

Lesson 7 | July 18, 2021

Paul's Prayers for Churches

Study Text: Ephesians 3:14–21; Philippians 1:3–11; Colossians 1:9–14

Central Truth: Christians should pray for one another to know God, show love, and live exemplary lives.

Key Verse: Colossians 1:9

For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding (KJV).

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives (NIV).

Learning Objectives

- Recognize critical priorities in prayer exemplified by Paul in his prayers for the churches.
- Apply proper priorities when contemplating one's own prayer life.
- Demonstrate in day-to-day living what it means to pursue effective prayer and Christlike love.

Introducing the Lesson

Say: After his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, the apostle Paul became firmly committed to expanding the Church, just as he had earlier been committed to hindering it. Later, Paul wrote letters to believers in the churches he had established. Three of these letters were to the Ephesians, the Philippians, and the Colossians. As we read the writings of Paul, we discover that he was a man of prayer, and he often reminded people that he was praying for them.

Opening Activity—Prayer Requests

Ask: ***What prayer requests have you given or heard in recent days? How seriously do you think Christians take prayer requests when they are mentioned?***

Say: Most of our prayer requests revolve around our families, health, or financial needs. There is nothing wrong with praying about those things; in fact, God wants us to bring all of our needs to Him. In today's lesson, however, we are going to look at a different type of prayer request. Perhaps, in doing so, we can broaden our prayer life to include these things Paul focused on in his prayers. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Have you ever prayed, “Lord make me more like you. I want to know more about you and your will for my life.”

[2Pe 1:4-10 NIV] 4 Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. **5 For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; 6 and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; 7 and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. 8 For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.** 9 But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins. 10 Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble,

Have you ever wondered whether or not the prayers you offer for yourself and others represent the priorities of God? It is easy to get caught up in the day-to-day affairs of life and lose sight of critical spiritual realities. We often find ourselves so consumed by our health issues, financial circumstances, and other temporal struggles that we fail to recognize God’s eternal priorities. **As you reflect upon the apostle Paul’s prayers for the churches he mentored, consider the critical importance of these prayer emphases in your own life.**

Part 1—To Know God in Fullness Empowered To Understand God’s Love

Ephesians 3:14–19

[Eph 3:14-19 KJV] **14 For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, 15 Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, 16 That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; 17 That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 May be able to comprehend with all saints what [is] the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; 19 And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.**

Say: Paul's prayer for the believers in Ephesus focused on their spiritual growth. He wanted them to have the power of the Spirit in their lives, and this included understanding God's great love for them. Our view of God greatly impacts our spiritual growth. **If our view of God does not include understanding His great love for us and the entire world, we cannot know Him in His fullness.** (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Paul's greatest priorities for the churches he established in Ephesus were eternal. His unrelenting concerns were for the spiritual growth of the ever-expanding numbers of believers in them. To the apostle, the Church is a magnificent mystery and cherished expression of divine love. His prayer for God's chosen and precious reflected this overwhelming passion.

Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3 is one of two recorded prayers offered by him in the letter. (The other is found in 1:17–23.) **His prayer in chapter 3 demonstrates his passionate desire to see God work powerfully among the Gentiles, which made up a large majority of the Ephesian believers.**

Paul specifically prayed that the Ephesians would be strengthened with power by the Holy Spirit. The word translated "power" in verse 16 conveys the sense of being **strengthened with might**—the might necessary to live victorious Christian lives. Paul then prayed that Christ would dwell in their hearts to make this victorious living a reality.

Lastly, Paul called upon God in prayer to root and establish the Ephesian believers in love (verse 17). The Greek culture placed a great deal of value on knowledge. Because of this, churches in the Greek culture were always in danger of an overly intellectual approach to faith. Understanding God, however, required much more than intellect. A true knowledge of God would only be possible through an understanding of the vast dimensions of divine love. Paul prayed that they would have the ability to "grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge" (verses 18–19, NIV).

Resource Packet Item 1: Love that Surpasses Knowledge

Divide the class into small groups and distribute the work sheet. Give them a few minutes to respond to the questions, then ask them to share some of their thoughts.

Discuss

? How would you describe God's love to an unbeliever? How would you describe His love to a new Christian?

? How does a fuller understanding of God's love impact the way you live your life? How might such an understanding impact your relationships with other believers, as well as unbelievers?

All Glory to Christ

Ephesians 3:20–21

[Eph 3:20-21 KJV] 20 Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, 21 Unto him [be] glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.

Say: These final two verses of Ephesians 3 are some of the most quoted of Paul's writings. Often we look at the beginning words, focusing on God's ability to fulfill our requests, but the main part of the sentence is "Now to him . . . be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever!" (Ephesians 3:20). The true focus is on giving all glory to Christ. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The apostle's prayer in Ephesians chapter 3 ends with a doxology. This doxology affirms Paul's absolute confidence in God to accomplish that which is beyond all he not only asks but conceives in his heart. Paul recognized that there is no limit to God's power. The only limitations lie with humans who lack sufficient ability to ask or imagine.

The power inherent within Paul's prayers, and ours, is not just some impersonal outside force. Rather, that power is found in the workings of God within us as we pray and believe boldly and confidently. Such power is due to the fact that Christ lives within His followers, and **we can therefore make the most bold of requests in faith that they will become living realities** (verse 20).

The doxology concludes with praise: "To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen" (verse 21, NIV). The exaltation of God will never end. It will continue throughout time and eternity. This glory will be evident in the Church first, and that is fitting. It is incumbent upon God's people to bring Him glory, beginning now and extending throughout all the ages to come.

Discuss

? Why do we tend to spend most of our prayer time asking God to meet our temporal needs, and often neglect seeking His eternal purposes in our lives?

? Why is it so vital that we understand the love of Christ that "surpasses knowledge"?

Part 2—Abound in Love

Paul's Joy and Confidence

Philippians 1:3–8

[Phi 1:3-8 KJV] 3 I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, 4 Always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy, 5 For your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now; 6 Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform [it] until the day of Jesus Christ: 7 Even as it is meet for me to think this of you all, because I have you in my heart; inasmuch as both in my bonds, and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel, ye all are partakers of my grace. 8 For God is my record, how greatly I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ.

Say: Paul's prayer for the Philippians, while specifically addressed to them, carries the theme of love applicable to every believer, and focuses on tangible demonstrations of love that could only come through Jesus Christ. Paul wanted their depth of love and insight to grow and bear the fruit of righteousness (1:11). Notice the end of verse 11: "to the glory and praise of God" (NIV). **Like his prayer for the Ephesians, Paul's primary goal was that God would be glorified. When we pray for others, what is our goal?** (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians from a Roman prison. Philippians is one of a number of Epistles known as "Prison Epistles." What is astounding in so many of these letters of Paul is their tone. They often are filled with expressions of joy. This is clearly the case in his letter to the Philippians.

The apostle's prayer for the Philippians begins with thanksgiving and expressions of joy. In 1:5, Paul stated the basis of his joy: He is grateful for their partnership with him in the proclamation of the gospel from the very beginning. Paul founded the church at Philippi at the beginning of his second missionary journey (Acts 16:11–40) and at the time of the writing of this letter, more than ten years later, the Philippians' relationship with him was unchanged. They had remained faithful partners.

[Act 16:11-40 KJV] 11 Therefore loosing from Troas, we came with a straight course to Samothracia, and the next [day] to Neapolis; 12 And from thence to Philippi, which is the chief city of that part of Macedonia, [and] a colony: and we were in that city abiding certain days. 13 And on the sabbath we went out of the city by a river side, where prayer was wont to be made; and we sat down, and spake unto the women which resorted [thither]. 14 And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshipped God, heard [us]: whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul. 15 And when she was baptized, and her household, she besought [us], saying, If ye have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house, and abide [there]. And she constrained us.

The faithfulness of the church at Philippi produced extraordinary affection on Paul's part, toward them. He expressed this in verses 7–8. Even while he was in prison, the church had aggressively sought to bring him comfort. The apostle never doubted the love and devotion of the Philippians.

Paul also expressed his confidence in God for His work in them. God had begun a good work in the Philippians and could be counted on to finish it (verse 6). He had every confidence that their profound spiritual growth would continue until the day of Christ's return. Paul understood that the work of salvation was the work of God and not his.

Discuss

? How had the Philippians demonstrated love for Paul?

? How was Paul able to maintain a joyful attitude in the face of imprisonment?

Knowledge, Discernment, and Insight

Philippians 1:9–11

[Phl 1:9-11 KJV] 9 And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and [in] all judgment; 10 That ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ; 11 Being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.

Say: Like other prayers we have considered, Paul gave thanks before moving to his petitions in Philippians 1. **The nature of his petitions are much different than some of our prayers, however. He was vitally interested in the spiritual growth of the Philippians.** In other prayers, he talked about praying for other things such as healing, but his primary emphasis was always on spiritual growth. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Following his expressions of thanksgiving and joy over the Philippian church, the apostle transitioned to prayer in 1:9. **He asked God to give them knowledge, depth of understanding, and the ability to discern the pure from those things that would hinder.**

Such qualities would be vital for the church both in good times and bad. Whenever Paul encourages the pursuit of knowledge, he never means knowledge for its own sake. Rather he calls for a knowledge motivated by and grounded in love. **For Paul, love for God, reflected in love for others, is the appropriate**

motivation toward knowledge. Paul was praying for the Philippian church's power to understand the will, the works, and the ways of God. The apostle longed for true believer to understand life within the perspective of the Lord and have insight into God's eternal kingdom.

The word translated "discern" in the NIV (verse 10) can be translated "judge," or "perceive." **It connotes the ability to discriminate between two or more things.** There is a sense of wisdom present within this word, as it has to do with the skill and ability to separate good choices from bad.

The "knowledge," "discernment," and "insight" referred to in this passage have to do with moral choices rather than mere intellectual understanding. Paul prayed for the Philippians so they would be "blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ" (verses 10–11, NIV).

Resource Packet Item 2: Putting Paul's Prayer into Practice

Distribute the work sheet and give the students a few minutes to reflect on how to implement the concepts of Paul's prayer into their personal lives. Then pray for God's help to fulfill the things they have noted. (You might want to close the class with this activity instead of doing it here.).

Discuss

? What does Paul's Epistle to the Philippians tell you about the ability to have joy even in difficult circumstances?

? Why is it important to pursue knowledge through love?

Part 3—To Live Worthy of the Lord Comprehending God's Will

Colossians 1:9–10

[Col 1:9-10 KJV] 9 For this cause we also, since the day we heard [it], do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; 10 That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God;

Say: Now we move to looking at Paul's prayer for the Colossians, the church in the city of Colossae. **This prayer also focuses on spiritual growth, a good indicator of the importance of discipleship in the eyes of God. Many people want to know God's will for their lives, but the place to begin is to study His Word.** A college professor

once commented that students often asked him how to find God's will for their lives. He always pointed to the Bible and asked if they were doing everything it commanded. That's a great place to start. As we begin to follow the Bible's teachings, God will then reveal more specifics to us for our individual lives. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The Westminster Shorter Catechism, written in 1646 and 1647 as an instruction for Christian life and belief, asked perhaps the most important question that could be asked: "What is the chief end of man?" The answer it provided is extraordinarily comprehensive. "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever."

In chapter 1 of Paul's letter to the Colossians, he wrote that his continual prayer for the church was that God would fill them with the knowledge of His will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding (verse 9). The word "fill" expresses the sense of being filled to the point of being complete. It is attained through the work of the Spirit of God in our minds and hearts. He must be the source for all our knowledge and understanding.

Biblically, understanding God's will for life begins with a recognition of His ultimate purpose for all human beings. He created humankind to bring Him glory. That is why we exist. Bringing God glory must be the central pursuit of His children. From this, all other decisions must flow. If we do not pursue this, the more specific desires for God's guidance are meaningless. It matters little to seek His direction concerning where we go or what we do if we do not desire to glorify His Name.

Paul expressed this truth in verse 10. **The will of God for us is that we live lives worthy of who He is, pleasing Him, bearing fruit, and growing in knowledge of Him. Knowing God includes growing in spiritual character. The work of the Spirit is to establish the character of Jesus in the lives of all who belong to His Kingdom. Only through this character transformation can we bring God glory.**

Resource Packet Item 3: The Knowledge of God's Will

Distribute the work sheet and discuss the questions as a class. If time is short, send it home with students for personal reflection.

Discuss

? How does the Holy Spirit help you in understanding the Scriptures and finding God's will for your life?

To Share in the Inheritance

Colossians 1:11–14

[Col 1:11-14 KJV] 11 Strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness; 12 Giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: 13 Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated [us] into the kingdom of his dear Son: 14 In whom we have redemption through his blood, [even] the forgiveness of sins:

Say: The inheritance we have received in Christ is indescribable. When we think of the price He paid to rescue us from sin, we should “give thanks” (Colossians 1:12, NIV). None of us would be worthy, on our own, to share in Christ’s inheritance. Such a gift calls us to demonstrate our love and gratitude, by living holy lives that are set apart for Him. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The apostle Paul reminded the Colossians of their spiritual qualifications in Christ Jesus, declaring them to be qualified to share in Christ’s inheritance (verse 12, NIV). God’s people have been made holy by Him; that is, they have been separated unto the Lord to be a people for His possession. To say that they are in the “kingdom of light” speaks to their purity as well as the purity of their calling.

None of this, of course, was accomplished on their own. It was Jesus who rescued them from the kingdom of darkness through His saving work on the cross. **His blood rescued them, atoned for their sins, and set them free. And, thanks be to God, the same can be said of believers today. We once belonged to the kingdom of darkness, but now are joint heirs of the kingdom of God’s Son (verse 13). Once we were under Satan’s power and dominion, but now we belong to God, for we are His people.**

Verse 14 declares to the Colossian church that they have been delivered and forgiven. **This concept of being forgiven speaks to the fact that all of their debts had been canceled.** The work of Christ on the cross had purchased fully their eternal salvation. **They had been fully reconciled to God.** What a marvelous promise this timeless truth provides for us today, as well.

We must keep in mind, however, that these precious promises do not mean that we are without obligation to God. We have been rescued so that we might honor and represent our kingdom citizenship in a fallen world. This is what Paul meant by living lives worthy of our calling. An indescribable price has been paid for our sins. **We have received a marvelous undeserved gift. We now are called, in return, to give thanks to God through living holy and righteous lives, demonstrating His love to a sinful and needy world, and praising His name throughout our lives.**

Discuss

? In what ways do you feel you may have misunderstood what it means to find and follow the will of God?

? How often do you reflect upon your response to Christ's death on your behalf?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: Paul's prayers for these three churches had a common thread, that of spiritual growth. Sometimes the things we pray for are temporal, and God delights in meeting our physical needs. But our first priority should always be to grow in Him.

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- Set aside time each day to study God's Word and apply it to your life.
- Pray that God will help you to grow in Him every day.
- Provide spiritual encouragement to a younger believer.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

That I May Know Thee.
Exodus 33:12–17

[Exo 33:12-17 KJV] 12 And Moses said unto the LORD, See, thou sayest unto me, Bring up this people: and thou hast not let me know whom thou wilt send with me. Yet thou hast said, I know thee by name, and thou hast also found grace in my sight. 13 Now therefore, I pray thee, if I have found grace in thy sight, shew me now thy way, that I may know thee, that I may find grace in thy sight: and consider that this nation [is] thy people. 14 And he said, My presence shall go [with thee], and I will give thee rest. 15 And he said unto him, If thy presence go not [with me], carry us not up hence. 16 For wherein shall it be known here that I and thy people have found grace in thy sight? [is it] not in that thou goest with us? so shall we be separated, I and thy people, from all the people that [are] upon the face of the earth. 17 And the LORD said unto Moses, I will do this thing also that thou hast spoken: for thou hast found grace in my sight, and I know thee by name.

Tuesday:

Love the Lord.
Deuteronomy 6:4–9

[Deu 6:4-9 KJV] 4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God [is] one LORD: 5 And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. 6 And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: 7 And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way,

and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. 8 And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. 9 And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates.

Wednesday:

Find the Knowledge of God.
Proverbs 2:1–7

[Pro 2:1-7 KJV] 1 My son, if thou wilt receive my words, and hide my commandments with thee; 2 So that thou incline thine ear unto wisdom, [and] apply thine heart to understanding; 3 Yea, if thou criest after knowledge, [and] liftest up thy voice for understanding; 4 If thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as [for] hid treasures; 5 Then shalt thou understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God. 6 For the LORD giveth wisdom: out of his mouth [cometh] knowledge and understanding. 7 He layeth up sound wisdom for the righteous: [he is] a buckler to them that walk uprightly.

Thursday:

Exhortation To Live Worthy.
1 Thessalonians 2:8–13

[1Th 2:8-13 KJV] 8 So being affectionately desirous of you, we were willing to have imparted unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were dear unto us. 9 For ye remember, brethren, our labour and travail: for labouring night and day, because we would not be chargeable unto any of you, we preached unto you the gospel of God. 10 Ye [are] witnesses, and God [also], how holily and justly and unblameably we behaved ourselves among you that believe: 11 As ye know how we exhorted and comforted and charged every one of you, as a father [doth] his children, 12 That ye would walk worthy of God, who hath called you unto his kingdom and glory. 13 For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received [it] not [as] the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe.

Friday:

Increase in Love.
1 Thessalonians 3:9–13

[1Th 3:9-13 KJV] 9 For what thanks can we render to God again for you, for all the joy wherewith we joy for your sakes before our God; 10 Night and day praying exceedingly that we might see your face, and might perfect that which is lacking in your faith? 11 Now God himself and our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way unto you. 12 And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all [men], even as we [do] toward you: 13 To the end he may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints.

Saturday:

Abound in the Knowledge of God.

2 Peter 1:2-8

[2Pe 1:2-8 KJV] 2 Grace and peace be multiplied unto you through the knowledge of God, and of Jesus our Lord, 3 According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that [pertain] unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue: 4 Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. 5 And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; 6 And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; 7 And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. 8 For if these things be in you, and abound, they make [you that ye shall] neither [be] barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.