

The Importance of Prayer: Praying For Loved Ones

Genesis 18:20-33

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

It seems to me, we talk so much about love today and we all talk about loving each other and we're all talking about self-esteem and the importance of recognition and I would dare to say that those of you in large companies talk more about this than ever our forefathers talked about it. And yet it's strange, there seems to be less love in a way. More talk about love and less love and I think loved ones, one of the ways that this shows itself is that we know there are many things in our wives, our husbands, our sons, our daughters, our fathers, our mothers, our friends, our girl friends, our boy friends that we would like to see change.

Year after year goes by and we do not see them changed and the reason we do not see them changed is we don't love them enough to pray for them. Now loved ones I know what you think. You say, "Brother, I pray for them." But loved ones you know as you sit there, what we call prayer is just child's play compared with real prayer, you know that. You know that what we do is when we get a little worked up about them or something terrible happens, then we pray for them.

Too often it's the situation that many of us have mentioned today. Either the loved one has a miscarriage or the marriage gets into difficulties and then we get enthusiastic and we pray for the urgency of that moment or maybe our partner just gets particularly unbearable and so we pray for them for a while but we don't pray on through to victory and deliverance. So many of us here this morning have friends and colleagues, associates at work, we have loved ones whom we have married, we have loved ones whom we're related to, we have all kinds of friends who have things in their lives that desperately need to be radically and permanently changed and yet it goes on, year after year after year, unchanged and you and I say, "Oh, we love them, we love them, we love them", but we never really do pray with prayer that enables God to change them.

So, it's with that in mind that I feel that I should share some things with you from this dear Book. The first is that God is able to change people radically and is able to change their whole situation radically if you will keep on praying for them. If you will keep on praying for them, God is able to change things radically but it means praying with a desperate seriousness, loved ones. It means beginning to give up time in your days to pray for them.

Could I just mention to you again the very real fact that there came a time in your life when you could no longer pray for your dad, because he was dead? There came a time in your life when you could no longer pray for your mom, because she's dead. There came a time in your life when you could no longer pray for your grandmother, because she's dead. There is a very short time during which you have the opportunity to pray in a radical way for your loved ones and that time is now and you don't know how long it will be but you do have this time.

Now may I ask you, how much of your day do you give to that? Do you see, that is it? How much of your day you give to that and think of all the other things we're doing? Think of all the time we spend eating, all the time we spend playing, all the time we spend working. Now do you see why I am suggesting to you that we don't really love each other, because the years go by and go by and go by and we don't really spend time praying for each other in a deep desiring way? We do all kinds of

other things for each other. You know that. We buy each other presents, we take each other out, we talk to each other, we are even kind to each other but none of those things will change the other person. The only thing that will really change them is God changing them in answer to our prayers.

Now, compare how little you pray for them; that's how much you love them. I don't know how many of you are in this situation but I think probably all of us here this morning, whether you're primarily a son or daughter or primarily a mom or dad, I don't think there's one of us here this morning that has not somebody that we care about very deeply and that we know needs to change in some radical way and needs to be delivered from something in some radical way and yet the truth is, we don't pray very much for each other and that's the only thing that really counts.

What I am saying to you is -- I know this is hard -- we don't really love each other. I know it's hard and that I know you'll say, "Oh look, I do love my loved one." Loved ones, you don't. We don't really love each other. Otherwise, we would pray long and hard for each other. I know why you don't. It's the same reason as I didn't because I thought, "Well, prayer, I mean it's not the greatest thing I can do for them."

Brothers and sisters, it's the only thing you can do. It's the only thing you can do for your loved ones. It's the only thing you can do for your colleagues. It's the only thing you can do for your associates. I'd ask you, "Where has all your talking got?" You wives are trying to convert your husbands; you husbands are trying to change your wives, where has all your talking got? You know where it's got, you know her. Twenty years later you're exactly at the same spot because man cannot change man.

What about your friends and your associates at work? How much has all your talking and all your witnessing got, it doesn't do anything. Only prayer changes them and what I am saying to you is, if you measure your love by the amount of praying you do for them, you can see how little we love each other, that's it loved ones. That's why I say we don't really love each other and I just take one more step, that's why so many of us are insecure these days because you hear, you know all the fine expressions, "Oh I love you, love you darling, love you, love you", and we know they don't love us. They don't love us. They don't really love us.

They say they love us but they don't really love us and we actually know we don't really love them because we don't put ourselves out much for them, because we won't engage in this laborious, toilsome business of praying for them, we won't. It's so hard and so loved ones that's why I want to share these things this morning. So you know what I am saying to you is that it is time to start loving each other and that means praying for each other. It's called interceding for each other, interceding.

Now, here it is loved ones, does it change? Yes, look at Genesis 18, what Gentry read at the time of the lesson. Genesis 18:20 because of course we are all thinking of the dreadful situations that our friends are in or our loved ones or we're thinking, "Oh, they've been going that way for 20 years, they're not going to change now, there's no way they'll change." Well, that's just lies. Those are just lies.

Genesis 18:20, "Then the Lord said, 'Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry which has come to me; and if not, I will know.' So the men turned from there and went towards Sodom; but Abraham still stood before the Lord. Then Abraham drew near and said, 'Wilt thou

indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; wilt thou then destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it?" Because of course Lot, his relative was in Sodom and so he was praying, "Lord, there is one man that is righteous in there, will you save him?" And you remember he kept on at it so that you almost feel he's been impertinent to the Lord. You feel you're pushing your luck far too far, just back off. You've asked God once but you see in verse 26.

Genesis 18:26, "And the Lord said, 'If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake.' Abraham answered, 'Behold, I have taken upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Wilt thou destroy the whole city for lack of five?' He tries to put it diplomatically you know, now let's say they are fifty and just five little ones missing, but do you know fine well it's him daring to go before God and keep on asking, asking, asking because he loved Lot.

You remember it gets to a ridiculous point in Genesis 18:30, "Then he said, 'Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak. Suppose thirty are found there.' He answered, 'I will not do it, if I find thirty there.'" and I thought that's enough, I'd back off. You got a promise, go with it but verse 31.

Genesis 18:31, "He said, 'Behold, I have taken upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.' Then he said, 'Oh let not the Lord be angry,' because he thought there was only maybe about 10 and Lot's family, "and I will speak again but this once. Suppose ten are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.'" Just look across the page, verse 15. Genesis 19:15, "When morning dawned, the angels urged Lot, saying, 'Arise, take your wife and your two daughters who are here, lest you be consumed in the punishment of the city.'"

If you keep on, God will answer. You keep on. You have a son or daughter, you have a husband or wife, you have a father or mother, you who have a friend who needs deliverance, you keep on. You keep on asking God. That's how you love. Only God can deliver them. You keep on asking and God answered and delivered Lot out of that city and he will do the same for you.

He can't force Lot to flee, he can only tell him to flee; Lot has to flee but he will tell him to flee. He can't force your loved one to accept him but he can tell him. He can make himself clear and reveal himself to your loved one, and that's what they need. That's what your friend needs, that's what your loved one needs, needs to see God as he really is, needs to have God speak to him.

God can't force him but he needs to have God speak to him. If you really love your wife, if you really love your husband, if you really love your dad or your mom or your son or your daughter, your friend, your colleague, loved ones, you'll come like Abraham and you will keep on pushing because that's what loving prayer is.

You know loving prayer is not wanting to know how you can work the trick or how you can work the magic. Loving prayer is not saying, "Oh now Pastor, tell me all the theological reasons why God would require importunity and prayer", that's not prayer. Prayer is, "I am desperate, Lord. I don't know how you operate. I don't know why you don't answer me now. Father, I want you to answer me. I ask you to answer me. I am going to keep on Lord. I am going to keep on keeping on." That's it.

Those of you who are salesmen know that if you say, "Okay, you can't see me today, all right I'll be

here in January for the spring buying." Eventually that dear person is going to realize, "I am not going to get away from this guy. I am not until I see his merchandize. I have to see it. Okay, I may as well give in, okay, show me it."

Now the Father yields his loving heart to persistence and perseverance and importunity in prayer. Brothers and sisters I just gently suggest to you that if you really love your loved ones then you will beseech the Lord God with the same importunity as Abraham. Now you remember Jesus told us to do this. He felt that this was so important that he told two different parables about it. You'll find one if you look at Luke 11:5. "And Jesus said to them, 'Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him"; and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything'? I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity, he will rise and give him whatever he needs."

Now Jesus suggested there that the failing was in the person that was being asked. He had to use that kind of an illustration because he could not find a friend like God. He suggests, of course, that the reason for importunity and prayer is not because God is unwilling to give -- because you see in verse 9, "And I tell you, Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!"

So He says, "God is not reluctant like this neighbor." The reason for keeping on asking God is not because you're trying to persuade God but because the problem is in you. You don't really want what you are asking God for. There's something in you that prevents God giving you the answer now.

See, loved ones this is part of our own uppityness. We ask God for something and he doesn't give it and we assume, "Well, Lord why aren't you giving it to us? I mean to such a perfect person is me, you're bound to give anything I ask. It can't be me. The problem isn't me and the problem must be you."

Well no, loved ones. The problem is never the Father. Our dear Father has more love for your loved one than you will ever imagine. Our dear Father in heaven has given himself to die for your wife or your husband or your son or your daughter or your friend. Our Father loves them far more than you with your petty little heart will ever love them.

He longs to give them a revelation of himself but he cannot because of what is in you and that's why Jesus tells us, we must keep on keeping on in prayer. Because as we keep on keeping on the Holy Spirit begins to reveal in us the sin in our lives or the wrong attitudes in our lives that would mean that we would be actually radically hurt if God answered our prayer. See, that's it.

See just as a dad will not give a razor to a little two-year-old, so the Father will not give us anything that will hurt us and some of us are in such a desperate state of independence of God and of desire for our own will in our lives and the lives of our loved ones that if God answered our prayer, he would just encourage us in that and so the reason for us having to keep on asking God is that in the asking God's Spirit reveals to us how far are our wills from his will, how far our

hearts are from his heart. How unloving our attitude is to our husbands or our wives.

God cannot answer our prayers until we are in a position where we can receive that answer and can be a help and a blessing to the other and so that's why Jesus says, "You must keep on asking." In other words, stop this attitude, "Well, I have been praying for him for twenty years and he is no better now than when I started. I guess his heart is just hard, that's just it. I'll just leave him", or, "I guess that's the way she's going to be, that's just her nature." And we give up praying and really what we're doing is ceasing to love that dear one and the truth is the Lord God is anxious to give to that loved one of yours what you're praying for but there's something in you that is stopping him.

Now, do you see that's the meaning of the thing at Peniel? You remember that strange story about Jacob at Peniel? I'll show you where it is loved ones, it's in Genesis 32:24, "And Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and Jacob's thigh was put out of joint as he wrestled with him." Because it was the angel of the Lord that was wrestling with him. "Then he said, 'Let me go for the day is breaking.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.'" Same attitude as Abraham. "And he said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.' Then he said, 'Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God' -- you wouldn't let go -- 'and with men, and have prevailed.' Then Jacob asked him, 'Tell me, I pray, your name.' But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.'"

Genesis 32:31, "The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his thigh." Ever after that he limped and had to hold on to God with one arm and ever after that, could only walk with his arm on God's shoulder. That's often what God is after. Often you and I are still too uppity. We're still too dependent on ourselves. I don't know if you men have examined Jacob's life before that, he was a manipulator. He manipulated everything. He was used to bribing this guy and that guy and getting things his own way by his own strength. That's what God wanted to bring him to the end of; that's often the same with us.

Too many of us here pity ourselves because we say, "We have a son that is driving us to distraction." Too many of us here say, "We have a partner that is driving us to distraction." Too many of us here say, "We have friends or colleagues that are beyond hope." We should be seeing that God is well able to act in their lives if we will at last come to the end of ourselves and come to the end of our ability to change them and that's why God wants us to keep on asking him, asking him, asking him until he can reveal to us the hopelessness of our own situation and until we begin to see the Father's dear heart of love.

I don't know if you have any idea how dear that heart is. If you could see the Father's heart, he is the dearest man. He is the dearest person. He has a heart that embraces us all in itself and he wants the very best for you and me and he wants the very best for our loved ones and he is anxious to gather us up in his arms. And as you keep on asking him and praying and praying and praying and it seems the same prayer day after day and yearning and yearning, gradually he reveals to you the independence of your own heart and the sin in your own life and the willfulness of your own heart and he begins to make your heart one with his and then his great heart of love begins to burst through yours and you begin to love your loved one with God's love, that's it. See that's the key.

You begin to love your loved ones with God's love. The heart of God begins to come through you and

you stop praying for this colleague at work for the sake of your business. You stop praying for your son or your daughter so that you may be thought to be a good Christian parent. You stop praying for your dear partner so that you will have a happier time and you begin to pray for the loved one because God's dear heart of love is bursting through yours and then the Holy Spirit begins to move in the other's life, that's it.

Jesus says, "You keep on praying, you keep on praying" and you know if you're sitting there and you're saying, "Well brother, that seems pretty deep stuff. I don't know all about it" -- I don't know all about it but you know that if you want something with all your heart, you'll keep on asking for it and there's no trick to it and there's no tricky theology and if you sit there and you say, "Oh well, I am not holy enough", no I am sure you're not holy enough, only Jesus is holy enough but what God is asking from you is the desire of your whole heart yearned out to him day-after-day for that loved one until he changes your dear friend, that's it.

That's the greatest love that you can exercise towards him, that's it. That's the greatest love you can exercise to the Lord. So brothers and sisters, I would just say to you, yourself and to myself, let's spend more time in our days praying for the changes that we really want to see. Let's spend more time praying for each other. Let's give more time to praying and to asking God the way Abraham did to change our loved ones and change our friends, to act upon them. Old Churchill said you remember, "Never, never, under any circumstances, whatever the provocation, however great the difficulties are, however many your enemies are, however hopeless it looks; never, never, never give up." Never give up, you never give up, you never give up praying.

Everything that God shows you that you believe he wants to do and that the other person needs, you go for that with all your heart to the very end. George Mueller you remember died and the week after he died, a certain man that he had been praying for, for 40 years, was saved, that's it. You and I, if we really love, we will begin to pray with a deep heart of yearning for the ones that we love and then they will know that we love them. Let us pray.

Dear Father, we see all the little things that you've given us that every dad gives to his children. We see all the flowers and the lakes, the snowmobiles and the cars and the nice suppers we have. We see the little dogs and babies and we see these clothes that you've given us. We see comedians and laughter, movies, Father, you've not held anything back of all the little treats that any dad gives to his children but Father we thank you that those are not just the gifts of some rich father to his children.

We thank you Father that you love us with all your heart and that your heart is soft towards us this morning and that you are far more anxious to give us good gifts than we are even to ask for them and that what we want for our loved ones, you want far-far more than we do but you can only bring that about when we begin to want it with your heart.

So Lord, we would take our stand against all discouragement that we had in prayer over the past years and we would now take our position before you again on our knees and we would come to you for our brothers and our sisters, for our friends and our relatives, for our husbands and our wives and our moms and our dads and our sons and our daughters and Father, we would begin to come to you again in prayer, in faithful prayer day-after-day for them until you answer, Lord. And we would thank you for Abraham and thank you for his holy boldness that he kept on coming to you time after time after time appealing to you on behalf of your own dear heart.

So Father we would in this quiet moment whisper to you the name of the person that we are going to take up the prayer battle for again. We would just whisper that name to you Lord and we would ask you now our Father, to begin to move in this dear life and to change them utterly and completely, to move in their hearts, in their spirits, to give them revelation of yourself so that they see you as they really are and to change and deliver them absolutely and completely and to make them what you want them to be, Lord.

Father we intend to go on praying this prayer until you answer the prayer or until you change us so that you are able to answer it. So Lord we ask you to bring us into perfect love, where we love them as you love them. Thank you Lord in Jesus' name, Amen.