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Enjoying God Ministries

Romans #61

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Partnering with God through Prayer to Shape the Course of History

Romans 15:30-33

I'll be the first to admit that prayer is one of the more perplexing mysteries in the Christian life. Why does God repeatedly encourage us to pray? If God wants to accomplish some goal for his own glory, why doesn't he just do it? Why does God tell us that if we hope to experience certain blessings, we must first ask for them? Does prayer really make a difference? Does prayer change things? Can we expect God to do for us apart from prayer what he tells us in Scripture he will do for us only through prayer? These are important and challenging questions, and there is hardly a more helpful and instructive passage in Scripture where answers can be found than right here in Romans 15:30-33.

Paul's Plans, Prayer, and the Providential Will of God

Paul was not the sort of man who made plans in defiance of God's providential leading. He knew that his schedule was always subject to divine revision. No one knew better than Paul himself that his proposed journey to Jerusalem, then to Rome, and eventually to Spain, was dependent on God's sovereign will. But he also knew that God has chosen to accomplish his will for us in response to the prayers that we bring to the throne of grace on behalf of one another. This is why he writes what he does in vv. 30-33.

Earlier in this letter, Paul assured the Roman Christians that he was praying for them (1:9), so now he asks that they pray fervently for him. There are several elements in this text that call for comment.

First, we must take note of the basis for Paul's appeal. He mentions two things: the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of the Holy Spirit. Second, we have to give full weight to what Paul says about *striving* in prayer. What does he mean by this? Strive against whom or what? Third, there are clearly three things that Paul wants the Romans to pray for, three things that he hopes will come to pass as a result of their fervent striving on his behalf. Fourth, there is a concluding prayer by Paul for the Romans, or perhaps we should describe it as a blessing he pronounces over them.

The Basis of Paul's Appeal (v. 30a)

The word translated "appeal" is quite forceful. This is more than a polite request. Paul isn't saying, "Hey, Romans, if you find some free time in the next few days and God brings me to mind, would you consider devoting a few minutes to interceding with him on my behalf?" No. This is an urgent plea, passionate appeal that reflects the emergency Paul faced. He is in great need and he is genuinely desperate for the

prayerful support of these believers in Rome. I would not go so far as to say that Paul was frightened, but he was undoubtedly greatly concerned about what lay ahead and the possibility that his best efforts might be thwarted and his life put in danger.

The apostle would undoubtedly have prayed that God would accomplish through him the three things that he mentions in vv. 31-32. But why does he ask the Romans to join him in praying for this to occur? Does it really make a difference how many people are praying for something to occur? Is there a greater likelihood that God will do what Paul wants if the Romans join him in prayer? Does God count heads and give preferential treatment to those who are joined by others in asking for something? Do numbers matter?

I could as easily ask, why do we invite all of you to join us in prayer on Wednesday at noon in the office building? Does it really matter how many people show up? Why do we invite you to join our intercessory team on Sunday morning to pray for these two services? In fact, why do we even have a “team” of people? Does God say to us, “Sorry folks, but only one of you asked me to do this. If more of you had joined in, I might then have been inclined to say yes.”

Paul’s appeal here is that they strive together “with me” in praying for these things. So, clearly Paul is himself praying that God would answer these requests. But if he is praying, why does he need the Romans to partner with him in prayer? I can think of a couple of answers to this.

First, God encourages multitudes to join together in prayer because it builds community and love and unity among Christians. When we all pray as one, we experience a deeper spiritual connection with each other, and that can only serve to increase our effectiveness in ministry.

Second, God wants us to see how powerful prayer can be. When many, instead of just a handful, are praying in unison for the same thing, and what they are asking God to do is done, we are confronted with the power of prayer and how God has chosen to honor it. I’m not opposed to the suggestion that God’s will is to respond more readily to the prayers of many, when they intercede in unison, than he would if only one or two prayed. I can’t explain why God seems more likely to say Yes to our prayers when many are engaged in unified intercession, but that appears to be the clear implication of this and other NT texts.

Third, and perhaps most important of all, when many pray, rather than just a few, God is more greatly glorified. When many, rather than just a few, give him thanks for answering those prayers, he is exalted. This is clearly what Paul said in 2 Corinthians 1:11, “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.”

In other words, when many pray, many more expressions of gratitude will rise to God than if only a few pray. And those expressions of gratitude draw attention to God and his greatness and goodness. So, a multitude of prayers serves to bring God more glory than only a small handful. And let us never forget that the ultimate purpose of prayer is to magnify the glory and greatness of God. Jesus said in John 14:13, “And whatever you ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.” The aim of prayer is that the Father be glorified through Jesus.

In the final analysis, we don't need to know why God is pleased with the prayers of many. Of course, he is eminently pleased with the prayers of each individual alone. But he is extraordinarily pleased when his people come to him in unity and oneness. Even if we can't figure out why, the NT is clear that this is something for which we must strive.

The so-called "Law of Agreement"

Before I leave this topic, I should probably say something about one statement by Jesus that people have mistakenly cited to demonstrate the importance and power of unified agreement among believers when they pray. I'm talking about Matthew 18:15-20 and the words of Jesus to the effect that "if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." But we must look at this passage in context.

(15) If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. (16) But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. (17) If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. (18) Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. (19) Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. (20) For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them" (Matt. 18:15-20).

Clearly Jesus is addressing the subject of church discipline. That is to say, he is setting before us the procedural steps for what is to be done when a professing Christian sins against another believer. The first step is private rebuke (v. 15). If unsuccessful, this is to be followed by plural rebuke (v. 16; cf. Deut. 19:15). If plural rebuke fails, which is to say that the person remains in denial or is unrepentant regarding their misbehavior, there follows public rebuke and eventually separation (v. 17), a decision that the church may be confident has divine approval (v. 18). So, if Matthew 18:19-20 is taken as a reference to prayer, its application must at least be restricted by the immediately preceding context (vv. 15-18).

However, I'm not persuaded that Jesus is saying anything directly about prayer, much less about the so-called "law of agreement". The "two" people in v. 19 who come to an agreement are, in all likelihood, the same "two" people mentioned in v. 15, namely, the offender and the person against whom the offense has been committed. Furthermore, the verb translated "ask" in v. 19 does not necessarily mean to ask in prayer. It may well refer to the "pursuing of a claim." Similarly, the word translated "anything" need not be taken in the sense of "any legitimate object of petitionary prayer" but in the sense we see in 1 Corinthians 6:1 where Paul has in mind "any judicial matter" that has come before the church for adjudication.

If this should prove correct, Jesus would have been describing a situation in which two people involved in a dispute come to an agreement on the matter that has divided them. Presumably, this will have occurred on the basis of the church's judgment, referred to in v. 18. In such cases our heavenly Father will approve and ratify the decision (literally, "it shall come to be from the Father," or perhaps, "it shall be allowed, granted, sanctioned"). Therefore, the "two or three" mentioned in v. 20 who are "gathered" or who come together in the name of Jesus are probably the two disputants themselves, along with the third party who was called in as an outside witness (v. 19).

Thus, Jesus is most likely not promising that God will answer any prayer that two people agree upon. Rather, Jesus would be saying that when two Christians involved in a personal dispute are able to resolve their differences, God ratifies or sanctions or approves the matter. The verdict of heaven, so to speak, is consonant with that of the church, before whom the matter was adjudicated (see 1 Cor. 5:4).

My reason for mentioning this text in Matthew 18 is that many will adopt the notion of a “law of agreement” and pray with the expectation that if they can only get one or two others to agree with them on some matter that God is obligated to answer their request accordingly. When he doesn’t, confidence in God and his Word is undermined. Of course, he may answer their prayers, but if he does it isn’t because he is honoring a “promise” allegedly stated in Matthew 18.

So, on what basis does Paul appeal to the Romans to join with him in prayer for these issues? He mentions two things. First, he issues his appeal “*by (or through) our Lord Jesus Christ.*” This may simply mean, because of what Jesus has done for us, join me in prayer. On the basis of the fact that his life, death, and resurrection have opened a door for us into heaven and to the throne of grace itself, join me in praying. Or it may be that he means, “for the sake of Jesus Christ” or “for the glory and praise of Jesus.” There are numerous things Jesus has done for us that make prayer urgent and important. He commanded us to pray and not to lose heart (Luke 18:1). He told us to pray in his name, which again is another way of referring to all he has done to reconcile us to the Father (John 14:13; 15:16). He modeled prayer by spending entire nights seeking his Father’s will (Luke 6:12).

But I think something else is in Paul’s mind. I think he appeals to Jesus as “Lord” because he knows that the risen Christ exercises absolute sovereignty over the lives and wills of humans. Jesus can respond to the prayers of his people to accomplish otherwise seemingly impossible things. He is the one to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been given (Matt. 28:18) and thus *Paul knows that Jesus has the right and the power to orchestrate events and turn the will of government leaders and religious zealots to do whatever he pleases. And that is precisely what he asks for in v. 31.*

Second, he also bases his appeal on “*the love of the Spirit.*” This is difficult to interpret. Is he saying, because of the love that the Holy Spirit has for you and me? Or is he referring to the love that the Spirit has created in our hearts for one another? I can’t dismiss the first option, but the second is more likely.

The Struggle of Prayer (v. 30b)

Paul writes something similar in Colossians 4:12 – “Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God” (Col. 4:12; see also Col. 2:1). Ok, but with whom or against what are we striving and struggling in prayer? We aren’t striving with God, as if he can be cajoled or bullied into giving us what we want. We aren’t striving to overcome his reluctance to help. We aren’t striving to persuade him to change his mind and do things our way. Prayer is never a conflict of wills, God’s against ours. The purpose of prayer isn’t to bend God’s will to conform to ours, as if we puny creatures were capable of overpowering the Creator. The obstacles to prayer against which we strive find their origin in us and in our Enemy.

So, at minimum Paul would be referring to demonic forces that don't want us to pray. In Ephesians 6:12 Paul said we "wrestle" (i.e., strive and struggle) against "the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." Demons are determined to sow seeds of doubt in our minds about whether prayer is important or whether it even works. They are constantly trying to undermine your prayer life by suggesting to you that God isn't listening. You're too sinful. You're too insignificant. You've failed too many times and he's given up on you. Who are you, anyway, to think that God will intervene in your life?

But we also strive against *distractions*. Just as you start to pray, the phone rings or your kids need your help, or you remember something urgent that needs your immediate attention or someone shows up at the front door. We also strive against the *laziness* of our souls. Life may have worn you down and you just don't have the energy to pray. Or it may be that you have run out of words. You just don't know what more you can say, so why not quit? Perhaps the greatest threat to persistence in prayer is a track record of *unanswered* prayer. Many times we didn't get what we think we needed and we wonder why it should be any different this time. So we quit.

There is also a sense in which we must strive against the *sin* in our lives that may prove to be a hindrance to prayer. The psalmist declared, "If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened" (Psalm 66:18). We must strive against *unbelief*. Do you remember the story of the demonized young boy whose father cried out to Jesus: "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). The apostle Peter exhorted us to "be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers" (1 Peter 4:7).

Whatever the distraction, whatever the obstacle, Paul's appeal and exhortation here is clear: Fight against everything that causes you to cease praying! Resist the temptation to throw in the towel! Cling to the promises of God! Press into his heart ever more intensely! Remind yourself often of the truth of Hebrews 4:16 – "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Do you want to see one excellent example of what it means to "strive" in prayer? Consider Daniel:

"Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes. . . Now therefore, O our God, listen to the prayer of your servant and to his pleas for mercy, and for your own sake, O Lord, make your face to shine upon your sanctuary, which is desolate. O my God, incline your ear and hear. Open your eyes and see our desolations, and the city that is called by your name. For we do not present our pleas before you because of our righteousness, but because of your great mercy. O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive. O Lord, pay attention and act. Delay not, for your own sake, O my God, because your city and your people are called by your name" (Dan. 9:3, 17-19).

Whatever the obstacles to perseverance in prayer may be, don't ever think that they can be overcome in your own strength. This isn't a matter of human will power or teeth-clenching determination. It is a matter of looking to, crying out for, and trusting in the strength that Jesus supplies. When Paul described his efforts on behalf of the Christians in Colossae, he made sure that everyone knew the source of his strength:

“For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me” (Col. 1:29).

Striving and struggling and pressing through in prayer is not an issue that draws attention to you and your willpower, but to God and “his energy” working powerfully in us. So, when you are tempted to quit, to throw in the towel, to turn your attention to less demanding tasks, thinking that prayer doesn’t work, turn to God and cry out for his help. Ask him to impart his power into your weak, failing, faltering mind, soul, and body. God will not say no to your request. He will faithfully supply you with the strength to push out of the way the barriers and obstacles that would otherwise cause you to quit.

The Three-Fold Request of Paul (vv. 31-32)

There can be doubt that Paul believed in the power of prayer. He clearly believed that his success in life and ministry depended on the prayers he prayed and that others prayed for him. Here are some examples:

“Yes, and I will rejoice, for I know that **through your prayers** and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance” (Phil. 1:18b-19).

“At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that **through your prayers** I will be graciously given to you” (Philemon 22; cf. 2 Cor. 1:8-11).

I find it incredibly instructive here that Paul confesses he does not know whether or not it is God’s will that he finally makes his way to Rome. He knows it is God’s will to spread the gospel. That has clearly been revealed to him. But God’s sovereign and secret will is something Paul does not presume to know in advance. We can all know God’s revealed, moral will. It is found in the pages of Scripture. But his secret, sovereign will is hidden from us unless God should choose to reveal it. We saw this in our study of the preceding paragraph, but it will do us well to look at these texts again:

“But on taking leave of them [Christians in the church at Ephesus] he said, ‘I will return to you if God wills,’ and he set sail from Ephesus” (Acts 18:21).

“For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God’s will I may now at last succeed in coming to you” (Romans 1:9-10).

“But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills” (1 Cor. 4:19a).

“For I do not want to see you now just in passing. I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits” (1 Cor. 16:7).

“And I trust in the Lord that shortly I will come also” (Phil. 2:24).

Do you live each day trusting in the will of God? Do you recall the counsel of James?

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”— yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that” (James 4:13-15).

We should all embrace this perspective on life: everything that happens, that comes our way, be it prosperity or pain or opportunity or obstacles, is subject to God’s providential will. I find that incredibly comforting. So, what then does Paul ask them to pray about?

First, “that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea” (v. 31a). Why did he need them to pray for this, and were their prayers answered? The need arose from Paul’s experience of facing opposition everywhere he traveled. And yes, it was answered, but not in the way he and the Roman Christians might have expected. Let me summarize what happened.

When Paul arrived in Jerusalem, we are told that “the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him” (Acts 21:27). Later, “all the city was stirred up, and the people ran together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple” (Acts 21:30). So how was Paul saved? Luke tells us that “as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion” (Acts 21:31). The Roman soldiers rushed to the scene and rescued him and put him in jail. The prayers of the church in Rome that Paul be “delivered” from unbelievers in Judea was answered when God responded to their request by making certain that “word” came to the tribune of the cohort. **God did that!** We don’t know who delivered the word. What we do know is that by God’s sovereign providential oversight of the situation, in response to the prayers of the Roman church, Paul was protected! The prayers of the Roman Christians 1,400 miles away were answered as God influenced the will of someone to inform the tribune, whose will God influenced to rush to the scene and rescue Paul!

That was only the first answer to their prayers. While he was in jail “the Jews [more than 40] made a plot and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul” (Acts 23:12). But “somehow” (!) Paul’s nephew heard of the plot and informed the Roman tribune who immediately dispatched 200 soldiers with 70 horsemen and 200 spearmen to escort Paul to Caesarea. All this, mind you, was God’s doing in response to the faithful, fervent prayers of the Roman Christians!

Second, he asks them to pray that his “service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints” (v. 31b). Paul is aware that some Jewish Christians in Jerusalem still didn’t fully trust him. They are somewhat suspicious of the gospel he preached and mistakenly assumed he was trying to undermine Jewish traditions. Perhaps they would look on the financial gift as a bribe, an attempt by Paul to win their favor and a good standing. If they refused to receive the gift or interpreted it as an attempt by Paul to purchase their affirmation, it would only widen the rift between Gentile and Jewish believers. Remember: the gift to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem came from Gentile believers in Corinth and Philippi.

Was this prayer of Paul’s and the Roman Christians answered? It appears so. For one thing, we don’t see or read anything in Scripture to suggest the monetary gift was rejected. The only biblical statement is in Acts 24:17 where Paul says, “Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings.” If this had been turned down, one would think something would be said to that effect. So, once again, God answers the prayers of Christians in Rome regarding events in Jerusalem!

We might be inclined to conclude that prayer changes people's wills. But the more accurate way of saying it is that God changes people's wills in answer to our prayers that he do so. In this case, the willing of a multitude of angry Jewish enemies of Paul is in the power of God to change. And the willing of suspicious Jewish Christians to disapprove of his monetary gift is in the power of God to change. If Paul himself didn't believe that God had the authority and power and disposition to change human choices, he wouldn't have asked the Romans to join him in praying for these things.

Third, and finally, Paul wants them to pray with him "so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company" (v. 32). Paul isn't talking about the sort of refreshment that comes from a week at the beach or in the mountains! He has in mind the joy and mutual encouragement and love that come from Christian fellowship. He described this earlier in Romans 1:11-12, "For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you – that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine" (Rom. 1:11-12).

Clearly, it is God's design and desire that you experience spiritual refreshment and encouragement that come from close relationship and interaction with other believers. If you ever needed a reason to join a community group or a d-group, this is it. You cannot grow up spiritually all on your own. You need the blessings and benefits and encouragement and prayers and love and support that come from mutual fellowship and joint prayers one for another.

Conclusion

Can you now see the indescribably powerful and critically important influence that you can exert in the church and in the world through your faithful and fervent prayers? It is not going too far to say that God has invited us to join him in shaping history by means of our intercessory prayers. In 1 Timothy 2:1-2 Paul exhorts us to pray "for kings and all who are in high positions." That means state representatives and judges and governors and Senators and the President and yes, even the Supreme Court.

We are to pray for God to exert a redemptive and Christ-exalting influence on the leaders of our universities, be they professors or provosts or presidents or the Board of Regents. We are to pray for business leaders and military officers. We should be regularly praying that God would move on the wills of administrators and teachers in our elementary schools, that they resist the pressure to promote secular agendas that would warp the minds and hearts of our kids.

And above all else, we are to intercede passionately for our missionaries. Don't let the distance between here and New York City hinder your prayers for the Edwards. Don't let the even greater distance between here and Japan or here and Turkey or here and Slovenia or here and the Czech Republic hinder your prayer. God is sovereign over every square inch of this world and over every human heart and decision.

So, I'll close the way Paul did in Romans 15:33 – "May the God of peace be with you all. Amen."