

Text: Phil. 1:1-8

Title: "Praying for God's People"

Time: 9/27/2020 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: I want to thank you for your prayers this past week for my Aunt Barb. She is battling cancer and had a six-hour chemotherapy treatment last Monday. I was blessed to be able to tell her that we were praying for her, and I was even more blessed to learn from my Dad that in spite of all that she is going through this week, she was especially burdened to pray for our church. My dad prays for me every day, and when he does so, he too prays for you, our church.

As we open our Bibles to the book of Philippians together, we find here a letter that was written by the Apostle Paul during a time of difficult trial in his own life. Paul was in prison, probably in Rome by this time, and so Philippians is one of four Pauline letters in our Bibles, which we call *The Prison Epistles*. Ephesians, Colossians, and the letter to Philemon in behalf of Onesimus, whom Paul had led to the Lord while in prison, are the other three Prison Epistles.

Very much like my Aunt Barb, in spite of the serious difficulty he was personally facing, Paul begins his letter by telling this local church that he is praying for them. In the first 8 verses of the epistle, we can read exactly what his prayer for this local church was like. As we spend time together learning from these verses, I have titled the message this morning, "Praying for God's People," and I want us to better understand this part of our Christian responsibility this morning from the example of Paul's praying.

I. The prayer for God's people is a prayer for grace and peace (v. 2).

Illustration: My wife Maureen surprised me when she picked me up at the airport on Friday because she had four newly purchased tires in the back of the Volvo. My Ford Escape needs tires, and Maureen got a terrific deal on four that are going to meet the need perfectly. She found the perfect fit for meeting that need.

Application: Paul prays for the Philippians to know grace and peace. Because we are God's people, grace and peace perfectly fit the needs that we have. We struggle with the temptations of the world, our flesh, and the devil, and often failing we need the grace of God's forgiveness. Grace is simply receiving what we could never earn and would never deserve, but what is also freely given to us in Christ to be accepted simply by faith. That is grace. In our struggle with the enemies of our soul, we do not need our merit or talent, we need God's forgiving and empowering grace.

And this same struggle often discourages and worries us, and so we need peace. Paul will write of the peace that passes understanding and that guards our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus our Lord (4:7). When the enemy attacks God's people with his intimidating successes, we need peace to guard us from despair, unfaithfulness, and loss of hope. Grace and peace are the right prayer requests.

And prayer is the right way to get this grace and peace, for they can only come from one place – “from God our Father and *from* the Lord Jesus Christ.” Notice that the second *from* in this phrase is in italics in the KJV, and that means that the translators are telling us that this English word has been supplied by the translators for clarity – there is no corresponding word in the original language. In Greek, however, the difference is significant, because if the Greeks wanted to indicate two sources of grace and peace, they would

have had to use two *froms*. That Paul used only one *from* means that he considered God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ in an important sense a single source of the answer to his prayers for the grace and peace of the people of God. Paul believed in the deity of Jesus Christ, that He is the One to whom we pray as much as is God the Father. The Father grants grace and peace, and the Son mediates them to our lives as our Prophet, Priest, and King.

So when we pray for other believers, especially when we pray for one another, we must pray for grace and peace from God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ. Do we?

II. The prayer for God's people is a prayer of thankful appreciation for them (vv. 1, 3-4).

Illustration: CNN reported on May 14, 2005, that Pope Benedict XVI put his predecessor, John Paul II, on "the fast track to possible sainthood." The article said in part, "The pope said Friday he had dispensed with rules that normally impose a five-year waiting period before beatification — the last step before sainthood — can even start. Benedict's decision means that John Paul, who died on April 2, could be beatified and thus declared a 'blessed of the Church' within a few years if a miracle can be attributed to him. The main purpose of the rule is to allow emotions to calm down after a person dies and for evidence and witnesses supporting the sainthood cause to be prepared."

What CNN called a "fast track" in 2005 actually took another 11 years or so. Popes John Paul II and John XIII were finally canonized as saints in April of 2014.

Application: This Roman Catholic dogma has little to do with what we read about saints and sainthood in the Bible.

Roman doctrine tells us that sainthood is conferred upon only a special few posthumously who ought to be prayed to as intercessors. By way of contrast, our passage teaches that every living believer in the church of Philippi for whom this letter was intended was a saint, and so every believer at our church here today is a saint. *Saint* is the loftiest label found in Scripture for a believer. It means *someone holy*. All of God's people are holy. All are saints. We must live in recognition that God has put this designation on us in Christ.

So we do not pray to saints; we must rather pray for them. Notice with me three simple things about praying for saints:

1. When we pray for saints, we serve the Lord as His slaves (v. 1). The word *servants* in the original language is the normal word for *bond-slave*. It is a word that is related to the verb *to bind*. As Paul writes to and prays for the Philippian believers, he thinks of himself and Timothy as slaves of the Lord and the believers he is praying for at Philippi as saints of the Lord. That perspective comes from thankful appreciation for those for whom he is praying.

When we pray for one another, it can be difficult to consider ourselves the slave and those we pray for the saints. My natural tendency is to think of myself as the saint for praying and those whom I pray for as something less spiritual than myself. I have found in my own prayers for God's people here that a great way to check that natural tendency is to remember that God's people are the flock of God whom He has purchased with His own blood (Acts 20:28). As we pray for one another, we must appreciate how valuable those for whom we pray are in the sight of God.

2. When we pray for saints, we pray for a local church (v. 1, "bishops and deacons"; 4:15). Paul's prayers for God's people were especially focused on their ministry together as a

local church. He had not only won these saints to the Lord, but also had ordained elders and called deacons, organizing those groups of new believers into a local church ministry. The leadership of the local church ministry is especially significant and in need of prayer. *Bishop* means *overseer* and refers to the church office of the pastor who has received a vocational call from God; *deacon* means *table-waiter* and refers to the church office filled by the layman who leads by unrepachable and faithful example. With no true commitment to the local church, there is no Pauline prayer of appreciation for God's people. We cannot love God's people and neglect His church. They are the same.

3. When we pray for saints, we pray thankfully and joyfully for them all (vv. 3-4). Divisive church cliques have no place in our prayer for God's people. In Chapter 4 we are going to see Paul address some tension between two of the saints - Euodia and Syntyche. (See also vv. 7-8 for "all.")

There are times when it can be difficult to pray thankfully and joyfully for all of God's people. The author of Hebrews indicates that at times sorrow does enter into these prayers, especially the prayers of pastors watching for the souls of God's flock (Heb. 13:17, "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you"). But sorrow is the exception, not the rule. We must give thanks in joy for our brothers and sisters in Christ as we pray.

So we have seen from Paul's example that our prayers for God's people must be prayers of thankful appreciation for them and prayers for grace and peace. Now finally,

III. The prayer for God's people is a prayer for gospel ministry (vv. 5-8).

Illustration: One of my favorite Christmas movies is “It’s a Wonderful Life,” in which George Bailey gets to see what the world would be like were he never born. George was down in the dumps, kind of wishing he had never been born, and so his guardian angel Clarence grants him his wish, and he gets to see what life would have been like without him.

Application: As we read this letter, we are forced to come to the conclusion that Paul understood well what life would be like in Philippi with no Philippian local church. Simply put, in that town there would not have been any fellowship in the gospel (v. 5), nor would there have been any defense or confirmation of the gospel (v. 7).

The gospel, of course, is simply the good news that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Towns that have no local church gospel witness are very different from towns that do. Paul was thankful that Philippi was a town that did. His prayers for this church were prayers for the furtherance of the gospel in a town that desperately needed the good news that Jesus saves from sin. It was a town very much like our own in that regard.

A local church may lack many things it wished it had, but it will never lack opportunity for gospel ministry. Gospel ministry in Philippi included two important opportunities:

1. The fellowship of the gospel (vv. 5-6). In this context, this fellowship is best understood as a sharing, participation, or partnership in the gospel ministry that includes a financial component. Paul is very likely referring to the generous financial help he had always received from the Philippian church. Later in chapter 4 he thanks them for the support

he had received from their emissary, Epaphroditus. On a number of occasions in other epistles, Paul refers to the Philippian example of financial support for the cause of Christ (Rom. 15:26, "contribution" = κοινωσίαν as here in 1:5).

Each of us needs to feel a personal responsibility for the financial needs of the work of God at this local church. Notice that local church generosity is a part of the Christian growth of the believer into Christlike maturity (v. 6). Praying for one another includes praying that God would advance His gospel through our generosity to this ministry.

2. The defense and confirmation of the gospel (vv. 7-8). Clearly, this part of gospel ministry had something to do with both Paul's bonds or imprisonment and his bowls or his deepest emotions. He had a deeply felt connection in suffering for the cause of Christ with the Philippian church for the sake of the defense and confirmation of the gospel.

We get our word *apologetics* from this word *defense*, and so to defend the gospel is to give an answer for the reason of the hope that lies within us with meekness and fear (1 Pet. 3:15). Our gospel message is verbal. In addition, the gospel is confirmed when the changed life of the believer demonstrates its firmness (1 Cor. 1:6-8, "Even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you: so that ye come behind in no gift; waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ: who shall also confirm you unto the end, that ye may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ"). Our gospel message is also nonverbal, backed up by a changing life.

Tragically, at times local churches do not defend the gospel, and their lives contradict it rather than confirm it. They cave in to the pressure of persecution. Not so for Paul, and Paul rejoices that it was not so for the Philippians either. He

prayed for them because they were God's instrument for gospel ministry – its fellowship, defense, and confirmation.

Conclusion: Are you praying for God's people? Do you pray for their grace and peace? Do you pray thankfully with appreciation for all of them as saints and local church members? Do you pray for their gospel ministry in this time and place, remembering what our town would be like with no New Boston Baptist Church?

As we close, because we are a gospel ministry, let me emphasize one more time that good news. Jesus Christ died for your sins according to the Scripture, and He was buried, and He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. Because He did that, "Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved" from his sin (Rom. 10:13). I encourage you to do so today if you never yet have.

"A man came – I think it was actually in Philadelphia – on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction – the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

–David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*