

Title: “House of Prayer – Prayer is Work!”- Colossians 1:24-2:5, 4:2-4

Aim: Consider that prayer is work, both to do it faithfully & in doing it.

Intro: In view of the fact that the theme of our Sunday mornings this year is “House of Prayer,” I been reading some books about prayer. One of those books is by an author I respect very much – Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City. His book on prayer is titled just that: Prayer, w/the subtitle, “Experiencing Awe & Intimacy w/God.” It’s a book I heartily recommend. 1 of the chapters is titled, “Touchstones of Prayer.” The premise of the chapter is that while there are no so-called secrets to prayer, there are what Keller calls “touchstones,” which he defines as “a small rock containing silica that was rubbed against a piece of gold or silver to test its degree of purity or genuineness.” He submits that these “touchstones of prayer may do the same for us in testing or proving the genuineness of our prayers. As I read this chapter & book I concluded that these “touchstones” indeed align w/Scripture & I think it might be helpful for us to consider them together, drawing them from the Scripture w/which they are aligned. You’ll note that this list of touchstones of prayer has been inserted in your bulletin for your keeping, if that will help. They are divided into 4 categories: What prayer is, what it requires, what it gives & where it takes us. For the next 3 months we’ll look at these touchstones 1 by 1. For today let’s consider the 1st subheading under “What Prayer Is.” **Prayer is Work**. We find this thought thruout Scripture. When asked by the people of Israel to pray for them, the prophet Samuel said (I Sam.12:23), “***...far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you...***” He considered prayer for them to be his obligation, obedience to God, a work that he was to carry out faithfully. Jesus commanded us in Mt.9:38 to “***...pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest***” – earnestly being the key word. Prayer takes

effort. The early disciples reportedly “**devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching & fellowship, to the breaking of bread & the prayers**” (Acts 2:42). Devotion is commitment to, again taking effort & time & thought. Paul urged the Romans believers to “**...be constant in prayer**” (Rm.12:12), & “**to strive together w/me in your prayers to God on my behalf...**” (Rm.15:30). To strive is to put effort & energy into a matter. And there are numerous other references to doing the work of prayer. One of the clearest references is found in Paul’s epistle to the Colossians. Really the whole epistle highlights Paul’s prayer for this church/these believers. He wrote (as often did in his epistles) that he had “**not ceased to pray for**” them (1:9). And I think this concept of prayer being work is clearly seen in our text this morning, **Colossians 1:24-2:5 & 4:2-4** [READ]. Paul said he rejoiced in his sufferings. He made a strange statement that “in his flesh [he was] filling up what [was] lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of His body...the Church.” What that means, I believe, is that as a Christ-follower, a servant of Christ he was destined to some measure of affliction/suffering for the sake of Christ. If he was going to carry out the work of Christ, he would suffer/be afflicted in the midst of that work, just as Christ suffered/afflicted, as if Christ were suffering thru him. But how was Paul suffering? How was he being afflicted? We know of course that he was enduring imprisonment. This letter was one of Paul’s “prison epistles.” We also know from Scripture that Paul was beaten several times, stoned & left for dead, shipwrecked & much more. He suffered w/ physical ailments. He said to the Galatians that he bore “**on [his] body the marks of Jesus**” (5:17). He wrote the Philippians (4:12) that he had “**learned the secret of facing plenty & hunger, abundance & need.**” However, Paul suffered not only physically for the sake of Christ, but also the spiritual/mental affliction of his deep concern for the Colossian believers in prayer. Suffering can be external or internal.

After listing numerous physical sufferings in II Corinthians 11:23-27, Paul wrote in vs 28, ***“And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.”*** The burden of the welfare of the churches he had planted was heavy upon Paul. Paul, who wrote (Phil.4:6), ***“Do not be anxious about anything...”*** was anxious! We can learn from this that anxiety will come, & therefore we must respond to it properly. I think we can surmise that Paul took his own admonition to heart: ***“...but in everything by prayer & supplication w/thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”*** Concerning his concerns for the Church, Paul prayed! We can draw from this passage some of the things about which Paul was deeply burdened & prayed. He had been given by God a stewardship, to take the Gospel to the Gentiles, to “make the word of God fully known” (vs25). I) **He was concerned** that they & others clearly understood the glorious mystery of sure hope (vs26-27). Mystery means something that had been previously hidden but was being presently revealed. The wonderful revelation to which Paul referred was that the way was opened, even for the Gentiles, to have new life, relationship w/God, & sure hope of eternity. That hope is Jesus - “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” Paul faithfully preached the gospel, but how could he be sure they heard & believed? He prayed! He labored in prayer. II) **Paul also labored in his teaching & in prayer** to “present everyone mature in Christ” (vs28). Can’t you imagine Paul in that prison cell earnestly calling on God for the spiritual growth of the Colossian believers & others, even while chained to Roman guards? I can imagine him even tossing in his sleep & waking to pray. He certainly prayed before & as he wrote each epistle, seeking the Holy Spirit’s leading & unction to write just the right words which would give insight & challenge, admonish & correct, leading to growth & maturity. III) **Paul also struggled** in his writings & prayer to encourage & assure the hearts of

the Colossian believers (2:1-3). In the face of persecution & even everyday life, the Colossians, like every other believer, struggled w/discouragement, doubt, the what if's, misunderstandings of the truth, pressure from government & false teachers. Unity would be threatened. Paul wanted to encourage them in their walk, praying that they would understand that their faith in Christ meant that He would be actively involved in their lives. He would supply the wisdom & knowledge they needed to live their lives as disciples. He would knit their hearts together. So Paul prayed for them, doing the work of prayer. IV) **He also labored in his writings & in prayer** to see them "in good order" & firm in their faith (vs4-5). Paul was anxious, & rightly so, that the Colossian believers might be deluded by circumstances & false teaching, that they might be wrongly convinced to turn from Christ (tho he himself taught that those truly in Christ will not turn away). What could Paul do besides writing to warn them? He could pray, & he did. He never ceased praying for them. He poured out his heart to God in prayer for them. He wrestled in prayer. He labored & struggled in prayer. Note, however, that as we read in 1:29, Paul's didn't do the work of prayer in his own strength. He struggled not in his own strength, but "***w/all of [Christ's] energy that He powerfully works w/in me.***" Remember as we looked at John 17, Jesus' "High Priestly Prayer" (last week), that we discovered that Jesus, even as He faced His death, thought about & prayed for His disciples & us? Paul was being energized by Christ as he prayed for these Colossians & all the churches. Jesus Himself was praying thru Paul, His life flowing thru the apostle. When we labor in prayer, do the work of prayer, we're not alone. Christ is w/us, praying for us. The Holy Spirit is w/in us, praying prayers w/groaning too deep for words. And the Father gladly hears us! The work of prayer is never a solo effort. Then, as we move to chap. 4:2-4, we see where V) **Paul urged the Colossian believers** (& us)

to join him in the work of prayer. ***“Continue steadfastly in prayer.”***

The word used there means “adhere to, be devoted to, or constant; be steadfastly attentive to, give unremitting care to” (Strong’s). We’re to be “watchful” in prayer – vigilant, alert – that takes effort, energy. Any sentry worth his/her salt works hard to stay alert, be watchful. And we’re to be watchful w/thanksgiving, meaning that we are to express our faith in God even before we see the answer, thanking Him for His faithfulness ahead of time, then thanking Him when we do see the answer. So we are to watch for the answer, expecting God to be God. Paul asked the Colossians to pray for his team. Paul was in prison, but he had others attending to him & praying w/him & carrying out his instructions & work – Tychicus would deliver the letter & report to them about how Paul was. Onesimus would accompany him.

Aristarchus was in prison w/him. Mark was attending to Paul’s needs, as were Epaphrus & Luke & Demas. They labored w/Paul in the work of prayer & were part of the answer to Paul’s prayers. Paul asked specifically that the Colossians pray for an open door for the word, the Gospel. Even in prison Paul was sharing the Gospel w/prison guards & others. Those w/him were preaching the Gospel & teaching others. Paul had the hope of being released & being able to go forth again to plant more churches & make more disciple. Part of our work of prayer should be directed toward the furtherance of the Gospel & kingdom of God on earth. We should be praying for an open door for the word in our own neighborhoods & communities, that God would use us to make disciples. Prayer is indeed work! We must give effort to it & be faithful. Keller wrote, “Prayer should be done regularly, persistently, resolutely, & tenaciously at least daily, whether we feel like it or not.” Then quoting Peter Forsyth, he wrote, “The worst sin (leading to other sins & inconsistencies in our lives) is prayerlessness.” Again he wrote, “Prayer must be persevering.” “Prayer is always hard work, & often an

agony. We sometimes have to wrestle even to pray.” “While God can & will grant times of peace & tranquility, no Christian outgrows the need to struggle & persevere in prayer.” We’ve got to stick to it & not give up – praying for the lost, praying for loved ones, praying for the church, etc. We must be diligent & give ourselves to prayer. As Oswald Chambers wisely wrote, “Prayer does not fit us for the greater work; prayer is the greater work.” God said, “My house shall be called a house of prayer.” Let us be His people of prayer, doing the work of prayer.