

Epaphras

Text

Colossians 4:12-13

Topic

We are introduced to Epaphras and encouraged by his example of laboring in fervent prayer for the saints

Title

"Pray it Again, Saint"

It's the last few days of 2013 and we are prone to be thinking about looking back and making lists.

I came across a list of *37 Things You Will Regret When You're Old*. Among the regrets are: not traveling when you had the chance... not learning another language... not wearing sunscreen... and neglecting your teeth.

Obviously it wasn't very scientific. Nor even marginally spiritual.

What about possible spiritual regrets? Billy Graham has been looking back over his amazing life and ministry. Here, in his own words, are the biggest regrets of Billy Graham's life and ministry.

Although I have much to be grateful for as I look back over my life, I also have many regrets. I have failed many times, and I would do many things differently.

For one thing, I would speak less and study more, and I would spend more time with my family.

I would also spend more time in spiritual nurture, seeking to grow closer to God so I could become more like Christ.

I would spend more time in prayer, not just for myself but for others.

I would spend more time studying the Bible and meditating on its truth, not only for sermon preparation but to apply its message to my life.

And I would give more attention to fellowship with other Christians, who could teach me and encourage me (and even rebuke me when necessary).

About one thing I have absolutely no regrets, however, and that is my commitment many years ago to accept God's calling to serve Him as an evangelist of the Gospel of Christ.

One thing I find fascinating about Billy Graham's regrets is that, after he mentions his family, he lists the four things we commonly counsel all new believers to do in order to grow in their relationship with Jesus: Pray, read and study the Bible, fellowship with other believers, and share their faith with nonbelievers.

As we embark on another new year, and inevitably think about resolutions and goals, those four remain as the pillars of your spiritual life.

They are all simple; all doable; all within your reach. You just have to believe that these really are the things you ought most, or foremost, to be pursuing on a daily basis. Otherwise life interferes and you'll find yourself putting these priorities on the shelf because of other urgencies.

I want to look at a character in the Bible, a man, who can inspire us in several of those crucial areas. His name is Epaphras.

Epaphras' name is mentioned only three times in the Bible (Colossians 1:7; 4:12; Philemon 23). There are six verses that actually make reference to him (Colossians 1:7, 8; 4:12-14 and Philemon 23).

He was a native or inhabitant of Colossae (Colossians 4:12). Most likely he founded the church in Colossae and maybe two others as well.

We learn the most about him from Colossians 4:12-13.

Colossians 4:12 Epaphras, who is one of you, a bondservant of Christ, greets you, always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.
Colossians 4:13 For I bear him witness that he has a great zeal for you, and those who are in Laodicea, and those in Hierapolis.

Epaphras is thought to have founded the church at Colosse because in chapter one he is said to have brought the Gospel to them. He may have founded the other two churches mentioned as well. He certainly was active ministering to the saints at Colosse, Laodicea and Hierapolis.

The verses in Colossians reflect that Epaphras had been sent by the believers at Colosse to Paul, who was in prison at Rome, to discuss matters pertaining to the church.

Or he may have gone on his own to consult Paul about how to deal with certain heresies that were creeping in to the churches.

Paul called special attention to Epaphras as someone who prayed, saying that Epaphras was "always **laboring** fervently... in prayers."

We want to look at Epaphras "laboring fervently... in prayers," but before we do, in order to be well-rounded, let's review the other descriptors Paul used about him.

Paul said to the Colossians that "Epaphras... is one of you." First of all, this tells us he was either a native of Colossae, or that it was his hometown.

Secondly, and on a more spiritual level, it tells us that even though Epaphras had brought them the Gospel, had founded the church and was their teacher and leader, he acted as "one of them," not **over** them.

I just can't stand folks who are always blowing their own spiritual horn, drawing attention to their supposed spiritual disciplines. A lot of people think serving is leading. They are always the head, in charge, in control. You never see them doing anything menial.

If you look at Jesus you see that leading is *servicing*. It's seeing the need and meeting the need - whatever that might be at the moment.

The night before He was crucified Jesus stooped to wash the feet of His disciples. It was a task that needed doing, but since it was the duty that fell to a lowly servant, the disciples all ignored the basin and the towels. So Jesus, their Lord and Master, took the task upon Himself, forever giving us the model for true servant leadership.

There's another insight to draw from this term "one... of you." It supposes that there is a group of people who meet regularly together, who know each other, who care for each other.

Are you "one of us?" Do you meet with us regularly enough to get to know others and care for them?

Epaphras was next called "a bondservant of Christ." This is the Greek *doulos*, which can have several translations, all the way from slave to voluntary servant.

We can get lulled by that word "voluntary." If I'm a volunteer, normally less is required of me and I can more-or-less set my own pace and agenda. I might show-up; I might not.

In the Old Testament, you could 'volunteer' to remain a slave. An Israelite might become an indentured servant, or a slave, to another Israelite in a variety of ways. After six years of service, however, he must be set free. Occasionally a servant wanted instead to remain in his master's household as a slave. It usually happened this way:

Exo 21:5 But if the servant plainly says, 'I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,'

Exo 21:6 then his master shall bring him to the judges. He shall also bring him to the door, or to the doorpost, and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; **and he shall serve him forever.**

That is what it means to be a voluntary servant. They were called bondservants - and that's what we are. Jesus set us free from sin and death, but we voluntarily submit to Him as His bondservants.

On a practical basis, the Lord allows us to choose our level of commitment as His bondservants. We can be as flakey or as faithful as we determine.

Best be faithful, for that is the true mark of a servant and it will be the basis for your rewards at the Judgment Seat of Jesus Christ.

No one wants to hear Jesus say, "Weakly done, my flakey servant." No, we long to hear, "Well done, My faithful servant."

Epaphras "greet[ed]" them from Rome. He was thinking about them so much that he asked Paul to send his love in the letter he was writing. He interrupted Paul, as it were, inserting himself into the letter, to be sure they knew they were on his heart and mind.

Epaphras "[had] a great zeal" for the Colossians, and for the Laodiceans, and for the Hier-apolians. (I'm guess that's what they were called!).

What does that mean, to have "zeal" for someone in Christ? Bear in mind in the first century there were a group of people called 'zealots.' The Bible dictionary defines them saying they were,

... member[s] of a radical, warlike, ardently patriotic group of Jews in Judea, particularly prominent from AD69 to 81, advocating the violent overthrow of Roman rule and vigorously resisting the efforts of the Romans and their supporters to heathenize the Jews.

Epaphras wasn't a *zealot*, but he was just as *zealous* (if that makes sense). He was passionate about furthering the Gospel, not by the sword but by the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. He was all about the Gospel.

We all have other passions besides the Gospel. Sports, hobbies, activities, politics (to name a few). We can be passionate, in a good way even, about many things.

But I shouldn't have to even point out that Jesus Christ and the Good News about Him must control and overrule *every* and *any* other passion we might have.

Which brings us to Epaphras' "always laboring fervently... in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God."

"Laboring fervently" is one word in Greek, *agonizomai*. As you might suspect, we get our word *agonize* from it.

Agonizing isn't necessarily a bad thing. It was used, for example, of someone contending for a victory in the public games. It was used a lot to describe wrestlers contending to win the prize. It indicates a straining of every muscle, every nerve, towards the goal of victory.

The connotation, therefore, is extremely positive. Epaphras labored fervently in prayer the way an athlete labors fervently in his sporting contest.

So, yes, we could say that prayer is hard work. But we should think of it as a joyful and purposeful work - as the kind of work we want to do and choose to do in order to excel.

Notice next what Epaphras prayed for. He prayed for the believers to "stand perfect and complete in all the will of God."

In passing, I read one commentary that said, "Epaphras was much on his knees so that others could remain on their feet."

I like that. It reminds me of another quote, this one by Charles Spurgeon, who remind Bible teachers like myself,

A certain preacher whose sermons converted many souls received a revelation from God that it was not his sermons or works by all means but the prayers of an illiterate lay brother who sat on the pulpit steps pleading for the success of the sermon. It may be in the all-revealing day so with us. We may believe after laboring long and wearily that all honor belongs to another builder whose prayers were gold, silver, and precious stones, while our sermonizings being apart from prayer are but hay and stubble.

By the way, have you ever heard someone say of a pastor that they got nothing out of his teaching? **It may be that they put nothing in to receiving the teaching.**

"Epaphras prayed they would be "perfect and complete." "Perfect and complete" are an ongoing process. You are *becoming* perfect; you are *headed for* completion. God has begun a good work in you and He will perform it until you awaken in the likeness of Jesus when you see Him face-to-face.

Epaphras thought first-and-foremost about a person's spiritual life and them maintaining a forward trajectory in it. He was concerned about what you ought to do in order to become perfect and complete.

And that's why the verse references "in **all** the will of God."

It's probably still popular, but I seem to remember a few years ago it being wildly popular to play poker, especially Texas Hold 'em. Occasionally a player makes the bold move of going 'all-in.'

If you are a Christian, **you need to be all-in**. There's no part of your life that doesn't belong to Jesus; there's no part that you can hang on to for yourself.

Why would you want to hold back? The Lord died to save you from sin and self and to set you free to serve Him to become everything you were created to be.

God is your Father and has only your very best interests and future in mind. If He has set a boundary in His Word, it is for your good. If He has given you a rule, obeying it will bring joy, not grief.

God has set very definite boundaries, for example, with regard to human sexuality and marriage. It's one thing that our modern society and its laws rejects those boundaries; **it's quite another that believers in Jesus do the same.**

We are normally not as bad as the worst sinners in the area of sexuality and marriage; but Christians are busy managing sin in these areas rather than refraining from it.

A. W. Tozer once said, "the difficulty we modern Christians face is not misunderstanding the Bible, but persuading our untamed hearts to accept its plain instruction."

Epaphras saw God at work in every believer's life to perfect them and make them more like Jesus. God was at work building for eternity. He prayed for them accordingly.

Epaphras labored in prayer for the saints. Three churches are mentioned: Colossae, Hierapolis, and Laodicea. There is solid reason to think that two out of the three churches were vibrant and victorious.

Can you guess which one wasn't doing well?

Well, of course you can, because late in the first century Jesus wrote to the church at Laodicea and strongly rebuked them. It was to the Laodiceans that the Lord said, through the apostle John,

Revelation 3:15 "I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot.

Revelation 3:16 So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.

This "cold or hot or lukewarm" comment gets a lot of attention. I came across well-documented archaeological information about the water in Hierapolis and in Colossae.

- Hierapolis was a prosperous trade center built around natural hot springs that were considered a source of healing power in the Roman period.
- Colossae was blessed with a constant supply of cold refreshing water of that came from snow-and-rain-fed streams that rushed down from the peak of nearby Mount Cadmus.

There is evidence that the city of Laodicea piped both hot water from Hierapolis and cold water from Colossae.

So when Jesus said to them, "You are neither cold nor hot," the Laodicean's would have understood it to mean that they were unlike the vibrant, victorious believers in Hierapolis and Colossae.

It puts us on notice that the Christian life is not automatic. There's no autopilot or cruise control. You can grow like the believers in Hierapolis and Colossae; or you can blow-it like the Laodiceans.

Which brings us full circle back to where we began - talking about regrets as we look back over our lives.

Billy Graham is not the only spiritual giant to list all or some of those same regrets.

What about us? What about you? Do you regret not spending more time in prayer? Or reading and studying God's Word? Or fellowshiping with the saints? Or sharing the Gospel?

Of course we do! So let's do something about it. This year. This week. Today and everyday.

Which gives me a nice segue to invite you to pray with us more this coming week and year.

First consider these insightful and challenging comments about the corporate prayer activities of a church.

As prayer meetings fail in a congregation, so will the ministrations of the pastor become unfruitful, the preaching of the word fail to convert sinners and promote holiness in the professors of religion (J.B. Johnston).

This much is sure in all churches, forgetting party labels; the smallest meeting numerically is the prayer meeting. If weak in prayer we are weak everywhere (Ravenhill).

Do our churches that have a prayer meeting have a weekly prayer meeting or a weak prayer meeting (Forsyth).

A congregation without a prayer meeting is essentially defective in its organization, and so must be limited in its efficiency (J.B. Johnston).

The prayer meeting ought to be the most important meeting in the church (R.A. Torrey).

Here is a partial list of ways you can participate in corporate prayer with us:

- Every Sunday, before each service, the Prayer Room is open and available upstairs for you and your family to pray. We have communion elements in the room as well. I've often hoped that occasionally (at least) someone or several individuals would spend the entire service in prayer.
- Every service one or two of our guys are up front to pray for you. Let them!
- Email us at prayer@calvaryhanford.com to share your requests and the updates.
- Fill out Prayer Cards anytime you are here; take a few, fill them out and bring them back.
- At least twice a month, on Wednesday nights, we have a time of participation during which you are encouraged to pray openly.
- Most every Saturday evening we meet in the Cafe for prayer from 6pm until 6:45pm.

And, as you heard announced, this Friday we invite you to join us during the hours of 10pm until Midnight in the Fellowship Hall.

For a moment, let's consider all the prayer opportunities I listed as 'prayer meetings.'

Charles Spurgeon said of prayer meetings,

The condition of the church may be very accurately gauged by its prayer meetings. So is the prayer meeting a grace-ometer, and from it we may judge of the amount of divine working among a people. If God be near a church, it must pray.

And if He be not there, one of the first tokens of His absence will be a slothfulness in prayer!

Let's do some prayer-math:

- Every Sunday in 2014 you will have at least two opportunities to pray - one before, and one after, the service. That's 104 possible prayer times.
- Every Sunday and Wednesday you can grab a Prayer Card or cards and hand them to us. If you came both Sunday and Wednesday, and only filled out one card each service, that's another 104 prayer opportunities.
- At least twice a month on Wednesday nights we pray; that's another 26 opportunities in 2014.
- It's not inconceivable you could email requests twice a week, for another 104 opportunities.
- Then there are the 52 Saturday's we will pray in 2014.

Conservatively, you will have close to 400 corporate prayer opportunities over the next 365 days.

We are not into numbers; nor do we keep attendance or statistics. I mention these numbers for our own individual perspective. If, at the end of 2014, I look back and see that I had 400+ opportunities to pray for myself and others, and I availed myself of none... or one... or even a dozen; what does that say?

It should say I have regrets.

Should The Lord not return... let's be able to look back, at least on our corporate praying, with no regrets.

