

Posture & Prayer

Ephesians 1:15-22

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



There was a ubiquitous assumption about everyone who stepped foot into that room. Or a commonly assumed purpose and set of goals. See, my freshman year, walking into the locker room for the first time, it seemed as if everyone was on the same track. Yes, we were here for college, but that was only if the baseball dream didn't pan out. The initial discussions and introductions were about batting averages, runs batted in, and how fast they could throw a baseball. A few would even note what professional workouts they had been invited to over the summer or their stats from playing in the Cape Cod Developmental League. All, to the untrained eye, sounded impressive, and the possibility of going to the next level and signing a professional contract was within reach. The reality of the situation was the exact opposite. Apart from two pitchers that year, no one was moving on to the next level, and it should have been apparent. And even those two pitchers, who were phenomenally gifted athletes, only had a "cup of coffee," as it is said in minor league baseball.

Here is what I learned that fall as an eighteen-year-old who was trying to figure myself and my life out. Perceptions matter. And not just the perceptions of how others see you. We all know the old adage, you can only make a first impression, once. However, what I learned that fall was that how you see yourself can significantly influence how you see others. It seemed as if everyone on my team saw themselves as just one year, one right scout, or one step away from the next athletic level, and because of that perception, they saw and assumed everyone else was on the same track. However, that wasn't true. It wasn't true of myself, and I came to find out it wasn't true of many of my teammates. We were here for college, and it just happened that we were offered money to play baseball, which helped us pay for college. These different perceptions would come to a head at times and cause points of friction and conflict. Value statements would be made, and they would be felt personally. I have no doubt that we've all experienced this reality of self-perception, and the assumptions and even conflict can come from it. But what if our self-perception could actually lead us to see others positively and graciously? What if our posture towards others was a statement of our health and growth? Looking at Paul's posture towards the Ephesian believers we'll see something that should inspire us. We'll also be reminded of truth that we've likely experienced already, **our posture towards others reflects the way we see ourselves.**

1. Posture

a. Paul's posture towards the believers – encouragement. (vv.15-16)

- i. Paul began his letter with the traditional greeting style for this time. (vv. 1-2) Then, he moved to a unique structure in writing a poem that focused on praising God (vv.3-14). This opening poem really sets the foundation for the letter as a whole. It focuses on God and reminds the believers in Ephesus about the one in whom their hope is secured.
- ii. Paul then moves to offering a praise and encouragement of the believers in Ephesus. (vv.15-16)
 1. The introductory thanksgiving which (contrary to custom) follows the *eulogia* is cast in the characteristic Pauline style. Paul assures his readers of his unceasing gratitude to God for the good news he has received about them, and assures them of his constant intercession. **Whereas the *eulogia* praises God for blessings received by the writer and his fellow-Christians, the thanksgiving is concerned rather with the work of God in the lives of those addressed.**¹
 2. The Ephesians knew Christ had saved them and could hold them up, and as a result they were charging straight ahead. For this, Paul thanked God.²

iii. What should stand out to us in this section is Paul's posture towards the believers in Ephesus. And his posture towards them, is informed by his own identity in Christ.

1. Remember, Paul is writing this letter not at the beginning of his ministry, but near the end. He is in Rome and under house arrest. Another letter he'll write in this period of his life is to the church in Philippi. To them, he'll remind them of his pedigree and resulting humility because of Christ. (Phil. 3:4-8)
 - a. **"If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."**
2. Paul, who has every reason to boast from his own accomplishments and pedigree, doesn't. And that comes out here in his opening thanksgiving to the believers in Ephesus.
 - a. He praises them instead of noting his own accomplishments. He's going to get to some tough stuff later in the letter where leading with his credentials earlier in the letter "might" have helped him. Or, at least that's what we would typically think. Instead, Paul leads with their shared identity, salvation through Christ. **And it is this identity that will not only bind them together but then be the basis for the ethical living that is to come in the letter.**
3. Simply, Paul rejoices in their salvation and praises them for their faithfulness that he continually hears of.

iv. Is this how we see other believers in our context?

¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 268.

² R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 50.

1. Are we known to positively praise for their faithfulness or are we known to tear down for their differences?
2. There is no mistaking it, we have lots of different churches in our town that represent different denominations. We even have different churches that represent the same denomination. And the critique that I often hear about denominations is that it shows just how divided we actually are as believers. That can be a fair critique. **However, I would contend that denominations, in the healthiest sense allow for unity among believers with different convictions, worship style preferences, and personalities. And what is the tie that binds us? Jesus.**
3. **Are we rooting for other churches and other believers in our city?**
 - a. Are we rooting for them by praying for them?
 - b. Are we rooting for them by praising God for them when we hear of their faithfulness?
 - c. Are we rooting for them by cheering on their pastors and leaders?
4. **Or are we rooting for ourselves?**
 - a. Are we rooting for ourselves when we emphasize theological differences and why we're right?
 - i. This is not talking about clear issues of heresy. It is instead focused on when we make secondary issues "hills to die on."
 - b. Are we rooting for ourselves when we fail to recognize the good work going on in and through other churches? Or, when we feel a sense of competition with other churches?
 - c. Are we rooting for ourselves when we make side comments about the pastors and leaders of other churches?
- v. **Paul roots for them.** → What is Paul praying for in the lives of these believers?
 1. In the simplest terms, he prays that their love for God and the hope of their salvation would continue to grow and enrich their lives.
 2. This is much more than the bare knowledge of God from his works which was available to the pagan world (Rom. 1:21); **it is that personal knowledge of him in experience which involves a two-way relation**, entered into by those who "have come to know God, or rather to be known by God" (Gal. 4:9), for "if one loves God, one is known by him" (1 Cor. 8:3).³
 3. Paul put the prayer for wisdom first because to him the gospel was so wonderful that it was impossible for people to see the glory of it unless they were taught by God, and also because he knew that the knowledge of God was life itself (cf. John 17:3; Phil. 3:10).⁴

2. Prayer

- a. What is prayer?

³ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 270.

⁴ Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 10, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 68.

- i. This is a pretty simple and straightforward question even for those who are not religious or practice religions outside of Christianity.
 - 1. Prayer is most often seen as making a request to a divine being.
 - 2. In Christianity, we understand prayer to include supplication, but it is not limited to that. Prayer also includes listening to God, it is an act of worship, and isn't limited to spoken words either.
 - ii. Summed up - The addressing and petitioning of God. Prayer to a god or gods is a feature of many, if not all, religions, but here attention will be restricted to the biblical teaching and some of its implications. A classic definition of Christian prayer is **“an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgement of his mercies”** (Westminster Shorter Catechism).⁵
- b. How does Paul see prayer?**
- i. **1 Thes 5:17-18 - Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.**
 - ii. This is part of Paul's closing instructions to the church in Thessalonica. He tells them to pray without ceasing
- c. Prayer, the response of a Christ-like posture.** → Let's take a minute and look at prayer a little deeper. We've seen how Paul's posture towards the believers in Ephesus was informed by his own identity in Christ.
- i. Closeness with God & prayer → **It is this covenant relationship that gives the warrant for prayer.**⁶
 - 1. What this means is that the motivation for the believer to engage in prayer is not to win God's affections or attention. Instead, it is that God has made himself known to man first and foremost and in this drawing near God has demonstrated his love and grace that motivates the believer to then engage in prayer.
 - ii. And we shouldn't be naive in that perspective. This letter would have been sent around to several churches in the city and with that, each of those churches would have things that they are doing well and things that they aren't doing so well. Still, Paul leads off by reminding them that he is praying for them.
- d. The personal impact of prayer.** → How does prayer change you and me, personally?
- i. Who is Paul praying to?
 - 1. Simple question right? He is praying to God. That action in itself is an acknowledgement that we are in need and are not sufficient for our own provision. Prayer in this way causes us to consider the reality of humility.
 - ii. What is Paul praying for?
 - 1. Paul is praying that they might know Jesus in increasing clarity and depth. This too helps to orient us in both our nature and our need.
- e. Keller on prayer – Struggle & Awe**
- i. “We should not drive a wedge between seeking personal communion with God and seeking the advance of his Kingdom in hearts and in the world. And if they are kept together, then communion will not be just wordless mystical awareness on the one hand, and our petitions will not be a way of procuring God's favor for “our many words” (Matt. 6:7) on the other. This book will show that prayer is both conversation *and*

⁵ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “Prayer,” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1745.

⁶ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “Prayer,” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1745.

encounter with God. These two concepts give us a definition of prayer and a set of tools for deepening our prayer lives. The traditional forms of prayer adoration, confession, Thanksgiving, and supplication are concrete practices as well as profound experiences. We must know the awe of praising his glory, the intimacy of finding his grace, and the struggle of asking his help, all of which can lead us to know the spiritual reality of his presence. **Prayer, then, is both awe and intimacy, struggle and reality.** These will not happen every time we pray, but each should be a major component of our prayer over the course of our lives.”⁷

ii. Struggle and Awe

1. Paul is in awe of God’s work in and through them.
2. Paul prays that they would be strengthened.

f. What are some practices of prayer?

i. 1 minute pause. (John Eldredge)

1. Sixty seconds to be still and let everything go.
2. <https://wildatheart.org/daily-reading/one-minute-pause>

ii. ACTS prayer model.

1. Adoration – Praising God for who he is.
2. Confession – Declaring our shortcomings and sin to God.
3. Thanksgiving – Thanking God for his provision.
4. Supplication – Asking God for his help and provision in our lives.

iii. Praying the Psalms

1. Utilizing the Psalms as a guide for prayer. This is literally when we read a Psalm and pray it over a person or a situation. This practice connects us to God’s Word and expands our vocabulary in prayer.
2. Reference: Praying the Bible: Donald Whitney

3. Perspective – Jesus Above All

a. A reminder of our foundation. → The one who is above all.

i. What “authorities” would have been present in Ephesus?

1. Nero (54-68 AD)

- a. Nero was one of the most notorious rulers in Roman history and he is known for his lack of compassion and capricious nature.
- b. Caligula reigned 37-41 AD and declared his own “gospel.”

2. Artemis - Local Deity

- a. Artemis, Ephesus’s major goddess, was known as a goddess of fertility and as “mistress of the wild beasts,” a daughter of Zeus and Leto, and a sister of Apollo.
- b. **In this cult she was a virgin who helped women in childbirth, a huntress with bow and arrow, and the goddess of death.**⁸

3. Other Roman gods

- a. Artemis was not the only deity that would have been worshipped in Ephesus. By far, Roman society was pluralistic religiously speaking. And as long as Rome got their taxes and the people offered their loyalty, you were welcome to worship just about anything else.

⁷ Timothy Keller, Prayer-Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God. (2014) p. 5

⁸ Darrell L. Bock, Acts, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 607.

4. Violence & Gladiators
 - a. As a clear reminder of who was in charge, the gladiatorial games were a constant reminder both of the fleeting nature of life and of Rome's authority. Ephesus had a gladiatorial games with inscriptions to favorite gladiators and a gladiator graveyard.
- ii. **Paul is clear, Jesus is above all expressions of authority in Ephesus.**
 1. What authority figures do we have in our context?
 2. What does it mean that Jesus is over all of them as well?
- a. **Rewind - Them & Us... In Christ.**
 - i. Paul's opening poem focuses on God as the main character. He has done all of the work, but it is also clear that there is one party who is the recipient of God's work, humanity.
 - ii. **v.4 then paints the reality that the redeeming work God has accomplished through Christ, is to take full effect in the lives of the redeemed. → "Holy & Blameless"**
 1. There is a dominant ethical quality about the divine election, as is inevitable in view of the character of the electing God. In 1 Peter 1:15–16, where the wording of our present text is echoed, this lesson is pointed with a quotation from the OT law of holiness: "as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.' " **No other way of life is fitting for those who are "chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ"** (1 Peter. 1:2). So here, the purpose of God's choosing his people in Christ is that they should be "holy and blameless" in his presence, both here and now in earthly life and ultimately when they appear before him.⁹
- iii. **What will this look like in the letter?**
 1. **People of peace through turmoil.**
 - a. Peace is not merely an absence of conflict but a state of wholeness. If they are truly all that has been described, then they are in need of nothing else.
 - b. What are we looking to make us more than what God can make of us?
 2. **People of hope through fear.**
 - a. If God is in control in the way that Paul outlines, then what do we have to fear? Yes, there are things to not look forward to and prefer to avoid. But what do we have to actually fear?
 3. **People of joy through hardship.**
 - a. We know that the Ephesian church experienced hardship, it is why they would need a corrective letter from Jesus (Rev. 2). We will experience hardship on this side of heaven. But joy is a contentment that surpasses my circumstances and is rooted in my identity.

⁹ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 255.