

"Unless by Prayer"

Ephesians 6:10–13

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Ephesians 6:10–13 (PowerPoint)

Preface

With the Word of Ephesians 6:10–13, which teaches that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers of this dark world and against the schemes of the devil," today marks the sixth time that I am delivering a sermon from this passage.

Some of you may be thinking, "What, this passage again?"

As I minister from Ephesians, there is a collection of sermons by the pastor Martyn Lloyd-Jones which I use almost like a reference book. It is composed of eight volumes, basically one volume per chapter.

However, for these mere four verses of Ephesians 6:10–13 alone, he preached twenty-six sermons, devoting nearly an entire book to them with concentrated emphasis.

In other words, that is how important it is for us Christians who believe in Jesus Christ—and indeed for all people—to recognize that our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the schemes of the devil and the evil spirits.

This book called the Bible, consisting of sixty-six books and written over two thousand years, begins with Genesis, treating as the most serious and tragic event the fact that the devil deceived humanity. And it concludes with Revelation by speaking of the future in which that devil will be destroyed.

And yet, despite this,

as if unrelated to the seriousness spoken of by the Bible, as we have come into this modern age and as the end of the world draws near, the recognition that our battle is not against flesh and blood but against the schemes of the devil and evil spirits is not only weakening, but is being turned into fantasy—into something unreal, into mere story or imagination. It seems necessary that we examine this carefully.

Part One

The more our world becomes modernized and civilized, the more it seems that society tries to confine believing in God and believing in Jesus Christ within the bounds of what it considers common sense, accepting it only within the limits of so-called science, and trying to keep it contained there.

Or, it tries to confine it within the framework of human ethics and morality—within the bounds of human conduct and speech—reducing it not to God but to morals based on humanity, to what is humanitarian or ethical, and to mere religious activity. It even seems that such a force is at work within ourselves.

That is to say, though with our mouths we say, “Father God, Lord Jesus,” and claim eternal life, in our way of living, our methods, our thinking, we are entirely worldly in our methods, perspectives, and ways of fighting.

In short, we are no longer praying.

We are getting through without praying.

We think the act of praying is troublesome.

We do not recognize the importance of prayer as a supernatural act.

Rather than humbling ourselves and taking inventory before God in prayer, we place ourselves above.

We put ourselves above prayer.

Unable to remember that prayer is everything, we casually say, “Well, all we can do is pray...”—as though mocking the Lord God and the privilege of being able to pray—placing ourselves above prayer.

We do not think prayer is best.

We treat prayer as something extra, thinking there are things far more useful than prayer.

And so we do not pray.

And in reality, we forget God.

To not pray ultimately means that in the very arena of our life of faith, we abandon spiritual warfare and end up fighting worldly battles by worldly standards.

The Bible teaches us that one of Satan’s great schemes is precisely to lead us not to pray.

When we look at the Gospels, there was a time when Jesus said to His disciples—who were unable to cast out an evil spirit from a child—“This kind can come out only by prayer.”

That is, to forget prayer—the act and posture of fully relying on God—is not only to fail to discern the evil spirits at work in things, but also to engage in battles that are not spiritual battles at all.

Battles of pride.

Battles over who is right and who is wrong.

Battles to show how great we are.

Battles to prove that we are doing enough, that we understand, that we can judge, that we want others to recognize us—battles to show that we are respectable people who do not even need to pray.

In fact, the disciples did not even come close to the act or thought of fully relying on God through prayer. Merely with the pride and title of being Jesus' disciples, they tried to handle the situation themselves, and Jesus saw through and pointed out the essence of their mistake.

The Gospel of Mark 9:14–29 (PowerPoint)

The disciples did not pray.

Instead of praying, they argued.

Did they want to show others that they were intellectual people by arguing?

Or were they intoxicated with their own intellect and intellectual appearance?

As a result, they could not cast out the evil spirit. Bound without noticing it to the thoughts, strength, knowledge, and experience cultivated in living in this world, they were led into fighting not a spiritual battle but a battle of flesh and blood. They could no longer discern the spiritual essence of things, nor even notice the devil's scheme or their own condition.

"Ah, unbelieving generation," Jesus said. An unbelieving generation does not pray.

They had been gradually stained by an unbelieving age that "forgets God."

They could not even realize that they had forgotten the most important thing for a person—not to forget God.

They do not pray.

Two thousand years ago was already an unbelieving age. But what about now, two thousand years later?

Is it an age of faith?

Or has it not become even more unbelieving?

In what sense?

In the sense that it does not pray.

Part Two

The more civilization advances, the more we fall into the illusion that everything is visible, refusing to believe in anything unseen. Even the only certain God, who is unseen, is treated as uncertain. Prayer to the unseen God is regarded as powerless, meaningless, or at best as something like psychological therapy that slightly soothes the heart. In the end, everything is thought to depend on money, power, weapons, academic ability, how much one possesses, how much attention one gathers. And so everything is reduced not to spiritual warfare but to battles of flesh and blood that leave nothing but emptiness. Are we not being made to remain there?

Have we not been led to remain in battles of flesh and blood, losing sight of the essence, and without even noticing that we are immersed in such manipulation?

As I have mentioned several times before, in the book *The Screwtape Letters* by C. S. Lewis, there is a passage where a senior devil writes advice to a junior devil on how to prevent Christians from praying:

"The best thing, where it is possible, is to keep the **patient** from forming the serious intention of praying at all. Whenever they are attending to the **Enemy**, we are defeated. The simplest way is to keep him looking at himself instead of looking at **Him**. Let him pray not to the **One** who made him, but to what he has made."

We fall neatly into the devil's scheme, not even seriously intending to pray, not even turning our attention to God.

Instead of looking to Jesus, we look to ourselves. Instead of turning to the One who made us, we are led to pray toward what we have made—money, works, papers, career, experience, knowledge, our own history.

We no longer even think of casting out evil spirits, nor do we understand why we cannot cast them out.

We have no time, no money, no strength, no margin to look to Jesus, to lift up our eyes to Him, to invite Him, to think of Him, to listen to Him, to speak to Him. We are being led by the devil to live in such an unbelieving age. How much spiritual awareness do we have of this?

How deeply do we recognize the seriousness and importance of Jesus' words: "This kind can come out only by prayer"?

Part Two

In a book written by Henri Nouwen (not yet translated into Japanese), titled "With Open Hands", he says something like this:

"When you pray, open your hands. Pray with open hands."

Then I thought, "What does it mean to open both hands, to pray with open hands?"

First, I think open hands mean a prayer that lays down attachment, a prayer that has laid down attachment.

To spread both hands is to open, to loosen, the hands that are clenched.

Henri Nouwen says, "With a clenched fist one cannot pray," and I think our clenched hands symbolize the desire to possess, the will to control, and the fear that tries to hide.

To spread both hands is to lay down attachment and pray to God.

To lay down attachment to oneself.

We sometimes feel as though we cannot live if we let go of our attachments. Yet surprisingly, after time passes, there are moments when we realize how empty,

unreliable, and fleeting the very things we once clutched so tightly and refused to release actually were.

Rather, because of that attachment, we sometimes realize that we lost something far more important that had been there.

Second, to pray with open hands means to pray in stillness.

Prayer is a conversation with the God who is in secret, an intimate fellowship with God.

Prayer is asking, but at the same time it is also the act of listening to God's voice.

In order to hear God's voice, we must stop.

When we quietly become still, meditate, and ponder the Word, we will hear the faint and gentle yet sparkling voice of the Lord Jesus, a voice that seems to pierce to the very essence.

When we pray in stillness, our ears to hear God's voice are opened.

When we hear God's voice through opened ears, our hearts are opened.

When we become still and pray, we can enter into God's presence, and we will know that we are in His presence.

As for myself, something I often think while praying daily is this: wherever I am, when I close my eyes, become still, and pray, "Lord," that place becomes heaven.

I am reminded that a respected seminary professor once wrote something like a poem of his own prayer:

"When I pray, I regret that the time ends. I regret that I must finish praying. I want to remain in the Lord's presence through prayer. But I must open my eyes and now stand and go. For opening my eyes and going out is also one form of prayer."

Henri Nouwen also says, "The stillness for prayer is the house where God's Word dwells and the space where God is."

When we pray in stillness, we begin to listen to God's voice saying, "I love you."

This voice saying, "I love you," is the voice that Jesus Himself heard when He was baptized by John the Baptist.

Matthew 3:16–17 (PowerPoint)

We human beings live carrying the wound that we are not loved.

The reason is the false voices and temptations whispered by this world and the devil.

The world and the devil say, "Show the proof that you are loved."

The devil also tempted Jesus, saying, "Show the proof, show the basis."

"If You are loved by God Your Father, turn these stones into bread. Throw Yourself down from the temple. Take hold of the power of the world."

But Jesus had absolutely no need to present such proof or basis.

Because He had already heard the voice of God the Father:

"You are My beloved Son; with You I am well pleased."

It is the same with us.

We all are those who receive God's love.

Every morning, every noon, every night, every day, the very first voice we must hear is precisely this voice:

"You are My beloved son. You are My beloved daughter. I delight in you."

Part Three

Third, open hands are a prayer of rest.

When we clench our hands, we tense up.

When we are attached to something, tension deepens and even our breathing becomes rough.

A clenched fist can, if misdirected, turn into violence.

But when we open our hands, we enter into God's rest.

Tension loosens, and peace comes.

Recently I have been made aware of something.

Without noticing it, we have been living in tension.

How did I know? I realized that I startle excessively at small things and am always somehow on edge.

Now I am trying to loosen that tension by opening my hands and quietly coming before God.

I am in the middle of trying to open hands that are not yet fully open, trying to relax—still practicing.

When we open the hands of our soul and release our strength, we are made alive by Christ.

God the Holy Spirit works.

To pause a little and take rest is not waste. Just as the beauty of music appears in the rests, the rhythm of life is ordered by rest.

Regular prayer of rest restores our spirit in the Lord.

Fourth, open hands are a prayer of offering, of entrusting.

To offer to God means to entrust to God.

With clenched hands, we can neither offer, nor entrust, nor present anything.

When we spread both hands, we can entrust our burdens to God.

We can entrust the things and the people we cherish.

To entrust to God is the safest way, and to store up treasure in heaven is the only eternal thing.

For example, Abraham loved his son Isaac, who was born to him in old age.

Yet that love gradually became attachment; that attachment produced anxiety; anxiety became worry and impatience.

From a certain moment, Abraham had become attached to Isaac more than to God.

At that time, the Lord God commanded Abraham, "Offer Isaac as a burnt offering."

In other words, "Open the hand that you are clenching."

"That attachment is making you suffer. I cannot bear to see you suffering because you cling to something other than Me. I detest your clinging to something other than Me."

Then Abraham opened his hand.

Opening his hand, on a mountain in the land of Moriah, he resolved to offer Isaac to God as a burnt offering.

And from the very moment he attempted to offer Isaac, Abraham gained freedom—true freedom.

Of course, God returned Isaac. Isaac too was freed from his parents' attachment and came to know the unfathomable, immeasurable love of the Lord.

Our Lord God takes responsibility for what we entrust to Him.

If we do not entrust it to God, we must take responsibility ourselves.

But if we entrust it to God, He takes responsibility.

Open hands are prayer that offers and entrusts to God.

And finally, fifth, open hands are prayer that receives.

When we are clenched, we cannot receive.

But if we open both hands, God gives grace into those open hands.

He gives abundant blessing.

When we become empty, there is filling; when there is filling, sharing is born.

To empty and then be filled, to be filled and then to share—this is, I think, God's beautiful cycle.

Henri Nouwen says, "Receiving is harder than giving."

It seems that God desires that we first receive.

We receive salvation, receive grace, receive love, receive strength. And when we read the Bible, we sense that when we ask, God wants to give.

The problem is that we do not pray.

We can share and give only to the extent that we have received through prayer.

Prayer is the path by which we can share what we have received.

Prayer is the fountain for our living and working, the treasure of the soul.

Prayer is the key to receive the heavenly treasure of God the Father, the Lord Jesus, and God the Holy Spirit.

To receive is acceptance, and acceptance is another name for obedience.

When the angel Gabriel came to the virgin Mary and told her that she would conceive Jesus by the Holy Spirit, to accept that Word of God was very dangerous.

At that time, an unmarried woman who conceived could be stoned to death according to the Law.

Even so, Mary accepted the Word of God, knowing the danger.

The Gospel of Luke 1:38 (PowerPoint)

Mary opened both hands and accepted the will of God.

From that moment, God's astonishing work of salvation began.

Conclusion

The rulers of this dark world and the evil spirits try with all their might to hinder us from opening both hands daily and praying to God.

The most straightforward scheme of the devil is to keep us from praying.

The disciples, who argued with people before the demon-possessed child yet forgot to pray to God, fell neatly into the scheme of the evil spirits.

But it is all right.

There, we simply pray.

When we notice, when we are taught, we pray.

Prayer cannot be stopped.

The devil can try to lead us not to pray, but he cannot make us not pray.

Therefore, let us pray.

Let us take seriously and earnestly Jesus' words, "This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer," and pray.

The devil may disturb prayer, but he cannot stop it.

Above all, our beloved Lord God, the Lord Jesus, and God the Holy Spirit—who prays together with our groanings—are waiting, delighting in our prayers as the most fragrant aroma to Himself.

Let us pray.

By prayer, let us struggle.

Into that struggle, the Lord will pour unfathomable and immeasurable grace.

Let us pray.

Benediction: The Gospel of Mark 9:29.