

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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For success in service to the saints - Romans 15:23-33

Fifteen years ago, when I was preparing to get married, the man who was to marry us asked my fiancée and me which character in history, apart from the Lord Jesus, we would most like to meet and speak with. I didn't have to think long before replying "the apostle Paul". I would still give the same answer today. Paul was a unique man in so many ways; he worked at a time when the Christian church was still being created and his labours for it were monumental. His gift, his writing, his travel, his suffering and his passion all leave me with a sense of awe. But if you could offer me one element of Paul's life that I could have for my own, I would choose Paul's prayer life. I find the insight, depth, focus, passion and joy of Paul's prayers exhilarating and I believe that his prayer life underpinned everything else that he did. It was the lifeblood of all his service for, and his own relationship with, Christ.

For the last couple of weeks we have been considering "How to pray like Paul" and today our subject is praying for success in service to the saints. This talk is based on Romans 15:23-33 which contains a request from Paul that the Roman believers should pray for **him**. It was not uncommon for Paul to request prayer, and when he does, the request almost always is for prayer about his service for the saints.

I will divide the talk today into three sections:

1. Reasons to pray for successful service
2. Praying for Christ's servants
3. Praying for success in service

1. Reasons to pray for successful service

We could probably think of many reasons to pray for successful service but I want to talk about just two:

- a. Love for the saints
- b. Desire for Christ's glory

a. Love for the saints

We can see how fundamental this is when we hear the Lord Himself say "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" John 13:35. It is clear then that it is expected of all Christians that they love other Christians; it is evidence to unbelievers that we are followers of Christ. We might be tempted to think that this is something that God gives us when we are saved and that we then have nothing else to add to it. Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10 give us further valuable insight, "But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do so toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more". It seems that the Thessalonian believers were doing rather well in this aspect of their Christianity but Paul still feels it necessary to urge them on to continuous increase.

Put simply, it is impossible to love the saints too much and, however much we grow in our love for each other, there is still scope for improvement. It's not difficult to pray for those that we love. We naturally pray for our family and close friends. The process is simple: we love somebody therefore we want the very best for them; we know that God is the only one who can provide that, so we pray to Him for them. There will be times when our loved ones cause up deep frustration, anger and hurt but we still pray for them because we love them. This is how we are to act towards the saints. You might say that I do not feel that way about all the Christians I know. Some of them are deeply irritating, have dreadful habits and seem to do their best to make themselves unlovable. You may well be right. Of course they may feel the same way about you! The vital thing to grasp is that when the writers in the Bible exhort us to love one another they are not asking us to generate feelings in our hearts; they are asking us to act in a certain way. Part of that way of acting is prayer. Not praying that God will make our fellow believers more lovable but praying for their spiritual growth and welfare. Systematically praying for our brethren along these lines will actually start to improve the way that we think about and act towards them. Eventually it may generate feelings for them as well but the feelings do not come first.

If we love the saints then we will want them to grow in their understanding of God's word and develop an ever closer relationship with Him. The most obvious way for that to happen is through the ministry of other believers and therefore we will want to pray for successful Christian service.

1.2 Desire for Christ's glory

Every real believer loves Christ, and so every real believer wants Him to be glorified as much as possible. This means that I will want all aspects of my own life to be honouring to Him. However I am only one person with very limited abilities and influence. How much better if I can also help hundreds, thousands or even millions to contribute to His glory! That is precisely what prayer for service lets us do. At the end of Ephesians 1, Paul speaks about the church as "His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all". The church is seen as so much a part of Christ that the two together make up one single being. A head without a body or a body without a head is less than one person. It is also His "fullness", so it completes Him, shows Him to others and carries out His work in this world. This is an extraordinarily exalted view of the church and it implies that all the individual members of that body will need to be increasingly like Christ Himself to play their part properly. This is why Christ gives gifted people to His church, so that they can serve their brethren by teaching and exhorting them to become more like Himself. Most of us are not gifted teachers but as well as exercising whatever specific gift we do have, we can also pray for the success of the ministry of those who are gifted in this way.

2. Praying for Christ's servants

We need to remember that we are **all** the Lord's servants and there are many things that fellow servants can pray for each other. I am going to look briefly at five:

- a. Pray for them to be sent
- b. Pray for their safety
- c. Pray that they will speak plainly
- d. Pray that they will be kept fresh
- e. Pray that they will be kept from sin

a. Pray for them to be sent

Let me quote Matthew 9:38: "Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into His harvest". This is a direct command from the Lord Jesus to pray for a specific issue; the sending out of workers. We often see this verse quoted on mission maps and missionary bulletins, and no doubt the primary application is to missionary work, but it is also relevant to all work done for Christ. Let me quote at some length the writer Ole Hallesby. He puts it rather better than I could. "The greatest danger in Christian work is that workers go out who have not been sent by God. The work they do is merely human work. There are people on the foreign mission fields who should never have been there. At the same time there are people here at home who should have been missionaries. This is our own fault. We should have prayed about this important matter. The same is often true of our pastors. We complain often that we have so many unqualified pastors. What we really should complain most about is ourselves and our own slothfulness in prayer". That was written in 1931 and it is hard to claim that things have improved. We have a responsibility to obey our Lord's clear command to pray about those He sends.

b. Pray for their safety

It is time I read part of today's passage! "Now I beg you brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the Spirit, that you strive together with me in prayers to God for me, that I may be delivered from those in Judea who do not believe" Romans 15:30-31. Let's note two general points to begin with. First, it is impossible to miss Paul's earnestness. He "begs" them to pray and speaks of that prayer as "striving". There is no formality or lightness about the request or how it is to be carried out. Their prayers are so valuable to Paul that he begs for them and requests that their prayers, like his, would have the interest, energy and perseverance that "striving" suggests. Secondly, Paul appeals to them "through the Lord Jesus Christ" and "through the love of the Spirit", that is the love that the Spirit has placed in their hearts. These correspond to the two reasons to pray that we looked at earlier.

The first specific request is "that I may be delivered from those in Judea who do not believe". Paul was taking a gift of money from Gentile churches to the church in Jerusalem. Recently the unbelieving Jews in Jerusalem had tried to kill him, so he asks the Romans to pray for his deliverance from these enemies. Opposition from outside will always come to those who work faithfully for Christ. In countries dominated by false religions, the opposition may come from religious leaders. In communist countries it may come from the state. In western countries it may come from part of the state or from some anti-Christian group or organisation. The Lord's servants are dependent on our prayers for their protection.

c. Pray that they will speak plainly

Listen to Colossians 4:3-4: "Praying also for us, that God would open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in chains, that I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak". You might think that Paul had such great gift and experience that the quality of his speaking could be taken for granted. Not a bit if it! Paul expressly asks for prayer that he will speak as he ought to and make things plain to his hearers. If Paul needed those prayers, then we can be certain that Christian speakers today need them even more. Pray that the people who speak in your church, and in other churches you know of, will clearly grasp the truths of Scripture for themselves and then just as clearly make them known to their listeners. If you have had to sit through some poor sermons recently, it is time that you started praying regularly for the people who have delivered them that God will increase both their understanding and their communication skills. You may need to pray for your own listening and understanding as well!

d. Pray that they will be kept fresh

Any speaker's sermon is only as good as their current relationship with Christ. Even the most gifted and well instructed speakers need to keep their relationship with Christ fresh and unbroken, or their service will be undermined. It is quite possible for a speaker with great gift to deliver a sermon that is faithful to Scripture, error free, easy to listen to - and totally devoid of God's blessing. Giving God's message to His people in a way that builds them up is not the same process as delivering a good lecture. It is about more than well crafted words and a charismatic delivery. The heart of communicating God's word is making God Himself known to the hearers, and that needs the speaker himself to be in regular, living contact with God. AW Tozer speaks about men who "had been in the presence of God and reported what they saw there. They were prophets, not scribes, for the scribe tells us what he has read and the prophet tells us what he has seen." We need such men today; therefore we need to pray for them. It is not a prayer for more gift, but for more time spent in God's presence so that the speaker is giving a fresh report of what he has seen.

e. Pray that they will be kept from sin

Satan wants to undermine any service for God. He will quite happily do that by damaging the servant. Few ways are as effective in stopping service as destroying the reputation of the servant. Not only does it stop future service, it will tarnish what has been done in the past too. When God's servants sin they are responsible for their own failure. James says, "Each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed" James 1:14. In other words, temptation comes from within. Nevertheless Satan knows how to use our weaknesses to his ends and our harm. Christian teachers and leaders have the same weaknesses as all other human beings but more is at stake in their downfall. We have every reason then to pray that the Lord's servants will be kept from sin.

3. Praying for success in service

I want to consider four specific elements of praying for success in service:

- a. Pray that service will be inspired and directed by God
- b. Pray that service will be accepted by the saints
- c. Pray that service will be fruitful
- d. Pray that service might grow and expand

a. Pray that service will be inspired and directed by God

This is almost too obvious to be worth mentioning. How can service for God be successful if it is not inspired and directed by Him? Sadly enormous amounts of what is regarded as Christian service are not actually service for Christ at all. If I start a work by my own choice and carry it on in my own strength, it may be 'Christian' in the sense that it is linked to the church and the Bible, but it is my service not Christ's. There is sufficient shortage of gift, money and time in Christian circles to wish to avoid waste of any of them on service that Christ has not asked us to perform. Pray that service will be started by asking the Lord what He wants doing and not by asking Him to bless the service we have planned out. Pray also that plans will always be reviewed in the light of God's subsequent leading. This is how Luke describes the leading of the apostles in Acts 16:6-7: "Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them". After this a vision led them into Macedonia. We do not know exactly how the Holy Spirit prevented these planned moves, and anyway that is not the point. The important thing to grasp is how Paul and his fellows were open to the Spirit's leading. They were always looking for fresh avenues of service but always sensitive to the Spirit saying "No".

b. Pray that service will be accepted by the saints

We need to return to our chapter. "That my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints" says Paul in verse 31. Paul knew that the money he was taking to Jerusalem might easily cause offence to the Jewish Christians there. If you are wondering why anybody would be upset about being given money, remember that the Jews were used to looking down their noses at "the dogs of the Gentiles", and all of us sometimes find that accepting 'charity' can hurt our pride. So Paul asks the Romans to pray "that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints". This has a wider application than just gifts of money. Earlier I spoke about praying that God will send out the right servants to the right places. It is also necessary to pray that the people these servants are sent to will accept their service. We might hope that all church attendees will appreciate ministry given by Christ's servants in the power of God's Spirit. Unfortunately this is not always the case. Some people prefer comfortable homilies to the challenge of God's word. Some people want a speaker who only talks about the aspects of Christianity that they are most interested in. Others just love to criticise others and bring them down. Our responsibilities do not end then with praying servants into place, we need to keep right on praying that their God directed, Christ glorifying service will be acceptable to the saints they serve.

c. Pray that service will be fruitful

Service is not an end in itself. It is true that service done in Christ's strength will always please and honour Him; but the ultimate goal is the building up of believers. Let's turn briefly to Paul's description of the prayer life of Epaphras in Colossians 4:12-13. "Epaphras, who is one of you, a bondservant of Christ, greets you, always labouring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. For I bear him witness that he has a great zeal for you". Epaphras was a Colossian. It is likely that he personally took the Gospel to them, but he was currently in Rome with Paul. He knew the Colossians personally and so prayed for them. But you could also say that he prayed that the service of himself and Paul to the Colossians might be fruitful. What he wanted for the Colossians was not more prosperity or a better intellectual grasp of Christian teaching. What he prayed for, and it is worth noticing again the elements of work and fervour in this prayer, was that they might "stand perfect and complete in all the will of God". This would be the result of their accepting wholeheartedly the teaching of Paul in his epistle to the Colossians; in other words he prayed that the service might produce fruit.

d. Pray that service might grow and expand

We must go back to Romans 15 again. "That I may come to you with joy by the will of God and may be refreshed together with you" says verse 32. This evidently refers us back to verses 23 and 24 where Paul said "But now no longer having a place in these parts, and having a great desire these many years to come to you, whenever I journey to Spain, I shall come to you. For I hope to see you on my journey, and to be helped on my way there by you, if first I may enjoy your company for a while". Paul was planning to travel to Spain after his visit to Jerusalem and hoped to visit Rome for the first time on his way there. Acts shows us that Paul was arrested in Jerusalem and only got to Rome as a prisoner. As far as we know, he never reached Spain. There is no time today to go into the topic of 'unanswered prayers'. We need to see that Paul was thinking and praying ahead all the time.

None of us may ever be involved in pioneering missionary work like Paul, and many may have to work in areas where progress is slow and difficult. However this does not mean that we should not pray that that service should grow and expand. Thank God that in some parts of the world Christian work is growing and expanding fast. In more difficult fields, never let our vision be one of simply 'stopping the rot' or 'managing the decline'. If that is all we pray for, then we should not be surprised if that is all we receive. I am not suggesting that we pray "Lord, please send wholesale revival across Europe next year". Such vague prayers show little exercise of heart or understanding of God's working. But let us make sure we pray specifically for the areas of service that we know, that they may flourish and grow. Let us pray for those in our own church that they will grow into spiritual maturity and increase in their witness to the unbelievers they know. These are the ways that God sends growth.

Final thoughts and next steps

I have often stated this morning that things depend on our prayers. Perhaps you have been thinking, "Surely God will ensure that His servants and His work survive without help from my prayers". If the question is "Is God incapable of working without my help?" the answer is obviously "No". An omnipotent God cannot find any job too difficult. But the fact is that God has chosen to work through prayer. He has deliberately opted to make certain things reliant on our praying for them. For this reason your prayers are genuinely necessary and it is important that you pray them.

Please don't sit back now and think "That was very interesting, I wonder what next week's speaker will say". Now is the time to plan how you can improve the way you pray for successful service. Write down the list of works and workers that you can support in prayer. In the next column write the things you will pray for them this month. Later you can add the answers to those prayers, and add some new issues to pray about for these people. Your list should

certainly include all those with responsibilities in your local church. It should also go further. What missionaries do you know that you can pray for specifically? Do you get newsletters from organisations like Wycliffe, Open Doors or your local Gideons? Which ones, and which individuals within them, will you pray for? Please support the work of 'Truth for Today' in your prayers and consider 'adopting' one or two speakers to pray for them specifically. Every servant of God really values prayer support in the same way that Paul did. Please make sure that you are making your contribution!

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