

Ephesians 6:18-20

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Date: 02 August 2015

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] we looked at the armor that God provides for us and our responsibility to put on the armor provided. This evening, we focus on what is often presented as the final and most crucial piece of armor, and that is a prayer. It's not a matter of great importance, but I'm not sure if Paul does actually present prayer as a separate piece of armor. He speaks of it in a way that's different to all the other pieces of armor where clearly they're being identified as such. Rather, Paul views prayer as the necessary accompaniment to each and every piece of armor that we put on and that we employ. Prayer is to pervade and underpin and undergird, surround and go before all our spiritual warfare. It is to accompany our use of all the other, if we speak of it, all the other or certainly all the pieces of armor that Paul identifies. And we can distinguish what

Paul has to say about prayer by noticing both a plea and a petition. A plea or a call to prayer that we have in verse 18, but then also a petition or a request for prayer that Paul directs to the believers in Ephesus. And we have that petition or that request in verses 19 and 20. So, we have in verse 18 this plea, this call to prayer where we have instruction concerning what prayer should look like and how we should pray. But then Paul moves on with this personal request. And in that request, we can also draw out lessons and a challenge for ourselves. Now, as we think together about what Paul has to say, my own plea, my own petition to you is that we would respond to the call that Paul makes and that we would make his request, his petition, our own as we would commit to praying for one another in the manner that Paul describes, in the manner that Paul requests for himself. And as we think about prayer, particularly the first part, the plea or the call that Paul makes, maybe we could have in mind the words of the hymn, What a Friend We Have in Jesus, and especially the words that we find in that hymn, What a Privilege to Carry Everything to God in Prayer. So, as we think about the different aspects and elements of prayer identified by Paul, it would be in that context of the privilege that it is for us to pray to approach a God who hears and answers prayer. What can we say about the plea that Paul makes, the call that Paul directs to his readers? Verse 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. What are we to do? What is the call that Paul directs to us? Well, we are to pray in the Spirit. Pray in the Spirit. He then goes on to describe the occasions and the manner and for whom we are to pray. But at the heart of the call is this plea that we as believers would pray in the Spirit. What's that about? What does that mean?

What is it to pray in the Spirit? Is this some kind of special, hyper-spiritual prayer? Not for ordinary Christians, but for special Christians who pray in the Spirit. All genuine prayer, all sincere prayer, prayer is prayer in the Spirit. We cannot pray in any other way. Anything else we do may look like prayer, but it's not prayer. Prayer necessarily must be in the Spirit. It is the Spirit of God who prompts us to pray. It is the Spirit who guides us as we pray, who helps us to pray in accordance with God's will. The Spirit. The Spirit directs us as we pray. The Spirit enables us to pray. The Spirit lifts our hearts to God, and the Spirit grants us the faith that believes in the one we are praying to. In the absence of the Spirit of God, we simply cannot pray. When Paul makes this plea, pray in the Spirit, he's saying pray. And this is the only way that we can pray in the Spirit, with the Spirit's help.

Paul speaks on other occasions about the manner in which the Spirit helps us. We're not going to spend time looking at the other occasions when he does so, but maybe if we just mention one example in Romans chapter 8, we have a particularly interesting description given by Paul of one manner in which the Spirit helps us, how the Spirit helps us in our weakness, even to the point of interceding for us as we pray, as we struggle to put into words our requests and our plea to God. The Spirit helps us and intercedes for us. We can only pray in the Spirit. There is no other way to pray. So, that is what we are to do, and what a privilege to be prompted and helped and accompanied by the Spirit of God as we carry everything to our Heavenly Father in prayer. Being reminded that prayer must necessarily be in the Spirit also is a reminder of how prayer is wonderfully Trinitarian. We pray to God the Father.

[6 : 32] We pray and approach God the Father in the name of Jesus, resting on the finished work of Jesus. We can come no other way. And we pray enabled and directed and guided and prompted by the Spirit of God. Prayer wonderfully involves each person of the Trinity. What are we to do? We are to pray in the Spirit. But how are we to do it? Well, Paul notes in this verse what we might call four universals that are to mark our praying. We just read through the verse. We can find them. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions.

This repeated use of the word all. On all occasions, with all kinds of prayers and requests. Then he goes on with this in mind. Be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. So, four occasions in which he uses this same word, though translated here with three times the same word and then a fourth word. But the idea is pretty clear. Four times in which we have this all-encompassing description of prayer. Let's just think about what Paul is saying.

First of all, he calls on the believers, he calls on us to pray on all occasions. Pray in the Spirit on all occasions. Prayer is always appropriate. There's never an occasion when prayer is unnecessary or overkill or going over the top. It's always appropriate. Whatever circumstance we're in, whatever the occasion is, prayer is fitting. Prayer is appropriate. An implication of this very clearly is that God is accessible and willing to hear and answer us on all occasions. There'll never be an occasion where we pray and God is simply not available because, wow, the occasion didn't merit His involvement. We are to pray on all occasions in the confidence that God is available to us on all occasions. I was seeing somebody who had retweeted a tweet about this, and it was something along the lines of, in good times, pray. In bad times, pray. As we celebrate, we pray and give thanks to God. As we suffer, we pray seeking God's help and grace and comfort. Every occasion is suitable for us to pray.

The language that Paul uses here, translated on all occasions, is language that some have suggested carries the idea of at every opportunity. And that certainly is sound advice. Whether we feel we have to choose between the two possible translations, possibly we don't have to, but it's certainly sound advice. At every opportunity, pray. Pray in the Spirit on all occasions. The great thing about prayer is that we can do that is that we can do that on all occasions, in any location. We don't need to be in a sacred place. We don't need to be in church. We don't need to adopt a certain posture. We don't need to be dressed in a particular way. None of these things are necessary for us to pray. Whatever we are, we can pray. As I was thinking about how open the opportunity is and how many and manifold are the opportunities that we have to pray, I was reminded of something my mom used to say when we lived in the manse in Dornoch. Now, I don't know if any of you had the opportunity to ever visit the manse in

Dornoch, be it when we were there or when others were there. This is the old manse, not the new manse. Well, it was huge. There's a story behind why it was so huge, but I won't take up time to tell you that story right now. If you're very interested, you can ask me afterwards. I'll tell you. But the house was huge, but the garden was huge. Now, why is this relevant? Well, it's relevant because my mom used to say, whenever I'm weeding, I pray because I don't need to concentrate when I'm weeding. You know, it's a fairly mindless activity. I hope that's right. Gardeners don't object to me suggesting that, but it was a perfect opportunity to just spend the afternoon. As I say, if you know the size of the garden, that's a lot of prayer. And I'm sure I have a lot to be grateful to God for the weeds in the Dornoch manse, as no doubt I was the beneficiary, as no doubt many others were, of prayers prayed as my mom weeded the garden. Even as I tell the story, I'm wondering if some of you are thinking, well, you should have been helping her. But anyway, let's move on. Let's move on. We can pray anywhere and in any circumstance. What a privilege to carry everything and on every occasion to God pray. But Paul not only says that we should pray on all occasions, but he also speaks of praying with all kinds of prayers. Now, that's a bit of an intriguing phrase. What does he mean by that, all kinds of prayers? Are there different categories or different types of prayers? It almost sounds a bit peculiar to speak of all kinds of prayers. What does that mean? The word there that the NIV chooses to translate as prayer, a perfectly reasonable translation, is translated in other translations by the word supplication. It's a bit more of an old-fashioned word, but it carries the idea of something very specific. And maybe that's what Paul has in mind when he says all kinds of prayers.

[12 : 44] What he has in mind is all kinds of requests, all kinds of very specific matters that you need to bring to God in prayer. But you can do that. All kinds of prayers, all kinds of requests you can bring confidently to God. That may be what Paul has in mind. Or alternatively, maybe Paul has in mind the fact that prayer includes or ought to include different elements. So it may be in one prayer, or it may be over a number of prayers. These different elements are to be present. We are to confess our sins as we pray. We are to adore God and worship God and lift up His name in adoration as we pray. We are to give thanks to God for all that He has given to us and provides for us. We are to intercede for others. So there's all these different aspects, if you wish, to prayer. Maybe that's what Paul has in mind when he speaks of all kinds of prayers. It's not that in any one given prayer, all of that ground will be covered. Though it may be. But as we think of all our prayer to God, we certainly should be looking to cover all of this ground, all of these different aspects of that prayer, all kinds of prayer.

What a privilege to carry all kinds of prayer to God. But then there's the next universal, the next all, or in this case, always. Paul goes on to say, pray in the Spirit or on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert, always keep on praying. The plea here is to perseverance. Paul knows from personal experience, I imagine, how easy it is to be discouraged and to give up. We can give up in different ways. We can give up on a particular plea to God. Maybe we've been praying for something in particular and there seems to be no response and we give up. Now, of course, there may be occasions when that is the right thing to do, when it becomes clear that we are no longer to ask for what we've been asking for. That is, of course, possible. But there are other occasions things when we simply give up because we grow tired and impatient. And Paul says, always keep on praying. But perhaps more fundamentally, we can make the very foolish mistake of giving up on prayer altogether. Or prayer becomes such a formality, such a fleeting activity that it has lost the meaning and the purpose that it has lost the purpose that it has lost the purpose of praying. And Paul, to those of us who find ourselves in that place, he says, always keep on praying. And he introduces this aspect of his plea with the call to be alert. We just kind of rushed through that part of the verse. But in calling us to always keep on praying, there is this supplementary call or accompanying call to be alert. And I wonder what in particular Paul has in mind when I read those words that the language reminds me of Jesus and his call to the disciples in Gethsemane to watch and pray. We know what the disciples did with the advice and the sorry consequences for them of not following that advice, as they did fall into temptation and weren't able to resist. And if we have that scene from Gethsemane as our backdrop, we might imagine that the call to be alert is simply almost a negative call, a call not to be drowsy, not to be careless, not to fall asleep, something we can often do when we pray. And I'm sure that is part of it. But I wonder if there's something more proactive about this call to be alert. That as

Christians, we are to be alert to what is going on around us, to what is going on in our lives, to what is going on in our families, to what is going on in the lives of family members, to what is going on in the congregation that we form a part of, the city that we belong to, the nation that we are part of, to be alert. And as we are alert, so we bring to God those matters that we are able to identify as requiring us to urgently turn to God in prayer. We are to be alert as we are called to always keep on praying. What a privilege it is for us to always carry everything to God in prayer. But then we have a final all here in this plea or this call to prayer, that we are to pray for all the saints. Our principal concern ought not to be ourselves.

This morning we were being reminded of how this is so much at the heart of Christian discipleship, seeking the good of others, not our own good. And that should be reflected also as we pray.

Of course, we can quite reasonably and legitimately pray to God about matters of private or personal concern. But our greater concern should be for others, as Paul urges us, pray for all the saints.

[18:16] We're not to be selfish in prayer. Think of Jesus as He has presented to us in the Gospels, in this matter of intercession, praying for all the saints, praying, interceding on behalf of others.

Think of how Jesus was always ready to respond to those who came interceding for others. A number of the miracles, that is the picture. It's not the actual one who is unwell who comes, but rather others come on behalf of interceding on behalf of others. We think of the friends of the paralytic, how they came and interceded on behalf of their friend, how Jesus warmed to their intercession. And so, we can be sure that as we intercede on behalf of others, our God warms to that selfless prayer.

Of course, Jesus Himself, when He prayed, so often He prayed for others. He interceded for others. Indeed, His high priestly prayer really was, perhaps the only prayer that really was for all the saints. He prayed for His disciples. He prayed for those who had not yet been brought to the faith. He prayed for us.

He prayed for all the saints, and we are to follow His example. Now, as a matter of practical reality, none of us can, nor I'm sure did Paul expect any believer in Ephesus to pray by name for every saint. That's simply not possible. But there is here a call for there to be a breadth and ecumenicity, a global reach in our praying, crossing physical frontiers and borders, but also crossing barriers of congregation or denomination as we pray for God's people. Now, if we're going to do this in any meaningful way, then it does require some kind of organization. If we simply set aside a time and simply without any prior thought begin to pray, it's unlikely we're going to be able to pray in this manner for all the saints. But there are helps for us. You know, in the monthly record, if you haven't got your monthly record, grab one as you leave. There's always a prayer diary there to help us pray for others within our own church. We have the missionary prayer notes that can direct us and guide us, and without them, how difficult it would be to, in any meaningful way, do what Paul is asking us to do. But with these helps, we can. What a privilege to carry all the saints to God in prayer. Well, this is

Paul's plea or call, but then more briefly, let's just notice the petition that he makes on his own behalf there in verses 19 and 20. What is the petition? Well, he goes on there in verse 19 to say, Pray also for me. Pray also for me. Now, we stressed just a moment ago the importance of seeking the welfare of others in prayer, and Paul, without doubt, was marked by that selflessness.

[21 : 33] And yet here, and not only here, on a number of occasions, he asks believers to whom he's writing that they might pray for him. And of course, he did so because he was so conscious of his own weakness of his own dependence on God. He knew that he needed help. He needed the help of God, and he needed the help of God's people. And yet, even when he asks God's people to pray for him, as we'll see, the prayer that he asks them to pray is that he might be a blessing to others. So yes, he's asking them to pray for him, but it's in order that he would be a blessing to others.

Let's just notice one or two features of this personal request that Paul makes to the believers in Ephesus. And as we notice them, let's just try and examine ourselves to see if we share in Paul's concerns. Is this something that we would want others to pray on our behalf? And I trust that it is.

Well, what are the features of his request? I've suggested four in the little outline there. First of all, there's a given in what he asks, and the given is his duty to speak. Pray also for me that whenever I open my mouth, there's no question as to whether he will open his mouth. And here, clearly, he's speaking about opening his mouth in order to tell others of Jesus. And for Paul, it's not a question whether he will or whether he won't. He's not even saying, pray that I would open my mouth. Oh, no, he knows he's going to open his mouth. Of course he will. And for Paul, it's inconceivable that as a Christian he would remain silent. He will, obviously, in his own mind, there's no doubt that he will open his mouth. That's a given. Well, maybe it was a given for Paul, but I wonder if it is such a given for us. We often are slow to open our mouths. Never mind what comes out, but even to open them is something that we're often slow to do. But for Paul, it's a given.

Pray also for me that whenever I open my mouth, then comes what he's asking, his need. And the need that he identifies as he opens his mouth, the need that he identifies is for clarity and courage.

Notice what Paul asks for there. Pray also for me that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me. That's the first thing that he needs to be given, words. And also then he says, so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel. So, the second thing he asks for is courage.

[24 : 19] And the actual verb there, given, applies to both things. The manner in which it's translated, it seems to be applying more to the words, that words would be given. But actually it applies to both the words and also the fearlessness. Both of these things, he asks the believers to pray that he would be given. He can't secure that for himself. They need to be given to him. And he asks that his fellow believers would pray that words would be given. But even these words that he speaks of, the older translations have there, I think, the word utterance. Now, utterance maybe is a little bit old-fashioned, but I think it captures something that maybe words doesn't capture, that Paul isn't simply asking for words. But he's asking for clarity in communicating those words. He has plenty words to say. Paul, if there's one thing he had plenty of, was words. But he's asking here for more than just words, but for a capacity to communicate those words clearly and appropriately to those he is speaking to.

He knows that every person he speaks to is different. The gospel message is the same, but the manner in which he will communicate the message, the manner in which he will secure the attention of the one he is speaking to will be different. And so there needs to be God-given clarity in communicating the words that he has to say. And there also needs to be, he needs to be given the courage to do so, to speak those words without in any way diluting his message, without adapting it for fear of rejection by his hearer, even when the truth that he has to communicate may be unpalatable or may be resisted or may lead to painful consequences for himself.

So he needs clarity and he needs courage. And it goes without saying it almost seems unnecessary to say, is that not true for us also? We too need clarity and courage as we open our minds and speak to others concerning Jesus. So there's the given, there's the need, but then there's also his desire. 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. This is his great desire, to make known the mystery of the gospel, to make Jesus known. His need, his request that he be given clarity and courage is born of this deep desire. Paul speaks of the mystery of the gospel. And in the New Testament, generally this word mystery simply refers to truth that was concealed but that has now been revealed.

So it was a mystery but now it has been revealed. But the word mystery still applies. It's not any more mysterious than that. It's the gospel, the truth of the gospel, the content of the gospel that was hidden but now has been made known. And as he speaks that message, that gospel, he does so as an ambassador.

It's not for Paul to make up the message. It's not for Paul to improvise or to change or to adapt as he sees fit. He's an ambassador. He's given words to speak and he speaks the words that he is given.

[28 : 10] This is his great desire. Notice that there's almost a merging of desire and duty. Without doubt, it was his desire to do so. But he also acknowledges there's an element of duty at the end of what he says there in verse 20, pray that I may declare it fearlessly as I should. Now that obligation, if you wish, may be a reference to the obligation to do so fearlessly but I think it covers more than that. Paul is recognizing that speaking and sharing the good news of the gospel is his great desire but it also merges with this sense of it being his great duty. This is something that he should do.

Then finally, we notice here what I'm calling the reward, though maybe reward isn't the most suitable word. And the reward that Paul has already received, if we can call it that, for doing what he's asking help to continue doing are his chains. And so, you know, I use the reward maybe or the word reward somewhat ironically. His reward for opening his mouth were the very chains that he speaks of there in verse 20, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Now, an ambassador in chains is a very incongruous picture, but it is Paul's reality. He is an ambassador and he is in chains.

Now, in the language that Paul uses, which is simply describing who he is and what he is and his circumstances, it is possible that Paul is using the word chains with a double meaning. The reason why it's possible is the Greek word that he employs is a word that can be used in one of two ways, maybe more, but certainly one of two ways. It can be used to describe the chains that a prisoner would be held by the chains that he has that tie him to the Roman soldier that he is chained to. And so, it means that.

It covers that meaning of chains. But the same word was also used to speak of golden chains that men and women of prominence and of repute would wear that would identify who they were and who they represented.

And so, ambassadors would wear golden chains and those chains would identify them and identify the king that they represented. And it may be that Paul here is using this play on words to speak of how he glories in his chains. Anybody else might look at him and feel sorry for him and say, well, what a terrible fate has befallen this man. And yet Paul can say, no, these chains, these chains are my glory. They are the chains of an ambassador. They speak of the one I represent. They speak of whose king I serve and whose gospel I proclaim. The chains identify him as a fearless ambassador of King Jesus. Well, to draw things to a close, the plea, the plea, the call of Paul to prayer, the petition, the request for prayer, together they capture the very heart of gospel work. Prayer and proclamation, prayer and word. We are all called to open our mouths and we all need to pray for ourselves and for each other that as we do, we would be given clarity and courage to share and to speak the mystery of the gospel. Let's pray that for each other.

[32 : 09] Well, let's pray now. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for the call that was presented and laid before the believers in Ephesus and that comes to us this evening.

And we ask that we would respond to it, that we would be those who pray in the Spirit, that we would know what it is to pray on all occasions with all kinds of requests, that we would pray always and pray for all the saints.

Help us. Help us. Help us. Help us grow in this matter. Help us to overcome those occasions when we grow tired, maybe discouraged, when we are not praying as we ought. And we pray that our recognizing that that that is so would not paralyze us, but rather as we listen to your word this evening, we would be encouraged with your help. For we know that we can only pray with your help. We can only pray in the Spirit, directed and prodded and guided by the Spirit. And so we ask that he would be the one who would be working in us and helping us. We pray that we would know something of Paul's desire to open his mouth and to share with others the good news of the gospel concerning your Son, Jesus Christ. And we pray that as Paul was conscious of his need for clarity and courage in communicating the gospel, that we too, conscious of that need, would pray for one another, that we would be granted clarity and courage. And as we do speak, so we would know that the thrill and the encouragement of seeing how the very Spirit who helps us pray and speak, that same Spirit helps others listen and respond. And all of these things we pray in

Jesus' name. Amen.