

Prayer and Witness

Romans 10:1-17

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We conclude our series on prayer looking at how prayer takes us beyond ourselves, outside ourselves. Prayer connects us with God whose mission is to reach the world with good news, with salvation and life. And, God intends to work through us, through our prayers, our witness, our service, to bring life to people. It's not that we try to take God to people, but God is taking us into the world.

One pastor coined the term "prayer-evangelism" to describe the connection between prayer and witness, how prayer leads us to go with God and how prayer sustains us as we go with God to bring grace and peace and hope to the world (Terry Teykl, *Pray and Grow*).

I just used a word that we're sometimes scared of: *evangelism*. "Christians and non-Christians have something in common: We're both uptight about evangelism" (Rebecca Pippert, *Out of the Saltshaker and into the World* 15). What's the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the word evangelism? A lot of people think of someone who's pushy or obnoxious. Or a TV evangelists whose lives turn out to be inconsistent with their message. Or maybe just a sense of unease, thinking we ought to do something about evangelism but we're not sure what or how. Now, what comes to mind when you think about the people who've had the greatest influence for God in your life? Probably you think of someone who is loving, kind, down-to-earth and such. Let's let those qualities guide our understanding of evangelism, which really just has to do with sharing good news.

At a youth retreat I met a man named Ross King who is a songwriter and worship leader. For a time, he was involved in a campus ministry at Texas A&M. He wrote a song for college students, but it reflects an attitude that a lot of us struggle with.

Me and my friends we've got the social thing down pat
Look for us on Friday night you'll always find us there

They know that I'm a Christian; they've got no problems with that
Sometimes I don't even drink but no one seems to care

We don't ever have deep conversations
So I never get a chance to share my heart

You know someone ought to tell them about Jesus
They need to know, they need to see
Someone ought to tell them about Jesus
But that's just not my gift so you probably shouldn't leave that up to
me

I am a leader almost everywhere I go
Honors and positions cover my identity
I have good morals, I'm sure everybody knows
God and church and family are important things to me

I know there are people who need Jesus all around
But I'm sure my actions speak for me.

You know someone ought to tell them about Jesus
They need to know, they need to see
Someone ought to tell them about Jesus
But that's just not my gift so you probably shouldn't leave that up to
me

I sang my song for a thousand just last night
I sang of Jesus' love and I made sure that I was heard
But in my class today, to my left and to my right,
Two lost souls were falling fast and I didn't say a word

You know someone ought to tell them about Jesus
They need to know, they need to see
Someone ought to tell them about Jesus

But that's just not my gift so you probably shouldn't leave that up to me

<http://fusestudents.tv/blog/?p=205>

Romans 10 is the middle section of the apostle Paul's discussion about the salvation of Israel. Paul was passionate about people coming to know Jesus and the salvation God offers in him. Earlier, Paul said, "I could wish myself cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, those of my own race, the people of Israel" (9:3-4). But he knows that's not really the way to go. He realizes that God has acted in Jesus Christ to renew the covenant and create a way of salvation open to all. So the focus of Paul's prayer for them is that they would find salvation by the way God has set up (N. T. Wright, *Romans*, New Interpreter's Bible).

Paul's passion for people to know Christ comes through in his prayers for them. He was motivated to pray and to work for others to hear the good news and have a chance to respond.

I saw a story recently about Doug Coe, who was the head of a little prayer group in Washington D.C. Arthur Burns, the head of the Federal Reserve, attended once and a newcomer asked him to pray. Burns was Jewish and it was kind of an awkward moment. Doug Coe didn't know how it would go. They all bowed their heads and this was Arthur Burns' prayer, "Lord may all Jewish people come to know Jesus. May all Muslims come to know Jesus. May all Christians come to know Jesus"

<http://www.mppc.org/series/can-smart-people-believe-god/john-ortberg/smart-people-part-three>). That's not bad.

Are we passionate about people coming to know Jesus? Do we have a passion that moves us to pray for others and work with God's Spirit to bring them the gospel, to let them see the gospel in our lives, to give them the opportunity to respond to God's grace that calls them?

Do we really believe that people who are apart from Jesus are lost? Maybe we need to think about what "lost" means. Apart from grace, human beings are lost in sin. Sin is separation from God, disobedience to God, rebellion against God. We are subject to death, spiritually as well as physically. And, a person doesn't have to die to go to hell. Too many

people live in the hell of disobedience and lack power to overcome. "Lost" also says we don't know the way. We don't know where we are or even who we are, or which way to go.

But, lost people matter to God. Jesus said that he came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10). Paul writes in another of his letters about "God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:3-4).

Prayer and witness go together as our praying puts us in touch with the heart of God and his love for his lost children. Larry Lacour was an evangelist and pastor. His parents were also evangelists. He told about being a little boy and listening to his parents pray, "Give us a greater love for the lost." One time as they were praying, Larry saw tears in his mother's eyes and he asked, "Mama, why are you crying?" She explained, "On Sunday we are to begin a revival, and we are praying that God will give us a passion for lost souls" (*Adventuring with God in Evangelism* 19-20). Do we dare pray like that?

We see not only the need for salvation and the passion to help people receive it. We also see how salvation is available and how God gives it. In verse 12, Paul says that the Lord richly blesses all who call on him. Verses 5-13 show us the resources for salvation and witness.

God has acted in Jesus the Messiah to renew the covenant with Israel and to offer covenant relationship with all people. This relationship includes righteousness that comes by grace through faith. Righteousness is God's character that we can know. It's right relationship with God, including forgiveness and a new way of life in Christ.

Paul draws on the promises of covenant renewal in Deuteronomy 30 to talk about what God is doing and inviting us to experience. We don't have to go searching for Christ. He seeks us. He don't have to travel far to know him. He is right here. The word, Jesus himself and the message about him, "is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart." The message of faith is that, "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe, resulting in righteousness, and with your

mouth you profess your faith, resulting in salvation” (see New American Standard Bible).

The essence of Christian faith is not a vague religious awareness or a general sense of a kind deity. It’s the confession of Jesus as Lord and belief that God raised him from the dead. That kind of faith accesses the power of God. It’s an opening to the grace of God that brings forgiveness, righteousness, new life, hope, peace, joy, direction, wholeness and all that’s included in salvation.

“No one who believes in him will be put to shame.” That’s an Old Testament way of describing salvation. Jews, Gentiles, anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

We pray for people to come to that point. To recognize God at work in Jesus and put their trust in him. We pray for opportunities to share our faith—and the courage to do it. What if we prayed as much for unchurched people as we do for our own needs and concerns? Would that lead to a breakthrough in our own hearts and in the lives of people around us?

Part of what Paul is dealing with here is why some people do not believe. He asks a series of questions about that. How can people call on the one they don’t believe in? How can they believe in Jesus if they haven’t heard of him? How can they hear if no one tells them? How can anyone tell them unless they are sent? But God has sent messengers. God’s word is near. Prophets have told what God is doing and saying. And God has come near in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, sent into the world on the mission of revealing God and being the way to God.

There’s a great scene in Matthew’s Gospel where Jesus sees the crowds and has compassion on them, “because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” They were lost. Jesus tells the disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.” In the next verse, Jesus gives authority to his disciples. Then he names the twelve apostles. Then he sends them out (Matthew 9:36-10:5). Pray that God will send someone to reach lost people. Now, you go because you’re called and empowered by Jesus.

And still, not everybody believes or accepts the good news. The message of Isaiah and other prophets was rejected. Jesus himself was rejected by many. Paul found people rejecting the good news he proclaimed. We're going to face rejection as we try to share faith and invite people to Christ and the church. But God can use even those encounters where we are rejected. Seeds are being planted that God will use.

And we're not alone in our witness. God is already at work with people, calling them, inviting them, nudging them, drawing them to himself. Our prayers can be part of how God works in people's lives to draw them in. I mentioned in an earlier sermon that we can't control people with our prayers. They still have a choice to receive or reject grace. But maybe our prayers can increase the Holy Spirit's influence in their lives.

So let's pray for vision to see the ripe fields, to identify people who are ripe for the gospel, ready to respond. Let's pray for people to know the love of God. Let's pray for people to be open to receive God's gifts. Pray for the whole city, for your neighborhood, for your family, for people you meet. Richard Fosters shares the idea of "flash prayers." As you meet people, when you see people in different settings, silently pray a quick prayer for them asking that the Lord's joy and a deeper awareness of his presence would rise up in each person. "We could change the whole atmosphere of a nation if thousands of us would constantly throw a cloak of prayer around everyone in our circle of nearness" (*Celebration of Discipline* 44-45).

Prayers for witness, for people to receive and respond to God's witnesses, are effective. Howard Hendricks tells about praying for his father. Ever since he received Christ as a boy his concern was for the salvation of his family and loved ones. Many times he brought up the subject of the gospel with his dad, but the response was not excited.

Howard's dad was a military man. He had seen action around the world. When his dad was in battle, Howard would become very sensitive to his spiritual need. He and his family prayed for his dad, but, he says, "At times I'm afraid my faith sputtered." His father's response was always the same: "Son, don't worry about me. I'll work it out with God" (as if God could be manipulated like a Pentagon official).

A man named Butch Hardman heard a tape of one of Howard's messages where he talked about his father's spiritual need. Butch listened and something about the story reminded him of his own father with whom he had shared Christ shortly before he died. He began to pray for this unknown man, George Hendricks. Some months later Butch attended a pastors' conference where Howard was the speaker. They met briefly then.

One day Butch was driving the church bus down the street when he saw a man standing on the corner who reminded him of Howard Hendricks. He backed up the bus, stopped, got off, went over to the man and asked, "Are you by any chance Howard Hendricks' father?"

"Er-yeah—you a student of my son?"

"No, I'm not, but he sure has helped me. Got time for a cup of coffee?" That encounter began a friendship, skillfully engineered by the Spirit of God. Butch undoubtedly sensed George Hendricks' hesitancy when he discovered he had met a preacher. For a long time Butch didn't invite him to attend his church. He simply suggested that he drop by the office for coffee. Patiently he endured George's cigars and his endless repertoire of war stories. Before long he also learned that George had been diagnosed as having terminal throat cancer.

Months later Butch was at his bedside. "Mr. Hendricks, I'll be leaving shortly for a Holy Land trip. Instead of my listening to you tonight, would you let me tell you a story?"

Butch had earned a hearing and he began simply to relate the conversation Jesus had with Nicodemus as told in John's Gospel. At the conclusion George accepted Butch's invitation to receive Jesus Christ as his Savior. Then he got up out of bed, stood, and saluted with a smile. "Now I'm under a new Commander-in-Chief!" That night Butch called Howard to tell him this good news.

The last time Howard saw his dad he couldn't believe this was the same man he had grown up with. His body was wasted, but his spirit was more vital than ever.

"In accordance with dad's specific provision in his will, Butch Hardman conducted the crisp military funeral in Arlington cemetery where the gospel of Jesus Christ was presented to the small group of family and military

attendants. As the guns saluted their final farewell, I knew God had vindicated forty-two years of prayer” (Howard and Jeanne Hendricks, *Footprints* 16-19; cited at <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/w/witnessing.htm>).

Is there someone you're praying for to come to know Christ? Don't give up. Are you the one that somebody is praying will come to know Christ? Why not right now?

Pray something like, "God, I need you. Forgive me. Come into my heart. I believe you raised Jesus from the dead. I confess that Jesus is Lord."