

Beloved, I have good news for you.

Prayer is not something you are called to stir up within yourself, some kind of spiritual work that you are meant to grit your teeth and perform so that you can earn God's favor.

Rather, prayer, just like every part of your life if you are in Christ, is God's gracious gift to you.

If there's anything you walk out of this sermon series remembering, let it be this.

You will only grow in prayer if you learn to pray by grace.

You will only mature in your life of prayer if you receive your life of prayer as a gift.

And to be precise, your life of prayer is the gift of participating, by grace, in the Son's eternal communion with the Father, by means of the Holy Spirit which he has poured out on you.

Jesus Christ lives forever as our man in heaven, and he lives for this reason — that he might forever intercede for those who draw near to God to him.

For this is the claim of Jesus: *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”*

And this is true for our life of prayer, just as it is true for our salvation, and the forgiveness of our sins, and our life everlasting.

For in him, in Christ, all things hold together, including our communion with God in prayer.

Over the next three weeks, we'll consider how the most prominent challenges in our lives of prayer are reframed by the reality of our union with Christ, and our reception of our life of prayer as a gracious gift through him.

Today, we'll consider the challenge of our prayerlessness, and our lack of love.

Next Sunday, we'll consider the smallness of our prayers, and our lack of faith.

And on December 18, the last Sunday of Advent, we'll consider the weakness of our prayer, and how quickly we give up in prayer, which is connected to our lack of hope.

This morning, we've heard already from Psalm 34, which teaches us from the Old Testament how God is always ready to hear the prayers of his beloved children.

And in the New Testament, we heard from a number of Paul's epistles, where Paul again and again, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, instructs us to pray without ceasing.

In our Gospel reading this morning, we heard the story of Jesus' prayer in the garden of the Gethsemane on the night before his death, and his disciples' inability to pray with him.

I'm going to read again briefly from that account in Matthew 26, as Jesus comes to his disciples and wakes them from sleeping. Listen now to God's holy and inerrant word from Matthew 26:40-41.

*“And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, “So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you. Prayer...

*"Could you not watch with me one hour?"* Jesus asks Peter in the garden of Gethsemane.

He has been praying, pouring his heart out to the Father, and Peter has been sleeping instead of praying.

*"Could you not watch with me one hour?"* Jesus says. And he says this not only to Peter, but also to us.

I don't know about you, but those words of Jesus haunt me.

*"Could you not watch with me one hour?"* He says.

Have you ever tried to pray for an hour?

It's almost impossible to do, unless you're doing at least one of two things (and this might be an argument for why these things are important).

It's almost impossible to pray for an hour unless you're praying in the presence of other Christians, or unless you're using written prayers, like the psalms, to speak aloud your prayers to God.

*"Could you not watch with me one hour?"* Those words from our Lord haunt me, personally, because they remind me of how often I, like Peter, fall short in my life of prayer.

The New Testament is full, actually, of this kind of language about prayer — calling us deeper and deeper into a life of prayer.

*"Be constant in prayer,"* Paul instructs the church in Romans.

*“Continue steadfastly in prayer,”* he tells us in Colossians.

*“Pray without ceasing,”* Paul says to the Thessalonians.

*“Pray at all times in the Spirit,”* he says to the Ephesians.

Paul speaks this way because constant, uninterrupted communion with God is the reason for which we were made.

God desires this kind of fellowship with us, and he sent his son into the world to redeem us so that we might enjoy eternal communion with him.

The collect by Thomas Cramner puts it this way:

*“Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to hear than we to pray, and to give more than we either desire or deserve: Pour down upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things for which we are not worthy to ask, except through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Savior; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.”*

God has invited us into this constant life of prayer, and yet, if we are honest, much of our lives are marked by prayerlessness.

There’s a spectrum here, of course. Some of us pray more than others, and some of us pray less.

But all of us, I think, live with a real tension between how much we long to pray and how much we actually pray.

And what is the cause of this gap? What is the root of our lack of prayer?

It's often easy to mark our lack of prayer up to things like busyness. If only I were less busy, we might think, I would certainly pray more.

But is that true? Really?

Or maybe we chalk our lack of prayer up to a lack of self-discipline and will power.

I just need to figure out some kind of reminder system to remind myself to pray, we think, and then I'll pray more.

But is that true? Really?

I would argue that if we were to understand ourselves according to a Biblical anthropology, we'd be forced to admit that in our life of prayer, as in all things, the decisions we make are actually fundamentally rooted in the persons we truly are.

As our Lord Jesus tells us, it is out of the overflow the heart that the mouth speaks.

The problem with our speech, according to Jesus, isn't our lack of will power, or our external circumstances. The problem with our speech is our heart.

And the same is true of our lives of prayer. We do not pray as we ought because our hearts have not yet been made perfectly holy.

If we were perfectly holy, fully sanctified, we would pray with the kind of fervor and frequency that Paul commands.

It's revealing that when Jesus challenges his disciples to wake from their slumber and pray with him in the garden, he frames his exhortation in explicitly spiritual terms.

He doesn't come to Peter and James and John and say — hey, you're not praying because you're tired.

Why don't you get up and do some jumping jacks.

Why don't you go grab a cup of coffee. Then you'll be able to pray with me.

No, he says, *“Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”*

Beloved, the problem with our prayer lives isn't our circumstances. It's not our busyness. It's not our forgetfulness.

No, the problem with our prayer lives is the weakness of our flesh, it's the remaining corruption of our hearts, it's the influence of the old man who still exerts power over us, even as we seek to put on Christ.

Truthfully, our lack of prayer to God is rooted in our lack of love for God.

These three abide, Paul says: Faith, hope and love.

But we if we are honest, our love for God fails. We love other things more than we love the one who made us, the one to whom we owe our love.

We do not love our heavenly Father as we should and so we do not commune with him in prayer as we ought.

The reason for our lack of prayer is not our busyness, not our circumstances, not our forgetfulness. It's our lack of love.

This is the sad news, and it may be difficult to face.

But there is no hope of getting better if we do accept the actual diagnosis.

But beloved, what if I told you that there was one man who loves God perfectly, who truly loves the Lord as the law commands, with all his heart, all his soul, all his might?

In him, love for God truly abides. It never fails.

And what if I told you that this man keeps watch for in prayer not for an hour, but for eternity?

What if I told you that this man lives forever for this reason—that he might make intercession for all those who draw near to God through him?

This is the good news of the gospel, beloved.

Because this man, with his perfect love for God, with his mature and faithful prayer life, has, by the power of the Holy Spirit, united himself to you — with all of your lack of love, with all your prayerlessness — such that it is no longer you who live, but he who lives in you.

Remember, beloved, the words of the Apostle Paul, and imagine these words in the context of your life of prayer.

*“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”*

You see, I think that many of us try to live as functional Pelagians when it comes to our life of prayer.

We think that if we just try hard enough, we'll pray more, as though we have in ourselves the capacity to improve our hearts and deepen our love God.

But that's not the gospel, beloved! And I can tell you, you will never pray more fruitfully by looking to yourself for your life of prayer.

No, you will only learn to pray if you will humble yourself, and go to Jesus, and say to him, as the disciples did: *"Lord, teach me to pray."*

For it is only in our union with Jesus, and in our union with his high priestly intercession that we will ever be able to pray as we ought.

James Torrance, the 20th century Scottish theologian, puts it this way:

*"The secret of true prayer is a vivid awareness that the real agent in Christian prayer is, in the first instance, not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord praying on our behalf in the power of the Spirit."*

This is what it means to receive prayer as a gift.

Because prayer is not something you stir up in yourself.

No, your life of prayer is the gift of participating, by grace, in the Son's constant communion with the Father, by means of the Holy Spirit which he has poured out on you.

We don't stir up prayer in ourselves. Rather, we step into the prayers of Jesus, who lives forever to intercede for us.

What if, in the midst of your busy life, you didn't think, ok, now I need to take a few minutes to pray?

What if instead, you kept on the forefront of your heart the reality that at every moment of your life — all the hours you've slept, all the hours you've worked, all the hours you've been too busy or too distracted or too feeble in your love to pray — all those hours, all your life, Jesus Christ has been praying in heaven on your behalf?

And so, what if, when you come to the time during the day to pray you thought — it's time for me to pray, but not in my own strength.

No, it's time for me now to enter into the prayers that Jesus has been offering for me all day long.

This beloved, is what it means to pray by grace. This is what it means to receive prayer as a gift rather than perform prayer as a work.

To realize that Jesus' prayers go before us. And Jesus' prayers follow behind us.

And when we consciously pray, if we are united to Jesus, then we are merely entering into Jesus' perfect life of prayer that he offers on our behalf.

This, beloved, is what it means to say — in my life of prayer, it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.

And the life I now live in the flesh in regards to my life of prayer, I live by the faithfulness of the Son of God, who loves me and gives himself for me — not just at one time in the past on the cross — but right now, in my life at this present moment — Christ is giving himself for me.

Beloved, do you know what it means that Christ is always praying for you?

It means, of course, on the one hand, that he is interceding with the Father on your behalf.

He is asking for the Father to bless you, to protect you from the evil one, to sustain your faith, to forgive your sins, to work all things in your life for good.

But it is more than that.

Christ not only prays for you, beloved, he also prays in your place.

Think, for a moment again, of that passage from Matthew.

*“And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, “So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”*

Jesus calls his Peter into a deeper life of prayer, even as he calls you and me into a deeper life of prayer.

But then, what does Jesus do? He leaves Peter, and he goes back to his Father, and he continues to pray.

He knows that Peter will not listen.

He knows that Peter might wake up for a few minutes and offer a few short prayers, but he knows that Peter will not watch for an hour in prayer.

He knows that Peter's love is weak, and his strength will fail.

And so, Jesus prays in Peter's place. He fulfills the law on Peter's behalf. He takes Peter's weak and immature prayers, and he gathers them up with his own strong and faithful prayers, and he offers them together to his Father.

And all of your life, beloved, Jesus is doing for you what he did for Peter in the garden of Gethsemane.

Whenever your life has been marked by prayerlessness, he has been praying in your place.

Whenever you are “too busy” to pray, he prays in your place.

Whenever you try to pray and you fall asleep because your flesh is weak, he prays in your place.

And so this week, as you pray, I encourage you.

Consider what it means that your life of prayer is a gift you receive, not a work you perform.

Consider what it means that it is not you who live, but Christ who lives in you.

And consider what it means that the Son of God lives forever, so that he might pray not only on your behalf, but in your place.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.