

**Title: Striving in Prayer**  
**Biblical Text: Romans 15:30-33**  
**Teaching Series: Justified by Love**  
**Preaching Date: October 22, 2023**  
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## **Romans 15:30-33**

*I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. May the God of peace be with you all. Amen.*

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Today Paul asks for prayer. If you remember, Paul has just explained to his Romans readers that he intends to come visit them for the first time. But first, he's going to deliver a financial gift to Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. While last week we considered the power of that gift—it broke down barriers of consumerism, materialism, and individualism—now, Paul counts the cost of delivering the gift. You see, when you break down barriers not everyone is happy about it. There were many people who found a level of comfort with the social and religious divisions of the day, even within the Christian Church. They didn't want the walls to fall down. *With me?*

So, Paul has good reason to be concerned. And instead of keeping his concern quiet ... he lets his brothers and sisters in on his anxiety, his fears, and his struggle. *Isn't that what church family is all about? We share burdens. We celebrate together. We weep together. Paul says here, we strive together in prayer. That's what I want to talk about today. I want to talk about what it means to strive in prayer together, especially in struggle.*

Many of us struggle to pray. Many of us wrestle with the effectiveness of prayer. We battle with trusting that praying, especially praying with each other, bears any affect on ultimate reality. After all, there are plenty of situations in which we might have prayed and the result didn't match our request at all. *What do we do with that? What's the purpose and power of prayer? What's the role of prayer in the life of the church? Paul seems to think it's pretty central.*

Here's how we'll organize our time in this passage ...

- The *posture* of prayer.
- The *content* of prayer.
- The *result* of prayer.

[Prayer]

## **Movement 1: The Posture of Prayer (v.30, Psalm 51:14-17, Matthew 6:9, John 14:13-14)**

One of the first things I think we'll notice about Paul's prayer request is that it's not passive. He nearly commands his readers to pray for him. *Read Romans 15:30 ... I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf.* You see that? *I appeal to you, brothers.* Immediately we get this sense of urgency. Before we even know Paul's specific request for prayer, we're learning something about what we'll call ... the *posture* of prayer. Prayer is not passive.

Paul doesn't ask his readers to some sideline sentimentality. He's inviting them into the struggle. This active nature to prayer is further demonstrated when he says *to strive together with me*. "Strive together" is a single compound word that only appears here in the Bible. It means to *join fervently* or *contend along with*. It's both active and communal. Modern people often consider prayer as a merely passive engagement in what's happening in our world. When we post "thoughts and prayers" we might as well say "I don't want to get involved." Or as one comedian quips, "Don't forget about me today." While prayer shouldn't be the only way we engage with the problems we face personally and socially, prayer is not an abdication of moral responsibility. Paul is conveying to us that prayer is not passive.

The Psalms are really a book of prayers and songs. If we want to learn to pray, we certainly should consider Jesus' explicit instructions on prayer in his Sermon on the Mount (something we looked at this summer). But we should also read the Psalms. Throughout these 150 prayers, we witness believers crying out to God in an active and honest participation with God and his people. They're not watching life from a distance. They're not sympathetic without accountability. They're repeatedly asking God for protection, comfort, justice, and healing ... and considering how they ought to get involved, live differently, and engage further.

Israel's second king, King David ... who was a shepherd boy who became king ... wrote 73 of the 150 psalms. He wrote many of them to be prayed and sung as a congregation during worship gatherings. That's why in the preface of many of his psalms it says, "*To the choirmaster.*" He's offering his prayers to the person who's organizing and leading the worship gathering, to be said or sung by all the people as a community. One of those psalms is Psalm 51. David wrote Psalm 51 after he committed adultery and got caught. Think about that. Prayer is not passive. David is in the middle of guilt and shame and grief and brokenness. This is a prayer not of passive sorrow, but active contrition. He seeks forgiveness, protection, accountability, and transformation. The prayer is not something he's checking off a list. The prayer is stepping into the light, into the struggle.

David says, *Read Psalm 51:14-17 ... Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. For you will not*

*delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.* Remember, this isn't just about David. David is teaching God's people to pray. It's communal. It's an invitation. It's an invitation into the struggle. Their prayer of confession is meant to be a beginning, not the end. He asks for deliverance from sin and vows to speak and live differently. Declaring righteousness and praise. Offering a broken and contrite heart—his life will be a sacrifice, not simply his prayer. That's striving. *You see?* Prayer is not passive.

All this being the case, the power of our prayers is not in our striving and activity. Tim Keller explains in his book on prayer that "*The power of our prayers ... lies not primarily in our effort and striving, or in any technique, but rather in our knowledge of God*" (Prayer, 49). This is why Paul incorporates every member of the Trinity in his articulation of the *posture* of prayer. Though we pray urgently. Though we pray together. Our prayer is most informed by the one to whom and by whom we pray: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Look again at v.30. ***Read Romans 15:30 ... I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf.*** Prayer isn't passive, nor is prayer about us. The posture of prayer is an active striving together, centered on the community of the Trinity: God the Father, Son, and Spirit.

- The Father hears our prayers. In Jesus' instruction on prayer, he tells us to directly address the Heavenly Father. ***Read Matthew 6:9 ... Pray then like***

*this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name."* When we pray, we're praying to our Father.

- The Son teaches us to pray and we pray in his name. Notice Pauls says, "*by our Lord Jesus Christ.*" Jesus promises his disciples that in his name there's power. *Read John 14:13-14 ... Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.* When we pray, we're praying in the name of our brother, in Jesus' name.
- The Spirit unites us in prayer. When Paul says, "*by the love of the Spirit*" ... he's talking about the love believers share as part of the fruit of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22). When we strive together in prayer, the Spirit works among us and brings us together through love as the people of God. We're praying with our spiritual family.

This is the *posture*. It's urgent. It's grounded in the Trinity. Of course, not every prayer will feel urgent in the same way as Paul is describing. Nor does every prayer need to hit each member of the Trinity like some spiritual game of Mad Libs. Rather, we're meant to nurture this posture regularly so that no matter what we're praying about we're becoming more and more dependent and aware of our familial identity and collective dependency upon Father, Son, and Spirit.

## **Movement 2: The Content of Prayer (v.31, Acts**

### **20:22-23,21:4,11-12)**

Now, that's the posture. It's how we are to approach prayer. *But what does Paul want his readers to pray about and what can we learn about prayer in general from his request?* Look at v.31. **Read Romans 15:31 ... "that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints."** Paul requests prayer for two things: 1.) deliverance from the Jews in Jerusalem and, 2.) that the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem accept the gift he's bringing. These two requests beg a host of questions. *Why is Paul worried about his safety in Judea? Why is Paul worried fellow Christians will not accept a financial gift?* Well, let's remember a couple things ... The Jewish world is still contending with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. They are still trying to find a place in their hearts and minds to receive him as the Messiah. And even if they did become followers of Jesus, a ton of old habits and prejudices about Gentiles, non-Jewish people remained unchanged.

Paul was worried Jews in Jerusalem wouldn't welcome him and try to hurt him so that the gospel (that Jesus is Lord and Messiah) would not spread. Paul was worried Jewish Christians in Jerusalem would think the gift from Macedonia and Achaia was tainted by godless Gentiles. And so he's asking for prayer. He's asking for physical protection. He's asking for spiritual transformation. That's the **content** of prayer: it's physical and spiritual.

Luke was a physician and historian who followed Paul throughout his multiple journeys in first-century Asia Minor. He's writings are found in the book of Acts. He actually records the scenes leading up to Paul's departure to Jerusalem. And no less than three times, people at every port of Paul's journey encourage him and even warn him not to go to Jerusalem because of the opposition he's sure to experience.

Meet me in Acts 20:22 ...

- First we'll see that Paul is very aware of the danger. ***Read Acts 20:22-23 ... And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.*** He knows. But he's going anyway. And so, he asks Rome for prayer.
- Everyone around Paul knows it's going to be physically and spiritual perilous too. Look at Acts 21:4. ***Read Acts 21:4 ... And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.*** So, people in Ephesus tell him not to go. Then he gets on a ship to Tyre, and the Christians there have been praying about this very trip and tell him not to go.



- Look at v.11. They keep going and get to Caesarea. *Read Acts 21:11-12 ...*  
*And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.' "* *When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem.* Okay, three women in Caesarea prophesy over Paul so convincingly that Luke (again, who's writing Acts) and those traveling with them urge Paul not to keep going. *And?* He keeps going saying he's willing to be thrown in jail or killed.

Again, we have many questions. *Is the Spirit warning Paul not to go? Or are people just afraid? Is Paul ignoring wise and Spirit-filled counsel? Or is he demonstrating great faith? Why isn't Paul listening? Well, we don't know yet.*

What we do know is that the **content** of prayer, Paul's request for physical protection and spiritual transformation is well founded. No one expects things to go well in Jerusalem ... not even Paul.

*What is the content of your prayers? If nothing else, Paul is willing to step into a situation and season where urgent prayer and reliance upon the Trinity is necessary.*

Considering the content of his prayers forces us, I think, to consider the content of our own. *Are your prayers necessary? Are mine? Or are they convenient?* Now ... my desire is to neither to shame nor guilt you to do something crazy. That's spiritual manipulation and it only leads to distrust and abuse. Rather, my aim is to invite us to interrogate the **content** of our prayers. We learn a lot about our lives by

looking at our prayer lives. Because, you see, perhaps one of the reasons we're often passive in prayer is because we live passive lives. Or we might say the *content* of our prayers is passive and so our *posture* is too. What we pray about doesn't require boldness, faith, urgency ... it doesn't require the full community of the Father, Son, and Spirit. *Why is that?*

Well, I think the reason is revealed in the *result* of prayer.

### **Movement 3: The Result of Prayer (vv.32-33, Acts 21:27-28, 30-31)**

Paul concludes his request for prayer with his final hope and a prayer for his readers. *Read Romans 15:32-33 ... so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. May the God of peace be with you all. Amen.* The reason Paul prays for spiritual transformation and physical protection is because he wants to make it to Rome. He wants to finally visit his brothers and sisters there and enjoy their company. This is his ultimate prayer. He wants to make it to Rome. So ... *does that happen?*

Well, let's look at Acts again. After an initially warm reception from the Apostle James and his community, things get tense in Jerusalem for Paul. Look at Acts 21:27. *Read Acts 21:27-28 ... When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, crying out, "Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching*

*everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.”* Now, what these "Jews from Asia" say about Paul is not strictly true. But opponents rarely do one another the dignity of honesty. They stir up the crowd, accuse Paul of division and blasphemy, and they start beating him with the intent to kill him (see Acts 21:30-32). Paul is given a chance to share his story to defend himself and identify with the Jewish people. He shares the gospel with them. But they're unpersuaded. He faces ridicule, multiple trials, threats of violence and death, and was imprisoned. In the middle of all this his Roman citizenship is discovered and he appeals to go to Caesar (see Acts 25:11,12). And so, he goes to Rome ... *as a prisoner.*

Okay ... let's do some prayer assessments here. From one vantage point Paul's prayers were definitely not answered. His physical protection and the spiritual transformation for which he appealed to his readers and solicited the Trinity, both seem to have been met with a dizzying "no" answer from God. After all, he gets to Rome but he's in chains. He's still recovering from physical abuse. He's still facing oppression and a legal battle from the Jewish community, not for social crimes but for preaching the gospel. It seems like all those warnings and prayers and encouragements to not go to Jerusalem were right. Not only so, but the result of all these prayer certainly do not seem to have led to a joyful arrival refreshed in the company of his brothers and sisters. Seems like Paul should not have come.

And yet, from another vantage point ... he is still alive. And a clue in the book of Acts seems to suggest that the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem had accepted the gift before the Jews from Asia caused a ruckus (see Acts 24:17). What's more, the book of Acts ends with Paul in Rome, still in jail but not suffering and surrounded by his spiritual family. *Read Acts 28:30-31 ... He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.* Physically, Paul is able to welcome all who visit him in prison for two years. Spiritually, Paul is proclaiming the kingdom to Roman Jews and Gentiles. *What could bring more joy and refreshment to the Apostle than seeing the gospel taught, believed, and growing? Perhaps, every aspect of Paul's pray request is met with an thrilling "yes" ... but just not in the way any of us could have expected or even desired.*

Herein lies one of the primary reasons we don't prayer or at the very least do not strive in prayer as Paul appeals ...

You see, sometimes the only *result* of prayer we're willing to accept is one where we're wrapped in comfort and our dreams are realized. *Are you with me? I know that's true for me.* When I pray for God's will to be done, I don't want it to cost me too much. When I pray for physical protection, I really mean I don't want to feel any pain. When I pray for spiritual transformation, I want it with minimal inconvenience to my career plans and bank account. *Make sense?* This is why our prayer get passive. Because we instinctively know bold prayers are costly. I think

this is the reason why the *content* of our prayers rarely requires this level of urgency and the full company of the Godhead: we're sacred. I know I am. I'm scared that praying with faith like this will cost me comfort, luxury, and money. I'm scared things won't end the way I want or like.

Paul's life and the prayer life he invites us to, requires faith in the gospel. *Do yours? Do mine? Do our prayer require the gospel. That Jesus is Lord?* You see, one of the things about Jesus which is so contrary to our common moral formation is his willingness to be inconvenienced and suffer for the sake of the joy and refreshment of his spiritual family. He took this posture all the way to the cross. And his work on the cross is not only our example but it's our power. The gospel helps us overcome our fears and teaches us to pray with a new posture and new content.

You see, when Jesus dies on the cross he puts our fears to shame. He puts death to death. In his death then, believers find hope in the middle of death. We realize that death can not take what Jesus secures. Therefore we can strive in prayer. We can pray with boldness and reject passivity and fear ... and embrace love and intimacy and faith.