

Watch & Pray (How to Pray)

Ephesians 6:18-20

February 12, 2017

Last summer, over the 4th of July week, I enjoyed a few days of vacation and traveled to the holy land. No, I don't mean Israel – I mean the great state of WI! I spent 2 days fishing with some old college buddies (one of whom caught a 5# bass!). I spent the other 2 days visiting my relatives at a campground in Crandon, WI. I took a detour partway through my travels to a town called Marathon, WI. There, in the St. Mary Catholic Cemetery, is where we buried my biological father back in 2015. It's a beautiful cemetery on the top of a rolling hill out in the middle of pretty much nowhere. Right down the road stands St. Mary's Catholic Church. It's a magnificent building. After visiting my dad's grave and placing some flowers, I decided to stop by the church that he grew up in. There was no one there but to my surprise the door was unlocked. So, I went in. It was ornate with an amazing domed and vaulted ceiling, stained glass windows, and an incredibly artistic set of statues and altar pieces.

Now, mind you, I was not raised Catholic. But, as a protestant, there was one thing that most impressed me about this church. It is one of the things I actually envy about the Catholic Church. Under every set of pews, there is a kneeling bench. What could be more appropriate than kneeling in worship before our God? Neither the Catholics nor the Protestants are doing everything right; but, there are certainly some things we could learn from each other. This experience got me to thinking about some postures for Prayer. I was surprised to find only a few references in the NT referring to kneeling in prayer. So, that caused me to do a little more research on prayer postures. The Bible mentions at least 4 different postures for prayer:¹

1. **Sitting** is mentioned in 1 Chron. 17:16, "Then King David went in and sat before the LORD, and he said: 'Who am I, LORD God, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far?'" I could only find 2 other references in the OT to sitting in prayer.²

2. **Standing** in prayer is actually mentioned quite often in the Bible. And it's kind of understood as the assumed common posture. Notice, for example, Mark 11:25, which says "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."³

3. **Lying down** is another prayer posture. And, this one is probably much less familiar to Evangelical Christians. (pic) One instance recorded in the Bible is when Moses came down from the mountain with the 10 commandments and found the Israelites worshipping the Golden Calf. Dt. 9:25 tells us, "I [Moses] lay prostrate before the LORD those forty days and forty nights because the LORD had said he would destroy you." Another instance is Matthew 26:39 where Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.'"

4. **Kneeling** is mentioned in Ephesians 3:14 where Paul says, "For this reason I kneel before the Father."⁴ This is probably one of the most familiar prayer postures to us. There is not one particular posture for prayer that is necessarily better or worse than others. It's just important that whatever posture we chose for our prayer times, we make sure that it conveys an appropriate level of REVERENCE for God.

In addition to postures for prayer, another key thing to understand is how we approach God in Prayer. Read the following skit and consider what it has to teach us about how we should approach God's presence in prayer, and how we should NOT. In this skit, prayer is illustrated by the idea of people coming to talk to the President in his oval office...

¹ See *NIV2011 Study Bible* text note for 1 Chronicles 17:16 on p. 655.

² See 2 Samuel 7:18 and 1 Kings 19:4

³ See also Matthew. 6:5 and Luke 18:11-13

⁴ Ephesians 3:14 is not the first time that Paul prayed for the Ephesians. Back in Ephesians 1:15-16, he has already prayed for them, "... ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers."

Narrator: The President sat at his desk in the Oval Office, waiting. He waited, even though there was a stack of letters to sign, a cable to read, a press conference to prepare for, a briefing with the cabinet to attend, a tea for an ambassador in the Rose Garden... Yes, there was a lot to do. But first some people were coming – some very important people. At least he thought they were very important. That was why he kept inviting them to come to the Oval Office and talk with him. He longed to hear what was in their hearts and minds, to talk about how they felt, what they needed, how they could help him accomplish his goals...

Secretary: (over the intercom) Mr. President. They're here, sir.

President: Ah. Send the first one in, please. (He leaned forward on the edge of his chair, waiting.) (The door opens, and a housewife ushers herself in. Without acknowledging the President's smile or outstretched hand, she plops down in a chair. Then she shuts her eyes tight.)

Housewife: (in a nasal singsong voice) Thank you for the world so sweet, thank you for the food we eat, thank you for the birds that sing, thank you, sir for everything. Goodbye. (She opens her eyes, gets up, and walk out.) (the President sighs)

President: (pushes the intercom button) Next, please. (The door opens and in comes a distinguished man wearing a tuxedo. He ignores the President's outstretched hand.)

Distinguished Man: (in a loud monotone) O thou chief executive who art in the White House. (Clasping his hands and looking at the ceiling.) O thou in whom so much doth constitutionally dwell, upon whose desk hath been placed a most effective blotter; incline thine ear towards thy most humble citizen. And grant that thy many entities may be manifoldly endowed upon the fruitful plain...(Wincing, the President closes his eyes and rubs his temples.) And may thy thou dost harkeneth whatly didst shalt evermore in twain asunder.

President: Excuse me, but what...? Distinguished Man: (seeming not to hear) Goodbye. (walks out) (The President sighs again)

President: (into the intercom) Next, please. (At first the President could see no one at the door, but then he saw a woman crawling through the doorway on their hands and knees.)

Woman on hands and knees: Oh, Mr. g-great and awful P-president (she blubbers, not looking up from the floor) I am but a disgusting piece of filth in your presence. No, I am less than that! How dare I enter here? How dare I think that you would do anything but grind me into the floor?

President: Please, get up. (offering his hand) You don't have to do that. I want to talk with you.

Woman: (whining) I deserve only to be squashed under the weight of your mighty desk. I could never have gotten an invitation to talk with you. It must have been a mistake. How can you ever forgive me for breaking gin like this? Oh, I'm so sorry, so sorry, so sorry...(crawls out on her hands and knees, groaning). (The President shakes his head, then slowly pushes the intercom button.)

President: (tired) Next. (A young punker enters, jammin' to music on her iPod. She ignores the President's hand.) Punker: Hey, Prez. What's happening? (looks around) Nice place you've got here. I'm like, so glad we could have this little chat, you know? You're not bad for an old dude, I guess. You don't bother me, I won't bother you, okay? Well, I've gotta go. Hang in there. (she walks out) (The President drums his fingers on his desk.)

President: (wearily) Next, please. Elderly Man: (He marches in staring at a piece of paper in his hand, ignoring the President, keeping his eyes on the list.) Mr. President, I want there to be a parking space waiting for me when I go downtown this afternoon. Not a parallel parking space, either – one I can drive right into. Not one with a parking meter. You can see to it that none of those meter maids gives me a ticket. Now, this is important!

President: (The President clears his throat politely.) Speaking of important, how do you feel about my program to feed the hungry? Would you like to have a part in...

Elderly Man: (He interrupts) And another thing! I lost my best golf club. A putter. Can't remember where I put it. Now, you find it for me, will you? Got to have that club before Saturday. I know you can do it. Goodbye. (He gets up and leaves.)

President: (The Presidents slumps in his chair.) Next. (There is a pause, and then a young woman enters slowly. She looks like a sleepwalker – eyes nearly shut, jaw slack, her feet dragging. She yawns and slides into a chair.)

Sleepy Woman: Dear... Mr..... President...(her head is drooping)...I know I should talk to you when I'm more...awake...but I've got so many things to do...So...sleepy...There was something I was going to say...What...is...? I was going to say...uh...(She starts to snore.)

President: (He buzzes his secretary.) Mrs. Stafford? Secretary: Yes, Mr. President?

President: Can I have your assistance please? Secretary: I'll be right there, Sir. (The Secretary steps in the room.) President: Could you help this young lady out? (sighing again)

Secretary: Certainly, Mr. President. (She helps the dozing girl to her feet.)

President: (He gazes sadly out the window.) How many do we have left?

Secretary: I'm sorry, sir. But as usual, most of the people you sent invitations to said they were too busy to talk. They had to binge on Netflix, go shopping, play basketball...

President: (dejected) Isn't there anyone out there? Secretary: There is one, sir. But you wouldn't want to talk with him. President: Why not? Secretary: Because he's just a child, Mr. President.

President: (he shrugs) May as well show him in. (Moments later a little boy enters shyly. He looks around the room, his eyes wide.) Child: Are...are you really the President?

President: (He smiles) I really am (offering his hand) (They shake hands. Then the boy sits down, folds his hands in his lap, and waits. The President watches, amazed at the boy's politeness.)

President: (finally) Isn't there...something you want to tell me? Something you have to recite, or ask for, or say? Child: (He looks down for a moment, thinking.) Yes, I guess there is.

President: Well, what is it? Child: Thank you for inviting me. That's all. (The President smiles.)

Narrator: When the President heard that, he couldn't seem to say anything for a while. All he could do was smile. But then they talked and talked and talked for the longest, most wonderful time.

Hebrews 4:16 says, "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with CONFIDENCE, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."⁵ And so, we approach God reverently but also with confidence that He really does want to talk with us. The Apostle Paul was a man of prayer. And at the end of his letter to the Ephesians, he calls every Christ-follower to prayer. In Ephesians 6:18 Paul charges us: "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people." So, this is summarized as praying On ALL occasions, With ALL kinds of prayers/requests, With alertness and ALL perseverance⁶, and For ALL the Lord's people. "Be alert and always keep on praying" is a simple but pertinent reminder: "Watch and pray." It's a reminder to persevere and "not fall into spiritual sleep or complacency."⁷ In other words, stay on your toes so that you don't forget to pray!⁸

We also need to pray with an attitude of humble dependence. In Ephesians 6:19, Paul says: "Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel." When Paul says "Pray also for me" it reveals his humble attitude of dependence. Even though he was the great, well-know, "mighty" Apostle Paul, it didn't stop him from asking for prayer support. Paul's example teaches us to do 2 things:

- 1) Wisely embrace our full dependence upon the Lord. Are we truly, fully dependent on God as Christ-followers? Or, are we just doing the best that we can on our own? If you've ever struggled living out your faith and heard yourself saying, "Ah! I just can't do it!" Well, you're right, YOU can't. And, I can't! The key to following Christ is having Christ in us and letting the Holy Spirit empower us for daily Christian living.
- 2) Humbly ask our Bros/Sis in Christ for prayer support.⁹ Are we humble enough to ask our Bros/Sis for prayer? Or, are we too concerned with what they might think? Has our personal pride and independence left us isolated from Christian Fellowship and struggling on our own? The Christian life is NOT meant to be a solo sport. God has designed His Church to be a Grace COMMUNITY!

Paul goes on to ask them to Pray for Gospel Declarations. Ephesians 6:19-20 says, "Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery

⁵ Ephesians 3:12, "In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence."

⁶ Luke commends the prayers of the persistent widow in 18:1-8.

⁷ Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Eerdmans, MI, p. 485.

⁸ "Believers are to pray continually because their struggle with the powers of darkness is never ending." (O'Brien, p. 484.)

⁹ See John R. W. Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, IVP, IL, 1979, p. 284.

of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.”¹⁰ Paul needs help knowing what words to say. Paul does not pretend that he’s got this whole thing figured out. Here is a man who has studied the Scriptures more than most, yet he asks them to pray for the very words that need to come from his mouth. He says, “whenever I speak,” meaning literally whenever I “open my mouth.”

Paul also knew that he needed Fearless confidence to say it! Even after all his many years of ministry success and writing various books of the NT, he asks his brothers/sisters in Christ to pray for his courage. It’s almost as if he’s reminding himself when he says: “As I should.”¹¹ It’s interesting to me that Paul does not mention that “ALL of us should declare the gospel fearlessly!” But, perhaps this is implicit in v. 18 above, where we were urged to pray for ALL the Lord’s people. When we pray for one another, clarity and courage are 2 key essentials to pray for.¹² So when you pray for me and when I pray for you, let’s pray for clarity and courage for one another. We need divine assistance in effectively presenting the gospel.^{13 14} In fact, we need divine assistance for lots of things. So, let’s take a look at 5 opportunities for increasing our prayer efforts:

1. **Monthly Prayer Meetings** are generally held in the afternoon on the first Sunday of every month. Watch your bulletin for details.
2. **Prayer for Weekly Ministries.** For anyone who is interested, we pray Sunday mornings at 8:00 a.m. and 10:30 a.m. in Pastor Jerry’s office for 5 minutes. Several people also pray Wednesday nights at 6:00 p.m. in the Fireside room for 5-10 minutes.
3. **Books:** Prayer that Works by Jill Briscoe, Prayer by Ole Hallesby, Operation World: The Definitive Prayer Guide to Every Nation by Jason Mandryk, and Prayer by Philip Yancey
4. **Church Prayer Chain:** In order to join our Church Prayer Chain, simply email pray@efcbemidji.org and type “Subscribe” in the subject line. You will then begin receiving email requests for prayer from people who attend our church. In order to submit a prayer request, simply email pray@efcbemidji.org and write your request. Then, it will be forwarded to over 50 email addresses of people from our church who will begin lifting up your need before the Lord in prayer. By the way, we are careful with the privacy settings on the church’s email system in order to make sure that your email address is never listed in the group email that goes out.
5. Pastor Fred’s **Sermon Series on Prayer.** Written transcripts are available at <http://www.efcbemidji.org> Click on the “MEDIA” tab and select “Sermon Transcripts” and you can find July 18, 2010 “Prayers of Pain and Praise,” July 25, 2010 “Jesus’ Model Prayer,” August 1, 2010 “Ask in My Name,” August 22, 2010 “Humbling but Healthy,” August 29, 2010 “How to Pray for Others.”

James 5 tells us that “the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.” May we be a church filled with people who are pursuing righteousness and who are people of pray. And may we experience power and effectiveness as God is truly at work among us! Amen.

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on February 12, 2017 by Pastor Jerry Johnson.

¹⁰ v. 20 talks about Paul being, “an ambassador in chains.” The “imprisonment of an ambassador would have been regarded as a serious insult both to the Sender and to the ambassador.” (O’Brien p. 489, quoting Anthony Bash, *Ambassadors for Christ: An Exploration of Ambassadorial Language in the New Testament*, J.C.B. Mohr, 1997, p. 132.) “Instead of expressing feelings of self-pity or resentment, or of requesting prayer for his release from prison, he revels in his mission.” (O’Brien, p. 489.) “What concerns Paul most, however, is not that his wrist may be unchained, but that his mouth may be opened in testimony...” (John R. W. Stott, *God’s New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, IVP, IL, 1979, p. 287.)

¹¹ Paul, on the road to Damascus, encountered the Risen Christ. In Acts 26:16-18, Jesus says to Paul, “Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. 17 I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them 18 to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.”

¹² See Stott, p. 286.

¹³ O’Brien, p. 487.

¹⁴ Our ultimate spiritual struggle, against the devil, is in winning the lost to salvation. The NIV paragraph break between vv. 17 & 18 can actually be a little misleading, because the Apostle Paul has not really left the topic of the Armor of God. (In fact, “Prayer is given greater prominence within the context of the battle with the powers of darkness than any of the weapons listed vv. 14-17.” (Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Eerdmans, MI, 1999, p. 483.) Now, that’s not to say that Prayer is just one more weapon in the arsenal to add to the 6 previously listed. Rather, Prayer is the all-encompassing invitation to depend upon God to work in and through the other armor. So, when we read of Paul requesting the words to say and the courage to say them, this connects with the Sword of the Spirit, God’s Word, and with feet fitted and ready to share the gospel. Note also that Prayer is not associated with a particular piece of the physical armor. And yet, it is clearly a vital thing in our spiritual mission to make known the gospel.