

Go: Love Your Neighbor, A Lifestyle of Prayer, 4/14/24

Prayer: 35 people made faith decisions on Easter, almost 50 people signed up for Christianity 101. God is On the Move at Brandywine and it's exciting to see how he's changing lives through us.

Speaking of prayer, we all have those people throughout our lives that have been praying for us, for me one of those was Sandy Coupris. Sandy was my first grade Sunday School teacher growing up in church. She had a thick PA Dutch accent, I remember she would say, "Today, we are going to talk about CHEESES." She loved the Lord, she was always telling people about him and a great prayer warrior for me. Many of you know my story, I walked away from my faith in High School and lived life for myself. But Sandy would always make sure she found me, or sent a message to me that she was still praying for me that I would seek "Cheeses" and find him again. When God got ahold of my life again and I gave my life to him, one of the first people that came to my mind was Sandy. I'm convinced that the reason I'm walking with the Lord today is because of people like Sandy Coupris, and my parents and many others were praying for me. And while I can't prove it, I don't believe anyone comes to faith in Jesus apart from people of prayer like Sandy.

If we are going to Love our Neighbor like Jesus which is what this 3-week series leading up to Go Week is all about, it is essential that we **Pray First, Love all and Invite often**...but it starts with prayer. All effective efforts to love our neighbors, serve them, engage in spiritual conversations that lead to the gospel, must be preceded by, bathed in, and generated out of a lifestyle of prayer. FYM has a saying. **"Talk to God about your neighbors before you talk to your neighbors about God."** This is how Jesus did it. In Luke 6:12 Jesus went out on a mountainside and prayed all night before he chose his disciples and invited them into a relationship with Him. So often we treat prayer like a something we need to check off the list, or we use it to attempt to get out of a jam (I didn't study for this test- God help me!). But Jesus saw prayer as essential to accessing the power of God for gospel mission. And we see this same perspective in the Apostle Paul's teaching on prayer and gospel mission in our passage we are going to look at today and next week.

Colossians 4:2-6 *Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.*

5 *Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. 6* *Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.* Today we will see from Colossians 4: Why we pray for our neighbors, How to pray for our neighbors, and What to pray for our neighbors.

Why we pray for our neighbors.

If we are going to love our neighbors, the #1 way we show this love is through prayer. Three times in 3 verses Paul emphasizes prayer, connecting it directly to mission. In fact he commands

his readers to pray, it's safe to say that Paul believed **prayer works!** I don't know the details of how, and I don't think it works exactly like a mathematical equation a certain number of prayers, multiplied by the amount of time we pray equals a certain percentage of people who come to Christ. But what we do know from Scripture, from the history of gospel movements and I know from personal experience is that God's strong arm moves in concert with our prayers. But it's not just that prayer makes sharing our faith and our outreach more effective, it certainly does. God is interested not only in outcomes, but also the process. He wants not only to work through you, but in you in your journey to become more like Jesus.

[Title Slide] I brought my axe with me to church today. Now you may be impressed that a pastor has an axe- wow he preaches and chops his own wood?? Don't be impressed. I bought this axe from Home Depot on Friday, primarily for today. A quick aside, I was at checkout with my axe and the checkout lady is looking at me and she asks, "What are you going to do with the axe?" Kind of with a concerned look. And so I said, "I'm going to bring it to church." And her eyes got really big. And I explained I'm a preacher I need it for an illustration but I do intend to actually cut fire wood. She seemed to settle down at that point. **Abraham Lincoln, "If I had 8 hours to cut down a tree, I would spend the first 6 of them sharpening my axe."** This is a great way to think about what Paul is saying about how prayer works. Prayer has a sharpening effect on us and a sharpening effect on our witness. Like a grindstone it removes our dullness and rough edges, it works to remove fears, doubts and indifference, making us ready, resilient and available for God to use us.

Let me give you two ways prayer sharpens us.

1. Prayer Sharpens our Dependence: from us to God. Notice, for Paul the emphasis is on what God might do in response to prayer. Paul believed that if God didn't act- if he didn't open doors, if he didn't give clarity, there would be no effective gospel impact. And so prayer brings us into greater dependence on God to do his work. **1 Corinthians 3:6-7 I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth, so neither he who plants, nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.**

Prayer reminds us how small we are, and how big God is. The great missionary to China, Hudson Taylor once said: **"When we work, we work. When we pray, God works."** It's not all on you, it's on God. That's where we should want the weight! If you are discouraged and frustrated with your progress with a neighbor you are trying to love, or if you are discouraged thinking nothing will change, it's probably because you are making it more about you and your skills and agenda, then it is about God's work. We can't change anyone. Prayer reminds us that God is at work and he is in the saving and transformation business! We pray, we show up and are available, he does the work.

2. Prayer Sharpens our Perspective: from the mundane to the sacred. The disciples struggled with this. Many times, when there were crowds of people, all the disciples saw was...well crowds. People bustling about to jobs, mundane tasks, kids running around...and sometimes they saw people as problems, as distractions, as annoyances...these kids always trying to hang on Jesus...But that's not how Jesus saw people. For example, in Matthew 9 when Jesus saw the

crowds, he was moved with compassion because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus saw them with sacred eyes, not as problems but as people to be loved, helped, healed. He saw the sacred opportunity of a spiritual harvest. The disciples didn't see it. So what did Jesus do? He called them to pray! ³⁷ *Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. ³⁸ Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."* "Hey guys, open your spiritual eyes and look at the harvest of opportunity!" Jesus called them to prayer because prayer sharpens our perspective from the mundane to the sacred, but also it sharpens our perspective of our neighbors from annoyances to avoid to people to be loved.

[#2 Perspective Slide] Do you need a perspective change when it comes to your neighbors? If you are like me, you probably have a file on every neighbor. That lady doesn't pick up after her dog. This guy plays his oldies way too loud outside every weekend. We have a neighbor right across the street that never takes care of their yard...always brown, covered in dead leaves, just makes the things look trashy...This week, I had a conversation with my neighbor who is not a Christian and she's on myHashtag. And she happened to ask me what I was preaching on this Sunday. "Well, funny you should ask." So I told her, "Loving and praying for our neighbors." And immediately, she said, "Wow I probably need that one." And she said that because she has a neighbor that has made life difficult for her...not me. And so I told her, consider praying for her, because prayer begins to grind away at our anger and replaces it with mercy and compassion. It's hard to hate someone you are praying for.

How we Pray for our Neighbors (What should be our mindset when it comes to prayer?) *v.2 Devote yourselves to prayer.* Of the 10 times this word is used in the NT- 6 of them reference prayer. Words matter. Paul says, "Don't just kind of pray, when you think of it," he says devote yourselves to prayer. When I was into mountaineering and was training a high altitude climb of Mt. Elbrus in Russia, my mindset was, "If I only accomplish one thing today it must be training." If you have ever run a marathon, it's the same perspective. This is the idea of devoting yourself. Paul says, devote yourself to prayer. If you accomplish one thing today, let it be prayer!

Paul goes on to describe the way in which we are devoted to prayer. ² *Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.* Interesting two words, almost opposites. I think what Paul is saying is that on one hand there is a heaviness, a soldier-like seriousness to prayer and on the other hand, there is a lightness, a child-like joy in it. When we pray, it's like we carry a sword in one hand and fresh picked flowers in the other. And prayer is like this. On one hand prayer is warfare, because life is war. Paul in Ephesians 6 reminds us ¹² *For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*

Your struggle isn't just with your neighbor, it's that the enemy, Satan, doesn't want them to experience God, doesn't want them to know Jesus...and will fight like hell to keep them lost. But in prayer, we have the opportunity to fight like heaven (in fact with heaven's power).

[Verse 2 slide] And so we need to pray with watchfulness, knowing the enemy is seeking to steal, kill and destroy. We are at war. On the other hand, we pray with thankfulness, with a grace and a gratitude, first because apart from God's intervention in our lives with the gospel, where would any of us be? But secondly, because it's a privilege and a joy. We don't have to pray for our neighbors, we GET to! See, if it's only war...then we see everyone as a target, everyone as a project or problem or battle to win...and it's easy to begin to see people as a drudgery. But if we also pray with thankfulness, we see people as beautiful with dignity, through the eyes of love with hope, not as a project but just grateful that you get to have a meaningful, potentially life-changing relationship with someone that God made and loves. Let's pray diligently for those on your myHashtag, let's pray with a wartime mentality and let's pray with gratitude.

What we pray for our Neighbors (what kinds of prayers should we pray?) *3 And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ.*

Pray for Gospel Opportunities: I take "open a door" this to mean two things. **1- Location:** Paul was a traveling missionary all over Asia Minor. He was asking for prayer for open doors to new opportunities, with new people, in new places so that the synagogue or the town square even the acropolis in Athens would be open to him to share the gospel. **2- Impact:** Paul was asking that when he shared the Gospel everywhere he went that God would change circumstances and attitudes and hearts to spiritual conversations so that instead of hitting a brick wall, the message would find an open door, a willingness to hear, and an open heart to the Holy Spirit's prompting.

We need to pray the same way. That God would open the doors of locations so that we might have access to people and places where the gospel has yet to make an in road. In your neighborhood, in your workplace, in your school, in the gym you work out in, in the under-resourced community where you serve, wherever God has strategically placed you or called you to go to. That we would see the opportunities all around us- the neighbor who needs their grass cut, or sticks picked up, or the couple with the new baby that could use a meal, or hurried single mom that could use babysitting, or the student in school that needs some help with their math.

And also pray for open doors of impact. That the people you are proving to be a good neighbor to, that God would be stirring in their hearts at just the right time. I was just speaking with a member of the church recently, and I was asking him how I can pray for him. He said God has blessed him with a successful business and because of that he had usual opportunities to develop relationships with wealthy, very successful C-suite kinds of people that few people may ever get to know in a real way. These are some of the least-reached people of the Brandywine Valley. And here is this Jesus follower whom God has placed right there. And I could tell that he felt the privilege and weight of that. And he asked me just like Paul here, pray for open doors.

If you ever have said, "I just don't feel like I have opportunities to share my faith." The way you change that is through prayer. I was in the sauna after a workout on Thursday and I was praying

for open doors, just like this passage. And within seconds, a young guy next to me says, “Are you the pastor at the church next door?” I said, “Yes.” And he said, I’ve been there before with a friend when I was in High School and I thought I recognized you. And we struck up a conversation- he’s not a believer as far as I can tell but we were talking about reading the Bible and sensing God’s presence and taking next steps, all while several others are sweating it out in a tiny room...sauna ministry- captive audience! Start praying for open doors and see what happens- these are prayers God will answer!

What else should we pray for? ***4 Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.***

Pray for Gospel Clarity

I find it encouraging that even the greatest evangelist to ever live, Paul, needed prayer for clarity when sharing his faith. Because I don’t know about you but there are times I’m still anxious, and awkward, and wonder what to say. If Paul needs prayer for clarity, if your pastor needs prayer for clarity, listen- WE ALL need prayer for clarity! Because the reality is most of the time we aren’t going to get a heads up that the opportunity is coming. It’s just going to happen when you are in the middle of biting into your cheeseburger or getting your groceries or walking your dog. We need to be prepared as the Bible says, in season and out of season. And that’s why we need to pray for clarity. Now that doesn’t mean we have to be Bible-answer man or woman. But we do need to be ready to give an answer for the hope that lies within us.

What else should we pray? **Pray for Blessing.** If Jesus says we should pray for our enemies and bless those who curse us, certainly we should pray this same way for our neighbors. Pray for their jobs, for their marriages and families, pray for their protection, for their health and flourishing. And if you aren’t sure how to pray for them, here’s a great idea...Ask them! One of the single most effective ways to love your neighbor is to ask how you can pray for them. I asked one of my neighbors on myHashtag- how can I pray for you, thinking I might get a more surface level request. They opened up and said, “I’m feeling a bit lost in the world and I feel like everyone in my life has let me down. You can pray I find some direction and joy?” Wow! What an opportunity to pray, what an open door!

So let’s sharpen our effectiveness through prayer. And we need prayer because of what we are doing together **On Saturday, April 27, we invite you to plan and host an informal Neighbors Social where you live.** This is our GO Week 2024 focus: simply loving our neighbor by spending time together, building relationships that can lead to gospel opportunities. Pick a place people will feel comfortable: your driveway, front yard, a common room, parking lot, neighborhood park, etc.

We’ve tried to make this as accessible and turnkey as possible for you, we’ve made a **NEIGHBORS SOCIAL KIT! (One per household, available at a table in the lobby)** Door hangers (if you need more), stickers, magnets, a sheet that walks through how to do this in detail. Offer a few snacks and drinks, try not to overthink it and stress out about it- KISS...but remember, the main goal is simply to get to know your neighbors.

This week- **pray first!** Talk to God about your neighbors. This week, if you haven't done so already, **2- Team up.** Find others in your neighborhood who will partner with you. Plan the event with them. If they are believers, spend time in prayer with them. **3. Invite.** We encourage you to knock on doors and invite them. If they don't answer, leave a door hanger. Text and call as well.

Let's do this right now- Let me invite up the band...who are your neighbors? Who will you invite? Let's pray.