

## Prayer Week 2013

### Pray That We'd Be Mature

Colossians 1:9-14

Mark Vroegop

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*<sup>9</sup> 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, <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, <sup>12</sup> giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. <sup>13</sup> He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, <sup>14</sup> in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Colossians 1:9–14).*

Since 2009 we have begun the New Year with a sermon on prayer and Prayer Week – a series of events which are designed to help you put this important aspect of the Christian faith into practice. The beginning of the year is always a good time to refocus on what things should be a higher priority, and your prayer-life should be a part of that discussion.

### Prayer Week 2013

Let me give you an overview of what is happening during Prayer Week, and let me invite you to make room in your schedule to take one step this week. Here is what is happening:

- Over the New Year the entire New Testament was read from this pulpit and 260 people each spent 15 minutes in prayer, seeking God's blessing and power.
- **Monday:** Morning Coffee and Prayer from 6-7 a.m.
- **Tuesday:** Prayer Summit with staff from 8:30 a.m.-12 p.m.
- **Wednesday:** Downtown noon prayer at Christ Church Cathedral on the Circle
- **Thursday:** Brookside noon prayer at the Oaks Academy Brookside
- **Friday:** Global Outreach Prayer at 6 p.m.
- **Saturday:** Men's planning & prayer time at 8 a.m.

Additionally, to help your family, I asked Dustin Crowe, one of our pastoral residents, to write a devotional that you can use with your family, small group, or circle of friends. It is a great resource, and he has served us well by putting this together. Again, I'm challenging you to take at least one step in the next week in regards to prayer.

## Why Prayer Week?

Prayer Week has become a bit of a tradition around here, and this can be a really good thing if we all understand why we are doing this. So let me give you a few reasons why we need to talk about prayer and why you should make time in your schedule to take one step in this matter of prayer:

- 1. Prayer is an important and common spiritual discipline.** I think it would be safe for me to say that every one of us knows that prayer, at any level, is important. No matter where you are on your spiritual journey, you probably know that prayer is a vital part of your relationship with God. And I would also think that it is safe to assume that most everyone has prayed about something in his or her life.
- 2. Prayer is difficult and often neglected.** Over the holiday I was reading book about the life of Martin Lloyd-Jones, and here is what he said about prayer: "If you have never had difficulty in prayer, it is absolutely certain that you have never prayed . . . everything we do in the Christian life is easier than prayer."<sup>1</sup> I would agree with his sentiment. I have often repeated this quotation: Prayer is the most talked about, and least practiced, discipline in the church.
- 3. Growth in prayer is always needed.** There is always a need for us to grow in our understanding and practice of prayer. I don't think that any of us could say that we have mastered prayer or that we have prayed enough. I think it is appropriate to never be fully satisfied with our prayer life. Since knowing God is inexhaustible, prayer should be as well.
- 4. Power and spiritual growth are linked to prayer.** A careful reading of the New Testament would demonstrate that God is moved to act when his people pray. The Holy Spirit cooperates with our praying to accomplish his work. Where there is no prayer, there is no power. I think that this is especially important for us as we live in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christianity. We have so many trappings of success with great books, beautiful facilities, incredible resources, innovative programs. But without the Holy Spirit empowering those activities, we could be very busy.

I'm sure that these are not necessarily new thoughts for you, but it is good to be reminded and challenged in this area because our commitment and practice of prayer tends to leak. I need Prayer Week because life – and ministry and sermon writing and people's problems and my own distractions – can easily cause me to lose my heart for seeking God's face. We need to pray. We need to pray.

## Praying About Maturity

This morning I want to focus on a theme that we will talk about this week and next: spiritual maturity. Next Sunday I will explain in more detail some very important things that are on the hearts of our pastors and elders and that relate to what it means to "present everyone mature in

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<sup>1</sup> Iain Murray, Lloyd-Jones – Messenger of Grace, (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth, 2008), 221.

Christ" from Colossian 1:28. We have much to share with you, and I think you will be encouraged with what we feel like the Lord is saying to us at this point in our church's history.

Today I want to introduce this focal point of spiritual maturity by challenging you to not only pray in the next week, but to pray specifically about what it looks like for all of us to be passionate followers of Jesus. I want to invite you to become a better disciple of Jesus with the goal of infecting others with a passion to follow Jesus as a disciple. I want you to value this in your relationship with God, and I want you to value this in your interactions and influence with people around you.

However, I do not want you to do this in your own strength. I am calling you to pray that we would be mature. I want you to pray this for yourself, for those who you love, and for our entire church. I want you to join our elders in seeking the Lord, not for more people, better programs, or a more innovative strategy, but for spiritual depth and a viral discipleship.

Our text is Colossians 1: 9-14, and it reflects the heart of the Apostle Paul for a body of believers in the city of Colossae. This church needed pastoral help because they were being influenced by people who purported to be knowledgeable and who seemed very humble and very spiritual. However, the focus was not on spiritual growth with Christ at the core. They were succumbing to "philosophy and empty deceit according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world and not according to Christ" (Col. 2:8). The entire book is a beautiful treatment of the basics of what it means for Jesus to be the center of everything.<sup>2</sup>

The first chapter is an introduction of this theme, and it is clearly expressed in what Paul prayed for this church. According to 1:7, Paul had received a report from Epaphras about the church, and this led him to thankful for what God was doing (1:3-8) and to pray that they would grow even more (1:9-14). This prayer shows us Paul's heart and what it means to be spiritually mature.

Paul's prayer is what I want us to pray. Let me give you a summary and put it in way that I hope will be memorable:

*Lord, I want to know you  
so that I can faithfully follow you -  
even when it's hard -  
all because of the gospel.*

Each part of this prayer is significant and important.

### **"Lord, I want to know you" (v 9)**

Paul had heard encouraging news about the church. He heard of their faith in Christ Jesus and the love that they have for all the saints (1:4). They had heard and understood the grace of God in truth, and they were full of love in the Spirit (1:6, 8). This was good news. But notice the effect it had upon the Apostle Paul. Rather than making him content, their spiritual initial progress caused him to pray even more fervently. The language of verse nine is meant to communicate a

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<sup>2</sup> For the full series on Colossians see <http://www.yourchurch.com/sermons/> and search under "Colossians: The Core."

persistence of approaching God with the Colossian church on his mind and heart. In other words, Paul was constantly talking to God about them.

But it is the content of his prayer which is most important. Verse nine says, *“asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in spiritual wisdom and understanding.”* Now part of the significance of this statement was the fact that Colossae was filled with discussions about “knowledge,” especially spiritual knowledge. There was talk about angels, special understanding, rules and regulations, and even visions. Colossae was a spiritually-oriented culture, and Paul desired to call them to a biblical understanding of relationship with Jesus.

He wanted them to be filled with the knowledge of God’s will. When you hear “God’s will,” I’m sure that many of you think about knowing the future, God’s plan for your life, or making a decision that fits with God’s plan. That is often our “default” when we hear a phrase like this. However, Paul is not using the word in this way. The word “will” can also mean something that is wished for or desired. In other words, it means living for what God longs for and for what He desires. God’s will is not just about the future; it means that a person loves what God loves, desires what He desires.

What’s more, notice that Paul’s prayer is not just that they would know God’s will, but that they would be filled with the knowledge of His will. The word means to be saturated, to satisfy, or to complete. The prayer is for the ways of God to take over a person’s life and being. One of my favorite definitions of revival is a “people saturated with God.” That is what this prayer is all about.

Finally, this knowledge of God involves the mind, and it also involves the application of truth. You need both to know God’s will. Knowing God requires that you know what the Scriptures say, that you meditate on God’s word, that you receive God’s word from others, and that you listen when God is speaking to you from His Word. You have to think, to know, and to study. But you also have to act. You have to do something. Spiritual maturity is not just about what you know; it is about how you live. A great illustration of this is in 1 Peter 4:2, where Peter calls people to live differently – to live for the will of God. Notice the contrast:

*Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God (1 Peter 4:1–2).*

So this prayer to know God’s will is a prayer about knowing God in such a way that it has a genuine effect on our lives. It is a prayer that longs for the heart of God to be expressed in the lives of His children. It is a prayer that we would pray for ourselves, asking God to fill us afresh with the Spirit’s control (Eph. 5:18) and the Spirit’s fruit (Gal. 5:16-18).

As we move into a new year, I want to call you to pray for spiritual maturity in your own life, the lives of those you can influence, and in the life of our church. I want you to pray that we would know God. Pray that we would be filled with all spiritual wisdom and understanding. Pray that our lives would fit with the will of God. Pray that we would be a church filled with people who come from all walks of life but whose common denominator is that we are saturated with God.

*Lord, I want to know you  
so that I can faithfully follow you -  
even when it's hard -  
all because of the gospel.*

### **“So that I can faithfully follow you” (v. 10)**

This passion to know God and His will was meant to lead us somewhere. It was meant to be practical and to have specific results. Knowing God works; it does something. That is why verse 10 begins with the important English word “so.” It links the previous prayer to the desired outcome.

Paul understood that there was a direct connection between knowing God in all spiritual wisdom and understanding very important aspects of what it means to faithfully follow Jesus. He lists four things here. They are connected and vital to our walk with God:

- **“walk in a manner worthy of the Lord”** – This would have been a culturally familiar phrase to Colossians, since it was a common inscription in the province of Asia, especially the nearby city of Pergamum.<sup>3</sup> It meant that there should be a connection between the gods and the conduct of people. Paul takes this phrase and uses it to describe the biblical connection between one’s allegiance to God and one’s life.
- **“fully pleasing to him”** – The Greek here reads “in all things pleasing him.” The NIV picks this up by translating the phrase as “please him in every way.” It seems that the sense here is a life that is ultimately and totally focused on honoring God. There is no compartmentalization of Christianity. Everything is affected by the rule of God.
- **“bearing fruit in every good work”** – Since spiritual fruit is something that is produced by the Spirit, it seems that Paul is praying here for spiritual effectiveness or empowerment in what they are doing. He is asking that every good thing that they are doing for God would be surprisingly fruitful.
- **“increasing in the knowledge of God”** – The knowledge of God is not static, and that is what makes spiritual maturity so wonderful and challenging at the same time. The more that you know about Him, the more you know that you need to learn. Knowledge about God leads to more knowledge about Him. You can never master what God is like, but you can certainly increase your understanding of Him.

Spiritual maturity is cyclical in nature. The more that you walk in a worthy manner, allowing everything to be ruled by God, bearing fruit in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God, the more worthily you want to walk, the more pleasing you want to be, and the more fruit you want to produce. It is a glorious process.

But it also works in reverse. Failing to know God, to walk in a manner worthy of Him and pleasing to Him, and not bearing fruit leads to a decreasing understanding of who He is. And that, in turn, leads to more disobedience, a life less pleasing, and bad fruit.

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<sup>3</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesian* – NICNT, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1984), 47.

One of the values of the start of a new year is asking oneself some questions about the cycle of spiritual maturity. For example:

- Have I increased in my understanding and love of God over the last year?
- Do I have a greater passion for Jesus and a deeper love for God?
- Is my prayer life more vibrant?
- Does God have more control of more areas of my life than a year ago?
- Do I talk more frequently with others about “matters of the soul”?
- Does my giving and generosity demonstrate that I have covetousness in check?
- Do I have a desire and seek opportunities to share my faith?

One the reasons that we are hosting a men’s planning time on Saturday is because we believe that it is really important to be intentional about our lives. I read a book a few years ago whose author said, “If you ran your business like you ran your family, you’d be out of business in six months.”<sup>4</sup> The point is simply that we ought to value the truly important areas of our lives enough that we are intentional about them.

And if it is important, then we ought to pray about it and seek God’s help.

*Lord, I want to know you  
so that I can faithfully follow you -  
even when it’s hard -  
all because of the gospel.*

### **“Even when it’s hard” (v 11)**

The third aspect of this prayer relates to a subject matter with which our culture and American Christianity is not very familiar: endurance. Year ago I read John Piper’s biographical sermon on Charles Simeon (1759-1836), who was the pastor of Trinity Church in Cambridge, England, for 49 years. Simeon endured much opposition and yet he remained faithful to his calling. Piper identified the value of reading about Simeon because of the culture in which we live.

*I need very much this inspiration from another age, because I know that I am, in great measure, a child of my times. And one of the pervasive marks of our times is emotional fragility. I feel it as though it hung in the air we breathe. We are easily hurt. We pout and mope easily. We break easily. Our marriages break easily. Our faith breaks easily. Our happiness breaks easily. And our commitment to the church breaks easily. We are easily disheartened, and it seems we have little capacity for surviving and thriving in the face of criticism and opposition.*

*When historians list the character traits of the last third of twentieth century America, commitment, constancy, tenacity, endurance, patience, resolve and perseverance will not be on the list. The list will begin with an all-consuming interest in self-esteem. It will be followed by the subheadings of self-assertiveness, and self-enhancement, and self-realization.*

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<sup>4</sup> Patrick Lencioni – “The Three Big Questions for a Frantic Family: A Leadership Fable About Restoring Sanity To The Most Important Organization In Your Life.”

*We need help here. When you are surrounded by a society of emotionally fragile quitters, and when you see a good bit of this ethos in yourself, you need to spend time with people – whether dead or alive – whose lives prove there is another way to live.<sup>5</sup>*

Notice how this theme of endurance emerges in verse 11. Paul prays that the Colossian church would be given powerful, spiritual strength in accordance with the glorious might of God. What an amazing thing to ask! So this prayer is not just about receiving spiritual knowledge; it is also about receiving from God the kind of power that is needed. It is asking God to enable you, to empower you, and to give you capabilities that you do not have on your own. It is the same thing that Paul declared in Philippians 4:13 – “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” It is the strength to do what you could not do on your own; a strength that you know could only come from God.

In Ephesians 1, Paul says something similar regarding power. The parallels between Paul’s prayer for the church at Ephesus and the Colossians are stunning:

*<sup>16</sup> I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, <sup>17</sup> that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, <sup>18</sup> having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, <sup>19</sup> and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might <sup>20</sup> that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places (Ephesians 1:16–20).*

The power that we have is linked to the resurrected power of Jesus. It is the power to conquer death. It is the power to defeat any evil. And Paul prays that this church would have power so that they could have endurance and patience with joy.

The prayer here is not just for strong-willed endurance or silent-but-annoyed waiting. The desire is to have a heart so full of God and so mature that one could endure and be patient while rejoicing. Patience and endurance are not uniquely Christian. What is uniquely Christian is joyful endurance and rejoicing in the midst of suffering. Hardship, suffering, and opposition will bring to the surface what is really inside of you. And we need to pray that God gives us the power to joyfully and patiently endure.

*Lord, I want to know you  
so that I can faithfully follow you -  
even when it's hard -  
all because of the gospel.*

### **“All Because of the Gospel” (v 12-14)**

Paul wraps up this prayer by returning to the ultimate reason why a person would pray this way. If you think about it, there is nothing about this prayer that makes sense from a purely human, self-

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/biographies/brothers-we-must-not-mind-a-little-suffering>

focused perspective. It would be totally understandable that there would be some of you who hear this prayer and think, "That's a crazy way to live." And you would be right. That is, until you understood verses 12-14.

I love that we get to end on this theme because this is the ultimate motivation for prayer and the reason why you should pray about maturity. Verses 12-14 remind us that spiritual growth, maturity, or discipleship is borne out of the gospel and gratitude for it. Just look at the stunning things that Paul says:

- "who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light"
- "he has delivered us from the domain of darkness"
- "transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son"
- "we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins"

This is the miracle of the gospel and the basis for spiritual maturity. It is the message that by receiving Christ, God forgives our sins, redeems us from the domain of darkness, adopts us into the realm of His Son, and gives us a spiritual inheritance that is totally undeserved. This is the starting point of a relationship with your creator. This is where Christianity begins.

But this is also why you pray for maturity. Do not make the mistake of thinking that you pray for maturity in order for God to accept you or love you. In Christ, he loves you totally and completely. The motivation to pray for maturity is not driven by a desire to pay God back.

Praying for maturity is what we should pray for because it is what we love! We have tasted the goodness and the grace of God, and we long for more of it in our lives, more of it in the lives of people we care about, and more of it in our church. We pray for spiritual maturity because there is nothing more glorious, more beautiful, more satisfying, more life-changing, and more liberating than the glory of God.

To think that we are called to be holy as He is holy (1 Peter 1:15-16) and to think that He wants us to be transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor. 3:18) is just simply amazing.

It is so stunning that we must pray about it, cry out to God for it, and seek it for one another. And so this week I want to call you to invest time in praying for maturity. I invite you to pray with us:

*Lord, we want to know you  
so that we can faithfully follow you -  
even when it's hard -  
all because of the gospel.*

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