“Love to Pray: Help!”

Romans 8:26-27 (NLT)

February 26, 2012 (1st Sunday in Lent)

First Presbyterian Church, Mooresville, NC

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We’ve in a year of emphasizing prayer. As part of this, we’re studying prayer in our Lenten small groups. We also have a monthly day of prayer, the third Thursday of the month, when the church sanctuary and historical session room are open from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. for anyone to come and pray. Also, we have people in that historical session room praying right now. We desire to have people praying during every worship service and every church school hour this year.

But all that being said, there are few things more confusing and troublesome than prayer. Why aren’t my prayers answered the way I want? Do I have to use special words? I prayed for something to happen, and the opposite took place--what about that? Why do I need to pray if God is almighty and sovereign, if he knows my life, my mind, and my heart already?
He knows what he’s going to do anyway, regardless of whether I pray or not, so why bother? We’re in need of some divine guidance about prayer.

During Lent we’ll look at some of what the Bible says about prayer for a sermon series we’ve named, “Love to Pray.” The first installment of this series may hit most of us where we live. It’s titled, “Love to Pray: Help!” We recognize we need help both in understanding prayer--what prayer is, what prayer does, why we pray--and in practicing prayer--how we pray, when we pray. We’re in luck. These two verses in your bulletin from Romans 8:26-27 provide us with a foundation for understanding and practicing prayer. Hear them:

26 And the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don’t know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. 27 And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God’s own will.
Let’s look at these two verses bit by bit for a moment. We notice that God helps us to pray. “The Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness,” the Apostle Paul writes the Roman Christians. That word translated into English as “helps” is, in the original Greek of the New Testament, a compound verb about a mile long. It’s like German, where there is one extremely long word that when you translate it into English, it takes at least 3-4 sentences. The root words for this verb in our verse are “along with,” “in the place of,” and “to bear or to take hold of” (James Boice, Romans, vol. 2, p. 888). The idea is that a great burden is lifted from your shoulders. You are helped to bear it and to handle it. Someone is coming alongside of you to carry it with you.

That’s how the Holy Spirit helps us with prayer. It’s a burden we can’t carry unless the Spirit comes along with us and assists us.

Then as he often does, Paul gives one example of what he means: “We don’t know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words.”
How true is this, that we really don’t know (and often don’t care) what God wants us to pray for. Left on our own, our prayers will turn in on themselves. They’ll turn into lists of self-centered, self-advancing requests that don’t have anything to do with what God wants to accomplish. Instead, they’re about what we want.

You know, that’s the popular understanding and practice of prayer: it’s like a soft drink machine. You put your money in, you get your product out. If you don’t get the product you picked, then you get your money back. A consumer transaction. What a deal!

But this common perception of prayer has only a small sliver of truth to it. Yes, we’re encouraged to let God know all our requests, as in Philippians 4:6, where we’re urged: “Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done.”

But putting requests before God is such a relatively small part of prayer. It has limits, guidelines. For example, we’re to ask in Jesus’ name, to ask as Jesus himself would ask and for what he would ask. So much for the new Lexus in most circumstances, huh?
Prayer is about so much more than requests. It includes our requests, rightly understood, but there’s so much more to it. Praise. Confession. Lament. Thanksgiving. Just to name a few things. Our groups studying the curriculum “Love to Pray” heard this definition of prayer last week. See if it resonates with you: “Prayer is the conversational part of the most important love relationship of our lives--our relationship with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (Love to Pray, p. 108).

Prayer isn’t reading a shopping list of stuff or a duty to check off our list of things to do. It’s a conversation that’s connected to the most important relationship of all: our relationship with the Three-in-One God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And this relationship is centered in love: the Triune God’s love for us, and our love for the Triune God.

It’s much less about method and the right words and the right time of day. It’s much more about an ongoing conversation with God. The God who loves us so much that he died for us and rose again for us.
The God who loves us so much that his very presence in our hearts is there if we profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, so that we’re never alone again.

Yes, we can pray at set times and pray written prayers. Nothing wrong with that. They’re helpful. But also: we can pray throughout our day, looking at the events of the day as part of our ongoing conversation with God about everything we encounter. This is what prayer is about. The set times and the ongoing times. And we can’t do it. Not on our own. But the Holy Spirit helps us, lifts the burden, assists us, comes alongside of us.

The Holy Spirit provides what we need to pray, and does so in a way far beyond human language, with groanings, that words can’t express or describe. The relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is so tight that words aren’t necessary. The relationship between the members of the Trinity ensures communication at the deepest level. As Paul puts it, “the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God’s own will.”
So the Holy Spirit helps us to get involved in this communication between Father, Son, and Spirit by the means of our prayers. Thus our prayers don’t stop at the ceiling. Our prayers instead go all the way into the presence of the Three-in-One God. They’re heard. They’re guided. They’re even re-expressed and re-calibrated as we mess them up, when we’re selfish, or ignorant, or lacking vision or clarity, or fail another way.

In light of this guidance for our understanding and practice of prayer, I’d like to make three suggestions strongly implied by what Paul says to us.

**Suggestion #1: as you start to pray, ask the Holy Spirit to help you.** This is right in keeping with the teaching of these two verses. If we are weak in our prayers--and all of us are weak in our prayers--then we should acknowledge this weakness at the start and ask the Spirit to help us pray the way the Father, the Son, and the Spirit want us to pray. Pray for the right things. Pray in the right frame of mind. Pray with the right intent. Pray to be so focused on God’s will that there’s no doubt of this prayer being part of our ongoing conversation with God.
Suggestion #2: focus less on times, methods, and specific words, and focus more on the relationship of love with God. It’s said that the one who loves well prays well. The center of our relationship with God is love. Everything else spins out from that center. Your love for God, yes, don’t deny that by any means. But please know prayer is much, much more about God’s love for you. A love that transcends your faults and failings, your heartaches and hiccups, your pains and problems.

Hear this well: the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, LOVES YOU. It’s why the Holy Spirit helps you with your prayers. It’s why prayer is the vehicle, the means, for communicating with the God of the universe. Why you’re not left instead on the outside looking in. Why, if you’re a follower of Jesus Christ, you’ve been brought into a relationship with God in the first place. Why God the Father created you, why Jesus saved you, why the Spirit is present in you right now. Set this truth in your mind, and the methods, words, times, and all the rest in prayer will tend to follow accordingly: God loves you and wants to converse with you.
Suggestion #3: if you’re new at this, here’s a simple plan to ease into this sort of thing. Set aside 15 minutes a day. 1st, for 5 minutes read the Scriptures. Start in a Gospel, like Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. Read a few verses or a chapter. As much as you can. 2nd, for 5 minutes think about what you’ve read. Reflect. Meditate. Ask, “What is God saying to me through it?” 3rd, for the remaining 5 minutes, pray. Ask for the Spirit’s help, and pray. Pray about what God has just shown you. Pray for your family. Pray for your friends. Pray for your enemies. Pray for grace to handle whatever comes up in the next 24 hours. Your ordinary words and figures of speech will do. Just pray.

My friends, it is easy, when it comes to prayer, to throw our hands in the air and give up. Prayer can be hard, tough, against our inclinations at any given moment. But remember this. As you cry, “Help!” the Holy Spirit is there before you. Helping you in your weakness. Helping you to carry your burden. Helping you to pray. Helping you to be in an ongoing conversation with God. When you cry, “Help!” about prayer, the request is always answered, and the outpost always defended.