

BIBLICAL CHALLENGES 2007 (08).

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Introduction

I begin today with a quote from **J.C.Ryle**. He wrote, *“I know that the elect of God are chosen to salvation from all eternity. I do not forget that the Holy Spirit, who calls them in due time, in many instances leads them by very slow degrees to an awareness of Christ. But the eye of man can only judge by what it sees. I cannot call any one justified until he believes. I dare not say that any one believes until he prays.*

“I cannot understand a silent and speechless faith. The first act of faith will be to speak to God. Faith is to the soul what life is to the body. Prayer is to faith what breath is to life. How can a man live and not breathe is past my comprehension, and how a man can believe and not pray is past my comprehension too.

“Let no one be surprised if he hears ministers of the Gospel dwelling a lot on the importance of prayer. This is the point we want to bring you to – we want to know that you pray. Your views of doctrine may be correct. Your love of evangelical religion may be warm and unmistakable. But still this may be nothing more than head knowledge and party spirit. The great point is this – whether you can speak "to" God as well as speak "about" God.”

Last Lord’s Day we began to look at prayer and the ministries of the church. We began by taking note of the fact that when it comes to the ministries of the church, prayerlessness is a serious problem. In our study we saw that the Lord’s message to Zerubbabel is applicable to the ministries of the church. The angel said to Zerubbabel,

“This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel, saying, ‘Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,’ says the Lord of hosts.” (*Zech.4:6*). The church will not be built by superior human wisdom, ability, skill or by an army of devoted workers.

The church will be built by the Spirit. The Lord promised, “I will build My church.” (*Matt.16:18*). There is no denying the fact that the Lord works through human workers and a variety of means. But He works through those who submit themselves to His Spirit, who are dependent upon His Spirit for power, wisdom, ability and skill. He works through those who humbly recognize that apart from Him they cannot do even the least thing.

In our study we saw the apostolic example of prayer in doing the work of the ministry. Their devotion to prayer was the expression of their dependence upon the Holy Spirit to fill them and work through them powerfully in the preaching of the gospel. When they faced obstacles and persecution, they prayed.

Lastly we looked at the realities of the ministry and the impossibility of the task we have from God. The Lord Jesus made it plain that from a human perspective the task is impossible. But, He added, that which is impossible with men is possible with God. The plain fact is that it takes an extraordinarily astounding miracle to save a sinner, a miracle that is comparable to raising Lazarus from the dead, a miracle that is comparable to the creation of man. And the point is this : only God can work such a miracle. Only God can save the sinner.

The Importance Of Unity.

The first major point I want to deal with is the importance of unity as it relates to prayer and the ministries of the church. We saw in our previous study that Ezra and Nehemiah were men of prayer. The Lord answered their prayers, granting them favors with the king, supplying their various needs for the work before them and protecting them from

their enemies. But the work could not be done without unity and the cooperation of the people.

In the case of the temple, work began and then stopped for a lengthy period because of enemy opposition and the peoples' discouragement and fear. (*Ezra 4:4, 24*). Under King Darius the building of the temple was resumed and the work was completed with "all diligence". (*Ezra 6:13-15*). "All diligence" points to the unity, cooperation and sense of urgency that took hold of the people and became evident among them. One writer noted that the people displayed a holy enthusiasm all Christians should share when they realize they are a part of God's plan to build His kingdom. (NAC).

The walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt in record time under the leadership of Nehemiah. Nehemiah refused to allow the many threats of their enemies to stop the work of rebuilding the walls. When the people became discouraged, Nehemiah would turn to prayer and encourage the people. The people were united in the work of rebuilding the walls. And *Neh.4:6* says, "the people had a mind to work." They were clearly and fully committed to the work.

We saw that the nobles refused to join in the work. But their refusal to work and their disunity with the people did not stop the people from doing the work before them and doing the work with great commitment, zeal and diligence.

The importance of unity for the ministries of the church is clearly seen in the N.T. But before we turn to the N.T. let us take note of *Psa.133*. (**read**). Note briefly the following. *Vs.1* shows us that unity brings us an effusion of joy. *Vs.2* tells us unity brings a special fragrance to the church. The oil that was used here had a special fragrance and it was made from a special recipe that the Jews were not allowed to copy. (*Exod.30:31-33*). *Vs.3* tells us that unity brings a peculiar vitality to the church. Mt. Hermon was proverbial for its lush greenery during the summer months. The heavy dew sustained its vegetation. During these summer months, from May to October, not even dew fell on Jerusalem.

Turning to the N.T., we begin with the Lord's prayer in *Jn.17*. There He prayed that we will be one. In *vs.11* the Lord prayed, "Holy Father, keep them in Your name, the name which You have given Me, that they may be one even as We are." In *vss.20-21* the Lord prayed, "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You."

In *vss.22-23* the Lord added, "The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me." Unity glorifies the Lord and it is a clear testimony to the watching world of the power of the gospel.

The unity of the church is clearly seen in the early chapters of the book of *Acts*. In *Acts 1:14* we read, "These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer." In *Acts 2:46* we read, "Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple." In *Acts 4:24*, under threat from the Jewish religious leaders, we read, "they lifted their voices to God with one accord." *Vs.32* adds, "And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul."

The first threat against their unity came in *Acts 6*. But the apostles dealt with this very quickly by appointing deacons. The maintained unity is expressed in *vs.5*. We are told that the apostles' statement regarding the choosing of deacons "found approval with the whole congregation." Up to this point the apostolic church manifested and maintained unity in prayer, worship, gospel-witness and in their dealings with each other.

The unity of the church began to unravel in *Acts 15*. It began with the demand that the Gentiles Christians must be circumcised and be directed to keep the Law of Moses. (*vss.1, 5*). At the end of *Acts 15* we see Paul and Barnabas sharply disagreeing and separating over John Mark (*vss.36-41*).

In his first epistle to the Corinthians Paul dealt extensively with the problem of divisions in the church. Paul wrote to them, “Now, I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment.” (*1Cor.1:10*). In *chap.3* Paul showed them that divisions in the church revealed that they were behaving “like mere men”, (*1Cor.3:3-4*), that is, like unsaved men who were under the control of their fleshly nature.

Paul made it clear to the Galatians that the deeds of the flesh are, among other things, “enmities, strife, jealousy, outburst of anger, disputes, dissensions, [and] factions.” These are all marks of divisiveness in the camp. And Paul added, “I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” (*Gal.5:19-21*).

Paul exhorted the Ephesians to be “diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (*Eph.4:3*). *Eph.2* shows us that this unity was achieved by the death of Christ on the cross and the preaching of the gospel. (*vss.11-22*). Paul wrote to the Philippians, “make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.” (*Phil.2:2*).

Euodia and Syntyche were publicly exhorted to live in harmony in the Lord. (*Phil.4:2*). These two women have been nicknamed “*Odious and Soon-touchy*”. In other words, Euodia was insensitive and Syntyche was overly sensitive. Paul was not prepared to have the insensitive and the overly sensitive walk away from each other and create divisions in the church. Both are guilty of sinful conduct. Paul’s command is that they must deal with their sins and find a way to live in harmony in the Lord.

There is one other fact I must point out here. Divisions in the church are bad and sinful. But not all divisions in the church are bad. Turn to *1Cor.11:18-19*. (**read**). Paul is disturbed that there are divisions in the church, divisions that had a very negative impact on the celebration of the Lord’s Table. But sometimes, divisions work to separate out

those who are not approved, those who are *adokimos*, and at the same time reveal those who are approved (*dokimos*). When the *adokimos* ones are removed, the church is able to move forward in harmony.

This is what we see happening in *Acts 15* when serious and contentious disunity surfaced in the church. God was exposing the group that came to be known as the “**Judaizers**”. These Judaizers had begun to corrupt the gospel by adding certain works to the gospel.

If we are to move forward as church, we must embrace, manifest and maintain the unity the Lord Jesus achieved by His death on the cross. This unity says we are one body in Christ, one new man in Christ, one people in Christ, one household in Christ. This unity must be manifested in our beliefs, prayers, worship, and witness. This unity must be manifested in brethren dwelling together in harmony. This unity brings into the church a spirit of joy, a special and attracting fragrance and a fresh vitality.

As fellow-believers in Christ, we cannot and must not be content to live in disharmony with one another. Disharmony is sin. Disharmony is working against what the Lord Jesus prayed for. Disharmony works against what Christ accomplished by His death on the cross. Christ, by His death, became the ground of our unity and the bridge to our unity. How can we claim to be standing on the Bridge of our unity while being divided and creating disharmony.

Disharmony works against and even destroys the church’s spirit of joy, attracting fragrance and spiritual vitality. Disunity disrupts the prayer power of the church. In *Matt.18:19* Jesus said to the church, “if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven.” If you are living in disharmony with a fellow-believer, you need to heed Paul’s exhortation to Euodia and Syntyche in *Phil.4:2*. If you can’t solve the problem, then you need to seek help. In *vs.3* Paul urged a person he described as a “true companion” to help these two women to resolve their conflicts and return to living in harmony in the Lord.

Our Goals.

This brings us to the second major point I want to deal with. And this is our goals as a church. The goals I am making reference to are the primary goals we find in the word of God. Our primary goals must be the salvation of sinners and the sanctification of saints through the preaching and teaching of the gospel. What do I mean when I say “**the gospel**”? The word “**gospel**” means “**good news**”. God’s message is a message of good news. God’s message of salvation in Christ to the sinner is a message of good news. And God’s message that edifies and sanctifies the Christian is also a message of good news.

The salvation of sinners and the sanctification of the saints are without a doubt the primary goals the word of God has set before us. When we stand before God in the final judgment the only two concerns that will matter is whether you are going to heaven or you are going to hell. The Bible makes it clear that God sent His only begotten Son into this world to save sinners. (*Jn.3:16*). Jesus said, “The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.” (*Lk.19:10*). Paul declared, “It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” (*1Tim.1:15*).

Secondly, Jesus prayed for His disciples, “Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth.” (*Jn.17:17*). Paul prayed in *1Thess.5:23*, “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely.” In *Phil.1:6* we have this promise, “For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.” God began this good work of salvation in you. And God “will perfect it”, that is, He will keep putting the finishing touches as He carries on this work to completion. This is sanctification.

Every ministry in this church must have these two primary goals of the salvation of sinners and the sanctification of saints in view. Every gift exercised in this church must be exercised with these two primary goals in view. The teaching and preaching of God’s

word must have these two primary goals in mind. The training of men to be ministers in the home and in the church must have these two primary goals in view. The training of women to teach their children and other women must have these two primary goals in view.

Our evangelistic preaching must have these two primary goals in view. Our distribution of tracts and tapes and our book service must have these two primary goals in view. Our youth work must have these two primary goals in view. Our mission's involvement must have these two primary goals in view. Our music ministry, be it playing music, song leading or special singing, must have these two primary goals in view. Our social activities must have these two primary goals in view.

Let me expand a little on some of the points I have made. Turn to *Eph.5:18-20*; *Col.3:16*. (read). Let us note, firstly, that the singing of "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" is described as "**speaking**". In *Colossians* we have "teaching and admonishing". Why? These three verbs stress the importance of the message in the song and the words used in the song to communicate the message. These songs must have content. These songs must have meaning. These songs must communicate truth. These songs must speak to sinners. These songs must speak to saints. The old hymn-writers clearly understood this fact. This is why their songs are so filled with doctrinal content.

Next, Paul wrote, "singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord" or "**singing and making music in your heart to the Lord.**" What is Paul's point? Paul's point is that our singing must not be formal, a performance to be applauded. Our singing must be an expression of deep, inner emotion and aspirations. (**Uprichard**). In other words, in singing to the Lord, we must put our whole being into our singing. This is just the opposite of singing with your teeth closed and your lips mumbling. Those around you must hear you. If they can't hear you, how would you be able to speak to them, teach them and admonish them with your singing?

How do we achieve these two primary goals in our social activities? *Firstly*, the unsaved must see the gospel worked out in all our conduct and in all that we plan and do in our social activities. Turn to *1Pet.3:15-16*. (read). Your conduct should reveal the changes Christ has made in your life and the hope Christ has given to you. Peter is saying when the unsaved sees this, they will ask you questions and you must be ready to give answers.

Secondly, your conduct as a Christian in our social activities should speak to, teach and admonish other Christians and be a means the Holy Spirit uses to sanctify them. Should a Christian “steups” when ask to bring a bucket of water or wash a pot? Should a Christian be counting how many pots he / she has washed and keep a list and complain about those who did not wash any pots? Is your reward with men or with God who sees? Your work ethic should be a resounding and sanctifying rebuke to those who are lazy and always hiding and doing so under the pretext of fellowshiping with the saints.

Jesus’ goal is to sanctify His bride, the church. (*Eph.5:26*.) What is your goal for your spouse? What is your goal for your children?

The key point I want you to note here is what is expressed in *Eccl.8:8*, “there is no discharge in a time of war.” We are in a war. We are waging war against the gates of hell. Our ministries and the programs and circumstances that flow from them do not release us from working to achieve our primary goals of the salvation of sinners and the sanctification of the saints. Going to the river does not mean that we can take a break from being a Christian and set aside our goals. The context of carnival does not give us the right to take a break from being a Christian and to set aside our goals.

Whether we are in church, at home, by the river, on the cricket field, on the beach, in a different country, on vacation, or whatever, the reality of being a Christian and behaving as a Christian to the glory of God does not change. The reality of the goals of the salvation of sinners and the sanctification of the saints does not change. Unless we grasp this truth, our Christianity and our conduct as Christians will be determined by the

circumstances we are in. Environment must not determine conduct and if environment determines your conduct as a Christian then you are wrong and dishonoring God.

Your Responsibilities in Prayer.

We come now to our final point, to look at your responsibilities for prayer on behalf of the ministries of the church. How are we to pray for the ministries of the church? We must pray keeping in mind that this good work is done, “not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit’, says the Lord of hosts.” We must pray keeping in mind what our Lord said to His disciples, “With men this [work] is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” (*Matt.19:26*).

We must pray, keeping in mind that apart from our Lord, we cannot do even the least part of this work. (*Jn.15:5*). We are totally dependent upon Him and the working of His Spirit. We are totally dependent upon the Holy Spirit, for wisdom, ability, skill, power, discernment, and insight. We must pray keeping in mind that it is our humble and holy privilege to be involved in God’s work, to be fellow-workers with God in His glorious and eternal plan for the salvation of sinners and the sanctification of saints. (*1Cor.3:9*).

Listen to the apostle Paul, “by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.” (*1Cor.15:10*). Can you say with Paul that God’s grace toward you is not proving to be vain? Can you say that grace is working in you and through you for the glory of God in the salvation of sinners and in the sanctification of saints?

You should be praying that God will use you in the ministries of this church in keeping with the gifts and graces He has given to you. You should be praying that the Holy Spirit will make you a sanctified vessel, useful to the Master and prepared for every good work. (*2Tim.2:21*).

Now, if there is one thing we can all do, we can all pray for the various ministries of this church, from preaching and teaching to going to the river for a day of fellowship. Every member of this church should become devoted to prayer for the ministries of this church, regardless of how weak your prayers may seem to be. We should labor earnestly in prayer as Epaphras did on behalf of the Colossian church and the churches in the Lycus Valley. (*Col.4:12*). The verb **“labor earnestly”** speaks of waging war in prayer. It speaks of agonizing in prayer as Jesus did when He was in the garden of Gethsemane. (*Lk.22:44*).

Those of you who are on the various committees should be devoting peculiar time to pray for the work you are planning and doing. You should be praying very specifically that the Holy Spirit would guide your planning and doing because you want the two primary goals to be achieved.

Now Brethren, I want to move from the general to the specific. As a Christian, your consuming burden in prayer must be the salvation of sinners. The example of Paul speaks clearly to us. Paul said concerning the Jews, his kinsmen according to the flesh, that he had great sorrow and unceasing grief in his heart for them. (*Rom.9:1-3*). And in *Rom.10:1* Paul said, “my heart’s desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation.” But far too often we are too self-focused in our prayers to grasp this truth and make evangelism, if nothing else, our consuming burden in prayer. But I want you to understand and I want to press upon you this fact that prayer is and must be our first step in the work of evangelism. Without earnest fervent prayer we are blowing in the wind in our evangelistic activities.

Now, as you pray for the salvation of sinners, you must confess to God that He alone can save sinners. You must give God thanks for sending His Son to die to save sinners. You must give the Lord Jesus thanks for coming into this world to live and die in order to save sinners. You must pray that God will make the dead sinner alive. You must pray that God will remove their spiritual blindness, their spiritual deafness, and their spiritual lack of understanding His word. You must pray that God will save the sinner.

You must pray rooting your prayer in God's revealed will :

- 1). **2Pet.3:9** says it is God's will to save sinners.
- 2). **1Tim.1:15** says Christ Jesus into this world to save sinners.
- 3). **Jn.6:44** says it is the Father who draws the sinner to Christ.
- 4). **Jn.10:16** says the Lord Jesus promised to bring in His sheep.
- 5). **Matt.16:18** says the Lord Jesus promised to build His church.

When you are praying for the gospel to reach the nation, root your prayers in **Matt.9:36-38; Psa.67 & Rom.10:13-15**.

When you are praying for your relatives, root your prayers in the precedents found in **Acts 11 & 16**. In **Acts 11:14** the Lord saved Cornelius and his household. In **Acts 16:14-15** the Lord saved Lydia and her household. In **Acts 16:31-34** the Lord saved the Philippian jailer and his household. These precedents are not specific promises of household salvation. But they give you a revealed basis for praying that the Lord would also save your household.

Secondly, you need to pray for those who preach and who do evangelism and you must root your prayers in Paul's requests as set before us in **Eph.6:18-20; Col.4:2-4; 2Thess.3:1**. Paul's point in **2Thess.3:1** is that you must pray as follows : *"Lord, just as You brought Your word to me and glorified Your word in saving me, so spread Your word to others and glorify Your word in saving them."* Or you may pray more specifically, *"Lord, glorify Your word in saving my father, my mother, my brother, my sister, my spouse, my neighbor, etc."* As you pray for them, name them before the Lord.

Thirdly, for those who preach and teach, you need to pray **Psa.119:19**, "Open [their] eyes, that [they] may behold wonderful things from Your law." You need to pray that the Holy Spirit will give them the wisdom that comes from above, insight, understanding and discernment as they study God's word and prepare to teach and preach. (**Jas.1:5; Psa.119:27, 66**). You need to pray that the Lord will give them the

diligence and strength and discipline to labor in studying God's word. (*2Tim.2:15; 1Tim.4:16*).

You need to pray that the Holy Spirit will fill them and give them power and unction for study and preaching so that your faith will not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. (*1Cor.2:4-5*). You need to pray that the word preached will come to each heart with convicting power. (*Jn.16:8; Acts 2:37*).

We turn our attention now to sanctification. You need to pray for the sanctification of those who are already saved. You need to pray as our Lord prayed, "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth." (*Jn.17:17*). Pray that God's word would teach, build, strengthen, convict, rebuke, admonish, bring about repentance and change, encourage and comfort. And root your prayers in the many verses that speak to these concerns.

As you pray for others, do not cease to pray for yourself in all these matters. Pray for your own sanctification. Pray specifically that the Holy Spirit will prepare your own heart to receive His word, that He will give you a humble heart, that He will give you a submissive heart, that He will give you an obedient heart, that He will give you a repentant heart, that He will give you the will and the strength to make the life changes you ought to make to the glory of God.

Finally, you need to pray that as we gather to worship God that God's special presence will manifest itself among us, that you will know and everyone else will know that God has visited us and dealt with us. Let your mind and your prayers be rooted in *Psa.80* at this point. Pray like the psalmist, "You who are enthroned above the cherubim, shine forth!" In other words, You who are the sovereign God, show us Your glory. Shine forth. Stir up your power. Revive us, as we call on Your name. Look down from heaven and take care of this vine You have planted.

These truths I have set before you gripped Isaac Watts and this led him to write the following verses, "*Pity the nations, O our God, Constrain the earth to come;*

Send Thy victorious Word abroad, And bring the strangers home. We long to see Thy churches full, That all the chosen race May, with one voice and heart and soul, Sing Thy redeeming grace.”

Brethren, I want you to know also that if you are zealous to rise up each day to pray for others and yourself, as I have set before you, if you are zealous to seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness in your prayers, if you are zealous to see His glory revealed and power displayed as the church gathers on the Lord's Day, I can assure you of one fact – you will be present in the Lord house on the Lord's Day. It will take a whole lot to keep you away from gathering with His people on the Lord's Day.

God can yet bring in revival in this church and a great harvest of souls into His kingdom. Let us earnestly seek God. Let us commit ourselves to stand in the gap and plead with God for the Lord to save sinners. (*Ezek.22:30*). Let it not be said about us that the Lord was astonished that there was none among us who interceded for sinners so that His mighty arm could bring them salvation. (*Isa.59:16*).