

Struggling to Kneel

The Affections of a Godly Man – Part II

Romans 1:9-10

Introduction

I have been preaching a series of sermons to men. The response from many men has been encouraging and moving.

One man jokingly said to me, “You know, I’ve noticed, over the years, that you’re a lot harder on men than you are on women.”

He is probably right. I do believe that the fundamental responsibility for leading the church, the home, the marriage, and the family is the shepherd, and every man is, in some way, a shepherd. However, I do not like the idea that I am harder on men than women.

One man sent some rather funny things about women and marriage to me. At first I thought they would be too blunt to repeat, but after that comment, I thought I would take a chance and balance the scales between the men and the women a little by reading a few of them.

One fellow said, “I married Miss Right. I just didn’t know her first name was Always.”

“The last argument I had with my wife was all my fault,” one man said to another.

“Oh, why was that?”

“Well, she asked me what was on the TV, and I said, ‘Dust.’”

I think that is enough, don’t you?

I have specifically begun addressing the men in this series of messages entitled, “The Affections of a Godly Man”. The truths, however, from Romans, chapter 1, certainly apply to every believer. They

are, I believe, truths that every woman can pray her husband becomes; truths that every daughter can look for in a future husband; truths that every son can grow up to be like.

When Paul wrote to the Christians living in Rome, Italy, beginning in chapter 1, and verse 8, we are given, among many wonderful truths, a personal look at the apostle Paul. This is the man who shocks us with his candor, as he writes in his first letter to the Corinthians, in chapter 4, verse 16,

Therefore I exhort you, be imitators of me.

He could say that, not because he was perfect, but because he was progressing in his walk and was a little further down the path than the others.

In the verses that we are about to look at, in Romans, chapter 1, we will discover, as Barnhouse observed, what made the apostle Paul “tick”. What did he think about? What did he long for? What did he feel passionate about doing? What drove his affections in life?

We will also discover a model for every man. This model is from a man who was not behind a pulpit, nor behind a university lectern, nor in front of a public audience making some carefully developed speech, but was a man on his knees.

E. M. Bounds was born in 1835. At one time, this lawyer served as a chaplain in the Civil War. Afterwards, he served as a pastor. He spent the last eighteen years of his life in prayer and writing. His writings would be ignored until long after his death, yet his words are as needed today as at any other time in modern history. He wrote the following potent words,

We are constantly on a stretch, if not on a strain, to devise new methods, new plans, new organizations to advance the church . . . but while the church is looking for better methods, God is looking for better men. What the church needs today is not more machinery, not new organizations or more and novel methods, but men whom the Holy Spirit can use – men mighty in prayer. The Holy Spirit does not flow through methods, but through men. He does not come on machinery, but on men. He does not anoint plans, but men – men of prayer.ⁱ

The Prayer Closet of the Apostle Paul

I invite you to join me in the private prayer room of the apostle Paul and discover what the affections of a godly man truly are. Let us begin by reading verses 8 through 10 of Romans, chapter 1.

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world. For God, whom I serve in my spirit in the preaching of the gospel of His Son, is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you, always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you.

You cannot help but observe, as Paul leafs through his prayer list, several things about him.

Observe Paul's godly piety

1. First, observe Paul's godly piety.

"Piety" is another word for, "devotion, or sacred allegiance, or reverence".

Paul wrote, in verse 9,

For God, whom I serve in my spirit . . .

I believe that Paul's use of the words "in my spirit," is intended to convey the intensity of his devotion to God. He is, in effect, saying, "I am serving God with my whole being," or, as the New International Version translates it, "with my whole heart"!

This is an expression that is deeply emotional.

Add to that the fact that Paul's word translated "serve," is the Greek word, "latreuo," which is translated, "worship". It combines the ideas of devotion and action. Worship is living for God, and serving God is worshipping God.

Paul is saying, in this one phrase, "My entire life, my being, my working, my serving is devoted to the honor and glory of God."

You might say, "Well, Paul is supposed to say that. I mean, he's an apostle and apostles are supposed to live like that."

It would be wonderful to agree with you, because then we would all be off the hook. However, there is that troubling little verse that I referenced at the beginning of our study, where Paul said, "Imitate me! Live like me! I'm showing you how to walk, so walk like me."

Godly living is not a sport, it is work. It is not something you do only if you feel like it, or if you have some spare time for it, or if you are naturally good at it. Paul told Timothy, in I Timothy, chapter 4, verse 7b,

. . . discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness

Paul said to discipline or train yourself. The word "train" is the word, "gumnazo," from which we get our word, "gymnasium". In other words, "Timothy, go into the gymnasium of the Spirit and work out in the Word and, if you're not breaking out into spiritual sweat, you're probably not working hard enough."

Later, in that same paragraph, Paul tells Timothy that this godliness is something for which we labor and strive. The word "labor" is the Greek word from which we get our word "agonize".

So, Paul speaks of gaining godliness with words like "agonizing" and "training," just as an athlete would train and push himself in order to run a race. In fact, Paul uses that very analogy in I Corinthians, chapter 9.

I have heard people say, "I don't read the Bible because it's hard to understand," or, "I don't pray like I ought to because that has just never come easy for me," or, "I'd like to memorize scripture but it takes forever."

They have never understood that successful Christian living requires spiritual sweat.

J. Sidlow Baxter pastored in the early 1900's. At one point, in his own walk and growth in Christ, he took a good look into his heart. He found that there was a part of him that wanted to pray and a part of him that did not. The part that did was his will and intellect; the part that did not was his emotions. He wrote of how he struggled and fought in order to gain personal victory.

As never before, my will and I stood face to face. I asked my will the straight question, "Will, are you ready for an hour of prayer?"

Will answered, "Here I am, and I'm quite ready, if you are."

So Will and I linked arms and turned to go for our time of prayer. At once all the emotions began pulling the other way and protesting, "We are not coming."

I saw Will stagger just a bit, so I asked, "Can you stick it out, Will?"

Will replied, "Yes, if you can."

So Will went, and we got down to prayer, dragging those wriggling, rambunctious emotions with us. It was a struggle all the way through. At one point, when Will and I were in the middle of earnest intercession, I suddenly found one of those traitorous emotions had snared my imagination and had run off to the golf course; and it was all I could do to drag the wicked rascal back. A bit later I found another of the emotions had sneaked away with some off-guarded thoughts. At the end of that hour, if you had asked me, "Have you had a good time?" I would have had to reply, "No, it has been a wearying wrestle with contrary emotions and a truant imagination from beginning to end."

Well, that battle continued for some time. And if you asked me, "Have you had a good time in your daily praying?" I would have had to confess, "No, at times it has seemed as though the heavens were brass, and God too distant to hear, and the Lord Jesus strangely aloof, and prayer accomplishing nothing."

Yet, something was happening. For one thing, Will and I were slowly teaching Emotion that we were completely independent of them. Also, one morning, just when Will and I were going for another time of prayer, I overheard one of the emotions whisper to the other, "Come on, you guys, it is not useful wasting any more time resisting; they'll go just the same."

That morning, for the first time, even though the emotions were still suddenly uncooperative, they were at least quiet, which allowed Will and me to get on with prayer without distraction. Then, another couple of weeks later, what do you think happened? During one of our prayer times, when Will

and I were no more thinking of the emotions than of the man in the moon, one of the most vigorous of the emotions unexpectedly sprang up and shouted, "Hallelujah!" at which all the other emotions said, "Amen!"

And for the first time the whole of my being – intellect, will and emotions – was untied in one coordinated prayer operation.ⁱⁱ

A godly life, ladies and gentlemen, is never a coincidence!

A godly man's affection for godly living compels him to persist in a life-long devotion; to intensely battle the flesh; to struggle and agonize for purity in and through every fabric of his being; to resist the philosophy of the world system, until body, soul, and spirit cooperate at times, in true and holy living for Christ and His church. In other words, a holy man does not just happen!

Would you struggle to kneel and beg God to make you a holy man? If you would, be ready at some point, to talk with strange words like these, "I am deeply devoted to God with my whole heart."

Observe Paul's godly praying

2. The second thing to observe about Paul, in verse 9, is his godly praying.

I say the words "godly praying" purposefully, because it is possible to pray in an ungodly way.

James, chapter 4, tells us how, as he rebukes believers for asking God for things with selfish motives in order to have more ease, more comfort, and more things. He writes, in verse 3,

You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.

Notice how Paul prayed, in the last part of verse 9,

For God . . . is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of [myself]

"And, oh, do I have problems. Just recently I learned that there is a plot to kill me."

And there was.

"I already had enough trouble with the law. In fact, I still have bruises from my last beating. There isn't a day that goes by that I don't unceasingly pray about myself and I'd like you, in Rome, to do the same."

Oh, I misread one little word of verse 9, didn't I?

For God . . . is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you

Paul wrote to the Ephesian believers, in chapter 3, verse 14,

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father

Oh? What drives you to your knees Paul? Continue to verses 16 through 19 to find out.

that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.

Most of the time, when I get on my knees, I pray that God will do that for me. Paul goes to his knees and prays that God will do this for someone else.

Paul wrote to the Philippians, in chapter 1, verses 8 through 11,

For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Did you catch that first phrase? Paul wrote, “I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And this I pray . . .”.

In other words, the affection of a godly man for Jesus Christ produces, in him, a compelling longing to engage in godly, selfless praying for the physical and spiritual well-being of other people. The affections of a godly man are revealed in the fact that he does not just:

- live for himself,
- think about himself,
- talk about himself,
- spend money on himself,
- pray for himself, or
- serve himself.

You might say, “Well, I don’t do that. C’mon, who do you think I am?”

Shall I be so bold as to add the words “and his family” to this list? The godly man does not just:

- live for himself *and his family*,
- think about himself *and his family*,
- talk about himself *and his family*,
- spend money on himself *and his family*,
- pray for himself *and his family*, or
- serve himself *and his family*.

James wrote, in chapter 1, verse 27, that,

Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit the orphans and widows in their distress . . .

In other words, in serving, caring for, and watching over those who are not even related to you nor can repay you, you are practicing godliness. Giving, caring, and praying for someone outside of your natural inclination and familial sphere of care, prayer, and concern is, at times, the best gauge of your true godliness.

Has it occurred to you that Paul, in Romans, chapter 1, is concerned for, longing for, affectionate for, and consistently praying for people he has never even met? In:

- verse 9, “. . . *how unceasingly I make mention of you*”
- verse 10a, “*always in my prayers making request . . .*”

(and, what is Paul requesting?)

- verse 10b, “. . . *if perhaps now at last by the will of God, I may succeed in coming to you.*”

Observe Paul’s godly planning

3. We have discovered Paul’s godly piety and his godly praying. Now, in verse 10, we will observe his godly planning.

How I love Paul’s transparency. In verse 10b, he writes,

. . . if perhaps now at last by the will of God . . .

I could not help but think of the prayer that the Lord taught as a model for praying. It is recorded in Matthew, chapter 6, where verse 10 says,

Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

We do not pray to have our will done in heaven, we pray to have His will done on earth.

Paul says, "I've been longing and praying. I want so badly to come to Rome, but I'm only going to come if it is the will of God."

My friend, what is it about your life, right now, that requires divine direction and leadership before you take another step? What is it in your life that you will not do or you will do, if God moves in your heart and spirit to do so? To put it another way, is there anything in your life that you are doing that He would not want you to be doing? Is there something that you are not doing that you know would please Him if you did?

Paul's life was ordered by the will of God and his plans were bathed in prayer. His life was ruled by submission to the leadership of His sovereign Lord, as he said,

*. . . if perhaps now at last by the will of God .
..*

You get the idea that Paul longed to do something, but waited in prayer for the hand of God to show the way.

Martin Luther, the church reformer and spiritual mentor of the early 1500's, often had students at his table during meals. On one occasion, as they were eating, Luther noticed his puppy, who happened to be sitting near him, watching him with an open mouth and motionless, pleading eyes. Luther commented, "Oh, if I could only pray the way this dog watches the meat! All his thoughts are concentrated on this piece of food. He has no other thought, no other wish, no other hope."

What a wonderful analogy of a godly man who waits upon His true and living God. We see Paul as that man who kneels and prays and waits, and prays again and waits yet again for the blessing and pleasure of God on his life and the lives of everyone who names the name of Christ.

Conclusion

What a mentor Paul was and is; what a model of the affections of a godly man.

I want to read a few pages from a chapter of a book that tells of one godly old man mentoring godliness in the life of his grown son. The chapter is entitled, "Thanks for Teaching Me the Value of Humility," and is from Senator John Ashcroft's memories of his dad, adapted from his book, *Lessons From a Father to His Son*.

This picture of my father that I'm about to share with you was taken in the autumn of his life. Late autumn. The changing colors of autumn's leaves, just before they fall, are a highlight of the season. Much like a mighty tree, my dad's true colors were the most vivid at the end of his life. The night before I was sworn into the Senate in 1995, my father gathered a small group of close friends and family for dinner. Seeing a piano in the corner of the room, my father said, "John, why don't you play the piano and we'll sing."

"Okay, Dad. You name it. I'll play it."

"Let's sing, 'We Are Standing on Holy Ground.'"

It was one of his favorites.

After the song, I eased away from the piano keys, and, thinking out loud, I said, "We're standing here having a good time, but I really wish we were in a dedication service." (Before each of my inaugurations as governor, friends would gather for such a service at my request, and we would invite God to be present in both the inaugural festivities and my administration.)

My lifelong friend Dick Foth spoke up, "We can do something about a dedication service, John."

At his suggestion, we gathered the next morning at a house not far from the Capitol, a beautiful house maintained by a group of friends for the express purpose of bringing members of Congress together for spiritual enrichment.

We began by chatting informally, and then sang a hymn or two. At the time I didn't know just how weak my father was. He had been losing weight through the months of November and December and had told an acquaintance of his, "I'm hanging on by a thread, and it's a thin thread at that, but I'm going to see John sworn into the Senate."

As we talked, the earnestness of my father's voice suddenly commanded everyone's attention. "John," Dad said, "please listen carefully." My children and I fixed our eyes on him. My brother Bob moved to the edge of his seat. Dick Foth and the others leaned in.

"The spirit of Washington is arrogance," my dad said, "and the spirit of Christ is

humility. Put on the spirit of Christ. Nothing of lasting value has ever been accomplished in arrogance.”

Suddenly the room went quiet. There was no chit-chat, no lighthearted banter, no whispering even. It was a profound moment. And everyone there knew it.

For a while we discussed my father’s words. After that, I asked for prayer.

I knelt in front of the sofa where my father was seated. Everyone gathered around me to place a hand on my head or my shoulder or my back. Everyone was standing when I noticed my father lunging and swinging his arms as he tried to lift himself out of the overstuffed sofa. With a damaged heart, operating at less than one-third capacity, he was expending every bit of energy he had, but he wasn’t making much progress.

I felt terrible. Knowing he didn’t have the strength, I said, “Dad, you don’t have to struggle to stand and pray over me with these friends.”

“John,” my father answered, “I’m not struggling to stand; I’m struggling to kneel.”

Some statements are so profound that they take a while to sink in; others hit you with the force of a nuclear explosion.

Those words took me back to those early mornings as a child when I joined him on his knees, praying that we would do noble things. Now, still on his knees, he was taking me there again.

On the night after my swearing-in ceremony as a senator, my wife and I were awakened by a rattling of the iron bars outside our Washington apartment. It was my friend Dick Foth. He told me of my father’s death. Then he told me this:

“Yesterday, your father pulled me aside and said, ‘Dick, I want you to assure me that when John gets to his assigned offices, you will have prayer with him, inviting the presence of God into those rooms.’”

“I looked at your father and said, ‘We’ll do just that. And, as a matter of fact, we’ll call you up in Springfield, put you on the speaker phone, and you can join us for the consecration.’”

“Your father grabbed me by the arm and said, ‘You don’t understand. I won’t be in Springfield.’”

“He knew what was coming, John. He knew.”

My dad had little energy left those last days of his life. And he chose to spend it passing on to me his deepest understanding of life. His heart made one final and valiant effort, and then he was gone.

Goody-bye, Dad

Thanks for the lessons.

And thanks for struggling to kneel.

I’m still struggling to learn.ⁱⁱⁱ

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 12/17/2000 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ E. M. Bounds, Power Through Prayer, quoted in PreachingToday.com, “Citation”.

ⁱⁱ J. Sidlow Baxter, quoted by Kent R. Hughes in Disciplines of a Godly Man (Crossway Books, 1991), p. 103.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Ashcroft, Lessons From a Father to His Son, quoted by Ken Gire in Thanks, Dad, For Teaching Me Well (WaterBrook Press), p. 59.