

Paul was an amazingly gifted apostle, given the challenge of extending the kingdom of God into the non-Jewish world of his day. That is an enormous task. He has written most of the books in the New Testament. He had an enormous task and an enormous gifting by God to do so. Yet, over and over again in his letters he is expressing his prayers to the Lord, he is urging the people of God to pray, and He is talking to God in the midst of the trials and the blessings of his life. Why? **Because Paul knows that this new creation that Jesus has brought into existence through His resurrection is perpetuated by Jesus Christ alone.** “I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”

So, Paul is constantly asking Jesus to do these things, to do the very things which he, himself, is working to see done. To open doors, to enlighten eyes of the heart, to abide in His people through faith, and constantly pulling together God’s people, these new congregations into this reality of prayer, of depending upon God and of thinking about Reality, this world, as a place where God is active and committed to bring about His Kingdom through judgement and redemption. So, the apostle is absolutely committed to pray to the One who is thus active and able to accomplish the glorious history which He has both ordained and for which He has commanded us to participate in its growth and building.

When we think back about what prayer looked like in Colossae, I have no idea. Was prayer normal in their society? It appears so. Was their experience of prayer informed by their former pagan ways? Was it informed by their experience of the Jewish background of the gospel’s beginnings? I know that their congregation, while being largely Greek, was also Scythian and Barbarian and Jewish in background. They came from different experiences with different assumptions about what prayer was, but it also seems that there was significant overlap between such multicultural experiences that prayer did not need to be explained, but was merely assumed.

We know that over and over again Paul instructed the church to pray. Most of us would acknowledge that prayer is an important part of the Christian life, that it is good and valuable and commanded by God. Yet, it is also probably true that all of us

would say that we are not content with the condition of our habits concerning prayer, or that many of us actually struggle to pray. Every age has its characteristic depravity, its cultural idol that pulls us away from depending appropriately upon the one true God and lean inappropriately upon some created thing. **I think that one of our cultural idols is self-reliance, particularly in the arena of technique.**

What I mean is that we have an unspoken, and unevaluated, assumption that we can make life flourish if only we could simply find the right *technique*. The right educational technique, the right scientific technique, the right medical technique, the right *methodology* will really make life thrive, physically, emotionally, and even spiritually. Then, we tend to approach prayer the same way, as a technique, as a “put in prayer A in slot A and things will all come together” as if prayer was created by IKEA.

We are almost always problem-solving, looking for the right plan and the right resources to make something work. You will strategize today, right? You may not call it strategy or technique, but you will do it. You have a plan to get food into your refrigerator, right? You make a plan to grow your tomatoes this summer, and that strategy has components that begin soon. You may be strategizing right now about how to get out this door after the service so that you don’t have to speak to anyone. Plans.

Such strategies are good and necessary. We are supposed to be do-ers, and prayer is not a refusal to act. But, we tend to then define *all* human problems as technical problems which require the right technique to solve. And we spend a huge amount of time trying to discover the technique that will solve our problem, and if we can’t come up with it, we invent it.

I have always been a person who finds it hard to pray, not because prayer is necessarily hard, but because my heart is so perversely bent towards self-reliance, towards the belief that I can discover and become competent in any technique which any problem in my life may present itself, an attitude, by the way, which is the exact opposite of prayer.

I grew up always wanting to understand how things worked, how things ticked. When I was four years old I took apart my Sit-n-Spin because trusting that it worked wasn't enough. I wanted to know how it worked, and if I could make it faster. I was always taking things apart to see how they worked.

Not only that, but I was always being told by my loving mother that my name, Richard, means "strong and powerful ruler", and that I was destined for greatness. Now, this greatness did not foresee that Sit-n-Spins had to be reassembled or they didn't work at all any longer, let alone better. I said I was always taking things apart, not that I was putting them back together.

**But this growing belief that our problems are technical problems which can be solved by our creativity, our passion, our determination, and the like, has created an underlying cultural value that our world is *makeable*.** That we can make the world whatever we want it to be, and that the world that we make, or will make, is whatever our strategies or techniques will produce, be that good or bad.

And you see this idea everywhere. Think of the issue of climate change. The underlying assumption is a technical one. We made this world, and it's changing, therefore it is our fault. We can, then, fix this world, if we alter our strategies and techniques. Whatever happens is due to the strategies, techniques, and power of man.

When it comes to spiritual lives, it's just so easy to just drop into this mode, and we apply these strategies to our moral lives, our spiritual lives, as well. And thus, in our assumption of greatness, we forget to pray. We replace prayer with strategy. Listen, it's not as if strategizing itself is bad, but it cannot be a replacement for the power of God. Our goal-setting and strategizing and planning must be our secondary work, behind the work of prayer, which is really an unwork, an asking for help. Pray first, depend on God, and plan wisely, keeping watch in gratitude. Prayer precedes plans because God governs the outcomes. **Proverbs 21:31 reads, "A horse is prepared for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the LORD."** That's how it works. We prepare the horse for the day of battle, but the victory is not ultimately due to our horse or our preparation, but the LORD, and Him alone.

And that mother, who loved me so desperately and worked to instill strength in me was also the mother who prayed for me nightly, every time I was sick or scared or needy or tearful, my mother was teaching me how to pray. And I know, now, that she prayed for me much more than merely at those times which I saw. I know, now, that she also particularly prayed that the stubborn, arrogant, defiant little ruler would learn humility, obedience, and to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. ☺

Yet, sin present in me fertilized the message about being strong and capable and powerful and scattered the seed of humility and God-reliance in prayer which my mother labored so hard to work in me.

I say this to my shame, because it shouldn't be this way, and reason tells us that, as creatures who are finite addressing a God who is not, that self-reliant strategy is the most ridiculous garment imaginable, like wearing a speedo in an Antarctic winter storm. It's not merely foolish and silly, but so stupid as to become rather dangerous.

Yet, I do not think that I am alone in this struggle with my own foolishness. I don't think that I am the only one not suitably dressed for this momentous life in God's world. I'm not the only one who assumes that what I really need is a good plan, a good strategy, or a good technique. Maybe you don't struggle with the kind of prayerless self-reliance that I struggle with, but you struggle more with prayerless shame or self-pity or fear, the source of your fear may be the same as the source of my pride: you and I both assume that we need a good technique. It's just that I believe that I can find it and you doubt that you can. And the outcome of our error is the same: we don't persevere in asking the Lord for what He can do. If your fear makes you flee from the Lord in despair, or your arrogance makes you stand away from the Lord in pride, both of us need the perseverance which the apostle mentions here, endurance and persistence, and tenacity to keep asking.

**Because the apostle has spent the first part of this book reminding us that all things hold together in Christ Jesus, and that we have everything that we need, an inheritance from God, a belonging in His world, a place in His presence, all because we are united to Jesus Christ according to His grace alone, through faith alone, in**

**Christ alone.** Do you remember this? He is the image of the invisible God who made all things. All the fullness of God is pleased to dwell in Him. It is He who reconciles all things to Himself and makes all things the way they are supposed to be. All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found in Him alone, chapter 2. It's the gospel, the good news of what God has done, but we can so easily slip back into the assumption that all things hold together because of the latest strategy, the latest plan, the latest theory of the world on how to manage our problems. But the world holds together only in Jesus Christ, so Paul prays, and He urges the Church to pray, and then to pray some more, to be looking to God, asking God to do what only God can do, and to make this message that all things hold together in Jesus Christ penetrate into the world in clarity and completeness and consequence. Persist in prayer, endure in prayer, be tenacious in asking God.

**Because that's the command here in verse 2 that governs the next two verses:**

**Persevere, Persist, Be Tenacious.** It's a compound word which literally translates, "Persevere towards," and, ironically, comes from the root word for "strength" or "strong." So, you could say that we are to be strong...just strong in being supported, powerful in issuing pleas, awesome in asking for help. That's what prayer means: asking, pleas for help, requests for supplies. It is an inherent expression of our inadequacy and God's superabundant resources. You could even say that you are to be strong in admitting your weakness, unlimited in acknowledging your limits so that you ask the supernatural, uncreated, supremely able Ruler of the Universe for what you need to live the life which He has designed for you.

And we must ask, "Why does the apostle give us a command to persist like this? To persevere?" Because he knows that it is easy to give up on asking. It is easy to think that our technique isn't working, or we're doing something wrong in our style or substance, that our passion isn't grand enough or our watchfulness has waned, or that we have simply fallen out of God's favor because we haven't kept our end of some moral bargain that we assume God requires. That we haven't put enough moral money into God's vending machine. It's easy to treat prayer like a technique, so we give up when it doesn't pay out.

Or, it is easy to become self-reliant or to become doubtful of God's presence, God's willingness to help, or God's ability to overcome the evil of my heart and the evil of other men's hearts. But, that is exactly what Paul is telling us to persevere in asking! **Look, he says to persevere in prayer doing two things. Do you see the two things? The first is "keeping watch" or "keeping alert" in it.**

You see, prayer is not only an active asking, but also a passive watching. Now, keeping watch is not a technique. If anything, it's a lack of technique. It's not really doing anything which warrants anything. It's just watching. It's the opposite of participating in the answer to prayer, it's observing God work everything out Himself. Prayer is asking God to do things, and then watching for what *God* does. That is why this watching is so tightly connected with thanksgiving. When you are watching for God's response to your prayers, you are quick to thank Him when He answers. If you are not watching for God's response, you are not grateful for His kind deliveries. It is also true that if you assume that prayer is a technique, then thankfulness is absolutely foreign to our response. Nobody thanks the vending machine. In fact, technique means that somebody or something *owes you*, because you have pushed the right buttons, performed the right magic, or paid the full dues. Rather, when we assume that prayer is a technique to get what we want, which may be good things, then when God doesn't respond the way we want or on the timeline which we want, we get angry or bitter with Him because we really assume that He owes us, because we put in the right prayer coinage and He should pay out. Like hitting that vending machine, we wail on God and complain that prayer is a rip-off.

**But Paul says that we are to keep watch *with thanksgiving*.** Gratitude comes from knowing that God does NOT owe us, but because He is kind; that He is a Father who knows more than us, who sees more than us, who is infinitely more power and more wise than we are, and loves us deeply, and that His timing and His answer are not merely right, but good, and that He is to be trusted with the whens and hows of our future. Our watching is an act of faith, of trust in Him, and He has proven to be trustworthy, most poignantly in the gift of His Son for you, of binding you to His Son's obedience and faithfulness and honor. Therefore, keep watch! Wait for His

answer. Fix your eyes on the horizon of your asking and God's answering, and do not be distracted by the false promises of your own strength and schemes and strategies.

And I think that there is a second aspect to "keeping watch" that must be mentioned, and Jon mentioned it last week in his sermon on Lament. It is the aspect of *expectancy*. We watch when we are expecting God to answer. The answer may be no, it may be yes, or it may be, not yet, but we watch for it expectantly. You see, you keep watch, you keep looking, when you expect something or someone to come over the horizon. Like a child waiting for his grandparents to drive up the driveway, so excited, expectant, and watching. In reality, why don't we watch? Well, why doesn't a child persevere in watching for his grandparents? Is it not because he either doesn't care that much (something else is more important to him, some toy, some TV programs, etc.), or because he doesn't really believe that they are going to arrive at all?

So, keeping watch is the expression of loving faith, fixing one's eyes upon the Lord with the expectation that He hears and that He answers the prayers of His children, and when we behold the kindness of God, whether that be His kindness of the past, the present, or the expected future, we are grateful for His generosity and His kindness, knowing that He does not owe us His goodness, but that He gives it freely and superabundantly out of a heart of patient promise-keeping love for His people.

To do anything else is simply faithless. I mean, that's my problem, you know. My faith is too small. My expectations are too small. Really, my appreciation of the very problem is way too small. Consider this: When I think that the world's problems are solvable by our human techniques, then I am terribly underestimating the problems in the world. When I think that re-education and assimilation of lawbreakers will change the hearts of lawbreakers, I am terribly overestimating the power of our education system. When I believe that therapeutic drugs will change the heart of man, I am terribly overestimating the power of drugs and underestimating the power of despair. Now, should we educate lawbreakers? Yes! Are therapeutic drugs sometimes helpful in staving off emotional despair? Yes! But

neither one cures the ill, but only manages the symptoms. Only one thing can repair the underlying problem: the good news of Jesus Christ.

**And this is why Paul follows up “keeping watch” with the second manner of our persistence in prayer: praying for opportunities for be heard and believed.** As you pray expectantly and gratefully, ask God to do the greatest work, the most necessary work, the work of the proclamation of this great solution to humanity’s true and greatest problem: sin and separation from God: Jesus Christ, the Son of God, *for us*. Pray for those who are imprisoned for the gospel. Pray for those who are laboring to proclaim it. We must persevere in praying for others, “praying for us, too,” says Paul, asking God to do what only God can do, and Paul has something particular in mind regarding this prayer for others.

**Not only are there two aspects of what prayer looks like, watching and praying for us, but there are also two particular purposes of this persistent prayer mentioned by Paul, and they go hand in hand.** You can see them introduced by a single small word, “that”. That’s it. It indicates the purpose for something. Persist in prayer with this purpose, first... *that* God would open a door for them concerning the message. The reason, or the content, of our requests, watching and asking, is so that God would open up access for the gospel.

What is a door? It is access. It is a bridge between one place and another place. So, Paul acknowledges that doors may be closed, but that God can open them. Only God can open them. So, he asks God to do so. What humanity needs is not more techniques, but hearts open to the gospel of Jesus. And the doors of men’s hearts may appear to be locked, dead-bolted, and guarded by fierce defenders...and I think that you probably have a loved one like that, who is so closed off to the good news of Christ Jesus that they are impenetrable to the gospel. Here’s the thing. You don’t have to coerce them. You don’t have constrain them. If their door is closed, you don’t have to break any locks or find any keys or crack any codes to open their hearts to the freeing joy of Christ Jesus for them. God can open any door and drop any defense. Are we praying like this? Are we imagining the doors being opened, and

then are we watching for them? Are we looking for the turning doorknobs or listening for the sliding bolts of God's handiwork?

You see, the apostle asks God to open a door to them "for the word", the "message", which is the good news of His Son, Christ Jesus, and of our union with Him by faith alone. This union, this representative for us of a person holy and human, good and God, righteous and willing to bear the penalty for our sins, who by sheer kindness has committed Himself to take upon Himself our curse so that we might gain His eternal inheritance, is the good news, the message which must cross the threshold into every land and every people. This is the door which must be opened by God – the access to people's ears and hearts to announce the message, the gospel for whose cause Paul has been bound up in prison. Pray for this door to be opened, no matter your condition, limited by languishing health, bound by steely threats and the iron bars of shame or mocking voices. Pray in these moments because God can open a door which the gospel can cross through and redeem the hearts of wicked men and bring wisdom to the minds of fools. God can move mountains, and the prayers of faith from His people are the means which He has ordained to do so.

I've had people ask, when questioning the absolute sovereignty of God, "Why should we pray if God is going to do whatever He wants?" I usually respond with, "Why would pray if God cannot do anything about such things?" **You see, we pray *because* God is sovereign!** We ask because God can open doors. If we don't believe that God can open doors to the gospel, if he cannot shape the hearts of kings like canals shape the flow of water, then why would we ask him to do so? Why God has ordained that His providence and His people's prayers coexist is found in the Fatherly wisdom of God, that our dependence upon Him is better for us than any kind of indifference or fatalistic approach to His providence.

But, we know from God's Word, that if a door to the gospel is opened, it is because God has opened it. So, persist in prayer, asking God to open a door for the gospel, and then watch gratefully to see Him work. You will gain in the asking and God will be glorified as He is worthy.

The second purpose noted, again by that little word “that”, is closely related to God opening the door. Do you see it again? In verse 4? **That I might make it clear!** So, not only does Paul know that God must open the door for the gospel, but God must also help him to “make it known” as he ought to. Paul, the preacher, the prophet, the former Pharisee trained by the famous Gamaliel, who excelled beyond his contemporaries in the matter of both law and rhetoric, knew that he needed the help of God to be clear! The mischievous mind and hungry heart are so prone to wander and miss the mark, to confuse rather than clarify, to major on minors and get caught up in peripherals. The apostle knows his own fragility, his own fears, his own inabilities, and he asks for persistent prayers to be made so that he reveals the gospel as it is, because God is the one who empowers preaching, both mine, and yours, as He wills.

**You see, it doesn’t come across as clearly in our sentence structures, but both of these purposes, “to open the door of the word” and “to make the word known” are modified by the exact phrase: “to speak.”** What Paul is saying that we should be persisting in prayer for, is that the door for the gospel would be opened for him *to* speak the mystery of the Christ, and that God would open his mouth *to* speak the gospel clearly and boldly. Not just because he ought to, but he says even more strongly, “as it is necessary.” To speak the mystery of the Christ and to speak because it is necessary for him to do so. The opening of the door is for the purpose of people hearing the good news of Jesus Christ, and people cannot hear if someone does not announce it to them. Opened hearts are made for the gospel and the gospel proclamation is made for opened hearts and ears, and God has told us that we are to keep asking Him to do both, and to ask on the behalf of others who are announcing the gospel as well.

And we can do so expecting God to do the miraculous work among us and through us into this world, because we know the gospel: that all things are held together in Christ Jesus, and that we belong to God because God has graciously granted us newness of life through His Son, and transferred us from the domain of darkness into His beloved Son’s kingdom. We know that in Christ we are complete, whole, and

will be transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ upon the day of His return, receiving the fullness of His inheritance when He makes all things new. This gospel is truly good news! And God has already worked in us to open the door of the gospel to our culture, for we are Gentiles, and to our ears, for we have heard the good news proclaimed, and ultimately to our hearts, because we have believed in Him. That is God's doing, and we are grateful...and we want to see it happen for others.

**So, how can we pray?** We can persist in asking God to do the miraculous work of opening our mouths and opening any obstruction to the gospel, keeping watch for God's answer, with gratitude in our hearts towards Him for His grace in redemption. We can do so, particularly, by asking God to open the avenues of the gospel to our city, to our neighborhoods, to our families. We can ask God to open our mouths and the mouths of our brothers and sisters overseas to speak the gospel clearly, because it is necessary for people to hear it for their salvation. We can ask God to help us be thankful in our asking, to behold His goodness and His generosity, to guard our hearts from becoming distracted by the pull of self-reliance and overestimating the power of man and underestimating the power of God. We don't have to strategize for God. We don't have to tell God how to do it. We only have to ask Him to do it, and then keep watch...and see what God will do.