

Prayer & Evangelism: Part One

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Introduction

Several years ago, I presented to the congregation I serve a series of sermons on prayer and evangelism. Given below are the scripture texts for those sermons followed by a more or less short reflection on how one might use them in prayer for a more effective life of sharing the gospel. Also, I have included a few more passages that I hadn't included in that series. These are not meant to be steps to evangelism, nor is the list of texts meant to be exhaustive. Rather, I see them as prayer strategies that become part of a way of life--a life devoted to seeing the lost found.

During the time I was preaching through the series, I shared the ideas with an older colleague and mentor. He asked me, "But do they work?" I wasn't sure how to respond. Since all of these prayer suggestions are simply asking God for what we already find in Scripture, his question seemed to me to be asking, "Does prayer work?" In the United States, we highly value pragmatism: "If I do *A* then *B* will be the expected result." We like things that work! Yet, prayer isn't pragmatic; it's relational. The Apostle John in 1 John states that "God is love." In His essential being, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, God is an eternal relationship of infinite and immeasurable love. As believers and followers of Jesus, we have been invited into this relationship of radical love! Prayer then isn't so much pragmatic as it is learning to live and converse in this boundless love that is God, knowing that when we ask, He answers out of His kind, generous, and loving heart.

James says that "we have not because we ask not," while admonishing his readers that sometimes our prayers are not answered because we ask with wrong motives. Notwithstanding other reasons given in Scripture for our prayers not being answered or our prayers being hindered, the simple yet profound wisdom of James' admonition, "we have not because we ask not," applies significantly to evangelism. So herein are some suggestions for things for which to ask in prayer. Some of these suggestions are merely stating the obvious; others are less obvious. My hope and prayer are that these suggestions might add some new rhythms, harmonies, and melodies of the song of the gospel of

Christ to your prayer life so that they might be written into the cadence of your life as evangelists!

Asking for the Holy Spirit

Luke 11:5-13 Then He said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and goes to him at midnight and says to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; {6} for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; {7} and from inside he answers and says, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been shut and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' {8} "I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs. {9} "So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. {10} "For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it will be opened. {11} "Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he? {12} "Or if he is asked for an egg, he will not give him a scorpion, will he? {13} *"If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?"*¹

In the gospels of Matthew and Luke, we have a record of the disciples asking Jesus to teach them to pray. In both passages, Jesus teaches his disciples *the Lord's prayer*—with some variations between the two texts. But Jesus has more to say about prayer than just what is contained in the Lord's prayer. In Luke 11—after teaching His disciples His prayer—He then tells them a couple of parables interspersed with a principle of prayer. The first parable tells of a man who has an unexpected visitor show up at midnight and has nothing to serve him. In a hospitality culture, it is essential to provide food and beverage to a guest—even at a late hour. I grew up in the hospitality culture of Japan where, anytime we visited neighbors, friends or new acquaintances, they always set food and beverage before us. In Jesus' parable—because of the lateness of the hour—the unprepared host goes to his *friend* to

¹ Unless otherwise specified all Scripture is taken from the *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995). Emphasis added through the use of italic font and underlining.

ask him to lend him three loaves to provide food for his unexpected guest. Jesus emphasizes that this neighbor is the man's *friend*. Yet, I find this *friend's* response to be *unfriendly* and inhospitable. This *unfriendly friend* won't get up to give his friend the needed bread. However, the unprepared host, not taking "no" for an answer, wears the *friend* down until he relents—getting out of bed, retrieving the bread, opening the door and giving it to his neighbor. All of the interpretations of this parable in sermons I've heard stress the importance of persistence in prayer.

This interpretation seems more than plausible when Jesus then states a general principle of prayer immediately following this parable. When translated the verse also draws out the importance of persisting in prayer:

"So I say to you, *keep asking*, and it will be given to you; *keep seeking*, and you will find; *keep knocking*, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who is asking, receives; and he who is seeking, finds; and to him who is knocking, it will be opened."

Yet, I am troubled by this interpretation. When we interpret this parable to be about persistence in prayer, we make God out to be the unfriendly "friend," who will only respond to our prayers when we wear Him down. In a similar account in Matthew 6, when the disciples have asked Jesus to teach them to pray, He said the following:

Matthew 6:7-8 "And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. {8} "So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

In these verses, Jesus plainly states that in prayer, we will not be heard for our many words—because the heavenly Father already knows what we need! He is not speaking in a parable here—but rather, He is speaking plainly. What if in our common interpretation of the parable and principle of prayer in Luke 11, we have stopped too soon in understanding Jesus' teaching about prayer? What if what Jesus is communicating to us is found by continuing to follow Jesus' teaching about prayer after the stated principle of prayer? What if in telling a second parable Jesus is contrasting it with the first parable—which then reinterprets the general principle of prayer?

Some may suggest that in taking this approach, I am setting aside the meaning of the first parable—persistence in prayer. However, there are three reasons why I believe I am not ignoring the meaning of the first parable. First, the parable and the following principle are logically tied together, so that the principle of “ask, seek and knock” states plainly what the parable is demonstrating. This principle is a very human principle that we all know—and may have used in our own lives at some point. I once saw a teenage girl ask her mother after church if they could stop at the mall to shop on the way home. Her mother said, “No, not today.” But the girl kept on pestering her mother, “But, Mom, I want to go to the mall.” She kept asking over and over again until finally, her mother gave in and went to the mall. We may have used this principle at work in asking for a raise or a promotion, or in asking a spouse to go on a desired vacation or to purchase something much wanted. Jesus then, in beginning with the principle of persistence, “ask, seek and knock,” is using a well-known, very human principle.

Second, I have seen this principle often applied while growing up in Japan. I remember seeing individuals and families before Shinto Shrines, clapping to get their god’s attention, then making repeated supplications and requests. We often saw on the roadside, Buddhist idols called *Jizō*, the protector of children and travelers, clothed with children’s clothing, with offerings of food and wine set before them. In hopes of finding healing for their children, families would come and renew the offerings and make their repeated entreaties. Or in the four-hundred-year-old groves of old-growth cedars at Nikko, I heard the repeated chanting of the Buddhist monks, a haunting sound—like the sound of the humming of the low string of a stringed bass. I frequently saw people write their prayers on paper and tie them to the trees surrounding shrines and temples in hopes that the gods would take notice and answer them. I also saw people murmuring their desperate prayers each day before Buddhas of gold and stone in hopes that their prayers would be answered. Hence, the principle Jesus gives is not only very human, but it is also a principle that is shared by most religions around the world, including Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Hari Krishna, etc.

Third, the Hebrew Scriptures themselves mock such repetitious prayer as told in the account of Elijah’s showdown on Mount Carmel with the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah. After meeting Ahab, the renegade king who has forsaken the God of the

Hebrews, Elijah meets the 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah on top of Mount Carmel for a duel of sacrifices. We pick up the story in verse 23 of chapter 18 in the book of 1 Kings:

1 Kings 18:23-29 {23} *"Now let them give us two oxen; and let them choose one ox for themselves and cut it up, and place it on the wood, but put no fire under it; and I will prepare the other ox and lay it on the wood, and I will not put a fire under it. {24} "Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD, and the God who answers by fire, He is God." And all the people said, "That is a good idea." {25} So Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one ox for yourselves and prepare it first for you are many, and call on the name of your god, but put no fire under it." {26} Then they took the ox which was given them and they prepared it and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon saying, "O Baal, answer us." But there was no voice and no one answered. And they leaped about the altar which they made. {27} It came about at noon, that Elijah mocked them and said, "Call out with a loud voice, for he is a god; either he is occupied or gone aside, or is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and needs to be awakened." {28} So they cried with a loud voice and cut themselves according to their custom with swords and lances until the blood gushed out on them. {29} When midday was past, they raved until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice; but there was no voice, no one answered, and no one paid attention.*

In contrast to this, Elijah, not only took the wood and oxen but also included 12 stones out of which to build an altar. Once Elijah set the wood and sacrifice on the altar, he commanded his servants to dig a trench around the altar, then instructing them to take four pitchers of water and douse the sacrifice, wood, and altar. He again commanded them to douse it a second time. At the time of the evening sacrifice, Elijah then made his request to God:

1 Kings 18:36-39 *At the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, Elijah the prophet came near and said, "O LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, today let it be known that You are God in Israel and that I am Your servant and I have done all these things at Your word. {37} "Answer me, O LORD, answer me,*

that this people may know that You, O LORD, are God, and that You have turned their heart back again." {38} Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. {39} When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, "The LORD, He is God; the LORD, He is God."

Elijah asked; God answered—no persistence necessary. I suspect Jesus had this story in mind when he said in Matthew 6:7, “*And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words.*” Why would Jesus give such a human principle, one shared by the religions of the world, and one that Hebrew Scripture mocks? We find the answer by looking at the wider context of the parable and principle.

In Luke chapter 11, verse 11, the New American Standard Bible begins the verse with the word *now*—a legitimate translation of the Greek conjunction *de* (dev). The translators have chosen to translate the word with the idea that a new topic is beginning. Yet, the word is also frequently translated with the adversative meaning *but*—showing a contrast. How does one know which translation is best? The answer is found by looking to see if indeed there is a contrast between the first parable, the stated principle and now Jesus’ second parable and His stated conclusion.

In Jesus’ second *parable*—which is more illustration than parable—He asks two questions, “But suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he? Or if he is asked for an egg, he will not give him a scorpion, will he” (Luke 11:11-12)? The expected answer is an “of course not.” We fathers love to give our children good gifts—at least for the most part. Jesus then states the expected answer curiously; He says that, even though we are evil as human fathers, we know how to give good gifts to our children. Now take a moment to ponder the contrast. In the first parable, we have an unfriendly friend who has to be worn down to receive that for which he is asking; in the second parable, Jesus contrasts this unfriendly friend with fathers who though being evil, know how to give their children good gifts. I am surprised by what Jesus then says in completing the contrast: “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your

children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him” (Luke 11:13)? In the first parable we find an *unfriendly friend* who reluctantly gives only because of the persistence of the one wearing him down; in contrast to this Jesus says in the second parable that our heavenly Father—the perfect father—is sitting on the edge of His seat ready to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask. I am astounded by the words *how much more!* Do you hear the vastness of this *how much more* in contrast with earthly fathers who, although being evil, know how to give good gifts to their children? O that the Spirit would give us ears to hear!

Now, when I look at Jesus’ principle of prayer—keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking—through the lens of the *how much more willingness of the heavenly Father to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask*, I find a much different nuance. Throughout our lives, when we ask for the Holy Spirit—the Father is more than willing—*how much more willing*—to answer. We don’t have to wear Him down. When we ask for the Holy Spirit, the heavenly Father gives us the Spirit! When I seek the Holy Spirit’s guidance, His direction, His comfort, His empowerment, asking in the *how much more willingness of the heavenly Father*, I find what I’m seeking. And *whenever* I knock, the Holy Spirit will open the door—not necessarily the door I wanted opened, but the door the Holy Spirit wants opened.

Ponder this! When we ask for the Holy Spirit, what is God giving to us? Is He not giving to us God’s very presence in the third person of the trinity, his inexhaustible power, his unfathomable wisdom, his deep understanding, and as Romans 8:9 describes the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Christ, aren’t we being given Jesus’ extravagant, grace-filled presence within—his wildly, compassionate heart, his boundless and unconditional love?

So here is the simple truth about prayer that is so essential to evangelism: God is sitting on the edge of His seat, yearning, longing to give us the Holy Spirit! I don’t have to wear Him down! The Spirit isn’t given only to those seeking a deeper life; God readily gives the Spirit to all His children who ask!

When any of us are coming into an opportunity to share our faith—or to build that preliminary trust—we can ask for the Holy Spirit! When I have gone to visit a member whose husband doesn’t know the Lord, I

pray, “Lord, flood me with Your Holy Spirit!” When I have an opportunity to speak at an A. A. meeting, I can silently ask, “fill me with an extraordinary measure of Your Holy Spirit!” When an unexpected spiritual conversation opens up, I can send an arrow prayer—not many words: “Please fill me with Your Holy Spirit!” When standing in a line, I can ask God for His Holy Spirit to fill the wings of my prayers for that bank teller or for that grocer. And in every instance and every opportunity, Jesus has promised us the *how much more willingness* of our Father in heaven to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask! We have not because we ask not!

I find such comfort in this simple truth! It means that no matter what the situation, no matter how frightened I may be in approaching a spiritual conversation, I am not alone; you are not alone! To ask for the Holy Spirit is to ask for the power that created the universe, for the power that raised Jesus from the dead, for the very real presence of the infinite love and compassion of Jesus!

So it’s not for our many words, nor for our persistence in wearing God down, that he gives us the Holy Spirit. Rather, it is in the heart of a perfect and loving heavenly Father who longs to give the Holy Spirit to any of his children who ask!

Afterword: For those who think that I am saying that there is no room for persistence in prayer, I think of Paul’s command in Philippians chapter 4:

Philippians 4:6-7 (RSV) *Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. {7} And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*²

Paul’s straightforward command is to have no anxiety about anything. When first heard, I think to myself, “What an impossible command; I frequently worry.” And I suspect that you also share in this repeated past time. But when I continue to read Paul’s command, the meaning falls into place. Instead of worrying and

²*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version.* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989). Emphasis added through the use of italic font.

having anxiety about everything, Paul gives us a different way to look at the troubling circumstances in our life about which we tend to worry. Every worry, every fear, and every anxiety is an opportunity to turn those worries, fears, and anxieties into prayer requests—to let God handle the situations that we are unable to handle. When my younger daughter was born with a severe breathing problem, which almost took her life three weeks into her life, I was very much anxious and worried. I learned to turn my worries into prayers—which ended up being a certain kind of persistence in prayer. Likewise, when the doctors diagnosed my older daughter with a transformed migraine—a migraine that never goes away—I have repeatedly out of anxiety brought my supplications to God, turning my anxiety into prayer. After more than 15 years of my daughter having this headache, my repeated entreaties are certainly a form of persistence in prayer. Lastly, I have recently been diagnosed with stage four cancer, which has metastasized into my bone. I've had and continue to have much anxiety about this—primarily arising from the possibility of prematurely leaving my wife and daughters. But I have learned to turn my anxieties and fears into prayers at the throne of grace, finding myself enveloped with a deep sense of the understanding-surpassing peace of Christ. And this, too, is a kind of persistence in prayer. Yet, we find the reality in Jesus words in Matthew 6:7, “... *for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.*” He already knew what my younger daughter needed so many years ago—and he provided. He already knows what my older daughter yet needs in continuing to have a transformed migraine. And in this terminal cancer diagnosis, he knows what I need even before I ask him. The persistence in asking, found in Philippians chapter 4, is a grace given to us so that we might find the peace of Christ that passes all understanding—knowing that God is about answering our prayers, entreaties, and supplications. I know I take back my worries too often, then once again having to turn them back into repeated prayer. I suspect I am not alone in this tendency! Through this repeated process, are we not learning to live into trusting God? And when we fail and pick up that anxiety or fear again, in the extravagant grace of Jesus, He has given us a way to return to His peace, as we learn to trust Him even more.

Praying for the Power of the Holy Spirit for Witness

Luke 24:44-49 Now He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." {45} Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, {46} and He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, {47} and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. {48} *"You are witnesses of these things.* {49} "And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city *until you are clothed with power from on high.*"

Acts 1:6-8 So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" {7} He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; {8} *but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.*"

In both Luke 24:48-49 and in Acts 1:8, Jesus links the disciples' witness with their receiving power "when the Holy Spirit has come upon" them. In Luke, after stating that they will be witnesses of His death and resurrection, Jesus commands them to wait in Jerusalem until they are "clothed with power on high." In Acts, Jesus tells His disciples that they "will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon" them—and as the implied result of this empowerment that they will be His witnesses "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."

I find it more than significant that the Holy Spirit in God-breathing the Gospels and Acts has set forth a very specific timeline, which—when considered—gives much-needed light to our call to be witnesses. In Luke chapter 24, I find the following precise timeline set by Dr. Luke:

Luke 24:1 But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared.

Luke 24:13 And behold, two of them were going that very day to a

village named Emmaus, which was about seven miles from Jerusalem.

Luke 24:33 And they got up that very hour and returned to Jerusalem, and found gathered together the eleven and those who were with them,

Luke 24:36 While they were telling these things, He Himself stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be to you."

Hence, on the very day of the resurrection of Jesus, after His appearance and revelation to the two men in Emmaus, and after they have hurried back to Jerusalem, Jesus appeared to His disciples as they were hearing the report from the two men. Significantly, Dr. Luke tells us that Jesus "opened their minds to understand the scriptures" (Luke 24:45).

In like manner, the Apostle John also sets a precise timeline in John chapter 20:

John 20:1 Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark, and saw the stone *already* taken away from the tomb.

John 20:19-22 So when it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace *be* with you." {20} And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord. {21} So Jesus said to them again, "Peace *be* with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you." {22} And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

In this passage, too, John emphasizes that Jesus appeared to the disciples in the evening of that first day, the very day of Jesus' resurrection. However, where Dr. Luke had said that Jesus "opened their minds to understand the scriptures," John says that Jesus "breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.' "

Earlier in John, Jesus had already told His disciples that He would give them the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, who would guide them into all truth:

John 14:16-17 "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; {17} *that is* the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, *but* you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you.

John 16:13 "But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come.

It is readily apparent when one pieces both stories together, that Dr. Luke's record of Jesus "opening their minds to understand the scriptures" and John's record of Jesus breathing upon them the Holy Spirit while saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit," are the same event. The very reality of the disciples receiving the Spirit of truth has the result of opening their minds to understand the scriptures!

Furthermore, within the wider context of the Gospel of John, I find two fulfillments of promises made by Jesus in His giving them the Spirit. The first we find in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John chapter three:

John 3:5-7 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. {6} "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. {7} "Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'

Within the context of the Gospel of John, then, the moment when Jesus gave the disciples the Holy Spirit after the resurrection is the precise moment when we see them *born of the Spirit!*

Yet, also, Jesus makes it abundantly clear in John 5:24 that the disciples received the gift of eternal life the moment they believed. Hence, there appears to be an unfolding of these blessings for the disciples which we receive concurrently. We find the second promise of Jesus about the giving of the Holy Spirit in John chapter 7:

John 7:37-39 Now on the last day, the great *day* of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. {38} "He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From

his innermost being will flow rivers of living water." {39} But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet *given*, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

Herein I find that Jesus promises the Holy Spirit to everyone who would believe in Him, but that they would only *receive* the Spirit after Jesus had been *glorified*. Within the Gospel of John, Jesus' glorification is nothing less than His exaltation on the cross. Hence, on the first day of the week, the same day that Jesus has been resurrected from the dead, He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." In that one event, the Holy Spirit took up residence within the disciples, having opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and they were born again!

Many scholars I have heard and read have stated that for John, the Holy Spirit was given on the first day of the resurrection and that for Dr. Luke, the Holy Spirit was given on the day of Pentecost. If this is the case, why would the Holy Spirit in God-breathing these texts give us such a precise timeline for the giving of the Spirit in John and the Baptism of the Holy Spirit in Acts? Also, how was it that in Luke, Jesus opened their minds to understand the scriptures?

I believe two errors have been made: the first error is to say that the fullness of the Holy Spirit is received when one believes; the second error is to say that the Baptism of the Spirit is a second work of grace necessary for salvation—as so many Pentecostal groups suggest. If every Christian has received the Holy Spirit and also has, therefore, received the empowerment of the Spirit for witness, why don't we see present-day disciples leading others to Christ in droves? What I find Scripture teaching is that on the first day of the week, the disciples were truly born of the Spirit, having received the indwelling Spirit of truth who had opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. On the same occasion, Jesus commanded the disciples to wait in Jerusalem until they have been clothed with power from on high for the *supernaturalizing* of their witness. Again in Acts 1:8, Jesus said the same thing to them!

On the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit was poured out upon the gathered disciples, they begin speaking in foreign tongues so that everyone present could understand them! Furthermore, Peter—now clothed with power from on high—preached one sermon and 3,000 people "received his word and were baptized." It's more than significant

that at the giving of the Ten Commandments—what Paul calls in 2 Corinthians chapter 3 the *ministry of death*—3,000 people were killed; at the giving of the Holy Spirit—what Paul calls in 2 Corinthians chapter 3 the *ministry of the Spirit*—3,000 people came to life. The Ten Commandments brought death; the Holy Spirit brings life!

I suspect, in our time, we have become so accustomed to relying on what I call “ministry technology,” that we have neglected the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to *supernaturalize* our witness. If I couple this with the *how much more willingness* of the heavenly Father to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask, I find that the Father longs to empower our witness—longing to send us power from on high so that we too might witness in the power and might of the Holy Spirit. We have not because we ask not. What might happen if, together with one voice, we were to ask the Father to empower our witness by the Holy Spirit? What might happen if we relied less on all of our “ministry technology”—our techniques and programs and strategies—and more on the ministry of the Holy Spirit—who gives life! On what occasion are we disallowed from asking for the empowerment of our witness by the Holy Spirit? I pray that we would all have ears to hear!

Praying for the Spirit's Leading

Galatians 5:18-25 *But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.* {19} Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, {20} idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, {21} envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. {22} But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, {23} gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. {24} Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. {25} *If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.*

In the Epistle to the Galatians the Apostle Paul contrasts two ways of living, one lived out according to one’s self-effort by following the external commandments of the Law, the other lived out according to the indwelling presence of our Lord Jesus Christ in and through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. In chapter 3, Paul stated

emphatically that we are not to be perfected by the flesh, or as the New International Version translates it: by our effort. Rather, just as having begun in the Spirit when we were *born from above*, we are now to continue *by the Spirit*, being continually *perfected by the Spirit*. Which is better then? To live by our self-effort according to the outward commandments of the Law? Or to have the very One who authored the Law come and live within—by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit?

If one reads chapter five carefully, this same contrast between Law and Spirit takes up the entire chapter. Is there something wrong with the Law? No, in the words of Paul, “May it never be!” As Paul states in Romans, the Law is “holy, righteous and good!” The difficulty is not with the Law, but with the depravity of our *flesh*—our self-life. When we as creatures of flesh try to accomplish the *works of the law* by our effort, we invariably produce the opposite, the *deeds of the flesh* (which is literally, *the works of the flesh*.) However, when we seek to *walk by the Holy Spirit*, seeking *the Holy Spirit’s leading*, He produces the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. Whereas the heart of the Law was to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves—as lived out by our effort—now we are to walk in the Spirit, being led of the Spirit, and He the very embodiment of love produces in us what we cannot produce ourselves: the fruit of love—God’s kind of love.

So what is it then to *walk in the Spirit* and to be *led of the Spirit*? Everywhere people went in Jesus and Paul’s day, they had to walk. If people were going to the market, they walked. If people were going to the synagogue or a gathering of Christians, they walked. If people were visiting neighbors or family, they walked. We don’t walk; we drive. Walking then became synonymous with living. To walk was to live, and to live was to walk. Throughout my life, as a Christian, I’ve come across many sets of *steps to walking in the Spirit*. Yet, in all these steps, I suspect that what was described was no longer the authentic *walk in the Spirit*—but only a manufactured copy. The best way I know how to learn to walk in the Spirit is to ask God to teach us to walk in the Spirit and to be led by the Spirit! I’ve been praying this for many years—and I am still learning!

There are facets of walking in the Spirit that we can describe: listening to the Holy Spirit's voice—through Scripture, through His still, small voice within, through sermons heard, through the counsel of the body of Christ, and so on. Paul speaks of *praying at all times in the Spirit*. Jesus speaks of worshipping in *Spirit and in truth*. We can ask God to teach us to hear His voice. We can ask God to teach us to pray in the Spirit at all times. We can invite the Holy Spirit to worship in and through us—in truth.

Paul describes one facet of walking in the Spirit in Galatians chapter three. Paul writes:

Galatians 3:1-5 You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed *as* crucified? {2} This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? {3} Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? {4} Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? {5} So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?

Herein Paul again emphatically states that we received the Spirit *by hearing with faith*—not by works of the Law. Furthermore, Paul says that we are not to be perfected by the flesh—by our self-effort—but as implied, we are to be perfected by the Spirit. Hence, faith is a necessary and crucial aspect of walking in the Spirit. Walking in the Spirit then is a life lived out of trusting God—and not ourselves—a life lived out of trusting in the Holy Spirit's work and not our own!

Walking in the Spirit and being led of the Holy Spirit are therefore crucial aspects of authentic evangelism. Often authors writing about evangelism speak of the necessity to love authentically those to whom we are sharing the faith. Yet, if walking in the Spirit and being led of the Spirit is the means by which the Holy Spirit produces the fruit of the Spirit in our lives—of which love is the first segment—then for us to live a life out of our self-effort, while not being led of the Spirit, is to love with a self-manufactured love, a love infinitely less than what the Spirit is able to produce within. By necessity, this will hamper the quality of our sharing our faith.

Furthermore, to be led of the Spirit is to be attuned to the Spirit's voice and promptings—to know when to go and when not to go, to know when to speak and when not to speak, to know what to speak and what not to speak, to have the Spirit move a conversation from an ordinary conversation into one that gives life. In the book of Acts, Dr. Luke reveals much about the Holy Spirit's leading—with much of the Spirit's leading having to do with evangelism:

Acts 10:19 While Peter was reflecting on the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you."

Peter's vision and the Spirit's subsequent communication to him were to result in the salvation of Cornelius as well as many of his family and friends. In the following verse, Paul recounts the Spirit's communication to him to go to Cornelius' house.

Acts 11:12 "The Spirit told me to go with them without misgivings. These six brethren also went with me and we entered the man's house."

Acts 13:2 While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

The Holy Spirit spoke to the believers to set apart Barnabas and Saul for their first missionary journey during which they would bring the Gospel to Asia Minor.

Acts 13:4 So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus.

The Holy Spirit sent Barnabas and Saul on their first missionary journey.

Acts 15:28 "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials:

As more and more Gentiles were coming to faith in Jesus, there arose a dispute in Antioch as to whether the Gentiles were required to keep the Mosaic Law, which the Jerusalem council resolved through the Holy Spirit's guidance.

Acts 16:6 They passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia;

Here the Holy Spirit forbid them from bringing the Gospel to Asia.

Acts 16:7 and after they came to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them;

Again the Holy Spirit prevented them from going into Bithynia—possibly for their safety.

Acts 20:23 except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me.

In this verse and the two following verses, the Holy Spirit seems to be testing Paul's resolve to be led before kings and ultimately Caesar himself, occasions in which Paul would proclaim the Gospel.

Acts 21:4 After looking up the disciples, we stayed there seven days; and they kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem.

Acts 21:11 And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, "This is what the Holy Spirit says: 'In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'"

It is clear from these verses that the Holy Spirit has a vital role in you and me when we share our faith. When I have sought to share my faith apart from the Holy Spirit's work and influence, I have often ended up doing more harm than good, frequently ending up in arguments and causing pain. As I've learned to walk in the Holy Spirit and to be led of the Spirit, I have time and time again seen a fluidness to His witness in and through me. I don't know how the Spirit does it, but one minute I'll be just conversing with someone, and the next minute, the Spirit will have opened the door, even giving me words and boldness! I am neither an expert on walking in the Spirit nor do I mean to write an exhaustive treatise on what it means to walk in the Spirit. Rather, I have found that asking the heavenly Father in faith to teach us to walk in the Spirit and to be led of the Spirit is enough! To ask this is to ask for the very will of the Father for our lives! I suspect that in the *how much more willingness* of the heavenly Father to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask, to ask that He would teach us to walk in the Spirit, to be led of the Spirit, is to request the very thing the Father longs to teach and reveal!

Praying for Increased Territory

1 Chronicles 4:10 (NKJV) And Jabez called on the God of Israel saying, "Oh, that You would bless me indeed, *and enlarge my territory*, that Your hand would be with me, and that You would keep me from evil, that I may not cause pain!" So God granted him what he requested.³

When Bruce Wilkinson's book, *The Prayer of Jabez*, was first published in 2000, it became a very popular, albeit little book. At the same time, Mr. Wilkinson took much criticism from those who thought the book taught a very self-serving message. Our own Director of the Board of Ministry half-humorously, half-seriously, wrote to Covenant ministers not to include the book as one of their books read for continuing education.

Because of the popularity of the book, I purchased a copy and read through the short book. Before reading Mr. Wilkinson's book, I was unaware that there even was a *Prayer of Jabez*. When I read the book, I looked up this very obscure little prayer which—oddly enough—is situated in the middle of a genealogy in 1 Chronicles, chapter 4. Why, in God-breathing this text, did Yahweh see fit to include this prayer, and to include it of all places in the middle of a genealogy? Did He mean to hide the prayer away in an obscure place, making it difficult to find?

Nevertheless, as I have reflected on this prayer, I sense that this prayer has—as do all of the promises of God—a New Covenant application. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the covenant of Circumcision and Law, for the most part, promised temporal blessings, blessings of prosperity and wealth. Within that context of material and physical blessings (see Deuteronomy 28:1-14), Jabez's prayer was in harmony with the expected blessings that God promised in that day. However, in the New Covenant, in Ephesians 1:3, Paul states that we as believers and followers of Jesus have been "blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies." The blessings of the New Covenant are—for the most part—spiritual.

³ *The New King James Version of the Holy Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982). Emphasis added through the use of italic font.

When Jabez prayed his prayer, he meant to have God enlarge his physical territory; he was asking for more land. In praying that God's hand would be with him, Jabez was praying that God would prosper him. Praying to be kept from evil and temptation was a common Hebrew prayer. Lastly, Jabez asked that as God increased his land holdings, prospering him along the way, that this venture would not cause others pain. So often, one's wealth and prosperity can be another's poverty and shame.

Yet, when I ponder this prayer through the lens of the New Covenant and given the primary mission of the body of Christ within the Covenant of Grace, I see something quite different. To pray for increased territory is to pray for increased evangelistic territory. What is wrong with asking God to increase my or our evangelistic territory—whether personally or corporately as a church body? Secondly, to pray that God would be with me is to pray that as I go out into this increased territory, God would be the One who accompanies me on the mission—prospering my witness along the way. Thirdly, to pray that Yahweh would keep me from evil, is to pray that in the midst of the inevitable spiritual attack that comes to those who actively seek to share the gospel, Yahweh would keep us from falling to the many temptations of sin and from the onslaught of the enemy's spiritual attack on all those who would share their faith. The enemy is always gunning for those, who seek to share Christ with their world, attempting to soil and destroy their witness through hypocrisy and sin. The desires of our flesh also, when given into, drastically harm our witness. Lastly, to pray that we would not cause pain is to pray that, as we evangelize, our witness and our approach to witnessing would not cause others undue pain. When I have sought to share my faith with others largely motivated by my flesh, I have caused people pain in the past—through conversations eroding into an argument, through bashing them with a confrontational approach, through pushing when the Holy Spirit isn't leading me to do so.

This obscure, little prayer of Jabez then, applied to evangelism, is more than appropriate! Is there not much wisdom in praying this prayer, applying it to our witness, whether individually or corporately, as the church? Applying the prayer to evangelism becomes a heartfelt prayer for a greater reach for our witness, and that as we go, God would prosper our evangelistic efforts, keeping our witness unsoiled from temptation and the attacks of the evil one and our flesh, while also

keeping us from causing others undue pain from our overstepping the Holy Spirit's guidance while sharing our faith! We have not because we ask not.

Conclusion

God has invited us into a radical friendship with Him—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in which we are invited to enter into His unfathomable, boundless love. He beckons us to come to His throne of grace as little children running into Daddy's arms, making our requests while knowing He will answer out of his kind and generous heart, giving to us His best for our best!

Out of His kind heart is His desire to seek and save the lost. Since we—indwelt with His Spirit—are his hands, feet, voice, and heart here on the planet, He has given us the mission to co-seek with Him those who are lost. Prayer then, as our two-way conversation with God, is an essential part of evangelism—of sharing the Gospel of the grace of Jesus with those lost. Herein, I have made several prayer suggestions, strategies in our conversation with God for a more effective life of sharing the Gospel.

When the disciples asked Jesus to pray, he told them—essentially—to keep asking for, to keep seeking after, to keep knocking for the Holy Spirit. And in the how-much-more-willingness of the Father, He always gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask. In every circumstance where we might have an opportunity to share the Gospel, we also can ask beforehand, during, and after for the infilling of an extraordinary measure of the Holy Spirit. We have not because we ask not.

In addition to the how-much-more-willingness of the Father to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask, He also longs to *supernaturalize* and *empower* our witness by the *power* of the Holy Spirit. Both corporately as a church body and individually, we can ask God, "Please empower our witness by the power of the Holy Spirit!" We can ask Him, "Please empower my witness today by the Holy Spirit so that I might effectively share the Gospel!" Scripture would more than suggest that in praying this, we are asking for the very thing God wants to do for us—empowering us for His mission of seeking, finding, and saving those lost in their sin and rebellion.

Also, it is essential to evangelism that we learn to walk in His Spirit and to be led by His Spirit. Without well learning to walk in and to be led by the Holy Spirit, we necessarily approach evangelism out of our resources, strategies, techniques—from out of our flesh. The best way I know to learn to walk in the Spirit and to be led by the Spirit is to ask Him to teach us—by His Spirit—how to walk in the Spirit and how to be led by the Spirit. And the best prayer for walking in and being led by the Spirit is to pray Jesus’ garden prayer, “Not as I will, but as You will” (Matthew 26:39)! As we learn to live in the Spirit and to be led by the Spirit, we become more aware of His promptings: of when to go and when not to go, of when to speak and when not to speak, of when to turn a conversation towards the Gospel and of when to wait for a better opportunity. Also, as we learn to walk in the Spirit, He opens doors for us, giving us more and more opportunities, while also giving us words to say with an empowered clarity and an empowered boldness. In short, we can ask to be led by His Spirit!

Lastly, the Prayer of Jabez, found in 1 Chronicles 4:10, has a significant New Covenant application to evangelism. We can boldly ask God to enlarge our evangelistic territory—both individually and corporately as a church, asking that God would go with us as we seek to share the Gospel, prospering our efforts, and that He would keep us from falling to the temptations that would soil and/or destroy our witness, while also asking that we would not cause those to whom we are witnessing any undue pain.

In part one of this article on evangelism and prayer, I have written about four prayer strategies found in Scripture for evangelism, the first three of which I believe are essential to an effective witness. The Lord willing, I have many more prayer strategies directly found in the Scriptures about which to write. I pray that these will become a very helpful part of the Holy Spirit’s call for you to share the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ!

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