

Introduction

I'd like to note two realities. First, our world is fallen. Everything in it, natural or manmade, has a dark side. The sun's rays, for instance, are the best source of vitamin D, which builds strong bones and teeth. But they're also a primary cause of skin cancer. Or floss cleans our teeth. But it can also infect our gums. Our world is fallen. I'd note a second thing. The seven billion humans who inhabit it are too. They have a dark side. They're at the ready to do evil when the conditions are right. One junior high ridicules another for wearing generic shoes. Or a driver backs into my car at the Dollar Store and leaves the scene.

It's an established fact. Our world and everyone and everything in it are fallen, which raises a vital question. Is it possible for people to live well in such a world? Yes, it is! It is possible to live well and Colossians 4:12-13 reveals one of the things that doing so requires. It's that people labor for each other in their prayers and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

Prayer as Labor

Paul closed out his letter to the Christians in Colossae by mentioning fellow workers who sent their greetings. One of those was "**Epaphras, who is one of your number**" to quote verse 12. 1:7 reveals in what sense he was that. He founded the church there. That's why he did what Paul wrote he did in verse 12. He labored earnestly for them in his prayers. That's an instructive statement from which we can learn a great deal about intercessory prayer, which is prayer for others.

Let's start with the word "**labor**." Our fallen world and the fallen humans in it profoundly and practically affect people's everyday lives. They create never-ending problems and needs of every kind in them. To labor for people means to work to solve the problems and to meet the needs they have. We do that in two ways.

One way is action. Many problems and needs are part of our domain

by nature. We have the power it takes to solve or meet them. Many are also part of our domain by divine appointment. God wants us to solve or meet them. We act, therefore, to do so. A Christian has an elderly neighbor who can't mow her yard or afford to hire it done. Being healthy and having a lawn mower, he has the power to meet that need and does. He mows her yard for her. He labors by acting.

We labor for people in a second way. The first is action. The second is request. Many problems and needs aren't part of our domain by nature. We don't have the power it takes to solve or meet them. But wanting them solved or met, we ask someone who does. Parents I know had a small son with a problem called speech Aphasia. It was beyond them to help him talk. So, they hired a professional speech therapist. They labored for him by asking someone to do for him what they couldn't.

But when problems and needs are beyond our power, it isn't just people we ask. It's God as well. Literally every problem and every need are part of His domain by nature. There isn't a problem He can't solve or a need He can't meet. So, we ask Him first and foremost. The parents I just mentioned did ask the speech therapist because Aphasia is treatable. But while it's treatable, it isn't curable. Also, in some cases, it isn't even treatable. So, they asked God first and foremost and continued to ask Him. Their son now talks normally because they did. They labored for him in their prayers – asked God to do for him what they couldn't.

It's true. When we pray, we labor. We work for people, which matters greatly in this fallen world of ours. Hear what Richard Foster wrote about that: **"In the ongoing work of the kingdom of God, nothing is more important than Intercessory Prayer. People today desperately need the help we can give them. Marriages are being shattered, Children are being destroyed. Individuals are living lives of quiet desperation without purpose or future. And we can make a difference . . . if we will learn to pray on their behalf."** He was right. So let's just do it. Let's labor for people. Let's pray, unceasingly, on their behalf.

Prayer as a Labor of Love

It's a labor of love when we do. Stop for a moment and think of the people you love the most. Also identify the things you desire the most for them. Some of those, if you've identified them thoughtfully, are beyond your power to do or give. So, you pray and ask God to do or give what you can't. You do that because you love them.

We have a group of grandmothers who meet every Sunday morning to pray for their grandchildren. Why do they do that? It's for two reasons. First, they love their grandchildren. And second, because they do, they desire things for them that are beyond their power to do or give.

They're living breathing proof that intercessory prayer is fundamentally an act of love and I emphasize that. It's an act of love.

It is because it's self-giving. Paul wrote about Epaphras in verse 13 that he had a "**deep concern**" for the Christians not just in Colossae but in Laodicea and Hierapolis as well. The Greek word translated "**concern**" there means "**pain.**" In fact, it's translated just that in Revelation 16:10-11 and 21:4. It refers to what we call "**travail.**" That's what intercessory prayer is. It's travail. Give it some thought. It brings the heart-rending problems and needs of others vividly before us. They in turn require considerable expenditures of energy and strength, both physical and emotional, to address in prayer.

Amy Fanzo, as many of you know, was a devoted intercessor. She had a prayer book filled with the names of people for whom she prayed – several hours every day. I'm going to tell you more about that in next week's service. Anyway, in the final stages of her illness, Amy felt badly that she couldn't pray for them as she wanted to. She mentioned it several times. I encouraged her though by telling her the truth about that. Intercessory prayer is travail. It requires an energy and strength she simply didn't have. I say that to say this. It's self-giving and labor in the truest sense of those words.

So there you have it – the nature of intercessory prayer. It's self-giving, which makes it fundamentally an act of love.

Labor Earnestly

Now that we know what we should do, labor for others in prayer, let's look at how we should do it. Verse 13 tells us. It's "**earnestly.**" Remember when Jacob wrestled with God in Genesis 32. The Greek word translated "**labor earnestly**" suggests that kind of interaction with Him. Bible commentator Walter Wink defined it more specifically this way: "**Biblical prayer is impertinent, persistent, shameless, indecorous. It is more like haggling in an oriental bazaar than the polite monologues of the churches.**" He was right. The word "**earnestly**" implies that intercessory prayer has three basic elements.

The first is precision. We examine a person's problem or need and determine in detail, with specificity, what will solve or meet it. We then ask God to do or give that. Recall the famous scene in *A Christmas Story* when Ralphie told the department store Santa Claus what he wanted. He didn't say, "**A BB gun.**" He said "**an Official Red Ryder, carbine action, two hundred shot range model air rifle!**" Ralphie asked with specificity and when we pray, so should we.

I'm pray for a young Christian Marine. I don't ask God generally, "**Please bless Him.**" I ask particularly: "**Please put a complete hedge of protection around him as you did a partial one around Job. Work in his cognitive processes so that he grasps the value of Jesus over the temptations before him. Also work in his emotional processes so he's able to avoid the reckless moments to which young Marines are susceptible.**" That illustrates one element of earnest intercessory prayer. It's precision. We ask specifically.

A second element is presentation. I mean by that, we present to God our reasons for what we ask. Several years ago, I was reading the celebrated intercessory prayer of Moses in Exodus 32. The Holy Spirit impressed it upon me as I was that I should do what Moses did. When I pray for people, explain to God why I want Him to do or give what I ask. I spelled out to Him, for instance, why I asked what I did for the Marine. His soul is at issue in the ongoing cosmic war between God and Satan.

He remaining faithful would glorify God and shame Satan. It would also be a witness to Marines who knew nothing about Jesus. Besides, I love him and want him to be safe and to know the joy of Jesus. I articulated all of those things to God – presented the reasons I asked for what I did.

There's a third element of earnest pray, persistence. This element has to do with a debated issue. Should we ask God for something once and drop the matter? Or should we keep asking until the matter is resolved. Jesus tells us in two of His parables, Luke 11:5-8 and Luke 18:1-8. The man and woman in them didn't ask once and drop it. They kept on asking. And so should we. We should keep on asking until one of three things happen: (1) God grants the request; (2) the request becomes irrelevant; or (3) the Holy Spirit tells us to quit asking.

Parents I know prayed for their clinically depressed son, who hardly left their basement, for over a decade. They asked God, several thousand times according to their own estimate, to heal him, which He eventually did. He suddenly came out his depression because, "**God healed me**" to quote him. The words of the acclaimed intercessor, E.M. Bounds, explain the moral of that story "**God loves the importunate pleaders, and sends him answers that would never have been granted but for *the persistence that refuses to let go.***"

Those then are the basic elements of earnest intercessory prayer: precision, presentation, and persistence.

Prayer as Interaction between Persons

They are because of what prayer is. It's an interaction between persons, God and us. It proceeds therefore in the manner that any healthy relationship between persons would. We make clear to God what we want, explain why we want it, and keep talking it over until the matter is resolved. That's how persons in any healthy relationship would interact, including ours with God. On His side, He's responsive to that kind of interaction. He genuinely does act pursuant to our requests.

People have repeatedly asked me this question over the years. Why

pray if God is going to do or give what He wants to anyway? That question assumes that His intention is fixed not flexible. He knows what is best and is going to do or give it no matter what. We're insolent if we think that our prayers are going to change the mind of a sovereign God. That's what many Christians believe.

Suppose that is true. If it is, intercessory prayer isn't, in reality, "**labor**." It doesn't do or give anything to anyone that God wouldn't have done or given anyway, which makes it a sham.

But it isn't a sham. The word "**labor**" implies that intercessory prayer does do or give things that wouldn't have been done or given otherwise. Consider Exodus 32:14. In response to Moses' prayer for Israel "**Yahweh changed His mind**." He intended to destroy Israel. Moses prayed and asked Him not to. He changed His intention and didn't.

That narrative illustrates that the kingdom of God is a domain of persons, God and us. And in that domain, the persons, including God, are flexible, responding to each other's intentions and will. His overarching purposes are unchanging, but He's flexible in how He achieves them. He gives us the dignity of causality by achieving them pursuant to our requests, which is part of His greatness. He's able to do that – to be flexible in achieving His purposes – because He's great.

Let's go back to the parents who prayed for their clinically depressed son. Suppose they had not asked those thousands of times. Would God have healed him? I think not. God was going to achieve His purposes in and through that son's depression. But He achieved them through healing him instead – because his parents prayed.

Conclusion

I leave you with the words of the great Church Father, Chrysostom, who wrote this about prayer. It is "**the root, the fountain, the mother of a thousand blessings**." He was absolutely right. Prayer is the mother of a thousand blessings for others. So, if we love others, we'll pray for them. Intercessory prayer truly is our greatest labor of love.