Helping Others through Prayer

Second in the series: Prayer Power

# Scripture: Col.1:3-14

# Key thought: One way we help others is by praying for them.

# Intro:

I believe that prayer changes thing! Do you?

Looking through my collection of notes on answered prayers, I found one from Beth Fussner. She and her husband and children were missionaries in Indonesia for many years. In one of her letters home, she wrote:

Thanks for your prayers. God works through them. I had gone through a long period of fighting fear, homesickness, and depression. It seemed I pray through it only to go under again. Then through two weeks in October the Lord seemed to be working specifically in my heart and on one Sunday the dark cloud I had been living under just blew away! Joy and enthusiasm were back! Two days later a friend called from our home church in Fountain City, Indiana. “How are you?” she asked. I answered with an explanation of how the months long depression were gone. She said, “Well, last Thursday night our Wesleyan Women International group set aside the regular program and just prayed for you all.” Does God answer prayer? I know it!

Today I would like us to remember that the real work of God is done first by prayer! The progress of the church is not produced by promotion but by prayer.

 "As image bearer and representative of God on earth, redeemed man (sic) has by prayers to determine the history of this earth!” Andrew Murray

The Bible consistently teaches us the importance of our prayers. One of the ways we come to understand this is by beginning to understand how we can help others through our prayers.

# Praying for others expresses love.

## Intercession expresses love for others

As people of faith, we desire to be helpful to others. Paul put it frankly when he wrote.

The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. Gal 5:6 NIV

One of the key reasons that we intercede for people is as an expression of our love for them. Paul prayed for the Colossians because he and Epaphras really cared about them. Near the end of the letter to the Colossian church, Paul comments on the prayer ministry of Epaphras.

Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis. Col 4:12-13

So praying for others happens because we care deeply about them.

## Being in prayer is an expression of our love for God too.

While I was researching for this sermon I found a quote, which I believe to be in my mother’s handwriting. It is one of the great blessings of my life that she often prayed for me.

Those failures in our own prayer life which we trace back to lack of mood are really… a symptom of something deeper; they are a symptom of a breakdown of affection. Christ bids us go and give God our love.” James S. Stuart

So intercession is something that happens also because we are in love with God, and in relationship with God, and intercession grows out of that love relationship. Because of this, our prayers will probably not be first an expression of the details of our needs or even the needs of others, but rather first an expression of our adoration of God for who He is and for the great privilege of prayer itself.

# We need to affirm faith in God answering prayer.

The second thought that came to mind as I thought about us praying for others is that we don’t pray unless we really believe we are making a difference. In order to become real intercessors for others, we need to reaffirm our own faith in God answering prayers of intercession.

## Jesus interceded for Peter

What did Jesus say to Peter on the night of the betrayal when Jesus was concerned about Peter's impending failure?

 "I have prayed for you, Simon that your faith may not fail." (Luke 22:32)

Now we all know that initially, Peter’s faith did fail and he denied that he knew Jesus. But when Jesus looked at him, genuine repentance began and by Pentecost, Peter was a different person. Ultimately, Jesus’ prayer was answered.

## Jesus has interceded for all of us

Did you know that Jesus interceded already while he was on earth for all of us who would believe on Jesus in the years after he was here? He believed that prayer was powerful and made a difference.

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” John 17:20-21 NIV

## Jesus promised us

Speaking of what would happen after his resurrection, Jesus said to his disciples,

In that day you will no longer ask me anything. Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete. John 16:23-24

Here’s another remarkable story of answered prayer that happened in the church family in the district that I was before I moved here.

The owner of a mobile home park near Big Flats New York asked Ken Green if he wanted to buy the park from him. Ken and Vandy Green were Christians who attended Big Flats Wesleyan Church. Amazingly they were able to work out the financing and bought the park. Ken immediately began to make physical improvements in the park which had gained a reputation as a rough neighborhood. During that time pastor Bern Lytle at their church was encouraging the congregation to become lighthouses in their own neighborhood and pray for, care for, and eventually share Christ with their neighbors. Ken and Vandy begin to pray for the people in the park that they now owned. Soon the Holy Spirit prompted them to actually move into the park and become residents there. For several years the Greens saw very little fruit from their efforts, but they kept on praying. During a week of prayer in January 2005 God began to move on the people of their church to join Ken and Vandy in making the park a focus of their prayer. By the end of the year the church had participated in two workdays at the park where church members worked alongside neighbors in the park. The church had sponsored a neighborhood block party where 50 adults and children from the park enjoyed an evening of fun food and getting better acquainted.

When Ken and Vandy first bought the park they had invited a team from another neighboring church to do a Bible club in the park. Several residents of the park had strongly objected and the club fizzled. But now, six years later, one of the men who most strongly opposed the Bible club before was actually the one who invited Pastor Alex, minister of children and youth at Big Flats Wesleyan, to hold the summer backyard Bible club in his backyard. You see this neighbor had invited Jesus to come into his life and deliver him from alcohol. That year his backyard hosted the club where 21 kids came to the Lord Jesus.

What remarkable changes happened when the church joined the Green’s in prayer for their park! Talk about the power of united prayer!

# Requests for those who do not yet profess faith

So what are some ideas of things we can prayer for? I think it is good to have two lists in mind, though of course, they are not really separate. It’s just that the emphasis may be different.

## Visible needs

We do not usually need coaching to pray for the obvious visible needs of our friends. That is what we most often ask prayer for in church services. But there is a special reason for praying for the visible needs of those who are not yet Christians. It is often partly through the answers to prayer that people receive in the mundane things of life that they come to understand that God cares about them and is at work in their lives.

“Man’s most important need is the salvation of his soul. However, the felt needs of the lost are what they feel is most important to them…When we pray for their felt needs and God answers, their eyes are opened to the reality and the power of God, and this in turn leads them to recognize their need for salvation…Most unsaved people believe in the power of God. What most of them do not believe is that God loves them. When God’s power is released on their behalf, they’re finally able to make that connection.”
Ed Silvoso, That None Should Perish

## Spiritual insight

But we must not stop our prayers for our friends who do not follow Jesus after we have prayed for their physical needs. We must also pray for them to receive spiritual insight.

What is their spiritual situation?

The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. 2 Cor 4:4

## Rescue from the enemy of our souls

I think of how the Holy Spirit instructed Paul about his ministry when I think about how to pray for those who do not yet follow Jesus.

I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’ Acts 26:17-18

Those who do not yet follow Jesus are falling under the influence of the enemy of our souls. They need to be rescued from that power and brought under the influence and loving care of Jesus.

How does Paul describe what God has done for the Colossian believers right here in the text we are studying?

He [God] has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.
Col 1:13-14 NIV

So we can pray for the completion of that spiritual rescue for others.

# Requests for those who profess faith

For those of our family and friends who are already believers, our prayer emphasis might be slightly different. Let’s learn from what Paul is praying for the Colossian church members.

## Grow in their knowledge of God Col. 3:10

Paul amplifies this request in his prayer for the Philippian church

This is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness. Phil. 1:9-11 NIV

Our spiritual growth is mentioned so many times in the NT, that we have no doubt it is God’s plan for our lives. But as Jesus warned us in the parable of the soils, the fragile plant of God’s Word in our lives is easily choked by the thorns of this world’s temptations and busyness. So we need to pray.

## Live a life that pleases the Lord Col. 3:10

This is one of the main verbs, the main action ideas, in Paul’s text. God’s people are to be in the business of perfecting holiness, to borrow another of Paul’s phrases. Listen to this great section From Pastor Rick Warren.

God doesn’t want you to become a god; he wants you to become godly – taking on his values, attitudes, and character. The Bible says, “Take on an entirely new way of life – a God – fashioned life, a life renewed from the inside and working itself into your conduct as God accurately reproduces his character in you.” (Ephesians 4:22 MSG) God’s ultimate goal for your life on earth is not comfort, but character development. He wants you to grow up spiritually and become like Christ. The Purpose Driven Life, Rick Warren, pages 172, 173

So we can pray for one another to make good choices in our daily lives, choices that testify well to our relationship with Jesus.

## Be spiritually fruitful Col. 3:10

Let me remind you again of a key text that we have chosen as one of our guiding lights here at Copper Hill Church. This is the NIV version.

Ephesians 2:10 “For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” NIV

This prayer is not just about us keeping on task, though we need to do that and sometimes we need some spiritual urging to do so. It is more about us depending upon God and being in touch with the Holy Spirit so that what we do for God will be spiritually fruitful.

For example, I may visit a person at the hospital. That’s a good deed. But perhaps the Holy Spirit nudges me to go earlier in the day rather than later and I end up being there when the Dr. comes in with a not-so-good report. I am able to be spiritually fruitful in a way I could not be if I had not listened. Or maybe you feel a nudge to include a certain verse in a card you are sending. You hear back that it was just the word that was needed. You were spiritually fruitful more than you knew. Spiritual fruitfulness is when the result is somehow more than the anticipated because God has touched the transaction with his Spirit. It happens because we pray.

# Conclusion

Adrian was a commercial diver in the Gulf of Mexico. But work was slow in the early 80’s. Normally he worked on offshore oil drilling rigs. The economy was bad right now and he needed the work.

The phone rang and Adrian answered it. His face lit up. But then his shoulders sagged and he groaned. “It’s one of those jobs,” he moaned. Sometime during the night, an Amoco crew boat carrying six men had sunk in the storm in the Gulf of Mexico off Matagorda Island. It appeared there were no survivors. The vessel had been located and Adrian and his divers had to leave to locate and recover bodies.

His wife writes, “I reached over and took Adrian’s hand. I knew this was a job he didn’t want to do.” Nine years before, shortly after he started diving, a helicopter had ditched in the ocean and a crew went out to recover bodies. Adrian was working topside, tending the divers when the first body was pulled up. It was gruesome. Adrian himself became physically sick. He vowed he’d never do that kind of job again and he never had until now. But someone had to do it. At the door as he got ready to leave I whispered, “I’ll pray for you!” Adrian was not particularly religious, but just two years before this I had opened my heart to accept Jesus as my Lord and Savior and been baptized. And so as the roar of Adrian’s truck disappeared, I began to pray for him. I prayed that Adrian would not find any dead bodies I didn’t want my husband to suffer that terrible experience again.

Out on the Gulf, the 166 foot Laverne Herbert lay upside down at a 45° angle in 60 feet of water, her stern on the bottom and bow tip protruding. Working from another crew boat near it, Adrian and a fellow diver put on their heavy diving helmets. Then, trailing Aaron communication lines, they slipped into the water. Its color deepened from emerald to dark green to a cold black as they descended. They crept inside the vessel through broken window glass and up a companion way pushing aside mattresses, charts, and boxes of oil rig supplies eddying around them.

Our children came home from school. “Where is daddy?” They asked. “Working,” was all I told them. In the evening we were watching television together and there was news about the Laverne Herbert. “Divers are still searching the wreck,” the announcer said. Our nine-year-old daughter, November, put two and two together. “Is daddy one of the divers?” She asked and I had to admit that he was. Then they were full of questions. “Are the people on the boat going to die?” Asked five-year-old Antares. “Will daddy find them?” Piped up his four-year-old brother, Orion. I searched for an answer, not wanting to let them think about their father out there searching for dead bodies. Then, as I groped for words, it was as if words were given to me. “Well, sometimes an air pocket forms in a hold underwater and people can live in it for a while.” In my heart I knew there was very slim chance of this happening. Mostly I said it to comfort the children, yet they grabbed at the straw. And they begin to talk as if there were actually survivors breathing in an air pocket down there. Taken aback, I said, “Now kids, the chances of that happening are very small.” But they would not be discouraged and right then and there they asked me if we could talk to God about it. So three little heads bowed as together they prayed, “Dear God, help daddy find somebody alive in that boat.” And I found myself praying with them.

Twilight deepened the Gulf skies as Adrian’s team were really climbed up the crew ladder from their final dive that Thursday. They had combed the Laverne Herbert from stem to stern and found no bodies and they noted that one of the ship’s life rafts had been released. It looked as though the crew had escaped only to be lost in the storm.

After I put the children to bed, I went into the living room and sank into a rocking chair staring into the darkness. Would God hear the prayers of an apprehensive wife and her three trusting children? Then, as I slowly rocked, I remembered the verse from Matthew in which Jesus said, “In all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive.” (21:22) I sat bolt upright. Believing! That was all he asked, just that we ask and believe. “Father,” I prayed, “I believe… And I put my belief in your hands for it is so weak.” Then I went to bed. I was very restless. Again and again I awakened. Each time I prayed for Adrian’s well-being, and that he didn’t find anyone dead.

On Friday morning Adrian stood on the deck of the crew boat, inhaling the sharp salt air, watching the black tip of the Laverne Herbert slowly rise and fall in the incoming swells. He was glad the time had come to leave and return home but something was bothering him, an odd feeling he could define. And suddenly he told his crew, “Let’s go down once more.”

Adrian descended into the cold water, translucent bubbles gurgling past his thick glass viewing port. He edged his way into the ships upside down wheelhouse, carefully watching that his air hose was not cut by the jagged glass. He worried about the vessel shifting; it could stifle his air and block his escape. In the cold blackness, Adrian worked his way through the floating debris. When he’d push a box one way, another box and mattress would float in. His hand touched something sodden; he winced. A pillow. Adrian pushed his way into the last cabin. Now in the dark it was difficult even knowing which way was up. A blanket folded in his way and as he grabbed at it the glow from his flashlight went out to an object hanging in the corner of the cabin. A foot. A human foot! Adrian felt the sickness surging within him. Another one of those. “Found something,” he muttered into his radio. And, steeling himself, he reached forward to grasp the limb. It moved! I almost dropped my flashlight. I thought it was a reflex action so I reached out to touch it again. It was all I could do to do it. But when I did the foot retracted and then I knew that a man was alive so I pushed myself up beside him and you can imagine the look in that guy’s eyes when my helmet broke through water and he saw me we got him out of there and up on the crew boat.

Friday afternoon Adrian was back at home telling the story to his children. He said, “You know, that man told me that he started praying that someone would find him. And in those 40 hours he waited in the black air pocket he never gave up hope.” The children were dancing up and down. November was squealing, “We knew it, we knew it.” Indeed the Lord answered the children’s prayers just as he had answered the prayers of a man who refused to give up believing and he answered my own prayers too.
(Condensed from Guideposts, April 1985)

“There is no way to learn to pray but by praying.” (p. 14) “If prayer is the greatest achievement on earth, we may be sure it will call for a discipline that corresponds to its power.” Samuel Chadwick, The Path of Prayer

Let me ask you-- what things would happen if no one interceded more than you do? What spiritual victories will be won in your church family if their happening depended on your prayers? Could the church of God be protected from Satan's attacks if the outcome depended upon your prayers? The sobering truth is that it does!!