

Our prayers reveal our priorities. Robert Murray M'Cheyne: "What a man is alone on his knees before God, that he is, and no more." Prayer reveals our priorities not only in terms of how we pray, but also what we pray. This morning we get to see the priority of Paul's prayers from Phil 1:9-11 (921). These three verses are one long sentence. Main Point: The priority of our prayers should pertain to a person's spiritual progress. What does he pray? 6 requests:

1. For love to abound – 9. More and more. Paul wants this church to grow in love. Now, today love is attempting to wear far too many hats. I love brisket and I love Alicia. The verb "love" had better have different definitions in those two statements. In the Bible, love is giving of self for the good of another. Love is based upon the cross of Christ. The cross is the primary display of love but also provides the clearest definition of love. 1 John 3:16: "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters." Love is cross-shaped. It is sacrificial.

God wants our love, this self-giving love, to overflow. Do you think he means love for God or their love for one another? Yes. Because the two are connected. Remember when Jesus was asked what the great commandment was? Remember how he gave two?

"The great commandment is this: love God with all you are and if you are doing that you will love your neighbor." **1 John 4:7-12, 19-21.**

Love is the great commandment. In Eph 3:17 he prays we'll be "rooted and firmly established in love." In Col 3, after listing seven virtues, we read, "And *above all* these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." Paul has a very similar prayer in 1 Thess 3:11-13: "Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints." God's will is that we increase and abound in love for one another and for all.

2. For love to abound with knowledge – 9. Love and knowledge go together. Paul wants an informed love. All the emphasis today is on an emotional love, mere feeling, but true love is based on more than emotion. In fact, lasting emotion is based on information. True information. Emotion will not last without truth; Truth is the fuel for genuine emotion. God wants our love to abound *with* knowledge. He wants our love to grow in knowledge.

For love to last, it must be founded on knowledge, on truth, on doctrine. People are down on doctrine today. "Doctrine divides." But here's the thing. Everyone does doctrine. Everyone is a theologian. For example, if someone is like I just want to be about Jesus. Let's just focus on Jesus. *But* who is Jesus? Doctrine. "Let's just focus on Jesus saving us." But who is he? The doctrine of Christ. And what kind of person does one have to be to forgive sins? God. Then what is the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. Doctrine of Trinity. And why do we need saving anyway? Anthropology – doctrine of man, and the doctrine of sin. And why is salvation so important? Eschatology – the study of the last things, judgment, etc.

For true love we need true knowledge and true knowledge is rooted in God. Because God is the author of truth. There is not *your* truth and *my* truth, just true truth based upon God and his Word, truth as God has revealed it and that accords with reality.

We are to abound in knowledge and true knowledge comes from God. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Not the end of knowledge. The beginning. You can't even really know anything without God. God is the very foundation for knowing anything. You know what I mean. Atheists are materialists who don't even believe we have a mind, only brain. No thoughts, only biochemical responses.

Paul prays a very similar prayer for the Col: "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," (Col 1:9). God's will is that we grow in knowledge, wisdom, understanding. This is why we take education so seriously. Doctrine fuels love. What is doctrine, but the study of the love of God. True love fuels true knowledge and true knowledge should fuel love. As Augustine put it in the 5th Century: "So anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbor, has not yet succeeded in understanding them."¹

3. For love to abound with discernment – 10. Every kind of discernment. This is the only time this word occurs in the NT. It means depth of insight. Discernment is a tad different from knowledge. Discernment is making necessary distinctions between right things and wrong things, good and bad, wise and foolish. Christians must be precise people. Oh, how discernment is needed in our day! We must discern the times.

Discerning is a loving thing. As love for God and neighbor grow, discernment should grow. The world and the worldly church says it is unloving to discern. They would define love as affirm affirm affirm. They would say it is unloving to discern. That's the opposite of what the Bible says. The Holy Spirit says love includes the ability to make necessary distinctions between right and wrong. In a wonderful book, called *Praying with Paul*, D.A. Carson writes, "The ever-increasing love for which Paul prays is to be discriminating. It is to be constrained by 'knowledge' and 'depth of insight.' Without the constraints of knowledge and insight, love very easily degenerates into mawkish sentimentality or into the kind of mush pluralism the world often confuses with love."² / For love to grow, knowledge and discernment must grow. Knowledge is not an enemy of love but a necessary precondition for its existence. Just consider the marriage relationship. The more I know Alicia the more I can love her well.

Then there is a purpose for the knowledge and discernment: *so that* you may approve what is excellent. The goal of this love with knowledge and discernment is that you might know the good and live wisely. So that you might discern the best, so that you might approve what really matters, so that you might be about the excellent things, those that are worth more, the superior stuff. One commentator writes, "Here we have a definition of Christian wisdom – to know what is advantageous or expedient – not to torture the mind with empty subtleties and speculations."³

Paul says something similar famously in Rom 12:2: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." There is a lot of life lived in the gray areas. We need biblical wisdom and discernment. We must be steeped in Scripture, viewing all of life through the spectacles of Scripture and living faithfully in our day. God wants us to increasingly be able to recognize, embrace, love, and follow God's will and way. Hebrews has a rebuke to Christians who have been on milk long enough and need to move to meat. Heb 5:14: "But solid food

¹ "On Christian Teaching," 27

² DAC, *A Call*, 126.

³ Harmon, 101.

is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil." / So the purpose of this prayer is discernment and the result is holiness. The priority of our prayers should pertain to a person's spiritual progress.

4. For the saints to be pure and blameless for the day of Christ. He is praying that we'd be more loving, more knowledgeable, more discerning so that we'd be ready for judgment day. The day of Christ. Judgment day was a driving factor for the Apostle Paul. That day was always before him. He wanted to be ready to meet His king. So he is praying that we would finish well. He is praying with the long view. Do you pray this way for your fellow saints? We should. As people get sick and suffer, yes, by all means pray for healing. We believe in divine healing. But also pray that we would finish well. That we would be like Paul: **1:20-21**.

Luther used to say he had two days on his calendar: this day and that day. Paul had a forward-looking framework. He mentions the day of Christ here and he did last week as well: **1:6**. The future informs the present. Eschatology drives ethics. I was recently struck by Acts 24:15-16: "having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man." This life is short and that day is coming: **2:10-11**. All will acknowledge who Jesus is – either in humble submission or in dreadful defiance.

He is praying that we'd be pure and blameless. In other words, he is praying for their holiness. That they would grow in being pure. Pure means unmixed or sincere. Lacking hidden motives. He prays that they would be blameless. Blameless is different than sinless.

No one is sinless, but we can be blameless. Blameless means the mud doesn't stick. It is the same idea as being above reproach. These are getting at both internal and external, inward and outward, motives and actions.

We should all make this our aim: spiritual growth. *Growing* in godliness. 2 Pet 3:18: "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." Growth in grace takes a lifetime. It is progressive. It is our lifelong journey. Kids, you all are growing up way too fast. But as you grow physically, make it your aim to also grow spiritually. Pursue the Lord, obey your parents, pray to the Father, read the Bible.

Jesus says we are to love God with all that we are. Paul is praying for our holiness, our spiritual growth. This means he is praying that we would live lives of repentance. The difference between Christians and non-Christians is not the presence or absence of sin. All people sin. The difference is that Christians repent of it.

5. To be filled with the fruit of righteousness – 11. What does he mean here? The fruit of righteousness. The fruit that comes from being declared righteous. Righteousness is the root, spiritual growth is the fruit. What does Paul mean by righteousness? Sometimes this word means right behavior, but when Paul uses it, he normally means a right standing given as a gift. I think it is the latter. Why you ask? Because the rule of exegesis is the same as the rule of real estate: location, location, location. Or context, context, context. **3:8-9**.

This righteousness is the gift of a right standing before God through faith. So, when we trust Christ, our sins are forgiven and we are credited with righteousness. The theological word is "imputation." Our sin is imputed to Christ and his righteousness is imputed to us. The great exchange. 2 Cor 5:21. This R *only* comes through Jesus Christ. God demands perfect righteousness but the only One to ever live perfectly righteous is Jesus Christ, the righteous One. "My hope is built on nothing less Than Jesus' blood and righteousness; I dare not trust the sweetest frame, But wholly lean on Jesus' name."

So Paul is praying that we would be filled with the fruit that comes from being counted righteous through Jesus Christ. Another way to say it, theologically, would be to say that our sanctification is built on the foundation of our justification. Our sanctification (our spiritual transformation over time) is built on our justification (the fact that we have been declared in the right through faith once for all). This order is important. It is not the case that we try to be sanctified, to be spiritually transformed, in order to gain a right standing before God. Heavens, no. Although that's exactly what most religions and sadly some Christians in the world teach. Tim Keller put it this way: "Religion operates on the principle of 'I obey – therefore I am accepted by God.' The basic operating principle of the gospel is 'I am accepted by God through the work of Jesus Christ – therefore I obey'."⁴

Justification and sanctification are inseparable, but must be distinguished. Listen to the way the New City Catechism puts it: Justification means our declared righteousness before God, made possible by Christ's death and resurrection for us. Sanctification means our gradual, growing righteousness, made possible by the Spirit's work in us. This is really important to get right for two reasons. First, in our evangelism. Most unbelievers don't get this. They think becoming a Christian just means being a good person. That's not the message of Christianity. Too many unbelievers think they have dismissed Christianity but they really have only dismissed a form of self-help religion. It is not that Christianity has been tried and found wanting but misunderstood and left untried.

Second, we must know that justification is the foundation for our joy and assurance. Listen to historian Richard Lovelace: "Only a fraction of the present body of professing Christians are solidly appropriating the justifying work of Christ in their lives. Many have so light an apprehension of God's holiness and of the extent and guilt of their sin that consciously they see little need for justification, although below the surface of their lives they are deeply guilt-ridden and insecure. Many others have a theological commitment to [the doctrine of justification], but in their day-to-day existence they rely on their sanctification for justification... drawing their assurance of acceptance with God from their sincerity, their past experience of conversion, their recent religious performance, or the relative infrequency of their conscious, willful disobedience. Few know how to start each day with a thoroughgoing stand upon Luther's platform: you are accepted, looking outward in faith and claiming the wholly alien righteousness of Christ as the only ground for acceptance, relaxing in that quality of trust which will produce increasing sanctification as faith is active in love and gratitude. In order for a pure and lasting work of spiritual renewal to take place within the church, multitudes within it must be led to build their lives on this foundation. This means that they must be conducted into the light of a full conscious awareness of God's holiness, the depth of their sin and the sufficiency of the atoning work of Christ for their acceptance with God, not just at the outset of their Christian lives but in every succeeding day."⁵

Before battery powered watches, they would need to be wound every day. You had to wind the stem to wind up the main spring and throughout the day, it would gradually unwind causing the watch to keep time. Justification by faith is the mainspring of the Christian life. But it must be wound every day. Why? Because the default mode of the human heart is self-salvation. Pelagian. Must keep hitting refresh on this righteousness. / He prays that we would be filled with the fruit that comes from the gift of righteousness.

6. For God's glory to abound – 11b – This is where it is all headed. This is 1:11 – look at **2:11b**. God's glory is the goal of all of history. You can ask anything about God and ultimately the answer will be "for his glory." /

⁴ Tim Keller, *Prodigal God* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 114.

⁵ Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* see 211 in old one

Kids, do you know why you exist? The first question of the New City Catechism (Dads, lead out in catechizing your children): “What is the chief end of man? Answer. Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” Why do you exist? To glorify God and enjoy him forever. / Friend, how often do you pray for God’s glory to abound? To spread? To cover the earth as the waters cover the sea? Paul teaches us to pray for God’s glory to be displayed. So does Jesus. This is why the Lord’s Prayer begins the way it does: Hallowed be thy name. May your name be honored as holy. May your name be glorified.

What do you pray for? Our prayers reveal our priorities. Too often we pray like prosperity gospel preachers. We pray for my health, my wealth, my mortgage, my job, my family, all too often my comfort. Let’s learn from Paul’s prayer and let’s pray God-centered prayers. Pray for one another with this kind of prayer. The priority of our prayers should pertain to a person’s spiritual progress. Members of SS, do you pray for one another? It is a command. James 5:16 pray for one another. We have new directories today. Today is Oct 15 so on page 15, we could pray like this: Father I pray for the Kluzeks. Would you cause their love to abound more and more. Would you help them to grow in knowledge and discernment? I pray for Lyric Kinkade. Would you grow her and help her to approve what is excellent? I pray that her Daulton’s upcoming marriage would be founded upon the excellent things. I pray for Gisela Koehn. Increase her purity and cause her to be blameless. Help her to live for the eternal. I pray for the Kings – would you help them to live for your glory, that your glory and praise would inform every decision they make?

Use Scripture to fuel your prayer life. In other words, base your prayer off of prayers like this. Let me close by briefly mentioning 6 ways that praying Scripture can help our prayer lives, with some help from Don Whitney’s excellent book, *Praying the Bible*:

1. Praying Scripture keeps us God-centered. Notice the difference between this prayer the way our prayers may go without divine assistance.
2. Praying Scripture keeps us Biblically-shaped. Piper says we too often use prayer like a domestic intercom rather than a wartime walkie talkie? Increased conveniences or mission?
3. Praying Scripture helps us Pray according to his will. We know for certain that it is God’s will because it is God’s Word. 1 John 5:14: “And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.”
4. Praying Scripture fosters meditation and memorization - The Word feeds meditation and meditation feeds prayer. William Bridge said, “Begin with reading or hearing. Go on with meditation; end in prayer.”⁶ Pray the Bible.
5. Praying Scripture keeps us focused. Prone to wander, Lord I feel it. Scripture gives us rails to run on.
6. Praying Scripture keeps us out of rut. We will pray for new things Scripture brings up. We pray the same old things about the same old things: Fam, future, finances, work or school, church or ministry, current crisis. Gets boring after a while. If you know it will be boring before you start, we will not have much enthusiasm about praying.

⁶ Mathis, 58.

Our prayers reveal our priorities. May the Spirit give us the grace to prioritize what our Triune God prioritizes: spiritual maturation. Increased love, knowledge, discernment, purity, blamelessness, all to the glory of God.