospital after where he had been air lifted to Fort Wayne and undergone emergency surgery, for what does one pray? I didn’t know, but I knew that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us. Being alone by our son’s side for the first time since the accident, the Holy Spirit led us to pray these words: “Father, this is your child, You do with him as You see fit. Amen.” The Holy Spirit granted the groanings of our hearts to be expressed in a way that was in tune with God’s will and submissive to His ways.

That is what God promises to do for each one of us as our prayers are inept because of our sinful nature. The Holy Spirit leads us to the reality that through Jesus’ death and resurrection we are the redeemed children of the heavenly Father. The Holy Spirit enables us to call upon our heavenly Father through prayer in a way that we of ourselves are incapable. He makes the groanings of our hearts acceptable to the will of God and submissive to His plan. Since the work of the Triune God is at the heart of our prayers, we never need to think we cannot pray. We can pray in the confidence of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.