

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

August 14, 2016

“Prayer for All Occasions”

Love to Pray, part 5 (based on the sermon by Al VanderGriend)

Ephesians 6:10-20

Would you pray with me?

Holy God, this is your church. The scripture says, you want to make it a house of prayer. So help us this morning. Help understand you better. Help us to strengthen our relationship with you by learning to be prayer warriors. Help us know your love, grace, and mercy, and teach us to respond. God, I ask that the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts would be acceptable in your sight. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Do you know the old saying about what’s great about being a guy? We have one shirt, one suit, and one pair of shoes, and they are for all occasions. I don’t mind that you ladies like to buy new dresses, but I’m just saying – I have had the same black suit since college, and every time I wear it, people still tell me I look nice. Of course, now that I’ve told you, you’ll probably stop saying that to me.

OK, that was a little silly, but sometimes, I think we imply that prayer is not for all occasions. If it’s not an overtly religious situation, we neglect prayer. Let me ask you honestly, what percentage of your prayer occurs either at church (when, by the way, someone else is actually saying the words for you), or it’s your one-size-fits-all prayer that your family says around the dinner table out of habit?

Prayer is for all occasions, but I have to admit, I myself feel convicted when I read these words in Ephesians 6:18, “Pray on all occasions.” While counseling at Bear Camp this week, I prayed with my campers every night. We prayed at meals,

we prayed at worship, we prayed at fire bowl. I reminded them that people all over were praying for them, including our church. There I was, teaching them about prayer, but inside I was thinking, "I still have a long way to go in my own prayer life.

Why is it so hard to ask someone, "Can I pray for you right now?" I think the reason is, we have yet to fully make prayer a way of life. Al VanderGriend points out in his book, Love to Pray, that's what Paul is saying to the Ephesians. Make prayer a way of life. How do we do that?

The answer is found in this great section of scripture in chapter 6. It's called the Armor of God. Please follow along with me as we break this down together.

Paul points out that too often, we are fighting the wrong enemy. We think our enemies are people. We call them terrorists or criminals, even (gasp) the political party which we oppose. We complain about the government or any other convenient human target. But Paul sets us straight. He spells it out in verse 6. "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

If your enemy has "flesh and blood," they are not your real enemy. Our enemy is the devil and his army. And if you are going to go up against your spiritual enemy, you better be prepared.

Paul tells us the best way to pray effectively. He uses a great analogy of a Roman soldier's battle gear to explain how prayer can be a part of every occasion. So let's break it down.

The first part is the belt of truth. Just like your belly is the center of your body, the center of your life should be built on truth. When your gut says, “This is wrong,” you’ve got to listen to it.

The second part is the breastplate of righteousness, or justice, as some translations say. Your breastplate covers your heart. When you believe the truth, that Jesus died to save you, you are justified, declared righteous. Your heart is purified; it is connected to God. The breastplate protects your heart and keeps it pure.

The third part is your feet – your sandals, if you will – which are supposed to be ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. Everyone who exercises knows, if you don’t wear good shoes, your feet are going to hurt. If you go around proclaiming war, anger, and hate, your life is going to hurt, too. So take peace wherever you go – get your laces tied up so you can go where God sends you to proclaim the good news.

The fourth part is the shield of faith, an interesting part of the armor. A Roman shield was covered in leather and could be soaked in water to ward off flaming arrows. What Paul is saying is that faith will ward off those spiritual attacks. You know, those voices that tell you, “God won’t forgive you.” “You’re too messed up.” “That prayer that you prayed, it wasn’t real.” We will have doubts as Christians, but the shield of faith extinguishes them. Even when we don’t have the answers, faith comes through for us.

The fifth part is the helmet of salvation, which reminds us of the goal that God has for us. God wants us to be saved. He wants our head to be in the game. Paul reminds us that we will receive a crown in the next life, eternal life, because of what Jesus has done for us. Like other parts of the armor, the helmet protects

our thoughts by reminding us of the truth. We are saved by the grace of Jesus Christ, and nothing else.

The last part of the armor is the sword of the Spirit, the word of God. Paul reminds us that the only offensive weapon, the only part which can actually attack the devil, is God's word. If you don't already memorize scripture, I challenge you to. Paul tells us that scripture is a very effective weapon indeed. But remember, the sword is to be used against the devil and his army, not people. Please, don't go around hitting people with a Bible and saying, "Pastor said this is what we are supposed to do." I mean that literally and figuratively. I know some people who believe that quoting scripture is a weapon to beat people down. That's not what Paul is saying. The Bible is a weapon against the devil and his schemes. There's a big difference.

Do you notice with all this armor, there is no protection for someone who runs away? Paul is saying that we are to be engaged in prayer all the time, in every part of our life. Spiritually speaking, we can't afford to turn around or drop our guard, or we open ourselves up for attack.

So why do we need this armor? Look at verse 18. Paul uses the phrase, "with this in mind." You see, prayer is not meant to be a separate, disconnected thing. It's supposed to be integral to our lives. Built-in. We are supposed to wear this armor all the time, so much so, that it fits like a part of our physical body. That's how we can pray in all occasions. Prayer can be spontaneous.

VanderGriend says, "Improving our prayer lives is not simply a matter of trying harder. Better praying does not simply mean better methods, longer lists, or spending more time in prayer. God's way of overcoming weakness in prayer is not simply a command; it's an offer of grace. It's the gift of his Spirit to help us."

We can pray on all occasions. God wants us to bring all of our lives to him. And we should bring God into all of our lives. “God is always conscious of us, always involved, and always eager to help. He wants us to be conscious of him no matter what is happening. God wants us to share our lives with him. Praying “on all occasions” means sharing our thoughts, our feelings, and our experiences with God.

Last week during communion, a boy came up to me and asked if we could pray for his lost cat. I said, absolutely! There is no time in life when prayer is inappropriate. “Whether we are happy or sad, content or challenged, at work or on vacation, spending time with friends or dealing with enemies” (A.V.) we can pray.

Look at Jesus’ life. He prayed all the time! “At his baptism, when tempted in the wilderness, before and after feeding over five thousand people, when parents brought children to him, before he raised Lazarus, at the Lord’ Supper, in Gethsemane, on the cross—and many other times not recorded in Scripture (Luke 5:16).” (A.V.)

Praying on all occasions doesn’t mean stopping and kneeling every minutes of the day. We can even pray breath prayers – bits of scripture or phrases that we repeat over and over. Things like, “Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” We can pray bits like, “Give me the peace that passes all understanding (Philippians 4:7). We can ask God to take our burdens up, because he cares for us. (I Peter 5:7). We can pray, “Jesus, I am tired, and I need rest.” (Matthew 11:28). “God, your love endures forever.” (Psalm 136)

The goal is to put things into our minds that surface again instantly when we need them. Just like a soldier, or better, an athlete, we practice to get better, but to train their bodies and minds to respond almost without thinking.

Prayer doesn't have to be complicated. We can make it as common as eating, drinking, or even breathing.

Paul says we are to use all kinds of prayer. We want a balanced relationship with God. We want a real conversation with God, one that includes praise, thanksgiving, confessions, and asking for help. If we are missing one or more of these elements, the relationship is lopsided, like an unbalanced tire. Ever tried to drive a car with one? It's bumpy. VanderGriend says, "There is something seriously wrong in a relationship with a friend, or with God, that is characterized mainly by asking."

There is one final thought you need to know. In this battle against the spiritual forces, prayer is the best weapon we have. It will deal a lethal blow to the devil. An anonymous author from The Kneeling Christian wrote, "There is nothing the devil dreads so much as prayer. . . . Satan laughs at our toilings, mocks at our wisdom, but trembles when we pray."

Will you commit to praying daily? I pray that you will. And if you are asking yourself, how long, the answer is: enough to have a real relationship with Jesus.

Memory verse

Ephesians 6:18 "Pray in the Spirit on all occasions, with all kinds of prayers and requests."

Reflection questions

1. When are you most likely to pray?

2. Are there certain prayers that you have memorized that you say often?
3. How prepared do you feel to pray? Is prayer a daily habit for you?
4. What part of the “Armor of God” is most helpful to you? What part do you need to use more often?
5. How can you pray “on all occasions”?