

## The Christian's Work: Prayer

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Romans 1:9, this is the verse we have reached in our study of Romans and you see it is the final part of the clause, "That without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers." "That without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers." We served for a while in Donegal which is the northern tip of Ireland and it was in a rural district and we had just one more example of this. A mother discovered her 19 year old son had cancer and had it very, very badly so they x-rayed him and they prepared to come out and they gave him as much x-ray as they could and finally they said, "Well, we can do nothing."

And then came this old comment that you meet again and again with people who say they are Christians and the mother said, "Well, the doctors can do nothing. There's nothing left now but prayer. There's nothing left now but prayer." And you can see the fallacy of it but how often we have said it in our own lives. We come into a certain situation, we try everything else and then we say, "Well, there's nothing left now but prayer. There's nothing left for it but to trust God now."

Now do you see that this was absolutely contrary to the spirit that Paul expressed in this Verse 9? He says, "For God is my witness, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers." And it's contrary to the whole biblical attitude. Old Elisha didn't say, "Well I'll try this method. Okay I'll set a light to it and see if I can overcome all the water that I've drenched that thing with." And he didn't try cutting himself with stones and with swords. He didn't try everything else before he got down on his knees and said, "Oh Lord God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob show these people that thou art God in Israel." In other words, the biblical attitude is that prayer is the immediate answer. Prayer is not the last thing you try. It's not the final resource that you try after you've tried all the normal methods but prayer for the Christian is the normal method.

So you can see this if you really begin to do a little general analysis on that Verse 9. If you're like the Americans that I teach you can't do general analysis but I hope you can. Will you look at Verse 9 dear ones, "For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers." Now this is the verse you remember, where Paul talks about the ministry of a Christian. He says, "A Christian is one who serves God and not man." He says, "A Christian is one who serves not with his intellect or with his emotion but who serves with his spirit."

But do you see that that important statement which we have spent three Sundays expounding is only the relative clause in this verse? Do you see that? That's only part of the subordinate relative clause, the subordinate relative clause, "Whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son." All of the ministry of a Christian is inside a relative clause but the main clause, the principle clause is, "For God is my witness, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers." In other words, Paul is saying the important thing that I want to get over to you in this verse is God is my witness that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers. All the things that I've said about the ministry of a Christian are subservient to the work of a Christian which is prayer.

Now really dear ones, the primary work is not to get into the Black ghettos. That is part of the ministry and sure we should do that. The primary work is not to try and transform society by being a social worker that is part of your ministry that is part of your ministry. If God has called you to be a social worker that is part of the ministry that he wants you to perform. But the work of

the Lord is prayer. In other words, the primary work of all of us who are Christians is prayer. This is what God sets in the forefront of the ministry of any Christian it's the work of prayer.

Paul does not say, "God is my witness that I've been stoned for you people, I've been buffeted for you people, I've been imprisoned for you people, and I've been shipwrecked for you people." Paul does not say that. Paul does not say, "God is my witness that I've worked with my whole hands tent making so that I could serve among you people and help you to know Jesus." Paul says, "God is my witness that without ceasing always I have been making mention of you in my prayers." In other words, Paul is saying, "My primary work for you is my prayer to God on your behalf."

Now why is this so? Because prayer alone enables God to operate in a uniquely Jehovah fashion. Prayer alone enables God to operate in a uniquely Jehovah fashion. In Elisha's day there were Baal gods that claimed to be god. There was Jehovah that claimed to be God. They needed final proof that one of them was God. Elisha prayed and the fire came down, that proved that he was God. Today, there is humanism parading in the name of Christianity. You know how it goes, what is a Christian? A Christian is one who loves everybody else. Well, that's not Christianity. It's humanism parading as Christianity.

There is psychology parading as Christianity. What you need is more peace, you need an integrated soul and then you'll feel the harmony of God in your life. And what we need in these days is a unique operation of God in people's lives that will declare what real Christianity is. Prayer alone brings that. Dear ones, the psychologist can imitate the impression that you make on people's personalities in the universe. The psychologist can imitate that. Anything you can do by your friendship for someone else in your life the psychiatrist or the psychologist can imitate that. Only God can do a unique work in their heart that no one else can imitate. That's why prayer is the unique work of the Lord.

When you are praying you're really doing the work of God because you're enabling him to bring about his inadmissible results in people's lives but only by prayer are you doing that, anything else can be imitated. You may say, "Oh well, now does it matter too much? I mean, I'm witnessing as well as I can and I haven't much time to pray for these people but I tell them about the books you've recommended and I try to bring them to church and I try to discuss Christianity with them. Now it will surely have some effect on their lives eventually." Yes, but on the final day it will show up in its true colors. On the final day shallow prayerless witnessing or preaching will show up in its true colors.

The church could be packed Sunday after Sunday. We could be moving into the basement. We could go like that for 20 years and on the final day God would reveal whether that was prayer work or whether it was the work of man. You know the passage I'm referring to, would you look at it in 1 Corinthians 3:12-15. Paul has just said you remember, that the foundation is Jesus Christ and then in 1 Corinthians 3:12 he says, "Now if any one builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones," that's prayer witnessing, prayer preaching, "Wood, hay, straw," that is prayerless witnessing, prayerless preaching, "Each man's work will become manifest; for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work which any man has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire." In other words, the work may look good at the moment but on the final Day of Judgment the prayer work will remain the prayerless work will be burned up.

Now what kind of prayer is Paul talking about here when he calls this the work of the Lord? Well, would you look first of all at the very words of the verse and you can see plainly that it is first of all prayer for other people, "For God is my witness that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers." It is intercessory prayer. Now you know that there are four other types of prayer that we should deal with in a mid week series either this quarter or next. There is prayer of adoration, there is prayer of thanksgiving, there is prayer of confession, there is prayer of petition but this is the prayer of intercession, this is praying for other people.

Now does the verse say anything more about this kind of prayer? Well would you look dear ones at the verse itself? Paul does not say, "For God is my witness that when I get up in the morning and I'm on my way to university I mention you to God." Is he saying, "For God is my witness that sometimes I mention you in my prayers." Is he saying, "For God is my witness that I have a prayer list and I go down the names and I quickly say, 'God bless this person, bless that person, bless the other person.'" He is saying, "For God is my witness that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers."

Now the translation there is not the best one of the Greek words. The Greek words are "pos adialeiptos". And "pos" can mean "that" or it can mean "how". "Adialeiptos" means without ceasing or unceasing. Now when you have "pos" with an adverb you translate it not "that" but "how". In other words the real translation is, "For God is my witness how unceasingly I mention you always in my prayers." What Paul says is the kind of prayer that brings results in people's lives is prayer that is unceasing and another word is "pantote" always. In other words he says, "God is my witness how unceasingly I mention you always in my prayers."

Now that's the kind of prayer that brings results in your witnessing life or in your own life in the university. It's prayer that is unceasing and that is containable. Now you may say, "Well, what's the significance of that?" We were married I think about six years ago and I remember, my wife is sitting here so I better watch it, I remember putting it down in my diary and unfortunately she saw it one day, the 28th of December, marry Irene. And I had trouble getting over to her that it was just a joke that I really didn't need to be reminded that I was marrying her on that day.

Now you can see that you just don't think of having to note down that kind of event. You live the previous week, the previous months in the spirit of anticipation that that's going to take place. That's why prayer that brings results must be prayer that is without ceasing, that is continual. You don't have to note down names of people that you're really concerned about.

Now dear ones, I'm not knocking the prayer list but I'm saying that if we need a prayer list maybe we're not loving them sufficiently. That prayer that is continual and without ceasing is prayer that is the real spirit of our life. It just purveys our whole life and that's the only prayer that will bring answers. Dear ones, this prayer that we do will not bring answers. It's no use you saying, "Oh I prayed and I prayed and I haven't gotten an answer." And all you're talking about is ten minutes before you rush out in the morning or five minutes before you go to bed. That is not the prayer that the bible says will bring results from God but it is prayer without ceasing and that is continual. It is prayer that is the whole spirit of our lives.

Now you can see this in this little book. Unfortunately, we haven't too many of them but if you want one you can put your name down and order it on the bookstore. But in this book you read some of the lives that had that spirit of outcome. Wesley spent two hours daily in prayer. He began at four in the morning. Of him, one who knew him well wrote, "He thought prayer to be more his

business than anything else and I have seen him come out of his closet with a serenity of face next to shining.” John Fletcher stained the walls of his room by the breath of his prayers. Sometimes he would pray all night always frequently and with great earnestness. His whole life was a life of prayer. “I would not rise from my seat,” he said, “Without lifting my heart to God.” His greeting to a friend was always, “Do I need you praying?”

If you check the back page of the bulletin you’ll find the same truth expressed five lines, well the first four lines, “The men who have most fully illustrated Christ in their character and have most powerfully affected the world for him have been men who have spent so much time with God as to make it a notable feature in their lives.” Charles Simeon devoted the hours from four until eight in the morning to God. Then if you look at the second paragraph, “Arch Bishop Leighton was so much alone with God that he seemed to be in a perpetual meditation. Prayer and praise were his business and his pleasure. Bishop Cane was so much with God that his soul was said to be God enamored. He was with God before the clock struck three every morning.” Bishop Ashbury said, “I propose to rise at four o’clock as often as I can and spend two hours in prayer and meditation.” And so it goes on.

Where men have been used mightily by God it has been because their prayer has been without ceasing and has been continual and has pervaded the whole spirit of their lives. Dear ones, these are men who have spent eight or nine hours in prayer each day. Men like Martin Luther have said, “I am so busy I cannot afford to spend less than three hours a day in prayer.” Now you see, we say, “Ah, but he only brought about a Reformation, I have the final tickets.” You see dear ones, the more you have to do the more you need to pray and the reason why you’re not seeing mighty results through your witnessing in these days is because it’s prayerless witnessing.

You’re trying to substitute the power of your own personality for the work that prayer alone can do. In other words, you’re not in Paul’s position where you can say, and you could say to the people to whom you are witnessing, “You have someone in your heart now, haven’t you? If you’re a Christian no doubt you have someone on your heart at this moment whom you want closer to God.” Now can you say to them, “God is my witness that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayer.” Can you say that? And can you say that that’s the spirit of your life, that your whole life is pervaded by that spirit?

Another reason for Paul putting those words in is that you’ll really have to want the thing when you pray like that. You know how it is, if you really want something you can be doing all kinds of things during the day but that’s the one thing you’re thinking of. So if it is marriage you’re thinking continually of the wedding. If it is the final you’re thinking continually of the final. What you’re really concerned about you think of all the time and that’s the prayer that God answers. So there’s no point in you coming to church on a Sunday and saying, “Lord, make me holier in my life.” When the real desire that God sees in your spirit is, “Make me successful in my examinations and give me a good job, and a good home, and someone good to live with.”

You fathers and mothers it’s no use praying once, “Lord, make my boy Christ like,” if your spirit is really praying, “Make him successful financially.” It’s no use us praying here at church, “Bring us a revival Lord, to the campus so that Jesus may be glorified,” if our spirit is really praying, “Lord, fill the church and make us successful.” Why Paul emphasizes prayer that is without ceasing and that is always going on in our lives is that that is the prayer of the spirit. And one of our problems is we offer to God the prayers of our souls. We offer up the prayer of our intellect. We say, “Now this is prayer time. Now I should pray for the people that I’m supposed to be witnessing to. Now Lord, would you work in their minds and make Jesus real to them.” And we pray with our

intellect.

But what we're thinking about all that day is how am I going to get through the day successfully? What are other people thinking of me? What kind of impression am I making on the others? What kind of grade am I going to get at the end of this day? In other words, God answers the prayer that you really pray he does not answer the prayer that you pretend to be praying.

You remember there's a piece in Proverbs 20:27 where this is emphasized that it's necessary to pray in the spirit for a certain reason. Proverbs 20:27, "The Spirit of man is the lamp of the LORD, searching all his innermost parts." In other words, it's your spirit that is God's lamp and by which he searches your innermost parts. He doesn't look at your lips when he wants to know what you want he looks at your spirit and sees the whole direction and attitude of your own spirit and that's the prayer that he's answering.

Psychologists have gone very near to this, they has said that parents always get the children that they deserve. And while that may be harsh, perhaps in a deep way it's true, that we produce either by reaction against us or by people who are too like us, we produce replicas of ourselves or replicas of our own inner beings. But this is true in the spiritual realm, God answers the prayer that you really pray and the problem with many of our unanswered prayers is that we don't realize what is really the desire of our spirits, we're pretending so much of the time.

Dear ones, there's so much more to be said and I believe that we should continue with it next Sunday. And I'm sorry, but it seems that God has so much to say to us in these days that I only get half of the verse done and I think it will take us about 50 years to get through Romans. So let me finish just on that dear ones, have you that kind of concern for the dear ones to whom you're with? Have you? Are you praying for them in that way? Now just let me apply it strictly to the fathers and mothers. Fathers and mothers are you praying for your sons and daughters like this? You young men and woman, are you praying for your fathers and mothers like that? Are you praying for your brothers and sisters like that or are you offering short prayers as a compliment to God?

Can you really say, "God is my witness that without ceasing I am always making mention of you in my prayers." Next day I'd like to deal with unanswered prayer and I hope to convince you that there's no such thing and that there is a way through. There is a way through to an answer to all your prayers and you can know it next day in your own life. Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, we thank you for the plain truth that your word teaches and we thank you that you have called us not to a vague life where things are uncertain but you have called us to a definite victorious life of discipleship where we see fire coming down from heaven and purifying the hearts of those dear ones whom we love. We thank you Lord Jesus that your promises are given to us and we have only to sign our name to them and expect the answers. Amen.