

Christ's Heart for the Church

Key Scripture:

"...even as Christ also loved the Church, and gave Himself for it..." Ephesians 5:25

Portion for the Journey:

There is no prayer closer to our Lord Jesus' heart than prayers for His Church. Almost all of the prayers recorded in the New Testament are prayers for the Church. Jesus' prayer in John 17, which is called His "High Priestly Prayer" demonstrated His deep love and concern for His Church. We need to ask the LORD to give us His heart for the Church so we pray, not on the basis of our understanding, but on the basis of Christ's heart for the Church.

A scriptural foundation to know how to pray for the Church.

In preparing our hearts to pray for the Church, there are several questions we need to ask ourselves:

1. What is the Church as defined in the Word of God?
2. How does Christ view the Church?
3. Is my heart in accordance with Christ's heart for the Church?
4. How can I as an intercessor pray for the Church?

1. What is the Church as defined in the Word of God?

There are many uses of the word "church". Webster's Dictionary defines church as 1) a building for public worship; 2) a particular sect or denomination; 3) a governing body; 4) the profession of the clergy; 5) a group of worshippers, 6) all Christians.

The Word defines Church very differently and we want to be sure when we are thinking of the Church that we are in alignment with His Word and His understanding of the Church, rather than the way the world uses the term.

The Greek word translated "Church" in our New Testament Bibles, is "Ekklesia" and it means literally "the community of God". Strong's defines it "a called people" as those who are called out or gathered together, the community of Christian members on earth or saints in heaven or both. The New Testament uses the term "ekklesia" to describe 3 groups of believers:

- 1) **The Church Universal:** This represents all believers over the whole world and for all time. Eph. 3:20-23 describes this church: "now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout ALL AGES, WORLD WITHOUT END. Amen."
- 2) **The local body of Christ in a given area, i.e. all the believers in a given area: Corinth, Ephesus, Rome, etc.**

For example: 1 Cor. 1:2 “Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, that all in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours.” (KJV) (We see even when referring to an individual group, he still ties them into that larger body of all believers).

- 3) **a group of believers meeting together, i.e. house church.** Rom. 16:5 “Likewise greet the church that is in their house, salute my well beloved Epaenetus, who is the first fruits of Achaia unto Christ.”

We do not want to see the Church as the World sees it, but to keep our hearts close to the Lord and see it as Jesus sees it.

2. WHAT IS CHRIST’S HEART TOWARD THE CHURCH?

Turn to Ephesians 5:25-27, 29 Seven key aspects of Christ’s relationship with the Church.

Eph. 5:25 “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the Church, and gave Himself for it...”

1. vs. 25 **The Church is The Bride of Christ.** The first thing we note is that Christ’s relationship to the Church is compared to that of a husband to a wife. We know that God the Father’s purpose in creating the Church was so that He could present His Son with a Bride who would be raised up to live and to reign with Him forever. That is the primary purpose for the Church’s creation, is to be the bride of Christ. As we meditate upon this we will see the value the Lord places upon His marriage covenant and we will see the commitment of love and protection which Christ has made to the Church. As Christ has entered into a betrothal with the Church, he has committed Himself to her, to love, protect, and cherish her for all eternity. The Hebrew culture makes distinction between betrothal and marriage. From the moment of betrothal, a woman behaves as if she were actually married. The union could not be dissolved except by regular divorce. Christ has an eternal hope for the Church that is based upon His covenant relationship with her.
2. vs. 25 **Christ loves the Church.** This is agape love. A term with which we are all familiar and often define as “unconditional love’. Let us take a few moments to examine the characteristics of agape love in the context of Christ’s love for the Church. Listen to these meanings and allow the Spirit to apply them to our own understanding of Christ’s love for us personally, as well as His love for the whole body of believers.
 - *although agape love includes great affection, it is not borne out of the emotions, but is an intelligent decision of the voluntary will?
 - *agape love gives without expectation of return
 - *agape is a love that is called out of the heart by the awareness or sense of the value of the object which causes us to be prized in His sight
 - *agape love sacrifices itself for the object loved, whether the object loved is worthy or not (Wuest states: This is a self-sacrificial love that impels the one loving to give himself in self-sacrifice for the well being of the one who is loved.)
 - *agape love is born out of devotion and not out of emotion, thus it is highly consistent and steadfast.
 - *agape love has ethical qualities of responsibility toward the object loved
 - *agape love means to esteem highly
 - *agape love means to find one’s joy in someone
 - *agape love means to respect

- *agape love means to love and serve with fidelity—great faithfulness
- *agape love means to regard with favor—His face is shined upon us
- *agape love means to exhibit compassion
- *agape love is an enduring love that does not ever end, it is firm and loyal.

We are called to be imitators of Christ, to walk in the same manner that He walked and our attitude towards one another should be the same as Christ's attitude toward us.

3. **Jesus gave Himself up for her:** The word "gave up" in the Greek is "paradidomai and it means to surrender oneself of one's own accord and good will without argument. This word is spoken of with respect to sacrifice, meaning Jesus offered or presented Himself on our behalf. It also means to allow Himself to be put into the hands or possession of another for our sake. Matt. 20:28 uses this same word when it says, "Even as the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life up as a ransom for many."

Jesus called us to walk in this same manner of sacrifice: John 15:13 "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

4. vs. 26 tells us that **Jesus purposed to sanctify His Church, cleansing her and making her holy** and pure. This means that we will be sanctified. We are being sanctified. We often see the blemishes, the faults and failings of the Church but we need to know that Christ sees the Church as she will become and He is her sanctifier.

Heb. 13:12 Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate.

vs. 27 "Having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she should be holy and blameless."

This really has to transform our thinking because it is so easy to focus on the negatives. As we see the Church in this way, His love will release in us the anointing to be a blessing to the Church.

If we meditate on the meanings of these words, we see a Church that is holy, pure and blameless, with no sin or blemish to mar her appearance. This is the ultimate outcome of Christ's relationship and workings within the Church.

5. **vs. 27 "That He might present to Himself the Church in all her glory!"**

This is the Church in her beautiful garments! Isa. 52:1 speaks of the garments of splendor, filled with beauty, glory and majesty. We need so desperately to see the Church as Christ sees her, and knows her to be. The Church is to be glorious. The meaning of the word GLORY in the Greek is endoxos, en meaning "in" and "doxos" meaning glorious, splendid, noble, gorgeous, honorable. Signifying the church adorned in pure and splendid raiment as a bride. Aren't these the very characteristics of the Church that Satan has tried to hard to obliterate in the eyes of the world? As we meditate on these words, don't you find yourself LONGING to see His Bride prepared for Him in all her splendor?

Rev. 21-22 gives us a glimpse of the CHURCH in all her glory: Read through these two chapters.

Rev. 21:2 “And I John saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride for her husband. ...v. 9-11 “And there came unto me one of the seven angels which had the seven vials full of the seven last plagues, and talked with me, saying, Come hither, I will show thee the bride, the Lamb’s wife. And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, having the glory of God and her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal.

There are two places in these chapters where Jesus proclaims, I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” (21:6; 22:13) He sees the end from the beginning. We must always remember that Jesus sees the final outcome of the church at all times, we see her only in her partial state of readiness. Let us keep the vision of the Church glorious ever before our eyes, as Jesus does. Jesus ever works to bring her to this point of glory. We must enter into this labor with our Master, the Lamb. By faith, we are called to believe what He sees and KNOWS about the Church.

Example: Gideon, O Valiant Warrior. Judges 6 Midianites were persecuting the Israelites, and they were hiding in caves in the rocks and working their fields in the night...

6. **Christ nourishes the Church:** The Greek word for “nourish” is used primarily with reference to children and it means to bring up or rear up to maturity, i.e. to cherish or train, nurture and feed. Not only does Christ see us in that place of perfection, but He has undertaken to nourish and bring us into that place.

This is the Father-heart of God, who has undertaken all to care for His children until we are mature. Paul also had this heart. Paul says in 1 Cor. 4:14-15, “I write not these things to shame you, but as my beloved sons I warn you. For though you have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the Gospel.”

A parent heart is concerned with the whole person, not just the knowledge they receive. They have a long term vision of what the child is to become, not just the single goal of teaching certain lessons. A parent represents a total and complete commitment to the child’s welfare and their development to their fullest potential.

7. vs. 29 **Christ cherishes the Church:** The word “cherish” in the Greek is “thalpo” which means to make warm, to brood over, to foster, to cherish. I especially love the concept that Jesus is brooding over His Church as a mother hen, waiting for her chicks to hatch. The term brood means to sit over and cover and protect the eggs for the purpose of warming and hatching them. The Lord is hovering over us to see us bring forth His Life. This is the same function we see God performing in Genesis 1:2, where the American Standard Version says, “And the Spirit of God was brooding over the surface of the waters.” As a dove broods over her eggs to bring them to maturity, developing and protecting early life. Be patient God isn’t finished with me yet.”

Dutch Sheets, in his book “Intercessory Prayer” has an excellent chapter in which he teaches from the Genesis 1:1,2 passage, stating: “The words “without form” are the Hebrew word tohuw (8414) which means “a desolation, to lie waste, a desert, a worthless thing, confusion, empty, barren, a formless, lifeless mass.” The basic concept is lifelessness or sterility; no order, no life. Verse two goes on to tell us “the Spirit of God “brooded or was “moving”, or hovering over... He states, “This term is a reproductive term literally referring to travailing or birthing, bringing forth life where there was no life

previously. (See Ps. 90:2; John 1:1-3, Col. 1:16) He encourages intercessors to cry out for the Spirit to brood or hover over individuals, or peoples to bring forth His life and purposes.

Thus we see Christ nursing and cherishing His Church to bring forth His life within her. This word “cherish” is the same one Paul used in 1 Thes. 2:7-8 “But we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children: So being affectionately desirous of you, we were willing to have imparted unto you, not the Gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because you were dear unto us.”

Summary: isn't this beautiful. Isn't this the heart that we want to have towards the church? To see the dearness and preciousness of the Church to Christ. Thus we see the glorious vision Christ has of His Church and His nurturing and cherishing this Church to bring her into her final fulfillment at the end of this age.

An Important Principle for us to Understand regarding God's Promises: THEY MUST BE PRAYED IN!!

In Isa. 61:11 we see God's promise: “For as the earth brings forth its sprouts and a garden causes things sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.” But the next chapter shows our part as an intercessor: Isa. 62:1 For Zion's sake, I will not keep silent and for Jerusalem's sake, I will not rest until her righteousness goes forth like brightness and her salvation like a torch that is burning...v. 6 “On your walls, O Jerusalem, I have appointed watchmen; all day and all night they will never keep silent, you who remind the Lord, take no rest for yourselves and give Him no rest until He establishes and makes Jerusalem a praise in the earth...”

Other examples: 1 Chron. 17:7-14 God's promise to David, v. 23, David's response: “And now, O LORD, let the word that Thou hast spoken concerning Thy servant and concerning his house be established forever, and do Thou as Thou has spoken. (see through v. 27)

1 Kings 18 God promised to send rain, but we see Elijah travailing in prayer for it to be brought forth.

3. Is my view of the Church in accordance with Christ's heart for the Church?

We must now ask the Lord to search our hearts and show us any attitudes toward His Church that are not pleasing to Him. By our words and our actions, is this what we believe about the Church in our day? How do we reconcile the sin, lukewarmness, compromise, immaturity that we see in the Church with the incredible, beautiful Church Christ sees and is bringing forth? We obviously cannot ignore the problems we see in the Church today, but what is the Scriptural approach to confronting these problems?

- 1) **We need to first repent of all judgments, criticisms, and negative attitudes we have toward the Church (Body of Christ). Critical heart: Criticism of our spouse...** Forgive. All have been hurt by individuals, pastors, etc. within the Church. This includes, I believe, all individuals, church groups, denominations, as well as the Church universal. Remember one of the names for our adversary, is the devil, which means “slanderer” and another is “accuser of the brethren”. We must be careful that we do not come into agreement with the accuser of the brethren in his condemnation of the Church.

Our attitude:

2 Cor. 5:14-17 “For the love of Christ constraineth us, because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead. And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again. Wherefore henceforth know we no man after the flesh, yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we him

no more. Therefore, if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature, old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.” (So we make choice not to regard one another after the flesh, but look to Christ and see what Jesus is able to do through His power of resurrection in their lives. We can declare and proclaim the risen power of the Savior. We stand in faith, knowing what Christ is bringing forth in them.)

2 Cor. 5:19 “To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the World unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.” This is our calling, we are ambassadors of Christ and we need to take this message to those who are in sin, rather than magnifying the sin.

2) **Stand in the gap:** As we see ourselves as part of the Body of Christ, we can stand in the gap and confess the sins of the Body and ask God’s forgiveness, cleansing and deliverance from that sin. When we see sin, we have a choice, to look at the sinner in judgement or to look to God and see His power to redeem, restore and cleanse through the completed work of Jesus on the Cross. We have many scriptural examples of this:

When Moses descended from Mount Sinai to find Israel dancing before the golden calf, he took radical steps to destroy the idol, to convict the people of their sin, and then ascended back up the mountain to pray to God.

Ex. 32:30-32 And it came to pass on the morrow, that Moses said unto the people, Ye have sinned a great sin, now I will go up unto the LORD, peradventure I shall make an atonement for your sin. And Moses returned to the Lord, and said, Oh, this people have sinned a great sin, and have made them gods of gold. Yet now, if Thou wilt forgive their sin--; and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which Thou hast written.” He had such intensity of desire to see them forgiven!! In the NT, we are told that those sins which we forgive, they will be forgiven. We are His priests and His ambassadors.

We see a continuation of Moses’ prayer in chapter 33, when he is not content that the Lord did not destroy Israel, or that the Lord would send His Spirit to accompany Moses only, but also interceded for favor for the entire congregation. v. 13-15 “Now therefore, I pray thee, if I have found favor in Thy sight, let me know Thy ways that I may know Thee, so that I may find favor in Thy sight. Consider, too, that this nation is Thy people. And He said, My presence shall go with you, and I will give you rest. And he said to Him, If Thy presence does not go with US, do not lead us up from here. V. 16 “for how then can it be known that I have found favor in Thy sight, I and Thy people? Is it not by Thy going with us, so that we, I and Thy people, may be distinguished from all the other people who are upon the face of the earth?”

Gen. 9:23 provides an excellent example of how we can choose to cover the sins of another in prayer or how we can expose them to others. (see vs. 20...)

We see similar prayers of intercession and identification in Daniel 9, Nehemiah 9, and Ezra 9. It is interesting to note that chronologically, Daniel occurs before the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. In Daniel, he stands alone asking God’s forgiveness for the sins of his people, but in Ezra and Nehemiah the entire congregation meets to corporately confess their sins and repent.

3. **We need to be willing to enter into travailing prayer for the Church** to see God’s purposes accomplished in and through the Church. We need to cry out to the Lord to give us the heart and the strength to travail for the Church. If we look at the New Testament prayers we will find that almost

every prayer that was recorded in the NT was prayed for the Church. Is this the primary focus of our prayers today? If we look at the description of those who prayed for the Church, we will find they were not half-hearted or lukewarm prayers, everyone spoke of praying with intense earnestness, agonizing and fervent prayers. We need to be willing to let the Lord stretch us and move us out of the comfort zone, to be willing to go without sleep, to be uncomfortable.

Isa. 37:3 “This is the day of distress, rebuke, and rejection, for children are come to birth and we have no strength to deliver.” This is kind of where we are at today, isn’t it? We know it is time for the Church to come to into her place but we are without strength to deliver. We can cry out to the Lord for His strength. Isa. 52:1-2 directs us to PUT ON HIS STRENGTH.

Another way that we can enter into this kind of prayer is to meditate on the examples that are given to us in the Word of God. I believe God can birth and impart to us this same spirit of prayer as we meditate on His Word and ask Him to impart His heart of intercession to us. I am going to give these to you rather quickly, but you can take this list and use it as a basis of meditation and prayer.

There is much we can learn from the prayer life of Paul, who had such a clear vision of the Church being brought to maturity. Time and time again, we see his willingness to sacrifice everything personally in order to see the Church brought into its fullness. Listen to these verses and note the heart that is behind the prayers being offered for the Church:

1. **He prayed unceasingly for the Church:** Romans 1:9-10 “For God, whom I serve in my spirit in the preaching of the gospel of His Son, is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you, always in my prayers...”
2. He had an intense burden to see the Church made complete and perfect: One of my favorite passages, related to Paul’s heart for the Church is in 2 Cor. 11:23-28. Paul describes all of the afflictions he has gone through:

He speaks of his labors, his imprisonments, beatings without number, often in danger of death.

5x receiving 39 lashes

3x beaten with rods

1x stoned

3x shipwrecked, having spent a night and a day in the deep

frequent journeys

in danger from rivers,

in dangers from robbers

in dangers from my countrymen

dangers in the city

dangers in the country

dangers on the sea

dangers from false brethren

labor and hardship

through many sleepless nights

in hunger and thirst

often without food,

in cold and exposure...

vs. 28 But apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure (deep concern, anxiety, to care so intensely that it disrupts the personality and the mind. Its root implies a participation or fellowship with the entire whole.) This is the key to how Paul could feel this way and how he could be so willing to be spent for the Church. We desire to be brought into this participation of desiring to see the entire whole brought into fullness.

3. He labored and strove mightily to see the Body made complete in Christ with great sufferings: Col. 1:24 “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body (which is the Church) in filling up that which is lacking in Christ’s afflictions ...Col. 1:28-29 “We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present EVERY man complete in Christ. And for this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which works mightily in me.”

Col. 2:1-3 “I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf, ... Meditate on the struggle the early believers went through to see the Church perfected.

1 Thes. 3:10 “Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.”

The term here used to describe his prayers was *perissos* (4053) and this word is a means of expressing measure which means more than abundantly, superabundant in quantity and superior in quality; vehemently, overflowing, exceedingly great. My interpretation of this meaning is that Paul prayed long, earnestly and effectively, with his great heart full of prayer to see them completed in their faith.

Epaphras: Col. 4:12 “Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bonds slave of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God. For I bear him witness that he has a deep concern for you and those who are in Laodicea and Hierapolis.”

The term “laboring earnestly” comes from the Greek Word “*Agonizomai*” which means to contend earnestly for victory in the public games, to fight or wrestle. It speaks of the task of persevering amidst temptation, and observation, to take great pains, straining every nerve and every muscle to the uttermost toward the goal. To suffer extreme pain, anguish, to make a convulsive effort.

“Deep concern” or zeal: 2205: to be hot, fervent, in this application speaks of great jealousy for the sake of God, signifies the constant honorable emulation with the consequent imitation of that which presents itself to the mind’s eye as excellent. In a good sense, it means to see a deficiency and seeks earnestly to supply the deficiency. It is synonymous with diligence or longing after.

1 Tim. 4:10 “For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers.”

Labor-2872: to labor or fatigue. To be completely worn out, to weary oneself with hard labor, to faint. This speaks again in the absolute sense, holding nothing in reserve.

Strive: 2679: to suffer reproach, to be railed at, reviled, assailed with abusive words, to be insulted or treated insolently

4. **He devoted all that he had in energies and resources to seeing the Church brought to fullness:** 2 Cor. 12:15 “So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well, if I love you more, will you love me less?”

spent: (1159) dapanao, from 1160, This term speaks in absolutes, nothing held back: to expend, i.e. to incur great cost, to consume, to be devoured, expense, consuming cost.

Be spent (1550) ekdapaneo: to expend (wholly), i.e. fig. To exhaust, spend. From 1537 and 1159, speaks of completion, to exhaust completely. This represents sacrificial praying in which the heart must be completely “sold out” for the cause. This can only come by a move of God’s heart upon our Spirits. We cannot work it in ourselves, but we can make ourselves available and ask God to work within us all that is needed.

Blessing: Rom. 15:5-6 “Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Jesus Christ; that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

What is God Speaking to Your Heart?

What is Your Response to the Message: