

Romans 8:26-39

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. 27 And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

28 We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. 30 And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

31 What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? 32 He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? 33 Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. 35 Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36 As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

THE PRAYER PROBLEM

What is the point of prayer?

I once did a children's sermon in which I used a red toy telephone. I told the children that prayer is just like calling someone that you love on the phone. Anytime you want to call God he's ready to listen. That's prayer.

Certainly God is willing to listen to our prayers. We can talk to God at any time.

But, as I've reflected on that children's sermon over the years I wondered if in my desire to simplify the message that I might have distorted it a bit. (That often happens, not only in children's sermons but also in grown up sermons as well.)

Prayer is more than just pulling out the red phone and giving God a call when we have a problem. Sometimes we say that prayer “works,” that all we have to try is give it a try. I saw a t-shirt once that did a take off on the Nike commercials. It said,

“Life's short. Pray hard.”

In other words, if we pray hard enough, if we pick up that red phone often enough, then we'll get what we want.

Is that the point of prayer, getting what we want? Is God really that great bellhop in the sky, ready to jump when we have something for Him to do?

I'm sure most of us wouldn't want to put it that way. But, quite often what I read and what I hear about prayer makes it seem that way.

And when we pick up that red phone in our hour of need and God doesn't seem to answer (at least not the way we would like Him to answer), we get discouraged.

We may even lose faith.

THE SPIRIT PRAYS FOR US

Prayer is the answer. But, prayer is also the problem. We don't know how to pray.

I didn't say that. That's what the Apostle Paul tells us in our lesson for today. Did you catch it?

Paul wrote that we are weak and that we don't know how to pray, at least we don't know how to pray properly. (Romans 8:26) We need instruction when it comes to prayer.

Apparently, proper prayer is more than just picking up the red phone and making our requests when times get tough. So how can we learn to pray?

Do we need to read yet another book on prayer? Do we need visit the monastery to take some continuing education on spirituality?

No, we don't need to read another book. We don't need to go on yet another retreat. We have a divine answer to the prayer problem. The Holy Spirit prays for us.

I have often mentioned the fact that when we don't know how to pray in a time of distress that the Spirit prays for us.

But, as I thought about our lesson for today it occurred to me that the Spirit doesn't just pray for us in groans too deep for words when we are overwhelmed by life and can't pray. The Spirit prays for us in groans too deep for words all the time.

Weakness describes our condition.

We don't know how to pray; all the time we don't know how to pray. And no amount of study or spiritual retreats will remedy that problem!

So what's a Christian to do?

According to this passage we need to remember that prayer doesn't begin with us. It begins with God's Spirit.

The Spirit knows our heart and the heart of God. The Spirit is the very presence of God. And according to this passage the Spirit "intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."

ALIGNING HIS WILL WITH OURS

Last week we talked about the fact that saints are not perfect people or even near perfect people. Saints are those whom God has chosen to preach His Word and do his will. In fact it seems that God often chooses weak and foolish people in order to make it plain to the world that the power of the gospel does not rest with us but in His saving grace.

But, despite our weak and foolish ways, God is able to accomplish His will through us. And that is the point of prayer, aligning our will with God's will. Notice that the Spirit prays for us saints "according to the will of God."

You'll remember that the will of God is not always what we expect. Indeed God's will is often what we do not want. Even Jesus had a hard time with this aspect of prayer. In the Garden of Gethsemane while sweating drops of blood he struggled to say in prayer, "Not my will but your will be done."

I think this is the most important statement in any prayer, "not my will be your will be done." And all true prayers should begin and end this way.

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, Jesus responded with what we now call the Lord's Prayer. That prayer begins with a desire to bend our will to God's will.

We say, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." And then we end that prayer by affirming that it is all about God's kingdom, God's power and God's glory.

So, prayer is NOT about our needs and us. Prayer is about bending our will to God's will. And we can't do that on our own. We need help.

God provides that help. The Spirit prays for us.

PREDESTINATION

But, when that Spirit enabled prayer happens, when our will is bent to the will of God something wonderful happens. We begin to see our world and ourselves in a different way.

We are not tossed here and there by the circumstances of life. We see ourselves as a part of God's purpose and plan.

Many of us like to quote the first part of verse 28. We say, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God ...”

That’s a comforting phrase isn’t it? No matter how bad things get God is going to work it out.

But, when things work together for good it doesn’t mean that we’re going to get what we want. It means that God’s plan and purpose is going to be accomplished through us.

Most people don’t quote the second part of this verse. Yes, all things do work together for good for those who love God and are “called according to his purpose.”

God’s plan and purpose takes precedence in our life and calling. It’s not all about what we want. It’s about what God wants for us. It’s our destiny being aligned with God’s destiny. We call that predestination, and predestination provides the foundation for proper prayer.

Our life is not just one big accident waiting to happen. Our life is an important part of God’s greater plan.

NOT FAIR

Many people struggle with this idea of predestination, that somehow it isn’t fair.

They’re right. It isn’t fair. Fair would be for God to judge us harshly for the many ways that we fail Him and those around us.

But, suppose God decided to forgive our sins instead of holding them against us. Suppose God decided to give us a new life based upon His plan instead of our plans. Suppose God’s plan for our life was a part of a grand plan, a plan hatched before the foundation of the world.

Well according to this passage (and many others in the Bible) this is not supposition. This is how God works. God chooses us out of grace. We are saved by grace and not by what we do. (Ephesians 1:4; 2:8-9)

God predestines us to be a part of his holy family, and there will be a family resemblance. We will look like Jesus. (Romans 8:29)

In other words, God not only saves us in Christ Jesus. God changes our character. The God who made us will remake us, will conform us to the image of his Son.

Verse 30 of our lesson for today summarizes it very well, “And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.”

Predestination is the Bible's way of saying that salvation is a work of pure grace, God's grace. And this "amazing grace" brings forgiveness of sin. We are "justified."

And with this forgiveness of sin comes a new way of life. We are "glorified." That is, our manner of life reflects this work of grace. God enables us to change what we cannot change. We sometimes refer to this as sanctification.

Notice how this basic understanding of salvation changes our approach to God in prayer. Prayer is no longer yet another work by which we seek to earn our salvation. Prayer is not a selfish expression of what we want.

Prayer is an expression of gratitude for a salvation that we do not deserve. Prayer is offered with a profound sense of humility.

And yet at the same time prayer is an expression of unshakeable hope. It's not about us nor does it depend upon us. It's about God and God's providential care for a world that He loves.

PERSERVERANCE

My sermon title is "Prayer, Predestination and Perseverance," three "P" words. We've discussed the first two P words, prayer and predestination. Now we see how those two ideas come together to produce the fruit of perseverance.

Perseverance means to stick with something despite great difficulty. But, here we are not talking about our perseverance, what we can do by the strength of our will and effort. No, we are talking about the perseverance of God and God's love.

In the Old Testament we read about the steadfast love of God. Despite the unfaithfulness of God's people God never left them. He kept coming back to them and calling them home.

The love of God's people was fickle. But, the love of God was steadfast. It did not vary.

The struggle to get the people of God out of captivity and into the Promised Land was symbolic of a spiritual struggle that continues to this day. We do not trust the goodness of God. We forget that the love of God is steadfast.

And so we are enslaved by our lack of faith. We wander in the wilderness instead of entering the Promised Land.

In fact if you go back to the Garden of Eden you see that this dynamic is present from the very beginning. Adam and Eve were tempted to eat the forbidden fruit was because they did not trust the steadfast love of God. They did not believe that God would give them what they needed when they needed it.

GOD IS FOR US

But, notice how belief in the steadfast love of God changes our attitude. Paul asks rhetorically, “If God is for us, who is against us?” That boils the argument down to its essence.

Do we believe that God is for us? Do we believe (as the Bible teaches) that the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, that his mercies never come to an end? (Lamentations 3:22)

This is the question we need to answer first and foremost. This is the question that needs to be at the center of every debate and disagreement. This question must be answered before we can even begin to pray.

Is God for us?

This passage teaches us in a very powerful way that God is for us. And if we believe in that one proposition, if we believe that the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, who can be against us?

The answer, of course is no one and nothing.

And then Paul proceeds to make a list of those things that tend to divert our attention from God’s steadfast love.

GUILT

And number one on the list is guilt.

I like to coin a phrase and say that there are more things wrought by guilt than this world dreams of.

Guilt can play a big role in our lives. That’s why we have a confession of sin and a declaration of pardon at the beginning of every worship service. We need to be reminded early and often that we are saved by grace.

Guilt has lost its power over us. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

If we can’t hear and believe this, we can’t hear and believe anything else. The voices of condemnation can be very loud indeed.

People who are weighed down with guilt respond in one of two ways. And both ways are ineffective and lead to condemnation.

The first ineffective way to deal with guilt is to become discouraged and depressed. We keep trying to please people who are disappointed in us.

But, it is never enough. The guilt always remains. And our depression deepens.

The second ineffective way to deal with guilt is to say that we don't have any, that it's always somebody else's fault. Sometimes people who use this approach end up in jail, and at the very least this approach leads to a lifestyle that is abrasive and alienating.

As you can see, both of these approaches lead to condemnation.

But, if God is for us, then nothing and no one can condemn us. Our salvation is sure.

Who is in a position to condemn us? Only Jesus. And Jesus died for us, Jesus rose for us, Jesus reigns in power for us, Jesus prays for us.

If you believe this, then all the problems that bedevil the world are of no consequence in the final analysis. As Paul put it, no amount of persecution, no ruler, no future threat, and not even death will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

As we say in our confession, "In life and in death, we belong to God."

INTERCESSORY PRAYER

Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury has defined intercessory prayer as "thinking of something or someone in the presence of God."

When I pray for someone I often pray for a specific outcome. I pray for health, for example or for deliverance from some problem. We want to live victoriously. And we often define that as avoiding the pain and maximizing the gain.

But, the Archbishop's definition of intercessory prayer suggests a deeper understanding of the gospel. He suggests that when we pray for others that we let go of the outcomes that we desire.

Instead, we imagine the one that we pray for is in the presence of God, and that will be enough.

Think about it. If in life and in death we belong to God, then as the Apostle Paul put it, to live is Christ and to die is gain. Nothing, not even death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

And when we no longer fear death, life becomes sweeter. There is an eternal hope that motivates our daily living. When we learn to trust God, we place the ones we love in the hands of that gracious God, and things change.

A mother said that her daughter was putting her through hell. She was totally irresponsible.

Every night, not knowing where her daughter was or what trouble her daughter was getting into, the mother would pray anxiously. She asked God to change her daughter. She asked God to show her daughter the error of her ways.

She said,

“Eventually, through my anxious prayers, I began to change.

I began to see my daughter as God may see her ... not as a rebellious, difficult young adult, but as a vulnerable, confused, scared little girl. I began to see my daughter more as a gift than as a problem.

With time she really did make some changes in her life for the better, perhaps because I began to look upon her with God’s eyes.”

I have often noticed that when I pray for others to change in some way, that God often changes me at the same time. When I think of someone in the presence of God, I come into God’s presence in a new way too.

I am reminded in a practical way that God helps me pray, that God has a plan for my life, and that God will never leave me: prayer, predestination, and perseverance!

STANDING ON THE PROMISES

I grew up in the Baptist Church, and we used to sing a song that I wish was in our hymnbook, “Standing on the Promises.” That’s what this passage is all about, standing on the promises of God, trusting in the steadfast love of God.

I like to say that we’re NOT standing on the circumstances. We’re standing on the promises of God our Savior.

That for me is a good definition of prayer, standing on the promises of God, trusting in the goodness and grace of God.

What about you my friend? Are you standing on the circumstances? Does your faith wither under the stress of life and death?

I invite you to stand on the promises. I invite you to believe that in life and in death we belong to God.

I invite you to reflect upon the fact that God is for us. In Him we are forgiven and freed to live in a new way. His kingdom comes. His will is done.
Amen.