

The Praying Body

Trinity CRC, November 27, 2022 AM
Prayer Summit

Colossians 3:12-17 (v.16)

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Our Bible reading is from Colossians 3. The chapter begins with the Apostle Paul reminding the church that we've been renewed through Christ. He came to earth in order to take our sin to the grave and bury it with him. Then he resurrects us with him to new life. Sinful creatures become new creatures in Christ and now we must learn how to live into that new identity with the new power of Christ in us.

So Paul starts out the chapter saying, "Since you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God." He then tells the church *therefore* to "Put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature." He lists things like sexual immorality, impurity, lust, greed, anger, rage, slander, lying and filthy language.

Then we come to our reading where he says, now that I've told you what to stay away from, what sort of things you might be doing that quench the work of the Spirit in you, now here's what you should do on the positive side. Our reading starts at v.12:

¹² Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

¹³ Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

¹⁵ Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Beloved family of God,

Last Sunday I was not up here to preach. I came up only to give a few announcements and lead the congregational prayer. But I told Patsy afterwards that in those minutes, I had an immense sense of love for and from this church. In the brief interaction where I joked that I was coming up to give another sermon, John—over there—shouted, "As long as it's short". And then I saw smiles and heard laughter throughout this place.

We enjoy each other because we are family. We value each other because we are family. Sometimes we even hurt each other because we are family. More often I hope we bless each other as family in Christ. We love each other in the power and in the name of Jesus, the name that unites us. His love fills us. Paul has the same sort of experience with the church in Colossae when he says in v.12, "*As God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved....*" He feels a bond of love with them

through Christ making them the family of God.

The love of Christ is what unites us as a church. This uniting love calls us to pray together. You don't see the word *pray* in our Bible reading but it's hidden in v.16 where we read,

¹⁶ Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

The psalms, hymns and even spiritual songs are mostly a reference to the psalter—the book of Psalms—which is the prayer book of the people of God that has been put into song form by the church throughout the ages.

What I find beautiful and important about this *for our purposes today* is that the psalms in our Bible share all the various emotions of God's people. No matter what you are going through, you can find a psalm that connects with your joy or struggle. And the fact is that there are more psalms about struggle or lament than about praise and thanksgiving.

The psalms are almost all testimonies of sorts. In those words, people share their feelings about their pain and joy and thanksgiving with the community of faith. God has given us the psalms in his book to encourage us in our faith, to help us see that his people in the past brought their life to God in prayer. When they were happy, they were thanking God. When they were hurting, they brought their pain and laments to God. When they are filled with awe, they gave voice to that in psalms of praise. And those psalms were often sung together.

Prayer is our response to God. Prayer is acknowledging, like the psalms do, that God is real, that we love him, that we trust him, that we have questions for him, even frustrations with him. We are not weird or unusual when we pray in various ways, whether expressing adoration or pain or lament or questions. It's what you do with those you love and trust. You are honest about what's going on and how you feel.

Paul in Colossians 3, just like the Psalms, invites us to be real with each other. He says to the church together as a whole and only secondarily as individuals,

¹⁶ Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

He's directing us to soak in the gospel, the love of Christ for us, so that we can instruct and direct each other wisely. And wisdom comes from the psalms and expressing our faith honestly like the psalms do. You see, in prayer we are teaching each other how to talk to God. In prayer we are even admonishing, directing or calling one another to a closer walk with God.

To encourage one another in our prayer life, it helps not only to pray together but also to tell one another about how God has heard and answered our prayers. The psalms do that for us too. Read them sometime and you can't miss that.

None of us has a perfect walk with God or a perfect prayer life. So sometimes we do well to listen to the stories of other Christians and how they received answers to prayer from God. That happens when we read the psalms. And it can happen when we tell one another how prayer encouraged us.

Elizabeth has been part of church community for a few years. She recently told me:

When I was working at an elementary school I was talking to this friend in the front office. She confided in me that her youngest son was sick with a high fever and the medicine the doctors prescribed wasn't helping. I asked her if I could pray with her and she said "yes, please". So I gave her a hug and holding her hand I prayed for healing for her son.

The next day as I was walking down the hallway, she came up to me and gave me a big hug.... She told me that one hour after I had prayed for her son, the fever had left him and he was now feeling much better. I was so happy for her and the verse from the Bible: "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." James 5:16 became so clear to me. This is perhaps the only time that I know for certain that my prayers made a difference.

I love that story and love that Elizabeth followed the prompting of the Spirit in that situation and offered to pray with the lady about her son. And the boy was healed. Now Elizabeth has a story to tell. I also like that she confides that she hasn't had many experiences like that.

I'd venture to say that this is probably true for most of us. Which is why it's important that we learn to share our stories together as the body of Christ. They encourage us. They help us see and hear again that God does answer our prayers. We know that's true because the Bible says so but we don't always feel it because sometimes God's answers are not "yes" to our request. They are "no" or "not yet" or even, "Later you'll see that my plan is better."

So sharing stories of our prayer experiences can help us encourage each other as fellow members of the body of Christ to pray and not doubt that God does hear and will answer, regardless of what the answer will be.

Jason Meyer, writing for the Desiring God ministry says, Martin Lloyd-Jones once said that the quickest way to quench the Spirit is to not obey an impulse to pray. Then he writes,

Once I was driving home very early one morning after working the night shift. It was around 4:30, and I was falling asleep at the wheel. I tried everything to stay awake. I turned up the radio I even slapped myself. The next thing I knew, I woke up in my driveway. I was more than a little shaken. I didn't know how I got there.

I walked inside the house now eerily wide awake, and as I walked into our bedroom I noticed the strangest thing: my wife was wide awake too. She would normally be asleep, but instead, she was sitting up in bed waiting for me.

She said, "Hi, honey, how was your drive?"

I said, "It's funny you should ask. I really struggled to stay awake on the drive home. In fact, I don't know how I got here."

She said, “Yeah I figured. . . .” . . . “I woke up at about 4:30 very suddenly, and felt this intense prompting to pray. I figured you must be struggling on the road since that is the time you normally come home. So, I prayed for you.”

Jason’s reflection ends: I think I am still alive, and typing these words, because my wife did not quench the Spirit in that moment. She obeyed the Spirit’s prompting to pray.

Now my skeptical side could easily think that’s a little hocky. But the truth is that it is the Spirit’s work to call us to prayer at times and it’s ours to obey as covenant partners of God. Just as God works and protects us far more than we realize, it is also true that we never can fully know what a difference our prayers have made. Sometimes there are these clear examples of how our praying and God’s saving are most definitely linked in time. But other times we pray for certain things or certain people and we don’t really know how that prayer is answered.

That’s the mystery of prayer. We do it in grateful obedience to God and then we trust him. We also listen for and try to obey the Holy Spirit’s prompting us to pray and what to pray for. We do it. Then leave it to God. We pray and then we trust God to answer it perfectly with his perfect wisdom and plan for us, for our loved ones, for the church and the world.

This is the gift and assurance that comes to us through Jesus. Our prayers are only effective because he has opened the gates of heaven for us and turned God’s ear to us. And he sent the Holy Spirit to us to encourage us to pray in faith knowing that God hears and always answers.

When we pray as a church, we are confessing that we believe in the power of Jesus to save us from anything and everything. Then we leave it to him to answer as he sees fit. Praying as a body of believers encourages us all in our faith as we together learn that God does hear and answer us, which is why we need to tell our stories. These stories give the glory to God as they affirm our faith and help us grow closer to one another and to God.

Let’s pray...