

God's New Society

Message 3

The Riches of Our Inheritance

Ephesians 1:15-23

Introduction

If you could ask one person to grant you a wish, who would you ask, and what would you ask for? Perhaps you would ask your professor for an “A” in English, or Physics, or P. Chem. Lab. Maybe you guys would ask one of these fine women to go to the formal with you. Or would you ask Bill Gates for a job at Microsoft? But as you think about it, these requests are ridiculously small, aren't they? While you are at it, you might as well go ahead and ask President Farrington for your degree, or ask that hot girl to marry you, or ask Bill for a spare million. But would any of you think to ask someone to pray for you?

“More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of.” That quote is from *The Idylls of the King*, Alfred Lord Tennyson's account of King Arthur and Camelot. It is from Arthur's farewell speech to Sir Bedivere as his barge drifts off into the sunset. Tennyson describes Arthur as a Christian king who righted wrongs and ruled Camelot with justice. Yet as he faced death, Arthur did not urge Bedivere to remain true to his vows, or to carry on the fight for justice, or to care for his loved ones. Arthur's last words were to ask Bedivere to pray for him. In the end, Arthur testified that prayer accomplishes more than arms.

Tonight we encounter one of the greatest prayers of the scripture. Perhaps only Jesus' final prayer before His death, found in chapter 17 of John's gospel, excels this one in the majesty of its scope. Indeed Paul picks up a vital theme from that prayer of Jesus and makes it the center of this plea for his Ephesian brothers. Here we see the grandeur of Paul's theology mingled with his tenderness for the Ephesian Christians. We see the loftiness of Paul's hopes for his friends as He reflects on the incomparable greatness of the Lord Jesus. If this prayer is fulfilled in your life, you will reach the pinnacle of human existence. Let's look more closely to see how an apostle prays for his loved ones.

Prayer Unceasing

Any sensitive reading of this prayer will halt the reader before he even gets to its content. Paul says that he prays without ceasing for the Ephesian Christians. This is a remarkable claim. At first we might think it is outrageous, or the reflection of compulsive personality. Paul did seem to be a bit unbalanced, you know – going right back to preaching on several occasions after he had been beaten. But perhaps unceasing prayer is part of the special calling of an apostle. Perhaps the apostolic calling carried with it a requirement of constant prayer, and the apostolic gift included some supernatural ability to pray all day.

Have you ever prayed all day? How about for an hour solid? We did this on the Ministry Team Retreat, and it was not too bad. It is a lot easier in a group, though, than on your own. But maybe with practice we could work up to 8 hours. That would be almost all day, wouldn't it? But seriously, we cannot pray all day when we have classes and studies and video games and movies, can we? If anyone beside the apostles should pray without ceasing, surely it would be the monks. Constant prayer is perhaps the biggest component of monastic life, so we can easily apply this verse to monks and nuns. But try as we might, we cannot succeed in pushing this example onto special religious people. In 1 Thessalonians 5:17 Paul commands the believers at Thessalonica – all of them – to “pray without ceasing”.

Prayer is commanded as part of the Christian life for all people. It is not just for apostles, or monks, or women. Prayer is part of the life of all Christians in all their lives – for athletes and scholars and housewives and children and old people – everybody. And we are all supposed to pray without ceasing. That means you. You, a Lehigh student, with many things to do, must pray all day. How can we do this?

When Paul says he prays without ceasing, I am sure he does not mean that any visitors had to listen to him praying the whole time. To pray without ceasing means three things. First, it means that we do not give up. We pray every day, every week, every year, all our lives. What were you praying for last year? Can you remember? Are you still praying for it? If you were praying for your roommate, have you lost interest and given up? I do realize that you cannot keep praying for absolutely everything you ever mention to God all your life. But the major issues of life should always be in your prayers. Like your family. Your family deserves your prayers every day for the rest of your life. The same would hold for your close friends, and for people you are leading to the Jesus. Paul spent two years in Ephesus and then he moved on, but he never stopped praying for his friends there. This is an example for us

Prayer without ceasing means that we never give up. We keep praying for the people dear to us. Unceasing prayer also means praying on the run. As you brush your teeth, or walk to class, or work out in the gym – in the midst of all the activities in your day you pray. I do not mean that you recite some formal prayer (although that is a good idea at times), but that you simply talk to God about what is happening. As you search for a parking spot, you ask God to provide one. As you work on your assignments, you punctuate your efforts with prayers for insight. As you talk with your friends, you pray for gracious words in your conversation. We have an example of this sort of prayer in Nehemiah. Turn to Nehemiah 4:1-5 and let's read how Nehemiah responded in a tense situation.

But it so happened, when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, that he was furious and very indignant, and mocked the Jews. ² And he spoke before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they fortify themselves? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they complete it in a day? Will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubbish -- stones that are burned?" ³ Now Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, "Whatever they build, if even a fox goes up on it, he will break down their stone wall." ⁴ Hear, O our God, for we are despised; turn their reproach on their own heads, and give them as plunder to a land of captivity! ⁵ Do not cover their iniquity, and do not let their sin be blotted out from before You; for they have provoked You to anger before the builders.

I think Nehemiah prayed these short, urgent prayers in the midst of a busy day's work. We can do likewise.

The third form of constant prayer is a habit of redeeming the time. Seizing the empty spots in your day to pray. It may be while you are waiting for the laundry to finish, or a friend to show up, or in a checkout line. There are times when you are stuck waiting, with nothing to do. Most of us get increasingly angry when our time is wasted this way. But these "wasted" minutes may be God's provision for you to pray. Perhaps someone needs your prayers just then, and God is calling you to spend five minutes ministering to them while the checkout lady finishes with the customer ahead of you.

(Bill Mummert's mother's midnight prayer.)

Unceasing prayer is the opportunity and the responsibility of all Christians. It does not come naturally, but it is a discipline that develops with practice. Whether on the run or in the wasted moments of the day, train yourself to pray always. And never give up praying for those dear to you.

The Greatest Prayer

When we encounter Paul's request for the Ephesians, we can at first be swamped by the dense language – "that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him..." (v. 17) More simply, Paul is praying for insight. He is asking God to help the Ephesians understand better. The reason for this request, the goal of the prayer, is that the

Ephesians may know God better.

Is this what you pray for your friends – to know God better? Is this what you would expect the apostle to pray for? Aren't there much more practical and urgent things to pray about? Shouldn't Paul have begun by praying for holiness in the lives of the Ephesians? Isn't the most urgent matter that they cease from sexual immorality, and avoid idolatry, and abandon greed and selfishness? Or shouldn't Paul have begun by asking God to help the Ephesians to be better witnesses? Or what about unity? Why isn't unity in first place?

By beginning his prayer with a request to know God, Paul is following the example of Jesus. In His last prayer on earth, Jesus said, "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." (John 17:3) Knowing God is not an extra stage in the Christian life. Knowing God *is* the Christian life. The life that Jesus gives, which He calls eternal life, consists in knowing God. Of course we are not talking here about theology, although it is related. The knowledge Jesus and Paul mean is that knowledge that comes from personal acquaintance. It is not the knowledge of facts and theories; it is the knowledge of direct involvement. This knowing God that Jesus and Paul pray for is like knowing a husband or wife, not like knowing your physics assignment.

I do not care how well you can lead a Bible study. I do not care how well you can share your faith. I do not care how effective you are in organizing retreats or other programs. If you do not know God, you are lost. You are not saved. And if you can do all these things superbly, but know God poorly, you are impoverished. You are a rich pauper. You have missed the most important thing in the world.

If knowing God is so important, how does one come to know Him? The first step is to turn from your sin and believe in Jesus. If you have never trusted Jesus to rescue you from enslavement to sin, you do not know God, and cannot know God in your present condition. Confess your sins to God and trust Jesus to save you. Now after you have taken the step of believing in Jesus, you can follow Paul's example and pray to know God better. This is a prayer that God will rejoice to answer!

Next you can grow in knowing God by spending time with Him. God is not the force. He is a person. Knowing God is not any different than knowing a human person. You talk to Him, He talks to you. Talk with Him when you go places, and as you think about things. You learn His opinions and adopt His standards. Practically speaking, you read the Bible, pray, and participate in the Lord's Supper.

One important practice in knowing God is to schedule some time with Him every day. Even if you have an incredibly busy day. Set aside at least 15 minutes to read a chapter of the Bible and pray. If you have the noon hour for lunch, come to Noon Prayer once a week or more. Pray as needs arise. But think about this. If you only saw a human person a few minutes a day, would you get to know him or her very well? Of course not! If you are going to know God, somehow you have to spend some serious time with Him. One way to do this is to reserve part of the Lord's Day just for God. Turn to Isaiah 58. This remarkable chapter tells you how to know God, but we are just going to read the last two verses now.

If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, From doing your pleasure on My holy day, And call the Sabbath a delight, The holy day of the LORD honorable, And shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, Nor finding your own pleasure, Nor speaking your own words,¹⁴ Then you shall delight yourself in the LORD; And I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, And feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father. The mouth of the LORD has spoken. (Isaiah 58:13-14)

Do you want to know God. Are you serious about it? Really serious? This verse is not hard to grasp. It is very simple. If you stop pleasing yourself on the Lord's Day and spend time with Him, you will know

Him so well – you will be delighted with God! This does not mean you must spend all Sunday shut up in your prayer closet, or that you cannot do anything fun. It just means you should give some solid time to God. I think for most of you this verse would be applied if you get up and out to Sunday School, where you study God’s word, worship in church, have dinner with your friends, take a nap, and spend maybe an hour reading the Bible and praying – just you can God. Now I do not say this as a prescription, or a rule for RUF Sunday observance. It is one way of applying Ephesians 1. I say this simply to give you a concrete idea of how you might spend Sunday. You pray about it. Ask God how you can know Him better.

The better you know God, the better you will lead, witness, serve, etc. By beginning with knowing God, Paul is laying the foundation for solid, true, enduring service in God’s Kingdom. All the “practical” needs we pray about will never be met securely if we do not know God. But as we grow in knowing Him, the practical issues begin to resolve themselves. Let’s not be deceived into focusing on secondary matters. Knowing God is the key issue.

The Riches of Our Inheritance

Paul’s first request is for insight – insight into God, so the Ephesians will know Him better. Knowing God is the first and central aspect of human life. Paul’s second request is also for insight. This time Paul prays for insight into our hope and our riches.

Too many Christians have an impoverished understanding of the Christian life. They understand, accurately, that in God’s sight they are miserable sinners and this whole world is deluged in sin. But that is all they see! They miss the vital fact that in Christ we have hope, and riches, and power! We have been called to a noble purpose. We have not been saved simply to wait out the rest of history. No! We have been called to know God, and to be sons of God, and to serve Him. We have a future, and it is a glorious future. We shall reign with Jesus and see God face to face. This amazing hope calls us on to a life of service now.

We customarily use the word hope to refer to something uncertain. We might say, “I *hope* I passed that physics exam.” It is possible that we didn’t, pass but we wish we will. Hope is not used that way in the Bible. The Greek word translated hope means something certain, but future. The object of your hope is a real thing, but out of sight at present. By this definition, many of us utterly fail Paul’s expectation that we know the hope of our calling. We need this prayer! We need to pray this prayer for each other! We need the hope of our calling.

When we understand the hope of our calling – our calling to be sons of God and rulers in the heavenlies, we are energized to serve God. This hope transforms weak Christians into powerhouses and cowards into heroes. The hope of our calling sent men and women into Africa and China a century ago, and sends them into the heart of Islam today. The hope is so vivid before them, life mean little. Do you have this hope?

Paul also prays for insight into the riches of our inheritance. If hope motivates us, the riches empower us. Remember what Paul said at the very beginning of this letter? “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ...” (v.3) Remember we said that this means we now have all possible blessings that God has to offer? Do you believe this? Has it changed your life in the past two weeks? If not, then either you do not believe it or you have forgotten it. You need this prayer! You need others to pray for you. You need to pray this prayer for your friends. You are going around like a dummy.

God has given you all the wealth and privileges of heaven and you act like you are still weak? Incredible! In verse 5 Paul says, “...having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself...” We are sons of God. We will inherit His treasures. Already He has given us every blessing we can get. But

we act like spiritual paupers. We fear to speak up in class. For shame! Hasn't God given you courage? Yes He has. We hesitate to tell our neighbors about Jesus. Hasn't God given you words to say? Yes He has! You are rich, but you act poor. Let's pray for each other that God open our eyes to see reality. Let's not live in the dark anymore. Let's live in the light of God's rich blessings.

The Power of God in Us

Finally Paul prays for insight into the power at work in us. And surprise! It is the same power that was at work in Christ!

Resurrected from the dead
Ascended to heaven and enthroned with God
Ruling in the heavenlies
Superior to all other powers
Made head over the church

How to Pray for Each Other

Our problem is not sin, lack of discipline, lack of gifts, etc.
Our problem is lack of insight
We don't long to know God better
We don't see we have the riches, hope, and power
Pray for insight for each other
Remind and admonish each other of our riches

(Harry Ironside story.)

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