

## THE DIVINE CINNAMON ROLL

Colossians 4:2-4

Martin Luther said to be a Christian without it is no more possible than to be alive without breathing. If you aren't certain about how important this is, just try to stop breathing and see how your life goes. In other words, Luther said this thing is absolutely necessary to life for a Christian. Ted Dekker, the writer, said it may just be the most powerful tool mankind has. You probably already know what I'm referring to. The thing Luther and Dekker referred to is prayer.

There are people who claim they have no interest at all in prayer. However, the reality is that we all find ourselves in need of prayer. In *The Count of Monte Cristo* Alexandre Dumas wrote, "For the happy man prayer is only a jumble of words, until the day when sorrow comes to explain to him the sublime language by means of which he speaks to God." He's right. The most proud, independent person, will likely find himself praying when sorrow comes to him and explains the reality of life. Today we're going to think about prayer as we look at Colossians 4:2-4.

A young boy was saying his prayers before going to bed as his mother and grandmother listened. He said, "Lord, bless mommy and daddy, bless brother and sister, bless grandma and grandpa, and all the rest of the family. Give me a good night's sleep." Then he shouted, "And please remember, Lord, that I really want a new bicycle for my birthday." His mother said, "You don't have to shout. God is not hard of hearing." The boy answered, "No, but Grandma is." I suspect a lot of us fear that maybe God is hard of hearing. Let's think about prayer.

### WE HAVE A POWERFUL TOOL

In Colossians 4:2 Paul commands us, "devote yourselves to prayer." Some of you are thinking, "oh great, a talk about prayer. Just what I don't need." The top two guilt producers for Christians are evangelism and prayer. If you asked most Christians, "how's your prayer life?" the majority would say, "it's not what it ought to be." It is rare to ask that question and get the answer "I don't see how it could be any better." So how's your prayer life? If you are thinking, "It ought to be a whole lot better than it is," I want you to think for a few moments about the word "ought."

What sort of word is "ought"? It is a common word when it comes to things like prayer. But "ought" is a word of obligation. It is about duty. In fact the dictionary says it is used to express duty or moral obligation. It is derived from the word "owe." You owe it to someone to do something when you "ought" to do it. I made a New Year's Resolution coming into this year. I resolved to watch more football games on television during

football season this fall. I did that because I was feeling guilty due to failing to live up to my moral obligation to watch lots of football games. Oh look, my wife is crying. Just kidding. I don't have any obligation to watch football. I don't owe it to anyone. I watch football games because I enjoy them. There is no "ought" involved.

When we say "I ought to pray more" we are missing the point completely. We are seeing prayer as an obligation and we are saying we somehow owe it to God to talk to him. That makes prayer a sort of good deed that we are required by God to do in order to be acceptable in his sight. It is a duty. That kind of thinking is total denial of the gospel of grace. The gospel says that what makes us acceptable to God and loved by him is not what we do, but what he has done for us. We are accepted by God because Jesus Christ has obtained that acceptance for us and given it to us as a gift. There is no obligation attached to it. If something has an obligation attached to it then it is not a gift. If there is an obligation in some sense you are earning the thing given. That is not true of the gift of eternal life in Christ. It is a true gift, and therefore it has no "ought" attached to it.

Imagine you see a friend along the side of the road struggling mightily to push his car down the road. You stop to help and say, "What happened? Did your engine quit or did you run out of gas?" Your friend says, "No. I just wanted to push the car on my own strength. I feel guilty because I know I really ought to turn the engine on and let it move the car. I ought to run the engine more, I guess, but I'm too busy pushing the car to have time to just sit in the car and drive it. I feel bad about my driving life. Oh well, let's push." Wouldn't you think your friend is an idiot? If he's choosing to push the car rather than let the engine drive it he's dumber than a box of rocks. Feeling guilty about not driving is completely missing the point. He shouldn't feel guilty, he should feel stupid. The same is true when it comes to prayer. Our problem isn't guilt, it's stupidity.

John 1:12 says those who put their faith in Jesus, who believe in him, have the right to be children of God. We have the privilege of having God as our Father. That means we can speak to him, appeal to him about anything and everything, as we would to a loving Father. In other words, we can pray. That is a priceless blessing, an unimaginable gift. The person who misses out when I fail to pray is me!

Have you ever had the experience of having a problem at a store or with a company, you are dealing with an employee and getting nowhere, so finally in frustration you say, "I would like to speak to your manager"? You realize the employee is sticking to the company script because he or she has no other choice. You need to talk to someone who has the authority to make a decision to fix a problem rather than just adhere to the company line. You need to talk to someone who actually has the power to do something about your situation.

A couple of years ago I had a problem with our mobile phone service provider, Verizon Wireless. They fouled up our bill and overcharged us several hundred dollars. So I called customer service and after a long and frustrating conversation finally was able to get the employee to see what had happened. He said that this was indeed a problem and that he would fix it that day and call me in a day or two to confirm that he'd taken care of it. I never heard from him again and the problem did not get solved. Thus began a 3 month long ordeal that involved repeated reruns of that conversation with the same result. How much would it have mattered if I could have called Lowell MacAdam, the CEO of Verizon? Do you think if I could have talked to him and explained my problem and he cared, and if he said he would fix the problem, that it would have dragged out for months? I'm pretty sure it would have been solved the next day.

Jeremiah 32:17 says, "Ah, Sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you." That verse says God is sovereign over all that exists. He rules over all. Or to put it in modern business terms, he manages it. So if you want something done about the way things are going, who do you talk to? You, follower of Christ, child of God, have the privilege of talking to the manager of creation. You have the incredible gift of going right to the top and speaking to the One who runs everything, the One who has power and authority to do whatever he chooses. According to Jeremiah, nothing is too hard for him. Prayer is the awesome, unfathomable blessing of being able to go directly to the CEO of all creation, who not only will take your call, but actually cares about you and your problem. Yes, we ought to pray, but not in the sense that we owe it to God, but in the sense that we are missing out on a huge blessing if we don't. We are being stupid and self-defeating.

James 5:16 says "the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective." Well, yes, but I'm not righteous. Hold on. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ you have the righteousness of Christ in God's eyes. Do you not think that's righteous enough? Our problem is that we think God answers our prayers because of what we do. When we start measuring our righteousness to see if it's enough to get God to answer our prayers we are denying the Gospel. That's like saying the cost of having a prayer answered is \$1 trillion. How many righteousness dollars do I have? Um, I've got 3 cents. Billy Graham is way better than me. He has a quarter. So how much short of getting God to answer his prayers is he? The same as me, \$1 trillion. Do you know how many righteousness dollars are put into our account by Jesus? Turns out it's \$100 trillion. The prayer of a person who is righteous before God through Jesus Christ is powerful and effective. If you are a believer in Jesus you are righteous before God, therefore your prayers are powerful and effective! Not because of you and how good you are, but because of how good Jesus is.

The Bible is insistent that God, the CEO of creation, does indeed take our calls and acts on them. He actually answers prayer. Isaiah 65:24 quotes God saying, “Before they call I will answer, while they are still speaking I will hear.” In John 15:7 Jesus said, “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you.” Paul clearly knew prayer is effective. He believed the Colossians’ prayers could lead to his ministry being effective.

I recently had a small answer to prayer that felt big to me. Laurie and I were at the Disneyland Resort. We were in the California Adventure park and had just ridden on the Radiator Springs Racers ride in Cars Land. We went into a store and did a little shopping. I decided to buy a shirt I liked. I reached to pull out my wallet, but it wasn’t in my pocket. What had I done with it? Then I realized the bad news. It was gone. It had either been stolen or it had fallen out of my pocket. This was not a life changing event. Compared to earthquakes, wars, or terminal diseases this was insignificant. But it is really unpleasant. The store clerk, who was very helpful, immediately called over to the ride we had been on and asked if anyone had turned in a wallet. I described my wallet for her and she passed that along, to no avail. No wallet had been found. The clerk then called the ride we had been on prior to the Cars ride. Once again, no joy. At that point she instructed us to go to the Chamber of Commerce building where they have a lost and found. She also encouraged us to call our credit card company immediately. As we walked to the lost and found building we prayed. We asked God to have mercy on us. The odds were that the wallet was gone because there had been plenty of time for someone to turn it in if they were going to do so. But we prayed and asked God to have some honest soul find that wallet. We got to the lost and found. When my turn came I told the young man behind the counter that I needed to report that I had lost my wallet. He asked what my name was and I told him “Myatt.” He said, “Richard?” I said, “Yes, how did you know?” He said, “We have your wallet. It was turned in and they are bringing it over from Cars Land.” I want to give glory to God right now. He answered our prayer. I didn’t have to call our credit card company and our bank, I wasn’t condemned to Purgatory, sometimes known as the DMV, to get a new drivers license. The most likely thing to have happened there was I would never see that wallet again. But I got it back with every credit card and every dollar still in it. I am very thankful. God answered a prayer, and it was a huge blessing.

Laurie and I have had much more significant answers to prayer. Michael and Anna are answers to our longest continuous prayer requests. God has blessed Carissa and Toby with terrific people to be their spouses, something we had prayed about for a long time. Michael came home from Afghanistan unscathed, and that was a huge answer to prayer. Anna after many prayers has a ridiculously cool job. Toby got into his first choice for

medical school. Anna is now 12 weeks into the first pregnancy of the next generation in our family, another answer to prayer.

Ah, but there's a problem. Others have lost their wallets and prayed but they weren't found. When our first son, Joel, was born premature with a congenital heart defect, we prayed earnestly that he would be able to live a healthy life. Those prayers weren't answered. It's great to have these promises that God answers prayers, but experience says there are a lot that are not answered. How are we to understand this?

Some scholars and teachers say that prayer isn't about just asking things from God. There is some truth to that. Prayer is about having a relationship with God, not just about trying to get things from him. Having said that, we need to admit that the core of prayer is asking. In Philippians 4:6 Paul said, "in everything, by prayers and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." We are to present requests to God about everything. We are to ask!

God wants us to ask. In Matthew 7:7 Jesus commanded, "Ask and it will be given to you." God wants us to ask because he wants us to look to him. He wants us to depend on him. It expresses trust in him when we ask. Our asking glorifies him because it says we believe he has the power and desire to answer. When we don't ask it dishonors God. It says we believe that it is up to us to get what we ask for and God is not to be trusted.

However, when we ask, we must not view prayer as though it is like having an Amazon gift card. Amazon is so cool. You go on their web site and you can shop for almost anything. It's great to have that gift card, find what you want, put in your order and know that in a few days that desired item will show up at your door. If you see prayer as being like Amazon what's going to happen when you put in your order and the desired item never shows up? You are upset. You've been ripped off. You did your part. You ordered properly and had the gift card, but the divine Amazon didn't produce. Or what if you ordered a new tablet computer and what arrived was a pair of jeans? You didn't get what you want. Again if God gives us something, but not what we asked for, we feel he has failed us.

Remember that Jeremiah tells us that God is sovereign. It is not your job to instruct the Sovereign, the ruler of all, on how to run things in his creation. We are to ask, but always with humility. We must always recognize, as we will see shortly, that we must submit to his wisdom and goodness.

To be loving God could not possibly be like Amazon. What would you think of a parent who gave a child anything the child asked for? So the parent's 8 year old says, "Dad, I

really want a brand new Corvette and I want you to let me drive it.” Does a good father say, “Whatever you want, Son,” and give it to him? That would be terrible. If your child says, “I don’t want to eat vegetables ever again. I just want to eat ice cream and cake. And I don’t want to do any homework anymore either,” and you say, “Whatever you want, it’s yours,” are you a good parent? A good parent must say no, and must give a child at times things the child doesn’t like. And the same is true of God.

There is also a logical impossibility of God answering every prayer. I’ve mentioned before that I was hit by this dilemma one day when I was in college. It happened at a baseball game. No one watches small college baseball. But this day, for some reason, several of my friends came to watch me play, including a young woman who I didn’t think I’d mind impressing. Unfortunately my first 2 at bats produced unimpressive results. My third at bat started out the same as I lamely flailed at a couple of breaking balls, looking pathetic. At that point I stepped out and silently prayed I silently prayed. “Lord, could you please let me get a hit here?” Hey, I know it wasn’t a big deal, but I was young and God did say ask about everything. I stepped back in the box and as I prepared for the next pitch the thought hit me, “what if the pitcher is a Christian and he’s praying right now, ‘Lord please let me get this clown out’”? There was no way God could answer both of those prayers. He was going to have to say no to someone. It was a moment of theological insight for me. As he turned out he answered my prayer. However, the young lady couldn’t have cared less. She was only there because my roommate was there to watch the game too and she was interested in him.

The Bible gives us some examples of prayers that are not answered. One of them is in Matthew 26:39. Jesus prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” Jesus prayed that he would not have to go through the cross. That prayer was not answered. In 2 Corinthians 12:8 Paul talked to God about what he called a “thorn in my flesh.” We don’t know what it was. I suspect it was some physical problem that seriously hindered Paul. He said, “Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.” He didn’t just pray. He pleaded with God to take it away and did so repeatedly. His prayers were not answered.

Jesus’ prayer was not answered as he requested ***because the Father was pursuing a much greater end***. He was making rescue possible for the entire human race. The lesser goal of not experiencing horrific pain was sacrificed to bring about the much greater end. In Paul’s case God had something to teach Paul. In verse 9 he said, “My grace is sufficient for you.” He was teaching Paul to rely on his sufficiency, and that was more important than Paul feeling like he’d be more effective in ministry without that thorn in the side. When God says no it is because he is doing something bigger and more important. We need to give God the right to say no. Jesus did so when he said, “Not as I

will, but as you will.” That’s an acknowledgement that the Father does indeed know what is best and it is submitting to his will.

### WE SHOULD EMPLOY THIS TOOL CONSTANTLY

In a way I feel like I don’t need to say this. That’s because prayer is a nearly irresistible impulse for humans. One study in 2004 found that nearly 30% of avowed atheists admitted that they pray sometimes. Efforts to find cultures without some form of prayer have been futile.

Ted Turner, the media mogul who called Christianity a religion for losers, said in an interview in *Fortune* magazine that he is an agnostic. But then he said, “I still say prayers for my friends who are ill. Little short prayers. Mini-prayers. It can’t hurt anything.” National Public Radio a couple of years ago interviewed a number of young adults who have drifted away from organized religion. One young man said that he doesn’t believe, yet when asked if he prayed he answered, “Yeah, I do and I don’t know what to make of it because I feel like a hypocrite... But I only do it when I’m at my most scared...And like I said, I don’t know what to do with that because it really does not align with anything that I’ve said...yet I still find myself doing that.”

Despite this tendency among all people, it is amazing how often we forego the privilege of prayer. Paul says we should devote ourselves to it. What does it mean to you when you devote yourself to something? Devotion means being diligent, faithful, committed, willing to put time and energy into something, to pay the price. Prayer is not always easy. Telling us we need to be devoted means there will be resistance and obstacles that will keep us from being diligent about it. Luke 18:1 says, “Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.” He said that because he knew giving up would be a temptation. There will be times when we think there's no point so we should just stop. Romans 12:12 says much the same. It commands us to be “faithful in prayer.”

That is a warning that every time you pray something will try to stop you. It may be a distraction, it may be something demanding your attention, it may be doubt, it may be a sudden feeling of exhaustion, it may be some bizarre temptation, but it will be something. I think the most common thing is doubt. What is the point of this? This won’t do any good at all. I’m wasting my time. In fact, I’m kind of mad at God because he doesn’t listen. In all of that you need to be devoted to prayer. Jesus said pray and do not give up. Trust God. Take the wild gamble of believing him even when it seems hopeless and crazy.

What typically gets in the way of us being more diligent in prayer? We've already identified one of those. It is seeing prayer as a religious duty rather than understanding it as a huge privilege and blessing, as an opportunity to speak to the one who rules. When we view prayer as a duty we tend to do it begrudgingly. Then it becomes a chore, and most of us don't do chores as often or as eagerly as we "ought." But another problem is setting unrealistic standards. We decide we have to pray for long sustained sessions, commit to do that, then fall short, keep trying, keep failing, then eventually just give up.

I suggest that the single biggest obstacle to our devotion to prayer is lack of faith. We simply don't believe it makes a difference. We don't think we really need to pray. Too many times we've prayed and not gotten an answer, or not gotten the one we want, and we conclude that prayer really doesn't matter. Laurie and I have enjoyed a new TV show this year called *Forever*. We were disappointed recently when we read that it has been canceled by ABC. It came as a shock to the cast and the producers. It has looked to us and to them like one of those shows that starts slow but builds an audience if given the time to do so. There was talk that another network might pick the show up and there were calls on the internet to call, write, email your support. I thought about doing that, but I didn't do it. I immediately thought, "it won't make any difference." When you think it doesn't make a difference, you don't bother, and that's exactly what happens with prayer.

Prayer is a mystery. It requires that we have faith in a God we cannot see, a God who rules and is sovereign. It requires that we accept that he may say no to some requests, and that we trust when he does so that he has a powerfully good reason. It is important that, by faith, we accept that when we pray it is good for us, it works something in our own souls, and that somehow it can and does affect things in this world. Somehow God uses our prayers as part of his will and plan.

Let me suggest an approach to prayer that might help you be more devoted. In 1 Thessalonians 5:17 Paul said we should "pray continually." The English Standard Version says, "Pray without ceasing." Make prayer an ongoing conversation with God. We should make our entire life an ongoing conversation with God. Prayer should not be seen as only valid if it is done in discrete chunks. For me to have a relationship with my wife it is important and good to have extended conversation time. But the overwhelming majority of our conversation is on the fly. We talk about anything and everything as we go through our days. That's what Paul is urging us to do. The idea is to make prayer your first response to everything. It is really living in God's presence and inviting him to be a part of everything you think, say and do.

Some odd things happen with prayer. Christians tend to develop a peculiar prayer vocabulary that we would never use while talking to another human being. Comedian



Tim Hawkins, for instance, points out how when someone is facing a difficult or scary situation someone will say, “I will pray for a hedge of protection for you.” A hedge? Really? I don’t mean to complain, but is that the best you can do? Just some good garden tools could cut a way through a hedge. How about a thick cement wall, maybe topped with razor wire? Is Satan really going to be stopped by some greenery? Will he say, “Oh no! A hedge! My greatest weakness is landscaping. How did they know?”

We need to quit putting prayer into some weird category where it becomes more like a performance than anything. We need to just communicate with God. Talk to him, with great reverence and love, of course, but he is our heavenly Father. He actually tells us he wants us to cry out to him, “Abba,” or in English words, “daddy.”

### WE SHOULD EMPLOY THE TOOL WITH THANKS

Paul also tells us that we need to be thankful as we pray. This is the same message we saw in Philippians 4:6. “In everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving present your requests to God.” We are to make our requests while giving thanks. We are to give thanks even before the outcome of the prayer is revealed. In other words, we are to give thanks to God for whatever the result is. This implies that we need to submit to whatever God decides.

This is kind of like going to the vending machine, pushing the button for our selection, but also saying, “I thank you for the opportunity to request, and I accept and thank you right now for whatever you decide.” If the machine gives you an apple instead of a candy bar because it is what you need, you accept that with gratitude. If the machine says, “Dude, looking at you I can tell you that the last thing you need is to drink a can of soda. So I’m going to say no and direct you the water fountain if you’re really thirsty,” we accept it and say thank you for caring.

Perhaps the most common problem people have with prayer is if they don’t get what they want they conclude it is pointless. In a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon Calvin prays, “Please let it snow.” He goes outside, and there is no snow. He tries again, “Please, please, let it snow.” But again to no avail. He tries again with the same result, so in the last frame he’s looking up saying, “Do you want me to become an atheist?” That’s our problem. Give me what I want or I quit believing in you. Giving thanks implies we believe regardless of the answer. Francois Fenelon wrote, “Accept what God chooses for you. This is more important than what you choose for yourself...What a horror to belong to myself and to my passions!”

When we are devoted to prayer and pray with thanksgiving, four things happen:

If you pray with thanksgiving, thus submitting yourself to whatever God thinks is best, your heart and your life become conformed to God's will. ***You become more like Jesus.***

***You get peace.*** Philippians 4:7 says “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” When I had my troubles with Verizon I was repeatedly told the problem would be resolved. I did not have peace. I couldn't trust them to do what they said. But God is faithful. He is true. He keeps his promises, so when we pray we can rest and let him deal with the thing we pray about in his great wisdom and love.

***You actually do affect things in this world.*** Somehow, in a way that is a mystery to us beyond our comprehension, God uses our prayers as a part of working out his purposes. You may not even know how your prayer is used by God, but it will be used. Would my wallet have been found if we hadn't prayed? Maybe. Would our kids have been blessed with such wonderful spouses if we hadn't prayed? Maybe. But maybe not. God says those prayers make a difference. How that works is a mystery that is way above my pay grade. It's above yours too, but it is real nonetheless. I've seen much evidence of God's answers to prayer in my life. More to the point, God has told us in his word that it is true, and his word never fails.

***You delight the Lord.*** Proverbs 15:8 says of the Lord, “The prayer of the upright pleases him.” The New American Standard translation is more accurate there when it says, “The prayer of the upright is his delight.” What do you delight in? There are things I enjoy, things that please me, but things that delight me are in a different category. Those are the things that bring joy to my heart and a smile to my face, the things I would choose over anything else. Laurie makes a lot of things that I love to eat, but she makes two that I delight in. One is her apple pie, which I believe is eternal because it is so good it has to have come straight from heaven. The other is her cinnamon roll. It is so good it is like an addiction. I can't stop eating it. It brings a smile to my face. Your prayer is like that cinnamon roll to God. He delights in it. Just the fact that you are talking to him makes God happy. It's like he's addicted to it. He cannot get enough of it. You may get distracted, you may get drowsy and fall asleep, you may not be eloquent, you may even be grumpy with him or focused on minutiae in your life, but he is pleased that you talk to him.