

Pastor Rolly Estabillo
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Steadfastly in Prayer

“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”
Colossians 2:4 (ESV); Luke 11:5-13

Good morning! Last week, I mentioned that we’re extending our series we’ve entitled “Christ Alone”. This series is based on the book of Colossians. Today, we’re looking at the fourth and last chapter wherein Paul the Apostle touches on the subject of prayer. This morning, I’d like us to look at one particular verse, Colossians 4:2 which says, *“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”*

Now, I know that many of us, if not all of us, pray in this room. We know what prayer means. The question is, do we look at prayer as something we always have to do or do we look at it as something we need to do only in case of emergency? You know, like a fire extinguisher. It is largely untouched until a crisis happens. I have a feeling that it is the second. Many Christians don’t pray enough. Many Christians don’t regard it with high importance the way they do other Christian disciplines like attending church, reading the Bible, going to a fellowship, attending a conference, etc. I’m guessing the reason why prayer is not popular is because we don’t get results right away. Compare that with reading the Bible or your devotional. Once you’re done reading, you feel like you learned something. And you feel excited. And that is good. Nothing wrong with that. Or like attending a conference or seminar. You learn something, too, and sometimes you come home with freebies.

When it comes to prayer, however, we don’t see results right away. There is nothing tangible that we feel or see or touch. And it takes a lot of effort on our part to pray before the answer comes. And because we are people who are impatient,

who have been born into a world of instant everything, we give up when our prayers seem to be bouncing off the ceiling like they don't reach heaven. Because we don't get what we want, we think that God is not listening. Like He's simply not interested in our prayers.

I guess if I surveyed this audience most of you would conclude that your prayers are ineffective. You seldom see results or answers that are as clear as you'd like them to be. Just think about a prayer request that you've laid out to God for a long time now and the answer hasn't come yet. Doesn't that make you feel like giving up? So, have you sometimes felt like it's a waste of time, that the heavens are closed to your requests?

Perhaps you feel like Franklin Roosevelt did when he was president of the United States. He often endured long receiving lines at the White House and complained that no one really paid attention to what he said. One day, during a reception, he decided to try an experiment. To each person who came down the line and shook his hand he murmured, "I murdered my grandmother this morning." The guests responded in typical fashion with phrases like, "Marvelous! Keep up the good work. We are proud of you. God bless you, sir."

It was not till the end of the line, while greeting the ambassador from Bolivia, that his words were actually heard. Unrattled, the ambassador leaned over and whispered, "I'm sure she had it coming."

That's the way a lot of us feel. We're more surprised when our prayers yield answers than when they don't. And why not? When you think of what prayer really is it's astounding that we'd get any answer at all. What I want you to understand is that unanswered prayer should be the exception and not the norm. We were created by a God who is more willing to answer us than we are to ask him. As it turns out, that's the biggest problem with prayer ... us.

The Apostle Paul says to the Colossians, be steadfast in prayer. The NIV, NLT, and NASB say, “*Devote yourselves to prayer.*” The KJV says, “*Continue in prayer*”. The Message says, “*Pray diligently*”. They all mean the same thing – don’t give up praying!

You may ask, “How do I not give up?” “What can I do to not give up?” “Why should I not give up?” This morning I’d like to answer these questions by taking a passage from the book of Luke where Jesus taught his followers the characteristics of effective prayer. If you want to pray and see results then begin to apply his advice.

(Read Luke 11:5-13)

Please note that what I’m sharing with you is that prayer is not a ritual but a relationship with God the Father. Because as we go through these characteristics of an effective prayer, you’ll also notice how it all points to knowing who God is and his character. And when we know God, all the more we would like to come to him. So, the first characteristic of an effective prayer is that

1. It’s aimed at something specific.

Jesus begins this teaching on prayer with a simple, everyday example. One man has a need and asks his neighbor for help. Then, teaching them more about prayer, he used this illustration: “*Suppose you went to a friend’s house at midnight, wanting to borrow three loaves of bread. You would say to him, ‘A friend of mine has just arrived for a visit, and I have nothing for him to eat.’*” Luke 11:5-6 (NLT) The man had a specific need for bread. In those days hospitality was a big deal. When a visitor arrived at your home it was your responsibility to set a meal before them immediately. You see, usually, the people baked just enough bread for the day. This guest arrived unexpectedly and there was no bread in the house, so he heads down the road to ask his neighbor for help. He was just hoping.

The same logic must be applied to prayer. You see, oftentimes we see no results because we ask for nothing specific. When we pray we tend to generalize and not ask God what we really need.

David Jeremiah says in his book "The Great Adventure" says and I quote:

"How often have we prayed something like, 'O Lord, be with cousin Billy now in a special way'? Have we stopped to consider what it is we're requesting? Imagine that you are a parent who is preparing to leave your children with a babysitter. Would you dream of saying, 'O Betsy, I ask you now that you would be with my children in a special way?' No way. You would say, 'Betsy, the kids need to be in bed by 9 pm. They can have one snack before their baths, and please make sure they finish their homework. You can reach us at this number if there's any problem. Any questions before we go?' We are very specific with our requests and instructions for our babysitters. We want them to know specifics. It should be no different with prayer." (end of quote)

Let me share with you a specific prayer by a little girl. Her story was told by Helen Rosegreave, a missionary to Africa, in her testimony at Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg. Here is the missionary's account:

One night, in Central Africa, I had worked hard to help a mother in the labor ward; but in spite of all that we could do, she died leaving us with a tiny, premature baby and a crying, two-year-old daughter. We would have difficulty keeping the baby alive. We had no incubator. We had no electricity to run an incubator, and no special feeding facilities. Although we lived on the equator, nights were often chilly with treacherous drafts.

A student-midwife went for the box we had for such babies and for the cotton wool that the baby would be wrapped in. Another went to stoke up the fire and fill a hot water bottle. She came back shortly, in distress, to tell me that in filling the bottle, it had burst. Rubber perishes easily in tropical climates. "...and it

is our last hot water bottle!" she exclaimed. As in the West, it is no good crying over spilled milk; so, in Central Africa it might be considered no good crying over a burst water bottle.

They do not grow on trees, and there are no drugstores down forest pathways. "All right," I said, "Put the baby as near the fire as you safely can; sleep between the baby and the door to keep it free from drafts. Your job is to keep the baby warm."

The following noon, as I did most days, I went to have prayers with many of the orphanage children who chose to gather with me. I gave the youngsters various suggestions of things to pray about and told them about the tiny baby.

I explained our problem about keeping the baby warm enough, mentioning the hot water bottle. The baby could so easily die if it got chilled. I also told them about the two-year-old sister, crying because her mother had died. During the prayer time, one ten-year-old girl, Ruth, prayed with the usual blunt consciousness of our African children. "Please, God," she prayed, "send us a water bottle. It'll be no good tomorrow, God, the baby'll be dead; so, please send it this afternoon." While I gasped inwardly at the audacity of the prayer, she added by way of corollary, "...and while You are about it, would You please send a dolly for the little girl so she'll know You really love her?" As often with children's prayers, I was put on the spot. Could I honestly say, "Amen?" I just did not believe that God could do this. Oh, yes, I know that He can do everything: The Bible says so, but there are limits, aren't there? The only way God could answer this particular prayer would be by sending a parcel from the homeland. I had been in Africa for almost four years at that time, and I had never, ever received a parcel from home. Anyway, if anyone did send a parcel, who would put in a hot water bottle? I lived on the equator!

Halfway through the afternoon, while I was teaching in the nurses' training school, a message was sent that there was a car at my front door. By the time that I reached home, the car had gone, but there, on the veranda, was a large twenty-two pound parcel! I felt tears pricking my eyes.

I could not open the parcel alone; so, I sent for the orphanage children. Together we pulled off the string, carefully undoing each knot. We folded the paper, taking care not to tear it unduly. Excitement was mounting. Some thirty or forty pairs of eyes were focused on the large cardboard box. From the top, I lifted out brightly colored, knitted jerseys. Eyes sparkled as I gave them out. Then, there were the knitted bandages for the leprosy patients, and the children began to look a little bored. Next, came a box of mixed raisins and sultanas – that would make a nice batch of buns for the weekend. As I put my hand in again, I felt the...could it really be? I grasped it, and pulled it out. Yes, “A brand-new rubber, hot water bottle!” I cried. I had not asked God to send it; I had not truly believed that He could. Ruth was in the front row of the children. She rushed forward, crying out, “If God has sent the bottle, He must have sent the dolly, too!” Rummaging down to the bottom of the box, she pulled out the small, beautifully dressed dolly. Her eyes shone: She had never doubted! Looking up at me, she asked, “Can I go over with you, Mommy, and give this dolly to that little girl, so she'll know that Jesus really loves her?”

That parcel had been on the way for five whole months, packed up by my former Sunday School class, whose leader had heard and obeyed God's prompting to send a hot water bottle, even to the equator. One of the girls had put in a dolly for an African child -- five months earlier in answer to the believing prayer of a ten-year-old to bring it "That afternoon!"

That was the story of the missionary.

“And it shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear.” Isaiah 65:24

So, whatever you want God to do for you or another person, ask specifically. It's not a petty matter to God. He is intimately interested in the details of your life. Pray specifically. After all, how can God prove to you he has answered unless it's specific?

2. It's approached with confidence.

Now, let me read again verses 7-8, *“Then the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs.”* Luke 11:7-8 (NIV)

So, this man took a bold approach. It took a lot of guts to do this. In ancient times most homes had only one room. On one end was a raised platform where everybody slept together - husband, wife, and all the children. Makes you wonder how they were able to have any children at all. Not only did the entire family sleep in this one room, so did all the livestock. They'd bring the chickens and goats inside too. The man knocking on the door was confident. The other fellow would have to get up, possibly wake up his wife and kids, stir up the animals, light a lamp, go unlock and open the door and give the man some bread.

The one knocking was confident because he knew his neighbor's reputation was on the line. Remember, hospitality was a big deal and no one wanted to lose good standing in the community.

Jesus' point isn't that God will do things grudgingly because his reputation's on the line. He teaches us that we can be confident in prayer because of God's character. He is compassionate and gracious and loving. He wants to answer us and he'll do it.

Hebrews 4:16 *“So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it.”* (NLT)

Ask specifically and ask confidently because God cares for your needs.

3. It’s applied with persistence.

Here’s where we lose it. Most often we don’t see results in our prayer life simply because we’re not persistent enough. We give up too soon. Jesus says, *“So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.”* Luke 11:9-10 (NLT)

Jesus’ point is that the persistent seekers find what they’re looking for. They find answers. Let me point out, however, that we don’t always get what we ask for. We will always get an answer if we ask, seek and knock, but it may not be the answer that we want.

If God doesn’t present you with what you need, there’s a reason. Persistence helps you at least discover that reason. In his book, “Too Busy Not To Pray”, Bill Hybels gives us an easy way to understand what God’s up to.

If the request is wrong, God says, ‘No.’

If the timing is wrong, God says, ‘Slow.’

If you are wrong, God says, ‘Grow.’

But if the request is right, the timing is right,
and you are right, God says, ‘Go!’

Let me share with you something. I may have shared this before but I thought it’s worth repeating because of its lesson. Now, this happened during our first year of marriage.

One day, I realized that I lost my wedding ring. It slipped through my finger as I was rummaging through our stuff around the house. Of course, I got alarmed. I

didn't exactly know where to find it, however. I prayed and then looked in our dining room, in the bedroom, in the basement, in the bathroom, but there was no sign of it. And, of course, it was so small that it was virtually impossible to locate it. It could have rolled off to la la land.

Days passed and I didn't know whether to let Anabel know or not. If I did, I was afraid she would get angry at me for being so careless. Fortunately, she never noticed it was missing. Anyway, it was one of those times when I really became a prayerful person. I really persisted in prayer. A week later, an electrician came over to do an electrical job on the second floor of our house. I was assisting him all along. Then, he asked me to look for an electric tape. I went down the basement. At the time, our basement looked like it was a victim of a powerful hurricane. Boxes strewn all around, furniture, paper lying around, stuff piled on top of each other. Nevertheless, as I was looking for an electric tape, I also prayed, "Lord, I hope I'll find the ring here." After I said that prayer, I lifted one box out of the way, and lo and behold, lying on the floor in all its glory and splendor, is the wedding ring! I immediately picked it up and put it back on my finger and I felt like the most blessed man on earth. I was so happy that when the electrician told me how much the job would cost me I didn't ask for a discount which I normally would do. If he asked me for a thousand dollars, I would have given it.

What's the lesson? Take off your ring when you're manually sorting your stuff. Of course, the real lesson is, God answers persistent prayers. And He answers according to his will and in his own time. He engineers circumstances and uses other people to answer your prayer. And also, another lesson, God protects husbands.

Folks, your prayer will always be answered, but be ready because the answer might be "No," "Slow," "Grow," or "Go!" There's a misconception that prayer is simply getting God to give you what you want. Actually prayer is a means by

which God changes us. If we're persistent he shapes us to want what he wants. He actually gives us the desire to want what he wants for us when we seek him in this way.

E. Stanley Jones says (and I quote), "Prayer is surrender-surrender to the will of God and cooperation with that will. If I throw out a boat hook from the boat and catch hold of the shore and pull, do I pull the shore to me, or do I pull myself to the shore? Prayer is not pulling God to my will, but the aligning of my will to the will of God."

Pray specifically. Pray confidently. Pray persistently. The fourth characteristic of effective prayer ...

4. Its answer is appropriated through trust.

The thing that you've got to know is that God is not like a genie. He just doesn't give you whatever you wish. He's not some malicious tightwad in the sky either. Listen to how Jesus describes the Father.

"Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" Luke 11:11-13 (NIV)

The people of Jesus' day were heavily influenced by Greek culture. The Greeks had their own mythology concerning the relationship between the gods and humanity. If you've ever read the stories you soon see how awful these deities were to men and women. They cared not one lick for the welfare of human beings, unless they happened to fall romantically in love with one. They were capricious, petty and mean. The Greek gods preferred to torment people for their own pleasure.

Jesus' point was that the true God, our heavenly Father is nothing like those mythological gods. He's a perfectly loving Father, who always has our best interest at heart. He's on our side. He's pulling for us. He wants to meet our needs more than we really understand.

If you have kids think about how you love to meet their needs. If one of your munchkins should ask you for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, you wouldn't wink at your spouse and slip them a peanut butter and petroleum jelly sandwich. If one of your little ones asked for a glass of milk you wouldn't present them with spoiled milk and laugh while they wretch, would you?

No, you'd give them the best that you have. Why? Because you love them and want their best. God is the same way, but to a greater degree. He's a perfect parent who gives us the absolute best. Why? He loves us.

It's for this reason that we can trust him. Effective prayer derives from a trust in the character of God and build on that same trust. And get this. If God is a loving parent, don't be afraid of him. Don't hesitate to come to him. Give him all your hurts, anxieties, troubles, heartaches, anything that you're worried about. Just keep trusting him. You are his child. You are not his slave. Keep on praying! Don't give up!

Romans 8:14-16 says,

"For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God's Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, "Abba, Father." For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God's children." Romans 8:14-16 (NIV)

Prayer that gets results can be the norm in your life rather than the exception. Commit yourself to pray specifically, confidently and persistently. Entrust yourself

to a heavenly Father who loves and cares for you more than you could ever dare to dream.