

Title: The Power of Asking

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Opening question: What do have in your house that is only enjoyed on special occasions?

Possible answers: Grandma's fine china, a bottle of wine from your wedding, a favorite article of clothing, your favorite imported candy.

Why do we do this? Maybe...

To protect or preserve a precious thing; or

Because the thing like (wine or treat) is in limited supply; or

To signify the importance of the occasion – I wear only wear the shirt you gave me when we go out on a date.

How is this like – or unlike - your relationship with God? Is it reserved for special occasions like Sundays and holidays?

Might this be the way you treat prayer? Do you feel it should only be used for big and important things? Do your prayers live safely behind a sign that reads, "In Case of Emergency Break Glass"?

I have two pairs of running shoes – my "old" pair and my "new" pair. I buy a "new" pair when the old pair is totally broken down. The new pair is the one I only wear when I go to the gym. Heck, I don't even *run* in my running shoes because that would require wearing them outside! My rationale has been that if I only wear my new pair three times a week for a couple hours at a time, then they will last a long time. And they are expensive. So I wear my old pair the rest of the time – for trail walks, yard work, running errands. Even when I go on a trip I take my old pair with me and leave my new pair safely at home.

But then my right foot started to hurt. A lot! And then the gym closed and I started exercising at home. Saving my new pair for the gym started to feel silly. Who knows when I'll get to use them again? So in an effort to alleviate my foot pain I started wearing my new pair more often. You can guess what happened. My foot doesn't hurt as much. Why? *Because it's now getting the support it needed all along.* I had been saving my shoes at the cost of my feet.

Paul wants us to understand that prayer is indeed "special," it is not meant for special occasions.

Let's hear how Paul ends his letter to the house churches in Ephesus:

Eph 6:17-24

17 Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. 18 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 saints.

19 Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, 20 for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

21 Tychicus, the dear brother and faithful servant in the Lord, will tell you everything, so that you also may know how I am and what I am doing. 22 I am sending him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage you.

23 Peace to the brothers, and love with faith from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 24 Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love.

Recall that Paul begins this section by urging the believers to be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power from now on. (Eph 6:10)

How do we remain strong? We wear the armor God has placed upon us. I included verse 17 so that we can notice how Paul includes prayer not as a particular piece of the armor exactly, but nevertheless as critical component to our standing firm in the midst of evil days. It is God's armor and God's power, available to us because now we are in Christ.

An essential way that we access God's power is through prayer. Christians tend to get passionate when they talk about the Power of Prayer. But I think a better way to think of is the Power TO Pray.

To pray is to access the greatest power in the universe: The Power of Asking.

Jesus speaks at length about the Power of Asking in his core teachings on prayer (See the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7). The essence of that teaching is this: You are to God as a beloved child is to a parent. It is the parent's joy and deepest desire to provide good things for her child, so by all means: Ask! God wants to hear your asking, has been anticipating your requests, will not give you bad things and will not withhold from you any good thing that you need.

The Power of Asking is well known to us, even if we do not pray. To ask for something is to initiate intimacy. It creates an opportunity for hospitality and generosity. Some of Jesus' most important conversations started with him asking someone for something, as he does in John 4 by asking the Samaritan woman at the well for a drink of water. Asking is the most basic form of vulnerability. When we ask for something, we acknowledge that we cannot do it all on our own. It reminds us that we were never meant to live that way.

Paul instructs believers to engage the Power of Asking in the three ways.

We are to:

- Ask "In the Spirit"
- Ask All the Time
- Ask On Behalf of Others.

We engage the Power of Asking by praying "in the Spirit"

If we were all together in one room right now I would ask you to reflect on a couple questions with me:

- What do you imagine it looks like to “pray in the Spirit”?
- What kind of person can do it?
- What kind of person would want to?

What do you think of when I say, “Pray in the Spirit”? Maybe you think of deep meditation, alone in silence and solitude, in hopes of having a transcendental encounter with the divine. Or maybe you picture a gathering of energetic prayer warriors singing and praying aloud, all at once, at the top of their voices in urgent and ecstatic intercession. It all depends on the faith traditions you were exposed to growing up. In light of that, we might well wonder what Paul is talking about. Is praying in the Spirit some special type of prayer? If so, how does it differ from “regular” prayer? Does it require advanced training or knowledge? Is it only possible for certain people who have attained higher levels of spiritual sensitivity or holiness?

Paul had to deal with these kinds of questions all the time. The churches in Corinth were infamous for their comparisons and competitions about who among them were the most spiritually gifted and talented. Paul had no use for such debates. Whatever he may be referring to here, it is pretty clear that Paul is not talking about some kind of advanced form of prayer that is only available to a select few. If he were, he would not be commending it to everyone, and certainly wouldn’t have been urging them to do it “on all occasions.”

To pray in the Spirit is to draw upon the deep relational capital we have with God through Jesus Christ. Such prayer begins from a place of security in which we rest in the knowledge that God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, destined us for adoption as beloved children, and that this is a freely given gift. God has done out of loving will and sheer desire. (Eph 1:4-6). Praying in the Spirit is asking, but it is asking from a place of intimate security and certainty. It’s not like other forms of asking.

Illustration: For a big part of my life, I imagined that Jesus was like a boss to whom I would report at the beginning of the day and then report to him again only when things weren’t going well. But Paul’s emphasis on constant prayer paints a different picture. In fact, my image of “working for God” is the exact of opposite of what Paul describes.

When we hear Paul urging us to pray in the Spirit, we can recall things that Jesus said:

I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. 20 For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. (John 5:19-20)

And then later to his disciples he said:

I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to

you. 16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. (John 15:15-17)

For Paul, praying in the Spirit is the natural and inevitable outcome of living as beloved daughters and sons. Remember: The whole first half of this letter is about our identity in Christ. When we are anchored in our identity in Christ, we tend to ask for different things. Our praying becomes more confident, but also more centered the real needs and raw longings that we feel in ourselves and hear expressed by others. Our praying moves deeper into the true nature of things, which means it comes nearer to grief and suffering. We move beyond “guessing” prayers, or “I’ll try prayer after I’ve tried everything else” prayers, or “I wish God would make this go away” prayers.

Instead we are to see ourselves as fully included co-creators and collaborators with God, just as Jesus saw himself.

Let’s pause on that. How does it feel to see yourself as a collaborator with God in the world? Is that exciting to you? Do you feel a part of you resisting it saying, “That can’t be true”?

Praying in the Spirit is for everyone. At times it may be quiet and contemplative in your prayer closet. Other times it will be fervent and exuberant in an intercessory prayer meeting. When it comes to praying in the Spirit, we can be less concerned with appearances and more interested in pursuing a deep, continuous, vulnerable collaboration with God.

As we ask by praying in the Spirit, we also

We engage the Power of Asking by Praying All The Time

Ephesians 6:18 says:

... Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. – Eph 6:18

Here is Paul’s clear and unequivocal call to NOT wait for a special need or a special occasion to engage the Power of Asking. The fact that he says “prayers and request” is a good reminder that *Thank You, I Love You, You are Amazing!*, and *Why, Lord?* Are also good and important prayers that we can offering up continuously through our day. We are in Christ, wearing God’s Armor, proclaiming the gospel in word and deed, and standing in the midst of evil days. We need prayer-saturated lives, as do the people for whom we are praying.

We need the ability to see the world as God sees it, continuously. So Paul isn’t urging us to stop in our tracks, bow our heads, and start praying in the middle of grocery aisle. We are to pray-as-we-go. I can imagine Paul on his missionary tours offering up brief, quick, and urgent prayer throughout the day for each customer who came to his booth. I see him at his workbench, prayerfully meditating on scripture in preparation for the talk he would give that evening at the fellowship gathering. Here, writing this letter from a prison cell, he spends his days firing off quick arrow-prayers for friends and colleagues whenever that come to mind. As he says at the very beginning of the letter:

... because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers... (Eph 1:15-16)

If we want to understand how it could be possible to “pray without ceasing” as Paul says here and elsewhere (1 Thess 5:17), we can liken it to something else we do all the time: Breathing. Prayers bring the life of God into us . Breathe IN. The gospel is the word of life we speak into the world. BREATHE out. We are constantly doing both.

Indeed Paul was continuously been doing both, and he knows he can't do it in his own strength. That is why he takes the bold step of asking the Ephesian believers to pray for all the saints, and specifically for him.

We engage the Power of Asking by Praying on Behalf of Others

With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel... Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should. Eph 6:18b-20

I don't know about you, but two of the biggest challenges I have faced during Shelter in Place have been feelings of powerlessness and a tendency toward self-absorption. Praying on Behalf of Others helps with both.

Paul knew what it was like to feel isolated and powerless, and to be sorely tempted to fall into despair and self pity. As an emissary for Christ's kingdom he was the worst possible situation. He was an ambassador in chains. Yet he continued pastoring from a jail cell and accessing the Power of Asking for those he loved. Not only that, but he modeled vulnerability but asking for prayer for himself. He mentions fear twice. He knows he cannot do this in his own strength.

Being socially connected yet geographically isolated means I know a lot about the hurt others are going through, but I can't go to them to do something about it. On Facebook I heard that a former church member now living in Florida was found to have tumors on his brain. This week I bumped into his parents at Costco. At that moment I was grateful to be able tell them I'd seen their post and was praying for their son. I asked how they were doing, and their anxiety was of course palpable. But it wasn't just the diagnosis. *Their son is sick on the other side of the country, and they can't go to him.* What an awful feeling of powerlessness. And yet, what a gift God has given us – the power to direct love and power and healing to the other side of the world!

There is nothing so liberating as taking our attention off of ourselves and directing our prayers, our intentions, and our concern toward someone else. Created in the image of the Trinity, pouring ourselves out for the sake of others is what we were made to do. That's why Next week's Drive-Thru Church experience is important. It is intended to help us keep serving our community and seeing each other even when social distancing requirements keep us from have our Service Worship Sunday as we normally do. Praying for someone else doesn't change my circumstances, but it does draw me back

into awareness that Christ is drawing all things into himself, and that God's loving purposes can't be thwarted.

Conclusion

We are to:

- Ask "In the Spirit"
- Ask All the Time
- Ask On Behalf of Others.

In so doing, we embrace the good works that God prepared in advance for us to do – work that is for our joy and God's glory. Amen.

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