

## Pray For Faithful Ministers

Hebrews 13:18-19

6/1/2015

Dusty Burris

Well, this morning it is our privilege to be back in the book of Hebrews. Counting today, we only have three more messages before we finish this wonderful letter. It's been a rich blessing, and I pray it will continue to be this morning.

Turn with me to Hebrews 13. Specifically, we'll be in verses 18 and 19 today.

As I was preparing this week, I was reminded that in 2 Kings 5, we're introduced to a man named Naaman. Naaman, of course, was a pagan Gentile, a leader of a foreign army, and he was a man of great power and influence in his nation. But as you remember, he had one glaring issue in his life, and that was that he was a leper.

I think we can sympathize with how difficult it would have been to have leprosy, particularly at this point in history. A disease that had no cure, a disease that you couldn't hide from those around you as it would have showed up on your physical body, a disease that often came with public stigma and shame, especially for a man of his power and his influence. We can see how this would have been not just an irritation to his personal life, but an embarrassment.

But through the mouth of a lowly servant girl, he ends up hearing that in Israel there is a prophet by the name of Elisha. This man Elisha has been known to do great things, even heal people. Naaman, of course, is intrigued. No doubt he would have done all that he knew to do in his culture, every herb and remedy and incantation that he possibly could have done. He surely tried all to no avail.

And so he makes the journey to Israel to meet this man Elisha, but as he arrives there, interestingly, Elisha doesn't come out personally to speak to him. He sends a messenger, and that messenger says these curious words, 2 Kings 5:10, *"...Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh will be restored to you and you will be clean."*

Now, you would think a man as desperate as Naaman must have been to be healed would have immediately jumped up and gone to the Jordan River and done exactly what Elisha said to do, but he doesn't do that. Instead, he becomes furious. He is offended, in fact, at what Elisha has suggested. He wanted some grand display. He wanted Elisha to come out and to meet him in person, maybe to part the clouds and do some obvious miracle to heal him, but no, instead he tells him to go down to a local river and dip seven times a river, in the opinion of Naaman, that was not as nice as many of the rivers in his own kingdom.

But thankfully, the servants of Naaman are wiser than he, and they give him this wise counsel in 2 Kings 5:13:

*"Then his servants came near and spoke to him and said, 'My father, had the prophet told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more then, when he says to you, 'Wash, and be clean'?"*

They say, listen, you were prepared to do even some great feat if he had required it of you. Why not do this simple thing? And so Naaman wisely, humbly, goes and does this, and God graciously heals him.

What I want us to see this morning as we begin is that there's a sense in which at times we can all be like Naaman when it comes to one particular command in Scripture, and it is the command to pray. How easy it is to belittle the gift of prayer.

How often do we move through life prayerlessly? How often is prayer treated as a last resort instead of a first response? How often we say things like, You know, I wish that I could do something for you, brother, but since I can't, I'll pray. You see, we treat prayer like Naaman treated the instructions of Elisha, such a little thing. How could such a simple thing really have any tangible effect on my life? And so prayer then is often treated as a last-ditch effort when all of our own attempts have already failed.

But that's not how God thinks about prayer. Remember what God says about prayer in James 5, for example, verses 16 to 18:

*"16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. 17 Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. 18 Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit."*

Our God says prayer is no small thing because of the One to whom we pray. Our God is all-powerful. He's able, and He calls us to humble ourselves and pray. Prayer then is one of the greatest gifts, greatest privileges that God has given to us as a believer, and the author of Hebrews is going to remind us of the importance of prayer in our passage this morning.

Let me just remind you quickly where we have been. You remember, hopefully, the grand theme of this letter, **The Superiority of Christ**, and we are now applying this superiority of Christ through these corporate applications, 10 that we've seen so far, 10 practices that should be ours as believers in Jesus Christ. They are, so far, **brotherly love, intentional hospitality, compassionate care, marital honor, contented trust, faithful imitation**. We are to **reject error** and offer **sacrificial praise** and **sacrificial obedience**. Those were the first nine practices. Now, we came last time to verse 17 in practice number 10, which was **intentional submission**. Just a reminder, that was a call to submit to the local church leaders that God has placed in our life, and as we humbly do that, it allows them to serve with joy rather than with groaning.

But today, we come to the final command in this section of chapter 13 in verses 18 and 19, and these verses really serve as a bridge between this section, where we have a list of command after command, to what will be the closing remarks of this letter. Listen to what the author says here in verses 18 and 19:

*"18 Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things. 19 And I urge you all the more to do this, so that I may be restored to you the sooner."*

Practice number 11 this morning is **Faithful Prayer**, faithful prayer, and the theme that we really draw out of these verses is that we are to **Pray fervently for faithful ministers of the gospel. Pray fervently for faithful ministers of the gospel.**

The structure is really simple. There's a primary command that's followed by two supporting arguments. **The Command** is really **A Prayer Request**. Look back at verse 18: *"Pray for us..."* The command is that one simple word, "pray". It's straightforward, easy to understand. The Greek word means exactly what the English word means. It means to pray to God.

But the fact that this is in the form of a command is instructive to us. The author is petitioning these people to pray. He's calling them to make a willful choice to pray.

Now, I do want to be clear. This passage is not really intended to be a how-to on prayer, but it is instructive for us this morning. It reminds us that prayer for the Christian is not optional. In fact, if reading the Scripture is like food for the soul, I would say that prayer is much like oxygen to the soul. Prayer is as essential to the health of your spiritual life as oxygen is to your physical life. The more we grow in spiritual maturity and deepen our relationship with the Lord, the more naturally prayer should come out of us, so much so that oftentimes we may catch ourselves praying without ever remembering to think cognitively, you know I should pray right now. It's an ongoing matter of the Christian life.

And when I personally seek to evaluate my prayer life, it helps me to break it into two categories this morning. The first category comes from 1 Thessalonians 5:17, where Paul says *"pray without ceasing;"* So the first category would be **Continual Prayer**. When Paul says pray without ceasing, by the way, it doesn't mean literally that we should be at our bedside kneeling in prayer 24/7, doing nothing else, no activity, no work. Rather, it's a reference to the fact that the Christian is to walk with God, to have a vibrant relationship with God.

I often think of Enoch who walked with God and was no more and prayed, God help me to walk with You. Help me to have a vibrant relationship with You. For the Christian, as we grow in maturity, we begin to see life more and more through a biblical worldview and we come to understand that absolutely everything in life has a connection to God and therefore there's always a reason to pray. Always, in every moment of life.

There's either an opportunity to give thanks to God, there's an opportunity to ask for help, for strength, for wisdom. There's a moment to declare the glory of God and the goodness of God or even to bear the burdens of others in prayer. But there's always, always a reason to pray. So when we see the world rightly, we find our prayer lives increasing and we find our awareness of the nearness of God increasing. So that's the first category, this continual prayer.

But a second category we might consider comes from Colossians 4:2 where it says: *"Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving;"*

There's obviously overlap in these two categories but I would call this **Devoted Prayer**. So we have continual prayer on the one hand and devoted prayer. Obviously, if you're devoted to prayer, you're also going to pray continually. But the idea I have in mind here is that the

Bible does tell us to pray for specific things. We are to obey the Scriptures and make sure that in our continual praying, we also have set aside times to devote to the purpose of prayer and to pray for the things God says we ought to pray for.

For example, I'll just give you a couple. We're commanded to pray for government leaders, 1 Timothy 2:1-2:

*"First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, 2 for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity."*

So we ought to pray for the leaders God puts over us. Of course, when we take the Lord's Prayer from Matthew 6, we can draw out of that several topics or themes that ought to show up in our prayer lives. Things like that God's glory would be magnified, that God's will would be done, that our daily needs would be met, that we'd be forgiven of our sins, deliverance from temptation. Those are all things modeled for us in the Lord's Prayer.

Back in chapter 5 of Matthew, he even tells us to go beyond that and pray for our enemies, Matthew 5:44: *"But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."*

So you get the idea. We could add to that list. In fact, it's not a bad study. I encourage you to look at prayer in your Bible. Do a word study and look at the different commands to pray for different things. But specifically this morning, as we consider our passage and this word "prayer", I would encourage you to evaluate your own prayer life in these two categories: continual prayer and devoted prayer.

Ask yourself, am I faithful to pray continually throughout the day as circumstances arise? Is that a normal part of my life? And secondly, am I faithful to devote myself to set aside specific times in which my only purpose is to pray? And in those times, am I faithful to pray about the things that God says I should pray for?

But it's crucial to understand that spiritual maturity produces more prayer, not less. As we grow in Christ, we don't need Him less. We recognize we need Him more. And that's important because we can be tempted to mistake growth in knowledge for growth in spiritual maturity. Now, I do want to say, we have to know God. We ought to stretch our minds and love God with our whole mind in the sense that we ought to be willing to make our brains sweat to understand the Bible and to think about what God says. But just knowing facts from the Scripture about God is not the same thing as knowing God Himself. Spiritual maturity is not to just increase in your knowledge but in your love and your pursuit of God.

As we think about this then, one of the pitfalls that can often come when we get that mixed up often happens, particularly when Christians begin to know and love the doctrine of God's sovereignty. And they study His sovereignty, as we should in the Scriptures, but they come to the wrong conclusion then that based on the sovereignty of God, there really doesn't seem to be much need anymore for prayer or for evangelism. After all, if God's just going to do it, then what's the point of prayer? That's a great example of growing in knowledge without growing in maturity. As you grow in spiritual maturity, you come to rightly apply the sovereignty of God and understand God's sovereignty is not a hindrance to prayer or

evangelism. It's the greatest motivation on the planet for prayer and evangelism because we understand the God to whom we pray.

He's an Ephesians 3 kind of God where Paul says that He's able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask and even think. You can't even outthink the things that God can do. Now, if my God is like that, I certainly want to pray. And if my God sovereignly is the one who's bringing dead men to life through the preaching of the gospel, then I want to share the gospel. And so when we come to understand the sovereignty of God and we mature in that knowledge, now we begin to apply it and all of a sudden we realize that the deeper our knowledge goes of God, the more we're on our knees praying to the Lord, the more that we're willing to confess and profess who He is to others.

But this is not just a call to prayer in general, although we ought to pray generally speaking. Specifically, He says in verse 18, *"Pray for us,"* Pray for us. It's a personal prayer request. Now, we've already seen in the book of Hebrews that the author doesn't give us much personal information about who he is. We don't know the author of Hebrews. We can make some guesses, but that's all that they really would be. That's probably because the author was so well known to the original audience that he didn't have to tell them who he was. They knew immediately this man.

As we'll see even in our text, they had a personal relationship with him. What that means is practically when we read pray for us, we unfortunately don't know who us refers to in totality. Obviously, it's the author and some group of people with him, either one or more ministry companions likely.

Some have thought that maybe this is a reference to he and Timothy because Timothy is mentioned in verse 23, but there as we'll see, it mentions that Timothy is not with him and he's hoping that Timothy will come to him. This is obviously to us an anonymous group of ministry companions, but known to the original audience.

But what I want us to see is that this request for personal prayer is instructive for us in a couple of ways. First of all, it's a reminder that we should pray for the spiritual leaders that God has placed in our lives. That's who this person would have been. The author was a spiritual leader seeking to give them instruction. He's asking, please pray for me. It's a reminder that those who lead us need our prayers, that we ought to be quick to lift them in prayer and never to think that because a person is a mentor or a pastor or an elder that they've reached some place of maturity in which they no longer need our prayers. No, they desperately need your prayers.

The apostle Paul was quick to ask for prayer. Just consider here in the book of Thessalonians 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2:

*"Finally, brethren, pray for us that the word of the Lord will spread rapidly and be glorified, just as it did also with you; <sup>2</sup>and that we will be rescued from perverse and evil men; for not all have faith."*

Same thing in Ephesians 6:18-20:

*"**18** With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints, **19** and pray on my behalf,"*

And he goes on to ask for specific things that they pray for him. But clearly, if the apostle Paul said, I need prayer, then certainly the rest of us and every other pastor and elder certainly needs your prayer.

But the author does leave the request open-ended. In this case here in verse 18, he doesn't give a specific list of things he wants them to pray for, which is also a good reminder that we don't have to know the inner workings of a person's life to effectively pray for them. We can imagine the kinds of things they might need us to pray for.

When it comes to leaders in the church, pray for these things. **Pray for their spiritual protection. Pray for their purity, for wisdom, for humility, for perseverance and boldness, for the health of their family life and for God to care for their practical needs.** That's just a short list of things that you could pray for us and really for any believer. But whatever you do, please pray. I confess, I need your prayers. Our elders would be quick to say they need your prayers. The people sitting next to you would say, hey, I could use your prayers. As believers, we need to be praying for one another. And it's our desire as elders to pray for you as you pray for us.

So there's the command, plain and simple. Pray for us. Now that command is supported by two statements that we're going to consider now in turn that reveal the motivation for prayer and the outcome that the author desires from these prayers. So here's **The Motivation**, and that is **A Clear Conscience**. A clear conscience.

He says:

*"Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things".*

Now, the word "for" clues us into the fact that in the author's mind, there's a connection between the command to pray and what he has just said. And that's important because honestly, it's not immediately clear what that connection may be. How does the command to pray connect with this declaration of his clear conscience and his honorable work before the Lord?

Well, let's just look at these two statements together. And as we consider them in context, I pray, it will become clear. He says *"Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things".*

Now, honestly, if we were saying this in English, we would probably reverse the order of those two statements. We'd probably more naturally say desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things, we're sure that we have a good conscience. That's the idea.

The connections between the two statements here is simply that he is confident that he has sought to serve faithfully as a minister of the gospel. Therefore, he has a clear or good conscience. But what's the connection between that reality and the command to pray? After all, on the one hand, we might think, well, if you're doing so well, why do we need to pray for you? You've got a clear conscience and you're ministering faithfully, so why pray? And yet, I don't at all believe the author's intention is to boast here of his clear conscience

or to present himself as if he is spiritually elite and now beyond the need for prayer. That's the opposite of what he says.

Instead, as I've studied this and thought on this and looked at the broader context, I believe what may be going on here is the author's anticipating some pushback from the audience over the things he's had to write in this letter. Remember, there's been some hard things said in the book of Hebrews.

In fact, some of the most difficult passages in the Bible come to us in the book of Hebrews, and he's saying this directly to this audience. Remember the passages, for example, the warning passages that we looked at, the warnings of apostasy. There are some really hard things that are said there, not to mention that in lifting up the superiority of Christ, his whole argument has been, listen, stop running back to the old covenant and the sacrificial system when we have the Lord Jesus Christ who paid the once for all sacrifice for our sins. Stop doing that. He is superior to those things, and for a Jewish person, that may have been very hard to hear, even a Jewish Christian.

The other reason I think this may be the case is because of what he will say here in a few verses in verse 22. If you look at Hebrews 13:22, he says:

*"22 But I urge you, brethren, bear with this word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly."*

Now why would the author feel the need to say, hey, bear with me, bear with what I have said to you, if he didn't anticipate that they perhaps were going to have a hard time doing that?

Remember, these Christians are at a weak point in their faith. We've talked about this. They're struggling. Some of them wavering in their faith, and trust me, when you have to lovingly but boldly exhort a Christian to trust God when they're struggling to rest in God and to endure in their circumstance, they're not always thrilled with you at the end of that conversation. And I think that's the author's thought here is this is rattling the cage, so to speak, of these people, and so in telling them, I have a clear conscience here in how I have handled myself, I believe what's happening is the author is telling them, listen, this has come from a genuine heart, a heart of love for you, a heart of love for the Lord. I have a good, clear conscience in how I've handled myself and what I've said to you and how I've treated you, and he wants them to know this is coming from a heart of love and brotherhood, not an adversarial heart.

He's loved them enough to speak truth to them, even if that truth is hard, in order to bring them back from the brink of spiritual disaster. That's required him to say things positively and lifting up the superiority of Christ. It's also required him to say some things negatively, warning them of the dangerous consequences if they don't repent from the path that they're on, but all of it's come from a genuine heart.

I think that also even connects with the command to pray. You know, when we pray for someone, it softens our heart towards that person. Just try it. I'm not talking about imprecatory prayers, that God rain down upon them, but praying for their good, that God would bless them, that He would grow them, that He would save them, that He would

sanctify them. Praying those things softens your heart, warms your heart towards them. God's gracious to do that.

And so it may be that the author's anticipating that the people have had some difficulty with what he said. Maybe they're pushing back a little bit on what he said, and he's asking for their prayer, knowing that will warm their heart, and then telling them, listen, I have acted in good faith toward you and have a clear conscience, and therefore I ask that you would do this and pray for me.

Now, similarly to the fact that this passage is not primarily here to teach on prayer, it's also not primarily here to teach on the idea of a good conscience, but I find it difficult to just blow by a statement like this and not at least for a moment stop and talk about this idea of living with a good and clear conscience.

I mean, this is a pretty bold statement. *"we are sure that we have a good conscience,"* That's a pretty bold statement. You know, I've ministered to many Christians who feel that a truly clear conscience is a goal that seems to be always just beyond them. They can never live with a peaceful conscience. They live with a conscience that just accuses them. It's always on fire.

And so a statement like this may be pretty confusing, even deflating to read, that someone out there is able to live with a good, clear conscience. Is that just for him? Is that a possibility for us as believers? And I want to say to you very clearly, yes.

Because of the gospel of Jesus Christ, it is not only possible, but it is intended that the Christian live a life with a truly clear and good conscience. Obviously, Paul speaks of this on numerous occasions. 2 Corinthians 1:12, he says:

*"12 For our proud confidence is this: the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you."*

So clearly, a good conscience, a clear conscience is possible for the Christian. So if you don't have a clear conscience this morning, what's the issue? What is at the root of an accusing conscience? Well, in ministry, as I've sought to help people in this, I've come to believe that primarily, there are two broad causes for a constantly accusing conscience. So let's just walk through these for a moment.

Cause number one is **A Refusal to Forsake Known Patterns of Sin**. A refusal to forsake known patterns of sin. We have to first begin by acknowledging that the conscience is a gift from God. By way of illustration, it's very similar to the gift of feeling physical pain. Now, that may not seem like a gift, but it is a gift in the sense that our Creator built within us the ability to feel physical pain so that we would learn over time, hey, don't do that. That hurts. That will harm your body. Instead, do this. And it leads us to live in a way that's safe and takes care of our physical bodies.

Our conscience is similar in the inner man in that it's a gift to warn us of the dangers of sin and to cause us to repent of that sin and to draw near to God. That's the gift of the conscience. So, if your conscience won't stop accusing you, then the most obvious question



you need to first ask is, is there a known pattern of sin in your life that you are hiding or holding on to?

Now, I do want to be clear to say there's no mystery here by what I'm describing. I'm saying a pattern that you know is there. I'm not talking about feeling like there must be something but you can't put your finger on it. I'm talking about hard-hearted sin. You know it's wrong and you're choosing to do it anyway. By the way, that's also what I mean when we take communion, just to be clear, and I talk about not holding on to hard-hearted sin. I'm not talking about the fact that all of us are sinners. We all sin every day. I'm talking about knowing that you have a pattern of sin, hiding it, and refusing to repent of it. That's the idea here.

Listen, if you're a Christian and that's your life, you will not have a clear conscience. God loves you far too much to let you have a clear conscience and lay your head on the pillow at night when you are living in rebellion to Him as one of His children. He won't do that.

So He's going to continue to amp up that conscious awareness of that sin for your good to drive you to repentance and restoration with Him. So, if this is you this morning and you know that you're living with a hidden heart of sin that you're harboring known sin, the path to a clear conscience is very clear. Confess that sin and repent. Confess to the Lord and confess to another person who can help you in that and seek to forsake that sin at all costs. That is the path for this first cause to a clear conscience.

But there's a second common cause for an accusing conscience that won't go away. Cause number two we'll call **A Failure to Trust Clear Promises of Scripture**. And this happens when Christians know what the Bible says about their new condition before God but they continue to act as if it's not true or if it's just too good to be true. It's the kind of thinking that says, yeah, I know grace and forgiveness and love and all that but you don't know who I was. You don't know what I did.

So, some examples of how this manifests would be things like this:

- Knowing that God says He loves you but refusing to act like He does.
- Knowing that God says He forgives you but instead insisting on punishing yourself until you feel like you're worthy of forgiveness.
- Confusing the daily battle with sin and temptation to having a rebellious unrepentant heart altogether. That's what I was talking about earlier.
- Believing that because we can never perfectly know the motives of our hearts that we must be sinning even when we're unaware and then living as if God is constantly condemning us for those sins we're unaware of. This happens all the time.
- Knowing that our salvation is eternally secure in Christ but living as if we must maintain it by our works. We've talked about seeking to earn God's favor with our works throughout Hebrews.
- A final example would be confusing disciplining ourselves to obey God as an overflow of our love for Him with disciplining ourselves to obey so that we can earn or keep His favor.

If you go astray in your understanding or application of any truths like this you will have an accusing conscience that won't go away and you won't be able to put your finger on a specific sin that you're committing because in this case there isn't one.

If this is you and the honest truth is when you think clearly about your life there's no pattern of sin that you're holding on to and refusing to repent of and yet your conscience is regularly accusing you then you're in this category. So what do you do? Well, you start to ask yourself some questions. What truth about God am I not believing? How am I failing to accurately apply the gospel to my daily life? In what way am I not trusting God to be who He says He is? These are the kind of questions that will help you to begin to identify what's really going on behind the scenes in your heart.

You see living with a clear conscience doesn't require sinless perfection. If it did none of us would live with a clear conscience except of course the Lord Jesus Christ. Instead living with a clear conscience requires believing that God is who He says He is and that He will do what He says He will do. Therefore when He says as He said in Hebrews that through Christ your sins are paid for past, present and future, that the law is done in the sense of the sacrificial system because Christ fulfilled it that you believe that is true. That for all who have repented of their sins and put their faith in Him their sins are washed away and that God now interacts with you on the basis of grace through faith in His Son.

Now of course there are undoubtedly sins in our hearts and our lives that we are unaware of that God sees clear as day. But that's different than believing that God is constantly treating you on the basis of that unknown sin. God is treating you in your life on the basis of the grace that's been extended to you in His Son. And so a clear conscience then really ties in to the gospel.

Have you come to know and trust the gospel, not just at the point of salvation, but for daily life? How often do you bring to mind your Savior and what He's done for you? And how does that affect the way you live and the way you think and the way you speak? I do want to stop and just say have you come to know the Lord Jesus Christ through the gospel? Have you come to understand why the gospel is referred to as good news? It is because our sins have separated us from our Creator the Holy God. We are estranged from Him with no hope of bringing ourselves back and reconciling ourselves. But God in His kindness has done what was impossible for us in giving us His Son who died for our sins taking the wrath of God on Himself and rising from the grave.

And the Bible now says that God's calling all men everywhere to repent and believe the gospel. And if for all those who do repent and believe the gospel there's forgiveness of sins and eternal life and reconciliation with God and adoption as His children and a part of that is a clear conscience. Not because we're such great people but because we've been washed clean by the blood of the Lamb. This is the gospel. It is the key to salvation. It's the key to being able to say I'm confident that I have a good conscience.

That's where it begins. How often then do you bring these truths to mind Christian? Do you shepherd your heart? Preach the truth to yourself about these things? Do you really believe what the Apostle John says in 1 John 1, verses 8 and 9 say:

*"8 If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."*

This is the key to a good and clear conscience. I admit that study was somewhat of a side note from the primary emphasis of this passage but I thought it was a rabbit worth chasing because it's hard to pass over a statement like that and not consider how can we say with the author that we have a clear conscience.

But I want you to consider now the prayer request of our author again and understand that as he connects this call for prayer and this declaration of a clear conscience, I think we can assume here that he recognizes that his clear conscience and his honorable conduct to this point is not to be attributed to him because he's asking for prayer that those things would basically continue in his life. He knows if he's going to have a clear conscience tomorrow and honor the Lord tomorrow it's going to be because of the Lord's help and the Lord's strength and the Lord's grace and therefore he realizes that's where it came from in the first place and he's asking that they would continue to pray for him.

And so asking for prayer then is not a sign of spiritual weakness it's a sign of spiritual maturity. The deeper we grow in Christ the more we realize He is where our help comes from and oh how we need it and so we find ourselves not only praying more but being more honest and open with others to say hey, pray for me and please pray for this this and this because I need your prayers and I know that if I'm going to be faithful in these things it's only going to be by God's grace. So if you want to apply this then be faithful to pray for your pastors be faithful to pray for one another and don't be shy about asking for prayer for yourself.

So now we know the motivation that he's given here for this command to pray but what about the outcome? What is he hoping this will all result in? Well, **The Outcome is A Hopeful Visit.** A hopeful visit. Verse 19:

*"And I urge you all the more to do this, so that I may be restored to you the sooner."*

I urge you all the more. That's an emphatic way of speaking, excel still more. Do it more and more. What is it he wants him to do? It's pray. Pray more and more because he's hopeful that it will result ultimately in this: *"so that I may be restored to you the sooner."*

The specific request is that he would be reunited with them which reveals several things. First of all, he does in fact have a personal relationship with this church. Now we know that for a fact. It's also very likely that he ministered among them at some point in the past in person and something has now taken him physically away. We don't know what that is. At first I thought maybe he was in prison but he clears that up in verse 23 because there he speaks of Timothy being in prison and them waiting for his release so that they can all come together.

So essentially, we don't know why the author has temporarily been taken away. Maybe he's doing ministry in other places, but what we do see is his heart. There is a deep personal bond between the author and the people to the point that he doesn't just say I'm hopeful that I'll visit you soon, he uses the word "restore". I'm hopeful that I'll be restored to you. That's an intimate word. That's a word that reveals he misses these people, they matter to him and that really causes us to filter the whole letter through that lens.

This really reached out and grabbed me this week because it reminded me that our relationships in the church with brothers and sisters of Christ often take on a familial tone. And that's really what we see in the words of the author here. That's because we're united together in Christ Jesus indwelt by the same spirit, adopted into the same family, we have citizenship in the same kingdom, and that begins to build an affection for one another. And yes, that affection takes time, it takes effort to build that, to build deep relationships in the church. They don't just come out of thin air. We have to work at those things, but we should. And often it creates a deep sense of love and affection for God's people. That's what it should do.

Let me ask you, do you long to be with the people of God? Do you long for relationship with God's people, with other Christians? When the Lord takes you away from our congregation for a Sunday or two or maybe a month because of sickness or travel or something that you have to be at do you long to be with the people here? Do you miss them? Not just going to church but the people specifically? And if the answer is no then I would encourage you to consider why not? How intentionally have you pursued fellowship with the people in this body? Do you stay after church with no other purpose than to be a blessing, to find somebody to encourage, to pray for, to spend time with? Do you open your home? Do you open your heart to people and let them in to know you? Do you care enough to spend time with them both here and outside of the church walls?

You know the Scriptures refer to us as brothers and sisters in Christ and we pick up that language in the church and rightly so we call each other brother and sister, but those are not just titles. The idea is that we ought to love and care for each other literally like we are brothers and sisters because such we are in the spiritual sense.

If your heart has begun to grow somewhat cold in your relationships towards others in the church let me encourage you to begin where our passage begins and to begin to pray. Pray for people, pray for people that are the hardest for you by name and you will notice the Lord begin to soften your heart so that even those relationships that come more easily are a blessing and even those relationships that take more work become a blessing because the Lord is at work in you to soften your heart towards those people.

And so as we begin to draw our time to a close let me just mention a few closing applications to rehearse what we have learned and think a little more pointedly about how we should respond. Number one: **Pray for Spiritual Leaders.** Pray for spiritual leaders. And let me encourage you again to take that command literally. Please pray for us your pastors and elders. We need those prayers. We cannot thank you enough for those prayers. May God hold us fast in every way.

But it's also never a bad time to just step back and look at your prayer life in general and so again I admonish you to think in those categories of continual prayer and devoted prayer. Ask yourself, does your life truly look like walking with God? Is your life characterized by walking with God an all-day relationship with God? I'm often struck by the fact that the disciples would wake up and they couldn't find Jesus, where is He? He's off praying. Sometimes He would rise early before the sun. Sometimes He would send them off late into the night He would go and pray because He devoted himself to prayer, and Jesus did that

being one with the Father, the God man. How much more should we devote ourselves to prayer? Feed your soul with the word and fill your spiritual lungs with prayer.

Number two: **Cultivate a Clear Conscience.** Cultivate a clear conscience. A clear conscience is a precious gift. There's nothing like laying your head on the pillow at night with a truly clear conscience washed clean by the blood of the Lamb. And if a clear conscience has evaded you to this point, then consider those two causes I mentioned. Honestly, is there some unrepentant sin in your life and if there is let me just admonish you and tell you very frankly don't believe the lie that so many believe that confessing that sin will be more destructive than harboring it inside. It will not be. I know that both by experience and just by the plain word of God Proverbs 28:13-14 says:

*"13 He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, But he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion. 14 How blessed is the man who fears always, But he who hardens his heart will fall into calamity."*

Don't harden your heart this morning. If the Lord's pricking your heart about a sin that you know is there and you refuse to tell anyone or to confess it to the Lord because either you want to hold on to it or you're afraid of the destruction it would cause if people knew, let go of that. Run to the Lord Jesus Christ. Live in the light, confess your sin and find forgiveness and a clear conscience.

But if on the flip side, the honest truth is when you survey your life there's no sin but also, you're having a really hard time identifying what is the truth or truth that I'm not accurately applying to my heart please come talk to us. We would love to help you with that. Our hearts can be a tangled web that are very hard to figure out and so you may say all I know is my conscience constantly accuses me, I don't think I have a pervasive sin but I need help. That's why we're here. Please come talk to us and let us help you in those things even today. But a clear conscience is possible for every true believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And then number three, finally, **Pursue Heartfelt Fellowship.** Pursue heartfelt fellowship. Are you in the pattern, in the habit, of cultivating deep relationships with people in the church? Do you find yourself quick to leave, late to come, and quick to leave or are you intentional to say no, I'm going to hang around, I'm going to spend time with people because I want to be a blessing to them, I want to fellowship with them. Listen, don't rob yourself of the gift of fellowship. If you want to invest in something that lasts invest in your relationship with other believers.

We're going to be together forever. You realize the people around you we're going to be together forever. That means what you invest in these relationships matters, it's worthwhile. We're going to stand shoulder to shoulder and behold our King. We're going to worship Him, we're going to see the Lord Jesus Christ, we're going to live in not only the Millennial Kingdom but the New Heaven and the New Earth forever.

So start investing in those relationships today. Don't rob yourself of the blessing of the body of Christ. Yes we're sinners. Yes we even sin against each other. Sometimes relationships can be hard because of that sin, but the fellowship of the body is a gift and a blessing. Don't neglect the gift that God has given to us in this group of people. What a gift from our Savior.

May He help us to be faithful in these things. May we be faithful to pray and love one another and may He give us the gift in His Son of a clear conscience.

Let's pray together. Lord Jesus, we ask for Your help in these things. We confess our need for Your help in these things and we also are so grateful for Your grace, that it surpasses all our sin, that You have done what we have done with You so please don't leave us in spiritual need.