

Spiritually Blessing Through Prayer
John 17:20-26, Phil 2:5-8

Brothers and sisters, when I was a young boy I used to read Danny Orlis adventure books.

And Danny's adventures in these books had him facing mystery, intrigue and dangerous situations – but using his skills, quick thinking, and relying on his faith and Christian morals – he always managed to come out ok in the end and help solve whatever mystery he had become involved in.

But what has always stuck with me from those stories was that there was always one character – who, at the beginning of the story was surly, angry, bitter, and didn't believe in Jesus – but by the end of the story they had undergone some sort of transformation and become a Christian.

So from a very early age I got used to the idea that Jesus changes people's lives and turns things around for them – and I came to believe that people had the potential to be more that what they already were.

And it wasn't just something I read about - I saw this happen in the lives of people in my Dad's church as well.

One of the most dramatic examples occurred in the life of a particular fellow I'll call Jack whose wife had reached out to connect with the church because their marriage was on the rocks.

Jack had a problem with alcohol and it was affecting his work and his relationships and I can remember when I first met them Jack's work wasn't going well, finances weren't going well, He and his wife had separated, and when I saw him you could see his countenance was dark, foreboding, angry...

Now the transformation didn't happen overnight, but a few years later after Jack encountered Christ – he became a different person and you could tell even just by looking at his face – the darkness and anger, it's all gone. His marriage was restored, he was able to start up an innovative building company, his family is doing well and he has a very close walk with Jesus Christ.

And I've experienced transformation in my own life as well. If you met me when I was a teenager... there's no way you would have said *"that boy is going to become a minister"* or even *"that boy is going to be a responsible, intelligent, articulate adult someday"*

But, Jesus' relationship with me has caused some significant changes and growth in my life and He is responsible for changing me into who I have become and the minister you know.

And all of this causes me to believe that its possible for people can become more than what they already are – that what is wrong in their lives can be changed and overcome and that specifically it's Jesus Christ who can bring that transformation about in people' lives...

So, I believe that a nominal church attender can become excited about going to church, and start to participate more in the life and work of the church and eventually becomes a spiritual leader...

Or, one that a friend or neighbor in our community who has politely resisted the message of Jesus is suddenly able to believe and confess that Christ is the way the truth and life...

Or, the person who has embraced society's lies about our sexual identity leaves those lies behind, finds a new identity in Jesus Christ, and reserves sexual intimacy for male female life-long marriage.

Or, that someone who is broken from abuse and low self-esteem, someone who is under the power of evil spirits, or someone who has done terrible things – can find healing, deliverance, and grace and mercy and forgiveness.

Brothers and sisters, I believe... I know this kind of change is possible – so as I meet people and get to know people, I can't help but imagine who they could become if Christ got ahold of their lives. And I want to invite you to imagine this as well...

Imagine how the people we know in our community could be changed, how they would go from having no faith to trusting

in Jesus and worshiping and serving him... imagine the impact these highly educated professionals and civic leaders could have on the city of Calgary and in God's Kingdom.

Imagine worship services at Valleyview full to capacity on Sunday mornings because so many people have been changed and so their Sunday morning priorities change... and they want to give the first hours of the week to God in worship.

Imagine adding additional kidz zone leaders, nursery caregivers, greeters, ushers, Christ care group leaders, starting a women's group, more bible study groups, prayer groups and so on because more people have discovered their grace-gifts and are using them to minister because people have discovered what they can do since they've experience the grace of Christ's forgiveness...

And I can imagine that we would be ordaining more elders to oversee and lead our ministry teams because more and more believers are maturing into spiritual leaders...

And I can imagine how we could be developing new ministry initiatives because our budget would be in surplus...

And more than anything else right now, I imagine how each of us as Valleyview-ers are going out to bless people spiritually and the impact this would have in the lives of those people whom you are blessing; grace, mercy, forgiveness, salvation, healing, redemption, restoration – transformation!

I can imagine these things – I can see it in my mind brothers and sisters. I know it is possible for things to grow from where they are now to something like this because I know, I believe that *transformation* is possible.

But I've also learned, after fifteen years of working towards this kind of transformation in our congregation and community, that any change and growth we have experienced has been the result of God answering prayers, and specifically answering the kind of prayer that targets the barriers that are preventing this transformation from taking place.

The hard truth we need to hear this morning brothers and sister is that the run-of-the mill generic prayers we often pray for God to “be with so-and-so” and “please help” are not really working with God to bring about the kind of transformation we’ve just imagined.

Not that I mean to denigrate anyone’s sincere efforts to put up a prayer in their moment of need – but if that’s how you are praying with regards to transformation brothers and sisters, I haven’t been doing my job as a pastor to teach you how to pray.

In order for transformation to take place in someone’s life, specific obstacles need to be removed by the Holy Spirit – so we need to engage in specific intercessory prayer that co-operates with the Holy Spirit to target those obstacles.

And so to equip us for this kind of prayer we’re looking at John 17, where we find Jesus doing some intercessory prayer of his own – with some pretty specific targets which we will look at.

So, what do we see Jesus targeting here in this prayer?

Well Jesus is particularly concerned that the world understands and believes that He is one whom God has sent, in fact he repeats this three times.

Why is it so important that the world know and believe that God has sent him? Because we physical humans are also spiritual beings and we are looking for a way to reconnect with God.

Just look at all the religions and spiritual practices in this “world”, not to mention all the things which people do to try and find meaning and satisfaction in life and its obvious people are searching to connect with something of ultimate significance.

Unfortunately, because of our rebellion, sin blocks the way between humans and God, and thus we are only able to connect with God if God connects with us first and provides a way for us to do this.

Thus it is imperative that people know and believe that God sent Jesus, that He is the way, because Jesus is the one who reconciles us to God, because He is both fully human and fully God as the Son, he is the perfect mediator.

Now a mediator is someone who steps in between two parties who are in conflict and goes back and forth representing one to the other to bring about reconciliation. This is how a mediator intercedes.

So, if we are going to pray for others' transformation, to intercede for them – our understanding of Jesus Christ as THE mediator must be our starting point.

Because of the intercessory work Jesus did for us, we are enabled to intercede for others. We can and should come before God in prayer for other people because of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done – this is a big part of what it means to pray “in Jesus' name.”

Another part of praying in His name is praying for others because of what His intercessory work has done to us. If we do not base our intercession on Jesus' intercession for us then we will come across as proud, self-righteous and judgmental to those whom we are praying for, and they will feel like they have to change themselves for our approval. That's not transformation - that's counterproductive.

Instead, we need to put into practice what Paul writes about in Philippians 2:5-8, and basing our intercessory prayers on Christ's example enables us to do that.

And if our intercessory prayer is based on Jesus, then when we pray we should also imitate Jesus and Go Out to be amongst those who we are praying for. That is why we used to do Prayer drives around our community once a month...

As Paul says in Philippians 2:7 Christ took on the nature of a servant and became human... and John 1:14 says “*the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*”

I mean it's a start that our church building is physically located in our community, it's a start that you and I live in our community... but it's still possible for us not to **be among** those we are praying for isn't it.

Dwelling among people means interacting, getting to know them, finding out their hopes and dreams, their fears and concerns, what they value or dislike, what they believe and what they need.

This is why I had you write down where you lived, worked, went to school, and what sports teams and clubs and interests you participate in – AND Who you know... as part of our spiritual blessing exercise at the AGM last Sunday.

And its why we acknowledged that you are not in those social circles and places by accident – God's placed you there. These are where we can build relationships with people outside of our congregation and where God will provide the opportunities to bless people spiritually by praying for them,

specifically – by name... just as Jesus specifically identified "*all those who would believe in him*"

So, intercessory prayer is based on Jesus, but it is also "about" Jesus. What do I mean by this? Well, as Jesus prays for "*all those who will believe in Him,*" He asks His Father that; i) they might be one, ii) they might be unified iii) that they would be in God iv) and that they could be with him and see his glory.

Those are curious prayer requests... what with all the daily needs of the people around him, and with all that was going in on in society and the world at that point and time in history.

We might expect Jesus to be more practical, or political, or concerned about social justice as he is interceding for people. Couldn't he have prayed for peace or political freedom? What about healing and for people to have enough food? Why not pray for equality and equity?

But instead, we see Jesus praying for people in the future... who have yet to believe in Him and requesting that they

become unified and connected to God – what kind of practical make a difference faith is this?

The point is brothers and sisters, when we intercede for others, it is tempting to limit our prayers and focus only on the practical things which they have asked us to pray for, needs which are really obvious. sickness, finding a job, going through a divorce, parenting challenges, and so on.

Now, we certainly we can and should bring these things up in prayer – scripture says *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”*

However – ***Intercessory prayer*** is more about focusing on the primary need, the root need, which all of us have. The need to be convicted of sin and to know Jesus as the means by which our sin is removed and we become reconciled to God. Intercessory prayer is asking God to work this revelation in people’s lives even if they don’t think they need it or want it.

So Intercessory prayer is “about Jesus” because it comes from a conviction that everyone needs to have faith in Jesus so that they can get past their sin and truly know God. It recognizes this is the greatest human need which needs to be dealt with first and then other needs can be prayed for.

And finally friends, Intercessory prayer is also about asking God to remove specific obstacles so that people are transformed into the men and woman God intends for them to become.

And in His prayer, Jesus specifically targets the obstacles of unbelief, separation, ignorance and spiritual blindness that would stand in the way of the people being transformed to become part of His Body – the church in the future.

So, brothers and sisters, I pray that the Father will answer Jesus’ prayer for us this morning and remove the barrier of spiritual blindness that keeps us from looking around at our school, at work, our family and friends, our community – and

envisioning how it would be if these people started to believe in Jesus.

That we would be able to see what it would be like if your fellow Valleyview-er experienced further transformation in their lives.

Brothers and sisters, God can make amazing things happen to ordinary people and Jesus knew this – look at who He chose for his disciples! They were ordinary everyday unschooled fisherman – but Jesus had a vision, plans, for who they would become and interceded for them, asking God to bring it about – and God did.

And we are here today as followers of Jesus Christ because the disciples were transformed into Apostles when they received the Holy Spirit and fulfilled their part of the great commission.

And so We also need to believe that the people we know and interact with can come to believe in Christ... because God has

chosen them, and that they can become followers of Jesus, and be transformed... like we have been.

And we need to believe that our fellow Christians, and ourselves, can grow beyond where we are at in our faith... That God always has more to do in us and through us – until that day when Christ returns and all things are made new.

So let us respond in faith and start praying intentionally for God to bring this transformation in our lives and in the lives of other people around us... by removing whatever is standing in the way of it.

So, let me ask you...what do you see working against those people for whom Jesus asked to be added to His body? What is keeping “ALL those who would believe” from believing?

Again, this is another reason why we need to be dwelling among, hanging out, and getting to know those whom we are

interceding for – because if we are not – how will we know what is specifically blocking their transformation?

Is it unbelief – a refusal to believe that Jesus is sent from God?
Is it false teaching – a miss-belief that God will accept you because you’ve basically been a good person, or that whatever path you follow will connect you with God as long as you try hard? That’s God’s love is merely affirmation??

Is it idolatry – allowing good things to become god things. When work, sports, family, education, etc... replace the disciplines of prayer, worship, and scripture reading and serving and giving which help keep Jesus at the center of our lives.

Is it the Devil – tempting people with the lure of fame, wealth, power if they play his game?

Whatever it is that you see working against people becoming part of Christ’s body you can step in and pray against it. And

friends, other people need you to do this for them... because they are unable to do it themselves.

Someone who is deceived by their own beliefs and false teaching will not ask God for the truth – right? Someone who is trapped in the busyness of idolatry will not be able to slow down to see the foolishness of building their life without God at the center. Someone who is hurting and broken is not able to just pull themselves up and get better on their own, are they?

But - you can intercede for them. You can pray to God for those particular people He has put in your life.

You can ask God to take away their unbelief, expose the false teachings; and have them see the foolishness of idolatry, and to protect them from Satan’s temptations by interceding against these things in prayer.

This is how we co-operating with God to help bring about transformation in people’s lives so that they can become more

than what they already are, so that they can become the men and women God intends them to be!

Brothers and sisters our calling as Christians to go and make disciples of all nations, our mission to reach out to our surrounding community and share the message of Jesus Christ in our words and deeds – has to start with intercessory prayer! Blessing people spiritually.

That's where the real work is... it always has been, and if we are serious about reaching out to our surrounding community – then we need to be willing to “pray the price.” What does that mean?

Let me close with an example of “praying the price...” Pastor Paul Yonggi Cho of the Korean Full Gospel Church was once asked by a local pastor why was it that Cho's church had a membership of 750,000 while his was only 3,000? The local pastor was better educated, preached better sermons and even had a foreign wife?

Cho enquired, "How much do you pray? The pastor said "Thirty minutes a day." To which Cho replied, "There is your answer. I pray three to five hours per day."

Praying the price friends is how much time and energy we are willing to spend interceding in prayer, co-operating with the Holy Spirit to bring about transformation in people lives.

The good news is that it has started here at Valleyview - we've started to pray the price and we've seen God working in us, and transforming us into the Church He has desired for us to become... one where streams of blessing flow out into the community.

And imagine... how much more God can do as we continue to pray the price and go out to bless people spiritually! Imagine what God will do in the lives of those whom you are starting to pray for.

So, brothers and sisters, let's get on with blessing people spiritually as the Lord is commanding us to do – and we can

start by interceding for them in prayer, intentionally and specifically – just as our Lord Jesus prayed for us.

Amen.