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### **Prayer and Predestination are Friends, not Enemies** **Romans 10:1-4**

Today we are going to dig deeply into the subject of prayer, or should I say the “mystery” of prayer. All of us, without exception, struggle to pray. Some attribute their failure to pray to the busyness of life: “I just don’t have time,” so they say. Others don’t pray because it so often seems rather one-sided, as if I’m doing all the talking and I struggle to believe that anyone is listening. Then there are those who have become disillusioned when requests they have brought to God for years remain unanswered to this very day.

Of course, many don’t pray because it seems to them unnecessary. They say to themselves: “If God is good and wants to bless me, then he’ll bless me whether or not I ask him to.” But as you know, this runs counter to what James said in chapter four of his epistle: “You do not have, because you do not ask” (James 4:2). My response to this has always been the same: ***Don’t ever expect God to do for you apart from prayer what he has promised to do for you only through and in response to your prayer.***

There is yet one more excuse people use to justify their failure to pray. And it runs directly counter to something that Jesus himself said in his introduction to the so-called “Lord’s Prayer.” In Matthew 6 Jesus spoke this to his disciples:

“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this: . . .” (Matthew 6:7-9a).

The excuse people give for not praying is that God already knows what I need, so why bother telling him or asking him to fulfill those needs. When I pray, I’m not informing him of something he doesn’t already know. After all, God is omniscient. He knows everything. So it seems to be a waste of time and energy to bring to him requests of which he is already and always aware. Jesus, on the other hand, disagrees. He couldn’t have been more explicit. It is precisely ***because*** God “knows what you need before you ask him” that he then commands us to pray. The original text of Matthew 6:9 is quite explicit: “your Father knows what you need before you ask him, ***therefore*** pray like this.” It is the truth of God’s omniscience that serves as the foundation and motivation for your prayers.

Jesus doesn’t say, “Hey, look folks. Since your heavenly Father obviously knows everything, including what you need most, devote yourselves to other matters and don’t waste your time and energy on telling him things that he already understands.” No, Jesus instead grounds or tethers the exhortation to pray on the truth of God’s comprehensive and exhaustive knowledge of your life. But why?

The answer to that question is what brings us to our passage today. There is a principle in our Lord’s exhortation that we find everywhere in Scripture, especially in Romans 10:1. The principle is this: ***God has suspended the bestowal of his blessings to us and others on our asking him for them.*** Simply because God knows what you need before you ask doesn’t mean he will give you what you need even if you don’t ask. Again, I will say this with all the force I can muster: Don’t ever expect God to give you apart from your prayers what he has promised only to give you through and in response to your prayers.

Our heavenly Father is an endless storehouse of blessings and gifts and privileges and wonderful experiences. But he has determined that we will be the recipients of all such things only when we come to him and ask for them. Prayer is the ordained means by which God has determined to fulfill his purposes. I

realize in saying this that yet another question pops into your heads: Why? Why has God orchestrated life and our relationship with him in this way? Why is prayer so important to God and essential for us?

I can't go into this in depth today, but let me say this one thing. All that God does, he does in order to magnify his glory and greatness. And ***prayer is one of the primary ways in which God's majesty and beauty are revealed.*** When we come to him in humility and need and desperation, he responds to us with the outpouring of his many blessings: we are seen as needy and he is seen as resourceful; we are seen as dependent and he is made known as the one who is depended upon; we are shown to be the ones who lack and he is shown to be the one who is infinitely and eternally abundant and resourceful.

One of the more helpful explanations of this truth is found in Isaiah 30:18-19.

“Therefore, the Lord waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him. . . . He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry. As soon as he hears it, he answers you” (Isa. 30:18-19).

But why does the Lord “wait” to be “gracious” to us? If he is really gracious and kind and wants to bless us, well, in the words of the Nike commercial: “Just do it!” If God longs to show us mercy and pour out his power, why does he wait until he hears “the sound of your cry” in prayer?

The simple answer is that God orchestrates it this way in order that he might be glorified in the most visible and public way possible. We read in Proverbs 15:8 that “the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but the prayer of the upright is his delight.” Why is it his delight? Why does it draw attention to his greatness? How does it glorify him? It is because more than anything else ***prayer highlights the depths of our poverty and helplessness and magnifies the riches and resources of God's gracious supply.***

Yet another text that says much the same thing is 2 Corinthians 1:11. There Paul is describing how he was delivered from a near-death experience because of what God did in response to the prayers of the Corinthian Christians:

“You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many” (2 Cor. 1:11).

If Paul and his company of friends are to be helped, it will only happen as a result of what God does in response to the prayers of people like the believers in Corinth. And when people see the answer that comes from their having prayed to God, “many thanks” will be given to God. And in giving God credit for it all, he is magnified and exalted as loving and generous and powerful.

You are all familiar with the doxology or declaration of praise in Ephesians 3:20-21.

“Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (Eph. 3:20-21).

It is because God, in response to our prayers, does far more than we could ever imagine or articulate, that he is deserving of “glory” now and forever more. One more text should suffice: Here is how Jesus put it: “Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, ***that the Father may be glorified in the Son***” (John 14:13).

I could go on almost without end giving you texts that describe why God has chosen to employ prayer as the means by which he wishes to accomplish his purposes and thereby be seen as glorious and generous, but I trust you get the point. So, what does all this have to do with Romans 10:1-4? Very simply this: Following immediately upon his discussion and defense of God's sovereignty in the salvation of sinners,

Paul declares that his “heart’s desire and prayer to God” for the Jewish people “is that they may be saved.”

### *If God is Sovereign, Why Pray?*

Now, many insist this makes no sense. They conclude that if God is sovereign in the salvation of sinners, prayer is useless. Maybe Paul suffered from sort of temporary brain freeze and didn’t realize that divine election unto eternal life makes prayer entirely unnecessary. I want to argue, on the other hand, that divine election or predestination and prayer go hand in hand and that one cannot exist without the other.

I say this while acknowledging that everyone, regardless of the denomination to which they belong and the theological tradition with which they identify, struggles to reconcile in their minds how God can be sovereign in the salvation of souls, on the one hand, and how we can meaningfully and sincerely pray for the lost and share the gospel with them, on the other. No one is exempt from addressing this problem. Their question is often phrased this way: “O.K., granted that a person’s conversion is ultimately determined by God, I still don’t see the point of your prayer. If God chose before the foundation of the world who would be converted, what function does your prayer have?”

The answer is that prayer functions much the same as preaching. We’ll see this later in Romans 10 where Paul asks this question: how shall the lost believe in whom they have not heard, and how shall they hear without a preacher, and how shall they preach unless they are sent (Rom. 10:14f.)? Belief in Christ is a gift of God (John 6:65; 2 Tim. 2:25; Eph. 2:8), but God has ordained that the means by which men believe on Jesus is through the prayers and preaching of his people.

The point is that our intercessory prayers for the lost and our preaching of the gospel are just as predestined as is the believing of the gospel on the part of those for whom we pray and to whom we preach. Just as God will see to it that his Word is proclaimed as a means to saving the elect, so he will see to it that all those prayers are prayed which he has promised to respond to. ***Thus, prayer is the means by which we obtain those blessings from God that God himself has foreordained to give to those who pray for them.***

In Romans 8:28-9:23 Paul spoke about divine foreknowledge and election and predestination, based not on anything in us but solely based on his sovereign good pleasure. So: ***Why, then, should we pray for lost souls to be saved? Why should we preach the gospel to lost people so that they might be saved?*** As much as this may be a problem for you and me, it wasn’t a problem for Paul. Or, if it was a problem, he never let on. He never minimized God’s sovereignty or our responsibility to pray for and preach to lost souls. He never for a moment so much as hinted at the possibility that one of these two truths canceled out the other. He believed in God’s absolute and unchallenged sovereignty on the one hand, and in the urgent necessity of prayer and preaching on the other.

How could he do this? The bottom line is that Paul obviously believed that God rarely, if ever, operates apart from means. What I’m saying is that whatever ultimate purpose or goal God may pursue, he achieves the end in view by means of countless steps or causes or conditions that precede.

I want to assert, on the one hand, that the success of the gospel depends on God’s sovereign good pleasure. As Paul said in Romans 9:11, God is determined that his “purpose of election” will stand. But I also want to assert, on the other hand, that its success depends on the prayers of Christian people like Paul in the first century and you and me today. Some are tempted either to inflate the power of prayer, thereby making God contingent, or to exalt divine sovereignty so as to make prayer superfluous.

Paul’s handling of the problem is of a different order. He does not conclude from divine sovereignty in salvation that people need not bother interceding on behalf of lost souls. He refuses to suggest that the certainty of the end precludes the necessity of means. Were you to have asked him, “Has God’s elective purpose guaranteed the salvation of its objects?” he would have happily said, “Yes.” Were you to have

then suggested that certainty of this sort reduces prayer and evangelism to a religious charade, nice but not at all necessary, I can almost hear his angry *mē genoito!* “God forbid!” “May it never be!”

The sincerity of Paul's words can be tested by reading Romans 10:1 in the light of 9:1-5. Paul's passion for the salvation of Israel is not inconsistent with his belief in the doctrine of unconditional election. The eternal purpose of God, set forth in chapter 9, is not incompatible with his prayer in chapter 10. ***Our attitude towards people and our prayer for their salvation are not to be governed by God's secret counsel concerning them.*** If anyone should argue that the truth of divine election negates the necessity of prayer, he must explain why Paul felt no such tension. Human logic/reasoning says: “Why bother praying for people if they are elect or non-elect by *God's* sovereign decision? They either will or won't come to salvation because of God's predestination, not your prayers.” But Paul will not let us reason this way.

We will examine the relationship between predestination and preaching the gospel later in Romans 10. But let me say this in advance. Paul was following the example of the Lord Jesus Christ, who on more than one occasion juxtaposed the certainty of eternal election with the urgency of gospel proclamation. Consider the words of Jesus in Matthew 11:27-28 - “All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

Here Jesus extols divine sovereignty in determining who shall be the recipients of a saving knowledge of the Son at the same time he urgently exhorts sinners to seek their soul's rest in him. Jesus was not being theologically dishonest with his audience, and neither was Paul with his. Divine sovereignty and human responsibility are not mutually exclusive propositions.

Be it noted that neither Paul nor any other biblical author is suggesting that prayer can alter or somehow change God's purpose in election. Our prayers do not increase the number of the elect nor does our disobedience deprive God's kingdom of those whom he otherwise wished to save. Paul asks us to pray because he is persuaded that ***God does not will the saving end apart from the specified means.*** Don't ever think that the divine decree makes an event certain irrespective of the causes and conditions (such as prayer) on which it depends. The latter are encompassed in God's sovereign purpose no less than the former.

So let me ask you: If God has eternally decreed that you should live, why bother breathing? If God has determined that the farmer will reap a bountiful crop, why bother planting the seed? If God has eternally decreed that you should be sustained by food, why bother eating? The answer is obvious in each instance. God insists that we make use of the means, or we will go without the ends which depend upon them.

We must also remember that our responsibility to pray fervently and urgently is dependent neither upon our speculations as to who may or may not be elect nor upon our ability to comprehend the relationship between praying and predestination. ***God's command, not our curiosity, is the measure of our duty.*** Much to our chagrin, it is not a part of God's revealed will in Holy Scripture to indicate who is and who is not elect. The names of those written in the Lamb's book of life cannot be found by reading between the lines of Scripture. No such information is to be found nestled between Malachi and Matthew, or is tucked away in the notes of certain study Bibles, or is listed under the heading *Elect* in a concordance.

#### *How, then, should we Pray?*

I assume that you, like Paul, pray fervently for the salvation of close family members or colleagues at work. In Paul's case, they were the many Jewish men and women of his day who had openly and persistently denied that Jesus was the Messiah. He expressed his profound and persistent sorrow and grief over their lost condition back in Romans 9:1-3. Here in Romans 10:1 he declares unashamedly that his “heart's desire and prayer to God” is “that they may be saved.”

Paul doesn't say anything about the nature of this prayer. He doesn't give any details about the wording that he might use. We don't know beyond his general affirmation precisely in what way he would ask God to save them, but my suspicion is that he prayed that God might ravish their hearts with his beauty and that he might unshackle their enslaved wills and cause them to come alive!

When you pray for lost souls, what specifically are you asking God to do? Do you ask God to orchestrate circumstances in their life that might open the door for someone to share the gospel with them? Do you ask God to put a Bible in their hand or another book or a gospel tract? Do you ask God to stir their hearts to ask relevant questions, such as: What happens when I die? Does my life have any meaning? Do you ask God to plant in their hearts an uneasiness with their lost condition, such that they begin to ask questions about whether or not there is a God and what is my relationship with him? Although those are certainly legitimate things to bring to God, I want to suggest that there is far more that we should make the focus of our prayers.

A person in need of conversion is "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1); he is enslaved to sin (Rom. 6:17; John 8:34). Paul says that Satan, the god of this world, has blinded the minds of lost people that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ (2 Cor. 4:4). In one of his more graphic portrayals of the condition of the unsaved, Paul describes them as being "darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity" (Eph. 4:18-19). We saw earlier in Romans 8:7 that the unbeliever is "hostile to God" (Rom. 8:7). These are just a few of the reasons why we must then ask God in prayer to make the lost person alive and release his will from bondage and enlighten her mind and soften their hearts so that hostility is effectually replaced with affection and rebellion is actually turned to submission.

As noted, although Paul doesn't give specific information on the content of his prayer for unsaved Jewish people, I believe he would pray that God might do for them what he did for Lydia: he opened her heart (which would have otherwise remained "closed") so that she gave heed to what Paul said (Acts 16:14). I will pray that God, who once said, "Let there be light!", will by that same creative power utterly dispel the darkness of unbelief and "shine in their hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). I will pray that he will "take out their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 36:26; 11:19). And with all my praying I will try to "be kind and to teach and correct with gentleness and patience, if perhaps God may grant them repentance and freedom from Satan's snare" (2 Timothy 2:24-26). I trust that you will pray, "Lord, circumcise their heart so that they love you" (Deut. 10:6). Pray: "Father, put your Spirit within them and cause them to walk in your statutes" (Ezek. 36:27).

J. I. Packer described our prayers for lost souls in his book, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*.

"You pray for the conversion of others. In what terms, now, do you intercede for them? Do you limit yourself to asking that God will bring them to a point where they can save themselves, independently of Him? I do not think you do. I think that what you do is to pray in categorical terms that God will, quite simply and decisively, save them: that He will open the eyes of their understanding, soften their hard hearts, renew their natures, and move their wills to receive the Saviour. You ask God to work in them everything necessary for their salvation. You would not dream of making it a point in your prayer that you are not asking God actually to bring them to faith, because you recognize that that is something He cannot do. Nothing of the sort! When you pray for unconverted people, you do so on the assumption that it is in God's power to bring them to faith. You entreat Him to do that very thing, and your confidence in asking rests upon the certainty that He is able to do what you ask. And so indeed He is: this conviction, which animates your intercessions, is God's own truth, written on your heart by the Holy Spirit. In prayer, then (and the Christian is at his sanest and wisest when he prays), you *know* that it is God who saves men; you *know* that what makes men turn to God is God's own gracious work of drawing them to Himself; and the content of your prayers is determined by this knowledge. Thus by your practice

of intercession, no less than by giving thanks for your conversion, you acknowledge and confess the sovereignty of God's grace. And so do all Christian people everywhere" (pp. 15-16).

*Israel's dedication (vv. 2-3)*

Nowhere was the religious zeal of the Jewish people seen with any greater clarity than in the life of the apostle Paul himself. Listen again to how Paul described his life as a Pharisee before he came to saving faith in Jesus. There is no better commentary on the meaning of Romans 10:2-3 than what we read there:

(3) For we . . . put no confidence in the flesh— (4) though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: (5) circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; (6) as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. (7) But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. (8) Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ (9) and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith (Phil. 3:3-9).

Zeal in and of itself is morally neutral. Its ethical character or value is determined by the object on which it is focused. Zeal that is divorced from knowledge of the gospel is no better than apathy. Although our society at large seems to believe that being "sincere" is the highest and most cherished of values, *sincerity is no substitute for the truth*. You can be sincerely wrong. You can be zealously wrong. You can be passionately misguided. Zeal counts for nothing if it does not submit to God's ordained pathway to righteousness. There are countless millions of people who are religiously zealous. It wasn't only the Jewish people in our Lord's day, but untold numbers of professing Christians in numerous denominations and churches who today think that because they are diligent to obey the rules of their churches and do all they can to avoid scandalous sins, they are in good standing with God.

You won't find anyone more zealous than the member of some bizarre religious cult. Their zeal often leads them to make incredible sacrifices, sometimes at the cost of their very lives. If you want to see religious zeal, travel to Mexico City and see the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe. It is the most highly visited Catholic pilgrimage site in the world. And the thousands who regularly crawl on bended and bloody knees to express their veneration are certainly zealous. But to what end? And what of seemingly orthodox and passionately devoted Protestants who think that, by never missing a Sunday service and faithfully giving excessive amounts of money in an offering and serving the poor, they will secure for themselves a place in God's presence. But many of them know little to nothing of Jesus and their faith is in the consistency of their obedience instead of it being in the obedience of Jesus who lived a sinless life and died a death for sinners on the cross.

All the zeal and sincerity and religious devotion and elevated emotions that you can muster will still not transform falsehood into truth, or death into life. John Stott put it well:

"The proper word for zeal without knowledge, commitment without reflection, or enthusiasm without understanding, is fanaticism. And fanaticism is a horrid and dangerous state to be in" (280).

Do you recall the story told by Jesus of the Pharisee and the tax-collector in Luke 18:9-14?

(9) He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: (10) "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. (11) The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. (12) I

fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ (13) But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ (14) I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:9-14).

Of what benefit was the zeal of the Pharisee? Nothing! Why? Because it was misguided and had as its focus human achievement, thinking that God would perhaps grade on the curve and give him a pass into heaven. The Jewish people weren’t untaught. So, of what were they “ignorant” (v. 3)? Their ignorance was of God’s prescribed manner for attaining a righteous standing in his presence. They pursued righteousness as if it were attainable by doing good works, rather than by faith (Rom. 9:32).

*Believe in Christ for Righteousness! (v. 4)*

Neither the Law of Moses nor any other moral rule or ordinance was ever intended to be a means whereby one might attain a righteous standing with God. It was always and only a pointer to Christ, through faith in whom one may be saved. The Jewish pursuit of righteousness through obedience to the law is wrong because Christ is the “end” of the law. But in what sense is Christ the “end” (*telos*) of the law?

Paul may be saying that Christ is the *fulfillment* of the law (Matt. 5:17), in the sense that all OT types, figures, institutions, and ritual pointed to and were fulfilled in him. Or it may be that he means Christ is the *goal* of the law (Gal. 3:23-26) in the sense that the Law existed primarily to lead people to faith in the Messiah. Its purpose was not to save, but to send the sinner to Christ. Or it may be that Christ is the *termination* of the law (Rom. 6:14; 7:4) in the sense that the Mosaic Law as a covenant has ended. God’s people are no longer legally or morally bound to the stipulations of the old covenant.

In fact, all three of these are true. But the one dominant idea is that in our pursuit of a righteousness that will avail in God’s presence, the Law won’t help. Why? Because no one observes or obeys it perfectly. And God demands absolute perfection. And where might that be found? In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. When you trust him wholly and without exception or qualification, his righteousness is imputed or reckoned to you.