

Tag-Team Prayer

Series: *Paul's School of Prayer*

Feb. 23, 2020

Eph. 6:18-20, etc.

Andrew Fuller was a pastor in England in the late 18th century. In 1792, Fuller helped found the Baptist Missionary Society, which specialized in sending missionaries to share the message of Jesus in unreached areas of the world.

In 1793, just one year after it was founded, the society sent out its very first missionaries. William Carey was one of them. Along with some companions, Carey would leave behind everything he knew in order to travel to the mysterious subcontinent of India.

Before departing for India, William Carey told Andrew Fuller that he felt like he was about to descend into a deep mine— a mine which had never been explored before— with no one to guide him. That's when Carey said these famous words to Fuller:

I will go down, if you will hold the rope.

William Carey's departure to India would be a key turning point in the global missions movement. And it wouldn't have been possible apart from committed Christians who "held the rope" for Carey and other pioneer missionaries.

Can you guess how these supporters held the rope, as it were? They *prayed*. They continually *prayed* for the missionaries.

Now let's shift the imagery from climbing ropes to the ropes of a wrestling ring. Pro wrestling fans will be familiar with tag-team matches. Two wrestlers work together as a team, taking turns to fight an opposing pair of wrestlers in the ring.

Did you know that back in the day, Pastor Jeremy was a huge pro wrestling fan? Mercifully, the Lord has since delivered him from that affliction... kind of... I think.

Because he still does own some wrestling paraphernalia— a few belts and some masks. He has this toy wrestling ring displayed on a shelf in his family room complete with wrestling action figures.

So speaking of prayers, Jeremy needs yours.

Here's a photo going way back to an era that Jeremy refers to as the "golden days" of pro wrestling. Can anyone tell me who these dudes are? This is Hulk Hogan and Macho Man

Randy Savage. Together they comprised a famous wrestling tag team called the Mega-Powers.

Of course nowadays, the term “tag-team” has come to be understood more generally as “two or more people supporting each other as they work together toward the same goal.” So it’s all about partnering with each other, supporting each other, having each other’s back.

That’s what we’re going to be talking about today when it comes to prayer. God calls us to partner with each other *in prayer*, to support each other *in prayer*, to have each other’s back *in prayer*.

This is the final Sunday in our series *Paul’s School of Prayer*. A few Sundays ago, we talked about a very real “wrestling match” that all Christians are engaged in—the wrestling match that we call spiritual warfare.

We studied the Apostle Paul’s famous passage on the subject in Ephesians chapter 6. As Christians, we do not wrestle against flesh and blood human beings, says Paul, “but against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” — against unseen, supernatural and personal forces of darkness—the fallen angelic beings better known as the devil and the demons who do his bidding.

The other week we saw how God in his grace and goodness equips us with effective spiritual armour and weaponry so that we can stand firm against the spiritual forces of evil. In the Lord’s mighty power, we have every reason to expect success in the wrestling match that is spiritual warfare.

But Paul’s choice of the term “wrestling” indicates that spiritual warfare isn’t a cake walk; it’s a serious struggle. Through the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, Satan is an utterly defeated foe, ultimately speaking, and yet he remains a formidable foe until Christ comes again.

In 1 Peter, the Bible likens the devil to a lion on the prowl:

Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.¹

¹ 1 Peter 5:8 (NLT)

What's the hunting strategy of lions? Lions are opportunists, aren't they? They lie in wait, watching for an animal to become separated from its herd. Lions will rarely attack a large herd of wildebeest, for example. It's just too dangerous. Instead, lions look for the straggler, for the lone creature that has wandered off from the herd. Isolation is the prey's weakness, and the lion's opportunity.

The same can be said of Christians when it comes to spiritual warfare and prayer. We need each other. Together, we will stand strong— especially as we multiply our prayer support for each another.

Those who descend into the mines of mission and ministry, as it were, need others to hold the rope for them in prayer.

Or— to shift the analogy— when we're up against the ropes in the wrestling ring of spiritual warfare, we will stand firm and prevail against the enemy as we support each other in prayer—tag-team prayer.

This is exactly what Paul has in mind at the end of his teaching on spiritual warfare in Ephesians 6, when he says:

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.²

Because as believers engaged in the reality of spiritual battle, we need each other's prayers, desperately.

Even Paul, this great Apostle, urges the Ephesian Christians to pray for him, as he goes on to say in verses 19-20:

¹⁹ Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

When you think about it, this is quite a remarkable prayer request. We know that all along Paul has been pouring his heart out in prayer for the Ephesian church. A few weeks ago in this series, we saw Paul's prayer in chapter 1 that the Ephesian Christians would come to know God better and better; that their eyes would be opened to recognize the astonishing, eternal hope that they have in Christ, and the availability of his incomparably great power

² Ephesians 6:18 (NIV)

for all believers.³ Then, we saw how Paul so evocatively prayed in chapter 3 that the Ephesians would know and experience in their heart of hearts the full dimensions of the limitless love of Christ.⁴

And yet, this Apostle who prays so richly and powerfully for the Ephesian Christians isn't just content to leave it at that. As we've seen, in the context of his teaching on spiritual warfare in chapter 6, he urges them to pray for him as well.

Indeed, the great Apostle would be very quick to tell us that he couldn't have done what he did apart from the prayers of so many regular, everyday believers like you and me. Paul knew that he needed the prayers of other believers just as much as they needed his.

Several years ago, I was preparing a sermon on the topic of spiritual warfare, and was reading a commentary on Ephesians written by one of my favourite Bible scholars.

He noted that whenever he speaks or writes on the topic of spiritual warfare, he finds that things tend to happen that hinder him in doing so. This comment really struck me. I took it as a prompting from the Holy Spirit that I needed to reach out to others and ask for their prayer support as I prepared that sermon on spiritual warfare.

So I did. I emailed maybe a dozen folks that I knew would be faithful to cover not only me and the message in prayer, but also my family. I was about to call the enemy out in that sermon, and I needed other believers to hold the rope for me in prayer, to be part of my tag-team, so to speak.

With a couple of exceptions, I found my sermon preparation went unusually smoothly, as did the other ministries and conversations I engaged in that week. For several days in a row, I experienced a notable sense of God's empowering presence in ministry that was surely a result of the prayer cover that others were providing for me.

Then came the service on Sunday, and everything seemed to go quite well—from the music to the message, and all the other aspects of our worship gathering. Various people had commented afterwards that they sensed the Lord had been working throughout the service.

³ See Ephesians 1:15-23

⁴ See Ephesians 3:14-21

Then, after church, I went home with my family. And what do you think happened? That afternoon my wife Jan and I had these strange misunderstandings and disagreements. And really, our whole family wasn't getting along all that well right into the evening.

Now, like most families, we always have our moments, but this seemed different, more intense. And it struck me that, "This is spiritual warfare. This is an enemy attack." I prayed through it, but it was a real wrestling match.

Things settled down soon enough, we all said our *I'm sorrys*, and made things right with each other. But I remember thinking, man, the battle's real, isn't it? The enemy couldn't hit us coming, so he hit us going. He couldn't strike us before the Sunday service, so he got his licks in after.

In saying this, I'm not for a second trying to take anything away from the potent prayer cover that a number of folks provided for me that week. It was powerful and effective, no question. But what I am trying to say is this: If we got hit like that *with* prayer cover, can you imagine what might have happened *without* prayer cover?

The Apostle Paul was no stranger to taking enemy hits. So, not only do we find him praying mightily for others, but we also find him seeking the prayer support of others for his own ministry. He faced all kinds of difficulties and perils as he brought the gospel of Jesus to unreached areas of the world. Here's an example of how Paul so valued the prayer cover of other believers as he faced the challenges of ministry:

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, **as you help us by your prayers**. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us **in answer to the prayers of many**.⁵

Along the same lines, Paul says this in his letter to the Romans:

⁵ 2 Corinthians 1:8-11 (NIV)

Dear brothers and sisters, I urge you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to join in my struggle by **praying to God for me**. Do this because of your love for me, given to you by the Holy Spirit.⁶

Another example of this is seen in Philippians, where Paul says:

For I know that **as you pray for me** and the Spirit of Jesus Christ helps me, this will lead to my deliverance.⁷

Paul also recognizes that if his ministry is to be fruitful and effective, he must be utterly dependent on God's help, which comes through the faithful and earnest prayers of many.

In Ephesians 6, we've already seen Paul asking for prayer that he may fearlessly and boldly proclaim the gospel. Similarly, Paul says to the Colossians Christians:

Devote yourselves to prayer with an alert mind and a thankful heart. Pray for us, too, that God will give us many opportunities to speak about his mysterious plan concerning Christ. That is why I am here in chains. Pray that I will proclaim this message as clearly as I should.⁸

Similarly, to the Thessalonian church, Paul writes:

Finally, dear brothers and sisters, we ask you to pray for us. Pray that the Lord's message will spread rapidly and be honored wherever it goes, just as when it came to you. Pray, too, that we will be rescued from wicked and evil people, for not everyone is a believer.⁹

So Paul faces many adversities and dangers in his apostolic ministry— including imprisonment and even death—but what are his prayer requests?

Yes, he does ask for prayers of protection, but only so he can have greater opportunity to proclaim the gospel, *which is precisely what got him into trouble in the first place*.

Paul's prayer requests, therefore, aren't geared toward mere self-preservation. They're driven by gospel advancement. Paul asks people to pray for his deliverance only to the extent that it will help the message of Jesus Christ to gain ground.

⁶ Romans 15:30 (NLT)

⁷ Philippians 1:19 (NLT)

⁸ Colossians 4:2-4 (NLT)

⁹ 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2 (NLT)

And here's the question for us: What might happen if you and I got serious about praying for God to open up opportunities for us to clearly and courageously proclaim the good news of Jesus in this community, other communities, and throughout the world?

This is a pivotal year for Cornerstone as we begin praying and planning in earnest toward what we've been calling Vision 2020. It's the big, bold vision that God has called us to over the next several years. It's a vision that we've discerned together collectively, and that God has been affirming across the entire congregation in many different ways.

In order to make space to develop new leaders, and to make space to reach people in a new context, God has called us to plant a new Cornerstone campus in another community a few years from now. And as we work toward that, God is also calling us to start a third Sunday service here, maybe in about a year's time, as well as to develop a Leadership Institute.

Make no mistake: the enemy is threatened by this vision God has given us to advance his kingdom. As such, I think it's appropriate for us to emphasize two "o" words today: *opportunity* and *opposition*.

First, we have before us a tremendous *opportunity* to advance God's kingdom as a church. The forces of darkness will lose ground, as we shine the light of Christ and reclaim ground for God in this community, as well as in another community God will show us—a community where we'll plant a new Cornerstone campus. And through the development of a leadership institute, kingdom gains will be made that are more far-reaching still.

Along with these opportunities, we should expect enemy *opposition*. I don't say this to scare you. Remember, we can expect success in spiritual warfare if we utilize the armour and weaponry God has provided for us. But in anticipation of both "o's"—opportunity and opposition—we will need to hold the rope for one another in prayer at a whole new level. We need to engage in tag-team prayer.

In isolation, we're easy prey (p-r-e-y), but when we pray (p-r-a-y) for each other, we will not only stand firm against the enemy, but together we'll make significant advances for the kingdom of God.

So instead of me standing here and talking for another 10 minutes about how we *should* support each other in prayer, we're going to talk about a practical way to *actually make that happen* in the weeks to come.

Now the season of Lent begins this coming Wednesday, February 26th. What is Lent?

Lent is a 40-day period leading up to Easter. It's a season of spiritual discipline, in which we *give up* something specific that tends to distract or lead us away from Jesus. In its place, we *take up* a practice that will help us to make more space for Jesus, and draw nearer to him.

This helps prepare our hearts to celebrate his cross and empty tomb on Easter weekend.

Today, on the final Sunday before Lent begins, we're going to give you a special opportunity to make a Lenten commitment.

We've placed two identical Lent commitment cards on every chair this morning—would you please grab those? Every person needs two copies. The form says:

This Lent, I will...

Make space for Jesus by surrendering _____.

Pray daily using the Lent Prayer Guide.

In a few minutes, I'll give you a space of time to think and pray about what God would have you surrender for Lent this year.

But first, I'd like to tell you about the special 2020 Lent Prayer Guide that we've prepared.

The prayer guide offers a 7-day cycle of reflections and prayer points based on the passages we've been studying these past couple of months in the *Paul's School of Prayer* sermon series.

We want to encourage and challenge all of you to use this prayer guide daily throughout the season of Lent. In doing so, you'll cycle through the book approximately 6 times. In the process, you'll draw nearer to Jesus through prayer.

The prayer guide will get us praying for each other in line with God's priorities as revealed in scripture, and particularly in the prayers of the Apostle Paul.

One feature of this prayer book is that it will get you **praying for Vision 2020** each week—for how God has called Cornerstone to plant a new campus, launch a third worship service, and develop a leadership institute. The guide includes prayer points for each of those areas.

The guide also includes a section with **family prayer activities** based on the prayers of the Apostle Paul. These are designed for families with younger children by Cornerstone's very own Children's Ministry Director, Kerri McIntosh.

We hope that the large majority of this congregation will take up the challenge to use this prayer book daily during Lent.

How might God change the way you relate to him, and your priorities both in prayer and in life as you use this prayer guide?

And what might God do in and through this church if hundreds of us are praying each day Paul's prayers for ourselves, for our loved ones, for our church family and the kingdom mission God has called us to in this community and beyond?

Now in terms of what to surrender for Lent, remember, you're trying to zero in on something specific that tends to distract or lead you away from Jesus.

The key is to make your commitment as specific and concrete as you can. I would encourage you to use the back of your card add as much detail to your commitment as possible.

On the screen you'll see a handful of examples of things you might surrender to Jesus for Lent:

- Social media
- Watching a certain TV show (or TV altogether)
- Food indulgences (like snacking at night)
- Checking email beyond certain limits
- Gaming on certain days or at certain times, or maybe altogether
- Bringing work home at night
- Eating out as often

This list is just to help prime your thoughts. But make sure to take a quiet moment of prayer and *actually ask God* what he would have you surrender this Lent.

In fact, why don't we all take a moment to do that now? "Lord, what would you have me surrender to you this Lent?"

As you get a sense of what God would have you surrender, write it down on your commitment card. Remember, add extra detail on the back if needed. Also I would highly encourage you to also commit to praying daily throughout the season of Lent using the prayer guide. Just tick the box on the card to indicate your commitment to do that.

And please make sure you fill out two cards identically. Because what you're going to do is keep one for yourself as a reminder of your Lent commitment. I'd like to invite you when you're ready— from all across the worship hall—to bring your second card to the front and lay it at the foot of the cross. Lay your Lenten commitment at the feet of Jesus, as it were.

Once you lay your card down at the foot of the cross, feel free to take a copy of the Lent Prayer Guide. They are spread out all across the edge of the stage. There are lots of copies so feel free to take one copy per person—no need to share with your spouse or anything like that. Each person is welcome and encourage to take their own copy for personal use.

Also, this prayer guide is available online at: www.cornerstonechurch.ca/lent2020. So if you prefer to use your phone or tablet or laptop to follow the daily prayers and reflections, that option is available.

So when you're ready, just get up out of your seat, from all across the worship hall, and bring one copy of your commitment cards to the front, lay it at the foot of the cross, and grab a prayer book to take back to your seat with you.

And we're going to have this beautiful mound of Lent commitment cards at the foot of the cross by the end of this exercise...