

Prayer and Evangelism

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Introduction.

Even when we think about evangelism from a Biblical perspective, even when we approach it in the way that God wants us to approach it, it is still a daunting task. There are hundreds of thousands of people in Joliet and the surrounding communities, and in that space, there can't be more than a couple hundred Christians. We are not the largest religious group in this area. We are not the wealthiest. We are not the most well known. Once we start considering the magnitude of the task before us and all the advantages we don't possess, it's easy for us to become hopeless about the lost.

However, even though we have all of these outside factors working against us, there are three massive advantages that we do possess. Two of those advantages have to do with who we are and what we can use, and we'll be looking at those things in later lessons in this series. However, as important as those things are, they pale in comparison to the third advantage we have. Above all else, we can look forward to success in evangelism because the Lord is on our side, and He allows us to entreat His aid. As Paul says in Romans 8, if God is for us, who can be against us?

The best way to make sure that the Almighty is fully engaged in our struggle for the souls of this area is through prayer. Sad to say, Christians often overlook prayer and the importance that it should have in their spiritual lives, and nowhere is this mistake more disastrous than in the realm of evangelism. If we don't pray about saving the lost, it will never happen. We can gain inspiration and encouragement, though, from the example of Christians in the first century. We've already seen just how evangelistic the early church was, and it's no surprise that this vast harvest of souls was preceded by prayer for those souls. We often don't recognize it, but the Biblical record is filled with examples of prayers about various aspects of proclaiming the gospel. Let's look at those examples as we consider prayer and evangelism.

Prayer Beforehand.

In this realm, we first need to remember to pray for **THE LOST**. We see Paul discussing his own prayers for the lost in Romans 10:1. There are two main ways we can imitate Paul's example here. First, we can pray general prayers for a large group of lost people or even for the lost the world over. This kind of prayer lends itself especially to public prayer in the assembly, because everyone can add their "Amen" to that without needing particular knowledge.

The second kind of prayer for the lost, though, is prayer for a specific lost person. Last week, we talked about how each one of us should come up with three lost people in our lives that we ought to be working on. Our first step in working with them, or in working with anyone else, must be to pray for them. This accomplishes two main things. First, it enlists the aid of the Almighty, without which we cannot succeed. Second, though, it also concentrates our attention on them. As we all know, it takes time and effort to remember to pray for something or someone on a regular basis. If we make that commitment, it also makes the object of our prayers more important to us. It helps us to love them, and it helps us to remember to take whatever opportunities we have to work to save them.

Similarly, we see examples in the Bible of prayer for **WORKERS**. In fact, Jesus Himself is recorded as praying for people who are willing to help the lost in Matthew 9:37-38. Brethren, I am convinced that the words of our Lord are no less true today than they were when He first uttered them. The harvest is still plentiful, and the biggest problem we have with collecting it is that the laborers are still few. We need to pray for more of them. Once again, a general prayer for more workers the world over is important. However, we can narrow it down more than that. We can pray that more workers will arise from our own number, so that we can reap a plentiful harvest of souls in the Joliet area. Even more than that, we can pray for ourselves personally, that we might become a worker for the lost if we are not already, and that we might become more effective in our work if we are already laboring. Let's remember to pray for more workers.

Of course, workers are only one half of the equation, which is why we also need to pray for **OPPORTUNITY** to reach the lost. This is something that Paul is recorded as doing over and over again, and we see him asking the church in Colossae to help him with this in Colossians 4:2-3. This is another place where prayers for generic blessing will benefit the work, but even more than the other two areas, this prayer is a spiritual gut check for us. I'm here to tell you, brethren: if we pray for opportunities, God will listen to us and give us opportunities. I've seen over and over again in my own prayer life that when I ask for a seeker to teach, it won't be long before a seeker shows up. The question is if that's what we want. If somebody came into our office at work and said, "I want to become a Christian; teach me the gospel", what would we do? I've known Christians who had exactly that opportunity and blew it. Deep down inside, what do we want? Do we want sinners in our lives, people who have messy lives and mountains of baggage, but who may listen to the word if we are patient and loving? Or are we honestly happier without all of the complications that evangelism brings? Are we serious about obeying God, or do we just want excuses not to? If we are serious, we need to pray for opportunity.

Prayers During.

Naturally, opportunities that we don't take advantage of don't do the sinner, the Lord, or us any good, so it's also important that we pray for **BOLDNESS** to exploit the openings we're given. Our brethren 2000 years ago were very bold, and one of the reasons for this is that they prayed about it a great deal. We see one such prayer in Acts 4:29. In context, the apostles have just been beaten by the Jewish authorities for preaching Christ, who warn them not to preach any more or else. Immediately, they assemble with the brethren and pray this. They were determined that they weren't going to be stopped from proclaiming the gospel by anything or anybody. That's an attitude we must share if we are to be successful. We need boldness in several different areas. First, we need to be bold in our willingness to love. We must not be afraid to stick our necks out and invest ourselves in our neighbor. Second, we must be bold in speaking when that opportunity appears, and if we've done our groundwork and prayed about it beforehand, the opportunity will come. Evangelism is about recognizing the door and taking advantage of it, and that won't happen without boldness.

Of course, we can be as bold as a lion and still fail miserably to lead a soul to Christ. That's why we also need to pray for **WHAT TO SAY**. Paul once again brings this up in Ephesians 6:18-19. Of course, we are not inspired by the Holy Spirit. We can't simply open our mouths and expect that God will blurt out the gospel for us. However, this is still an area where we need the Lord's help. Perhaps more than anything else, I've heard Christians say, "I just don't know what to say to the lost." Well, if we don't know what to say, and it's keeping us from obeying our Lord, shouldn't we be praying about it? I'm not going to presume to say just how God would answer such a prayer. Maybe He will help us to study more so we will be better prepared. Maybe He'll help our neurons to fire a little bit better so that we can remember what we studied in Bible class five years ago. Maybe He'll just provoke us to invite along another Christian who's better equipped than we are, and let me tell you, brethren, if you've got somebody to the point where they want to know about Jesus, I'd be delighted to come along and bat in the run. I don't know just how God will help, but I am confident that the help will appear. Let's not be shy about seeking it. Let's pray for help in what to say so that He can be glorified.

In something of a subpoint to this, we can also pray for **CLARITY** in our speech. Paul does this in Colossians 4:4. The older I get, the more I realize what an underrated virtue clarity is. I've heard more than a few preachers who obviously know a great deal about the Bible, but preach in such a scattershot, unorganized way that their point gets lost beneath mounds of stuff. Believe me, brethren, that's not just a problem in the pulpit. If some man can confuse me, even though I know the Bible pretty well and have been going to church my whole life, how confusing would he be to someone who doesn't know the Bible and doesn't have a church background? To be honest, I don't think it's possible for a study with a non-Christian to be too simple and too clear. Some people are good at talking to outsiders in a way that doesn't confuse them, but the rest of us ought to be praying for help, so that our words are as effective as possible.

Prayers After.

As part of our evangelistic work, it often becomes necessary to pray for **DELIVERANCE FROM ENEMIES**. Unsurprisingly, this was a big part of Paul's prayer life, and we see him soliciting more prayers about this in Romans 15:30-31. Now, there's one large, obvious difference between Paul's prayers about deliverance and our prayers about deliverance. Paul had all kinds of folks who wanted to kill him, and his prayers were for deliverance from them.

Typically, that's not a response we're going to generate today when we preach Jesus, but it is still true that there are enemies of the gospel out there. When a soul is hanging in the balance, just like God has His workers out there, so does the devil. These workers of evil could be anyone from an ungodly husband to a friend who's a bad influence to a grandmother who's a staunch member of a denomination and hates those "church-of-Christers". People like that don't always show up, but when they do, they're bad news. They can almost singlehandedly keep an otherwise receptive soul from obeying the gospel. Once we get familiar with a prospect, it's typically not hard for us to figure out who those enemies are. When we do, we need to pray about them. Ideally, we want them to have their hearts softened so that they will obey the gospel themselves, but if not, and it is often if not, we want their impact to be diminished so that they won't lead their spouse or friend or whoever astray. Let's pray for our work to be delivered from people like that.

Finally, of course, we should pray for **SUCCESS**. Paul certainly did, as we see in 2 Thessalonians 3:1. In fact, we can be certain that one of the reason why Paul was able to bring the gospel to so many was because he prayed that he would be able to. As with every other topic on the list, this one can be a general prayer, but it is perhaps most effective when it is most specific. When we've been working with someone for a while, and our lives have become wrapped up in theirs, and we have genuinely come to love them, that's when we're most passionate about evangelism, and when we're passionate about the things we're praying for, that's when God is most likely to listen. This may well not be a prayer that is answered immediately. The only way we can get a quick, certain conclusion to our evangelistic efforts is if we do the things that will always be unsuccessful. We may have to work with a sinner for months or years before he listens. However, the more we pray about it, the greater the likelihood that he will listen and be saved.