

**“Praying for Others”**  
**Colossians 1:9-14**  
**September 11, 2016**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

Most of Paul’s letters contain prayers for those he was writing, and his letter to the Colossians is no exception to that practice. As we look today at his prayer, we face two challenges. The first one is that Paul’s example of how to pray for others answers a question that few are asking. It’s something like trying to interest people in a class called “Getting Maximum Benefit from Your Daytimer.” If you were not in the workplace more than 15 years ago, you probably don’t even know what a Daytimer is. It was a paper-based calendaring and planning system that has now been made obsolete by the smartphone. Many would put praying for others in that category of relics from the past that are no longer necessary.

The second challenge is that simply to bring up this topic of prayer triggers a guilt response that prevents us from hearing what God might be saying to us. Very few of us have the prayer life we would like to have, and it’s quite an easy thing to respond to that situation with the kind of guilt that just wants this sermon to end as soon as possible. But there is another possibility. We can hear these words with faith and hope instead of guilt and despair. To hear with faith means that we believe that prayerlessness is a sin that, like other sins, is covered by the blood of Jesus. Further, by faith we believe that what God commands he also enables. And then by faith we also come to view prayer not as a burden to be endured, but as God’s means for accomplishing God’s work in our lives. Paul believed that, and his faith led him to pray. Paul had never been to Colossae, so he would have known very few of the people he was praying for. He knew the pastor of this church, Epaphras, because he was converted under Paul’s ministry in Ephesus. So Paul was praying for his spiritual grandchildren. He believed so firmly that God answers prayer that he said he prayed unceasingly, by which I take him to mean regularly and frequently. So as we get into this topic of praying for others, let’s hear with faith about what we ought to pray for and what we ought not to pray for.

**I. What to Pray For**

I see three distinct prayer requests from Paul as he prays for his spiritual grandchildren. He first of all prays that they might **“be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.”** When we read that phrase about being filled with the knowledge of his will, most of us think about guidance for the future. To know God’s will is to know what to do in areas like whom to marry, what major to declare in college, what job to take

and other such life decisions. That is not what Paul is talking about here. We can see what he means by noting the result of this request in verse 10: **“so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him.”** For Paul, to know God’s will is to know the kind of life that pleases him and to live that kind of life. Paul is being consistent with the Bible’s view of knowledge here, which is somewhat different from the view that was beginning to take hold in the Greek world of his day and is also prevalent in our world. That incorrect view sees knowledge exclusively as being in the cognitive realm and as being disconnected from how we actually live. According to the Bible’s view, to know something is more than knowing the correct answer to a question. It means to know to the point that we act in accordance with that knowledge. For example, it’s one thing to know the formula for gravitational force, and quite another to know gravity in the practical way that makes you careful as you get close to the edge of a cliff. Paul is praying for that second kind of knowledge, the practical kind that goes beyond the cognitive.

Let me give an example in this area of prayer. If I were to ask you to answer true or false to this proposition, how would you answer? “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.” The majority of you would probably get the right answer and say “True” to that definition. Some of you may even know that this definition is from the Westminster Shorter Catechism. But Paul’s prayer is not answered until we actually use that knowledge and begin praying.

D. A. Carson gives a helpful illustration of this in his book on the prayers of Paul. He tells of a husband and wife driving along in their car when they came upon a very nice car stranded on the side of the road with its hood up. They pulled over to offer their assistance, and the stranded driver sheepishly explained that he had run out of gas. He said that he knew he was low on gas when he left his house, but he was running late for an important meeting and decided to take his chances with his gas. The good Samaritan couple happened to have a gallon of gas in the trunk of their car, and they poured it into his tank. Several miles down the road, they saw the same car, again stopped on the side of the road with its hood up. Even more flustered this time, the same driver admitted that he had passed by a gas station because of his urgent business meeting. Don’t we often do the same thing in the area of prayer? We know that prayer fuels our Christian lives, but we often allow ourselves to get so busy that we don’t pray. Paul’s prayer is that we would know God’s will about prayer to the point that we actually pray. Until we pray, we don’t really know it. So his first prayer request is really one for our sanctification.

Here’s an application of this. Are there people in your life who need to change? Perhaps there is a son, a daughter, a husband or wife, a co-worker, who is bringing harm to himself or herself and many others because of self-destructive behavior. Our tendency is to address that need by either running

away from that person or by nagging them in the attempt to bring about the needed changes. Try praying this prayer instead.

Paul's second request is that they might increase in their knowledge of God. Again, this word to "know" is more than something that happens in the mind. It is a relational word that means to know God intimately. It is that Old Testament idea of knowledge when we read that Adam knew his wife, Eve. So it means to have that kind of openness, vulnerability and love. It is the kind of knowledge of God revealed by Mary, the sister of Martha, and which Jesus commends. Do you remember that story? Jesus and his disciples were being hosted by Mary and Martha. Martha is busy making the preparations for the meal, while Mary was sitting at the feet of Jesus listening to him. Martha's resentment grows and eventually is directed at Jesus. **"Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me"** (Luke 10:40). But instead of rebuking Mary, he corrects Martha. **"Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion."** The good choice is to know and love God, and that is what Paul prays for here.

The third petition is for the power of God to be unleashed in their lives. Notice the emphasis Paul gives to this by repetition of different words for power. **"May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might"** (v. 11). Once they have God's power, imagine what they will be able to do. No enemy will be able to stand against them. They will be delivered from any destructive force that threatens them. They will be able to take the world by storm. But that's not the direction Paul takes with this request. He prays for God's power in their lives, **"for all endurance and patience with joy."** He doesn't pray for God's power to *deliver* them from their suffering, but for God's power to *endure* their suffering, and to do so even with joy. Does this mean that it is wrong to pray for deliverance from our suffering? No, there are abundant biblical examples and promises about praying for deliverance from such trials as illness, persecution and poverty. But at the least, Paul's prayer here suggests that praying for deliverance should not be our only prayer. There are times when God answers our prayers for deliverance by saying "No," and it is then that we need to pray for endurance.

Let's apply this third prayer request of Paul's by thinking of a circumstance or person in your life that you find troubling. If you could, you would very much like to change it. Perhaps it's being single when you would like to be married, or maybe it's being married to someone with whom you would like not to be married. For others, it might be an ongoing struggle with depression or anxiety. You've prayed and asked God to deliver you, but such deliverance from your trials has not been forthcoming. You need what Paul prays for here, God's power for endurance. What that looks like is submission, saying "Okay" to God's rule over your life by accepting these trials as coming from his good

hand. It looks like trust in God that believes he has your good in mind even in these trials, with the result that you are filled with joy and contentment.

These are the great treasures Paul prays for. He wants us to know fully the will of God to the point that we do his will. And he wants us to know and love God and to trust him and submit to him even in the trials of our lives. We are to pray these things for our friends and family.

## II. What Not to Pray For

I know something about you that leads me to conclude that most of you are not going to pray these things that Paul has just shown us we should pray. What I know is that you are like me, and we all have a sin nature that innately trusts ourselves instead of God. Further, I know that you, like me, have some guilt in this area of prayer. If we are going to learn to pray as we ought, these very significant obstacles must be addressed. Paul does so in the last three verses of his prayer, a section I have titled “What not to pray for.” Those are my words, not Paul’s. The words Paul uses are the words **“giving thanks.”** He doesn’t ask God for these things to be given to the Colossians for the simple reason that they already possess them. It is as we learn what we already possess in Christ that we are energized for prayer.

Paul reminds us first of all that God is our Father, for he is the one to whom we give thanks. Jesus taught us to begin praying, “Our Father,” because you will never pray until you believe that God is your Father who loves you and is for you. I often begin my own prayer time by calling this to mind again. Because of Jesus, God is for me, not against me.

God our Father has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints. We don’t qualify ourselves. God has qualified us, and he has done so through Jesus so that our qualifications might be solid and firm. Paul will later go on to tell the Colossians, **“Let no one disqualify you”** (2:18). Some false teachers had attempted to do so by **“insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions.”** This false teaching was that one had to qualify oneself through ascetic practices or esoteric experiences. Do you ever feel disqualified, like you aren’t like these other good Christians here in this church? Paul wants us to remember that even the most “rough around the edges” Christian is qualified in Christ.

Next, he gives thanks that we have been delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of his beloved Son, Jesus. The domain of darkness is the kingdom where you are in charge and you get to do whatever you want to do. But since it’s a kingdom of darkness, you inevitably make the wrong decisions. But God, in his mercy, has delivered you from that kingdom and placed you in another one. This one is ruled not by you, but by

our Lord Jesus. He is a good and wise King, and he knows how to rule our lives. How did you make it into that kingdom? God delivered you. It wasn't your idea, but God's grace that brought you there.

Paul concludes his thanksgiving with a word about the redemption and forgiveness we have in Christ. Our audience with God in prayer is based on Jesus and not ourselves. That is such good news, because it means our standing is secure. Many people today have a hard time with the statement from Jesus that he is the way, the truth and the life, and that no one can come to the Father except through him. Some see that as being narrow-minded and too limiting. They want God to accept them no matter what way they might choose to come. But in their objections, they miss the wonder of this verse. There is a way for sinners to come to a holy God, and it is pure gift.

How are you going to grow in your prayer life? It will not be through greater effort, but through a greater reliance upon God's grace in your life. The command to pray, and the example Paul sets of that here, is not unlike someone telling you to fly. Have you ever seen any of those old clips of early flying machine inventors? Many of them feature large, wooden wings covered with feathers that the operator is supposed to flap hard enough to become airborne. Others have an odd assortment of wings and umbrellas, and they always seem to collapse as they are used in the attempt to fly. That's the way it is when we attempt to pray with self-effort. We can flap the wings of prayer for a time and wear ourselves out, but we won't fly. That happens as we remember to give thanks for the grace of God through Jesus. So begin your prayer with such thanks. I note that Paul both began his prayer back in verse 3, and concluded it with such thanksgiving.

## **CONCLUSION:**

The great English poet George Herbert once wrote a poem on prayer. It was a relatively short poem, consisting of only one-hundred words, none of which was a verb. It was simply a series of rich images about prayer. Let me mention just two of these images. He called prayer "the soul's blood." As blood keeps the body alive, so prayer keeps us spiritually alive. And he also called prayer "reversed thunder." It is reversed because it goes from earth back to heaven, thundering with the kind of volume impossible to be ignored. Is there some choice you need to make in light of this? Perhaps you could decide on a few people and begin praying these things for them. You may want to join a group of us who meet every Wednesday morning at 6:30 for prayer. Or perhaps your choice is not to go to prayer requests until your heart is filled with thanksgiving for God's grace to us through Christ.