**Struggling together in prayer –**

Romans 15:14-33

**Intro**

What happens when we pray? What is actually accomplished? Something? Nothing? Anything? I think we need to be able to answer that question. b/c *how* you answer that question, is going to determine a lot with regards to where we’re going this morning. So? Think about it: *What happens when we pray?*

Today we’ll be continuing our series called “**Transforming Prayer: How everything changes when we seek God’s face**”; walking through some of the prayers of the apostle Paul. And this morning, I’m going to deal specifically with the subject of praying on behalf of others. Praying on behalf of others, or what has historically been called *Intercessory payer:* the idea of interceding with God on behalf of someone else.

Now if you’ve been a Christian for any period of time, or been here for any part of this sermon series even, I think we can say that it ought be a given in our minds that Christians should pray. I mean, even if you’re not a Christian here this morning I don’t think there’s anyone here, that would hear me say that and go, “WHAT?!? Christians are supposed to PRAY? Man I gotta get out my iPhone and schedule that in on my calendar right away!” No, right? Even hearing that we should pray for others doesn’t really surprise most of us. We usually do that here on Sunday mornings. We see Ms. America praying for world peace, or whatever. So we get that we should pray for others too.

But did you notice the word Paul uses in Rom. 15 when he asks the church in Rome to pray for him? He uses the word: ***struggle***.You might respond, “Struggle? In prayer? Really? That makes prayer sound like work!” And I would reply, “Yes. That’s exactly what it is!” And that’s why I think we so badly need to hear what Paul has to say to us this morning: b/c we don’t think that “prayer” and “struggle” are words that oughta go together, when, practically, we all know they do. B/c, think about it: you let one of your kids get sick, or your spouse leave you, or you loose your job, and suddenly, you know *exactly* what Paul means by struggling in prayer. It’s like your prayer life goes into overdrive, and you’re praying *all the time*; long drawn out prayers; you’re on your face, crying; tears and snot running down your face; you’re even trying to pray in like King James English, “*Oh High, Benevolent and blessed Lord God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we do beseech Thy most humble benevolence and sundry mercies upon Thy most lowly and humblest of servants …”* We *totally* get what Paul means about prayer being work … when **we’re** the ones who are facing some difficulty**.** But, you see, there’s a ***disconnect*** somewhere; at least, if you’re anything like me – and it sounds like the Christians in Rome were had the same disconnect as well. B/c when someone *else* is dealing with a difficult time or a tragedy, **I don’t pray like that**! I don’t! Yes, of course, I pray for others and I pray regularly. But we often don’t intercede with God on behalf of others at anywhere near the level that we intercede with Him for ourselves.

And so Paul is warning the Roman Christians then – and us today – that we can become lazy and apathetic in our praying for others, **because** much of our praying is often self-centered. Have you ever noticed even how much easier it is to focus in times of prayer - when we’re praying about some struggle *we’re* going through - and how much harder it is to focus in prayer as soon as our own storms have past?

Well, in Rom. 15, Paul is going to teach us all what it means to struggle in prayer on behalf of others. And we’re going to look at that teaching in three ways: we’ll look at **what struggling in prayer is, our motivation for struggling, and finally, struggling with precision.**

And the big idea I want us to come away from this morning with, is simply this: **if we want to be free from the tyranny of self-centered praying, we must do the work of struggling in prayer on behalf of others (X2).**

Turn back in your bibles to Rom. 15 and let’s see how Paul helps us learn to do that.

So, as we said, Paul begins this section in vs. 14-29 with a kind of missionary letter of sorts; telling the church in Rome what he’s been up to and how he’s been planning for some time to come and visit them. And now it looks like he’s finally going to make that trip happen.

And then in vs. 30, he makes this urgent request: look at vs. 30 with me. He says, “*I urge you brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit,* ***to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me.****”*

And so we need to say first of all,

**1. Because we’re called to struggle with one another in prayer we must: know what struggling in prayer is – vs. 30b**

Look back at verse 30 again with me. Now the ESV translates the second part of that same verse this way, “***to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf.****”* And I think they both those translations are right and that they both need to be held together to help us understand what Paul is getting at here.

The actual word used in the Greek means, “to join w. someone in a common effort, to fight/contend along with someone.” And so, putting this all together, there is a sense in which Paul is both urging them to come alongside him in his struggle **and** teaching them that praying itself *is* struggling. Do you see that? Is that making sense?

There’s a number of places in Paul’s letters where he describes how he does this very thing himself as well. And looking at those examples might help sharpen the picture for us if you don’t quite see it yet.

In Col. 2:1 he writes, “*For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those in Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts might be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery.”* Later in 4:12 he tells them, “*Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in the will of God.”*

Also in Galatians he calls them, “*my little children, for whom I am in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!”* Now Paul’s a dude, and so he has never had a child himself. But he’s clearly seen that, and knows what a great effort and struggle it is. And he’s saying, that’s how I struggle for you in my prayers.

And in fact, even Jesus himself teaches us to pray this way for others, when He makes *this very* request of His disciples in the garden of Gethsemane. Remember how He is in deep distress about the cross He is about to face, and as He goes off to pray alone He says to Peter, James and John, *“Stay here and keep watch with me.”*  And then, when He comes back and finds them sleeping, what does He say to them? “*Could you not watch with Me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation.”* For Christ Himself was surely – in His humanity – struggling with the temptation to protect Himself from the coming sufferings. And so He was urging His friends to struggle alongside Him.

So do you see better now that this struggling in prayer that Paul is urging them towards is both a coming alongside someone who is struggling **as well as** the struggling itself?

John Calvin said it well in his commentary on this verse when he said, “he [Paul] shows how the godly ought to pray for their brethren, that they are to assume their person, as though they were placed in the same difficulties.”

I love the sport of rugby. I played for 3 years in high-school and then another year after that in a city league. And I loved every minute of it, b/c it’s this amazing sport that has all the skill and beauty of soccer combined with all the mud and violence of football, and all without helmets or pads! That may explain a lot to any of you who’ve ever wondered about me.

But I think the scrum in rugby is a part of the game that I think just illustrates perfectly what Paul is after when he speaks about struggling/striving together in prayer. Now if you’ve never seen it before, (SHOW PIC HERE) in the scrum, the forwards of both teams literally link their bodies together into this hulking triangle, that then smashes forcefully – as one – into the other team’s triangle. And the ball is tossed in and then delivered back to the “hooker” (and no, that’s not at all what you might be thinking!) But the point is, they must join together tightly, side by side, in order to work together as one unit, and push against the opposing struggle.

And so, we could almost read Paul’s request as, “I urge you to get into this scrum with me, by praying for me as I face these difficulties ahead. When you do that, we truly face it together!”

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So one of the clear ways we see here that we can fight against that tyranny of self-centeredness in our praying, is by struggling alongside our fellow brothers and sisters in this same way; by praying for them when they’re in distress. And doing it with the same amount of effort and fervency as we do when *we’re* the ones who are struggling. So it’s not 20 minutes of praying for your own needs, and then tacking on a quick, “Oh yeah, and God, please help Barton as he preaches this Sunday.” Or, “And please be with those Christians in prison for their faith in North Korea. Amen.” No, we are to struggle together with our brothers and sisters in prayer. I promise you: the results of this kind of other-centred praying will be that your own faith and prayer life will be strengthened as well.

Well, now that we’ve got a better picture of what Paul is getting at when he urges the church at Rome to struggle in prayer with him. Next we need to consider what Paul says our motivation should be for doing that. So we need to say,

**2. Because we’re called to struggle with one another in prayer we must: have the right motivation for struggling – vs. 30a.**

Look back as vs. 30 with me (READ vs. 30)

Now it should be said right from the beginning here, that Paul doesn’t write the church at Rome and say, “Hey listen guys, I’m going through a bit of a rough spell here, so – you know, *if you think of it* – could you join in my struggle with me by praying for me?” I mean, he doesn’t even say “please”! He just says basically, “This is what I’m doing and so this is what I’m urging you to do for me and why. Cool?”

The sense in the Greek is to *strongly* urge, to appeal, or exhort. And so, we need to look now at what Paul lists as his basis for making this strong appeal to struggle alongside him in prayer. He lists two here in vs. 30.

Look at vs. 30 with me (READ vs. 30). So he’s urging them to struggle with him in prayer:

1. by our Lord Jesus Christ
2. by the love of the Spirit

Let’s consider each of those quickly. 1. **By our Lord Jesus Christ:** Paul is referring both to the work of Christ in His life, death and resurrection; purchasing men and women back for God, as well as the fact that He is a Redeemer that is shared by them all. You see he doesn’t just call Him *the* Lord Jesus Christ, he calls Him *our* Lord Jesus Christ. So he’s saying based on the fact that we have this same amazing Saviour, Jesus Christ, *and* 2. **By the love of the Spirit:** here I think Paul is now referring to the unifying work of the Holy Spirit, Who – in love – unites us all together to Christ and applies His finished work on the cross to all of us.

So Paul is saying, struggle alongside me in praying on my behalf out of your gratitude for the inestimable love poured out for all of us in Christ, that we have all been made partakers of by the Spirit of God.

Paul says something very similar to this in Phil. 2:1,2. Before he urges the church at Philippi to follow Christ’s example of humility towards one another he says this, “*So, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind …”* And the clear implication is, you do have those things in Christ.

So, in the same way here in Romans, Paul is urging us to join in the struggle of others; to work alongside them by praying for them, on the basis of that same love that has been shown to us in Christ and applied to us by His Spirit. And we all understand what it means to work on the basis of love – it often doesn’t even feel like work at all!

I am **NOT** a morning person … not at ALL! And yet, when I fell in love with my wife, and knew I had her love in return, there was no end to what I was willing to do on the basis of that love. I was working until like 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning some nights, but I would still *spring* out of bed at 7:30 in the morning, and drive to Sarah’s apartment to drive her to school at UBC *with* fresh Starbucks waiting in the car for her. (some of you single guys should be furiously taking notes right now).

We’ve all felt – or at least witnessed - at one time or another how the motivation of love can be a game changer when it comes to working on behalf of others.

There’s one more motivation for us to consider, but it’s one that is not explicitly in this text. Though, b/c it is all through Paul’s writings, I think we can safely assume it’s also intended here. And it’s found in Eph. 6:12. Here Paul writes, “*For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”* And then he concludes later by urging them in vs. 18f that they should pray at all times in the Spirit with all prayer and supplications for all the saints as well as for his own ministry.

So, yes, Paul will go on here to list *real people* who are opposing him. But he knows that ultimately, he is striving against a different foe; a spiritual enemy. And so he doesn’t tell the church at Rome to come to Judea with him and form a posse; build some human wall around him or something. No, instead, he urges them to strive alongside him in prayer against what is *truly* opposing him.

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And so, based on what Paul says our motivation should be for struggling alongside others in prayer, we need to have a real attitude shift when it comes to praying for others. We need to stop basing our prayers for others on how bad their struggle is, or how worthy they are of our struggling, relative to our *own* needs and struggles. No, like all obedience, we need to see that it’s out of our love for God, and in gratitude for the love that He poured out for *our* undeserving souls on the cross, that we then *can’t help* but join in the struggle with our fellow Christians. Particularly when we see that our struggling alongside them is against a spiritual foe. And so understanding Paul’s motivation *forces* out of the tyranny of self-centered praying.

The last thing we’ll consider from our passage this morning is this:

**3. Because we’re called to struggle with one another in prayer we must: struggle with precision – vs. 31, 32.**

The first two parts of what Paul had to say were, I think, for those of us who need to grow in learning what it means to struggle with others in prayer. This last section, though, I think includes those people, but focuses more on those who are currently struggling.

Look at vs. 31 and 32 with me. Look what Paul does here. He says, (READ vs. 31,32). So he says my goal is to come to you and be refreshed together with you, but I got these two big hurdles I need to get over before I can do that. And so he urges them to prayer on his behalf.

Quickly let’s look at these two hurdles he mentions:

1. (beginning of 31) Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea. Now Paul says this b/c it hasn’t been all sunshine and roses for him since his conversion on the road to Damascus. There’s a number of powerful people, and angry mobs as well, that don’t exactly wanna sit around with Paul and sing Chris Tomlin songs. And beyond that, Paul says in Acts 20:22,23 “*And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there,**except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.”* So he knows that when he gets to Jerusalem it’s gonna go bad for him. And yet we read later in Acts that he *is* ultimately delivered from the unbelievers there; but only b/c he is arrested and taken away under Roman guard. So the prayers are effective but not, probably, in the way Paul was envisioning.
2. (second half of 31) Pray that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there. Here Paul is referring to the collection of money for the poor in Jerusalem that he spoke of up in vs. 25-28; remember his missionary letter? And the issue here is really more political than anything else. The freedom in Christ that Paul is preaching now, is causing quite a stir amoung the devout Jewish population unsurprisingly; even amoung those who believe in Jesus as the Messiah. And so, John Stott says of this hurdle:

[for the church in Jerusalem] “In accepting the gift from Paul, Jewish Christian leaders would be seen to endorse Paul’s gospel and his seeming disregard of Jewish law and traditions.”

So Paul knows this isn’t as simple as just dropping an envelope in the offering plate when he goes to the temple at Jerusalem. Acts doesn’t say specifically if they did or didn’t accept the offering, but that lack of mention of it seems to indicate that they did.

But step back for a minute – now that we know what Paul is urging them to pray for – and ask yourself, “What’s going on here?” “What is Paul doing here?” Isn’t he teaching those of us who are currently struggling, to be open and honest with others about the fact that we’re struggling? And to be specific about where we need prayer? b/c in doing that, we can both help others to escape self-centered praying by showing them precisely how they can struggle alongside us. And we can also receive the benefit ourselves of prayer and support in the precise areas where we need someone so desperately to struggle with us.

Or think of it like this:

When Sarah and I first came to DHBC over 8 years ago, we were newly married, with a baby then on the way, overextending ourselves in life, and going quickly from bad to worse in our marriage. (Is there anyone else who got married and quickly found out it wasn’t just *exactly* what you thought it was going to be like?) We were struggling *every day* just to keep afloat in our marriage /// but – here’s the thing - basically *nobody* knew it. Nobody, except Janet Anderson of course, who would see us rushing in late from the car and stop at least one of us and say, “How are you doing this morning?” And she would just look into your soul, so that it didn’t matter if you tried to throw up the usual smoke screen of, “Oh, it’s been a busy week at work” or whatever. Her persistent look always just said, “No, no, no … how are you *really* doing?” And we’d just break down and cry and she’d pray for us. I miss her still so much!

But think about it: we were struggling deeply and needing others to struggle with us in prayer /// and yet at the same time – by not sharing that struggle with anyone - we were totally isolating ourselves from the help we so desperately needed. Yet, would either of us have had *any* justification in saying, “Ugh! DHBC *says* they’re this caring community, but we are totally alone here and no one is caring for us as we’re drowning here!”? No. No.

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What Paul is demonstrating for us here is yet another strategy to fight with against that tyranny of self-centered praying**.** He’s trying to show us what it looks like to open yourself up to others and reveal to them where you’re *really* struggling. So that they can receive the gift of struggling alongside another brother or sister with precision. And so that you can receive the gift of having someone struggle alongside you where you *actually* need someone to struggle with you.

Now that doesn’t mean that *everybody* needs to know where you’re struggling - that’s not what I’m saying. *But somebody should!* That is what I’m saying. And failing to do this leaves you alone and struggling by yourself. This grace is right in front of you for the taking //// but it must be taken. Do you see also how practical and good the commands of God we find in Scripture are?

**Conclusion**

So, what happens when we pray? What is actually accomplished? Something? Nothing? Anything? You remember I asked you that question as we began? And hopefully now you see how integral your answer is to all we’ve been talking about this morning.

B/c if your answer is that nothing happens, then it makes no sense to pray for anyone else – or even to share your struggles with others - b/c, **WHY?!** You’re wasting your breath; and prayer for yourself even is just more of a cathartic “talking-out of your problems” to yourself.

But // if your answer is that something does happen; that prayer *does* accomplish things: **wel**l, then we have all the reason in the world to struggle in prayer on behalf of others and to reveal our true struggles to others. b/c we can truly *join* in whatever trial or difficulty they are facing, and grow in our faith together as we watch God use our prayers to accomplish His perfect will.

Now, it’s important that you understand that I’m not saying, this morning, that we shouldn’t pray for ourselves at all – don’t hear me saying that! Jesus’ teaching on prayer in particular is clear that we are to bring our personal needs before our Father in heaven. But, in turning our gaze more often off ourselves in prayer; in struggling alongside our brothers and sisters in Christ with the same fervency with which we pray for ourselves, we can then stand together in the power of the Spirit against our true enemy; and we can accomplish *much* together by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit.

So, we’re going to apply what we’ve been talking about now in our prayer time this morning. I’m going to ask – much like we did in our Lament service a few months ago – that those of you here this morning who are struggling; who are in need of others to come alongside you and struggle with you to stand. You don’t need to say what it is your struggle is here; just standing will let us know that you you’re struggling. And then together as one body – and in total silence – I want us to pray for those who stand up. That means I want you all to pray for those standing, but I don’t want anyone to pray out loud. And in a few minutes, I’ll close us.

So if you are in a place of struggling this morning and want to know the beautiful grace of having other brothers and sisters struggling alongside you, would you stand now? Let’s pray for these people.