



Potomac Hills

Presbyterian Church, PCA



By Grace Alone ~ Through Faith Alone ~ In Christ Alone

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Colossians 1:3-20

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English Standard Version

“Prayer that is Challenging”

This is the 2nd sermon in the series on prayer entitled,
“The Priority of Prayer.”

Colossians 1:3-20

“We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴ since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ⁵ because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, ⁶ which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing — as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, ⁷ just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf⁸ and has made known to us your love in the Spirit. ⁹ And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰ so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. ¹¹ May you be strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. ¹³ He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. ¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through Him and for Him. ¹⁷ And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything He might be preeminent. ¹⁹ For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through Him to

reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross."

Heavenly Father, once again we have come to sit under the teaching of Your Word. And so we ask that You would enable us to come with interest and attentiveness, and by the power of Your Holy Spirit, grant us the knowledge of Your will that we find here in Scripture, and give us the wisdom and understanding to make it a part of our lives. Do that great work in each of us, this morning, in Jesus' name, Amen.

INTRODUCTION: *The Cargo Cults of the South Pacific.*¹

Among the more unusual religious movements in the world are the cargo cults of the South Pacific. Though their origins date back to the 19th Century, they experienced a huge upsurge in popularity during World War II. As part of their island-hopping campaign against Japanese forces, the American military often used remote islands as supply depots and air bases. The dazzling array of modern technological devices they brought with them, such as airplanes, jeeps, modern weapons, refrigerators, radios, power tools, even cigarette lighters that magically produced fire ... all appeared to be supernatural to the islanders. As a result, some of them concluded that the white men must be gods who flew in out of the sky bearing all these amazing things.

Eventually, the island bases were abandoned as the fighting drew closer to the Japan itself. But the tribesmen found their way of life permanently changed by their exposure to the "cargo gods" and the gifts they brought. They built shrines to the cargo gods, often weaving perfect replicas of planes, control towers, and hangers, and venerated such holy relics as cigarette lighters, cameras, eyeglasses, and pens. Vainly hoping to bring back the cargo gods, their chiefs "utter[ed] 'magic' phrases, such as 'Roger ... over and out ... you have landing clearance.'"

The cargo cults still thrive to this day, the best known one is the John Frum cult (as in John "Frum" America), which is headquartered on the island of Tanna in Vanuatu (formerly the New Hebrides). Followers of the cargo cults are so **passionately consumed** with **materialism** that missionaries find them very difficult to evangelize because they're interested in **cargo**, **not the gospel**.

Incredibly, the cargo cults find a parallel in contemporary Christianity, in the Word of Faith movement more commonly known as the Prosperity or Health and Wealth gospel. We learned about that false gospel when we went through 2nd and 3rd John. This Prosperity movement is in effect a Western cargo cult, teaching that God delivers tangible, consumable products on demand. Its proponents teach that prayer is a means of self-gratification; a tool for getting houses, cars, clothes, and other cargo. The god of the Prosperity movement is little more than a magic genie who exists to grant the materialistic wishes of his followers.

Though they may not go to the extremes of the cargo cults or the Prosperity movement, Christians can still pray for the wrong things. Our prayers are too often shallow, shortsighted, misdirected, and, quite frankly, selfish. We pray for health, wealth, happiness, comfort, success, a house, a job, a spouse, a promotion, or a raise. Now, none of those things are bad in and of themselves, but as I told you last week, if we seek these things **without passionately desiring a deeper knowledge of God**, we are selfishly running **after God's blessings** **without running after**

¹ The Introduction is adapted from *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, by John MacArthur, pages 251-252.

Him.

And while those things aren't necessarily wrong, they weren't high on the prayer lists of either Jesus or Paul. The problem of praying for **the wrong things** is compounded when believers pray for **the wrong reasons**.

James warned us in **James 4:3**, "*You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.*"

The essence of prayer is not demanding things from God but listening to discern His will. The deeper believers' prayer lives become, the more they line up with God's will as revealed in Scripture, the less inclined they are to ask for trivial things. And so, if we're going to make any headway in reforming our personal and corporate praying then we'll have to begin by listening to Scripture and seeking God's help in understanding how to apply Scripture to our lives and our church.

And so the aim of this series on prayer is simply to work through several of Paul's prayers in such a way that we hear God speak to us today, and to find direction to improve our praying, both for God's glory and for our good.

And that's what Paul's writing about here. So let's attend to God's word here in Colossians. We start by seeing ...

v. 3-8: WHY We Pray For You²

"We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you,⁴ since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints,⁵ because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel,⁶ which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing — as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth,⁷ just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf⁸ and has made known to us your love in the Spirit."

The Apostle Paul commends the believers, and he says, 'Look, God is already at work in you. Let me prove it to you. I can see the signs of grace in your life, examples of faith and love and hope. In fact, when Epaphras came to visit me here in prison, he told me about the faith and the hope and the love which was growing in the church at Colossae. That's proof that God is at work.'

And the Apostle Paul said, 'look, those things don't come naturally.' We may think it's natural to believe, to love, to hope. Paul knew better. Paul knew that you really can't do those things the way God intended unless the Holy Spirit's at work in your life, and the Apostle Paul says, 'I've heard of what's happening in your lives. That's evidence that God's at work.'

The Apostle says, 'when I heard the report about what was happening in your midst, about how the Holy Spirit was working in your lives, about your faith, your love, your hope — we immediately started praying for you.'

Now that may seem to be a rather strange response, but there's a great principle here — every spiritual work is a motivation to pray, not a discouragement for praying. Every spiritual work, that is, every work done by the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers, is a motivation, is an encouragement, for us to pray.

² The Exposition of the text is adapted from *A Call to Spiritual Reformation* by D. A. Carson, pages 63-77, 95-110; the sermon, "*The Incomparable Christ #3*" by Dr. J. Ligon Duncan, First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, MS; *The New American Commentary: Philippians, Colossians, Philemon* by Richard Melick, pages 192-209.

You see, so often our prayer is in response to disaster, to affliction, to difficulty, and, of course, **that's appropriate**. There's no better place to go than to **go to God** when things are going wrong. But, Paul's logic also drove him to pray when he saw God **at work**. And that's very important for us, because **we don't** tend to think that way.

Normally, when things are going well, we're tempted **not** to pray, to put it on autopilot, to let God handle it, and we presume on His blessings. But not the Apostle Paul. That wasn't his spiritual logic. His spiritual logic said, 'God's at work — that's a reminder to me to go to Him in prayer and ask Him to continue and increase that work.' Why? Because Paul knows that prayer is the instrument which God has ordained to bless His people.

That being said, we need to learn from Paul then ...

v. 9a: **HOW We Pray For You**

"And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you,"

The first thing we see here is that we need to ...

- **Pray for people we don't know personally**

Paul writes that *"from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you."* In the first prayer we examined last week from 2 Thessalonians, Paul was praying for Christians whom he knew personally. In fact, they were Christians in a church he'd founded himself. **But here** Paul is writing to a church **he's never visited**, a church founded by Epaphras, who was probably led to the Lord through Paul's ministry in Ephesus, which we see in Acts 19.

Though he's never visited them, Paul assures the Colossians he's praying for them. Apparently Paul has added the Colossians to his prayer list, ensuring that he never stops praying for them, and as each new report comes in of God's work in that place it becomes another reminder for Paul to keep praying for them.

We must ask ourselves how extensive our own praying is. Do all our prayers revolve around our own family and our own church? Of course, we're primarily responsible for praying for our family and our church. But if that's the farthest reach of our prayers, our prayers may be an index of how small and self-centered our world really is.

So it will do us good to fasten on reports of Christians in parts of the world we've never visited, find out what we can about them, and learn to intercede with God on their behalf. Just two weeks ago, Ann Marie Davis led us in an exercise to do just that. But it's meant to spur us to pray, not just to mark a once-a-year event.

Secondly, we see that we need to ...

- **Pray for people regularly**

We've come across this element of Paul's prayer life before. Here we find it again, *"And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you."*

This doesn't mean that Paul's praying was some sort of continual mystical experience, or that his claim is a rather bold exaggeration. Rather, I think it means that however much Paul pursued his normal activities, he maintained set times for prayer. In short, Paul's telling the Colossians that since hearing about them he's made it a point to intercede with God on their behalf in his regular prayer times; he has **not stopped praying** for them.

The point to be emphasized here is that there are some things for which we should **not stop praying**. When Paul tells the Colossians that he has *"not ceased to pray for you,"* he implies that there are some things for which we must pray over and over and over again. For instance, Christians learn to thank God, at each meal, for their food; the prayer that our Lord taught us to pray assumes we should ask for food on a daily basis. Likewise, it won't do to set

aside time today to ask God to make us holy, if we don't return to the request for another year. We need some of God's blessings constantly, and as we ask God for them constantly, so He constantly meets our need.

That's the sort of thing Paul has in mind when he tells the Colossians that he has "**not ceased to pray**" for them. There are certain things that Christians need again and again, constantly, if they're actually going to live as Christians. For these things Paul intercedes with his heavenly Father on the Colossians' behalf. This unceasing nature of his praying serves as a model to encourage us to learn persistence in praying. But perhaps more importantly, it rouses our curiosity: **just what** does Paul constantly pray for?

And so we move on and learn that Paul tells us about ...

v. 9-14: **WHAT We Pray For You**

What is it, then, that Paul prays for again and again on behalf of the Colossian believers, as if the supply must be constantly renewed? There is only one petition in this prayer [it's actually just one sentence in the Greek], but it breaks out into various parts. And so the first thing we see in following Paul's example of prayer is that we need to ...

v. 9: Pray for **KNOWLEDGE**

"And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,"

We must think through what Paul means by "**the knowledge of His will**" with which he wants believers to be filled. Most often we use the expression **the will of God** to refer to God's will for my career or for some aspect of my future that is determined by an impending choice. We "seek the will of God" over whom we should marry, over major changes, over when we should move.

And none of that is bad. Nevertheless this focus is often misleading, and sometimes even **dangerous**, for it encourages me to think of "the Lord's will" primarily in terms of **my** future, **my** vocation, **my** needs — and that can become just another form of self-centeredness, no matter how piously I phrase it. Worse, it wipes from my thinking the dominant ways in which the Bible speaks of His will.

Consider such passages as **Psalm 143:10**, "*Teach me to do Your will, for You are my God! Let Your good Spirit lead me on level ground!*" To do the will of God in this passage is virtually synonymous with obeying what God has mandated. What God has mandated is His will; our responsibility is **to do it**. The psalmist here doesn't encourage us to **find** God's will; he assumes it's already known. When he says "**Teach me**," he doesn't say, "Teach me your will," but "**Teach me to DO your will.**"

Elsewhere we're told, **Ephesians 5:15-17**, "*Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, ¹⁶ making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.*" In such a context, to "**understand what the will of the Lord is**" means that **over and against** the evil and folly of the surrounding society, where, because of laziness and self-indulgence, people squander opportunities that the Lord graciously gives, Christians are to make **the most** of every opportunity, **to avoid** foolishness, and thus to show they understand **what the Lord's will is**.

And likewise, Paul writes in **1 Thessalonians 5:16-18**, "*Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*" Therefore, when some perpetually whining Christian comes to me, I've been known to tell them that I **know** what God's will is for their lives — "*give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the*

will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” It’s just dumb to pretend to seek God’s will for your life, in terms of a marriage partner or some job move, when there’s no desire to pursue God’s will as He’s already revealed it.

The second part of this verse that needs explanation is the phrase *“in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.”* This assumes that spiritual wisdom and understanding are **the means** by which God fills us with the knowledge of His will. Knowledge of God’s will **consists** of **wisdom** (so often tied in Scripture to knowing how to live) and **understanding** of all kinds, at the spiritual level.

And that’s what Paul **prays** for the Colossians. His prayer is motivated in part by his concern over their flirtation with the false teachers of their day. These dangerous tendencies end up reducing Christ in importance compared to these false teachers and false teachings, **and Paul simply will not have it**. And so in the next chapter he writes, **Colossians 2:8-10**, *“See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. ⁹For in Him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰and you have been filled in Him, who is the head of all rule and authority.”*

So here Paul is praying that they may be filled with the knowledge of the will of God, a knowledge that consists of wisdom and understanding of all kinds, at the spiritual level. How else will they [and us] withstand the pressures of the surrounding pagan culture, pressures that are as subtle as they are common? How else will they [and us] think Biblically, and genuinely bring their [and our] hearts and minds and lives into conformity with God’s will?

Is there anything that our own generation more urgently needs than this knowledge of God and His Word and His will?

Some churches have chased every fad, scrambled aboard every bandwagon, adopted every gimmick, and pursued every encounter with the media. Other churches have rigidly cherished every tradition, determined to change as little as possible, and worshiped what is ancient simply because it’s ancient.

But where are the men and women whose knowledge of God is as **fresh** as it is profound, whose **delight** in thinking God’s thoughts after Him ensures that their study of Scripture is never merely intellectual, but whose **desire** to please God easily outstrips those corrupting desires to shine in public?

I mean, after all, people cannot live by bread and Jacuzzis alone. We desperately need to meditate on and reflect on and depend on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. The need takes on painful urgency when we discover that even within our churches, let alone our country, there are rapidly declining standards of basic Bible knowledge. True, basic Bible knowledge doesn’t ensure the kind of knowledge of God’s will that Paul has in mind. But **ignorance** of the Bible, the place where God has so generously disclosed His will, pretty well ensures that we won’t be filled with this knowledge of God’s will, this knowledge that consists of all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

Small wonder, then, that this is something we must constantly pray for. And it’s to our great shame if we haven’t been constantly praying along these lines. Few needs more urgently demand our intercession before our merciful heavenly Father than this one. The rapid growth of many churches in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, as humbling and as thrilling as it may be, will be **jeopardized** unless it’s accompanied by a deepening knowledge of God’s will.

And in the Western world, where much of the church continues to squander its

remarkable heritage in the grace of God, the knowledge of God declines while our fascination with techniques and fads increases. Aren't these good enough reasons to join Paul's prayer that God might fill us with the knowledge of His will?

But, as always with Paul, knowledge of God's will isn't nearly enough, because we have to take that knowledge **and do something with it**. And so, Paul tells us that we also have to ...

v. 10: Pray for OBEDIENCE

“so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.”

We've come across this thought before too. In **2 Thessalonians 1:5**, for instance, Paul assures the Christians in Thessalonica that they *“may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering.”*

But here the language is even stronger, because it's more personal. The purpose of Paul's praying is that believers might live a life **“worthy of the Lord”** — an astonishingly high standard. And just in case his readers are slow to discover just what **“worthy of the Lord”** means in practical terms, Paul spells it out: he wants them to be **“fully pleasing to Him”** [pleasing to the Lord Jesus].

That's what it means to live a life **“worthy of the Lord.”**

We might have a clearer vision of what this means if we lived in a shame culture. In a shame culture, one of the worst things you can do is bring shame on your family, clan, or tribe. In a shame culture, people are taught they must be worthy of their family's name, worthy of their country, worthy of their heritage.

By contrast, in the Western world, we don't think in such terms. We don't live in a shame culture. Many Westerners are applauded when they act in stubborn independence of their peers. Rugged individualism pervades Western ideology.

Most cultures in the first century were closer to the pattern of a shame culture. But instead of insisting that Christians live up to the church's **expectations** — our tribe, if you will — Paul tells them they must live up to the **expectations** of the church's Lord. They're not to live a life worthy **of the church**, but they're to live a life worthy of the Lord.

That would be an immensely powerful plea in a shame culture. In the Western world, it's far too often taken as nothing more than just another option. But in Paul's world, to be a Christian, to confess Jesus **as Lord**, meant to adopt a worldview in which you are **bound** to please Him in every way. Not to do so would be to bring **shame on Him whom you have confessed as Lord**.

And so, if we are to join Paul in his prayer, we have to align ourselves with his motives, “And we pray this in order that you may **“walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him.”** In thought, word, and deed, in action and in reaction, I must be asking myself, “What would Jesus **have me do?**” Not “What would Jesus do?” but “What would Jesus have **me do?**” What is **speech** or **conduct** worthy of Him? What sort of speech or conduct should I **avoid**, simply because it would **shame Him**? What would please Him the most?”

Honestly asked, these simple questions would transform how we work, what we do with our time, how we talk with our parents, spouse, and kids, what responsibilities we take on in our church, what we read, how we treat our neighbors, what we do with our money.

Transparently, **we cannot begin** to be utterly pleasing to Jesus unless God fills us with **the knowledge of His will**. Conversely, the knowledge of His will is not an end in itself but has as its goal such Christian maturity that our deepest desire is to **please** the Lord Jesus.

Paul goes on to describe what it means to please the Lord when he says, “*bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.*”

“***Bearing fruit in every good work***” simply fleshes out what it means to live a life “*worthy of the Lord.*”

True, Christians are saved by grace, **Ephesians 2:8-10**, “*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*”

But God’s free grace in our lives has a significant purpose,¹⁰ “*For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus **for good works**, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*”

The kinds of good works demonstrated and the degree of fruitfulness will vary a great deal from believer to believer. But Paul cannot imagine anyone being pleasing to Christ **without bearing fruit in good works**. Again, Paul’s thought can be put the other way around: he prays that believers might be filled with the knowledge of God’s will, so that they may live a life worthy of the Lord Jesus and utterly pleasing to Him — and this means bearing fruit in good works.

At the same time, when Paul describes these believers as “***increasing in the knowledge of God***” he has come full circle. What Paul means is that knowledge of God’s will, knowledge that consists of all spiritual wisdom and understanding, turns in part on obedience, on conformity to the will of God. To learn something of God’s will and to use such knowledge to live a life worthy of the Master and fully pleasing to Him, is to **engage** in the **business of obedience**. But as you get busy in the business of obedience, you get to know God better.

“***Bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God***” is not as easy as it sounds. It takes persistence, and hard work, and a good attitude ... or we are fully capable of completely screwing it up.

And so that’s why Paul tells us that we need to ...

v. 11: Pray for ENDURANCE

“*May you be strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy,*”

What is remarkable is that the power for which Paul prays is frequently tied to the power of the resurrection, as we see in **Ephesians 1:19-20**, “*and what is **the immeasurable greatness of His power** toward us who believe, according to **the working of His great might**²⁰ that He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places.*”

But its demonstration among believers is found not in miracles or in their own resurrection, but in great “***endurance and patience.***”

The expression “***all endurance and patience***” suggests both the kind of stamina that gets under a burden and carries it with enduring fortitude, and the kind of stamina that knows how to possess its soul in patience. Those are **not** virtues that are popular in our age. We extol champagne: lots of fizz and a pretty good high, but having no nutritional value for the long haul. In an age when tempers are hot, quick solutions are courted, success is revered, victory is cherished, independence is lauded, and easy triumphs are promised, “***endurance and patience***” at first glance seem like less than stellar qualities.

But the truth is, they are so far beyond human capacity that they require the power of the Spirit of God. And so the Apostle Paul prays that the Colossians would be strengthened with

real spiritual power. He asks, in fact, that they would ***“be strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might.”***

Paul is hinting at the might, the power, the strength which resides in the Almighty Himself, he's saying to these Colossians, 'I'm praying that you will be filled with the power of God.' It's important to note again that Paul is pointing to a power outside of the Colossians. It's not a power within the Colossians that he's asking to be increased; it's a power which comes from God and which God gives us and strengthens us with.

If a rich man gives you money, he may not be giving you very much, but if a rich man gave you **in accordance with his wealth**, you would be in for a huge windfall. Now the Apostle Paul is saying, 'God is going to give you this power **in accordance with His glorious might.**' That's how powerful the power of God is going to be. And it enables us to have endurance and patience that's way beyond our own abilities. Not to be confused with mere physical stamina, these virtues enable the believer to survive with joy when persecuted, to triumph in self-control when insulted, to trust God's providence when one is suffering.

And when Jesus sees these virtues in us, He is well pleased.

And finally, to close out his list, Paul tells us that we need to ...

v. 12-14: Pray with THANKSGIVING

Because of this knowledge, wisdom, and understanding; because of this walking worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, bearing fruit in good works; because of this endurance and patience, we're to be *“giving thanks to the Father.”* Not to give thanks would be mute testimony to a catastrophic loss of perspective; to give thanks, to give thanks with joy, is to remember that *“the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. ¹³ He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”*

If God had perceived that our greatest need was economic, he would have sent an economist. If he had perceived that our greatest need was entertainment, he would have sent us an entertainer. If God had perceived that our greatest need was political stability, he would have sent us a politician. If he had perceived that our greatest need was health, he would have sent us a doctor. But he perceived that our greatest need involved **our sin, our alienation** from Him, **our rebellion, our death**; ... and so He sent us a Savior.

What Paul is saying is that to live a life worthy of Jesus Christ is to overflow with thanksgiving in the light of the salvation we've received. If in fact, we've been *“delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins,”* then our only appropriate response is gratitude.

APPLICATION: Pray with This Cord of Three-Strands³

Paul prays constantly that these Christians will be filled with the knowledge of God's will. Then he tells them the purpose of his prayer: he wants them to live a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him, and Paul assumes that such a life is utterly impossible unless there is a growing spiritual grasp of what God's will is. Finally, he fleshes out such expressions as ***“worthy of the Lord”*** and ***“fully pleasing to Him,”*** with some concrete characteristics of Christians who live this way. His list isn't meant to be exhaustive, merely typical, but it is no less revolutionary. Christians, he says, bear fruit in every good work. They grow in the knowledge of God, they are strengthened by God's power so as to display great endurance and

³ The Application is adapted from the article “Pray beyond the Sick List” by David Powlinson, *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, Winter 2005, pages 2-5.

patience, and they joyfully give thanks to the Father for the astonishing salvation He has granted them through the Son He loves, Jesus Christ.

When was the last time you prayed like that?

This prayer of Paul so neatly fits into the same categories for prayer that I went over last week, let's review them again. I said that there are three emphases of biblical prayer: circumstantial prayers, wisdom prayers, and kingdom prayers.

1. Sometimes we ask God to change our circumstances: heal the sick, give us daily bread, protect us from suffering and harm, make our political leaders just, convert my friends and family, make our work and ministries prosper, provide me with a spouse, quiet this dangerous storm, send us rain, give us a child.

2. Sometimes we ask God to change us: deepen our faith, teach us to love each other, forgive our sins, make us wise where we tend to be foolish, make us know You better, enable us to sanctify You in our hearts, don't let us dishonor You, give us understanding of Scripture, teach us how to encourage others.

3. Sometimes we ask God to change everything by revealing Himself more fully on the stage of real life, magnifying the degree to which His glory and Sovereign rule are obvious: Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven, be exalted above the heavens, let Your glory be over all of the earth, let Your glory fill the earth as the waters cover the sea, come Lord Jesus.

When any of these three gets detached from the other two, prayer tends to go sour. If you just pray for better circumstances, then God becomes the errand boy (usually somewhat disappointing) who exists to give you your shopping list of desires and pleasures — no sanctifying purposes, no higher glory.

If you only pray for personal change, then it tends to reveal an obsession with moral self-improvement, a self-absorbed spirituality detached from engagement with other people and the tasks of life that need doing. Where is the longing for Christ's kingdom to right **all** wrongs, not just to alleviate my sins so I don't feel bad about myself?

If you only pray for the sweeping invasion of the kingdom, then prayer tends towards irrelevance and overgeneralization, failing to walk out in our lives how the actual kingdom rights real wrongs, wipes away real tears, and removes real sins. Such prayers pursue a God who never touches ground until the last day.

Learn to pray with this cord of three-strands, braided out of our real need. Teach others to pray the same way. And they will pray in a noticeably different way for you and for others ... even if they don't know them personally.

And I pray that through these prayers ... God would enable you to know Him more. Think about that.

You need to pray.

Take a moment to do that, and then I'll close.

*Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your word. It convicts us where we have so woefully fallen short. And so by Your grace, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we ask that You would change us ... enable us to grow in faith and increase in love and to demonstrate this kind of maturity **by how we pray**. We ask that You would do this in us and for us, in Jesus' name and for His glory. Amen.*

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2 Thessalonians 1:11-12

“To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of His calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by His power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.”