

Introduction

Today, I'm going to preach about the single most important thing that I know about prayer. Paul reveals what that is in Romans 8:26.

Not Knowing How to Pray as We Should

In this verse, Paul mentions a "**weakness**" that all of us have. We "**do not know how to pray as we should.**" The word "pray" here refers to asking God to give or do something for others or us. One of our weaknesses in that regard is that we sometimes don't know how to pray as we should. Praying as we should has to do with two things.

The first is our motives. Motives refer to the reasons we ask God to give or do something. When those reasons are wrong, we aren't praying as we should.

On Sunday mornings for 22 years now, I've asked God to do this: "**Be with my mouth as I preach as you were with the mouth of Moses in Exodus 4:15.**" I have a confession though. For many of those years, I asked that for two reasons. One was that the hearers would be helped and God pleased in the process. The other was that the hearers would think I'm a good preacher. The first reason was a right one but the second a wrong one. So, I wasn't praying as I should.

The truth is that many of our prayers are like that. Richard Foster says it this way in his book *Prayer – Finding the Heart's True Home*: "**We all come to prayer with a tangled mass of motives – altruistic and selfish, merciful and hateful, loving and bitter. Frankly, this side of eternity we will never unravel the good from the bad, the pure from the impure.**" He's right. I once talked with a Christian who prayed faithfully for God to bless his boss, who was an angry and unreasonable man. He did, he explained, because Jesus tells us to pray for those who mistreat us and besides, he admitted, it heaped burning coals of fire on his boss's head when he did. Our motives for asking are often mixed just like his, which means we aren't praying as we should.

Praying as we should has to do with a second thing, ideas. Ideas refer to the subject matter of our prayers. They're the specific things we ask God to give or do. If the idea of our request is wrong, we aren't praying as we should. That an idea is wrong can mean one of two things.

The first is that it's a bad idea. God giving or doing it would be more harmful than helpful. Years ago, a new convert prayed for his daughter in a small group I attended at the time. She had a critical exam coming up and so he prayed: **"Lord, I know she isn't going to study for it but help her get a good grade anyway."** God granting his request would have harmed his daughter more than helped her. She was apparently a slacker in school and God doing what he asked would have reinforced that quality of hers. It was a bad and thus wrong idea.

That an idea is wrong can mean a second thing. It isn't the best idea. It is a good one that is helpful. But it isn't the most helpful. A Christian prayed and asked God to help her get into law school but He didn't. So she went into education instead and became an outstanding teacher. She realized later that she was doing more good and getting more joy teaching than she would have practicing law. It's often said that the good is the enemy of the best and that's what we have here. What we ask God to give or do may be a good idea but it isn't the best. It's wrong, therefore, not morally but prudentially.

That then is what it means not to pray as we should. We pray incompetently. Our motives and/or ideas are wrong.

The Holy Spirit Prays With Us

Now, if I stopped preaching at this point and didn't explain the second half of verse 26, I know what some of you would do. You'd quit praying. Since your motives are often mixed and since you can never be sure that your ideas are the best ones, you'd probably conclude this. It'd be better all the way around for everyone involved if you just quit asking God to give or do things.

But that isn't the case. And it isn't the case because of the second

half of verse 26. Paul reveals a staggering truth. It's that **"the Spirit Himself intercedes with us with groanings too deep for words."**

That statement tells us what the Holy Spirit does. He **"intercedes."** The Greek word translated that connotes "prays." So, the meaning is that the Holy Spirit prays. To whom does He pray? The answer is **"Father God."** The third person of God, the Holy Spirit, prays to the first person, the Father. He does so with **"groanings too deep for words."** Commentators disagree as to what that means. I think it means that the Holy Spirit communicates with the Father mind to mind, non-verbally, without spoken words.

Keeping that in mind, notice something about verses 26 and 27 in our English translations. They both say that the Holy Spirit **"intercedes for"** us. But the Greek word translated **"intercedes"** has something attached to it in verse 26 that it doesn't in verse 27, a preposition. That preposition is *"uper,"* which can mean **"instead of, in the name of, acting for."** In my view, that's exactly what it does mean here. Paul's point, therefore, is this. When we pray to Father God, the Holy Spirit also prays - instead of us, in the name of us, acting for us. Or to say it more simply, when we pray, the Holy Spirit prays *with* us - not *for* us as verse 27 says it, but *with* us.

Do you realize what that means and it's a powerful thing? If we're followers of Jesus, we never pray alone. We have an ultimate prayer partner, the Holy Spirit. He helps us in our weakness by actually accompanying us in our prayers. He's a presence in us and when we don't know how to pray, when we're incompetent to pray, He prays with us. I hesitate to quote the same person twice in one sermon but I will today. Richard Foster articulates so well what the Holy Spirit, as our prayer partner, does: **"When we stumble over our words, the Spirit straightens out the syntax. When we pray with muddy motives, the Spirit purifies the stream. When we see through a glass darkly, the Spirit adjusts and focuses what we are asking until it corresponds to the will of God."** In the end, He prays to Father God,

on our behalf, the prayer we would have prayed if we knew how.

I once heard a distraught Christian utter a prayer that was so muddled I hardly understood what he was even asking. But he didn't pray alone. The Holy Spirit accompanied him in his prayer and presented it to Father God with a clarity and preciseness that no human being could ever achieve. The muddled prayer was made a perfect prayer through the intercessory ministry and work of the Holy Spirit.

That illustrates so well the sixth way that the Holy Spirit helps us. He prays with us. He reshapes, refines, and reinterprets our feeble, muddled, ill advised, and ego-driven prayers and makes them presentable, acceptable, to Father God. That is a spectacular reality, the implications of which to our prayer lives are profound.

Pray Boldly

Verses like Ephesians 3:12 and Hebrews 4:16 reveal one of those implications. We should pray boldly.

Listen as I quote part of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution: "**Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech.**" That line in the First Amendment gives us one of the most significant and precious freedoms that human beings have, the freedom of speech. With just a few exceptions, we can say what it's on our minds and hearts to say. We can speak boldly in other words.

Well, what the First Amendment gives us in our legal lives, the Holy Spirit praying with us gives us in our prayer lives – freedom of speech.

Many followers of Jesus pray guardedly, limiting their speech. They say to Father God what they think they should say, not what they want to say. They allow what they think should be on their minds and hearts, not what actually is, direct what they ask Him to give or do. They do so because they reverence and fear Him, which is a good thing. But the ultimate result is a bad thing. Their prayer lives eventually die from lack of interest. Prayer eventually becomes a tiresome irrelevancy to them.

But the Holy Spirit praying with us, as I defined it, gives us freedom

of speech. The prayers of the Bible's greatest intercessors demonstrate what I mean, like those of Abraham in Genesis 18 or Moses in Exodus 32. They're models for us all. Listen to Walter Wink's commentary on Abraham's prayer in Genesis 18: **"The fawning etiquette of unctuous prayer is utterly foreign to the Bible. Bible prayer is impertinent, persistent, shameless, indecorous. It is more like haggling in an oriental bazaar than the polite monologues of the churches."**

If you're like me, that kind of language makes you uncomfortable. You may even think it's blasphemous. But in reality and for the most part, Wink is right. Yes, Father God is our Maker and Judge and we should fear Him. But at the same time, the Holy Spirit is with us making our prayers acceptable to Him. As followers of Jesus, therefore, you and I cannot offer a bad prayer. Hear that again and don't ever forget it. You and I cannot offer a bad prayer. Consequently, we can say what we want to say. We can ask Father God to give or do what's actually on our minds and hearts, not what we think should be on them. The Holy Spirit gives us freedom of speech in prayer. So, pray boldly.

Pray Specifically

The Holy Spirit praying with us has a second implication. We should pray specifically. We should ask Father God to give or do what we want in detail.

Going back to the word **"weakness,"** in verse 26, one of our weaknesses is that we often don't know what is best or even good for others or us. The problem is that we're so finite and circumstances are sometimes so complex. The fact is that very few of our prayers are fully informed ones. That in turn makes us insecure about asking Father God to give or do specific things.

Imagine two scenarios, assuming in each that the Holy Spirit doesn't pray with us. In one, God promises me that He will give or do whatever I ask. If He did, I'd either quit praying or only pray generally, **"God, give or do what you will."** In the other scenario, God promises you that He

will give or do whatever you ask. If He did, I'd either want you to quit praying for me or only pray generally, **"God, give or do what you will."** You get my point. Without the Holy Spirit praying with us, we aren't knowledgeable or wise enough to pray specifically for others or us. We'd harm or destroy their persons and lives, or ours, if we did.

But we do have the Holy Spirit praying with us and that makes all the difference. It makes us competent to pray. He takes our ill-advised requests that would harm or destroy and presents them to Father God as perfectly advised requests that help or save.

Because He does, we can and should pray specifically. We should deliberate carefully over the persons, circumstances, and events involved and then ask definitively for what we want God to give or do. In his classic book *With Christ in the School of Prayer*, Andrew Murray gives us an incisive guideline in that regard: **"Our prayers must be a distinct expression of definite need, not a vague appeal to His mercy or an indefinite cry for blessing. We should learn to pray in such a way that God will see, and we will know what we really expect."** That is an outstanding guideline. Pray in such a way that God will see and we will know what we really expect.

I was concerned about my son Moses getting a job when he left the Marines, for instance. So I prayed about that, not vaguely, **"God, give him a job,"** but specifically, in detail, **"God, give him a job that pays at least \$15 an hour, has health insurance benefits, doesn't possess his life, and is enjoyable to him."** That request met Murray's guideline. God saw and I knew what I expected. I prayed specifically.

Conclusion

That then is single most important thing that I know about prayer. The work of prayer doesn't depend on us. It depends on the Holy Spirit instead and the sixth way that He helps us. He prays with us. So, pray boldly and specifically. He's our prayer partner when we do.