

Praying for Spiritual Growth Colossians 1:9-14

Kent Hughes tells the following story about the effectiveness of prayer:

Almost [90] years ago a young missionary named Raymond Edman staggered in from an Ecuadorian jungle, desperately ill. “He’ll be dead by morning,” the doctor predicted. Edman’s wife dyed her wedding dress black, so it would be ready for the funeral.

However, thousands of miles away in Boston, Edman’s friend, Dr. Joseph Evans, interrupted a prayer meeting, saying, “I feel we must pray for Ray Edman in Ecuador.” The group prayed earnestly, until finally Evans called out, “Praise the Lord! The victory is won!”

The rest is oft-repeated history: Raymond Edman recovered, *his wife’s dress did not*, and Dr. Edman went on to become president of Wheaton College and to minister for forty years!

History is filled with stories of God’s people praying for one another and seeing God do marvelous things, like healing people of illnesses. Praise God for this.

But these are not the only kind of prayers that matter.

These are not the only kind of answered-prayers for which we should give God praise.

- The majority prayers in the NT are for spiritual growth, not physical healing.
- To be sure, we should pray for healing (**I have been doing this all week!**).

We need to understand the vital importance of praying for believers’ spiritual growth.

Paul’s letters are filled with these kinds of prayers.

- D.A. Carson has a wonderful book on Paul’s prayers.
- Here is one of them – Colossians 1:9-14.

It’s not the kind of prayer that stands out as *extraordinary*, like the prayer for Raymon Edmans’ healing, but these kind of prayers have been prayed throughout the history of the church, and God has answered them throughout the history of the church — and the results have been extraordinary!

The massive impact of these kinds of prayers will only be known in heaven.

If you are praying for someone’s spiritual growth, then that is no small thing!

- You are doing what the mighty apostle did regularly!
- Mothers/Fathers praying for their children’s spiritual growth; pastors praying for members; small group leaders for group members....
- This work is not small and insignificant; it’s vital and powerful.
- One of the most important things a pastor can do is pray for his members (Acts 6:4)
- One of the most important things you can do as a member, is pray for other members to grow in the knowledge of God’s will.

Where would we be without the prayers of others?!

Paul has celebrated God's grace in bringing the Colossian believers to faith in verses 3-8. And now he prays for God to continue to work in their lives.

This prayer is significant for two major reasons:

- 1. It serves as a model for how to pray for others believers.**
- 2. It serves as basic teaching on spiritual growth.**
 - “What does God want for a Christian's life?” **Here are some essential marks.**
 - **Paul paints a glorious picture of a life that pleases God.**

The structure is clear: **grammatically** (1) there is one petition: to be filled with the knowledge of God's will; this is followed by (2) the purpose or goal of the petition: to walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him (Christ) in every way; and then (3) Paul describes how this looks in daily life, what it would look like for God to answer this prayer, giving four ways we walk worthy of the Lord with four participles: (a) bearing fruit; (b) increasing in knowledge of God; (c) being strengthened with all power; (d) giving thanks.

So three headings: (1) the **petition**, (2) the **purpose**, (3) the **picture** [of the life that please God, the picture of what it would look like for good to answer this prayer].

#1: The Petition: to be filled with the knowledge of God's will (1:9)

9a: Before we even get to the petition, notice 5 lessons from Paul in the school of prayer.

- 1. Paul ties thanksgiving with intercession (“And so”).** Our prayers should contain both.
- 2. Paul's is praying for those he hasn't met (“we heard”).** We can be connected with believers around the world through prayer.
- 3. His prayer is with companions. (“We”).** Spurge says: “I commend to you, brethren and sisters, the habit of frequent prayer together. When a Christian friend drops in, his visit will perhaps end in mere talk unless you secure its spiritual profit by at least a few minutes spent in united prayer... ‘I alone’ is certainly a good word in prayer; but ‘we also’ is a better one. Let us link hands and intercede for our brethren and the whole church of God.”
 - **One of the purposes of monthly member meeting is to do this, as well as our group time together — it is “we also” prayer time.**
- 4. Paul's prayer is immediate. “Since we heard, we prayed.”** A report about other Christians, is a prompt to pray for their spiritual growth. Let it be your reflex to pray for them.
 - Ad avoid the “I'll pray for you” but never really getting around to it.
- 5. Paul prays without ceasing (“not ceased”).**
 - **Peanuts Cartoon clip: Charlie Brown was writing to his pen pal. “Dear Pal, it has been a long time since I last wrote to you. I would have written before, but I forgot all about you.... [After looking over it he says], “Somehow that doesn't sound right.” (Ht: RD)**
 - **That wasn't Paul's way.** “From the day we heard of it, we haven't ceased praying.”
 - **It wasn't his way to forget fellow believers; neither should we.**

9b: The Petition: What should we ask God to do in the lives of believers?

Be filled with **“the knowledge of his will”**

“be filled” – be controlled by it; to be dominated by it; to be under the influence of it; **to have it pervade your being so that it affects your desires and thoughts**

• In Scripture, you can be filled with anger, bitterness, or God’s will/wisdom/the Spirit.

God doesn’t save you and then just leave you to yourself in this life.

• He redeems you and then equips you, and fills you for every good work.

Usually, when a person speaks of “knowing God’s will” it has to do with particular choices that a person has to make:

• **Should you take the job offer in KC?**

• **Should you marry Katie or what’s her name?**

• **Should you go to Clemson or SC?**

• **But that’s not what Paul’s talking about.**

• This is **not bad to seek guidance (we should)**, but it’s not the primary way Scripture speaks about knowing God’s will.

• More often than not, the will of God is that **which is found in Scripture (God’s revealed will)**. It means **knowing biblical truth and then applying it in daily life.**

In the NT we find several commands which are **always God’s will**:

• In **1 Thess 4:3**, “this is the will of God: that you be holy”

○ **Whether you marry Shelia or Sarah, this is God’s will: your holiness.**

○ Not circumstantial but substantial.

• In **1 Thess 5:16-18**, “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

○ **Whether you take the job in Atlanta, or whether you say no and remain where you are, this is God’s will: that you give thanks.**

It’s folly to pursue God’s will in terms of marriage, vocation, relocation, if you don’t have a deep desire to do the revealed will of God in Scripture.

Paul’s idea of God’s will being that which is **revealed in Scripture** is displayed in **two** ways:

(1) **“be filled”** is in the passive voice; **God must act. He must reveal his will (otherwise we couldn’t know it); and he has.**

(2) These 3 words: **knowledge, wisdom, understanding** are often bundled together in the **OT**. Paul draws on this Jewish understanding of God’s will – **which has to do with God’s commanded will**. What he has said we **should do**.

*I delight to do your will, O my God,
your law is within my heart (Ps 40:8)*

“your will” is parallel to “your law.”

**“You know his will and approve the things that matter,
being instructed from the law” (Rom. 2:18)**

“Happy are we, Israel, because we know what is pleasing to God” (Bar. 4:4)

It's wasn't some kind of **secretive, mysterious will**.

- Today, people even justify things that are contrary to Scripture, saying, "It was God's will." God's will is never outside the bounds of Scripture!
- God has spoken; and we seek wisdom and the Spirit to apply it.
 - **"in all spiritual wisdom and understanding"**
 - Through **prayer; the community of faith, and desire for obedience.**
 - Through renewal of our minds that they may test and approve God's will (Rom 12:2).

In ancient paganism, no one could know the "will of the gods." The pagan worshiper had no clue what his deity wanted! One ancient prayer was something like this: "I wish I knew that these things would be pleasing to one's god. But what's good to me may be an offense to god. Who can know the will of the gods?"

- It was total frustration; no idea what his or her deity wanted.
- Why? **Because these gods don't talk!**
- But our God has spoken. You can know his will in his Word.
- What a privilege to have a God who reveals what He wants!

Further, we must add that Paul had more than a Jewish understanding; he had a Messianic understanding of God's will, a new covenant understanding.

- He knew that the Word focused on Christ (Col 1:27), the full-filler of the Law, the one in whom is all wisdom, the revelation of God in the flesh.
- That Scripture tells one big story which exalts Jesus.

So then, this pray to know God's will means to know that which is stated is God's word, and that which centers on Christ.

- Notice "wisdom, understanding, knowledge" centering on Christ in in **Col 2:2-3**.
- He wants the Colossians to **see the world through a Christ-centered lens and live in accord with it.**

So when it comes to God's will, Scripture is the primary source, and Christ's glory is the ultimate goal.

- **Be filled with the knowledge of his will – that is allow the word of Christ to dominate your mind and heart; allow God's purposes in Christ to order your steps.**
- **How? "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" (Col 3:16)**

Remember the problem in Colossae: **he doesn't want them to led astray by false teaching (2:8), but to be wise, discerning, to build their lives on the word of God, and to center their lives on Jesus Christ.**

The unwise life is not building his or her life on the Word; they are not living for Christ's glory, they are chasing satisfaction elsewhere or some false gospel somewhere.

- So Paul's burden here is that the believers may be filled with the knowledge of God's will so that they may detect false teaching and not flirt with it.

- He prays that they may be able to think Christianly, that they would be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in a context filled with syncretism, and live for Christ’s glory, by the power of the Spirit.

We need to be praying like Paul here. **“Lord fill us to the brim with your word; empower us by the Spirit to be conformed to the image of Jesus, to align ourselves with his purposes, for his glory.”**

#2: The Purpose: to walk worthy of the Lord, pleasing him in every way (1:10a)

Paul keeps together *what we should never separate — knowledge and lifestyle.*

- The reason Paul wants the Colossians to be filled with the knowledge of God’s will is so **that it will shape the way the live.**
- It is not knowledge for **knowledge sake; it is knowledge for the sake of obedience.**
- **“walking worthy of the Lord”** (cf., 2 Thess 1:5; Phil 1:27; Eph 4:1).

What does this mean *to walk worthy of the Lord Jesus?*

It means to **“please him in every day.”**

- If we lived in more of a **shame culture**, we would fill the force of this more.
- In honor/shame cultures, more of the culture of the Bible, **one of the worst things you can do is bring shame to your family or tribe or clan.**
- People will go to great lengths to **avoid shaming their family.**
- **For example, I read recently of a Korean student that was studying at a British university, and he came to see a professor for counsel. He was failing his classes, and this was an obvious problem. But his bigger concern was dealing with his family back in Seoul. His parents sacrificed much for him to go to school, and they could not fathom the thought of their son not succeeding. To return home without a degree, would bring shame. (DAC)**
- **To live worthy of the Lord means that we live in such a way that we do not bring shame to the Lord Jesus, whom we have confessed to be our Savior and King.**
- It means to live in a way that pleases the Lord Jesus. It means living for his honor.

Practically: this means

- **Avoiding any speech that brings shame to his name**
- **Avoiding any activities that would bring shame to his name**
- **It means asking, “What would please my Lord the most right now?”**
- **It means looking at your relationships and asking, “Is this relationship honoring Christ?”**

**Spiritual growth means that we keep this as our central aspiration:
to honor the Lord Jesus.**

Hebrews 13:20-21

²⁰ Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, ²¹ equip you with everything

good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever.

Let us also pray that we would enjoy pleasing him.

That our greatest pleasure would be to bring him pleasure.

- As the British gold medalist and eventual missionary Eric Liddell says in the film *Chariots of Fire*, “God made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure” (Eric Liddell). He would go to China and die there as a missionary.
- May we feel Christ’s pleasure as we do his will.

#3: The Picture: bearing fruit, increasing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened for endurance, and giving thanks (1:10b-14).

If this petition is answered, here is what it will look like.

Paul gives four traits of a Christian who is pleasing the Lord.

They are expressed in four participles.

A. Bearing Fruit

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 being 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.

- We are saved by grace alone, but God’s grace has a purpose: good works (Eph 2:8-10).
- One who does not bear fruit does not please the Lord.
- That includes the good work of **evangelism, the work of neighbor love; pursuing holiness; maintaining right relationships** — doing those things that reflect the Savior.
- He is the vine and we are the branches; as we remain in him we bear fruit.
- Cf, **Phil 1:9-11** - make this part of regular praying.

B. Increasing in the Knowledge of God.

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 being 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.

Paul is not satisfied with status quo; he is not okay with apathy.

- He wants the saints to grow, to increase in the knowledge of God.
- He has already prayed that they would be filled with the knowledge of God’s will, so that they may live a life worthy of the Lord.
- Now he’s sketching out what that life looks like, **and it looks like continued growth.**
- **We grow in our knowledge of God primarily through the Word and the Spirit; but we also grow through our obedience.**
- **We learn that we may obey, and as we obey we also learn more.**
- As you get busy in the Lord’s work, you learn more about the Lord.
- **Christian, are you growing in the knowledge of God through study and obedience?**

- What **evidences** are there in your life that you are **increasing in the knowledge of God?**
- Do you share Paul's longing? "I want to know Christ more" (Phil 3:10)
- He fills his prayers with this: "that you may know the hope to which he called you... power..." (Eph 1).
- After lamenting the problems of the church (evangelism, worship, integrity), Don Carson says: "**But there is sense in which these urgent needs are merely symptomatic of a far more serious lack. The one thing we most urgently need in Western Christendom is a deeper knowledge of God. We need to know God better.**"

C. Being Strengthened for Endurance

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 **being 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.

- Notice that Paul, who often prays for believers to be filled with power (eg, Eph 1:19-20), does so **for the purpose of *endurance***.
- He **doesn't pray for power so that they may do miracles!**
- But he prays for the glorious might of God to strengthen them for ***endurance*!**
- This is the Christian life: it is a life of ***endurance***.
- The one who endures is the one who pleases the Lord.

With "**patience**"

- We need power that we may be **steadfast, to endure for a long period of time under hardship**
- **James 5:10–11:** ¹⁰ As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹ Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.
- We need God's power to endure the trials of the prophets and of Job.
- **Some of you really need to hear this: because this is a church filled with people dealing with serious trials:**
 - **Health challenges, parenting challenges, school challenges, career challenges, relational challenges — and you are doing the right things — but you need endurance.**
 - **Let us pray for strength to wait on the Lord; to be patient; to endure.**

With "**joy**"

- This could modify endurance and patience (ESV) or the next activity: giving thanks (NIV). (There is almost no punctuation in the early manuscripts so it's hard to tell).
- God is pleased with joyful endurance, as well as joyful thanksgiving.

D. Giving Thanks

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 being 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.**

Thanksgiving pleases the Lord.

- Look at 2:7, 16-17.
- Paul wants the Colossian believers to be a thankful people.

Remember we said last week that thankfulness is one of the ways you fight **discontentment**. It is also one of the ways you **stay tied to the truth**.

- The false teachers were telling the Christians that they need something else, other than Jesus; that they didn't have spiritual fullness.
- But Christ is enough!
- Be thankful for the gospel, and don't believe that lie.

We don't give thank to some generic deity, but to our gracious Father!

Verses 13-14 elaborate more fully on what He has done for us... and what it is?

It's a New Exodus!

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.

Exodus 6:6-8

⁶ Say therefore to the people of Israel, 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. ⁷ I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. ⁸ I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD.' "

The parallels are obvious and glorious..

The new-covenant community in Colossae had experienced a greater rescue operation, a greater redemption. So have we!

Inheritance – the **Promised Land is a type of new creation to come (Rom 4:13)**; we have a greater inheritance; indeed the meek will *inherit the earth*.

“Father qualified you” – We have not earned this inheritance; we have not earned heaven; we have received this through the Father's grace.

- **“I'm sorry but you aren't qualified.”** You don't have enough stars!
- We aren't qualified, but the Father qualified us!

“The Saints in Light”

- God's people (the saints) have been delivered from **darkness (darkness is a power, a demonic power if you like, as in the Exodus)** into the kingdom of the Son! It's a a kingdom of **light!**
- It's a whole new regime; a whole new kingdom!
- Out of darkness; under a whole new regime — through rescue and forgiveness.
- **Basketball, 4th grade — I didn't like the regime... I had no hope; but this was different!**
- **We got transferred.**

Delivered/Transferred (13)

- In Exodus, the Israelites, were under the cruel bondage of Pharaoh.
- They were enslaved and crushed, but God by his power, rescued them to took them the Promised Land.
- We were in bondage to sin and Satan, when God delivered us and transferred us into the kingdom of the beloved Son.
- **In West Philadelphia.... "I looked to my kingdom I was finally there, to sit on the throne as the prince of Bel Aire." Will Smith got transferred from the hood to a palace.**

into the **kingdom of God's beloved Son.**

- **Literally, "The Son of His love."**
- **This is where the Father placed you!**
- **In the Kingdom of the Son of His love!**
- **What grace!**

Some of you may remember the Old Milwaukee Beer commercials – guys would be out fishing or something and then the commercial would end with them around the camp fire or something, and one would say, "Guys, it just doesn't get any better than this." Well, I can think of many things better than Old Milwaukee –

When Paul says that God has placed you in the Son of His love, it is absolutely true: It doesn't get any better than this.

We have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (14)

Because we are in the beloved Son, we have all the benefits of this **redemption** (that is, "delivered from bondage"), one of which is the forgiveness of sins.

- **Our debt has been dealt with in Christ; we have been released from the tyranny of sin!**
- **We continue to enjoy the forgiveness of sins!**
- **The Apostle's Creed should excite us when we read, "We believe in the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting, amen." Don't you just want to take off!? I do!**
- **I've often said that I want the Creed cited at my funeral, with gusto!**

So in light of this salvation, this inheritance, this kingdom, this redemption, this forgiveness, the only appropriate response is joyful gratitude to God.

And this pleases God. Gratitude to God pleases God.

This reminds me a story I heard recently about a guy named Kenny McDonald.

- **He lived on the Isle of Lewis of the NW coast of Scotland around 1950.**
- **A revival was going on there.**
- **He was about 29 years old.**
- **He was in to the things of the world, drowning his sorrows in drunkenness regularly, and he was not happy.**
- **But he told his aunt that he would attend an after-meeting that was held in her house (these meetings would happen around 9pm in cottages and homes).**
- **He heard Duncan Campbell on John 14:6, “I am the way.”**
- **The message transformed him.**
- **At end of the message, the minister said something like, “If anyone wants to respond to the gospel, a room here has been cleared, and we would be happy to talk with you... We can’t save you, but God can and we would love to point you to Jesus Christ...”**

That night in his aunt’s home, God saved this young man.

I love his testimony:

I never ever looked back. God saved me that night in the house. And he will never hear the end of it! I will praise him throughout eternity for his patience and grace with a sinner like me. I’ve never lost what he gave me that night. In addition to the joy of salvation, he gave me tears, and I’ve never lost the tears.
(RD)

“God saved me that night, and he will never hear the end of it!”

That’s where Paul’s prayer ends — with a joyful and grateful people!

Those who have never gotten over grace!

May God fill us with the knowledge of his will that we may live a life worthy of the Lord, pleasing him in every way, bearing fruit in every good work, increasing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power for endurance, with joy giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sin.

That’s a great prayer to pray for fellow believers.

This is a great guide for what it means for you to grow as a Christian.

If you are not a Christian, we point you to Jesus Christ.

He will have you.

He will save you today; and you can join us in *never letting him hear the end of it.*