

Wrestling in Prayer

Sunday, January 16, 2021

Colossians 4:12

*12 Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always **wrestling in prayer** for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.*

I'm sure most of us have read or heard about this little verse at some point or another. For the most part we view it as a commendation about Epaphras' prayer life. I don't disagree with that, but the more I think about the phrase "**wrestling in prayer**" the more I feel like there may be a secondary meaning.

Transliteration: *agonizomai*

The word itself can mean to labor or strive earnestly or to contend, struggle, with difficulties and dangers antagonistic to the gospel

I want to suggest that part of Epaphras' contention or struggle in prayer involved wrestling with some of the same issues that we must all wrestle with when it comes to the spiritual discipline of prayer. One by one, I want us to contend with principles of prayer that we may take for granted, or don't truly understand, or in some cases have been taught incorrectly. Principles that must be dealt with if we are to remain faithful and be victorious in prayer

In order to do that, I want to re-examine the teaching that Jesus gave his disciples when they asked him to teach them to pray.

Matthew 6:5-14

5 "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 6 But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. 7 And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

*9 "This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
10 your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
11 Give us today our daily bread.
12 And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.*

14 For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. **15** But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

- Prayer is first and foremost about relationship

9 *“This, then, is how you should pray:*

“Our Father

your Father... 3x in the previous verses

- Prayer is believing in and understanding who God is

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,

In the Lord's prayer Jesus begins by drawing our attention to the existence and attributes of the one true God. I have met many people who believe fervently in prayer, but the more important question is who are they praying to?

More than once Jesus spoke of prayer "in my name" By default this means that there is prayer that is not done in the name of Jesus. In the name is more than a tag line to a prayer but suggests a deep understanding of who we pray to. To keep the name of God hallowed, we must know and understand the attributes of the God to whom we pray. Remember what the writer of Hebrews tells us...

Hebrews 11:6

6 *And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.*

- Prayer is not a formula

7 *And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.*

One of the issues we must WRESTLE with in regard to prayer is the temptation to reduce prayer to some sort of a formula. A formula says, if I do this, this, and this then I am guaranteed to get a certain outcome.

- **Prayer is not telling God what to do**

9 *“This, then, is how you should pray: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, **10** your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

When I pray, I must keep in perspective that He is God, and I am not. He is my father, He is set apart, it is His kingdom, and He rules supremely.

As an earthly father I understand this principle. Now I am not omniscient in my understanding of things - as much as I would like my kids to believe that - and I am not saying that my kids can't teach me things from time to time. Still, I am the father, I do have more experience with most things than they do and a deeper understanding of most things than they do; and in those circumstances, I don't like my kids telling me what to do.

How much truer is this with God. He is ALL knowing and understands EVERYTHING better than we do.

Isaiah 55:8-9

8 *“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. **9** “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

Having said that, as an earthly father, I love it when my kids ASK me. I delight to give them what they (politely and with proper respect) ASK me for (as long as I believe it is their best interest and will not harm them or lead them in a wrong direction

Matthew 7:7-11

7 *“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. **8** For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.*

9 *“Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? **10** Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? **11** If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!*

- Prayer is not bribing or manipulating God

As he introduces this prayer, Jesus speaks of the prayer practices of the pagans...

7 And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Not only did the pagans believe their many words would earn an answer to their prayers, but they also believed they could bribe their gods

But God tells us...

Deuteronomy 10:17

17 For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes.

So many times, in prayer we fall into the trap of attempting to bribe or manipulate God. One example of this is the foxhole prayer. "Lord, if you get me out of this, I will serve you the rest of my life."

While some may actually keep that vow, we must remember that the reason God answered the prayer had much less to do with the promise made to him and much more to do with his infinite grace and love.

Let's take a quick look at a prayer you may have read this week if you are following along with the Bible Reading Guides this year.

Genesis 28:20-22

20 Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear 21 so that I return safely to my father's household, then the Lord will be my God 22 and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth."

Jacob's prayer was not evil, but it was founded upon the idea that we can bribe or manipulate God. Years later, in fact the night that he wrestled with God, Jacob's perspective on prayer had changed.

Genesis 32:9-12

9 Then Jacob prayed, “O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, Lord, you who said to me, ‘Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper,’ **10 I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant.** I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two camps. **11** Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. **12** But you have said, ‘I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.’”

Rather than tell God what He needed to do and bribe Him in order to get Him to do it, Jacob falls upon to things...

1. The kindness and faithfulness of God, despite his unworthiness (Grace and Mercy)
 2. The promises that God had made which declared who He was and what He would do. (The promise he references in his prayer is the promise that God made to Abraham) In other words, there is nothing wrong with declaring the promises of God, quoting scripture, speaking of the attributes of God as we pray. Indeed, these are some of the most powerful words we can pray.
- Prayer is not bringing God into conformity with our will but bringing our will into conformity with God's
10 your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Here we see the struggle in prayer, perhaps greater than anywhere else. Jesus not only taught us to pray this way, He showed us how to pray this way...

Luke 22:39-44

39 Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him. **40** On reaching the place, he said to them, “Pray that you will not fall into temptation.” **41** He withdrew about a stone’s throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, **42** “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; **yet not my will, but yours be done.**” **43** An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. **44** And being in anguish, **he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.**

We too must wrestle in prayer until, like Jesus, our prayers reflect a desire for His Kingdom and His Will, not our own.