

The Core: Living With Jesus at the Center

“What to Pray for People You Love”

Colossians 1:9-14

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9 And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, 10 so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. 11 May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, 12 giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. 13 He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Col 1:9-14

What you pray for reveals a lot about you. Did you know that? The content of your prayer requests are very revealing.

One of my pastoral roles at Calvary was participating in a golf marathon fund raiser for the school ministry by being stationed at one of the holes and praying with the parents as they made their way around the golf course. Couples would pull up to the tee box, and I would simply explain that we were going to pray for their kids. Then I would ask them a question that turned out to be very revealing. I would ask, “How can we pray for your kids?” That question became a bit of a window to their soul. Sometimes I was almost in tears as I heard a Dad or Mom just pour out their heart for their kids. “We want Luke to honor Christ and be a godly young man. We want him to have a huge impact in the Kingdom, and, as his parents, we just need wisdom to know how to help him do that.” And then there were a few other times I was in shock as I heard (typically a Dad) very quickly say, “You can pray that our kids will be healthy and safe.” I think I even asked once, “Is there anything else?” And the Dad said, “No, that’s it.”

What do you pray for people you love? I had you memorize 1:9-10 because I want you to see the treasure trove of things for which you could pray. Now I’m not against praying for health and safety – I pray that for my kids a lot. Believe me, with three boys I pray for safety all the time. But there is something in me that dies when I hear a parent say that the most pressing or most apparent need in their child’s life is health and safety when the Bible is packed with other things that make health and safety look like nothing!

Our theme in this series has been to discover what it means to live with Jesus at the center. Having Jesus as your core means that you see everything through the lens of his death, burial, and resurrection. This mentality and choice, living with Jesus at the center, should radically

change everything but especially how you pray. Or maybe this is a better way to say it: when Jesus is core, your prayers change.

In Colossians 1:9-14 we get a glimpse into the heart of the Apostle Paul as he tells the Colossian church exactly what he is praying for. He loves them dearly, and his prayer reflects the yearning desire of this spiritual father for his spiritual children.

I had you memorize this text on purpose. I wanted to have this text on your heart so that when you are led to pray for someone, you will pray God-centered prayers. What do you pray for people you love? Pray God-centered prayers

Colossians 1:9-14 really only has one prayer, and the prayer is: "God, I pray that they would know you so that their lives would please you." Our aim this morning is to unpack this prayer so we can pray it with the level of depth that God intended, and at the end of the service I'm going to give you an opportunity to pour out your heart to the Lord for someone you love. I want to help you pray God-centered prayers for those you love.

"That they would know You" (v 9)

Paul tells the people that the report that he heard about them caused him to continually pray for them. He had told them this before (1:3-8) but in those verses he told them why he was praying for them (i.e., faith in Christ, love for the saints, and hope in heaven). In verses 9-14 he tells them what he is actually praying for.

Now at first it looks like there are many things for which Paul is praying. If you read the verses quickly you might think that there are four, five, or six things that are on Paul's heart. Actually, there is only one prayer request, but it is so sweeping, vast, and powerful that everything else flows from it.

Paul's singular prayer for them was "that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will." Everything else from that prayer. His prayer is for them to be filled with the knowledge of his will, and everything else explains what this means or looks like.

Now when I use the word "will" we immediately have a bit of a problem because usually we think of God's will as something that is future. We pray about knowing God's will when we don't know what to do or when we have a decision to make. Certainly, God's will means that, but limiting it to that definition would not fit the tone of Paul's prayer here.

The Colossians 1:9 image of God's will is an understanding of who God is, what He desires, what He loves, and what he wants. It is used the same way in Colossians 4:12 when Paul says

that Epaphras prays that they “may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.”¹ The word “will” can also be translated as something that is wished for or desired.² In other words, the will of God can mean much more than God’s plan for the future; it means learning what God desires or wants.

Now knowing someone really well means that you know what they would desire or wish for. For the last two years, our boys gave me a wonderful gift just before our family vacation. There are few things that I enjoy more than sitting around a campfire in a canvas chair in Northern Michigan with a cup of fresh coffee and reading the newspaper. And apparently they observed Dad’s nirvana because they took up a coin collection for me so that I could get a newspaper every day. They knew me. They knew what I like. They know my desires. They have knowledge of my will.

Let me give you another example. A few weeks ago I came home and Sarah was singing the praises of one our kids because on a day that she wasn’t feeling well he single-handedly cleaned up the entire kitchen after lunch while Sarah was sleeping. And he did it without anyone asking. He made the connection between what he saw and what Mom would want.

In other words, he had grown in the knowledge of his mother’s desire. He knew what she would want because he knew her.

Therefore, Paul’s prayer for this church is that they would live in such a way that they would be filled with this kind of knowledge of God. Meaning, that they would be completely saturated³ with a spiritual understanding of who God is and what He desires. “God, I want them to know you.”

Notice as well in verse nine that this knowledge of God is not just an intellectual knowledge; it is spiritual. The text says “filled with the knowledge of his will **in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.**” Paul is praying that they would know God, and this kind of wisdom and understanding is something that 1) God does, thus the passive tense of filling in verse 9, and something that 2) happens by the Spirit of God.

I trust that you realize that not everyone who is knowledgeable about God knows God. Smart does not equal spiritual. Hell is going to be filled with very smart people. In fact I would guess that there are some broken-hearted parents who pray this way: “Lord, our son is so smart, but he reasoned you right out of his life!” How does that happen? 1 Corinthians 2:12-14 helps us here.

¹ Other examples of this usage are: Romans 2:18, 12:2, 1 Thess 4:3, 5:18.

² See 1 Peter 4:2 – “so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God.”

³ The Greek word is pleroo and it means to cram, to level up, to furnish, to influence, satisfy, or finish.

Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. 13 And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. 14 The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor 2:12-14).

In other words a person cannot know God until they are converted, repenting of their sins and trusting in Christ. Nothing associated with Christ or his church makes sense to the “natural man” because he cannot understand without the Spirit.

Let me bottom-line this and make it very simple. No one knows God until they accept they accept the most foundational and fundamental spiritual truth: God is holy; I’m a sinner under God’s judgment; I need to repent and trust in Christ for the forgiveness of my sins. Knowing God starts or ends there.

What does God want? What is His will? First, he wants you to repent and trust Christ. Second, he wants his children to grow deeper and deeper in knowing and understanding Him.

Now remember that there is only one prayer here: “I want them to know you.”

- It may be prayed for a son who is the smartest, most intellectual, got-it-all-together young man in rebellion against God
- It could be prayed for a daughter who grew up in a godly home, confesses Christ, but who seems to be drifting further and further away
- It might be prayed for a person in the midst of a really hard time who is trying to understand why this is happening and how it connects to God’s purposes
- It could be prayed for a godly child with so much potential and you just want them to use his or her gifts for God’s glory
- You could even pray it for your own heart: “God, I want to be filled with the knowledge of your will. I want to know you!”

God want us to pray this way. Do you know why? Because He wants us to know him too! Isn’t that beautiful?

“So that they would please You” (v 10-14)

The effect of this knowledge of God’s will is incredible, and it takes Paul five verses to identify all the amazing ramifications. You could boil down the longing of Paul’s heart to this simple statement: I want them to know you so that they will please you.

Verse 10 is very important. Their knowledge of God’s will (what God wants) will result in a direct effect in how they live. Their lives will please Him in two ways. First, their lives will fit

who God is, and second, their lives will function in accordance with what God loves. Knowing God leads to lives that fits and function.

A life that fits

Paul would have nothing to do with a separation between what someone believes and how they live. These are inseparable and this is the main message of chapter 3. But in verse 10, we see that knowledge of God leads to a walk that is “in a manner worthy of the Lord.”⁴ This means that you understand who Jesus is, and the actions of your life match what you know about Christ. So you can see the problem if you don’t know or understand who Jesus is! If you don’t know him, you won’t know what doesn’t fit.

When you know Christ, a life that fits him is pretty obvious. It would be as obvious as me wearing Joe Bartemus’ suit coat. It may be the same color and same fabric, but it simply doesn’t fit. It is obvious! As an individual comes to know God, they realize what doesn’t fit with the worth of Christ. And there are few things more painful than watching someone live a life that doesn’t fit with Christ.

A life that fits is a life that pleases Christ.⁵ In other words, Jesus sees us being like him and he loves it. You might compare it to what a mother feels when her daughter chooses to wear her wedding dress. There is something very special about the moment when a daughter emerges from a changing room looking like her mother 22 years ago.

Jesus Christ is filled with joy when he sees the glorification of God multiplied in and through our lives. He is pleased with a life that fits.

A life that functions

Everything that follows in verses 10b-14 is an explanation of what a life that pleases him looks like.⁶ Again, we see Paul’s emphasis on an intimate knowledge of God that does something – it works! So real spiritual maturity or really knowing God is directly linked to how we live. What happens at 96th and Towne every Sunday is not even close to the sum total of functional Christianity. What happens here is just a catalyst for everything in your life.

Now what does this look like?

1) Fruit leading to greater knowledge of God (v 10)

⁴ For more on “worthy of the Lord” see 1 Thess. 2:12, 3 John 6, and Matt 10:37.

⁵ For more on “pleasing Him” see Rom 8:8, 15:1-3, and 1 Cor 7:32

⁶ That is why the NIV puts a colon after the phrase “please him in every way.” I am not certain and I tend to question the punctuation of the ESV on this passage. For a fascinating study compare the punctuation between NIV, NASB, and ESV.

The text says “bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.” This means that there is a direct relationship between knowing God, bearing fruit and knowing God more. I think it works like this: I come to know who God is in a deep way such that my life looks more and more like Christ, and as I do what he calls me to do, I see fruit. **And I know that it was God who did it, which increases my knowledge of God.**⁷ In other words, bearing fruit helps me learn about God.

This week John Schmidler took me on a visit of Saul to Paul ministries which is a residential discipleship center for men with serious substance abuse problems. The men all shared what they had been learning and what God was showing them even that very day, and the fruit was amazing. Guys who had been addicts for their entire lives shared the combination of the Word, the Spirit, and the fellowship of brothers was helping them find freedom. And every single one of them kept talking about what God had miraculously done in their lives. Well, the fruit of God’s work in their lives increased my knowledge of God. I left seriously pumped up!

So pray that God would make a loved one spiritually fruitful so that they or others could learn more and more about God.

2) Strength in suffering (v 11)

The second manifestation of a life that is pleasing to God and that for which we pray for others is for spiritual strength in suffering such that a person will endure and be joyfully patient. This strength comes from God “with all power according to his glorious might.” The idea is that their strength is being supplied to them, and it is directly tied to God’s power. Don’t you love that? The spiritual strength prayed for here is tied to learning to bear up under⁸ something with great and joyful patience. So the heart-felt prayer is for a loved one’s ability to be spiritually strong while the pressure of hardship or pain grows.

How many of you know someone who is going through a really tough time right now? Do you ever wonder what to pray? Pray this: God, give them power directly from you to help them be strong.

3) Gratitude in grace (vv 12-14)

The third and final mark for which Paul prays is an over-arching thankfulness. But what is he thankful for?

⁷ Admittedly, some translations put a comma between the good fruit clause and the increasing in the knowledge of God clause. However the structure of the grammar could go either way, and it doesn’t make sense to me that Paul would independently list the knowledge of God again here without linking it to something new since he just mentioned it in verse 9.

⁸ Greek word hupmone

12 giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. 13 He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Col 1:12-14)

The Gospel! Do you see it? It is all over verses 12-14! Redemption, forgiveness, deliverance from the domain of darkness, a qualification to share in the inheritance – these are all words tied to the work of Christ in the Good News. And it was the Father through the Son who accomplished this work.

I hope that you realize that if you really understand grace, and if you really understand who God is, then you will be a person who sees life through a continual lens of gratitude. The battle line for gratitude is not just whether or not you'll be thankful. The battle line is whether or not you understand God. And do you know when this is tested? When God does something that is hard or confusing. Can you still thank him because you really know him?

Maybe you know someone today who has had some hard stuff in their life, and you long for them to learn how to root their gratitude to God in the gospel. This is why we have to help people connect the gospel to their lives and learn to celebrate the gospel. Because when hard stuff happens it is all you've got! And so we pray, "God, help them to please you by giving thanks to you for all that you've done."

A life that functions in God's grace should yield fruit leading to more knowledge, strength in suffering, and gratitude to God. I know that some of you just ache for a family member, friend, or counselee to be like that. God invites us to pray for them. This prayer invites us to pray God-saturated prayers that lead to fruit that really pleases God.

I've seen this in my own life. I remember being at a prayer summit when Sarah was pregnant with Savannah, and we were scared out of our minds about losing another baby. In a small group prayer time, I just poured out my heart to the Lord about my fears, and then some fellow pastors gathered around me. I remember one of my Charismatic pastors put his big hand on my head and prayed with power as he said, "I pray strength for my brother...strength for my brother." It was like he believed that he could pray it into my soul. And that is what happened. He prayed spiritual strength into me. His prayer was a catalyst to my faith! His God-centered prayer empowered my heart.

In light of this text, there are three kinds of people I want you consider with me:

First, is there someone in your world whose godliness and growth thrills you? Is there someone who is starting to turn the corner, and whose life you just want to see ascend for the glory of God. Pray God-centered, "Help them to know you, Lord!" prayers. Then, let them know that you are praying for them. Inspire them. Encourage them.

Second, is there someone for whom your heart aches? Is there someone whose present path just brings tears to your eyes? Who is it that God is calling you to renew your prayer efforts for today? For whom would cry out, "God, help them to know who you are!" Whose life today is heading down all the wrong paths and you would say, "God, I want them to have a life that fits and functions in a way that pleases you." In a moment, I'm going to invite you to come up to one side of the auditorium to seek God's face for them or to pray with one of our elders or deacons.

But there is a third person who is on my heart today. And I want to speak directly to you. You are the person that will be prayed for over here. There are people who love you, they want God's best for you, and they might be seated right next to you. And I want you to hear this message as if it were God speaking directly to you: It is time to stop breaking your loved one's heart. And I'm going to open another side of the auditorium for some risky God-centered repenting. The kind that says, "Enough! I want to know God!"

Making Jesus the core means praying God-centered prayers that sound like "God, I pray that they would know you so that they could please you."

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