

THE PRIORITY OF PRAYER

Ephesians 6:18-20

INTRODUCTION

I'm going to begin today by talking about something that a portion of you love. This particular thing is a form of entertainment that you likely enjoy most if you were born in the 90's or later. It's something that if you're not careful can consume a great number of your free hours over the course of your week. In fact, some people love it so much it keeps them from the other more important responsibilities of their life! To my own chagrin and surprise, if you play this form of entertainment enough by neglecting everything else in your life, you can go "pro" and make a considerable amount of money!

Does anyone know what I might be referring to? Video games! Now don't be afraid to be honest - raise your hand if you pick up a video game controller at least one time a week. There was a season in my life in high school when I got caught up in this addicting hobby. I mainly played sports games, like Tiger Woods Golf, MLB The Show, and NBA 2K (yeah, that's right, no other numbers after the "k"). I was decent at these, but whenever I switched over to RPG's or first person shooters, I was just horrible. The action was so fast, that I simply couldn't keep up!

I remember one event that my friend organized at his home. It was a Halo Competition in which we connected everyone's tvs and xboxes together, We gathered 16 tvs in all! Before the launch of Xbox Live, this was as cool as it got! However, it wasn't so cool for me because no one wanted to be on my team. One of the main complaints my friends had was that I often had certain guns or other explosives I failed to use because I simply didn't know I had them! They would say, *"Jason, if you would just take advantage of your best resources, you'd be far more successful on the battlefield."*

This rang in my mind this week as I prepared this sermon on the priority of prayer. In Timothy Keller's book on Prayer, he says that "*prayer is the greatest untapped resource in the Christian's arsenal against the enemy.*" We are a people who are excellent at collaborating with others, seeking answers from books, and initiating plans, but we are not naturally inclined to first seek the face of our God in prayer. It's our greatest resource on the spiritual battlefield, yet we often fail to use it. If we are honest, prayer is often our last resort instead of our first response.

To illustrate this, imagine a tent full of soldiers as their five-star general walks in. He has just returned from delivering a decisive blow against their enemy. Every man stands at attention. Here they are sharing a field tent with the man who had, for all intents and purposes, beaten the enemy! Sure, there would still be some deadly attacks and scattered skirmishes, but every soldier was overjoyed and grateful for the certain victory that was gained by the general's operation. The war would end soon, and all of them would be able to go home.

The general warmly encouraged these soldiers to be "at ease" and take a seat. As the men began to relax, the general began to describe the continuing tactics of the enemy forces, as well as the recommended strategies, equipment, and weapons he himself was making available to the men. When he was finished with his presentation, amazingly, he offered to stay for as long as was necessary and answer any questions the men might have. He even offered to consider their personal requests. But oddly, the tent was quiet.

Some men stared blankly ahead, seeming a bit intimidated. Others were carefully pouring over their field manuals and maps. And still others were looking at magazines or quietly chuckling as they shared the latest jokes with the guys in their row. For a group of fairly new recruits, ***the general was surprised that all of them seemed oblivious to the opportunity that was set before them.*** In the end, the general's experience, his

knowledge, his authority, his resources, none of these things seemed to persuade the soldiers to simply speak up.

We are often not victorious over temptation because we do not request supernatural help. We do not approach challenging situations with the grace and love of Christ because we do not ask for it. We do not reach our neighbors with the gospel because we did not avail ourselves of our general's resources.

I want you to keep that story, that parable, in mind as we look this morning at Ephesians 6:18-20. ***Here we will see that we fight for God against the enemy through prayer.*** Far more than just another resource, prayer is our most essential resource! Why? Because as Pastor Darin reminded us last week, we are in the middle of a spiritual battle! ***We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places*** (Ephesians 6:12). ***This battle cannot be fought with the strength of our hands, but only in the weakness of a bowed knee.***

To remind you of the context of Ephesians 6, in v.10-13, the Apostle Paul gave us the ***explanation*** for the fight: we must be strong in the Lord because we are engaged in a spiritual battle with the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. In v.14-17, Paul told us the ***equipment*** for the fight: the full armor of God, which enables us to stand firm against this powerful enemy. He mentioned the belt of truth; the breastplate of righteousness; the boots of the preparation of the gospel of peace; the shield of faith; the helmet of salvation; and, the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. Now in v.18-20, Paul describes the ***effecting*** of the fight, that is, ***how to fight the enemy.***

We will see three ways we can tap into the effectual power of prayer. These three ways will deepen our relationship to the true victor, increase

our peace, strengthen our boldness, allow us to see more of God's activity in our lives, and greatly affect the advancement of God's kingdom in the world around us. They will even help us overcome the self and our lack of desire to even want authentic spiritual transformation.

BODY

Let's start with number one: How do we fight for God against the enemy through prayer? *First, we fight for God by praying at all times.* Looking at v.18, we see it is a continuation of Paul's treatise on spiritual warfare. The first word, "*praying,*" is a participle that connects back to the originating command in v.14 to "*stand firm.*" Paul is showing us that standing firm necessitates prayer!

Additionally, Paul knows he cannot conclude with just the Word of God in v.17. ***This is because God's Word has no effect without the spiritual headway gained in prayer.*** I have been here many times as a Christian - faithful in reading but lazy in praying. I can pride myself in knowing much Scripture, but what value does it have if I'm not asking God to do something with it in my heart? ***There is a great threat, especially to an American, well-educated Christian, to open his mind to learning but keep his heart closed from transforming.*** If we want God to transform our hearts, we must want more than just the Word of God in v.17; we must want the praying heart of v.18! An authentic, radical and vibrant Christian life results from an authentic, radical, and vibrant relationship with Jesus. ***And here's the secret: Your relationship with Him only develops in prayer!*** Christian, do you believe this?

And as you see in v.18, this is not a one-time prayer or an occasional prayer. It says, "*Praying at all times in the Spirit.*" We fight for God by praying at all times. You might be thinking, "Come on, Paul, be realistic! I have to make a living! I have to go to school! I have 3 kids to chase around my house all day! How can I pray at all times?"

You will be comforted to know the phrase is literally, “at every opportunity.” It’s the same idea as 1 Thessalonians 5:17, “*Pray without ceasing.*” The Greek word translated “without ceasing” was used of a hacking cough and of repeated military assaults. Someone with a hacking cough does not cough every second, but rather he coughs repeatedly and often (and likely needs to be COVID-checked and quarantined for 14 days). The point is that he never goes very long without coughing. In the case of repeated military assaults, the army makes an assault then regroups and attacks again and again until it conquers the city. ***In the same way, we should pray often and repeatedly until we gain the thing for which we are praying.***

John MacArthur explains in his commentary on Ephesians:

*To obey this exhortation means that, when we are tempted, we hold the temptation before God and **ask for His help.** When we experience something good and beautiful, **we immediately thank the Lord for it.** When we see evil around us, **we pray** that God will make it right and be willing to be used of Him to that end. When we meet someone who does not know Christ, **we pray** for God to draw that person to Himself and to use us to be a faithful witness. When we encounter trouble, **we turn to God** as our Deliverer. In other words, our life becomes a continually ascending prayer, a perpetual communing with our heavenly Father.*

That last sentence, that our life is to be a perpetual communing with God, is vital. Prayer isn’t just rushing into God’s presence as if you were rushing into the bank to get some needed funds and then not going back until you needed more. Prayer is much more like rushing off to meet your boyfriend or girlfriend because you love being with them! I find it intriguing how often Jesus went off to a desolate place to pray. Why was this the case if He already experienced perfect union with the Father within the Trinity? Could it not be because he simply loved being with Him?

Church, do you love being in the presence of God? Many of us as Christians can at least remember a time when we often ran away to be alone with God out of sheer desire. Do you remember the freedom that brought you, the joy it brought you, the strength it gave you? ***Do not be deceived: If you are not praying to God, you are not walking with God.*** I can almost guarantee from my own experience that without an active prayer life, you have an active sin life. Will you not carve out a time this week to confess your cold heart and ask for a warmed heart? Peter said in Acts 3:19, *“Repent therefore and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.”*

Also, when we’re in need, prayer is not to be our last resort. How many times have you heard someone say, “We’ve done all that we can do! Now, all we can do is pray!” In response to that, John Bunyan said, *“You can do more than pray after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed.”* Prayer should be the first thing that we think to do when we’re aware of a need.

Nehemiah of the Old Testament is a wonderful example of this. When he learned in ch 1:3 that the remnant of his people still in Jerusalem were in great trouble and the walls of the city were burned down, v.4 says, *“He fell down and wept and mourned for days, and he continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.”* Then in chapter 2:3-4, Nehemiah is before King Artaxerxes to ask help for his people back home. V. 4 says, *“Then the king said to me, ‘What are you requesting?’ So I prayed to the God of heaven.”* ***Nehemiah knew his requesting of God’s favor was far more important than his requesting of the king’s favor.*** After all, who was the true king - King Artaxerxes or the God of Heaven and Earth? Proverbs 21:1 says, *“The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.”*

Church if the 2020 Election brings you any concern, remember the One who can direct the heart of the president, no matter who gains the office. ***But there's a good chance He won't do it if His people fail to first pray!*** In response to the state of our nation right now, I wonder what are you doing more of: complaining or praying?

Prayer is not a mere formality to say before a meal or to open a meeting. It's the way that we acknowledge our need and dependence on God and lay hold of His promises. As John Calvin wrote in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, *"It is, therefore, by the benefit of prayer that we reach those riches which are laid up for us with the Heavenly Father."* Or, to cite Bunyan again, *"Pray often, for prayer is a shield to the soul, a sacrifice to God, and a scourge for Satan."*

For these reasons we should be a people who pray often. But rather than guiltting ourselves into needing to pray as often as possible, start by choosing to pray more than you are now. Maybe you need to schedule a time; maybe you need to set a reminder on your phone; maybe you need to find a friend to pray with; maybe you need to begin by simply getting right with God. ***The flow of God's Spirit in your life, which is what motivates prayer, is cutoff by on-going unrepentant sin.*** For some of you, your first prayer will be a prayer of confession and repentance. But the promised forgiveness of God in Jesus will bring the free-flowing power of the Holy Spirit back into your life! ***Like a snowball rolling down a hill, your prayer life will begin gaining momentum and become bigger than it is right now.***

This leads us right into our second point: How do we fight for God against the enemy through prayer? ***We fight for God by praying in the Spirit.*** V.18 again says, ***"Praying at all times in the Spirit..."*** Similarly, the book of Jude in v.20 says, ***"But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit."***

What does it mean to “pray in the Spirit”? First, we need to clarify what it does not mean: ***Praying in the Spirit does not refer to praying in tongues or praying emotionally.*** The early church experienced the gift of speaking and praying in tongues (see 1 Cor 12-14 for more detail). There is debate about whether that gift is still given, but we are not here today to answer that question. In our text, Paul is talking about making definite petitions to God, not praying in an unknown tongue.

Also, while it is right to involve our emotions in prayer as we sense our desperate need, this is not what Paul means by praying in the Spirit. It is possible to pray emotionally in the Holy Spirit or to pray calmly in the Spirit. ***It is also possible to pray emotionally in the flesh,*** getting all worked up for reasons far removed from the Holy Spirit. So, what does it mean to pray in the Spirit?

Praying in the Spirit is to pray in dependence on the Spirit, in accordance with God’s Word.

Three comments on praying in the Spirit:

1. I cannot pray in the Spirit if I have unconfessed sin in my life.

Psalm 66:18 states, ***“If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear.”*** If I think that I can come before God’s holy throne in the power of His Holy Spirit, while at the same time holding on to sin in my life, I am greatly deceived. That’s why Peter tells husbands that if they do not treat their wives properly, honoring them as fellow heirs of the grace of life, their prayers will be hindered (1 Pet. 3:7).

God knows our hearts. We can’t play games, thinking that we can disobey Him and then come and sweet talk Him into giving us what we want. You can’t pray in the Spirit, “Lord, bless my business,” while you’re being dishonest and corrupt. You can’t pray, “Lord, bless my

family,” while you’re secretly enslaved to pornography. You’ve got to repent of all known sin and do the deeds appropriate to repentance before you can pray in the Holy Spirit.

2. *Praying in the Spirit is to pray according to God’s will as revealed in His Word.*

Paul has just told us to take *“the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God”* (6:17). God’s written Word reveals to us His moral will for our lives (1 Thess. 4:3) and His eternal will of summing up everything in Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:9-10). The Spirit will never lead us to pray contrary to the will of God as revealed in the Word of God. You cannot pray in the Spirit, “Lord, bless my marriage” if you’ve entered into marriage with an unbeliever.”

One of the most misunderstood verses of Scripture is Psalm 37:4, which says, *“Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart.”* It sounds like we can manipulate the will of God to get what we want. However, correctly understood, this verse could be translated, *“Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you His desires.”* The more you pray in the Spirit, the more you are beholding the glory of the Lord. The more you are beholding the glory of the Lord, the more He is making His desires your desires! ***And here’s the kicker, God always answers the desires of His heart with a resounding YES! If you want to see God answer more prayers in your life, perhaps you first need to check if your prayer matches His desire.***

You can know for certain if your prayer matches God’s will if it’s revealed in the Bible. We want to be a people who pray according to God’s way! I cannot walk into another person’s country and culture and assume my way of doing things is appropriate. No, I must first take time to learn his ways. ***Church, the best way for us to learn***

God's ways is by studying God's Word and then praying it back to Him. It's a good practice to take any passage of Scripture and learn to pray it back to God. I am praying in the Spirit if I'm praying according to God's Word.

3. Praying in the Spirit is to pray in dependence on the Spirit, under His direction and power.

Although it doesn't happen very often, I have had times where I was struggling to pray, finding it difficult to concentrate, and not sensing the Lord's presence. Then, suddenly the Spirit prompts me to pray something and He directs my thoughts and words, giving me power and freedom in prayer that I was lacking moments before. The Spirit is moving me along in prayer that originates with Him.

Also, at times the Spirit puts the same request on my heart frequently and with an intensity that I formerly lacked. Maybe it's on my prayer list and I mechanically went through the list. But then one item comes home to me with unusual force. I believe that this is, in part, what it means to pray in the Spirit.

I took a two-week vacation during the last two weeks of July for the purpose of moving my family to a new home we would buy in Land O Lakes. It was a much bigger home with plenty of space for our four kids. It also seemed like a great deal financially, especially compared to what we could find in Carrollwood. So we went under contract with the home, got approved, and started moving towards a closing date. However, along the way, the closing date for various reasons unknown to us kept getting pushed back. This began to stress Emma and I, but we moved forward with packing our house and preparing everything for the move. It came down to the new week we were supposed to sign and another small obstacle pushed the date back again! At this point, Emma and I stopped to pray far more diligently,

saying, “God, is this house even your will for us?” Over the course of 24 hours, with much prayer and conversation, Emma and I both felt a definite NO from the Lord. There’s more to the story than what I’m sharing now, ***but I believe praying “in the Spirit” sometimes entails a specific directive the Lord puts in our path that becomes an opportunity for obedience.*** The consideration of this home was no longer a matter of our volition but of God’s decision. Will we obey His leading? So with the closing date set a day later, we formally withdrew our contract and began unpacking our boxes back into our home.

We should keep praying, even when we don’t feel this unction of the Spirit. But we also should ask the Spirit for His specific direction and power as we pray.

So fight for God by praying in the Spirit!

Thirdly, fight for God by praying alertly with all perseverance. The second half of [v.18](#) says, ***“To that end, keep alert with all perseverance...”*** We know that Paul is applying alertness and perseverance to prayer because he begins this sentence with “to that end,” with that end being faithful prayer in the Spirit. These are adjectives that describe the nature of our prayer. ***Our prayer should be characterized as alert and persevering.***

The word “alert” means “awake and vigilant.” Jesus told the disciples in the garden (Matt. 26:41), ***“Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation, for the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”*** Jesus gives us the rationale here for why our prayer must be alert. Because we have an enemy who is prowling around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour! ***Alert prayer is essential for on-guard protection from temptation.***

Consider the state of a battle-ready warrior slowly making his way through the woods towards an enemy camp. All his senses are heightened. If there is a subtle change in the wind, he immediately notices it. If he steps upon a crinkling leaf, he hears every crack it makes as if it were piped through a loudspeaker. If a bird flies by, he raises his gun with his finger on the trigger! Every part of his being is ready for attack because he knows an enemy wants to do him harm!

There can be no laziness or sluggishness in the fight against temptation. Our enemy is far too crafty. After Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, it says in [Luke 4:13](#) that *the devil departed from him until an opportune time*. So we must be a people who upon seeing a fiery dart of temptation in the distance immediately go to God in prayer! I'm not sure about you, but the slower I am to respond to attack, the less likely I am to find victory. The more I gaze at evil or consider evil, the more the weakness of my flesh wins out. Yet Jesus said to his disciples that the spirit is willing, so we must be alert and catch temptation before it gets to our hearts by immediately going to God in prayer.

In addition to being alert, we must be persevering in prayer. This is one of the aspects of prayer that I find most difficult. We are to pray with "all perseverance." Luke begins [chapter 18](#) of his gospel account by saying that *"Jesus told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart."* This parable tells the story of the widow who kept pestering the hardhearted judge, until finally he relented just to get her off his back. This judge is unrighteous, but Jesus is full of grace and mercy. Therefore it says in [v.7](#), *"Will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night?"* This parable tells us that God is more likely to answer our prayers if we persevere in them over the long haul. ***This should give us hope to keep praying for the most unlikely and impossible of results to come to fruition!***

I am great at starting prayer. But after praying a few times and seeing no result, I suffice to say it must not be God's will. **Blasphemy! Who am I to assume the outcome of God's will?** The only thing certain is my lack of persistence to pray until God answers! I am inspired by the story of Jacob who wrestled with a man in Genesis 32. This man happened to be an angel of God who had authority to bless Jacob. The two men wrestled most of the night until the angel said, *"Let me go, for the day has broken."* But Jacob said, *"I will not let you go unless you bless me."*

I wonder how many of us have this passionate persistence in our prayers with God? "God, I will not stop pestering you with this prayer until you bless me, until you answer my request!" What faith! What devotion! What perseverance! ***Oh church, how many more prayers would be answered in our lives if we viewed them as wrestling matches with Almighty God in which we wouldn't give up until he granted our request?*** God doesn't promise to answer with a "yes," but Scripture makes it clear the likelihood of a "yes" drastically increases with persevering prayer.

CONCLUSION

So we have seen this morning that we are to fight for God against the enemy with prayer. We are to fight for God by praying at all times, praying in the Spirit, and praying alertly with all perseverance. Now is the time that God is calling Christians to rise up by going down in prayer! Now is the time that God is calling us to let go of pride and the myth of self-reliance and to humbly rely on Him!

Going back to our opening illustration of the troops gathered together after their leader's decisive victory. Similarly to their general standing and waiting for them to avail themselves of his wisdom, authority, and resources, so Jesus as our general stands and waits for us to avail ourselves of all He offers. Will we do it today? Will we again remember that prayer is our greatest resource in our fight against Satan? Let's pray.